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PORNOGRAPHY AS A SUBJECT FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES:

New Directions for the Field of
Women and Religion

by Marymay Downing

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Religious Studies

University of Ottawa

Ottawa, Canada

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
Abstract	iii
 Chapter 1: Introduction	 1
Basic structure of the argument	2
Defining 'pornography'	8
A note on methodology	27
Previous work in the field	
(a) Wayland Young	36
(b) Herbert W. Richardson	45
 Chapter 2: A Dialogue of Antithesis	 67
Pole #1: Pornography represents a "liberated" view of sex -- the polar opposite of repressive Christian antisexualism	68
Pole #2: Christian antisexualism explains all opposition to pornography -- the polar opposite of itself	83
Conclusion	104
 Chapter 3: Variations on the Christian Connection	 110
Variation #1: Both pornography and Christianity treat sex as shameful and male violence as inevitable	111
Variation #2: Christian theological doctrine on the transcendence of God legitimizes male dominance and its extension in pornography	131
Variation #3: Pornography constructs a transcendent God-like voyeur/viewer	145
Variation #4: Pornography has Christian forerunners	154
Summary	158

(continued)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

(continued)

	page
Chapter 4: Pornography Denies My Soul	160
The theory of gender-based differences in sacrality	160
Views on sex as sacred advanced by feminist scholars of religion	164
Feminist arguments against pornography	177
Does the evidence support the theory?	193
Summary	212
Chapter 5: Parallels in Form and Content	214
(1) A similar scope of meaningfulness	215
(a) A review of the range of meanings in pornography	219
(b) An interpretation of sacred meaning in sexual violence	230
(c) Humility in pornography and in religion.	249
(d) Summary of content analyses	254
(2) The iconographical quality of pornography	255
(3) Summary	266
Chapter 6: Conclusion: An Issue of Relevance and Importance	269
Bibliography	278

ABSTRACT

The argument of this thesis is that pornography is a subject relevant for religious studies, particularly for the sub-field of women and religion. A review of the etymological derivation and history of the word 'pornography', and of various positions in the current definitional debate, provide the basis for defining the term. Methodologically, the thesis approach is feminist because it engages with feminist theory in religion and proceeds from the premise that pornography is experienced by the majority of women as a "problem" in need of analysis. Only a few religious studies scholars have treated the subject previously; their ideas are outlined and critically assessed.

Chapter Two examines the history of modern pornography's self-conscious relation of antithesis with Christianity, beginning with pornographic literature of the late 18th century and including contemporary pornographic books and magazines. The validity of the commonly accepted proposition that all opposition to pornography continues to be generated by Christian antisexualism is challenged by means of detailing the evidence for profound transformations in Canadian churches during the last decade concerning doctrine on sexuality, and by reviewing the official positions consequently taken by the churches as the basis for their denunciation of pornography. Thus the relevance of a religious studies perspective on the problem of pornography

is first demonstrated. The importance of women's new authoritative roles in producing these profound doctrinal transformations is also revealed through this analysis, providing a second instance of pornography's relevance as a subject for religious studies, specifically for the field of women and religion.

A third demonstration of pornography's relevance is presented in Chapter Three by means of analyses of several feminist critiques of pornography, each of which asserts significant correspondences between pornography and the Christian religion. In contrast to the common assumption, pornography is shown to express the same understanding of sex as dirty and shameful as was taught by traditional Christian doctrine, as well as the same dualistic metaphysics which judges the body as inferior to the spirit, and the same acceptance of male violence as an inevitable aspect of human nature. Pornography's celebration of the sexual domination of women by men is also claimed to represent an extension of the ethic of male domination that is legitimated by traditional Christian theological doctrine on the transcendence of God, and therefore to indicate the justification for reforming Christian doctrine according to principles of "process theology". The viewer of pornography, furthermore, is encouraged by the nature of the product viewed to develop a voyeur type of subjectivity that can be considered "God-like" in its transcendence and detachment. Finally, the argument is also put forward that pornography, in its current

secular manifestations, has Christian precedents during the Renaissance and Reformation periods in the form of imagery depicting sexual violence against female martyrs and imagery designed to elicit a sexual response in the viewer so as to create an experiential appreciation of the doctrine of the "Fall". These variations on "the Christian connection" make pornography a relevant subject for inclusion in the critical analysis of Christianity that constitutes a major focus for feminist work in the field of women and religion.

Chapter Four proposes that newly developing theory about gender-based differences in experiences of the sacred is supported by an analysis of women's objections to pornography. When compared with views expressed by feminist scholars of religion about how sex can be a source of sacred experience, views on the sacredness of sex embedded in women's objections to pornography are recognizable as significantly similar. Pornography thus indirectly yields information useful to developing theory in women and religion. The religious basis of women's criticisms of pornography, moreover, is revealed by this analysis to be very different in nature from traditional Christian antisexualism, which is the way it is typically characterized in even the most recent apologies for pornography, thus indicating another reason why a religious studies perspective is relevant to the issue of the problem of pornography.

Finally, by analyzing the abstract features of pornography's

content and form, the argument is presented in Chapter Five that pornography can be seen to be functioning like a religion in contemporary society. Its meaningfulness, contrary to most expectations, can be compared to multivalent religious myths and symbols. And its pervasive visual presence throughout society, compounded by the potency of its images that have been photographically generated, make the contemporary manifestation of pornography comparable to religious iconography. In combination, it is argued, pornography provides a powerful means of orienting individuals in relation to the psycho-physical conditions of life and death in a manner that, in the abstract, resembles the orienting function of religion. For this reason as well, then, pornography is relevant for the discipline of religious studies.

The argument concludes by noting that pornography is a relevant subject for religious studies not only because it contributes to these various aspects of theory in the study of religion, especially in the field of women and religion, but also because the discipline of religious studies offers a particularly useful perspective on the problem of pornography. By elucidating more fully the nature of pornography in its contemporary manifestations, including the manner in which it can be seen to be functioning as a replacement for religion in modern society, a religious studies perspective helps to explain why pornography should be recognized as a problem of significant dimensions that merits more serious attention and efforts at resolution.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The argument of this thesis is that pornography is a subject that is relevant for the discipline of religious studies, particularly for the sub-field of women and religion. Few religious studies scholars have paid attention to the subject of pornography to date, probably because it has been understood as more appropriate for other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, or cultural studies. The purpose of this thesis is therefore to introduce new directions for future work in the field of women and religion by demonstrating how pornography is relevant to religious studies and why it merits further analysis.

As the subsequent chapters of this thesis will show, the basis of pornography's relevance for religious studies, and particularly for the field of women and religion, is not singular, but manifold. Each chapter deals with one or more aspects of its relevance, providing an initial systematic mapping out of the principal areas that should be fruitful for subsequent, more comprehensive investigation. As will be seen, these principal areas encompass the various differing approaches that are used in the study of religion, i.e., historical, sociological, psychological, etc., and therefore hold the

potential for contributing significantly to the development of the discipline and of the field of women and religion within it.

In this introductory chapter I will first sketch out the structure of the argument presented in the following chapters. Then I will offer a few points to clarify the definition of pornography that I will be using, and my methodology. Finally, I will review the ideas that have previously been put forward on the subject of pornography by religious studies scholars.

BASIC STRUCTURE OF THE ARGUMENT

I begin my argument for the relevance of pornography as a subject for religious studies in Chapter Two by presenting the first part in a two-part critical assessment of a widely accepted understanding, the understanding that there is an antithetical relation between pornography and the religion of Christianity due to their diametrically opposed attitudes toward human sexuality.

Briefly, the common perception is that Christianity is a religion that condemns and represses human sexuality. Unlike Hinduism, for example, the iconography of Christianity is totally devoid of celebratory sexual imagery. Pornography, on the other hand, at least the kind that has been produced in Western Christian cultures in the last few centuries, and especially in the last few decades, expresses an attitude that accepts and celebrates sexuality. It explicitly rejects the antisexual Christian ethic. It is my argument, however, that, although this

understanding of the antithetical relation between pornography and Christianity has had its merits in the past, and still appears on the surface to be a reasonable assumption, it is today actually an outmoded understanding.

I demonstrate one reason why this understanding should be recognized as outmoded in Chapter Two through an examination of publications concerning pornography and sexual ethics issued recently by the major Christian churches in Canada. Through this examination, I show that the basis for an antithesis between pornography and Christianity is in the process of shifting dramatically. For these documents tell us that it is no longer centred over opposite attitudes toward sex as such, but over other ethical issues, such as violence and exploitation. Moreover, as I point out, these church documents also reveal that the shift in church doctrine concerning sex is occurring as a consequence of women's new, and rapidly growing, status as an authoritative influence within the church. Both the doctrinal shift on sex in the contemporary Christian churches, and the evidence indicative of women's leading role in its occurrence, are significant facts about modern religion that the outmoded view which pits pornography against Christian antisexualism tends to obscure. Thus, I argue, in an indirect manner the subject of pornography reveals its relevance for the field of women and religion by calling to the foreground facts that might otherwise tend to remain obscure if no attention was given to pornography

from a religious studies perspective and the outmoded view was therefore able to continue unquestioned.

In Chapter Three I demonstrate a second reason why the common understanding pitting pornography against Christian antisexualism should be recognized as outmoded, and another reason why pornography is relevant to religious studies. For Chapter Three reviews various arguments, found in feminist and other analyses of pornography, that highlight poorly recognized alignments and similarities between pornography and Christianity, and that thereby challenge the assumption of their essential difference from each other. One of these arguments, for example, maintains that pornography does not express attitudes that are philosophically incompatible with traditional Christian antisexualism at all, as the common view holds, but rather it expresses the same whole metaphysical perspective as that of traditional Christianity, including its anti-sex perspective. Another calls attention to historical religious forerunners of contemporary secular pornography, such as, for example, Christian devotional texts with depictions of sexually sadistic torture inflicted on female martyrs, texts which were produced more than a millennium after martyrdom itself ceased. The similarities between pornography and Christianity discussed in this chapter cast a very critical light on the traditional religion of Christianity when viewed from a feminist perspective, adding to the feminist project of critically analyzing the world's major religions that is already under way.

Chapter Four introduces another perspective on the relevance of pornography for religious studies, and more specifically for the field of women and religion. In this chapter I compare feminist critiques of pornography, on the one hand, with interpretations of the sacredness of sex presented in recent literature by feminist scholars of religion, on the other hand. I argue that the comparison between these two sets of literature, each by female authors, reveals that they share key assumptions about what makes sex sacred. One group writes explicitly about the sacredness of sex, the other often implicitly through its criticisms of the spiritual assault that they experience from pornography's portrayal of what type of sexual encounter is most desirable. Though expressed in different ways, the similarity in their ideas about the sacredness of sex, I suggest, is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. One is that it shows there is a religious basis to feminist criticisms of pornography, a religious basis, furthermore, that should not be confused with traditional Christian antisexualism, even though in fact such a confusion tends to happen in most public debates over pornography. The other reason the similarity in their views is noteworthy is because it may constitute evidence to support a theoretical proposition suggested recently concerning gender differences in sacrality. This proposition asserts that men and women tend to experience the sacred in different ways as a consequence of gender-based differences in the processes of psychological development under conditions of mother-dominated

parenting patterns (and compounded by male-dominated social and cultural patterns). The assumptions shared by these two groups of women, each writing about what makes sex sacred, I argue, lends credence to the part of this theory which proposes that women tend to experience feelings of connectedness as sacred. Thus, pornography is revealed to be relevant to the field of women and religion through the information that it yields, once again indirectly, about women's experience of the sacred, information, furthermore, that may be supportive of developing theory in this area.

Chapter Five presents the argument that pornography is relevant to religious studies for the reason that it manifests significant parallels with religion in the abstract structural terms of form and content. To demonstrate these structural parallels, I first examine content analyses of pornography, arguing that the scope and depth of meaning in pornography in abstract terms matches the scope and depth of meaning in religion. Some of these meanings, furthermore, are arguably religious in nature, according to a few analyses which I describe (raising as a sequel to these analyses the question about whether they may be expressive of a specifically male form of sacrality). And some meanings in pornography refer to, or produce, states of consciousness very much like those recognized as religious states of consciousness, such as humility and self-transcendence. After analyzing structural parallels in content between religion and pornography, I look at form. I argue for the recognition of

meaningful parallels between religious iconography and secular pornographic imagery in terms of their comparable pervasive and potent effects in people's daily lives, especially as a consequence of the types of image-producing technologies available to pornographers in the late twentieth century. Both these structural parallels, I argue, mean that pornography functions in contemporary secular culture in a manner analogous to the way that religions function in traditional types of culture in which religion provides the major operative orienting principle. And this constitutes yet another reason why pornography is a relevant and important subject for inclusion in religious studies.

Chapter Six concludes my argument concerning the manifold reasons why pornography should be recognized as a relevant subject for this discipline by summarizing its salient features, and by making some suggestions about their collective significance for theoretical and practical concerns in the field of women and religion.

Through this demonstration of the reasons for treating pornography as an important and relevant subject for religious studies, one of my major goals is to promote a deeper appreciation of the subtleties in the connections between religion, pornography, and gender relations, that pertain at this particular time in the history of Western culture, especially in North America. For in the closing decades of this century we are witnessing dramatic and overlapping changes in all three areas.

In my view, the combined effect of rapid change in each of these areas, and, moreover, in interaction with each other, is having a dizzying impact. It presents a compelling illustration of a social phenomenon that Alvin Toffler described presciently in the book *Future Shock* back in 1970, when he argued that the pace of change within modern American culture was actually beginning to produce an effect just as disorienting for individuals as the "culture shock" that people suffer when transported suddenly into a foreign culture. By clarifying the nature of some of the changes in progress with respect to pornography, religion, and gender relations, perhaps a few stable reference points by which to regain some balance can be established.

I will now proceed with a clarification of the key term in this argument, pornography, and then elaborate on my methodology, before summarizing the ideas about pornography previously expressed by scholars of religion.

DEFINING 'PORNOGRAPHY'

Unfortunately, pornography is notorious for being difficult to define, and no definition has yet gained consensus acceptance. In the climate of acute controversy that surrounds pornography, furthermore, definitions are inevitably framed to serve an apologetic or prosecutory purpose. Given this climate, a brief review of the etymological history of the word 'pornography' may

be instructive for clarifying the different positions taken in the definitional debate, which I will briefly outline, and the reasons for my own choice of definition.

The original ancient Greek words 'porne' and 'graphe' in combination literally translate into "a writing or picture about, or by, a prostitute." The noun 'porne' (meaning 'prostitute', 'harlot' -- i.e., the lowest class of prostitute in ancient Greek society, often a slave) is etymologically related to the verb 'pernemi' which means 'I sell'.

Among ancient Greek writers, Athenaeus used the combined term in its adjectival form, 'pornographos', in reference to the writing of harlots in *The Deipnosophists* (13.567b). According to an etymological study of the modern English usage of 'pornography' by Walter Kendrick,¹ the word does not occur in Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary*, but does appear in *Webster's Dictionary* from 1864 on, and from 1909 on in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It gained currency in the vocabulary of modern languages following the 1850s, according to Kendrick, after an art historian, C.O. Muller, and a historian of prostitution, Paul Lacroix, each revived the term for his own purposes, relying on Athenaeus' usage of it as a precedent. However, its new

¹ Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987). Cited in Joan Hoff, "Why Is There No History of Pornography?" in *For Adult Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography*, ed. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 20-21, 38-39.

application resulted in the word acquiring an extended connotation beyond the meaning specific to its Greek roots. For the term was revived by art history as a classification for the frescoes and statues excavated at Pompeii which, though sexually explicit, were not confined to the context of prostitution. Thus the connotation of the type of sexual behaviour depicted by pornography began to broaden beyond its original context of prostitution, subsequently incorporating a variety of specific and non-specific contexts for the sexually explicit representations it denoted. Finally, by 1961, *Webster's* offered the following definition of 'pornography': "a portrayal of erotic behavior designed to cause sexual excitement."² This definition provides a totally context-free, generic meaning for the sexual behaviour portrayed by material classified as pornographic. It completes a historical tendency to dilute and ultimately eliminate the original reference to prostitution in the Greek roots of the word. Interestingly, this is the definition preferred by apologists for pornography, yet it is not the definition chosen by prostitutes and pornography workers, as I will show shortly.

While paying attention to the etymological history of 'pornography', I should make note of a few relevant points about 'erotica' too. 'Erotica' is a word that appears in English

² Cited in Joan Hoff, "Why Is There No History of Pornography?" *op. cit.*, p. 39.

dictionaries only in the twentieth century. From the beginning it was simply a euphemism for pornography just as, in the above 1961 *Webster's* definition, erotic behaviour is a euphemism for sexual behaviour. Customarily, then, 'erotica' has functioned as a synonym for 'pornography'. It is only very recently that some people, feminists most notably, have begun using 'erotica' as a contrasting term denoting a certain type of sexually explicit representation in distinction from the type that pornography represents.

The most often quoted feminist distinction between pornography and erotica is Gloria Steinem's:
"[Erotica] contains the idea of love, positive choice, and the yearning for a particular person. Unlike pornography's reference to a harlot or prostitute, erotica leaves entirely open the question of gender."³

To date, though, this distinction between the two terms has not acquired very much authority outside of feminist dictionaries. The 1992 Supreme Court of Canada ruling in the case *R. v. Butler* is a notable exception in the Canadian context.⁴ For those who

³ Cited in Hoff, "Why Is There No History of Pornography?" p. 41, n. 9. Emphasis in the original. See also Gloria Steinem, "Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 35-39.

⁴ See the judgment in the case *R. v. Butler*, 27 February 1992, in which the Supreme Court of Canada distinguishes three categories of sexually explicit material. It refers to one of these categories as "erotica" when it states that Section 163 of the *Criminal Code* "does not proscribe sexually explicit erotica without violence that is not degrading or dehumanizing, but is designed to catch material that creates a risk of harm to society." *R. v. Butler*, p. 6. My emphasis.

do distinguish pornography from erotica, in any case, the fact that this distinction has not generally been made in social science experiments on the behavioural and/or attitudinal effects of pornography, renders their results relatively useless.⁵ This is but one illustration of how definitional differences impede a resolution of the social controversy over pornography.

As mentioned above, apologists for pornography tend to prefer the definition that provides a context-free understanding of the sexual behaviour that it portrays. For example, in *Pornography: The Other Side*,⁶ F.M. Christensen argues that the term 'pornographic' properly has a rather narrow meaning referring to depictions of "sexual content whose purpose is to arouse or satisfy sexual feelings"⁷ or "sexual frankness for the sake of sexual excitement."⁸ He maintains that any meaning beyond this simple sexual frankness is an arbitrary augmentation of the only essential characteristic of pornography. And he explicitly rejects any definitional reference to prostitution as anachronistic pedantry that conveys an exaggerated distortion of

⁵ Jillian Ridington, "Pornography: What Does the New Research Say?" reproduced in Margaret Smith and Barbara Waisberg, *The Pornography Workshop for Women: A Leader's Handbook* (Toronto: Birch Associates, 1984), Appendix VIII, p. 1.

⁶ F.M. Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

⁷ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 1.

⁸ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 2.

the "tiny amount" of pornography that is actually about prostitutes.⁹

A problem with the definitional position taken by Christensen, in my view, is its suggestion that the context of the sexual behaviour depicted by pornography is irrelevant or inessential. I think this amounts to an arbitrary exclusion of the contextual factor. For there is always some relational context in which sex takes place, whether in pornography, or in life. An act of sexual intercourse could be an act of mutual desire and love-making, or it could be an act of purchased sexual service, or it could be an act of coercion and rape, to name just a few possibilities in a wide spectrum of possibilities, each implying a very different emotion or meaning experienced by the participants in the act. There is no such thing as sexual frankness that escapes the condition of being frank about one or another kind of sex, whether mutual, purchased, forced, or some other kind.

Furthermore, Christensen himself qualifies the kind of sex that he thinks pornography is about at another point in his book when he argues that it depicts men's sexual fantasies, not reality. He writes that "standard sexual materials do not even pretend to describe the everyday world."¹⁰ It is arbitrary and

⁹ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 166, n. 1.

¹⁰ Christensen writes: "Women in pornography are sexually uninhibited because that is the sort of women the men and boys who seek it out fantasize about already.... it is false that

misleading, or at least androcentric, then, to characterize representations of men's sexual fantasies as "sexual frankness" *per se*, as Christensen does when he defines pornography this way. By denying the relevance of any contextual component with his definition of pornography, he obscures the actual nature of the context as he himself understands it, that is, the context of male fantasy, while implying that the context is reality.

In the end, however, the really cogent point to be made here is the following: To define pornography as if there could be such a thing as sexual frankness devoid of context merely serves to avoid or obscure the fact that precisely this contextual factor -- not explicitness or frankness -- is now the most critical issue in contemporary discussions about pornography. Unlike a few decades ago when sexual explicitness itself was the main issue, today the focus has shifted to context as the most important element for consideration, due mainly to the violence

male-oriented erotic stories 'stereotype' women *in general* as being like their uninhibited women. As a wish rather than a claim of fact, they do not make assertions about women in general.... Heterosexual pornography no more tells the 'lie' that all women are promiscuous [as antipornography feminists complain] than gay porn tells the 'lie' that all men are homosexual. (It is clear enough who the real liars are.) Indeed, patrons of pornography often seek it out precisely *because* the women they know are not like that; it is obvious to them and nearly everyone else that standard sexual materials do not even pretend to describe the everyday world." *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 47. Emphasis in the original.

that has become such a prominent feature of recent pornography.¹¹

Some people take the position that the levels of context should be understood in the most comprehensive manner possible. They highlight not only the contextual factor in the content of pornography, in the scenario of sex that it portrays, but also in the methods of production and distribution of pornography, thus calling attention to the role of pornography in the context of the social, economic, and political struggles between the sexes. Several feminist authors in particular seek to include the widest possible scope of contextual meaning in their definitions. Susan Cole, for instance, defines 'pornography' as, not just a representation, but "a practice of sexual subordination in which women's inferior status is eroticized and thus maintained,"¹² or

¹¹ The Supreme Court of Canada endorses the relevance of the contextual factor in its recent decision. It does not define 'pornography' itself in this decision, but it does distinguish three categories of sexually explicit material with reference to what Section 163(8) of the *Criminal Code* deems to be "obscene" (*R. v. Butler*, per Gonthier J. pp. 7-8):

" a) Explicit sex with violence, which generally constitutes 'undue exploitation of sex' within the meaning of s. 163(8) of the [*Criminal*] *Code*, on the basis of demonstrable harm;

b) Explicit sex that is degrading or dehumanizing, which will be 'undue exploitation of sex' if it creates a substantial risk of harm; the risk of harm can be assessed with reference to the tolerance of the community, under the 'community standard of tolerance' test; and

c) Explicit sex that is neither violent nor degrading or dehumanizing, which will not generally fall under s. 163(8) of the *Code*, according to Sopinka J. "

¹² Susan G. Cole, *Pornography and the Sex Crisis* (Toronto: Amanita Enterprises, 1989), p. 9. My emphasis.

"the practice of presenting sexual subordination for sexual gratification."¹³ With her definition, Cole aims to call attention to the abuse and exploitation of the workers in the process of making pornography, as well as to the socio-political context of the product's production and use. Lawyers for the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) argue for a legal understanding of pornography that is of a similar nature. In their Factum presented to the Supreme Court in the case *R. v. Butler*, mentioned above, they state: "LEAF submits that pornography amounts to a practice of sex discrimination against individual women and women as a group."¹⁴ The problem with definitions in this group, of course, is that some are so broad that many things besides pornography could be covered by them.

Others who take a position emphasizing the importance of including the contextual factor in defining 'pornography' focus primarily on only one level, namely, the context portrayed or implied by the material's content. Definitions in this category usually try to capture under the term 'pornography' portrayals of sexual behaviour that are generally agreed upon as morally problematic types of behaviour. Some are very comprehensive, as

¹³ Susan G. Cole, "Pornography: What Do We Want?" in *Good Girls / Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face*, ed. Laurie Bell (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987), p. 159.

¹⁴ In the Supreme Court of Canada, *R. v. Butler*, Factum of the Intervener Women's Legal Education and Action Fund [1991], File No. 22191, p. 2.

for example, the following definition by Jillian Ridington presented to the Association of Women and the Law in 1983:

Pornography is a presentation, whether live, simulated, verbal, pictorial, filmed or videotaped, or otherwise represented, of sexual behaviour in which one or more participants are coerced, overtly or implicitly, into participation; or are injured or abused physically or psychologically; or in which an imbalance of power is obvious, or implied by virtue of the immature age of any participant or by contextual aspects of the presentation, and in which such behaviour can be taken to be advocated or endorsed.¹⁵

(As Myrna Kostash remarks in response to Ridington's suggestion, "By this definition, *what* in popular culture, in elite culture, in advertising, in best sellers, in movies ... is *not* pornographic?"¹⁶ -- a question reflecting pornography's relevance for all disciplines dealing with culture.) Other definitions in this category are more concise, but have the same general focus on the contextual factor in the content of pornographic representations. The United Church of Canada's Task Force on Pornography, for example, defines it thus:

Pornography is material that represents or describes degrading, abusive and/or violent behaviour for sexual

¹⁵ Reproduced in Myrna Kostash, "Second Thoughts," in *Women Against Censorship*, ed. Varda Burstyn (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985), p. 34.

¹⁶ Myrna Kostash, "Second Thoughts," p. 34. Emphasis in the original.

gratification so as to endorse and/or recommend the behaviour as depicted.¹⁷

Definitions which classify as 'pornographic' only those presentations depicting morally problematic types of sexual behaviour, it should be noted, thereby preserve the possibility of sexual explicitness *per se*. As mentioned above, material that may be sexually explicit but is not felt to be problematic because it contains such ideas as "love" and "positive choice" is often labelled 'erotica' in contrast to 'pornography'. The Anglican Church of Canada Task Force on Pornography, for instance, produced a study guide in 1985 that it calls "Pornography: The Distortion of Erotica."

After considering the etymological history of 'pornography' and the issues that surface in debates over its definition, I have concluded that it is probably a good idea to retain explicit reference to the context of prostitution in defining pornography. The definition should reflect the fact that contemporary forms of pornography are most commonly photographs or videotapes which involve real people (sex trade workers) in their production, doing work involving the provision of real sexual services. It should reflect the fact that the purpose of the product which records their work, as even Christensen's definition allows, is to produce sexual stimulation in the consumer, stimulation which

¹⁷ The United Church of Canada, Division of Mission in Canada, "Report of the Task Force on Pornography," 1984, p. 1.

the consumer purchases. These facts constitute commercial sex and make the phenomenon of pornography, its production and consumption, a version of prostitution -- a version mediated by the product called pornography -- even if the scenario enacted and recorded to form the content of a given pornographic product presents a type of sexual behaviour that is ostensibly outside the context of prostitution.¹⁸

It is worth noting that prostitutes and pornography workers themselves consistently make reference to the original Greek derivation of 'pornography' and emphasize the substantive links between the two phenomena of prostitution and pornography.¹⁹ They argue that "the separation of pornography from prostitution

¹⁸ This version of prostitution, moreover, is a very lucrative one. In North America the pornography business is larger than the conventional film and record businesses combined. See the United Church of Canada's periodical, *Women's Concerns* (March 1985), p. 3: "Canada's pornography industry takes in \$500 million a year, which is part of a North American industry that grossed \$10 billion in 1983 -- more money than the conventional film and record industry combined. Kiddie porn accounts for about \$2 billion of the \$10 billion." Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the distribution side of the business is thriving and expanding, even in the current recessionary economic climate, with new outlets now opening in Canadian suburbs as well as urban settings. See Bill Taylor, "Porn in the 'Burbs," *Toronto Star*, 8 May 1993, p. J1.

¹⁹ See, for example, the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, "Statement on Prostitution and Feminism," reproduced in *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, ed. Gail Pheterson (Seattle, Wa.: Seal Press, 1989), pp. 192-197. Item 7 begins as follows (p. 196): "*Pornography: 'Writings of Harlots'* Sexually explicit material or pornography refers specifically in original Greek to the writing of 'harlots' (prostitutes)."

[is] hypocritical and fundamentally divisive to women."²⁰ Marie Arrington of the Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes says,

I define pornography as the images of prostitution. It is the same act put into pictures. What you see in pornographic movies is basically what happens to women in prostitution. Knives are prevalent because knives are not illegal in this country. Guns are, but they are still used against prostitutes. The major difference between pornography and prostitution is that with pornography, the producer of the image makes the lion's share of the money.²¹

I wonder why an apologist for pornography would resist including the element of prostitution in its definition, unless out of a sense that this would automatically tarnish the idea of pornography with the moral opprobrium widely attached to prostitution. Yet this happens anyway, according to pornography workers:

... like prostitutes, pornography workers are stigmatized as whores, denied recourse after abuse, and are often blamed for abuse committed against them.²²

In fact, prostitutes and porn workers interpret the violence in pornography, which so alarms feminists and others, as expressive

²⁰ Gail Pheterson, ed., *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (Seattle, Wa.: Seal Press, 1989), p. 35.

²¹ Reproduced in *Good Girls / Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face*, ed. Laurie Bell (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987), p. 177.

²² International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, "Statement on Prostitution and Feminism," in *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, op. cit., p. 196.

of this very attitude, this broadly based social condemnation of prostitutes. As a leading activist on behalf of prostitutes' rights, Margo St. James, said at a conference of sex workers and feminists in Toronto in 1986,

And as far as violence is concerned, I feel that the stigmatizing, the whore stigma, is what legitimates violence, even in the home, because when the husband slugs his wife, he precedes the abuse with, 'You slut!' 'You whore!' [... and ...] Erotica versus porn is a red herring. I want to see porn not made synonymous with violence. I want us to see sexually explicit material, period, and separate out the violence.²³

Prostitutes and porn workers argue that only when the social conditions of prostitution itself are altered, only when violence against prostitutes and social ostracism of prostitutes are no longer accepted by everyone as occupational hazards of the profession, only when prostitution is not generally viewed with moral opprobrium, only then, they say, will pornography -- the representation of their work -- cease to be a phenomenon that is itself degrading and abusive of women.²⁴

²³ See *Good Girls / Bad Girls*, ed. Laurie Bell, op. cit., p. 130 and p. 86. Emphasis in the original.

²⁴ Not only does prostitution affect pornography, but there is an effect that operates in the opposite direction as well, insofar as women prostitutes report in a recent Australian study that the nature of their work has been changing over the last few decades as a result of customers requesting what they see in pornography. See Roberta Perkins and Garry Bennett, *Being A Prostitute: Prostitute Women and Prostitute Men* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985).

If the work done by pornography workers were openly recognized as a version of prostitution by defining 'pornography' appropriately to reflect this fact (rather than obscuring it through repudiating the root meaning), as porn workers suggest, then perhaps support could be generated more readily to enable pornography workers to acquire more control over the conditions of their work, the type of product made, and its means of distribution.²⁵ Since they are determined "to change the demands of a market which eroticizes children and the abuse of women," as is stated by the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (see n. 25), their control of the industry of pornography would probably satisfy, in the long run, many of the concerns expressed by feminists in their alarm over pornography in its current manifestation. For this reason, too, I would support a definition of 'pornography' that reiterates its root meaning by referring to prostitution.

²⁵ This strategy is recommended in the "Statement on Prostitution and Feminism" delivered by the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights at the European Parliament, in Brussels, 1986: *"The ICPR claims the right of sex workers (as opposed to managers) to determine the content, production procedure and distribution procedure of the pornography industry. Such empowerment will require solidarity among sex workers, solidarity between women both within and outside the sex industry and education of women in the production of sexually explicit material. In support of such a feminist self-determining movement, the ICPR calls for public education campaigns to change the demands of a market which eroticizes children and the abuse of women."* *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, p. 196. Emphasis in the original.

In general, when using a term that is consciously adopted from another language, it is advisable to respect its meaning in that original language as much as possible. Otherwise it can be used for purposes of obscurantism and mystification. The term 'pornography' may well be a case in point.

For all these reasons, then, I would recommend defining 'pornography', in the first instance, most minimally, as:

Representations (in any medium) of sexual relations produced within, or indicative of, the context of prostitution...

However, this definition is not quite sufficient by itself. First, it would not cover those forms of pornography that are not photographic, nor indicative of prostitution strictly speaking, such as some literary forms. And, second, as Margo St. James argues, theoretically it need not imply violence. That is at least debatable, even though the current reality is that relations in the context of prostitution are fraught with violence and degradation, especially for the most vulnerable classes of prostitutes. Pornography itself, in any case, frequently depicts violence, some of it real, as in the examples called "snuff" pornography in which real torture and murder are recorded.²⁶ For the definition to be current, this fact should

²⁶ See Anne Cameron, "Hard Core Horror," *Broadside* 4, no. 4 (February 1983), p. 5. This issue of *Broadside* also contains a description of the film *Snuff*, from which the classification "snuff" pornography derives its name. See Women Against Pornography [Victorial], "Snipping Up Snuff," p. 7.

be reflected too. Moreover, for the purposes of this thesis about pornography, the contextual factor of violence in pornographic representations of sex is equally as important as the context of prostitution. Therefore, I would elaborate on the above minimal definition so that it reads as follows:

Representations (in any medium) of sexual relations produced within, or indicative of, the context of prostitution, or of sexual relations under comparable non-mutual or unequal conditions, or conditions in which the terms are dictated by the will of a violently inclined dominant participant in the relation.

In the interests of clarity, besides offering this definition, I will also specify examples so that there may be no misunderstanding about the products that I have in mind when speaking about pornography in the subsequent chapters.

There are at least four distinct recognized forms of pornography on the market today, though new forms are constantly evolving, such as, for example, computer products.²⁷ At the

²⁷ Pornographic computer programs are giving new meaning to the term "sexual harassment in the workplace," as indicated by the following account by Rona Maynard in "The Cries that Bind," *Flare* (September 1992), p. 100: "Diane, a law student, considered herself lucky to have found a summer job with a Toronto-area firm. When her boss unveiled a new computer-graphics package, all the lawyers gathered round to watch. Diane was the only woman, and what she saw stripped away her confidence. 'There, in living, moving color on the screen, was a man "giving it" to a woman from behind, and then ejaculating on her breasts ... I stood rooted to the spot, speechless, having no idea how to react ... I wished the floor would swallow me up.' She never complained. 'I ... sensed that if I didn't laugh along with my male employer and his male colleagues, I would be excluded, both on a personal level and a professional level.'"

moment, however, the four most widely available forms are as follows:

(1) Magazines. These include titles such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler*, *Lips*, *Hot Lips*, *Shaved*, *Cheri*, *Bound Bitches*, *TIT...illation*, *40+ Hot and Sexy Mature Women*, *Older and Bolder*, *Playgirl*, *On Our Backs*, etc. Some titles are well-known serials, while others are single-issue publications. Some are aimed at a gay, lesbian, or bisexual readership, but most are geared for the heterosexual male consumer. According to a 1984 report by the Government of Canada, "540 different pornographic magazines were being sold across Canada" and "The sales of pornographic magazines audited by the Audit Bureau of Circulation grew by 327 per cent between 1965-80."²⁸

(2) Films and videos. These are advertised in the magazines just mentioned and in advertising circulars. They are available by mail order or through "adult entertainment" or "XXX-rated" video rental outlets. Changing technology here has meant that the "adult only" film theatre is giving way to the television and VCR player in private homes. Cheaper video production costs have resulted in thousands of titles being made available, and also in a "shelf life" of little more than a few months for most of them.

²⁸ Government of Canada, The Minister of National Health and Welfare, "Sexual Offences Against Children in Canada: Summary of the Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youths appointed by the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada," 1984, p. 62.

(3) Cable-television channels. These make pornographic television programs available to the subscriber. They are also often offered, usually at extra cost, to hotel patrons. New satellite technology on the horizon today promises a vast expansion in the availability of pornographic programming that will be accessible through private television equipment in the very near future.

(4) Books. Earlier in this century, books used to be the major form of pornography that people were concerned about, but today they are less central to the debate because of the explosive technological growth that occurred in the visual media. Books remain a relevant form of pornography, however, including such classic titles as *Justine*, and others, by the Marquis de Sade, and *Histoire d'O* by the pseudonymous Pauline Réage, as well as recent titles, such as *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis.

To conclude this section on defining the key term in my argument, 'pornography', I would reiterate the point raised by Myrna Kostash's comment, i.e., the fact that a meaningful proportion of current mainstream culture bears a pornographic quality, though it is not generally set aside and recognized as pornography in the same way that the above products are. Like a number of feminist analyses of pornography, this one attempts to take this fact into account. As Mariana Valverde suggests, in defining pornography we should "begin to define it broadly enough to encompass those aspects of mass culture that glamourize the

subjection of women,"²⁹ recognizing that this would include "traditional feminine culture embodying the same power relations that we see expressed in violent porn."³⁰ Therefore, several mainstream films and videos, so-called "slasher" films aimed at the adolescent market, a fair amount of regular television programming, and a major proportion of advertising generally, as well as women's fashion magazines, and the like, should all be understood as figuring among the products which are usually intended by the term 'pornography' in this thesis.

Next I will discuss my methodology, then review previous work in this area by other scholars of religion.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The two most salient points to be made about the methodology of this thesis are as follows:

(1) As mentioned above, the argument is interdisciplinary. That is, it incorporates the various approaches recognized as appropriate approaches within religious studies. In fact, a significant feature of pornography's relevance as a subject for religious studies is the fact that it has relevance within each of these approaches. Some parts of the argument, therefore, deal

²⁹ Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1985), pp. 123-124.

³⁰ Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, op. cit., p. 124.

with the subject in historical terms, other parts in sociological terms, and still other parts in psychological terms, as will be obvious as the argument proceeds.

(2) The argument is feminist. The argument is feminist for a couple of reasons.

First, it is feminist in the sense that it makes use of existing feminist theory in religion, and aims to contribute, in turn, to the further development of this theory. What is feminist theory in religion? The following summary points should be noted:

Feminist theory in religion is theory that takes account of women's religious experience as women articulate it. Feminist theory tries to answer questions in relation to religion that women identify as relevant for their interests. It is theory that seeks to identify and explain how religion affects women in psychological, sociological, and historical terms, as well as how women, in their own right, affect religion. Feminist theory also examines what is specific about men's experience of religion, their effect on religion, and its effect on them. In other words, feminist theory seeks to elaborate the significance of the factor of gender for the fullest account of religion itself, showing how stunted analyses of religion are when they attempt a "human" perspective as if gender made little meaningful difference.

Feminist theory in religion, as in other areas of scholarship, does not claim for itself the old standards of

"disinterestedness" that used to be *de rigueur* for all the social sciences and humanities. The possibility of attaining "objective truth" has also lost credibility in postmodernism, an intellectual movement that runs historically parallel to feminist thought, though for different reasons. That is, feminist theory concurs with postmodernism's challenge to the search for objective truth insofar as it presents itself as theory that explicitly recognizes the necessarily perspectival quality of all theorists' claims. However, unlike much male postmodernist thinking, feminist theory does not speak from a place of profound nihilism. Lacking a long-standing faith and practice in the "disinterested" pursuit of knowledge, feminist theory is not thrown back on nihilism, but is able to proceed with the "interested" pursuit of knowledge that has almost always been part of its self-understanding. Thus, feminist theory about religion which seeks to elaborate the significance of the gender factor within the phenomena of religion does so with a purpose, and that purpose is to empower women with the knowledge obtained. With that knowledge it may be possible for women to influence the effects of religion in their lives so as to minimize its deleterious impact and maximize its personally empowering potential.

Feminist scholarship in religion, it is important to note, is already a well-developed field. It is one field within academia in which the documentation of the weighty historical

tradition of misogyny and the ideology of male superiority has been most prolific.³¹ The need for scholarship that might help empower women to resist this tradition and to work for a better future is a premise that in this discipline requires no further demonstration. So, while this thesis is one of the first in Canada in the authorized field of "women and religion," that fact says more about the conservative tendencies in Canadian academia than it does about the stage which feminist scholarship in religious studies has reached internationally. It should be recognized that this thesis enters a discourse that is already well along the road. My argument engages with this discourse, highlighting points of theory for which it provides supporting evidence, or about which it raises new questions.

³¹ See, for example: Joanne Carlson Brown, Carole R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989); Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970; London: Virago, 1978); Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (London: Macmillan, 1989); Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines, eds., *Not In God's Image* (London: Temple Smith, 1973); Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); Charlene Spretnak, ed., *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982).

Finally, there is one characteristic of feminist scholarship which should be mentioned for the reason that it is bound to effect the manner in which many women will interpret pornography, the subject of this thesis. That characteristic is the way that feminist scholarship, because it is "interested" scholarship, tends to reach well beyond academic circles. Large numbers of women inside and outside academia in the last few decades have read the results of feminist research detailing the misogynist teachings of leading religious, political, and philosophical thinkers throughout Western history. The full weight of that tradition is therefore at the forefront of their consciousness when they encounter pornography, and should be assumed to be influencing their response to it.

Besides engaging with feminist theory in religion, the argument of this thesis is feminist in a second, more general, methodological sense as well. It follows the methodological principle that has been identified by a number of feminist scholars as central to a distinctively feminist method across all disciplines, i.e., the pursuit of questions deemed important from the perspective of women's experience, even if not deemed important by any given traditional scholarly discipline.³²

³² Pamela J. Milne made this observation in "The Difference Genre Makes: An Exercise in Exegetical Method and Feminist Hermeneutics in the Book of Judith," a guest lecture at the University of Ottawa (28 February 1991) sponsored by Le Centre canadien de recherche sur les femmes et les religions / The Canadian Centre for Research on Women and Religion. In her lecture, Milne called for the recognition of the fact that there is no such thing as "neutral scholarship," although this illusory

Thus, even though pornography has not been considered a very important question for religious studies previously, it has motivated my research because, like the vast majority of women, my experiences with pornography have been problematic, driving me to understand it better so that I might devise a more effective response to it.

Critics argue that traditional social science has begun its analyses only in men's experiences. That is, it has asked only the questions about social life that appear problematic from within the social experiences that are characteristic for men (white, Western, bourgeois men, that is).... Reflection on how social phenomena get defined as problems in need of explanation in the first place quickly reveals that there is no such thing as a problem without a person (or groups of them) who have this problem: a problem is always a problem for someone or other.... One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences.³³

principle has provided the basis for pervasive disciplinary resistance to feminist scholarship, at least until the mid-1980s. She pointed out that feminist scholarship is feminist because of the questions that it asks, not the methods it uses, and because it centres on gender as the principal category of analysis. On the topic of feminist methodology, also see: Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna, *Experience, Research, Social Change: Methods from the Margins* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1989); and Himani Bannerji, Linda Carty, Kari Dehli, Susan Heald, and Kate McKenna, *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1991).

³³ Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press; and Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987), pp. 6-7. Emphasis in the original.

The discoveries I made about the relevance of pornography as a subject for religious studies -- discoveries which I put forward in this thesis -- occurred in just this way, as a consequence of my treatment of pornography as a "problem" in need of analysis in the first place. They occurred because I paid attention to pornography as a source of stress and conflict in my own life in both public and private contexts, and as a problem for countless other women as well, as indicated by the widespread opposition to pornography that women have publicly expressed. Our individual experiences are all unique, of course, and there is profound disagreement among women, and among feminists, over various issues related to pornography. We differ over the relative importance of the problem, over what aspects of pornography are most problematic, and why, and over how best to respond to each.³⁴ There are also significant exceptions to women's general perception of pornography as a problem, examples of women who like pornography, or at least some of it.³⁵ Yet, on the whole, and despite our differences of interpretation or strategy,

³⁴ A good analysis of the various feminist positions on pornography can be found in *Feminism and Pornography*, by Ronald J. Berger, Patricia Searles, and Charles E. Cottle (New York: Praeger, 1991).

³⁵ See, for example, Sallie Tisdale, "Talk Dirty to Me," *Harper's* (February 1992), pp. 37-39 and 42-46. Also see several letters-to-the-editor responding to Tisdale's essay, including one by Pat Califia, author of *Macho Sluts* and other sadomasochistic pornographic works of literature for lesbians, in *Harper's* (May 1992).

most women today (and some men too³⁶) say that they experience pornography as a problem, a problem for which there is still no satisfactory solution, and a problem which is still not even adequately understood even though it has already been analyzed extensively.³⁷

³⁶ See Michael S. Kimmel, ed., *Men Confront Pornography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1990; reprint, New York: Meridian, Penguin Books, 1991).

³⁷ Illustrative of the way that women tend to perceive pornography as a "problem" are the following two comments. The first is taken from Geraldine Finn's review of the anthology *Women Against Censorship*, ed. Varda Burstyn (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985): "Because they do not actually examine or understand pornography from the gender-specific standpoint of women, from the position of pain, humiliation, confusion, and anger which pornographic sex occasions in women, the proposed strategies and arguments against censorship in this collection actually *miss the point*. Pornographic sex is literally and figuratively thrust down our throats *all the time and from every direction* in our society, whether we want it or like it or not. And as all these writers readily acknowledge, you don't have to go to a porn store to get it; just turn on your tv or flip through your radio dial. But it is precisely this central experience of the daily grind of total sexual assault (which is the problem of pornography) which these essays fail to address with their alternative strategies..." Geraldine Finn, "Women Against Censorship -- A Critical Response," *Canadian Dimension* 20, no. 4 (July-August 1986), p. 36. Emphasis in the original. The second comment is taken from Ursula King's recent book, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (1989; reprint, London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 222, and is typical for its assumption of the problematic status of pornography: "Agonising questions as to what is the ethically right choice arise with regard to many issues facing women today (and men too). How to resolve the paradox between advocating and guarding the sacred powers of life, of nature, of the earth, and yet campaign at the same time for the right to abortion? How to defend sexual freedom and a pluralism of sexual lifestyles and yet prevent powerful male groups from exploiting female sexuality as a marketable product?"

My interest in taking up this problem for yet further analysis naturally means that I bring to bear on it my own intellectual training and experience in the field of women and religion, and this, of course, leads to my "discoveries" of matters relevant to this field. But also, as mentioned before, I bring my own perspectival biases. My experiences as a white, lower-middle-class, heterosexual, Canadian-born woman of European ancestry, now in my fifth decade, all inevitably contribute to shaping my analysis, and should be taken into account. Similarly, my theoretical position as a radical feminist rather than a libertarian feminist, socialist feminist, or liberal feminist, should also be borne in mind.³⁸

In conclusion, I should add that, in attempting to analyze this problem, one of the major questions that motivates my own research is how to explain the appeal of violent pornography. Why is there a market for this kind of material? What is the source of the appetite for representations of violent sex? In the final chapter, I suggest a possible answer to this question that I argue makes sense once the religious dimensions of the issue have been properly recognized.

Next, and for the remainder of this first chapter, I will review previous work done by religious studies scholars on the subject of pornography.

³⁸ For explanations of these theoretical positions in relation to the subject of pornography, see Ronald J. Berger et al., *Feminism and Pornography* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

PREVIOUS WORK IN THE FIELD

As mentioned before, only a few scholars in this discipline have paid any attention to pornography to date. The two most important analyses to mention are those found in Wayland Young's book, *Eros Denied*,³⁹ and Herbert Richardson's book, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*.⁴⁰ I will review each in turn.

(A) Wayland Young

In *Eros Denied* Wayland Young indirectly presents one of the early attempts to distinguish pornography from erotica using religion as the significant variable. Young implies that erotica is found most typically in non-Christian cultures, whereas pornography is a quintessentially Christian cultural phenomenon. Erotica is found in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, for example, in the sizable proportion of their art that depicts frankly sexual scenes completely devoid of any hint of doubt, danger or shame.⁴¹ The tendency in Christian culture, however, has been to confine such examples of Classical erotica to special collections not readily accessible to the public. The portrayal

³⁹ Wayland Young, *Eros Denied: Sex in Western Society* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

⁴⁰ Herbert W. Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate: The Americanization of Sex* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1971).

⁴¹ Young, *Eros Denied*, op. cit., p. 51.

of sexual activity without shame is generally treated as offensive, indeed incomprehensible, to Christian sensibilities.

Pornography, yes; nasty dirty little bits for people to masturbate over; we understand that all right, and condemn it. But not this perfectly frank, perfectly insouciant celebration of something which just isn't celebrated like that.⁴²

This is as close as Young comes to defining these two terms. Pornography consists of "nasty dirty little bits for people to masturbate over," while erotica is the "perfectly frank, perfectly insouciant celebration of [sexual relations]." (Note: Young prefers the term 'fucking', giving an etymological argument in defense of his decision to use it.⁴³)

Young's implicit argument is that Christianity cannot comprehend erotica, and therefore typically excludes it, whereas pornography is the perfect expression of the Christian understanding of sexuality. Pornography somehow conveys the understanding that sex is bad even in the midst of aiming to excite a sexual response, and the understanding that sex is bad is a fundamental Christian doctrine. Hence, while pornography may be condemned in Christian culture, it is at least understood, and is therefore a meaningful part of the culture as a whole. Erotica, on the other hand, not even being understood, is truly excluded.

⁴² Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 53. Emphasis in the original.

⁴³ Young, *Eros Denied*, pp. 11, 17-22.

The distinction Young draws between pornography and erotica is minimally developed since it is peripheral to his main thesis. His main concern is to demonstrate that "our culture is too restrictive in censoring erotic images"⁴⁴ and that Christianity is responsible for this unhealthy state of affairs. To support this criticism of Christianity, Young offers an historical analysis of the Christian religion which interprets the heresy of Manicheanism to be in fact its most characteristic quality over time.⁴⁵ "The Manichean refusal of pleasure and love which lies near the heart of the Christian picture of the world, has clothed itself from time to time in different forms."⁴⁶ In brief, these different forms are as follows: The Manichean "refusal of pleasure and love" took hold in orthodox Christian doctrine through Augustine who spent his formative years, from nineteen to twenty-eight, as a Manichee.⁴⁷ Augustine left the Manichean sect, "but carried with him the Manichean, dualist, anti-life, anti-fucking cast of mind."⁴⁸ Aquinas, in turn, clothed Augustinian-Manichean attitudes about sexual intercourse as inherently sinful with the dress of Christian rationality.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 31.

⁴⁵ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 168.

⁴⁶ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 204.

⁴⁷ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 164.

⁴⁸ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 170.

Finally, even in the post-Christian cloth of modern secularism, Young calls the persistence of these same attitudes toward sex "the Cheshire Scowl," the scowl that is left by itself after the cat-body that gave rise to it, i.e., the religion, disappears.

In most of us today, systematic beliefs about sin and damnation have long since disappeared, and all that is left is a negative feeling of doubt and guilt. Manichean Christianity was a scowling Cheshire cat, and all that is left is the scowl.⁵⁰

In essence, Young argues that Christianity has bred an unhealthy antipathy toward sex in Western society that amounts to a Manichean-style, suicidal individual and social pathology. He expresses this idea in typically direct and blunt language:

Among the great religions of the world and of history, Christianity must be squarely qualified as anti-life. It could praise fucking. Some do. It could associate it with sowing or reaping. Some do. It could regard it as an emblem of the fusion of man with God. Some do. It could, and here is the proof of the assertion, it could be quite neutral about it. Some are. But no; the act considered by itself, without question of who or when and why, is felt as a shame and a danger. Only when it is done in marriage and with the desire to have children can it be 'excused,' or even hallowed.⁵¹

Christianity is responsible for widely instilling the belief in Western society that sex is bad except under qualified conditions. Young argues that this belief necessarily leads to despair. "If fucking is a bad thing then so are we; there is no

⁵⁰ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 215.

⁵¹ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 172.

hope, because what makes us bad is what makes us. It is a closed circle of despair."⁵² In Young's view it would be far healthier to believe that sex is good except under specific conditions such as "furtiveness, grabbing, venality, and so on."⁵³ It would be far healthier to treat sex "as a joy and a good, which may be spoiled, not as a dirt and a danger which may be made antiseptic."⁵⁴ A positive, accepting, celebratory attitude toward sex would be healthier than the Christian attitude, "Because," as Young writes in the book's last sentence, "those who believe there is something wrong about the way people are made are bound to believe there is something right about the way they are unmade."⁵⁵ Thus he concludes by invoking his earlier remarks on this subject, the subject which impels him to write *Eros Denied* and provides its relevance:

It is a feeble, blind, and tense culture that withdraws its vision, which is art, from anything. When that from which art is withdrawn is that which continues life, and therefore culture, the culture wills its own extinction. When we call sex a "blind force" we are saying that we will not look at tomorrow. We deny ourselves. We deny our children, casting them off from the chain of existence which justifies us and defines them, by denying their origin. And we have externalized the denial, the withdrawal, the exclusion, through our favorite medium; technology. We have built weapons which threaten to do in the flesh what our

⁵² Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 325.

⁵³ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 327.

⁵⁴ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 327.

⁵⁵ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 328.

taboo does in the spirit, to discontinue human life, and with it our culture. How could we not? It was possible. Will a thing long enough, and you find the means to do it. Meanwhile black and brown and yellow peoples, without Christianity and its attendant technology, stand amazed and slowly understand that the final message of the Christian and post-Christian West, from the Urals to the Pacific coast, is despair, is severance, is an ending, is No. Christian and post-Christian and Communist culture is a eunuch; pornography is his severed balls; thermonuclear weapons are his staff of office. If there is anything sadder than a eunuch it is his balls; if there is anything more deadly than impotence it is murder.⁵⁶

With the expression of these concerns, Young reveals that his thesis in *Eros Denied* is similar to that of Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*.⁵⁷ Both are concerned about how the repression of "Eros" is connected to, and responsible for, the unleashing of powerfully destructive energy in modern Western civilization. Marcuse analyzes the social-psychological dynamic in Freudian terms, whereby the weakening of the "life instincts (Eros)" through repression permits the initial possibility of civilization, but the process unbinds the "death instinct" which in the end threatens civilization's undoing. Young adjoins such Freudian terms and concepts, attributing the unleashing of the destructive psychic forces we see in modern Western society to a religious factor, namely, Christianity, rather than to a necessary inner dynamic of social psychology. But both authors

⁵⁶ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 107.

⁵⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

believe that the denial or repression of Eros is key to both cause and cure of the problem.

The distinction Young draws between pornography and erotica is a minor, relatively undeveloped part of this larger thesis. Yet his association of pornography with Christianity, and erotica with non-Christian cultures is consistently drawn. Young claims to be able to distinguish "various degrees of 'pornographicness'" only among images "made within Christendom," and specifically not among images "made before or outside Christendom."⁵⁸ His criteria for judging contrasting degrees of "pornographicness" and aesthetic value in the treatment of sex in art made within Christendom are stipulated as follows:

I decry a work to the extent that it is produced by and for a masculine compulsion to masturbate, and that only, and praise it to the extent that it is produced as a true statement and a direct celebration of what people do to express the love they have for one another and to continue their kind. Images which do this, do it successfully, and do nothing else, are extremely rare in our culture.⁵⁹

When Young discusses images made "before Christendom," he implies that there was no pornography as such, or at least very little pornography. As already mentioned, he observes a tone of "frank, insouciant celebration" in classical portrayals of sex, which better fits his criterion for aesthetic value than for

⁵⁸ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 30.

⁵⁹ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 30.

pornographicness. In addition, he finds no suggestion whatsoever of doubt, danger or shame in classical depictions of sex, nor the furtiveness which, presumably, he would associate with material "produced by and for a masculine compulsion to masturbate, and that only." Classical depictions of sex were too much a part of public life to serve that minimal function.

For them -- though for the Greeks more than the Romans -- fucking, like everything else, was an action suitable for religion, for narrative, for depiction, for tragedy, for comedy, for poetry, and for satire. It was simply not a 'loaded' topic. It could be right, it could be wrong, it could be ennobling or degrading, just like any other sizable chunk of human life.⁶⁰

Finally, since the representation of sex was not excluded from any classical cultural expression as somehow unsuitable to that form, it was therefore not segregated into a form of its own. Young notes that "Licht found the word *pornographos* -- a writer about whores -- once only in his reading of classical literature."⁶¹

In sum, while Young's argument associating pornography with Christianity, and erotica with non-Christian cultures, is mostly implicit, it is discernible and, in my view, merits further attention as a claim for the history of religions. I think the contrast it makes between Christian and ancient Greek religious attitudes about sex is overdrawn, however, insofar as Young's

⁶⁰ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 52.

⁶¹ Young, *Eros Denied*, p. 52.

argument implies that there was no pornography to speak of in ancient Greece, and states that there were no feelings of doubt, danger or shame about sex either. The absence of both these elements in ancient Greece allows Young to present them as quintessentially Christian phenomena. Yet, subsequent work on the ancient Greek treatment of the sexual theme reveals the presence of both elements. Michel Foucault⁶² has analyzed the ways Greek men expressed their own serious emotional stresses surrounding sexuality. Marilyn Arthur⁶³ has identified a class-specific range of emotions and attitudes about sex, including the attitude that sex is fraught with danger. And Eva Keuls⁶⁴ has sketched a fuller picture of Greek sexual practices and their representation showing, among other things, the presence of Greek pornography. Given these studies, I believe that it is time to up-date the history of religions claim implicit in Young's argument, the claim that pornography and feelings of doubt, danger or shame about sex are uniquely Christian phenomena, even if they have been prominent Christian phenomena.

⁶² Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, Vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1988). Originally published as *L'Usage des plaisirs* (Editions Gallimard, 1984).

⁶³ Marilyn B. Arthur, "Early Greece: The Origins of the Western Attitude Toward Women," in *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, ed. John Peradotto and J.P. Sullivan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), pp. 7-58.

⁶⁴ Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

(B) Herbert W. Richardson

In his book, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, Herbert Richardson presents a comprehensive theory about the evolution of consciousness in which he traces a meaningful pattern in the relationship between sex and religion from prehistoric times to the present in Western civilization. Pornography, in the form of the *Playboy Playmate* image, figures in his evolutionary model as a symbol representing the achievement of modern American society at the fourth stage in the model. That is, it represents the successful integration of sex within friendship and mutual understanding between men and women. It represents the evolutionary achievement of "agapic love" over "eros love".

To understand Richardson's interpretation of modern pornography, and in particular his interpretation of *Playboy's* unique status elevated above other "girlie magazines," it is necessary to situate these views more fully within the context of his whole theory about the evolution of consciousness. For, as he believes, the evolution of sexuality "is but a manifestation of" the evolution of consciousness:

Sex is not some peripheral human function, but is the fundamental manifestation of the human spirit. The way that man [sic] deals with his body shows how man is conscious of himself and what self-aspirations he entertains. This explains why religions -- which are fundamentally concerned with the development of the spirit -- are concerned with sexuality and find this realm to be the testing ground of faith. The history

of sexuality is ... the history of the schooling of the human spirit.⁶⁵

There are five stages in Richardson's evolutionary model:

mimetic consciousness -- from earliest times
ego consciousness -- beginning 7000-1000 b.c.e.
rational consciousness -- beginning 800-400 b.c.e.
self-consciousness -- beginning 1300-1700 c.e.
polyconsciousness -- just beginning to emerge now

The salient features of each stage are, briefly, as follows:

The first stage, mimetic consciousness, is the consciousness of "tribal man" [sic] and is marked by an awareness of being part of nature. Human sexuality is correspondingly understood to be part of the surrounding natural forces of fecundity.⁶⁶ It is symbolized in male and female deities,⁶⁷ and is ritualized in imitation of the cycle of vegetative and animal fertility, as, for example, in "primitive human sacrifice [which] was one aspect of this *mimesis*."⁶⁸

The second stage, ego consciousness, is marked by individuation from the tribe, which involves a rejection of the mother and a corresponding oppression of women.⁶⁹ It is

⁶⁵ Herbert W. Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

⁶⁶ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 4-11.

⁶⁷ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 8.

⁶⁸ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 7-12.

achieved through a transformation in the way men control their sexual behaviour and through "psychological separation from the Mother,"⁷⁰ and these are achieved, in turn, through the physical separation of males in "the practice of male virginity." The practice of male virginity is the key that gives males the space to develop an "emerging will, or ego" as their "dominant mode of consciousness."⁷¹ The emergence of the paradigm of "volitional creativity" over "sexual creativity" is reflected in Hebrew male monotheism, and in the replacement of the fertility ritual with the "enthronement ritual."⁷² Richardson thinks that the laws of extreme avoidance of women in the Hebrew Bible express the sexual consciousness of men at this second stage in his model, that is, they express the "extreme anxiety experienced by men before the sexual power of the female."⁷³

Women do not evolve at the same rate as men, according to Richardson's model, since at this stage "mimetic consciousness remains dominant in [women] and they do not develop wills of their own"⁷⁴ but remain other-focused in their roles as wives and mothers. Richardson observes that the higher social status of Greek and Roman women, in comparison to Hebrew women, and

⁷⁰ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 18.

⁷¹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 18-19.

⁷² Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 9.

⁷³ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 21.

their "freer" sexuality, was paid for by "a lesser development of ego consciousness and of human individuation" in Greek and Roman societies.⁷⁵

Unfortunately, Richardson is less specific about the evolution of women's consciousness after stage two. And his frequent use of the masculine form 'man' as a generic interchangeable with 'human' often makes it difficult to tell whether he intends to include women.⁷⁶ However, I think he probably means to suggest that women (at least those among the religious elite -- see below, p. 58) "catch up" during stage three, even though most of the intricacies of stage four seem to apply mainly to men. Except when quoting Richardson, then, I use inclusive language for the remaining stages.

Reason replaces the will as the central organizing principle of consciousness during the third stage in Richardson's model, that of rational consciousness. This third stage begins (800-400 b.c.e.) with the emergence of "the consciousness of an unchanging transcendent order"⁷⁷ and the redefinition of the human as

⁷⁵ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 22.

⁷⁶ A typical example of his sexist language occurs when he is discussing "perpetual virginity" which applies to both men and women during stage three, rational consciousness. Richardson writes (p. 32): "Even to imagine the possibility that sexual desire can be renounced involves the presence of a new kind of human consciousness, a consciousness wherein a man no longer identifies with and feels the instinctual sexuality of his body as truly his own."

⁷⁷ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 37.

a "substance of a rational nature."⁷⁸ Anything not rational, such as sexuality, is considered inessential, and renounced. "Perpetual virginity" becomes a goal for women as well as for men during early Christianity, leading to the development of the full equality of men and women as equally "rational" beings, and opening the way for the development of love as friendship between men and women.⁷⁹ Previously, during stage two, the ancient world had believed that "a personal, voluntary friendship between a man and a woman was impossible"⁸⁰:

They could be related to each other only *sexually*, not by the moral communion of friendship -- for friendship presupposes full equality and likeness of humanity ⁱⁿ each of the persons united in this moral communion.⁸¹

During stage three men and women gain "full equality and likeness of humanity" insofar as they are rational beings. Those who demonstrate their rationality through the "renunciation of sexuality" become able to develop a new form of relationship with each other, the moral communion of friendship, spiritual love.

Once the reality of this spiritual love has been experienced, it is possible to ask whether sexual intercourse itself might be so transformed and elevated

⁷⁸ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 31.

⁷⁹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 31-36.

⁸⁰ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 34. Emphasis in the original.

⁸¹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 34. Emphasis in the original.

that it can be integrated within it. And this is, in fact, what occurs in the next evolutionary stage. But the first experience of this spiritual love between man and woman was so startling and so satisfying that for a thousand years the practice of perpetual virginity was joyously chosen as the way to love more fully. This virginity was not the repudiation, but the enhancement, of love and the dignity of both man and woman.⁸²

The Renaissance marks the beginning of the fourth stage in the evolution of consciousness, self-consciousness. Humans become aware of themselves as the free and active cause of their own consciousness, laying the ground for the "transformation of sexuality" and bringing about the potential for the unification of sex and love. This unification can happen when the individual achieves "integration of the sexual drive within the totality of voluntary personality."⁸³ In this case, the genital drive, the sexual drive toward orgasm that emerges with puberty, is transformed so that it operates "only within the range of voluntary love," being no longer an "anonymous generalized drive looking for release (Kinsey's 'outlets')."⁸⁴ The goal, and satisfaction, ceases to be private orgasm, becoming instead one of personal communion, epitomized in the end by the American ideal of "simultaneous orgasm." "What this concept is trying to express is that what makes sex satisfactory is not the orgasm itself, but the simultaneity or perfect mutuality of the persons

⁸² Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 36.

⁸³ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 41.

⁸⁴ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 44.

who unite themselves to one another through the act of sexual love."⁸⁵ The practices of "courtly love" in late medieval Europe and, later, "petting" in modern America, both of which preclude orgasm, serve to encourage the development of the ideal of love as psychological intimacy. They are each social institutions offering the means of breaking the power of instinctual sexuality and bringing it under the individual's volitional control, in a manner akin to the control that the individual acquires over other, non-sexual, instinctual drives before puberty.⁸⁶

All these "transformations" in human behaviour that occur at stage four in the evolution of consciousness, Richardson writes,

... could only take place within a wholly transformed metaphysics, or world view. Just as an individual person's sexual self-image is an evidence for the mode of consciousness in him [sic], so the sexual practices of a total society are manifestations of a total religio-political outlook. The development of courtly love, therefore, not only evidences the emergence of self-consciousness in man [sic], but also evidences the rise of a new form of religion, or theology, in late medieval society.⁸⁷

Richardson presents the religious dimension of this fourth stage as marked by a recovery of the personal sense of God from the sense of God as universal rational principle that prevailed

⁸⁵ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 45.

⁸⁶ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 41-47.

⁸⁷ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 60.

during the previous stage, and also by the recovery of the female. "Medieval theology found the way to symbolize divinity in both men and women by elevating Mary to a place of co-dignity (if not precisely co-equality) with Jesus."⁸⁸ Mary's elevation was achieved through the doctrine of her immaculate conception, which meant that she had been conceived without sin, like Jesus, though by very different means, as he explains:

"Immaculate conception" means something different from virgin birth. By "immaculate conception" is meant that Mary was conceived in the normal human way, but without sin. In the religion of this time, it was still assumed that all sexual intercourse was sinful because it involved the temporary suspension of man's reason and voluntary freedom⁸⁹ by man's passions -- at least in the moment of orgasm.

A consequence of the Marian doctrine of immaculate conception which is "not yet fully explicated by Catholic theology -- is that it implies there can be a perfectly sinless act of sexual intercourse," meaning "an act of sexual intercourse in which there is a perfect congruence of moral intention and sexual feeling," or sexual intimacy that is "fully moralized and

⁸⁸ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 61.

⁸⁹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 61-62. Is this not an instance where the ambiguity of sexist, exclusive language provokes some interesting questions? Was the state of woman's reason or passions ever considered relevant to this doctrinal issue? Since woman can conceive without experiencing orgasm, perhaps only the male's orgasm is relevant in the transmission of "original sin"?

spiritualized."⁹⁰ That, Richardson asserts, was precisely the intention of courtly love practices that began to emerge coincidentally with the initial popularization of this Marian doctrine in the 11th and 12th centuries.

Richardson qualifies the idea of the "recovery" of the divine female in Mary by pointing out that she does not symbolize a "regression" to the Great Mother of pre-patriarchal history because the latter was an ambiguous figure, "a Life Figure and a Death figure," whereas Mary has no death side. Hence, in Mariology "woman is freed from this 'biological' duality -- just as, in patriarchal religion, man freed himself from it."⁹¹ However, as Richardson also relates, the death side cannot be denied, the awareness of human finitude cannot be eliminated from human psychology, nor from causing "anxieties and negative feelings." Though "not projected on Mary or the lady of courtly love, they do find their symbolization and expression" eventually in the symbol of the Witch.⁹²

Richardson explains the pronounced degree to which the Witch figure of the late Middle Ages is bound up also with sexuality. It results, he says, from the anxiety that men experienced due to their new approach to women "as sexual friends and equals":

⁹⁰ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 62.

⁹¹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 62-63.

⁹² Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 64-65.

Everything in man's past had been such as to make him experience sexual encounter as aggressive, as a relation where one person manifested power over the other. We have seen, for example, how much the exaggerated authority of the male over the female in the patriarchal system also was a defense against unconscious anxieties about the sexual power of woman. For men to begin to behave toward women in a new way, approaching them not with aggression, but with openness and intimate caring, was a brave thing. No matter how much man tried to believe there was no danger in this open kind of love, the older fear about the power of woman still was at work in him. It is this older fear that was first objectified and then catharsized in the figure of the Witch.⁹³

Once thus "catharsized" in the witch-hunts, men moved beyond this fear, presumably, or at least some men did. For he writes that the American Puritans were the first to take the next step in psychosexual evolution, that is, to combine romantic love and marriage, and thereby to transcend the "age-old separation of procreative sex and personal love" that still prevailed even during the period of courtly love.⁹⁴ The Americans also abandoned the European model of sexual initiation by an older experienced partner, requiring of adolescents instead that they undergo a long, gradual period of "psychosexual learning" through the American "institutions" of prolonged dating and petting. In cases where this process of psychosexual learning is successful, the result is that "a gradual increase in sexual knowledge, self-knowledge, and intimate knowledge of others is attained so that

⁹³ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 65.

⁹⁴ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 67.

the primordial anxiety associated with sexual intercourse is overcome."⁹⁵

This is the new male-female relation which, Richardson argues, is so aptly represented by "the new symbol complex of the 'Playboy-and-Playmate'" in *Playboy* magazine.⁹⁶

It might be said, I think, that Richardson's account of the interaction between the social and symbolic elements during stage four of his model presents a kind of dialectical movement. Symbolically, Mary represents the thesis, the Witch is the antithesis, and the *Playboy* Playmate serves as the synthesis.

As the very name 'Playmate' itself suggests, the *Playboy* Playmate symbolizes a relationship between men and women in which sexuality has been incorporated within genuine friendship, and in which men have overcome the "primordial anxiety" that this type of intimacy at first provoked.

What is especially unusual about the *Playboy*-*Playmate* symbolism is that the sexually attractive woman is here conceived as a friend and equal. The very name "Playmate" carries with it reminiscences of pre-adolescent childhood when sexual differences were not decisive for friendship groups. The "Playmate" is the girl from whom all the aggressive aspects of human sexuality have been removed. (Many commentators even call her asexual. They reveal their own male group bias!) The *Playmate* is not of interest simply for her sexual functions alone. The photo montage that surrounds the *Playmate* portrays her in a variety of everyday activities: going to work, visiting her family, climbing mountains and sailing, dancing and

⁹⁵ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 84.

⁹⁶ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 89-92.

dining out, figuring out her income tax. She is, first and foremost, the Playboy's all-day, all-night pal.⁹⁷

Most importantly, in the male-female relation symbolized by *Playboy*, the sexual woman is no longer a source of male anxiety.

We might recall our earlier discussion of the anxiety of the male before the sexual power of the female (symbolically the mother), an anxiety that threatened to render him impotent unless it could be transformed into aggression whereby he could dominate the female. By imagining her as hostile or potentially dangerous, the primitive male was able to generate the feeling of aggression required for phallic penetration. It was because the sexual relation drew upon this reservoir of anxiety and aggression that the pre-modern world regarded friendship between sexual partners as impossible.⁹⁸

It is important to note that, because of its symbolism, *Playboy* magazine differs profoundly from "lower-middle-class 'girlie magazines'"⁹⁹ which still portray the sexual woman as a

⁹⁷ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 90.

⁹⁸ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 88.

⁹⁹ "*Playboy* magazine is aimed at the college-aspiring group within our society, that is, at those persons who prolong adolescence while they learn specialized social and work skills. This prolongation of adolescence leads, as we have seen, to a greater integration of sexual and personal feeling and behavior. Those men and women who begin full sexual life immediately after the onset of puberty never attain to such an integration. For them, sex remains to a high degree segmental. We can see this difference between the integrated sex of the upper middle class and the segmented sex of the lower middle class by comparing the *Playboy* symbol of man-and-woman with the parallel image of man-and-woman found in lower-middle-class 'girlie magazines' (that is, in magazines aimed at a readership that has had a shorter adolescence and hence not learned the full integration of personal and sexual feelings)." Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 90.

threat to the male. "Girlie magazines," in stark contrast to *Playboy*, continue to reflect a "pre-modern" sensibility. They are aimed at a readership of men who have not had the benefit of sufficiently prolonged periods of adolescence to learn "the full integration of personal and sexual feelings"¹⁰⁰ necessary for overcoming men's primordial sexual anxiety.

The girl in lower-middle-class girlie magazines is never portrayed as a man's friend -- and for neither her man nor for her is sex "just fun." Sex for them is always deadly serious. It is where they prove their manhood and their womanhood. This girl is always portrayed as a threat to the male. She is pictured with animal skins, boots, and a whip. She dresses in exotic black lace and various erotica. She is dangerous and bad. She poses a threat to the man who is not Male enough to take her. Her man is not some *Playboy*, but a real Male tested in deadly combat with his buddies (the girlie magazines are filled with tales of the muscular adventures of all male groups) and he knows how to tame her, too. He will "lay it on her" (how many men still talk this way?) and "make a woman out of her."¹⁰¹

If it is fair to characterize Richardson's account of symbolization at the self-consciousness stage of evolution as a dialectical movement from Mary to Witch to *Playboy* *Playmate*, then perhaps these other "girlie magazines" represent the continuation of the Witch symbol. The survival of the Witch symbol, metamorphosed into lower-middle-class pornography, is evidence that the dialectical movement is not yet fully resolved at the

¹⁰⁰ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 90.

¹⁰¹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, pp. 90-91.

symbolic level, and that the corresponding transformations occurring socially in this stage of evolution are also not yet complete. Not all men have achieved the degree of psychosexual integration enjoyed by the readership of *Playboy*. The *Playboy* symbol represents only those who have most fully realized the potential of self-conscious psychosexual integration.

To complete this brief account of Richardson's five-stage model for the evolution of consciousness, Richardson predicts that the fifth stage will be ushered in by another "disciplined spiritual-sexual elite"¹⁰² following the pattern observable in the history of sexuality in which the great evolutionary "leaps" were innovated by "three great pioneering elites ... the ancient Hebrews, the Catholic monastics, and the American Puritans and spiritualists."¹⁰³ "Every evolution in the sexual order presupposes, and only expresses, an evolution in the spiritual order."¹⁰⁴ Taking his cue from the "more complex communalization of sex hinted at by the American utopias," i.e., the Shakers, the Oneida group, and the Mormons, Richardson anticipates that the fifth stage...

... must be a kind of 'polyconsciousness.' It must be a consciousness whereby men [sic] can somehow find that sharing does not threaten themselves and their

¹⁰² Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 137.

¹⁰³ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 138.

¹⁰⁴ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 137.

individualities, a consciousness that is able to bear a greater multiplicity in unity.¹⁰⁵

Richardson desists, however, from making any further claims about this "polyconsciousness", asserting only that some such new form of consciousness "must first precede the institutionalization of any such communal sexuality."¹⁰⁶

Obviously, Richardson's account is not, like Young's, a polemic against Christianity. Nor does it make the same history of religions error of attributing all sex-negative attitudes, or male sexual anxieties (as Richardson prefers to characterize the problem), to Christianity. In fact, quite the reverse, for Richardson calls male sexual anxieties before the sexual power of women "primordial" (or at least a prominent feature of stage two),¹⁰⁷ and argues that Christianity contributed to the conquering of these anxieties. By its institution of the practice of celibate religious orders for both men and women, he reasons, Christianity made it possible for the first time in

¹⁰⁵ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁶ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁷ "It was in ancient Israel, rather than in Greece, that the primacy of legal over biological creativity was established in its most uncompromising form. Hence it was in Israel that the superiority of the male over the female was most unequivocally affirmed -- a fact that has had unique consequences for the position of women in Western societies ever since. But, precisely because of this development, it was in Israel that the anxiety of the male before the sexual power of the female came to its most acute expression." Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 11.

history for friendship and psychological intimacy to develop between men and women. This laid the basis so that eventually, after many centuries, sex could be incorporated back into the male-female relationship without rekindling men's primordial sexual anxieties, and attendant sexual aggressiveness, except for the temporary, "cathartic" period of the Witch-hunts. (The other notable exception, of course, is the lower classes of men whose circumstances deprive them of opportunities for sufficiently gradual psychosexual development, and who therefore remain even today at an essentially "pre-modern" level of psychosexual development. Richardson's model applies primarily to the elite class, as he reveals explicitly in his comments about the last stage).

While Richardson does not make the same history of religions error that Young makes, then, a major difficulty with his account nevertheless resides in the area of the history of religions. For Richardson's model is an explicitly evolutionary model. That is, it assumes the idea of progress toward a higher level of consciousness with each advance through the various stages of the model. It specifies, for example, that "tribal" mimetic consciousness, with its awareness of being part of nature, involves "a lesser development of ego consciousness and of human individuation" than is desirable.¹⁰⁸ As a consequence of his

¹⁰⁸ For example, he writes that, "Man's developing awareness that his own sexuality might be different from the sexuality of animals was a major evolutionary advance." Richardson, *Nun*,

understanding of "tribal" consciousness, it should be noted, he ignores the possibility of male-female friendship among tribal peoples when he asserts that Christianity was first to make male-female friendship possible. Because his model is evolutionary it also suggests that the rejection of the Mother symbolically, and the oppression of women socially, were both necessary, and therefore pardonable, for "human individuation" -- first men's, then women's individuation -- and "ego consciousness" to occur. (By 'individuation' he means the process through which humans recognize and utilize their "power to transcend and transform [biological instincts]." ¹⁰⁹) In this respect, Richardson's evolutionary model is similar to the model of spiritual evolution proposed in 1861 by J.J. Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht*, which explicitly presents "the victory of the patriarchate" over the matriarchate, and a corresponding spiritual advance characterized by the "liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature." ¹¹⁰

Perhaps the fact that Richardson's model -- like Bachofen's -- does not enjoy currency within the discipline of religious studies is due to this problem of its evolutionary nature. Such

Witch, Playmate, p. 5. My emphasis. Also see pp. 17-22, where he equates "tribal" consciousness with that of an infant.

¹⁰⁹ Richardson, *Nun, Witch, Playmate*, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ J.J. Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) is available in a selection of his writings, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim, called *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

evolutionary models are increasingly being recognized for their ethnocentric limitations.

Yet, despite this drawback, Richardson's theory of sexual-spiritual evolution is an intriguing attempt to account within one coherent framework for such phenomena as the prolonged popularity of celibate religious orders, the revival of feminine imagery for divinity (in virginal form) in the medieval emphasis on the symbol of Mary, the subsequent emergence of the Witch figure (and the period of the Witch-hunts), and finally the appearance of a new symbol effectively superseding both Mary and the Witch, i.e., the *Playboy Playmate* (along with the remnant of the Witch in "lower-middle-class 'girlie magazines'").

Furthermore, Richardson's account is useful for the purposes of this thesis. It is useful, in the first instance, because it accords to one form of contemporary pornography, i.e., the *Playboy Playmate* figure, the status of a "symbol complex" on a par with the religious symbols of Mary and the Witch figure, and to "lower-middle-class" pornography a status implicitly comparable to the Witch figure. Richardson thus sets a useful scholarly precedent by treating pornographic imagery as carrying a religious function, and as expressing a paradigmatically modern spiritual sensibility. Although my own argument interprets the religious significance of pornography in a manner quite different than his, Richardson's example shows that my interpretation is

not unprecedented for the mere fact of according religious significance as such to pornography.

Richardson's model is useful, in the second instance, because it acknowledges, from a male perspective, the fact of men's sexual anxieties before the sexual power of women. He presents these male anxieties as a fact that helps to explain particular patterns and events in the history of religions. And he presents them as a fact of male developmental psychology, as a consequence of male processes of individuation and ego development that require radical separation from the mother. His model therefore complements the psychological theory about gender differences in developmental psychology which I use in Chapter Four, as mentioned above.

Finally, Richardson's model is also useful for its recognition of the factor of class in pornography. There are upper-class prostitutes and lower-class prostitutes, and there are corresponding class interests reflected in pornography too.

Richardson's recognition of this last fact, however, may be inadvertent, since he does not himself recognize the *Playboy* *Playmate* as a prostitute figure, not even as an upper-class one. (Nor, for that matter, does he ever label either *Playboy* or its lower-middle-class counterparts explicitly as 'pornography'.) From a feminist perspective, this is where Richardson's model fails in its usefulness. For Richardson's interpretation of *Playboy* suggests that he has been completely "taken in" by the

illusion of the-girl-next-door type of innocence that this particular magazine cultivates. The *Playboy Playmate* presents, as Richardson recognizes, a non-threatening type of sexual allure. Her image is neither aggressive nor whorish. But what Richardson doesn't seem to recognize is that this image is very carefully designed precisely in order to appear that way.

The following account of women's perceptions in looking at *Playboy* reveals the naiveté in Richardson's interpretation of it, and therefore demonstrates the inadequacy of his interpretation of this particular example of contemporary pornography when viewed from a feminist perspective, despite the usefulness of some other components in his theory. For when women look at this magazine, as Mariana Valverde explains, we see something very different from the symbol of agapic heterosexual love that Richardson sees in it.

When we look at a *Playboy* centrefold we generally see a young white woman with a flawless body; she is either sitting or reclining, her genital area is exposed in a purposeful manner and is usually in the centre of the picture. In itself, the picture does not have very much meaning. We supply most of the meaning ourselves, from our experience of living in a sexist, ageist and racist society, and from our general knowledge of what *Playboy* is and what is expected of the viewer. We know from sources outside the magazine that it is not coincidental that the woman in the picture is young, slim, white, and helpless-looking. We know from our own experience that the photo was created for a male audience and that when a man looks at it he will react in certain specified ways. He will not merely glance at the photo as he would at a landscape or a family photograph; he will gaze intently, stare at, and possess that woman with his eyes. We also know, from our knowledge of how

capitalism works, that the purpose of the publication is not to celebrate the female body but rather to use female bodies to make profits. Thus, we use our knowledge of both the production and the consumption processes involved in pornography to interpret the picture and ascribe to it a meaning.

Furthermore, we are informed about the usual relations between men and women in our society, and that information is what produces the feelings we experience when looking at the otherwise harmless photo. We feel embarrassed for the model because we know that her apparent naive innocence is a deception designed to heighten the male's pleasure in conquering the pictured body. We feel angry at men, both those who make money from the photo and those who spend money on it. We feel vulnerable and at risk. But it is not the picture itself which creates these feelings. If men never raped women in real life, the same picture would not have the same power to make us feel violated.^{!!!}

Therefore, in conclusion, Richardson's treatment of the subject of pornography from a religious studies perspective, though useful in some respects, is ultimately unsatisfactory for feminist purposes, just as the evolutionary model of which it forms a part is an inadequate model for the history of religions.

In addition to these two analyses of pornography by Wayland Young and Herbert Richardson, there have been a few feminist scholars in the discipline who have recently paid attention to the problem of pornography. Ginette Paris refers to pornography briefly in her discussion of the social and psychological value for women in reviving the ancient Greek goddess, Aphrodite, in

^{!!!} Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, op. cit., pp. 125-126.

her book, *Pagan Meditations*.¹¹² And Mary Jo Weaver analyzes the treatment of pornography by both feminist critics and traditionalist Christians in her article, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination."¹¹³ The ideas of each of these authors will be incorporated in the appropriate sections of the argument that follows.

Now, having completed my review of previous work in the field dealing with pornography, I will proceed with my own analysis. In the following chapters I will show how pornography is a subject that is relevant for religious studies, and for the field of women and religion in particular.

¹¹² Ginette Paris, *Pagan Meditations: The Worlds of Aphrodite, Artemis and Hestia*, trans. Gwendolyn Moore (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1986).

¹¹³ Mary Jo Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," in *For Adult Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography*, ed. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 68-86.

CHAPTER TWO

A DIALOGUE OF ANTITHESIS

Objections to pornography are basically just objections to certain types of sexual attitude and behavior.... In the Western tradition, compared with others of the world, attitudes toward sexuality have been extremely negative.... It was largely through the spread of Christianity and Islam that most of the world acquired its traditional sexual attitudes. More liberal views evidently prevailed before that time in most places.

Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*¹

The idea that pornography and Christianity have an antithetical relation to each other is the idea that is still most commonly held, and with good reason. Modern pornography explicitly relates itself to Christian antisexualism as its major opponent. And the Christian churches have a history of lobbying for censorship of pornography. Their opposition to each other is manifest, both historically and ideologically. Yet it is not as simple as it appears.

In this chapter I will analyze both poles in this opposition, and begin demonstrating how the antithesis between pornography and Christianity is often overly simplistically drawn, even in the most current discussions about it.

¹ F.M. Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side* (New York: Praeger, 1990), pp. 3, 18.

POLE #1:

PORNOGRAPHY REPRESENTS A "LIBERATED" VIEW OF SEX -- THE POLAR
OPPOSITE OF REPRESSIVE CHRISTIAN ANTISEXUALISM

The first examples of modern pornographic literature came out of the Enlightenment, when the hegemony of religiously grounded thinking began losing credibility in Christian cultures. From the beginning, pornography combined sex and the church as a way to mock the church and assert independence from it. In 1727 the book *Venus in the Cloister or the Nun in Her Smock* was outlawed in the first English case establishing obscenity as a crime in England.² In France the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) wrote the books *Justine, ou les Malheurs de la Vertu*, *Juliette*, *Les Cent Vingt Jours de Sodome*, and *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*. His books established what became a reference point for sadomasochistic sexual behaviour as a pornographic literary subject. An obvious and striking feature of de Sade's style is his manner of having the characters repeatedly deliver philosophical discourses on virtue and vice, which have been much lauded for their prose and trenchant thought, and in which God and Christian ethics are scorned and roundly rejected.

In *Justine, ou les Malheurs de la Vertu*, for example, the young woman, Justine, is a devout, virtuous Christian who

² Gary L. Ward, "Introductory Essay: A Survey of the Pornography Issue," in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), p. xiv.

encounters and suffers at the hands of an endless array of individuals who assault her faith along with her body. A typical example of the philosophizing so characteristic of de Sade's style is the following conversation between Justine and "the Dubois woman" who renounces any Christian sense of remorse for her path of vice:

"But do you not believe," I continued, "that heavenly justice awaits in another world those whom crime has failed to frighten in this one?"

"I believe," continued this dangerous woman, "that if there were a God there would be less evil on the earth. I believe that if this evil exists, either these disorders are the will of this God, in which case he is a cruel creature; or he is incapable of preventing them, in which case he is a weak god; and in both cases a loathsome creature whose wrath I must defy and whose laws I must despise..."³

When de Sade describes the kind of vice his philosophy endorses the actions often combine sexual assault with blasphemy. One such scene runs as follows:

...they [the monks] had the child stripped, laid her face down upon a large table, lit tapers, placed the image of our Saviour upon the young girl's loins, and dared to perform upon her buttocks the most awful of our mysteries. Unable to endure this horrible spectacle, I swooned away. Severino, seeing me in this state, said that in order to accustom me to such things I must serve as altar in my turn. I was seized and laid in the same place as Florette, the sacrifice was performed, and Severino seized the Host, that sacred symbol of our august religion, plunged it into the

³ The Marquis de Sade, *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue*, translated by Helen Weaver (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 245-246.

obscene site of his Sodomitical pleasures, forced it furiously, shoved it shamefully under the redoubled blows of his monstrous shaft, and uttering blasphemies, released upon the very body of his Saviour the foul torrent of his lust.⁴

De Sade initiated a pornographic literary tradition that continues into the present. It includes authors from Georges Bataille and Pauline Réage to Bret Easton Ellis, a young American writer who is author of the recent, highly controversial novel, *American Psycho*.⁵ Ellis sets the story in *American Psycho* in New York City in the 1980s, a very different social and intellectual climate than that of the early Enlightenment which was the background for de Sade's books, and Ellis' treatment of the theme of Christianity reflects that difference. Yet there are several touches in Ellis' novel that subtly recall a Sadeian approach, such as the one in which he prepares his victim for torture by "crucifying" her, that is, by nailing her spread-eagled arms to wooden boards laid on the floor using a nail gun:

I drag her back into the living room, laying her across the floor over a white Voilacutro cotton sheet, and then I stretch her arms out, placing her hands flat on thick wooden boards, palms up, and nail three fingers on each hand, at random, to the wood by their tips. This causes her to regain consciousness and she starts screaming. After I've sprayed Mace into her eyes, mouth, into her nostrils, I place a camel-hair coat from Ralph Lauren over her head, which drowns out the screams, sort of. I keep shooting nails into her hands

⁴ The Marquis de Sade, *Justine*, p. 161.

⁵ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House; and Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1991).

until they're both covered -- nails bunched together, twisted over each other in places, making it impossible for her to try and sit up.... Finally, in agony, after I've taken the coat off her face, she starts pleading, or at least tries to, the adrenaline momentarily overpowering the pain. "Patrick oh god stop it please oh god stop hurting me..."⁶

Before proceeding to stab her in the breasts, slice off one of her nipples, "fuck her in the mouth" a few times, and other atrocities, Patrick sets up his "Sony palm-sized Handycam so I can film all of what follows."⁷ Besides such scenes of sadistic torture with their subtle whiffs of blasphemous mockery, Ellis uses Christian symbols as meaningful metaphors for modern madness, both Patrick's own individual state of psychotic insanity, and the madness of modern society as a whole. For example, when Patrick reluctantly attends a rock concert to humour a friend, he experiences a vision in which the rock performer literally metamorphoses into the devil and communicates with him.⁸ Another example is in the name of the quarter of New York City, "Hell's Kitchen," where Patrick chooses to rent space for disposing some of the corpses of his many victims.⁹ Though much less obvious than in de Sade's writing, the symbols evoking a Christian worldview still vibrate in Ellis' writing. On the

⁶ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 245-246.

⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 246.

⁸ Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 146-147.

⁹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 219.

one hand, Ellis seems to mock Christianity and its symbols, to imply that they express madness rather than a satisfying religious perspective; yet, on the other hand, these same symbols are appreciated, and are used as meaningful metaphors for describing modern society precisely because of their being so richly demonic and psychotic. Ultimately, however, except for its demonic messages, we are made to understand that Christianity is passé and meaningless. Any kind of spiritually salvific or optimistic religious outlook on life is long since dead, belonging to a former era, to a bygone time, and to another kind of consciousness:

Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted...

Comparable observations can be made about the pornographic magazines as about these books by de Sade and Ellis. The overall tenor of pornographic magazines is less violent than the literary tradition, though there is variation in the levels of violence across titles and over time: the well-known title, *Hustler*, for example, and other less well-known titles, such as *Bound Bitches*, are unabashedly more violent than *Playboy*. But the magazines are

¹⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 375. Ellis' world has no spiritual dimension at all, in fact; it is unrelentingly materialistic and shallow -- all surfaces --, a point made monotonously manifest through his bizarre stylistic feature of paying attention to the minutest material details as if they were repositories of meaningfulness.

all just as anxious to present themselves as being in opposition to Christian ethics, or at least to Christian sexual ethics. Since 1953, when the best-seller *Playboy* began publishing, its explicit philosophy has been to oppose the repressive sexual ethic of Christianity. While admitting, indeed lauding, a new "more liberal" attitude toward sex among "some" members of the clergy, Hugh M. Hefner, editor-publisher of *Playboy*, focuses his attention on the task of uprooting the anti-sex heritage of Christianity in the United States. In *The Playboy Philosophy*, Hefner says:

I think our Judaeo-Christian heritage includes an element of antisex that has gotten out of hand over the centuries, and has given us more problems than benefits. Too much of the emphasis has been on 'Thou shalt not'; too much on guilt, fear and suppression.... Western religion, especially the Puritan and post-Puritan aspects of it in America and England, has a far more antisexual history than most of the members of contemporary society realize; and yet this is precisely where our own irrational sex attitudes come from.¹¹

¹¹ Hugh M. Hefner, *The Playboy Philosophy*, Condensed Edition (Chicago: Playboy Magazine, 1979), p. 27. Hefner reports on his own research on the history of Christian attitudes toward sex: "... when I first became involved in researching the origins of our religions' antagonism to sex, for some of the early installments of the *Philosophy*, what I discovered came as something of a revelation. I learned that prior to the Exile, the Jews were a remarkably permissive people regarding sex; I also found that Christian antisex began less with Christ than with St. Paul. It was strongly re-emphasized by the Church of the Middle Ages, but reached its zenith after the Reformation, of course, with Puritanism and the period thereafter, particularly in the latter part of the 19th Century." In this editorial series Hefner also responds to the occasional "protest that *The Playboy Philosophy* is opposed to the basic Judaeo-Christian heritage of America" by asserting that "we have consistently directed our criticism, not at organized religion per se, but at

Penthouse, which began in 1969, echoes the *Playboy* line, only more irreverently. *Hustler*, starting in 1974, is more irreverent and iconoclastic still, but promotes the same condemnation of "unhealthy" Christian ideas about sex: "the magazine has as its goal the promotion of healthy sexual attitudes and enjoyment of the human body."¹² Given the remarkably high circulation figures of pornographic magazines,¹³ I think we can be confident that it is the magazines that are mostly responsible for the persistent (but -- as I will argue -- misleading) contemporary

the antisexual element within it.... [at] that part of our religious heritage that has, for centuries, emphasized sex primarily as sin and, in the most extreme form of the Puritanism that has so influenced our Anglo-American culture, has opposed almost every kind of pleasure as immoral and against the will of God." (p. 1)

¹² *Magazines for Libraries*, 6th edition (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1989), p. 771. My emphasis. I think it is worth noting that the contributor of this particular entry about "men's magazines" generally, and *Hustler* in particular, is male. He does not appear to recognize any conflict between what he identifies as the magazine's goal, i.e., the promotion of "healthy" sexual attitudes, and what he describes as its "sometimes tasteless assault on specific individuals, products, standards of behavior, etc."

¹³ From the "Pornography Fact Sheet" in the study guide, *Pornography: The Distortion of Erotica*, produced by the Anglican Church of Canada, 1985:

- In North America "Playboy" and "Penthouse" circulation is greater than "Time" and "Newsweek".
- Penthouse sells 500,000 copies in Canada per month.
- Of 10 most profitable magazines on newsstands six are "men's entertainment".
- Canadian publisher David Wells boasts that his skin magazine outsells "Toronto Life", "Saturday Night", and "Macleans" combined on newsstands.
- Business World magazine reports that 30% of all Canadian newsstand sales come from periodicals that would have been illegal twenty years ago.

understanding that the sexual ethic which pornography represents and endorses is an ethic that is the "liberated" alternative to Christian repression or Puritan prudery, i.e., its polar opposite, its antithesis.

Even those who do not bother to read the magazine articles in which the argument is spelled out can hardly fail to pick it up. Pictorial layouts repeat the theme in features that lampoon Christian rites and symbols. Satiric cartoons poke fun at hypocritical clerics and nuns who pursue insatiable sexual appetites that they are not the least bit inclined to repress, or at the unfortunate devotees who are unable to repress their sexual urges much to their discomfort and chagrin. Breaking the taboo against using explicit sex for its subject matter is matched in porn magazines, as in de Sade, only by breaking the taboo against sacrilegious topics. *Hustler's* May 1984 cover, for instance, shows a naked woman bound to a cross, and contains a photo feature using naked women to spoof biblical passages (pp. 50-73). In one picture of this feature, women's exposed buttocks are lined up along a table, becoming the bread ("buns") of the Eucharist. Examples like this could be multiplied, but are hardly necessary, since few people today are ignorant about the religious parody in which pornographic magazines specialize.

The first idea I am suggesting is worth noting about pornography, then, is this: In its modern forms since the 18th century and continuing into the last decades of the 20th century,

pornography has been as much concerned with Christianity as with sex. It is as much preoccupied with being irreverent and iconoclastic as with being an erotic catalyst. This is a feature that a future archaeologist could use to help date a piece of pornography from our era. Not every single piece includes this religious referent, but enough do that it is important to bear in mind whenever thinking about what pornography really is, or about why different groups of people find it offensive for different types of reasons: some people for its sexual explicitness, some people for its violence and misogyny, and some people for this, its irreverent attitude toward the church. Furthermore, this self-conscious irreverence in pornography is one of the reasons why pornography is a relevant subject for religious studies.

Of course this is hardly a novel or controversial observation about pornography. Gleeful sacrilege as additional titillation for the consumer seems only natural and consistent, speaking psychoanalytically, if one accepts the idea that the repressive nature of Christian sexual ethics was the cause of pornography in the first place. And indeed that has been the consensus view about the cause of pornography, and of its rebelliously defiant tone, since the 1960s. The social phenomenon of pornography, as Susan Sontag wrote in 1966, was understood to be...

a group pathology, the disease of a whole culture, about whose cause everyone is pretty well agreed. The mounting output of dirty books is attributed to a festering legacy of Christianity sponsored by sexual

repression and to sheer physiological ignorance, these ancient disabilities being now compounded by more proximate historical events, the impact of drastic dislocations in traditional modes of family and political order and unsettling change in the roles of the sexes.¹⁴

During the 1960s and 1970s Christian antisexualism seemed a workable explanation for pornography that fit with popular psychoanalytical theory about repression and its consequences. It explained the immature or adolescent rebellious tenor of the pornography of the day, its attacks on the church as well as its spiteful treatment of women, as in the novels by Norman Mailer and Henry Miller, for example, and in *Hustler* magazine. The repression theory explained why pornography seemed sometimes to offend even the sensibilities of sexual liberals during the period of the so-called "sexual revolution" when people on a large scale began insisting on enjoying their sexual lives without guilt. That is, it explained why pornography so frequently transgressed that difficult-to-define limit, going beyond what was sufficient to be sexually "liberated". The excess, the violence, it was said, was a natural consequence of centuries of repression of the sexual part of human nature.

For most of the '60s and '70s the repression theory as an explanation for the widely acknowledged excesses of pornography was used in its defense against would-be censors by sexual

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination" [1966], in *Perspectives on Pornography*, ed. Douglas A. Hughes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), pp. 133-134.

liberals, including participants of what was known then as the women's liberation movement. I remember making the argument myself. The argument was that the excess, the elements of degradation and violence that everyone agreed were superfluous for erotic purposes, would gradually diminish in time. The pornographic genre in the arts would mature as repression eased. Paul Goodman expressed this idea well when he spoke against censorship of pornography in 1961 in his article, "Pornography, Art, and Censorship," though his remarks seem now, thirty years later, to be somewhat naive and overly optimistic:

But here is a dilemma: what if the censorship itself, part of a general repressive antisexuality, causes the evil, creates the need for sadistic pornography sold at criminal profit?... The fact is that our generations are living through a general breakdown of repressive defenses, increasingly accelerating; and therefore a deepening social neurosis. Freud's doctrine, let us remember, is that it is not repression (total amnesia) that causes neurosis, but the failure of repression, so that repressed contents return in distorted guise. The process is irreversible; our culture has experienced too much of it to ban it, or frighten it, out of mind. Therefore the only recourse is to try to get, as methodically and safely as possible, to the end of it, so that the drives can reappear as themselves and come to their own equilibrium. This involves undoing the repressive attitude itself.... so long as the attempted repressing continues, the repressed contents must continually emerge in more and more distorted form.... [A non-censorious policy] would tend to diminish pornography -- make it not a big deal.... such isolated pornography as a genre would simply become boring and diminish.... And not least, any social change in the direction of permissiveness and practical approval, which integrates sexual expression with other ordinary or esteemed activities of life, must diminish the need to combine sex with punishment and degradation. To increase the possibility of satisfaction in real

situations is to make unnecessary the hipster struggle for violent and apocalyptic experiences."¹⁵

I think time has shown that there are limitations in the analysis of pornography as simply the "liberated" antithesis of the repressive sexual ethic preached by Christianity. Perhaps it was a persuasive account of pornography once, but it has become somewhat thin and anachronistic for the 1990s. Censorship of pornography was relaxed considerably during the last three decades, yet the natural non-violent "equilibrium" that Goodman expected would assert itself in the absence of repression is still nowhere in view. Far from diminishing, pornography has expanded into a huge and flourishing business worldwide.¹⁶ And

¹⁵ Paul Goodman, "Pornography, Art, and Censorship," in *Perspectives on Pornography*, ed. Douglas A. Hughes, op. cit., pp. 43, 47-48, 49, 60.

¹⁶ "In addition, film, TV and magazines are under pressure to compete with pornography, now the biggest media category. Worldwide, pornography generates an estimated \$7 billion a year, more than the legitimate film and music industries combined. Pornographic films outnumber other films by three to one, grossing \$365 million a year in the US alone, or \$1 million a day. British pornographic magazines sell 20 million copies a year at £2-3 a copy, grossing £500 million a year. Swedish pornography earns 300-400 million kronur a year, a sex shop there selling 500 titles, and a corner tobacconist, 20-30 titles. In 1981 500,000 Swedish men bought pornographic magazines each week; by 1983 every fourth video rented in Sweden was pornographic, and by 1985 13.6 million pornographic magazines were sold by the largest distributors in corner kiosks. Eighteen million US men a month buy a total of 165 different pornographic magazines, generating about half a billion dollars a year; one US man in ten reads *Playboy*, *Penthouse* or *Hustler* each month; *Playboy* and *Penthouse* are the most popular magazines in Canada. Italian men spend 600 billion lire on pornography a year, with pornographic videos representing 30-50% of all Italian video sales. Pornography worldwide, according to researchers, is becoming

in the process it has not, as was predicted, lost any of its violent and degrading excesses. Quite the contrary, as some studies in the 1980s demonstrated, when they compared the amount of violence portrayed over the years since the '60s in pornographic magazines, films and videos, and showed that violence was a growing rather than diminishing feature of pornography. Moreover, as Naomi Wolf has shown recently in her immensely popular book on this subject, *The Beauty Myth*, the theme of sexual sadomasochism spawned within pornography has been taken up and incorporated as "chic" by mainstream entertainment, by music videos, fashion magazines, and the allegedly non-pornographic popular film industry. Naomi Wolf writes:

The thirty-year education of the young in sex as stylish objectification or sado-masochism may have produced a generation which honestly believes that sex is violent and violence is sexual, so long as the violence is directed against women. If they believe this it is not because they are psychopaths but because that representation in mainstream culture is the norm.¹⁷

Surely the earlier analysis of pornography as articulated by Goodman, i.e., the interpretation of pornography as something

increasingly violent. (As slasher film-maker Herschel Gordon Lewis said, 'I mutilated women in our pictures because I felt it was better box office.'). . . . In 1990, outdated copies of *Playboy* and women's glamour magazines began to be shipped to the Soviet bloc. . . ." Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random House, 1990), pp. 60-61.

¹⁷ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, op. cit., p. 131. Emphasis in the original.

which will naturally wither away when it is no longer repressed, fails to explain the recent history of pornography in terms of its continued growth and increasing violence. Yet pornographers -- producers and consumers alike -- seem to be interested in maintaining the view of pornography as representing a "liberated" alternative to repressive Christian antisexualism, with the corollary idea that its sadistic excesses are due (still) mainly to the legacy of sexual repression. For these ideas allow them to argue that the excesses of pornography therefore need not be a cause for reasonable concern since they will disappear of their own accord in due time. Framed by that argument, the current sadistic excesses can be excused, or explained away, even regarded as merely humorous, as just another human foible, and as ultimately irrelevant, and not worth any more serious attention. The excesses are adequately explained as a natural part of the human response to repression, and nothing more.

Increasingly, however, as I will show, those who continue to characterize pornography in this way (i.e., simply as a reaction against Christian antisexualism, with the all-important implication that all opposition to pornography must be simply the re-assertion of Christian antisexualism), are forced to ignore or to misrepresent certain realities. Their characterization only serves to dismiss from view the very thing that needs to be analyzed and explained, that is, pornography's penchant for linking sex with violence and degradation. The theory of repressive Christian antisexualism as the cause of pornography,

and therefore of pornography as the exemplar of liberation from this antisexual repression, becomes in the 1990s a lame excuse for not bothering to examine pornography's continued representation of sex as most liberated and exciting precisely when it is also degrading and violent. It becomes an excuse for not having to explain why this representation of sex has such mammoth appeal in contemporary society.

Those who criticize opposition to pornography as simply an expression of the re-assertion of Christian antisexualism, such as Christensen,¹⁸ for example, evidently accept the picture of a simple antithetical relationship between pornography and Christian sexual ethics. To maintain that view in the 1990s, however, requires ignorance about, or the misrepresentation of, certain key realities, among them, notably, contemporary Christian sexual ethics, as I will show.

¹⁸ Christensen (1990) avers that all antipornography positions are at heart based on antisexualism derived principally from traditional Christian attitudes. "It was largely through the spread of Christianity and Islam that most of the world acquired its traditional sexual attitudes." (p.18) He argues that today the "right-wing and feminist extremists ... are capable of having a huge influence [in the pornography debate because] ... the so-called sexual revolution did not destroy this culture's basic sex-negative attitude; there remains a deep well of guilt and ambivalence for them to exploit." Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 57. This is a widely held belief about the motives behind antipornography arguments and strategies. At the street level and the bedroom level the argument is more frequently formulated in terms of "prudery", but that is simply a condensation of the idea of a distinctively Christian shame about sex. The word 'prude', of course, is heavily laden with an aura of condemnation, and is generally used with insulting and intimidating intent.

Now, then, after examining one pole in this supposed antithesis, pornography, I turn next to its opposite pole, Christian antisexualism.

POLE #2:

CHRISTIAN ANTISEXUALISM EXPLAINS ALL OPPOSITION TO PORNOGRAPHY --
THE POLAR OPPOSITE OF ITSELF

This argument is not intended to deny the fact that Christianity has indeed, historically, promoted the idea of sex itself as sinful and part of the "fallen" nature of humankind. Saint Augustine, whose influence on Christian theology has been unsurpassed, described sexually excited genitalia as "the plague and mark"¹⁹ of our fallen nature. Through careful scholarly examinations of texts by such influential Christian thinkers as Augustine, several feminist critics of Christianity have already amply demonstrated the indisputable antisexual bias in the

¹⁹ " 'We are ashamed,' wrote St. Augustine, 'of that very thing which made those primitive human beings [Adam and Eve] ashamed, when they covered their loins, that is the penalty of sin; that is the plague and mark of sin; that is the temptation and very fuel of sin; that is the law in our members warring against the law of our mind; that is the rebellion against our own selves, proceeding from our very selves, which by a most righteous retribution is rendered us by our disobedient members. It is this which makes us ashamed, and justly ashamed' (*On Marriage and Concupiscence* II, 22, p. 291). Cited in Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Vol. 25 [Summer 1983] of *October*, published by MIT Press for the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies), p. 18, n. 17.

Christian historical record, cogently arguing in the process that Christian antisexualism has resulted in, or at least strongly influenced, a corresponding misogynist bias in historical Christianity. Far from disputing their conclusions, I believe key points in their analyses bear repetition.

For example, in "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," Rosemary Radford Ruether notes the distinctive character that the view of sex as "inherently sinful" gave to the new Christian religion in its first centuries.²⁰ But, though "shocking" at first, through its doctrinal establishment by the Church Fathers the idea of sex as sinful became, by definition, the "Christian" perspective on the matter. The requirement of virginity as necessary for women's acceptance as the spiritual equals of men, as Ruether's article shows, also belies the antisexual bias of the early Christians. The fact that celibacy is still demanded of the clergy in the Roman

²⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 150-183. Ruether writes (p. 168): "Even though Augustine's definition of original sin, as transmitted through an inherently sinful character of sexual libido, only brought to definitional form the emotional prejudices of the Church Fathers generally, this view was shocking to many in its apparent debasement of the goodness of marriage and the blessings of progeny, so contrary to the Old Testament view. Jerome and Augustine endlessly defend themselves against the charge of Manichaeism by arguing that marriage is honorable because of its *good end* in procreation, even though the *means* are debasing..." Emphasis in the original.

Catholic Church is yet another contemporary expression of the same antisexual attitude.

In her book, *The Church and the Second Sex*,²¹ Mary Daly outlines how (i.e., through the psychological mechanism of "projection") the antisexualism of the Church Fathers resulted in misogynistic attitudes as expressed by such social patterns as the sexual "double standard":

In the mentality of the Fathers, woman and sexuality were identified. Their horror of sex was also a horror of woman. There is no evidence that they realized the projection mechanisms involved in this misogynistic attitude. In fact, male guilt feelings over sex and hyper-susceptibility to sexual stimulation and suggestion were transferred to "the other", the "guilty" sex. The idea of a special guilt attached to the female sex gave support to the double moral standard which prevailed. For example, in cases of adultery, the wife had to take back her unfaithful husband, but if the wife was unfaithful, she could be rejected.²²

Carol P. Christ is another feminist critic of Christianity who, like Ruether (1975), sees its antisexual attitudes as the perpetuation of dualistic Platonic anti-body attitudes which were adopted by early Christian thinkers. Carol Christ elaborates on the oppressive consequences for women flowing from the Christian symbolic complex that has been used for expressing these antisexual, misogynist and ultimately anti-body ideas over the

²¹ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968; reprint, with a new feminist postchristian introduction by the author, New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

²² Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, pp. 88-89.

centuries. In her article "Why Women Need the Goddess"²³ she writes critically about the influence of the two most meaningful symbols of "woman" for Christians, that is, Eve and the Virgin Mary:

Because of women's unique position as menstruants, birthgivers, and those who have traditionally cared for the young and the dying, women's connection to the body, nature, and this world has been obvious. Women were denigrated because they seemed more carnal, fleshy, and earthy than the culture-creating males. The misogynist antibody tradition in Western thought is symbolized in the myth of Eve who is traditionally viewed as a sexual temptress, the epitome of women's carnal nature. This tradition reaches its nadir in the *Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Evil-Doing Women)*, which states, "All witchcraft stems from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable." The Virgin Mary, the positive female image in Christianity does not contradict Christian denigration of the female body and its powers. The Virgin Mary is revered because she, in her perpetual virginity, transcends²⁴ the carnal sexuality attributed to most women.

Christ develops this last idea about the symbol of the Virgin Mary in one of her articles, titled "Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology" (1983), which appears as a reprint in her book *Laughter of Aphrodite*.²⁵ In this article, Christ

²³ Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 273-287.

²⁴ Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," pp. 277-278. Emphasis in the original.

²⁵ Carol P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 135-159.

elaborates on her analysis of this symbol by making the point that "Catholic feminist theologians are rightly aware of the destructive elements in Marian tradition, particularly its function as one pole of the virgin/whore, virgin/witch polarity that has been used to oppress women."²⁶

It is worth adding to these analyses by Ruether, Daly, and Christ, the following summation of historical Christian antisexualism by Mary Jo Weaver in "Pornography and the Religious Imagination"²⁷:

If the Gospel is "good news" about salvation, it is bad news about sex. Ancient warnings against the allurements of "the world, the flesh and the devil" were most easily imagined in terms of the flesh, and although one could easily make a case, as Rosemary Ruether has done (1974), that the explicitness of patriarchal warnings against sexual expression constituted a way for agitated celibates to discharge some of their sexual energy, the fact remains that the teachings of traditional Christianity are built upon a hatred of women and a profound abhorrence of sex. Nietzsche's chilling comment -- "Christianity gave Eros poison to drink; he did not die of it, but degenerated into a vice" (cited in Sadock, Kaplan and Freedman, 1976, 32) -- seems no more than a common-sense interpretation of a flawed tradition.²⁸

²⁶ Carol P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, p. 151.

²⁷ Mary Jo Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," in *For Adult Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography*, ed. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 68-86.

²⁸ Mary Jo Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 70. Note: Interestingly, in this same article Mary Jo Weaver also deals with exceptions to the traditional sex-negative view. She describes modern affirmations of a celebratory attitude toward sex by conservative evangelical groups of American Christians, but analyzes their view as flawed

To repeat, there is nothing in the foregoing analyses of Christian antisexualism (and its damaging consequences for women) that I mean to dispute by my argument. Despite exceptional instances of theologians who resisted the weight of this conventional view, and mystics whose language was filled with sexual metaphor, a negative view of sex has indeed been the dominant traditional Christian doctrine. Hugh Hefner, editor-publisher of *Playboy*, is correct about that fact. There have even been periods when for Christians sex was felt to be the very epitome of vice. During the 1500s that idea is conveyed iconographically, as Erwin Panofsky shows in his analysis of the painting *The Exposure of Luxury* which was painted "around 1546." Writing about the meaning of this painting, Panofsky observes, "That alluring sexual voluptuousness rather than other forms of evil should be selected at this particular date to symbolize vice, is perfectly in harmony with the spirit of the Counter-Reformation."²⁹

by their acceptance of male domination and female submission as givens of the sexual relationship. Weaver sees potential for developing a truly sex-positive Christian ethic through building on the tradition of "spiritual eroticism" found within the mystic strands of Christianity, but only if the Christian theological model of a transcendent God is reformed by "process theology" so that the erotic relationship becomes one of mutuality, rather than domination. I will return to Weaver's analysis below, in Chapter Three.

²⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 90-91. Originally published by Oxford University Press in 1939.

So, by questioning pornographers' characterization of their Christian opponents as antisexual, I do not mean to deny that Christian authorities have in the past, and even in the recent past, criticized pornography simply for its explicit sex and on the basis of an antisexual attitude. Nor am I denying that many Christians still do.

However, although the fact is not generally fully appreciated yet, it happens to be the case that Christian authorities no longer all repeat this same familiar refrain any more. The dialogue about sex is actually shifting ground and the antithesis, on which pornographers depend for their justification, is not the same as it used to be. The decade of the 1980s saw many churches -- in Canada at least, where I will focus my attention -- begin to say some radically new things about sex.

The new attitude being expressed by authoritative voices within Canadian churches, as I will show, is a sex-positive attitude, one which repudiates the idea of sex itself as sinful. As part of its positive attitude of embracing the wonderfully pleasurable and "God-given gift" of sex, these voices welcome sexual imagery too. But in the area of sexual imagery they draw a distinction between "erotica" which they welcome, and "pornography" which they condemn. Unfortunately, in the often rancorous public controversy over pornography, their condemnation of pornography often gets interpreted as simply a continuation of the familiar traditional Christian antisexual perspective. The

subtleties in their new point of view become lost. These subtleties are probably understood only by those people who are most intimately involved in church life, people who have some exposure to the latest church documents and resources on the subject of sexuality and its cultural representation. Since those numbers are reputedly diminishing significantly in our increasingly secular Canadian society,³⁰ it may well be that very few people are aware of the radical changes occurring in the official Christian view of sex.

It might be instructive, then, to take a close look at relevant church documents produced over the last few decades.

For example, the House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada published the following statements excerpted from "A Message to the Members of the Anglican Church of Canada and the People of our Country" (1983):

As a Church, we take seriously the biblical declaration about God and about mankind. Against the background of that declaration, we restate our understanding of human sexuality and our deep concern for the impact of pornography upon our people and upon the whole of society.

Holy Scripture affirms that God is the Creator of all human beings both male and female, and that all persons, male and female, have a particular affinity to the Creator. The Bible states "In the image of God created He him: male and female createth He them."

³⁰ See the recent study of decline in church attendance in Canada by Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin, 1987).

This truth is the ground of our conviction that men and women, sharing this "image", share also a common responsibility to each other in their sexuality. Because both maleness and femaleness are part of God's gift in creation, *we are able to claim a wholesomeness in sexuality.* The relationship between man and woman is God-given; beneficial to both and mutually enriching -- *a gift to be celebrated and enjoyed.*

Although this positive biblical attitude to human sexuality is clear in our marriage services, *we are aware that the Church has sometimes failed both in its attitude and its teaching to help its members understand and express these biblical truths. We recognize that this failure has contributed to some of the negative attitudes to human sexuality which exist today...* (my emphasis)

The acceptance of sexuality as wholesome rather than sinful does not mean, it should be understood, that the Anglican Church has embraced the pornographer's sexual ethic. For, as this document proceeds to explain, pornographic representations of sex are culpable for their exploitation, degradation, and violence. However, the acceptance of sexuality as wholesome by the Anglican bishops does mean that the basis for the old antithesis between Christianity and pornography is dissolving. Over the issue of the morality of sexual enjoyment the former antithesis between the two is collapsing. An antithesis remains, but it has a different basis. For the bishops do still find cause to oppose pornography, as they make clear at a later point in this same document where they articulate their reasons for vocalizing strong opposition to pornography and for encouraging everyone else to do likewise:

It is because of our belief in the beauty and sacredness of human sexuality that we are deeply concerned by the perversion of that sexuality in the form of pornography. In recent years, pornographic publications and movies have become more and more explicit as well as more readily available. Pornography victimizes and degrades man by portraying a stereo-type of aggression. Pornography increasingly uses children as subjects, and increasingly depicts and incites to violent behaviour. It not only distorts wholesome and God-given sexual relationships, but exploits them for profit, so that persons who, in God's purposes, are capable of and deserving of fulfilling personal relationships are deceived into accepting debased fantasies in place of love and commitment. A society which acquiesces in such deep depersonalization and such increasing incitement to violence cannot escape the consequences. Ultimately this downward spiral will bring us to the point where the very image of God in which men and women are created will no longer be recognizable in us....

We urge all Canadians to take seriously this evil and to work for its eradication.

While the Anglican bishops accept sex as a good, then, they retain the prerogative of qualifying the point by saying that the positive potential in sex can be distorted so as to cause suffering, and that this is exactly what pornography does.

Official statements by The United Church of Canada between 1958 and 1984 are similarly revelational of a doctrinal shift regarding sexuality, and at the same time of new explanations for their opposition to pornography.

In 1958 the 18th General Council of The United Church of Canada [U.C.C.] drew attention to "a new tide of filth in the form of sex exciting novels and fifty-cent picture magazines of a

revolting kind."³¹ In 1962 the 20th General Council of the U.C.C. passed a resolution, "Control of Indecent Literature,"³² that encourages "frank discussion of such subjects as sex, marriage and relationships between men and women, on a high level of respect for the dignity of these relationships as given of God to mankind." This 1962 resolution also laments "a marked decline in standards of decency in literary works such as novels, picture magazines and pocket books, so that references to sexual and other physical details of life are often made in terms of coarse vulgarity, obscenity and sensuality."

While it appears that U.C.C. opposition was to explicit "sensuality" in 1958 and 1962, by 1984 the language of their document, "Statement on Pornography,"³³ has a decidedly different focus of concern. That focus is now on the violence and degradation in pornography, not on its sensuality. At its 30th General Council in 1984 the U.C.C. adopted several resolutions concerning pornography, including the following definition (as cited above in Chapter One):

³¹ Cited in an editorial note in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), p. 235.

³² The United Church of Canada, "Control of Indecent Literature" (a resolution adopted in 1962), reproduced in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), p. 235.

³³ The United Church of Canada, "Statement on Pornography" (1984), reproduced in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), pp. 235-238.

Pornography is material that represents or describes degrading, abusive and/or violent behaviour for sexual gratification so as to imply and/or give endorsement or recommendation to the behaviour as depicted.³⁴

The resolutions speak about how pornography "exploits, degrades and violates the image of God in all persons, particularly women."³⁵ They say that "more and more pornography shows the torture of women in particular" and they therefore resolve to "Help young people gain a solid understanding and respect for mutually-affirming sexuality" and to "Work toward a positive, life-affirming view of human sexuality."³⁶ Most importantly, they (like the Anglican bishops, as noted above) admit that "in the past our church in its preaching and teaching office has been remiss in not affirming the divine gift of human embodiment and sexuality." They therefore resolve "that the preachers and teachers of the church be urged to undertake forthright affirmation of the goodness of these gifts."³⁷

Undoubtedly, a number of factors in combination are responsible for producing this effect, this doctrinal shift, in sexual ethics in the teachings of Canada's two major Protestant

³⁴ The United Church of Canada, "Statement on Pornography," op. cit., p. 235.

³⁵ The United Church of Canada, "Statement on Pornography," p. 236.

³⁶ The United Church of Canada, "Statement on Pornography," p. 236.

³⁷ The United Church of Canada, "Statement on Pornography," p. 236.

denominations. There are sociological factors such as changing sexual mores and the declining stature and authority of the church in society. There are theological factors, such as a tendency toward immanent, and gender-varied conceptions of divinity. But one factor that I think is particularly important to name is a factor which has both sociological and theological dimensions (among several others), and that is feminism.

Evidence for the influence of feminism on this doctrinal shift in Christian sexual ethics is scattered throughout the resources compiled by the churches for use by their members in devotional services, workshops and private meditations.

The Anglican Church reveals that it has listened to feminist critiques of sexual politics, for example, in its 1985 study guide titled "Pornography: The Distortion of Erotica."³⁸ The authors of this study guide lament the fact that formerly the church was "very quiet about sexuality" and about the fact that the church's past action and tradition can be said to have "fostered a concept of sexuality that is male dominated."³⁹

³⁸ Anglican Church of Canada, Task Force on Pornography, "Pornography: The Distortion of Erotica" (Vancouver 1985).

³⁹ Anglican Church of Canada, Task Force on Pornography, "Pornography: The Distortion of Erotica" (Vancouver 1985), in the section titled "Catch the Vision," p. 1. Further signs of significant feminist influence on Anglican thinking concerns the related subject of wife assault. See *Violence Against Women: Abuse in Society and Church and Proposals for Change*, The Taskforce Report to General Synod 1986 of the Anglican Church of Canada (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1987). This document also makes informed use of respected feminist authors in this field (e.g., Fiorenza 1983; Luxton 1980; Ruether 1973; Smith

Explicit reference to several well-known feminist theorists is contained in the March 1985 issue of the U.C.C. periodical, *Women's Concerns* (Issue 28, "Calling Women of The United Church of Canada to Respond to General Council Actions"). The articles in this issue of *Women's Concerns* cover such topics as sexuality, "the changing roles of women and men in church and society," and the report of the U.C.C. Task Force on Pornography. Each article advises the reader to complement some U.C.C. document, such as *Gift, Dilemma and Promise: A Report and Affirmations on Human Sexuality*, by The United Church of Canada, with a number of other articles, books and periodicals, prominent among which are several respected feminist works. For example, feminist references cited for the topic of sexuality and religion include the periodicals *Broadside*, and *Kinesis*, and the authors Ruether (1974), Ruether and McLaughlin (1979), Heyward (1984), Baker Miller (1976) and Snitow, Stansen, and Thompson (1983). On the subject of pornography the recommended authors include Dworkin (1979), Griffin (1981), Lederer (1980) and Ridington (1983). In addition to the church's task force report on the changing roles

1974, 1977, 1980; Tribble 1984; Walker 1979) and contains a similar self-critical attitude indicating agreement with feminist critiques, as, for example, in the following statement taken from the preface (p. 10): "If the church is to address wife assault, it must understand the patriarchal roots of the problem. If the church is to act, it must do so from a stance of confession. It must confess its collusion in the patriarchal prerogative. It must confess its role in prescribing abuse as fitting behaviour for husbands. It must confess its role in promulgating a theology which excuses wife battering."

of women and men in church and society, readers interested in this subject are advised to consult Christ and Plaskow (1979), Collins (1974), Schüssler Fiorenza (1983), Heyward (1982, 1984), and Spretnak (1982), among others. These are all well known and respected feminist sources.

The fact that these two Protestant churches have been influenced by, and clearly agree with, recognized feminist thinking on these topics can probably be attributed to the authoritative status that women now occupy within these churches. The United Church of Canada ordained its first woman minister in 1936, and since the late 1970s has witnessed a substantial increase in women entering the ministry. Half of its candidates are now women. A few notable women have even served at the very top of the U.C.C. hierarchy over the past decade.⁴⁰ Several Anglican Church dioceses began ordaining women in the late 1970s as well. I do not think it is unlikely that several women among the many now seeking and obtaining ordination would be acting from feminist convictions and dedicating themselves to educating the church about feminism.

In the United States of America there is also some evidence that feminist critiques are having an impact within the churches,

⁴⁰ For example, the Very Rev. Lois M. Wilson, winner of Canada's Pearson Peace Medal in 1985, is a former moderator of the U.C.C. (1980-82). She was also the first woman president of the Canadian Council of Churches (1976-79), and subsequently became one of the first women presidents of the World Council of Churches (1983-1990). And Dr. Anne Squire, who was made moderator of the U.C.C. in 1986, was the first lay woman to achieve that position.

such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in which women have been able to gain access to authoritative church positions in recent years. The 1988 report prepared by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for instance, which is titled "Pornography: Far From the Song of Songs,"⁴¹ presents an exhaustive analysis of pornography that is thoroughly conversant with the latest feminist literature on the subject.

Protestant denominations are not alone in officially changing their doctrinal perspective on sexuality. Nor are they the only churches to acknowledge the influence of feminist thought on their own thinking, or at least to acknowledge the compatibility of feminist thought with the newly emerging Christian view on sexuality. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, endorses one point of feminist analysis in its 1984 "Statement on Pornography,"⁴² in which the bishops quote as authoritative Susan Brownmiller's analysis of the institution of prostitution. This Roman Catholic document also contains an admission of former church complicity in the acceptance of a problematic understanding of sexuality that was harmful to women, an acknowledgement comparable to the admissions

⁴¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Pornography: Far From the Song of Songs" (1988), reproduced in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), pp. 91-213.

⁴² Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement on Pornography" (1984), reproduced in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), pp. 21-29.

of responsibility for former antisexual teachings that were made in the above Anglican and U.C.C. documents. The Catholic bishops argue in this official statement that pornography, like prostitution itself, is "incompatible with the dignity of human persons and their fundamental rights." About prostitution they write:

Often enough prostitution is explained and excused as a response to physical need. However, the phenomenon of prostitution goes much deeper. The client asks for the play acting of another person who offers sexual availability but without the demands and the risks of encounter and mutual self-giving which characterize human sexuality. Thus prostitution, especially legalized prostitution -- which we feel would be totally unacceptable -- "institutionalizes the concept that access to a woman's body is a right given to men by money, if not by God, and that sexuality is a service women ought not to refuse to civilized men" [citing Brownmiller (1976)]. It may have been possible at one time to claim certain church authorities for such a position. However, this is no longer possible today if we consider the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. As the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations has stated in almost the very words of Vatican II: "Prostitution as the slavery of women and children is incompatible with the dignity of human persons and their fundamental rights."⁴³

Too much should not be made of this one instance in which the Roman Catholic Church in Canada has treated with respect some feminist criticism of traditional attitudes about sexuality, however. It is rather anomalous, given other instances that Canadian feminists would urge not be forgotten. For example, the

⁴³ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement on Pornography," op. cit., pp. 24-25.

response of the Catholic Church to the feminist play *Les Fées ont soif*⁴⁴ in the late 1970s was effectively censorious because this play was iconoclastic in tackling head-on the issue of female sexuality and its distorted and unhealthy formulation within Christian tradition as a virgin/whore dichotomy.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Denise Boucher, *Les Fées ont soif* (Montreal: Les Editions Intermède, 1978). Translated by Alan Brown as *The Fairies Are Thirsty* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982). The Catholic Diocese in Montreal temporarily obtained an injunction banning this controversial feminist play. See the *Montreal Gazette*, 30 January 1981, p. 3. A respected critic of feminist Québécoise literature, Patricia Smart, describes the play as follows in her video "Women in Quebec Literature" (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1988): "The play -- centred on three characters: the Virgin Mary, a traditional mother, and a prostitute -- is a strong attack on the Catholic Church and on the role of state power which have together kept women from a sense of their own rights and power, and alienated them from their bodies.... In the play, a character emerges from within a huge plaster statue representing the Virgin Mary and asks the audience to recognize the real woman who has been hidden in the pure and bloodless image of Mary that the Church has created. 'I am an image,' she says. 'I am she who has no body.... No one dares to break my image.... Don't I have, somewhere, a daughter who will deliver me?' Together with the mother and the prostitute figure, who also abandon their traditional roles, she sets out in search of her real self, her body and new ways of relating to men and to children. It is a revolutionary project, and the play ends with the imagining of a new society based on love among equals."

⁴⁵ Further indication of the discomfort that feminist thinking still causes many Roman Catholics is the furore that erupted in 1991 over the film *The Burning Times*. The film, produced by Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada, presents a feminist perspective on the witch-burnings in Europe and on the culpable role of the Roman Catholic Church. Offended by the portrayal of the Roman Catholic Church as "a wicked, patriarchal, misogynist institution," the Catholic Civil Rights League complained to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission over its broadcast, petitions of protest were tabled in the House of Commons, and numerous columns and letters-to-the-editor on the subject appeared in Canadian newspapers. See: Peter Stockland's column "A lady not for burning," *The Ottawa Sun*, 31 March 1991; Bob Harvey's column

The position that the Catholic bishops take on sexuality in their "Statement on Pornography," furthermore, is not as much of a rejection of former negative attitudes as is found in the Protestant documents. For they also write about the "inherent ambiguity" in which "the original goodness of sexuality (...Gen. 1, 27-31), often enough brings about domination rather than true encounter between people (Gen. 3, 16)."⁴⁶ They say that "sexual pleasure which in itself signifies joy in life and the grateful acceptance of the gift of life, can also bring about harm and violence. This threat of violence arises from the inherent aggressivity in sexuality."⁴⁷ In spite of repudiating their former toleration of prostitution, then, the Roman Catholic Church here seems to be perpetuating a predominantly male view of sexuality, a view which one might reasonably argue is in keeping with its exclusively male priesthood.

"Catholics protest witch film," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 8 June 1991; Jack Kapica's "Fifth Column" piece in *The Globe and Mail*, 12 June 1991, titled "Jack Kapica explains why a feminist film on witchcraft will not help the cause of women in the church"; a letter-to-the-editor responding to Kapica's column, by G. Bruce Sanguin, Minister, West Hill United Church, in *The Globe and Mail*, 22 June 1991; and Peter Stockland's column responding to the CRTC's ruling (which decided against further action, thus dismissing the Catholic Human Rights League complaint) in *The Calgary Sun*, 24 December 1991, titled "A slap in the face." (My thanks to Donna Read, director of *The Burning Times*, as well as *Goddess Remembered* and *Full Circle*, for providing me with these references.)

⁴⁶ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement on Pornography," op. cit., p. 21.

⁴⁷ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement on Pornography," p. 22.

To sum up the salient points gleaned from this review of recent Canadian church documents: The churches have continued their opposition to pornography, but their reasons have changed. While there is variation in the degree of reversal, former teachings on sexuality are changing. Some churches now affirm sexuality as a good, and as a gift worthy of celebration. They consciously turn away from their former teachings about its sinfulness, even admitting responsibility for the harm such teachings caused. In effect, these churches now seem to be preaching a very similar sex-positive message to the one that some pornographers used to espouse in the 1950s and 1960s.

Why, then, do the churches still oppose pornography? Two reasons are obvious. First, the churches explicitly specify in the documents quoted above that they oppose pornography for its violent, exploitative and degrading messages. That is where the new antithesis between pornography and reformed Christian doctrine rests, not in their respective views on the morality of enjoying sexual pleasure. Second, both explicit and implicit in these same church documents are signs that the churches have been influenced by feminism, by feminist arguments about sexuality, about pornography, and about how Christian teachings have contributed to women's subordination.

No one should be surprised by the significant influence that feminism has had on recent church teachings about sex, and therefore also on the new basis for church opposition to pornography. The improving status and authority of women within

Canadian churches, particularly over the last two decades, has made it inevitable that the effects of feminist thought would soon begin to be felt under the influence of women's leadership. In fact, these fundamental doctrinal changes concerning sexuality that are occurring in the major Canadian churches are occurring because women have made the issues of sexuality and pornography priorities, and they may well represent an important confirmation of Naomi Goldenberg's prediction concerning the impact to be expected from feminism on traditional religions. Naomi Goldenberg predicted in 1979 in *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*,⁴⁸ that, when women "succeed in changing traditions so that they are treated as the equals of men," women will, in the process, "radically alter the religion." They will leave it recognizable in name only.

But a merely semantic veneer of tradition ought not to hide the fact that very nontraditional faiths will be practiced. Those of us who fancy ourselves scholars of religion will perceive what is happening more clearly if we do not pretend that we are watching minor metamorphoses occurring within the Jewish and Christian traditions.⁴⁹

Therefore, in an indirect way, pornography is relevant to the field of women and religion as an issue which helps to reveal that there is, as was reasonable to expect, a significant impact

⁴⁸ Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 6-9.

⁴⁹ Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods*, p. 9.

on Christian doctrine resulting from women's new roles of leadership within the tradition.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued for the recognition of two main ideas. The first idea that I maintained was worth noting is that a distinguishing feature of modern pornography is its preoccupation with Christianity almost as much as with sex. The second idea I put forward is that the assumed simple antithesis between Christianity and pornography on the basis of Christian antisexualism in particular no longer holds. Too many Christian authorities are recanting traditional anti-sex precepts of the faith to allow such an assumption to continue unchallenged. An antithetical relationship between the two remains, but more refined analysis, more sophisticated analysis than the one which bases it on Christian antisexualism, as such, is required to describe and explain it.

This second idea is one which many feminist antipornography activists outside the church do not yet fully appreciate. For there are many feminist critics of pornography outside the church who accept the analyses (by Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin, and others) which assert that pornography actually expresses the *same* antisexual attitude taught by traditional Christianity and not its opposite as pornographers claim. (These analyses are the

subject of the next chapter.) Unfortunately, antipornography feminists who continue to promote this analysis, without acknowledging that anything has changed inside the churches as a result of church members listening to these very critiques, leave a misleading impression of the current state of Christian views on sex in the same way that pornographers do.

Feminists opposed to pornography might want to argue, however, that too much weight should not be given to these recent changes inside some of the more progressive Christian churches. For there remain other much more conservative churches which continue using traditional teachings about sexuality, and which are often even more vocal in their opposition to pornography, thus lending credence to the common belief that antisexualism lies behind all Christian opposition to pornography.⁵⁰ For practical reasons, moreover, it is too complicated to draw fine distinctions between segments of Christianity each time one engages in the public debate about pornography.

Nonetheless, I think it is advisable for antipornography feminists to be cognizant of changing Christian attitudes about

⁵⁰ See, for example, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church statements, such as the "Standards of Christian Living" (1986), reproduced in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), pp. 227-230. This statement speaks of "the evil that is in the world through lust" and of the Satanic nature of "sensual indulgence" in pornography as in many other forms of the media which focus on pursuing sensual pleasure. "Let us not patronize the commercialized amusements, joining with the worldly, careless, pleasure-loving multitudes who are 'lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.'" "

sex. Pornographers depend on the widespread ignorance about change of this nature. The common misconception about a simple antithesis between Christianity and pornography based on Christian antisexualism continues to control the parameters of the debate about the moral value of pornography. As mentioned before, Christensen relies on it in his recent book, *Pornography: The Other Side*, as the contrast against which to defend the positive moral value of pornography. He argues that "pornography, together with the desires that underlie it, is natural and healthy"⁵¹; whereas "the historical view of the church was that sex was polluting, so that the holy would avoid it altogether. It could be tolerated only to produce children..."⁵² Opposition to pornography, according to Christensen's analysis, simply reflects the fact that "parts of that attitude toward sex and the body are still with us."⁵³

Christensen writes as if all opponents of pornography hold the same antisexual attitudes, including radical feminists. For he sees feminist opposition, too, as rooted in women's shame about their bodies. After examining a variety of feminist antipornography arguments, Christensen concludes that they are

⁵¹ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵² Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 18.

⁵³ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 18.

all "patent rationalizations."⁵⁴ Women's shame is the real reason behind all of them.

It seems quite clear that the most fundamental source of feminist views about pornography and women is the sex-negative conditioning we all have received, but which females receive in greater degrees.⁵⁵

Like the feminists, Christensen sees religious fundamentalists as similarly

... intolerant of those whose sexual needs or practices reflect a difference from their own repressed nature.... Underlying all these charges, very clearly, is a general antisexualism. They tend to consider sex education about as evil as pornography, and they are constantly working to censor sexual knowledge out of the lives of young people.⁵⁶

In all fairness, Christensen could not be expected to be aware of the subtle shortcomings of continuing to view Christian

⁵⁴ Upon examining a series of feminist antipornography arguments, Christensen writes in *Pornography: The Other Side* (p. 39) that, "yet another standard argument against pornography reveals yet again that its motivation is not what it pretends to be.... The fact is that all the standard arguments against pornography in itself are logical fallacies of one kind or another. That such patent rationalizations have been convincing to so many is a testament to the power of socialization..." What is the real motivation? He specifies (p. 31): "The real reason for attacking the showing of sex organs seems clear, namely, that they alone among body parts are considered shameful." Christensen finds support for his interpretation in the works of Nancy Friday (p. 44): "As Friday and other women writers have suggested, the basic reason many object to pornography is the deep-laid belief that their sex organs are unclean."

⁵⁵ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 41.

⁵⁶ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 56.

antisexualism as an explanation for all opposition to pornography, since his field of expertise is the philosophy of science, not religious studies. His lack of familiarity with the field of religion I think may also explain his too peremptory dismissal of feminist "metaphysical" arguments against pornography, as I will argue below, in Chapter Four. In any case, the consequence of the acceptance of the common view by Christensen, and many others, is that it presents traditional religious conservatives and feminists as sharing traditional Christian antisexualism in an endless replay of old attitudes as though recent history had not brought any significant changes. It doesn't allow for the possibility of the picture that I have described in this chapter, i.e., a new Christian vision of sexuality influenced by what feminists have envisioned and articulated about sexuality over the last few decades, a vision which affirms the pleasures and beauty of sex within the context of relationships of mutual respect and caring while simultaneously condemning sexual relations in which anyone is forced or coerced or made to suffer.

To conclude, in this chapter I have begun to present my case for the relevance of pornography as a subject for religious studies by addressing two ideas that I think are most likely to come to mind if someone is asked to consider the religious aspects of pornography: (1) the anti-Christian quality of so much modern pornographic satire, and (2) Christian antisexualism as the basis for all criticisms of pornography as well as being

the root cause of pornography (and its excesses) in the first place. I have argued that the second of these two ideas, while it appears to have merit in some respects, does not adequately reflect changing historical conditions. If there is a dialogue of antithesis between Christianity and pornography, and there is, it should not be perceived as static. It is a dialogue that is in transition from being polarized over sexual morality to a polarization over other moral issues, specifically issues of violence and exploitation. The static perception of this antithesis as centred on sexual ethics is erroneous, with an unfortunate tendency to obscure a number of interesting facts and issues. It obscures current official Christian attitudes toward sex, and thereby also the fact of the significant impact of women's new leadership roles within the church. Furthermore, the presumed antithesis between pornography and Christianity on the basis of one being sex-positive and the other sex-negative, by dominating most discussions of pornography, tends to obscure other less obvious, but important aspects about pornography that are relevant to religious studies. In subsequent chapters I will clarify what these other, less obvious aspects are.

CHAPTER THREE

VARIATIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN CONNECTION

In Chapter Two I argued that the appearance of an antithetical relationship between pornography and Christianity, in which the former is taken as sex-positive and the latter as sex-negative in orientation, needs up-dating in order to reflect better the recent pro-sex doctrinal changes in the major Christian churches in Canada, changes which, significantly, reflect women's powerful new influence within these churches. In this chapter I will argue that the frequently assumed antithetical relationship needs reappraisal for another reason as well. It is not only the case that Christianity is becoming sex-positive in orientation; it is also the case that pornography is becoming recognized for being more negative than positive in its orientation regarding sex than heretofore acknowledged by more than a few. In fact pornography is becoming recognized for being in reality more similar than dissimilar to traditional Christianity in a variety of ways. The purpose of this chapter is to review some of the arguments recently being put forward that present analyses of the sometimes subtle but important similarities between pornography and Christianity. In this chapter I will review and comment on four such variations on the theme of "the Christian connection."

VARIATION #1:

BOTH PORNOGRAPHY AND CHRISTIANITY TREAT SEX AS SHAMEFUL AND MALE VIOLENCE AS INEVITABLE

As I mentioned in Chapter One, the idea that pornography's treatment of sex actually expresses the same attitude of disgust which permeates the dominant trends in traditional Christianity over the centuries was an idea put forward as early as 1964 by Wayland Young in *Eros Denied*. Young's point was that Christian culture, even in the modern secular era, does not even understand, let alone share, the celebratory attitude toward sex found in erotica, and therefore automatically censors it. But pornography is understood perfectly well. "Pornography, yes; nasty dirty little bits for people to masturbate over; we understand that all right, and condemn it."¹ Pornography is condemned because it presents itself as furtive enjoyment of what is shameful, i.e., sex, not because it denies that sex is shameful.

Young does not elaborate this idea much further. And, as far as I can see, it did not become widely accepted or repeated. Several years later, however, feminist critics of pornography, Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin, each reached a similar conclusion for themselves. In 1979, in her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin writes, "Pornography does not, as

¹ Wayland Young, *Eros Denied*, op. cit., p. 53.

some claim, refute the idea that female sexuality is dirty: instead, pornography embodies and exploits this idea; pornography sells and promotes it."² Dworkin also identifies the taste for violence in pornography with the virtual reverence for violence in male-supremacist culture since the crucifixion of Christ,³ and thus begins to broaden the scope of parallels between pornography and Christianity. Then, in 1981, in *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*, Susan Griffin outlines a comprehensive analysis of how pornography, contrary to most expectations, actually expresses the same worldview, the same dualistic metaphysical understanding -- including the same abhorrence of sexuality -- as traditional Christianity expresses. She discusses a set of themes in which the two can be seen to

² Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979; reprint with new introduction, Toronto: Plume, Penguin Books, 1989), p. 201.

³ Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, p. 53: "Because male supremacy means precisely that men have learned to use violence against others, particularly against females, in a random or disciplined way, loyalty to some form of male violence, its advocacy in language or action, is a prime criterion of effective masculine identity. In adoring violence -- from the crucifixion of Christ to the cinematic portrayal of General Patton -- men seek to adore themselves, or those distorted fragments of self left over when the capacity to perceive the value of life has been paralyzed and maimed by the very adherence to violence that men articulate as life's central and energizing meaning." Earlier, in *Woman Hating* (1974: 73), Dworkin wrote about the Christian underpinnings of the ethic of violence against women as a cultural phenomenon. She was not speaking explicitly about pornography there, but the critique has obvious applicability: "the dualism of good and evil, virgin and whore ... inherent in Christianity finds its logical expression in the rituals of sadomasochism." Cited in Mary Jo Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," *op. cit.*, p. 72.

coincide with, rather than contradict, one another. Her analysis merits a brief review.

Griffin begins her analysis by acknowledging how unusual the idea of a similar worldview being shared by pornography and Christianity seems at first:

We are perhaps surprised to find that the metaphysics of Christianity and the metaphysics of pornography are the same. For we are accustomed to thinking of history in a different light. We imagine the church fathers as the judges of and inquisitors against the pornographers. We imagine the pornographer as a revolutionary of the imagination, who bravely stands up to speak of the life of the body openly while the church pronounces on the evils of the flesh.⁴

There are innumerable apt quotations extant from writings by the early Church Fathers, and by their ascetic forerunners in Classical culture, which pronounce on "the evils of the flesh." Griffin adduces a representative selection from such writers as Tertullian ("natural beauty ought to be obliterated by concealment and neglect, since it is dangerous to those who look upon it"), and argues that against these voices we juxtapose what we imagine is...

... the voice of the pornographer, who we imagine defends the body, loves flesh, worships desire, would explore all the possibilities of sexual joy. Thus we

⁴ Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 14-15.

begin to think of pornography as a kind of transgression against 'holy' prudery.⁵

But although pornography is obsessed with transgressing Christian morality, in fact, Griffin argues, "what is called a transgression against the church fathers is finally loyalty" because "every theme, every attitude, every shade of pornographic feeling has its origin in the church."⁶

Griffin identifies the same psychological process of denial and projection in the minds of both pornographer and Church Father or Inquisitor. By this mental mechanism each seeks to deny the physical side of himself, which is feared and hated, and perforce ends up projecting this denied part of himself onto the body of woman who becomes thereby carnality itself, dangerous, evil, and in need of punishment.

Both the church and pornography have chosen the same victim on which to push this denied knowledge.... A woman's body evokes the self-knowledge a man tries to forget. And thus he dreads this body. But he does not understand this dread as belonging to himself, and a fear of what the female body calls up in him. Rather, he pretends to himself that she is evil.... [Furthermore,] he can not reject this knowledge entirely. It comes back to him through his own body: through desire. Just as he pushes away a part of himself, he desires it. What he hates and fears, what he would loathe, he desires. He is in a terrible conflict with himself. And instead he comes to imagine that he struggles with a woman. Onto her body he projects his fear and his desire. So the female body, like the whore of Babylon in church iconography,

⁵ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 15.

⁶ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 16.

simultaneously lures the pornographer and incites his rage.⁷

This psychological pattern of denial and projection arises out of the dualistic metaphysical system which posits the soul as good and the body as evil. The pornographer's participation in this pattern reveals his underlying acceptance of the same dualistic metaphysics despite his protestations to the contrary, that Christianity treats the body as evil but he treats it as good. Beginning with the prototype anti-Christian rebel, the Marquis de Sade, Griffin reviews a wide selection of pornography and observes the various signs by which pornographers' reveal their participation in this psychological pattern of denial and projection.

Griffin shows, for example, that pornography does not "cast shame away and join carnal and spiritual love together again,"⁸ which would be a signal of the rejection of dualistic thinking which characterizes Christianity. The original pornographer, the Marquis de Sade, himself admitted that, "After an act of coitus with a woman, he found her repulsive, and hated her company,"⁹ for all the world as if he shared the view that sex is disgusting and sullies a woman, rather than holding such a view in contempt

⁷ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 19-20. Emphasis in the original.

⁸ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 20.

⁹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 20.

along with the rest of the Christian perspective he scorns. In fact, instead of rejecting the familiar Christian paradigm that paints women as either virgin, and holy, or whore, and shameful, pornography embraces the paradigm with fervour; it is actually obsessed with these two personae, these two stereotypes of womanhood. The hero in pornography repeatedly reprimands the virgin for her prudery and presumed purity, and punishes her by raping her, an experience which is presented as immediately transforming her into the opposite, a whore. "Over and over again, the pornographer's triumph, the pièce de résistance in his fantasy, occurs when he turns the virgin into a whore."¹⁰ Or, if the pornographic hero's rape victim is already a whore, "He reminds her of her already fallen condition. When he rapes her he tells her that he does so because of her humiliated state, to punish her."¹¹ What is important to recognize is that in either scenario the sexual act is obviously understood as "an act of humiliation to the soul," a means of humiliation, which reveals that the pornographer, despite his protestations to the contrary, is assuming "the old religious definition of the act" as something inherently evil and shameful.¹²

The theme in pornography which associates women with animals is another example which Griffin thinks indicates that the

¹⁰ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 22.

¹¹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 22.

¹² Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 22.

pornographer is engaging in the denial and projection of the same despised part of himself that the ascetic, body-hating Christian despises. The sight of a woman's body, Griffin says, recalls to a man his physical, animal nature, the part of himself that he cannot control, and that is mortal. Remembering the serpent in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, he thinks it is his animal nature which ultimately destroys him, which is his enemy. This despised part of himself he also projects onto images of women, presenting them as animals, as beasts "in heat," or in acts of coitus with animals. In the pornographer's mind, "a woman's body becomes the symbol which contains all that a man finds soiled by bestiality in himself."¹³

Griffin interprets the theme of the revelation of female flesh in pornography as another example indicating that the pornographer shares the same body-hating, flesh-fearing perspective typical of Christianity. But, instead of concealment, as advised by the Church Fathers, the pornographer opts for the unlimited exposure of female flesh as his method for conquering his fears of the "overwhelming seductive powers" of a woman's beauty which "can lead him into the world of flesh and the devil. Desiring her, he forgets his soul. He moves into eternal perdition."¹⁴ For, in Griffin's view, the revelation of the flesh in pornography is done precisely in order to undermine

¹³ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 27.

¹⁴ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 30.

these seductive powers of female flesh, to expose the mystery of the female body, and to reveal it as nothing so mysterious and powerful and threatening to men as they fear it to be, to reveal it as "nothing more than flesh, and flesh under culture's control."¹⁵ In photographing her, the pornographer "possesses" the woman, "he controls the one who has captured him," thus making himself safe from her power; and the viewer, the voyeur, remains at a similarly safe distance, similarly maintaining his sense of control. "He can look freely and turn away when he wishes. He can run his hands over the two-dimensional surface, but he will not be touched."¹⁶ The only desire either man permits himself, therefore, is in a form in which he is in control. Griffin might have noted that Saint Augustine, too, believed that the ideal of human sexuality before the Fall took a form in which the man never succumbed to desire but always exercised supreme control.¹⁷

¹⁵ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 33.

¹⁶ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether describes Augustine's vision of sex before the Fall as follows: "Augustine defended the bisexual character of the original creation, defining woman as the original material principle in relation to spirit. What was lacking in original creation was not bisexuality but sexual libido -- that is, instead of making the original creation nonsexual, he makes it nonsensual. This view leads to Augustine's belief that in Paradise man would have 'used' woman in a completely 'unfeeling' way, just as he moves his hand or his foot dispassionately and in a way that is totally under control of the rational will. Specifically, the male would have been innocent of that 'hideous' erection of his sexual organ and that rush of sensual feeling that defies rational control in his

The "central metaphor" of pornography, Griffin thinks, is the transformation of a woman, a living person with her own reason for being, into a thing, an object, which exists only for the sake of the man.¹⁸ Here, we are reminded of Eve's creation for the sake of Adam, to please Adam, and of the Christian tradition which entertained as debatable the idea that a woman has no soul.¹⁹

The pornographer reduces a woman to a mere thing, to an entirely material object without a soul, who can only be "loved" physically. But the church, and the Judeo-Christian culture, give us the same ethos. For we read in church doctrine that the man is the head and the wife the body,²⁰ or that woman is the known, whereas man is the knower.

response to the visual image of woman. With the same rationality and dispassion that a farmer sows his seed in the furrow of a field, the man would have sowed his seed in the woman." See Ruether's article, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 161-162.

¹⁸ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 36: "For the pornographic camera performs a miracle in reverse. Looking on a living being, a person with a soul, it produces an image of a thing. Any presence the real woman being photographed might have had has vanished in this lens. In pornography, even when a real woman poses for the camera, she does not pose as herself. Rather, she performs. She plays the part of an object. And rather than an accidental quality of pornography, this objectification of a whole being into a thing is the central metaphor of the form."

¹⁹ This debate was ostensibly settled, among Catholics at least, in the mid-16th century at the Council of Trent, when the pronouncement was made that women do have souls.

²⁰ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 3.

Yet, paradoxically, this mere thing without soul does not behave entirely like a thing, for pornography repeatedly shows the woman as being in need of domination, as if she had a will of her own. This is because she does have a will. For, in the psychological movement of denial and projection, the woman should be recognized as symbolizing, not only the idea of woman-as-soulless, but also the idea of the man's own soul, that part of himself of which he is frightened, which he tries to deny, but which can not be denied and will ceaselessly assert its presence.²¹

If the "central metaphor" of pornography is comparable to the Christian paradigm whereby woman is body, despised materiality, a mere thing, whereas man is soul, a being more spiritual than material in nature, Griffin thinks it is also meaningful to see in "the sadomasochistic ordeal" another close correspondence. She calls this sadomasochistic ordeal the "high drama of pornography," claiming that it mirrors the "theatrical moments" in "the story of Christ's martyrdom."²² Because the

²¹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 39-40.

²² Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 46: "If all the literature of pornography were to be represented by one performance ... the scenes ... would have to be the moments (which are inevitable in the pornographic oeuvre) in which most usually a woman, sometimes a man, often a child, is abducted by force, verbally abused, beaten, bound hand and foot and gagged, often tortured, often hung, his or her body suspended, wounded, and then murdered. But this is a drama we have all been called upon to witness, to witness and weep at beholding, taking this suffering into our hearts with our very belief in the divinity of goodness; for who in this culture can have escaped the story of Christ's martyrdom? All the theatrical moments of the agony of Christ mirror the high drama of pornography: the arrest, the

cruelty depicted in pornography "is identical to that transgression which men played out against the body of a god who was to have redeemed the human soul from the original sin of carnality,"²³ the great puzzle becomes decipherable. The great puzzle of sadomasochistic pornography is the pornographer's assertion that pain produces pleasure: "in the pornographic demimonde, cruelty is treated like a rare and precious delight."²⁴ Women critics of pornography often challenge its representation of women as seemingly enjoying their own rape or torture, but Griffin reminds her readers that in pornography woman symbolizes the denied, projected part of man just as much as, if not actually more than, herself. It is not the woman's suffering the man enjoys so much as his own. It is the denied part of himself he enjoys punishing. He derives the pleasure of redemption that comes, as in the Christian story, through the suffering of deserved punishment, or "discipline", as pornographers like to call it. By its associations with childhood, the term 'discipline' raises another issue, the issue of a possible underlying psychological phenomenon that might explain the attractiveness of both the Christian story of redemption and of sadomasochistic pornography, i.e., the profound

humiliating interrogation, the public ridicule, the beating, the binding to a cross, the suspension of his body from that cross, the cruel wound inflicted on his side, his terrible slow death."

²³ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 46.

²⁴ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 47.

sense of powerlessness and rage from carnal pains and frustrations which are suffered in infancy. Griffin explores a few ways in which pornography can be read to express this theme of infant rage at the mother's breast. She describes pornographic scenarios ranging from direct violent attacks on women's breasts,²⁵ for example, to indirect "reversals", such as instances of forcing reluctant women to suck on a penis and swallow the "milky" semen. Thus, she says, when a woman is the victim in sadomasochistic pornography, when "a woman is tortured and reduced to the level of an infant, humiliated by her desire, her helplessness, and materiality, the issues of control and revenge mingle in an obsessive repetition of the crucial drama of infancy."²⁶ We can see "the child's desire to have the power his parents had, to inflict upon them the longing, rejection, frustration, pain, and humiliation that the infant once felt."²⁷ In the infant's mind, moreover, the mother and the self are initially fused, so that the levels of meaning in the

²⁵ The following instance from *American Psycho* (p. 290) could be added to Griffin's collection of pornography's violent attacks on women's breasts: "Back in my bedroom, Christie lies on the futon, tied to the legs of the bed, bound up with rope, her arms above her head, ripped pages from last month's *Vanity Fair* stuffed into her mouth. Jumper cables hooked up to a battery are clipped to both breasts, turning them brown.... In the morning ... the smell coming from her burnt corpse is jolting and I have to open the venetian blinds, which are spattered with burnt fat from when Christie's breasts burst apart, electrocuting her, and then the windows, to air out the room..."

²⁶ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 64.

²⁷ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 60.

pornographic symbol of woman slide easily from mother, against whom the infant desires revenge, to the denied and projected, unacceptable parts of oneself, the disobedient carnality which also deserves punishment. Her suffering recalls the sins of humanity for which the suffering and death of Christ brought redemption. Revenge and redemption are both sweet, both pleasurable, both necessary to one who feels intensely that the conditions of nature, of carnality, sex, and death, are intolerable. Thus, in the realm of psychological compulsions, in the realm where culture seeks revenge against nature, as Griffin puts it, pain can indeed produce pleasure.

For all these reasons, Griffin argues, pornography, from the first writings by the Marquis de Sade, is "not an elaborate attempt to free flesh from Christian hatred of flesh."²⁸ De Sade's espousal that nature itself "yearns for cruelty," not joy, is just an inverse way of expressing the same animosity toward nature, toward the vulnerable and mortal embodied nature of human existence, toward this life, and this world, that Christian ascetics have preached over the centuries. Moreover, pornography ritually restates the same attitude. Recalling, for comparison, the Christian Inquisitors and witch-burners of recent centuries, Griffin concludes:

For above all, pornography is ritual. It is an enacted drama which is laden with meaning, which imparts a

²⁸ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 69.

vision of the world. The altar for the ritual is a woman's body. And the ritual which is carried out on this altar is the desecration of flesh.²⁹

Finally, as the remaining most significant point of correspondence between pornography and Christianity, Griffin alludes to the pornographer's defense of violent pornography on the grounds that it provides men with a cathartic substitute for real violence.

The pornographer's argument for catharsis rests upon a philosophy which describes the male human being as filled with an innate rage which must from time to time be alleviated.... What the pornographer's argument for catharsis conceals above all is his secret worship of the image of himself as violent, and his desire for some redemption, some entrance into a mystery within himself, through violence.³⁰

What the pornographer is indirectly admitting by assuming there is a need for cathartic violence, is that he believes human nature is inherently aggressive, cruel and rapacious. But is this not the same as the Christian view of human nature as inherently sinful, as "fallen", and prone to evil? I am reminded of the statement by the celibate Catholic bishops, quoted in Chapter Two, which asserts that "sexual pleasure ... can also bring about harm and violence. This threat of violence arises

²⁹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 79.

³⁰ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 94-95.

from the inherent aggressivity in sexuality."³¹ Pornography, says Griffin, should be situated squarely within, not outside of, the whole Western religious, philosophical and scientific tradition of belief in the inevitability of male violence, starting from the Bible, and including Hobbes, Darwin, Freud, Wilhelm Stekel, Konrad Lorenz, Lionel Tiger, and many others.³²

Before leaving Griffin's articulation of the similarities between pornography and Christianity, it is worth noting her observation of the religious perspective, or "sacred meaning," which pornography "silences".

Through all pornography, and behind every profanation, ... we can find a different vision of the world, glimmering just out of reach, at times not even visible, but always present -- this silenced presence of the idea of a marriage between spirit and matter, the forgotten knowledge that culture might embody nature for us rather than deny her.... Behind the static object which the obscene vision calls woman is a sacred image of the goddess, the sacred image of the cow, the emblematic touch of divinity in the ecstasy of the sexual act, and behind all these the knowledge that within matter and not outside the material is a knowledge of the meaning of the universe.³³

Even behind the sadomasochistic story in pornography Griffin finds a hidden "sacred meaning." Behind the humiliation and death of the woman she sees the desire for the death of the ego,

³¹ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement on Pornography" (1984), in *The Churches Speak On: Pornography*, ed. J. Gordon Melton, op. cit., p. 22.

³² Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 94-96.

³³ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 71.

of the cultural self. She sees a desire for freedom from enslavement to the "false image of ourselves, expressed and given a life by pornography."³⁴

In comparing the points made by Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin it is important to notice that, for both, the important reason for demonstrating the similarity between pornography and traditional Christianity is clearly to show that the acceptance of men's violence against women is part of this picture, not only a shared view of sex as shameful. Dworkin seems most concerned with how the social system of male supremacy is buttressed by an ideology of admiration for men's violent abilities.- Her research over the years has focused on how male-dominated culture provides such an ideology in abundance.³⁵ Dworkin lays out the evidence for its virtual reverence, whether one looks at the central crucifixion motif in the Christian religion, at male-authored

³⁴ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 76-77. "This, then, is the sacred meaning of humiliation: If we humiliate the false, cultural image of ourselves, which is not ourselves, we free our real beings.... For we are whole beings. We know this somewhere in a part of ourselves that feels like memory. And thus, despite the fact that we can find no culture living today which does not express a profound hatred of the bodies of women, and a fear of human nature and natural life, we have within us a longing.... We know that every natural being has spirit. Every culture recorded has expressed this longing in some form. One encounters it as an idealized vision of the past, or as conjecture about the nature of past societies, as a utopia or an idea of heaven." (pp. 77-78)

³⁵ See Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974), *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979; reprint, Toronto: Plume, Penguin Books, 1989), *Right-wing Women* (New York: Putnam, 1983), *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

philosophy or literature, or at pornography. In a sense Dworkin sees pornography as a weapon in men's arsenal which they choose consciously for its political effectiveness in battling the challenge to their domination being brought forward by contemporary feminists. In her political work combatting pornography, Dworkin seems to have been convinced over time by men's arguments -- by writers ranging from Georges Bataille to Leo Tolstoy -- that male sexuality is indeed inherently violent.³⁶ Griffin, however, has not been convinced of this.³⁷ She doesn't take the male argument at face value in the same way Dworkin does. Her emphasis is different. She thinks men are deluded in imagining themselves to be possessed of an inherently violent sexuality.³⁸ For Griffin, men's delusion about their

³⁶ I think this explains Dworkin's sympathy for the position taken by conservative, anti-feminist women, which she expresses in *Right-wing Women*. In this book Dworkin argues that right-wing women accept the inevitability of male violence and so have come to accept the *status quo* as the best system for offering them protection against it. Dworkin differs from these women, not over their assessment of men, but over their assessment of the *status quo* as the most protective system for women.

³⁷ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 96.

³⁸ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 98-100: "What the pornographer calls catharsis is not at all a catharsis. Rather, it is an attempt to defend a belief in illusion. The pornographer's argument is really his illness arguing for its own continued existence. This defense is what a healer of the mind might call resistance. The mind at war with itself wants to be healed, but still clings to the old damaged way of being.... The pornographer argues that pornography pulls back the veil drawn over violent impulses and by revealing these impulses, heals.... But what the pornographer does not see, because he himself speaks for the illness, is that pornography is the veil, is the false

own nature is more responsible for their appetite for pornography than any conscious choice to use pornography in a political war with women. Her analysis of the similarities between pornography and Christian dualistic thinking -- in terms of both systems showing symptoms of the psychological movement of denial and projection of the despised carnal part of the self -- is an analysis that is primarily concerned with explaining how the motivations for men's violence, and particularly for their sexual violence against women, can be understood in a way that does not require accepting the inevitability of such violence. Griffin's analysis is a diagnosis of an illness of the mind. And it contains the potential for a cure through self-awareness, followed by a self-conscious repudiation of all cultural forms that celebrate dualism, including traditional, explicitly dualistic Christianity and the equally, but implicitly, dualistic cultural product of pornography. Her final optimistic word: "We have choice."³⁹

paralysis, is the obsession with a delusion. And part of this delusion is the belief that man is a violent creature who must purge himself of his violence by acting violently, or by imagining violence. This delusion serves the deluded by arguing (to whatever in him may abhor violence) that his fantasy of violence actually heals him. And moreover, through this delusionary image of himself as intrinsically 'violent,' he continues to imagine himself as invulnerable and powerful. Arguing that he is 'overwhelmed' by desire to be violent, he escapes the fact that he is indeed 'overwhelmed' by other feelings: by fear, or by desire." Emphasis in the original.

³⁹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 265.

Obviously there is room here for a more detailed analysis of Dworkin's and Griffin's ideas concerning the links between Christianity and pornography. The line of argument presented by these feminist critics of pornography invites close consideration and comment by scholars of religion. That would be beyond the scope of my argument in this chapter, however, so I must leave it for another time or another scholar. Though I am tempted to make one observation at least. It seems to me that Griffin's idea of pornography as a perfectly consistent obsession for a Christian, an "addiction", as she calls it at one point, does seem to have a certain explanatory power for otherwise seemingly anomalous phenomena: for example, the use of pornography by one of this century's most renowned Christian theologians, Paul Tillich,⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See Hannah Tillich, *From Time to Time* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), pp. 14-15, 189-90, and 241-243, for revelations of Paul Tillich's use of pornography. For example, referring to herself as "the old woman" and her husband as "the old man," she recounts one time when she found him watching pornographic films: "'Ah,' said the old woman, entering his room without knocking, 'the old torture game.' The old man had pushed the buttons on his custom-made screen. There was the familiar cross shooting up the wall. 'So fitting for a Christian and a theologian,' she sneered. A naked girl hung on it, hands tied in front of her private parts. Another naked figure lashed the crucified one with a whip that reached further to another cross, on which a girl was exposed from behind. More and more crosses appeared, all with women tied and exposed in various positions. Some were exposed from the front, some from the side, some from behind, some crouched in fetal position, some head down, or legs apart, or legs crossed -- and always whips, crosses, whips." (p. 14) This autobiography by Hannah, who was married to Paul, also contains accounts of his repeated infidelities and a related pattern of denial about them (pp. 18-20, 105-106, 129, 187, and 240), as well as a final deathbed request for forgiveness from Hannah (p. 223).

and the confessions of addiction to pornography by leading Christian antipornography activists.⁴¹ My purpose in this chapter, however, is simply to sketch as clearly as possible the outline of Dworkin's and Griffin's arguments, not to explore the many nuances of meaning, nor, ultimately, to assess the validity of their views. My intention is to show only that an argument treating Christianity and pornography as part of the same worldview deserves a response from religious studies scholars. Since pornography is widely believed not to express a Christian view, a reasoned argument that it does, is one more indication that pornography is a relevant subject for religious studies.

Not many religion scholars thus far have taken up the challenge posed by Dworkin's and Griffin's line of argument. Mary Jo Weaver is one who has, however, and her response merits attention. Weaver's response also happens to be particularly relevant to the argument of this chapter, not only because it attempts to correct the analyses offered by Dworkin and Griffin, but also because Weaver presents her own slightly different characterization of how pornography and Christianity are

⁴¹ See Bill Dedman's article on an American Methodist priest, Donald Wildmon, become famous in recent years for his active promotion of the censorship of pornography: "Bible Belt Blowhard," *Mother Jones* (November/December 1992). In this article Dedman reports on a conference organized by Wildmon at which was featured a "reformed pornoholic" named David Caton. Dedman writes, "Like the reformed drunk at a temperance revival, Caton confessed the sins of his past, explaining that pornography was more addicting than heroin. Why, he had some stuff out in the car that would blow your socks off if anybody wanted to see it. Well, just the men. It was strong stuff." (p. 76)

connected. As I mentioned earlier, there are a variety of ways in which pornography is gradually coming to be understood as more similar than dissimilar to Christianity. Mary Jo Weaver's argument presents another variation on this theme of "the Christian connection."

VARIATION #2:

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINE ON THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD
LEGITIMIZES MALE DOMINANCE AND ITS EXTENSION IN PORNOGRAPHY

The point of Weaver's article, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination,"⁴² is to analyze the "religious incongruities" in the presumed alliance, or "imaginal coalition," between antipornography feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin on the one hand, and antipornography right-wing evangelicals like Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Falwell on the other. Whereas others have pointed out the danger that feminists incur in making a political alliance with religious conservatives⁴³ (who also tend to be conservative on other issues concerning which feminists are seeking change), Weaver wants to clarify the

⁴² Mary Jo Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," in *For Adult Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography*, ed. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 68-86.

⁴³ By "religious conservatives" Weaver means to include "right-wing Roman Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and mainline Protestants." See note 3, p. 83.

"irreconcilable theological assumptions" in the views held by the two groups to show another reason why an alliance between them is untenable, even for the singular purpose of combatting pornography.⁴⁴ At the same time, however, while she wants to show antipornography feminists additional reasons for not aligning themselves with religious conservatives, she also wants to convince them that they need not therefore reject Christianity. Weaver wants to show feminists how they can argue "against pornography and religious conservatives at the same time without dismissing Christianity itself."⁴⁵

In Weaver's opinion Andrea Dworkin should be praised for helping to "change the terms of the debate so that pornography is now an issue of power rather than an index of purity."⁴⁶ Yet this is precisely what the religious conservatives do not, and can not, understand because of the nature of their theological convictions:

In fact, because religious conservatives imagine God as a dominating sovereign who demands human submission, they fail to criticize what antipornography feminists perceive as the root of pornography, power used to render others sexually docile."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 68.

⁴⁵ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 69.

⁴⁶ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 68.

⁴⁷ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 69.

Religious conservatives oppose pornography because they believe that by condoning promiscuity pornography is perverse. They believe that Christianity actually enhances human sexuality by regulating it within marriage, but pornography perverts that potential. Within marriage, it is important to recognize, their view is that sex is something to be heartily enjoyed. "Erotic sexuality is healthy within marriage."⁴⁸ God intended a pleasurable, robust sex life for husbands and wives. Weaver discusses a body of recent conservative Christian literature on sex within marriage which expresses a high level of appreciation for its pleasures, including concern that women not be cheated of the enjoyment of orgasm.⁴⁹ This literature must render

⁴⁸ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 72.

⁴⁹ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," pp. 71-72: "'Sex was given to us for pure pleasure,' according to Jack and Carole Mayhall (1978), and Rusty and Linda Raney Wright (1981) tell their readers that they can get the most out of sex by placing it within a context of communication and commitment.... Religious conservatives like Tim and Beverly LaHaye have used statistical data to prove that 'Christians are considerably more satisfied with their love life than non Christians' (1976, p. 206), and the Christian philosopher Neil Gallagher argues that 'if husbands and wives gave each other the robust sex God intended, there'd be very little market for porno' (1981, p. 207). The 'eternal woman' whose vocation was surrender, described by Gertrude von le Fort (1934), a religious writer and convert to Catholicism, has been appropriated and transformed by Marabel Morgan (1973) into 'the total woman,' whose 'surrender' ought to be to seduce her husband every day for a week. 'The Creator of sex intended for His creatures to enjoy it,' she chirps (p. 131); 'sex is as clean and pure as eating cottage cheese' (p. 141).... If sex has been disparaged by Catholics, who subordinate the ideal of marriage to the ideal of virginity, Protestants extol marriage as a blessed vocation and fundamentalists have taken pains in the last few years to relate sex to the life of the spirit. Josh McDowell, a traveling

incomprehensible for religious conservatives Dworkin's claim that Christianity treats sex as "dirty". What is important to recognize here, however, is that the model of marriage accepted by religious conservatives is one of male dominance and female subservience according to the biblical pattern ordained by God. Therefore, the model of sexuality they accept is also one of male dominance and female subservience.

Virtually all of the books by conservative Christian writers about marriage assume that proper sexual pleasure can be found only in marital relationships

evangelist for Campus Crusade for Christ, talks about sex and prayer as two dimensions of the same experience, and Peter Gardella, a scholar who examined conservative Christian sexual ethics in *Innocent Ecstasy* (1985), argues that Christianity gave America an ethic of sexual pleasure." Weaver reports on this literature further (p. 73): "Contemporary fundamentalists, who look to scriptural texts as a warrant for their behavior, have taken a verse from this book [The Song of Solomon] -- 'Oh that his left hand were under my head and his right hand embraced me' -- as a divine approval for clitoral stimulation (Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, 1986, 50). New translations of this biblical text, notably the one by S. Craig Glickman (1976), are meant to show Christians what God intended romantic love to be. Finally, it is not altogether clear that Roman Catholic teaching about sex is universally repressive or, as Boswell has shown (1980), that it has been universally consistent. While it is true that Catholic teaching about marriage is based on natural law theory, which makes procreation the primary end of marriage with sexual pleasure clearly secondary, Peter Gardella perceives in Catholic sexual ethics a fundamental sensuality. According to him, the first American writer to prescribe orgasm for women was the Catholic bishop of Philadelphia, Francis Patrick Kenrick, who said, among other things, that women have the right to experience orgasm by touches after intercourse if they have not achieved orgasm during intercourse (p. 9). Orgasm is also a growing concern for conservative fundamentalists. Jack and Carole Mayhall (1978) tell their readers that sex is good and that God's command to increase and multiply means 'do not cheat each other of normal sexual intercourse ... a wife who never has an orgasm is being cheated' (p. 216)."

where the man is clearly the head of the family.... The conservative Christian vision ... is predicated on a pattern of dominance and submission, and [even] the erotic possibilities of Christian spirituality are linked with a⁵⁰ reading of the tradition that upholds male mastery.

Consequently religious conservatives do not recognize the male dominance aspect of the pornographic picture as problematic, only pornography's disrespect for the regulating principle of marriage. Hence, an alliance between religious conservatives and feminists like Andrea Dworkin is ludicrous. Religious conservatives do not agree with Dworkin's claim that Christianity treats sex as "dirty", nor with her moral judgment that male dominance in sexual relations is a problem.

Weaver disagrees with religious conservatives who assert that their traditional vision of Christianity both values sex and honours women. She writes, "the fact remains that the teachings of traditional Christianity are built upon a hatred of women and a profound abhorrence of sex."⁵¹ She affirms the validity of several feminist arguments to the effect that Christianity has contributed to the humiliation and degradation of women -- in

⁵⁰ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 79. It should be noted that this recent encouragement of a pro-sex attitude among religious conservatives is very different from the feminist-inspired pro-sex doctrinal changes outlined above (see Chapter Two) for this very reason, that is, because the conservative Christian sex-positive vision simultaneously endorses male dominance and female submission, whereas the feminist-inspired reforms do not.

⁵¹ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 70.

pornography and in general -- through its teachings about "the inferiority of the body and the identification of the body with the female."⁵²

Feminist theologians like Rosemary Ruether (1975) and Mary Daly (1968), as well as critics like Susan Griffin (1981), condemn traditional Christianity both for its treatment of women and for its teachings about sex. From the very beginning, they say, Christianity has taught us how to debase women and hate sex. And, indeed, even a casual reading of the "Fathers" of the church (Tavard, 1973) shows that the Christian tradition is full of scorn for women, scorn that overflows into canon law (Henning, 1974) and medieval theology (McLaughlin, 1974). The notion of women as inherently lustful, an opinion of "the Fathers," is reflected in clerical attitudes toward women and in the witchcraft mania (Russell, 1972).⁵³

She also affirms the idea that Christianity bears responsibility for the pornographic imagination. However, Weaver disputes the validity of the argument that the Christian roots of the pornographic imagination rest in its moral teachings about sexual conduct. She disputes the validity of the "focus on Christian sexual ethics in order to show the links between sexual repression and pornography."⁵⁴ And she disputes the conclusion

⁵² Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 70.

⁵³ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 70.

⁵⁴ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," pp. 69-70: "When writers like Susan Griffin ... criticize Christianity, they often focus on Christian sexual ethics in order to show the links between sexual repression and pornography. Furthermore, by attaching sexual repression to Christianity, historians like Barbara Walker (1983, pp. 910-20) assume that other religions are sufficiently free sexually that

drawn by some feminists that in order to overcome pornography Christianity must therefore be rejected.

In Weaver's estimation, feminists like Susan Griffin are mistaken to base their claims for the "elective affinity between Christianity and pornography"⁵⁵ primarily on Christian sexual ethics. She argues that Christianity is not the only religion that is guilty of asceticism or of misogyny, as is implied by antipornography feminists who condemn Christianity alone as responsible for the pornographic imagination, disregarding other ascetic and misogynist traditions.⁵⁶ Furthermore, there is a strong tradition of eroticism in Christianity, albeit in spiritualized form, in the language used mostly by mystics which describes "erotic relationships between the soul and God."⁵⁷ Weaver criticizes Griffin, in particular, for positing the necessity to choose between eroticism and traditional

one need not look to them for the roots of the pornographic imagination.... I will argue that the elective affinity between Christianity and pornography does not rest with Christian teachings about sex but with traditional Christian teaching about women as inherently inferior." The latter, moreover, as she proceeds to elaborate, is derivative of Christianity's theology of transcendence, which is the real nub of the problem.

⁵⁵ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 69.

⁵⁶ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," pp. 73-75 and 76. Compare my comments above (pp. 43-44), similarly criticizing Wayland Young's argument for characterizing Christianity as unique for its negative attitudes toward sex.

⁵⁷ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," pp. 77-79.

Christianity,⁵⁸ as if there were no such "erotic descriptions of spiritual union," or as if they could not be distinguished from Christian literature about female inferiority. In Weaver's view, "Christianity contains a possibility for the erotic that can be appreciated even though the traditional teachings about women as inferior and subservient, in need of male mastery, must be rejected."⁵⁹ While it may be true that "the erotic possibilities of Christian spirituality are linked with a reading of the tradition that upholds male mastery"⁶⁰ within the conservative Christian vision, Weaver believes that an alternative theological vision could make a different reading possible.

Where Weaver places the root problem of the Christian contribution to pornography is not, then, in its moral teachings about sex *per se*. She places the root problem in its theological teachings about God's nature, and about the corresponding nature of the relationship between the divine and human realities. The problem is "a dualistic understanding of the spiritual and

⁵⁸ Griffin asserts that "we cannot choose to have both eros and pornography" (*Pornography and Silence*, p. 249). By this statement, Weaver concludes, "she means in part that we must choose between Christianity and eros, between the bondage and discipline of traditional Christianity and the biophilic freedom of erotic nature." Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 69.

⁵⁹ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 79.

⁶⁰ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 79.

material worlds, a distinction upheld by the belief that God is a radically transcendent and dominating being."⁶¹

In the creation story in the Bible ... the maker is divided from the thing made in such a way that the creator is inherently superior to the created order and stands in a relationship of mastery over it.⁶²

When this transcendent theological understanding is coupled with the doctrine of complementarity which says that only males were made in the image of God, while God designed women for subservient roles and for procreation, then the pattern of male dominance and female inferiority and submission in both marriage and in sex is legitimated. Pornography only mirrors and extends the pattern that a theology of transcendence first creates. Here, then, in its theology of transcendence is where Weaver thinks we should locate Christianity's responsibility for pornography, its connection with pornography.

The theological understanding of a radically transcendent God whose qualities were appropriated by males to the disparagement of women and bodily life is the basis for the double standard identified by antipornography feminists⁶³ as the foundation of the pornographic imagination.

⁶¹ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 75.

⁶² Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 75.

⁶³ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 76.

Fortunately, from Weaver's point of view, the problem can be corrected, and the foundation of the pornographic imagination can be undermined, without requiring the rejection of Christianity. For Christianity contains another radically different theme, the theme of divine immanence, as found, for example, in the doctrine of the Incarnation. And this theme of divine immanence has been developed into a new model of theology, modern "process theology," which is "a system based on the work of Alfred North Whitehead (1929)."⁶⁴ Instead of domination and submission, process theology "conceptualizes the relationship with God as one of partnership and mutual vulnerability."⁶⁵

Because process theology develops the partnership and communicative elements of the divine/human interaction,

⁶⁴ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 80.

⁶⁵ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 80. The following provides a brief summary of the difference between traditional theology and process theology (p. 81): "In the classical theology of traditional Christianity, although the creative center of the universe, God is the supreme exception to human experience and has no necessary relationship with the world. God, in other words, appears not to need the world at all and is said to sustain its life as an act of supreme goodness and generosity. For process theologians, however, God does need the world and the bustle of choices that make up human and subhuman existence. For Whitehead, God is the supreme exemplification of all metaphysical and human categories, not their exception. Far from being unrelated to this world, the process God is that being who is conditioned and affected by everything that happens here and understandable only in terms of relationships. God is absolute not in the traditional sense of being final, total, unlimited, and unchangeable, but by being encompassing in influence, related to and suffering with all entities, and being the ultimate and highest destiny of each.... For Whitehead ... 'It is ... as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God' (1929, 530)."

it can break the tradition of religious tyranny and make way for a theology that can displace the dominance of men over women with genuinely mutual patterns of relationship.⁶⁶

After elaborating on the basic elements of process theology, Weaver concludes that it corrects the problem of providing divine sanction for male dominance which was created by the original theology of transcendence, that it allows for the recovery of the erotic tradition already present in a spiritualized form within Christianity, and that it therefore renders unnecessary the rejection of Christianity itself by feminists who are concerned with how best to oppose pornography.

Process theology enables one to imagine a Christianity that is not a source of and foundation for the pornographic imagination and makes it possible for anti-pornography feminists to retrieve those parts of the Christian vision which some of them may find life-enhancing. What Griffin associates with eros -- celebration of life, falling in love, poetry, mutuality, change, vulnerability, and beauty -- are the very elements that a process system recognizes as most clearly embodying the divine reality. In this system, the God of mastery is replaced by a God whose only power over humanity is in the lure of beauty. While one must choose between eros and pornography, therefore, one does not necessarily have to choose between Christianity and eros.⁶⁷

To summarize Weaver's variation on "the Christian connection," the essential point to reiterate is that

⁶⁶ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," pp. 80-81.

⁶⁷ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 82.

Christianity's responsibility for the pornographic imagination derives primarily from its theology of transcendence. It is this theology of transcendence, this conception of a Lord and Master of the universe, which lends itself to the ethic of male dominance and leads to the pornographic imagination. It is this transcendental theology, not its repressive asceticism, which distinguishes Christianity from other religions, making it more responsible than other religions for pornography. Since religious conservatives continue to embrace this transcendental theology and its corresponding ethic of male dominance and female submission, regardless of their appreciation for the pleasures of marital sex, such religious conservatives can not expect to "save the world from pornography" by offering a Christian alternative, because it is not really an alternative at all.

Religion as defined by conservatives is not antithetical to pornography but supportive of it, and an appropriation of the "old-time religion" is an affirmation of the very framework upon which perverse extensions of dominating masculinity are constructed.⁶⁸

Therefore, feminists would be unwise to make an alliance with such religious conservatives for the purpose of opposing pornography. At the same time, however, antipornography feminists need not reject Christianity itself. For, reformed by process theology, Christianity can be seen to welcome eros, and

⁶⁸ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 82.

can become a suitable ally for feminists dedicated to struggling against both pornography and "the old, tyrannizing tradition of conservative Christianity."⁶⁹

Before moving on to the next variation on "the Christian connection," the next example that shows why pornography is a relevant subject for religious studies, it is worth raising the following questions: Does Weaver's argument deal satisfactorily with the challenge raised by Dworkin's and Griffin's line of argument? Does Weaver's argument even represent Griffin's argument correctly when she characterizes Griffin as focusing on Christianity's responsibility for pornography as being due to its repressive sexual ethic?

While I must leave a detailed discussion of these questions for another time, I do want to offer some preliminary comments. I think my own review of Griffin's argument shows that it is more complex than Weaver has implied. In fact, if Weaver and Griffin were placed in a debating position with each other over the question of whether Christianity merits retention, it may be that the strength of Griffin's argument rests in the multiplicity of parallels she draws between pornography and Christianity. Weaver reduces the number of parallels that she claims are truly relevant to one: a theology of transcendence, with its implicit sanctioning of male dominance. It benefits Weaver's position in favour of retaining Christianity to reduce the parallels to one,

⁶⁹ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 82.

of course, since this one she can argue is subject to elimination through the adoption of process theology. But it should be noted that, in the process, Weaver does not respond to the issue of the crucifixion theme, for example, which is so central to the Christian story, and which Dworkin and Griffin both highlight in their arguments attempting to explain the acceptance of violence in pornography, indeed, the virtual delight that pornographers seem to take in "the sadomasochistic ordeal," as Griffin labels it. By casting Griffin's argument primarily as a critique of Christianity's anti-eroticism, Weaver avoids having to deal with the subtler levels of her argument. To be fair to Weaver, she does acknowledge at one point that "according to Susan Griffin (1981), Christianity is the foundation of the pornographic imagination because it legitimizes patterns of domination and submission,"⁷⁰ but she does not develop this point further. Ironically, she does not explore the critique of dualism that she and Griffin actually share.

The last two variations on the theme of "the Christian connection" that I will review are somewhat less complicated and can be presented more succinctly.

⁷⁰ Weaver, "Pornography and the Religious Imagination," p. 69.

VARIATION #3:

PORNOGRAPHY CONSTRUCTS A TRANSCENDENT GOD-LIKE VOYEUR/VIEWER

The third variation on the theme of this chapter presents an intriguing twist. Instead of focusing on the subject matter or contents of pornography, it addresses the issue of the subject who views pornography, specifically visual pornography. It addresses the issue of what it means to be a voyeur, and what sort of subjectivity is created within members of a society which culturally encourages voyeurism. Instead of drawing parallels between Christianity and pornography in terms of how each treats key themes, like sex and violence, this third variation draws a picture of a parallel in which the consumer of pornography appears as "God-like" in the sense of being detached and all-powerful, that is, in the very sense of God as transcendent and masterful which has been the traditional Christian understanding of God, and which, as was just discussed, has been only recently repudiated by Christians like Mary Jo Weaver and other process theologians.

As already mentioned above, the voyeur's state of detached control is something to which Susan Griffin refers when she writes: "He can look freely and turn away when he wishes. He can run his hands over the two-dimensional surface, but he will not be touched." Griffin also describes the voyeur as a "sadist" because he participates, by his act of watching, in the humiliation of a person through her being made into an object,

which is an inherently humiliating experience for a human being. Through his detachment, furthermore, the voyeur subject shares the sadist's position of invulnerability. He is in a position of enjoying her humiliation and perhaps her fear without any fear of his own.⁷¹

It should be noted that Griffin uses gender-specific language like this for the voyeur subject, because the pattern most typical for pornography is one in which men are the voyeurs/consumers and women are depicted/consumed. However Griffin also takes care to point out explicitly that the sadist can be presented within a sadomasochistic pornographic scenario as female, with a male victim. For the sadist and the masochist, she argues, following the theory about sadomasochism propounded by Wilhelm Stekel, "are one person" playing the two roles interchangeably.⁷² This one person in pornography, however, in the final analysis, is ultimately male.⁷³ So her use of the

⁷¹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, pp. 47-49.

⁷² Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 50: "In the midst of the sadomasochistic ritual, we discover that the sadist imagines himself in the body of the masochist and the masochist imagines himself in the body of the sadist. The two halves of this ritual represent one self divided and at war with itself. Thus, throughout pornography, we discover a reversal of the sexual roles."

⁷³ Despite considerable variety in the sex role reversals of men and women within pornography, Griffin argues, "we must remember that these are not men and women in actuality, but only figments who belong to a fantasy. And in the deepest sense, this fantasy is an illusion society has given to men exclusively. We know, of course, that a woman can participate in the pornographic mind. She can harbor the same illusions; she can read

masculine gender to speak of the sadistic voyeur character within pornography, and of the voyeur/consumer of pornography, is intentionally and appropriately gender specific. Thus the voyeur/viewer of pornography, his state of detached control, and his sadism (which is simultaneously also masochism), are all preeminently male in Griffin's analysis.

While Griffin analyzes the detached control of the voyeur/viewer of pornography in terms of sadomasochism, the analyst who explicitly describes his state as "God-like" is the feminist philosopher and cultural critic, Geraldine Finn (1985, 1989). Finn's analysis, like Griffin's, highlights the detached, all-powerful nature of the voyeur/viewer's subjectivity, and accords central importance to the fact of its masculine gender identity. But, whereas Griffin's analysis deals with psychological issues, interpreting pornography as an expression of a self-conflicted subject (an expression which is in turn consumed, obsessively, but vainly, to ease this sense of inner conflict), Finn's analysis is political in nature, interpreting

pornography; she can model herself after its images. And yet the world of pornography is a world of male gestures and male language and a male ethos. It is an atmosphere which belongs to men's clubs and locker rooms, to the lobbies of brothels, to the private male conversation, to fathers and sons. Pornography is written largely for men and largely by men, and the women who have recently entered this audience or this trade enter a tradition already defined and shaped by men. Thus the male and female characters who play out the roles of sadist and masochist in pornography are simply representations of one mind, and of a mind that has been shaped as 'male' in this society." Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 52.

pornography as a cultural representation which helps to create or construct the type of viewer/subject which perpetuates patriarchy.

In "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I"⁷⁴ Geraldine Finn analyzes the construction of the subjectivity of the voyeur/viewer of pornography using ideas about the nature of the subjectivity that is constructed through "the condition of viewing" itself. This condition, she argues, confers an "'ontological status of separation,' of Sovereignty":

For the viewer is essentially external to the world-viewed and therefore uneffected by it. The world is present to him and visible, but he, like God, is absent from the world and invisible. He cannot be objectified by the gaze of an other subject for he is not part of the world his gaze objectifies. In pornography, he looks at her looking back at him; but she cannot see him. He is Sovereign. The world-viewed appears in response to his will and he has only to close his eyes or turn away and the world-viewed will cease to be. He is judge, spectator-speculator, owner and controller, with no responsibility for or to that which he observes. He conjures it both in and out of existence. He is the one who knows, while he himself is inscrutable and is not known.⁷⁵

Now, significantly, this God-like viewer who is constructed through the condition of viewing is, in the case of pornography, also simultaneously constructed as male. For, as Finn argues,

⁷⁴ Geraldine Finn, "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 9, nos. 1-2 (1985): 81-95.

⁷⁵ Finn, "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I," *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

pornography is about sex, and to the extent that it elicits a sexual response, it reminds the viewer of his sexual identity. In a male-dominated society this means that pornography reminds the viewer, who is generally male, of his "membership in the sex class which rules."⁷⁶ Pornography calls forth the male viewer's sexuality, it excites him, not for his sexual pleasure alone, but more importantly for his "experience of sexual superiority and control"⁷⁷ that his identity as male confers upon him in a male-dominated society.

Thus, according to Finn's analysis, male subjectivity constructed by means of the condition of viewing pornography in a male-dominated society, experiences itself in the same act of viewing simultaneously as God-like, detached and all-powerful (the self as viewer), and as the socially sovereign male (the self as voyeur). Through its influence in this manner on identity construction, or subject construction, of the male viewer as God-like and sovereign, pornography therefore serves an important function in the reproduction and maintenance of the social and political system of male dominance. This is the process that explains how, as Finn writes in another place, sexual imagery constitutes "the active reproduction and

⁷⁶ Finn, "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I," p. 87.

⁷⁷ Finn, "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I," p. 87.

endorsement of a gender-based hierarchy which systematically empowers men and disempowers women."⁷⁸

Reproducing images of male and female, especially when they are clearly marked as "sexual" or as specifically masculine or feminine, reproduces the code of gender differentiation and oppression and therefore its reality.⁷⁹

Keeping this point in mind it is interesting to observe the analogous "religious" roles that Finn finds for women in pornography. She argues that the "pornographic woman" is both "idol and idolizer." The woman is presented as an object of male desire, but is produced by pornography in order to solicit the man's sexual response, his pleasure. She appears to be worshipped, yet in fact she is the one who worships him. "For her desire is constituted as his desire for her."⁸⁰

To summarize, Geraldine Finn's intriguing variation on the Christian connection is a variation which posits the subject construction of the pornographer voyeur/viewer as God-like in the traditional Christian sense of being detached and all-powerful, and posits the "pornographic woman" as his idolizer. It is a variation which highlights the political nature of pornography,

⁷⁸ Geraldine Finn, "Sexual Representation and Social Control," *Perception* 9, no. 4 (March-April 1986), p. 24.

⁷⁹ Geraldine Finn, "Sexual Representation and Social Control," *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁸⁰ Finn, "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I," p. 85.

which posits the construction of a subject who is "under the spell of the transcendental illusion which is constitutive of power."⁸¹

Before turning to the final variation to be considered in this chapter, one comment must be made here about the implication that Finn's analysis of pornography holds for that other form of sexual imagery about which feminists generally speak more supportively, i.e., erotica. In Finn's view, the reality is that "a sexist society ... relies on the social production and reproduction of sexual difference to be sexist."⁸² But this means that "all sexual imagery is suspect and politically problematic,"⁸³ including so-called sex-positive imagery. On this point, Finn differs significantly from many other feminists who write about the desirability of erotica, both for its own sake, and for the sake of providing an alternative with which to challenge the appeal of pornography. Finn thinks that "women-positive" imagery is essential to fight sexism, and that "women-positive" imagery is possible, but that "'sex-positive' imagery

⁸¹ Geraldine Finn, "Nobodies Speaking: Subjectivity, Sex, and the Pornography Effect," *Philosophy Today* 33, no. 2 (Summer 1989), p. 180.

⁸² Geraldine Finn, "Women Against Censorship - A Critical Response," *Canadian Dimension* 20, no. 4 (July-August 1986), p. 36. Emphasis in the original.

⁸³ Finn, "Women Against Censorship - A Critical Response," *op. cit.*, p. 36. My emphasis.

is just not possible in sexist society."⁸⁴ Even if it were possible, it probably would not challenge or undermine the appeal of pornography at all, nor, most importantly, would it alter the problem of the type of voyeur-subject that is created by the very condition of viewing sexual imagery however "positive" or "negative" that imagery may be:

We will not fight pornography by censoring it, therefore, nor by flooding the market with alternative sexual imagery as is often argued by those who oppose present pornography and the traditional discourse of sex in the name of "sexual freedom", desire and the right of individuals to "take their pleasure and make their own lives" [citing Snitow et al. 1983, p. 41]. For it is precisely the politics of "taking one's pleasure" and "making one's own life" (of rational individualism) which is at issue here. Objectification and abstraction, emotional detachment, isolation and estrangement from the Other belong to the *voyeur-subject* of sexuality itself i.e. to the "ontological condition of viewing" and not to the world-viewed. Tinkering with the latter does nothing to challenge the sexual régime articulated through the former. Censorship merely suppresses the voyeur-subject in some of its ugliest manifestations; while the introduction of alternative sexual imagery actually generalizes and diversifies its incitement. Neither strategy challenges the sexual régime itself: its form, its logic, its code, its mode of production of truth, knowledge, pleasure, need, people, practices and sexuality, as a "complex political technology" administering life (of both individuals and the species) through the subjugation of bodies (under the sign of sex) and the control of population [citing Foucault 1980, pp. 127 and 139 ff.]. Patriarchy requires such a regime and thrives on sexual incitement: on the identification of self with sex, sex with pleasure and pleasure with potency (dominance and submission). For sex, the possession of a penis, is patriarchy's only excuse; the sign and symptom of

⁸⁴ Finn, "Women Against Censorship - A Critical Response," p. 36.

men's domination of women. It must therefore be constantly called-forth as evidence of the régime and of the legitimacy, by right or by might, of its rule.⁸⁵

Hence, Finn's argument raises an intriguing and unique perspective on erotica, as well as presenting an intriguing twist to the variations theme. Feminists concerned about developing adequate theory for dealing with pornography, in religious studies and other disciplines, will need to take cognizance of these related ideas about erotica that are part of Finn's argument concerning the construction of the God-like voyeur-subject of pornography. For Finn's analysis suggests that the only thing women would achieve by flooding the market with erotica, and inciting female voyeurism, would be women's own "emotional detachment, isolation and estrangement from the Other." The effort might increase women's identification with rationalism and individualism, but would not necessarily affect the sexual hierarchy in society, in fact, very likely would only further entrench it. Some consideration needs to be given to whether Finn is right about this. The addition of transcendental Goddess-like voyeur-subjects of erotica to complement already widespread transcendental God-like voyeur-subjects of pornography may not constitute an improvement for society.

⁸⁵ Finn, "Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eye/I," p. 90. Emphasis in the original.

VARIATION #4:

PORNOGRAPHY HAS CHRISTIAN FORERUNNERS

The final variation on the theme of "the Christian connection" is simple enough. It is the observation that in the visual history of Christianity there are types of depictions of females that can only be described as "religious pornography," as forerunners of the later, secular genre. Margaret Miles offers a few examples in her history of the Christian treatment of female nakedness, a book titled *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*.⁸⁶ Writing about these examples, Miles observes, "Indeed, religious pornography featuring at least partially naked women increased through the Renaissance and Reformation periods; pornography did not become secular until well into the modern period."⁸⁷

Miles supports her claim for the existence of "religious pornography" by citing evidence for the popularity of depictions of female martyrs enduring torture, often explicitly sexual in nature. She writes:

More than a millennium after Christian martyrdom virtually ceased in the West, texts like Jacobus da Voragine's *Golden Legend* and myriad visual images

⁸⁶ Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

⁸⁷ Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, op. cit., p. 156.

supplied the popular interest in women's body parts. Devotional texts like the *Golden Legend* graphically describe women martyrs, and such texts are often accompanied by pictures of their torture, dismemberment, and executions.... In figure 27 [a reproduction of a 15th-century work by Master Francke titled "Martyrdom of Saint Barbara"], the legendary Saint Barbara is depicted being tortured before her execution. One burly executioner beats her with a knotted cord while another slices off her left breast. Another legendary woman, Saint Agnes, suffered a similar fate and became a frequent subject of paintings: her breasts were cut off, and she was often depicted carrying her large, firm breasts on a platter.⁸⁸

As another significant example of Christian religious pornography, Miles offers an analysis of the works by the 16th-century German artist Hans Baldung Grien, most notable for his themes of "female nakedness, Eve, and witchcraft."

Baldung developed what one of his commentators has called a "heightened awareness of the theology of the Fall." In his work a new and increasingly explicit visual connection is made between Eve, sex, and death.⁸⁹

Miles shows how Baldung's nude Eves "both represented and evoked male desire," and argues,

That was the point of Baldung's new visual interpretation of the Fall: Eve's body, offered to the sixteenth-century male viewer, did not merely symbolize but effectively reproduced the lust that, in Baldung's

⁸⁸ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 156. Miles also compares 20th-century pornography and advertising images with the 16th-century "interest in isolated body parts" as "fascinating and terrifying" (p. 161).

⁸⁹ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 127.

reinterpretation, simultaneously caused and resulted from the Fall.⁹⁰

At the same time Baldung's treatment of the theme of Eve "also evoked fear by reiterating, in an intensified iconography, the singularly disastrous moment of the doom of the human race."⁹¹ And Baldung's other works, his paintings and drawings on the theme of witches, associated "the naked female body ... even more insistently ... with evil."⁹²

After analyzing Baldung's religious art and its pornographic qualities, Miles questions whether Baldung's works "signal an increment of misogyny in sixteenth-century Germany," reflecting on the fact that "Baldung's work occurred at the same time that witch persecution was scapegoating large numbers of women," especially in his geographical area. Her conclusion:

Baldung's work did not provide a critique of his society's interest in scapegoating women, but aligned its considerable visual force with the physical force that attacked women. It thus illustrates the danger -- the literal, physical danger for thousands of women tried and executed as witches -- of the projection of a dominant perspective unchallenged either by the artist or by the self-representation of those considered "other."⁹³

⁹⁰ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 136.

⁹¹ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 136.

⁹² Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 136.

⁹³ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 138.

Miles' argument about the Christian religious forerunners of pornography, therefore, also implicitly raises serious questions about the potential dangers to women from contemporary secular sadomasochistic pornography. It comes as no surprise, then, that an important tenet of Miles' thesis, the conclusion she reaches upon consideration of the history she reviews, is that women must begin to articulate and publicly represent a "collective female subjectivity."⁹⁴ She believes that men's fear of women -- and the danger to women to which men's fear of them can lead -- comes from not knowing women because women do not represent themselves publicly. Women have not in the past presented sufficient public self-representation to counter the public representations of them that men have constructed out of their fear and ignorance, and women still do not do so in the present.

In fact, it must be mentioned that, while Miles has shown that pornography has Christian forerunners, she also believes that the pornographic "male gaze" which empties the image of woman of her "religious subjectivity" is not fundamentally a Christian impulse. She considers it was an impulse present in the surrounding sexist secular society which actually managed to subvert the earliest Christian understanding of the female body "as the site and symbol of religious subjectivity,"⁹⁵ an understanding that was originally asserted in defiance against

⁹⁴ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 168.

⁹⁵ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 59.

"secular society's identification of the female body with male desire, its relegation of the female body to spectacle and object."⁹⁶ The understanding of the female body as the site of religious subjectivity was not maintained, in Miles' view, due in part to Christian women's inadequate self-representation. So, in Miles' historical analysis, Christian religious pornography also was the consequence of women's inadequate self-representation as religious subjects, just as much as secular pornography today similarly reflects a corresponding inadequate self-representation of women's subjectivity.

In sum, this fourth variation on the theme of "the Christian connection" in pornography, presents the idea of a historical continuity in visual culture between the Christianity of the Renaissance and Reformation periods and contemporary secular pornography. Pornography, in other words, can be seen to have religious precedents in Christianity. And the work of Margaret Miles represents an important, knowledgeable treatment of this theme upon which other scholars might profitably build.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have examined variations of alignments between pornography and traditional Christianity that feminist critics of pornography and/or of Christianity claim to discern,

⁹⁶ Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 54.

highlighting themes ranging through antisexualism, acceptance of male domination, dualism, sadomasochism, voyeurism, and historical continuity in the visual depiction of a hatred and fear of women. My purpose has been to suggest that these areas could provide fruitful directions for future study in the field of women and religion. For pornography should be recognized better for the ways that it shares key traditional Christian themes and metaphysics.

CHAPTER FOUR

PORNOGRAPHY DENIES MY SOUL

Nothing escapes him of her body's grace
Or of her floodlit skin so sleek and warm
And yet so strangely like a uniform,
But what now grips his fancy is her face,

And how the cunning picture holds her still
At just that smiling instant when her soul,
Grown sweet faint, and swept beyond control,
Consents to his inexorable will.

-- Richard Wilbur

In this chapter I will correlate key arguments found in two different sets of feminist writing, one set of writing on human sexuality by feminist theologians and theologians, the other by feminist critics of pornography. The purpose of this correlation is to demonstrate shared assumptions, and to question whether these shared assumptions constitute supporting evidence for feminist theory in the psychology of religion about gender-based differences in human sacrality, that is, in what it is that humans experience as sacred.

THE THEORY OF GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES IN SACRALITY

The theory for which the arguments to be examined are germane is the theory that gender is a factor that influences religious thinking in a manner analogous to the way that Carol

Gilligan¹ has shown gender influences moral reasoning. That is, just as women tend to assign greater value than do men to relationships of connectedness as a guiding principle in moral reasoning, so do women, more than men, tend to experience relationships of connectedness as sacred, and therefore to name such experiences of connectedness, or of "self-in-relation," as religious or spiritual. This tendency is discernible as a major theme in recent writings on women's spirituality. The editors of one collection of such writings entitled *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* identify a consensus view amidst the variety of approaches brought to bear on this theme in the shared idea that "the self is essentially *embodied, passionate, relational, and communal.*"²

The underlying psychological explanation for women's greater tendency to value connectedness in both the moral and spiritual domains is attributed by this theory in the first instance to the different processes of individuation that males and females undergo. Maturation usually occurs in the context of mothers providing the primary parenting role. The result, as Nancy

¹ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

² Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 173. Emphasis in the original.

Chodorow³ argued, is that the boy's individuating process, insofar as it produces a masculine-gendered identity, involves a greater degree of separation from his mother than does the girl's process of individuation into a female-gendered identity. The boy thus first learns to value separation and individualism above connectedness and relationship. These values are then eventually elaborated in male-dominated culture into complex systems of masculine superiority, individualistic morality, principles of detached objective scientific knowledge, and religious models of transcendent deity, i.e., deity which is conceived of as totally independent and separate from this world.

In contrast to the transcendental form of religion that tends to arise from male experience of the self as an isolated, rational ego, according to this theory, the female experience of self-in-relation tends to correspond with religious ideas of immanent divinity. "The notion of the relational self can be correlated with the immanent turn in feminist views of the sacred: in both cases connection to that which is finite, changing, and limited is affirmed."⁴ Whereas the masculine

³ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978).

⁴ Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions*, op. cit., p. 173. Other authors who have articulated similar versions of the theory of gender-based differences in religious tendencies by drawing on the work of Chodorow and Gilligan are: Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap* (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1982), pp. 52-61, and 124-125; and Harriet Lutzky, "Duality in the Study of Gender and

model of separation underlies the whole pattern of dualism that characterizes Western philosophy and religion, i.e., the separation and hierarchical valuation of male over female, mind over body, reason over feeling, spirit over matter, and the Creator God over the created world, the alternate model deriving from female experience does not make these radical separations or differential valuations. Writer after writer in the feminist corpus of literature on religion in fact decries the destructive behavioural consequences stemming from and sustained by dualistic thinking, up to and including behaviour that despoils the environment and threatens the continuation of life on earth because no reverence for the physical world as sacred inhibits such despoiling.⁵ A corrective spiritual vision is necessary, and most feminist theologians and theologians argue that cultivating sensitivity to immanent divinity is the corrective that is required.

The topic of human sexuality fits naturally within this movement toward revaluing the sacredness of the physical world, or what Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ call the "immanent turn in feminist views of the sacred." When the human body is valued as sacred, the way is cleared to view sex as sacred as

the Sacred," paper presented at the conference "Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Religion," University of Ottawa, 14-15 March 1991.

⁵ See, for example, a recent treatment of this theme by Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Returning Words to Flesh: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Resurrection of the Body* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

well. It is important to recognize, however, that feminist articulations of why sex is sacred rely not only on such an immanental turn, but also on the correlate concept of self-in-relation. In fact, in some respects, as I will endeavour to show next, it is the latter concept which provides the distinctively feminist basis for understanding sacred meaning in sex.

VIEWS ON SEX AS SACRED ADVANCED BY FEMINIST SCHOLARS OF RELIGION

Feminist theologians and theologians write about sex as sacred in terms of immanence and in terms of relationality, often combining both terms. Thus sex is described as the sacred "life-force" immanent in the world, the energy by which life sustains and reproduces itself. And it is also described as the means of "deep connection," the connection of one person with another and of the self with the world. Significantly, it is the latter characterization which receives the most emphasis by feminist theologians and theologians as the basis for thinking about sex as sacred.

Careful analysis of the spectrum of works on this subject reveals that the sacredness of sex understood in its relational terms actually has three modes of operation, though not all three are explicitly mentioned by every author. The three modes are internal, interpersonal and cosmic. By internal relationality I mean the idea of the union of body and soul in the self that is expressed, for example, as I will show shortly, by the symbol of

the Greek goddess of sexual love, Aphrodite. Interpersonal relationality is the connection between self and other, self and one's sexual partner. Cosmic relationality is the sense of union that the self feels with the world, with non-human life forms, with all of nature, and with the divine, through the sexual experience. These three modes are operationally connected, though distinguishable for analytical purposes. The sacred interpersonal relation in sex presumes the integrated selfhood of each partner, for instance, so that they are present to one another as persons in the fullest sense, body and soul united, personal individuality fully expressed.

Ginette Paris probably best articulates the internal mode of relationality which makes sex sacred, though that is not how she labels it. Paris writes about the socio-psychological value of recovering a polytheistic framework for celebrating aspects of our lives that have been tarnished or disparaged under the monotheistic religious régime, one such aspect being sex. For Paris, the Greek goddess of sexual love, Aphrodite, is properly understood, not as a symbol of sex as unadulterated physical pleasure, but as a symbol of sex as the "harmonious integration of body, soul, and mind."⁶ The tendency to over-emphasize

⁶ Ginette Paris, *Pagan Meditations: The Worlds of Aphrodite, Artemis and Hestia*, trans. Gwendolyn Moore (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1986), p. 44. Paris argues that Aphrodite is, in fact, more successful as a symbol for the "harmonious integration of body, soul, and mind" than is the Christian symbol of the Trinity. She writes: "...our monotheist God is a spirit without body. It is true that his son lowered himself to our

Aphrodite's physical attributes at the expense of her spiritual attributes can perhaps be explained as compensatory in light of the fact that the idea of sex as physical pleasure has been anathema to so much Christian doctrine historically. But Paris reminds her readers that the symbol of Aphrodite combines both physical and spiritual attributes, and that, in fact, the "Aphrodisiacal connection" is found precisely in their union, in "the meeting of soul and body in joy and orgasmic ecstasy."⁷ The Greeks represented the spiritual attributes of Aphrodite using the symbols of the dove and the pearl.⁸

level and deigned to incarnate, but he is neither a lover nor a father, his mother is a virgin, and his terrestrial life has been presented to us in a way that could hardly be more disincarnate. The body of Christ only assumed importance at the moment when he had a crown of thorns on his head, nails in his hands and feet, wounds in his sides, and blood streaming from his heart. It is with reference to his agony and suffering that the Catholic priests have given the most detail on the corporeal life of Christ.... Aphrodite is divine, pure and spiritual; but, distinct from the Christian Trinity, she leaves no doubt about her approbation of corporeal realities." Paris might have added that Aphrodite's corporeal realities were infused with notions of pleasure rather than pain and suffering.

⁷ Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, op. cit., p. 74.

⁸ "The white dove is a symbol of purity and a bearer of peace. The Greeks associated it with Aphrodite, and it symbolized, as did the many winged animals, the presence of the spirit, the 'pure' spirit of Aphrodite. In removing the Holy Spirit (symbolized by the dove) from its link with woman and with the body, Christianity confirmed the de-sanctification of sexual pleasure. The dove, associated with the meeting of soul and body in joy and orgasmic ecstasy (the Aphrodisiacal connection), was associated by the Christians with the hour of death when the soul leaves the body. The dove, like Aphrodite, seeks companionship and social contact; this cooing and loving bird symbolizes both the social and the pacific aspects of the Goddess. As for the pearl, it evokes something exclusive, hidden, and difficult to

Since pain, discomfort and physical frustrations can be as effective as they are in making us feel trapped in our bodies and alienated from them, is it any wonder that sexual pleasure can be effective at creating a sense of "harmonious integration"?

Following from the idea that Aphrodite symbolizes the integrated self experienced through the pleasure of sex is the idea that the fullest possible sense of the person is therefore present in the sexual encounter. For this reason, Paris writes, "one does not see the woman ... in a display of buttocks, breasts, and sex which belongs to no one" such as is found in pornography.⁹

Consequently, Aphrodite, under Paris' analysis, also serves as an effective symbol for the interpersonal mode of relationality, though, once again, these are not terms Paris herself uses. What Paris does clarify is that the sexual relationship which Aphrodite symbolizes is one that is profoundly personal and intimate, involving the full participation of each self in an open, playful, and hence vulnerable state of being

find, something precious, feminine, and perfect. Like the diamond, the pearl often symbolizes matter's spiritualization.... the pearl is hidden, and, as with all spiritual knowledge, its acquisition implies a deep plunge inwards and a disciplined attention. The apostle Matthew said, 'Cast not thy pearls before swine.' This goes too for Aphrodite's mystique; decadent orgy and sexual promiscuity have nothing to do with pure Aphrodisiacal mysteries." Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, p. 74.

⁹ Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, p. 73.

that is incompatible with "decadent orgy and sexual promiscuity,"¹⁰ with "disgust for oneself or for the partner,"¹¹ or with violence or transgression, none of which accompany sexual love as a state of grace. She contrasts the symbol of Aphrodite with her Greek counterpart Dionysus:

[A]lthough the knowledge of both Aphrodite and Dionysus requires corporeal abandon and sexual union, they must be approached by different paths. Dionysus's sexual urge appears in a rough and impetuous way, akin to the brutality of the satyr who hustles the nymph or to the wild-haired woman of the Bacchanals who throws herself upon the prey. Far from this tumult, Aphrodite, who dislikes haste, teaches lovers the refinements of voluptuous delays and artistic subtleties unknown to the Dionysian approach.¹²

Starhawk is one writer who typically combines terms of immanence and relationality when she writes about how Witchcraft understands sexuality as sacred. She speaks of sex as "a sacrament" of the Goddess who is understood as an immanent form of deity. Unlike God the Father, she writes, "The Goddess does not rule the world; She is the world."¹³ Within the perspective provided by the idea of immanent divinity, "Sexuality, as a

¹⁰ Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, p. 74.

¹¹ Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, p. 28.

¹² Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, p. 19.

¹³ Starhawk, "Witchcraft as Goddess Religion," in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1982), p. 51.

direct expression of the life-force, is seen as numinous and sacred."¹⁴ This is how she expresses the sacredness of sex in terms of immanence. Then she immediately adds to this statement another which introduces the other perspective, that is, the idea of sex as sacred in terms of its relationality:

Sexuality, as a direct expression of the life-force, is seen as numinous and sacred. It can be expressed freely, so long as the guiding principle is love.¹⁵

Starhawk elaborates on the relational terms of the sacredness of sex, again, typically, in combination with immanental terms, in an article dealing specifically with ethics. She writes:

Because divinity is manifest in human beings, our needs and desires are not seen as evil or negative, but as sacred evidences of the life-force.... *Sexuality is sacred* not just because it is the means of procreation, but because it is a power which infuses life with vitality and pleasure, *because it is the numinous means of deep connection with another human being*, and with the Goddess. Witches value diversity in sexual expressions and orientations, recognizing that different people have very different needs and capacities. Sexual ethics are based on honest recognition of one's own impulses and desires and honoring one's true feelings rather than either repressing them or feigning a level of desire which does not exist. Force or coercion of any sort, however, is extremely unethical. *Sexuality is sacred because through it we make a connection with another self* -- but it is misused and perverted when it becomes a means of treating another as an object, or treating

¹⁴ Starhawk, "Witchcraft as Goddess Religion," op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁵ Starhawk, "Witchcraft as Goddess Religion," p. 55.

oneself as an object, or attaining power over another.¹⁶ (my emphasis)

In the above quotation all three modes of relationality are present, though in varying degrees of explicitness. The interpersonal mode is most explicit in the sections I have italicized. The cosmic mode is directly implied in the statement that sexuality is sacred because it is the "numinous means of deep connection with another human being, and with the Goddess," since the Goddess in Witchcraft "is the world". The internal mode is also implicit, but less obvious. It is implied by the sections about "honest ... desires," "true feelings," and about not treating another person or oneself "as an object." These sections suggest the notion of authentic integrated selfhood, that is, the harmonious integration of body and soul which forms the unique individual. This is precisely the internal type of relation bestowed by the gift of sex, and for which reason, among others, it is felt to be sacred.

Starhawk also elaborates further on the manner in which the cosmic sense of connection can be experienced through sex in her book *Dreaming the Dark* (1982). Here she repeats the idea that "sexuality is an expression of the moving force that underlies

¹⁶ Starhawk, "Ethics and Justice in Goddess Religion," in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1982), p. 419.

everything and gives it life"¹⁷ and argues that a similar idea lies behind ancient fertility rites, though such rites are difficult for modern people to understand. Ancient fertility rites she describes as "religious celebrations that honored the sacredness of instinct, and the power of the life-force that pulses no less through our human bodies than through the bodies of other animals."¹⁸ While the modern sensibility might not comprehend or appreciate the impersonal element of ancient fertility rites, Starhawk's book is concerned with the need for a comparable awareness of identification between human and non-human life in modern consciousness. Her book encourages readers to reflect on how, through our sexuality, we share the same vital energy that permeates the whole web of life, we reveal ourselves to ourselves as participants in the natural world from which we have become dangerously alienated. Starhawk hopes that through reflection on our sexuality we may come to feel our connection to the world better, and perhaps even thereby to foster "an erotic relationship with the earth"¹⁹ which might motivate us to protective action in the face of planetary despoilment.

¹⁷ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), p. 136.

¹⁸ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, op. cit., p. 144.

¹⁹ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 143.

Carol P. Christ's most recent book, *The Power of Eros: A Goddess Thealogy*,²⁰ proposes a clarification of the idea that sex is sacred which places it most emphatically within the framework of the terms of relationality. Sex is sacred in her view only insofar as it is erotic, and the sacred power of eros she defines as "the deep feeling, both physical and spiritual, that connects us to other people and all beings in the web of life."²¹ Here, and in the following passage, all three modes of relationality which I have identified are evidently part of Christ's thinking on the nature of the erotic sexual connection, i.e., the inner union of the physical and spiritual parts of the self, and the combined physical and spiritual feelings of connection with other people, and with the world:

In human life, sexuality can be one of the most powerful experiences of eros. But not all sexual experiences are erotic: erotic sexuality is not exploitative, nor an expression of dominance, nor merely an occasion for self-gratification. Eros is a deep connection with the uniqueness and intrinsic value of the other. When it draws body and spirit together, connecting us to others and to 'our deepest most nonrational knowledge,' erotic sexuality is sacred in and of itself.... All deeply erotic sexual relationships, whether homosexual or heterosexual, monogamous or nonmonogamous, are expressions of the life force, the power of the Goddess.²²

²⁰ Carol P. Christ, *The Power of Eros: A Goddess Thealogy* (forthcoming).

²¹ Christ, *The Power of Eros*, draft manuscript, p. 16.

²² Christ, *The Power of Eros*, draft manuscript, pp. 186-187.

Carol Christ's neo-pagan thealogy, like Starhawk's Witchcraft thealogy, is one of immanence, which is frequently the case when the cosmic mode of relationality experienced through sex is accorded sacred significance by feminist authors. But it is worth reiterating that a thealogy of immanence does not mean only that the body and "our deepest most nonrational knowledge" are valued, whereas transcendent religions tend to denigrate both; it means also that we are able to feel our connection to the world through our embodiment. As Christian theologian Beverly Wildung Harrison writes, "Feeling is the basic bodily ingredient that mediates our connectedness to the world."²³ Hence, she reasons, it is a mistake to respond to a disintegration of morality by repressing sex and sensuality, since "moral insensitivity derives from being out-of-touch with our bodies."²⁴ Carol Christ concurs. For she writes, "The source of morality is eros, the deep feeling of connection to other people and all beings in the web of life."²⁵ The impaired state of moral judgment in modern societies, Christ argues, is due to the fact that "moral decision-making arises from within 'a

²³ Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), pp. 218-219.

²⁴ Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," *op. cit.*, p. 219.

²⁵ Christ, *The Power of Eros*, draft manuscript, p. 192.

broken web',"²⁶ a web broken by our male-dominated ideal of the separate, independent and eminently rational (i.e., unfeeling) self, and by the violence that consequently has been permitted to permeate our relationships and our cultural expressions.

In yet another work on contemporary feminist spirituality, *The Once and Future Goddess*, author Elinor W. Gadon argues explicitly for the "resacralization of sex". By this she means the recovery of the erotic bond of feeling that can develop through sexuality, just as it can develop through "sharing deeply any pursuit with another person -- be it physical, emotional, psychological, or intellectual," but perhaps most fully through sexuality because "our sexuality can be understood as the truest indicator of our personality,"²⁷ making it the route for the deepest possible level of sharing. Gadon also refers to Deena Metzger who articulates the intuition that what makes sex sacred, or what can make sex sacred, is precisely its potential to create bonds of feeling, the sense of connection, of "communion". She quotes Metzger, as follows:

Sometimes according to behaviorists, feelings follow behavior, but most often the behaviors overlaid upon an alien worldview alter to correspond to the underlying thought. Contemporary sexual freedom is a case in point. For although it seeks to imitate what is thought to be pagan permissiveness, it is essentially distinct, because the symbolic magical components have

²⁶ Christ, *The Power of Eros*, draft manuscript, p. 196.

²⁷ Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 291.

not been restored. It may look like the same behavior, but it is entirely different. In fact, we do not know what appropriate behaviors, rituals, ceremonies will develop when puritanism is dislodged from the deepest levels of our psyche and when the sacredness of sexuality is restored. We cannot know what forms will develop in the contemporary world when the inclination toward bonding is not undermined by the terror of fusion. Though we talk about wholeness, oneness, holiness, we persist in developing duality, separation, division. So we do not know how we will come to express a sacred universe when it is restored. We do not know what forms sexuality as communion will take.²⁸

Though we do not know what forms will convey the idea of "sexuality as communion," Elinor Gadon is certain that pornography is not one such form. For she writes, "Pornography is the direct denial of the power of the erotic, since in emphasizing sensation without feeling, it represents the suppression of true sexuality."²⁹ Similarly unsuited to qualify as sacred sex in Gadon's estimation is the version of heterosexual encounter presented in dominant culture which portrays it "as a war between the sexes, or, at best, a game divorced from true feeling ... a social activity rather than the fullest expression of one's being."³⁰

I will make two final brief observations to conclude this set of evidence for my claim that the relational aspect of sex is

²⁸ Cited in Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, op. cit., p. 299.

²⁹ Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, p. 291-292.

³⁰ Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, pp. 312-313.

the aspect that feminists tend to identify as most germane to an understanding of sex as sacred. First, the foregoing includes no reference to the necessity that a sexual encounter be reproductive in order to be appreciated as sacred. In fact, a number of feminists have specifically sought to minimize any tendency to perceive sex as sacred primarily because it is the means for creating new life. Ursula King, Mary Jo Weaver and Emily Erwin Culpepper have all written about the dubious advantage in reviving ancient symbols and rites which may inherently associate women's sexuality too strongly with fertility, making them virtually synonymous.³¹ The identification of women's sexuality as sacred due to its procreative power is the type of limiting and essentialist perspective on women that feminism seeks to move beyond. Second, and related to the first point, is the observation that when relationality is granted priority in the determination of sex as sacred, the assumption that sex means heterosexual sex is weakened. Thus, Carter Heyward, writing "as a lesbian, feminist,

³¹ Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (1989; reprint, London: Macmillan, 1990); Mary Jo Weaver, "Who is the Goddess and Where Does She Get Us?," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 1 (1989): 49-64; Emily Erwin Culpepper, "Contemporary Goddess Theology: A Sympathetic Critique," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor and London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1987), pp. 51-71.

Christian priest and teacher"³² can "affirm that lesbianism is a political act, a spiritual affirmation of God -- the power of relation -- in the world."³³ Indeed, if it is accepted that sex is sacred primarily because it is a singularly profound, mutual relationship of love, then lesbian sex may have a certain historical advantage as a vehicle for the divine, since, as Carter asserts,

... in our present social order, mutual sexual relationships are available largely in same-sex relationships.... it is unwise to expect true personal equality -- mutuality of common benefit -- between women and men in a sexist society.³⁴

Next I will turn to the other set of writings whose arguments I want to correlate with those just set out by feminist theologians and theologians on the sacredness of sex. The other set is writing by feminist critics of pornography.

FEMINIST ARGUMENTS AGAINST PORNOGRAPHY

There are many threads in feminist arguments against pornography. The best known, most publicly debated arguments

³² Carter Heyward, "Sexuality, Love, and Justice," in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 294. Emphasis in the original.

³³ Heyward, "Sexuality, Love, and Justice," op. cit., p. 299.

³⁴ Heyward, "Sexuality, Love, and Justice," p. 298.

deal with the social and political issues concerning the contribution that pornography makes to social and political conditions of male dominance, including male violence against women. My focus here, however, will be primarily on arguments that articulate what could be considered essentially a religious view. Though not proposed by scholars of religion, embedded in the feminist antipornography arguments I will examine is a shared set of assumptions concerning what is valued in sexual relations, that is, the same elements which feminist religious scholars label as sacred. One line of criticism complains that, while pornography displays the body, it denies the soul, and thereby undermines the experience of the union of body and soul in sex. Another expresses hopelessness and despair, a profound spiritual malaise, because pornography portrays male sexuality as inimical by nature to the kind of mutual, loving relationship to which women aspire. I will elaborate further on each of these arguments in turn.

When feminist antipornography arguments use the term 'soul' the implied meanings often range quite widely. It may refer to concepts of subjectivity, selfhood, personal will, intelligence, the uniqueness of a person's individuality or personality, the source of human worth and dignity. This is the psychic energy that animates the physical body and which, combined with the body, constitutes the human person. Feminist arguments about the objectification of women in pornography frequently use the term 'soul' interchangeably with terms such as these to express the

idea that something of inherent value, and something that for them is a necessary part of good sex, is left out of the pornographic picture. Sometimes the term also refers to the idea of the immortal soul, a concept more readily recognizable as religious in nature. This use occurs specifically in analyses of violent pornography which explicitly targets a woman's immortal soul in order to express an unbounded level of hostility and intent to harm.

Susan Griffin provides an instance of the latter, obviously religious use of 'soul' in her analysis of pornography as expressive of the view (synonymous with the Christian view) that sexual experience has the power to taint the soul.

Thus, in the pornographic drama of the virgin and the whore, we discover the old religious definition of the sexual act. For in pornography, when a man makes love to a woman who is a virgin, he does so in order to destroy her spirit. In this mind, the sexual act is an act of humiliation to the soul.³⁵

Furthermore, the particularly sadistic examples of pornography may include the dramatic sequence in which a woman is brought to the point of performing acts of self-humiliation. Through succumbing to fear she fails to show the mettle of a martyr and destroys her own soul.

To begin with, it is obvious that to frighten another being is in itself an act of sadism. But beyond this,

³⁵ Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 22.

when a living soul allows herself to act from fear, to be dominated by fear, another sort of suffering takes place, which is deeper than even fear itself. For a woman who does not act from her own will has by that failure again become an object, a thing. She again loses part of the sufferings of this self, her soul.... by terrifying her, pornography pits a woman's physical survival against the needs of her soul, and drives her soul thus to destruction.³⁶

Lest the impression be left that only the souls of Christian women are targeted in pornography, the example of the Jewish novel, *Satan in Goray*, should be mentioned. In this novel, as Andrea Dworkin shows, the theme is a woman's complete possession. Possessed sexually and impersonally by "mortal men, leaders of the community," the female character Rechele is eventually rendered "vulnerable to supernatural possession" by a dybbuk, an evil spirit.³⁷

The broader, but not necessarily therefore less religious, sense in which pornography is destructive of women's souls does not require physically violent or palpably hostile scenarios. Objectification is enough to achieve the effect women find meaningful to describe as a denial of their soul, or as a process of dehumanization. Objectification is achieved by pornographic imagery typically through presenting women's bodies as the single focus of interest, rendering identity and personality as irrelevant, superfluous, and even an encumbrance to the male

³⁶ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, op. cit., p. 49.

³⁷ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 67-79.

viewer's focus on enjoying his own desire, as the advertisements for sex dolls who "never talk back" imply. The message is clear that women's bodies are displayed to stimulate a sexual response in the male viewer, not as a means for the women so displayed to express themselves or their own sexual desire. But that process turns the woman into a sex object and only a sex object. It nullifies her subjectivity.

Feminists whose orientation is primarily political recognize the political dangers for women in cultural imagery that undermines the subjectivity of women regardless of the context of the imagery, that is, whether or not the context is sexual. Thus Mariana Valverde opposes objectification in pornography even though she is a feminist who is suspicious of much feminist opposition to pornography insofar as she suspects it may reflect inhibitions about sexuality. In her view such sexual inhibitions prevent women from discovering untapped sources of power available through claiming their sexual pleasure. Valverde urges women to eschew inherited ideals of humans as "disembodied souls". Nonetheless, in *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, she writes critically of the opposite extreme presented in pornography, the equally distorted picture of (female) humans as soulless bodies, or mere objects:

As feminists, what we properly object to is the kind of objectification found in pornography whereby women are turned into mere objects, anonymous creatures with no will of their own, no names and no distinctive

features. When women are presented *only* as objects then we are clearly being dehumanized.³⁸

Thus, also, Eileen Manion observes that pornography will inevitably be one of those sets of "images and spectacle," through which "our culture constitutes itself," that will provoke political struggle between women and men. "For the image of woman as moronic sex object, we would like to substitute the image of woman as complex person, active subject -- someone to be reckoned with and regarded seriously."³⁹ The objectification of women in pornography undermines women's efforts to be taken seriously as political equals because it creates the impression that women are "moronic". Lacking subjectivity, women objectified in pornography appear thereby to lack intelligence. This effect of pornography is one which consequently provokes women's anger and political opposition.

But there is another strand in women's arguments about the effects of objectification in pornography which expresses pain rather than anger. Anger is the feeling women have when they reject the pornographic image of themselves as moronic, as devoid of intelligence and will, on the basis of knowing the image to be false. Pain results when women identify with the pornographic

³⁸ Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1985), p. 45.

³⁹ Eileen Manion, "We Objects Object: Pornography and the Women's Movement," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 15, nos. 1, 2 & 3 (1991), p. 295.

image, when they try to emulate it because they believe they will thereby achieve cultural approval and/or sexual desirability. As pornography becomes more prevalent and accepted in mainstream culture it becomes more constitutive of the cultural ideal of "Woman", and the economic and psychological pressures on women to emulate and identify with this ideal increase. But to identify with an ideal that is merely an object, and not fully human, is to turn oneself into an object, a process which entails a painful sense of the loss of one's soul. Susan Griffin describes the feeling when one is made into an object:

To be made an object is in itself a humiliation. To be made a thing is to become a being without a will.... Objectification of another is in itself a sadistic act, for to be made an object is to experience a pain of a loss of a part of the self: the soul.⁴⁰

Unfortunately the pain of the loss of their soul which women suffer through each act of identification with objectified images of themselves is not confined to singular instances when they encounter these images, though that is painful enough. The problem is that women find themselves becoming actors, taking on the role of soulless but sexually desirable objects, as a more or less permanent state of being. They become actors: "women impersonate a stereotype of the female."⁴¹ They mime life, but that means they do not live it. Women become like the black

⁴⁰ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 47.

⁴¹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 204.

slaves who "learned to mime a slow and stupid manner" to fit the image of black character invented by the racist mind of the slave-owner,⁴² and whose lives, as slaves, were not their own to live. Not only is the pornographic stereotype of the female devoid of self, or soul, like the racist stereotype of the black character was devoid of intelligence, but the process of impersonation is itself one by which a woman abandons her real self, to become a false self. Her experience is therefore no longer truly her own, but that of the character she impersonates. This is a deeper, more complex process by which "pornography is violent to a woman's soul," as Susan Griffin explains.

In the wake of pornographic images, a woman ceases to know herself. Her experience is destroyed. As R.D. Laing writes, if 'our experience is destroyed we have lost our own selves.'⁴³

Naomi Wolf also complains about the destruction of women's experience, more specifically women's sexual experience, that results from the psychic damage done by pornography which "merely" objectifies. In her book, *The Beauty Myth*, she writes about how "beauty pornography" (in fashion magazines and mainstream entertainment as much as in the magazines and videos recognized as "pornography"), creates a social situation which "prevents women from fully inhabiting the body ... from being at

⁴² Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 202.

⁴³ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 202.

ease in the flesh or in the present, those two erotically and politically dangerous places for a woman to be."⁴⁴ Under the cultural onslaught of beauty pornography a woman's own self is inhibited and replaced by "the ultimate anaphrodisiac: the self-critical sexual gaze."⁴⁵ A woman compares herself to the pornographic model and may feel either "wry humility, an antidote to desire" or a sense of "measuring up" which is "ultimately as anti-erotic, since the woman who 'fits' does not win; she's simply allowed to fill the outline of the Iron Maiden."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random House, 1990), p. 102.

⁴⁵ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, op. cit., p. 119.

⁴⁶ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 118. The Iron Maiden is the current confining ideal of female beauty promulgated through the "dissemination of millions of images." She writes (pp. 6-7): "This frantic aggregation of imagery is a collective reactionary hallucination willed into being by both men and women stunned and disoriented by the rapidity with which gender relations have been transformed: a bulwark of reassurance against the flood of change. The mass depiction of the modern woman as a 'beauty' is a contradiction: where modern women are growing, moving, and expressing their individuality, the 'beauty' is by definition inert, timeless and generic.... Possibilities for women have become so open-ended that they threaten to destabilize the institutions on which a male-dominated culture has depended, and a collective panic reaction on the part of both sexes has forced a demand for counter-images. The resulting hallucination materializes, for women, as something all too real: no longer just an idea, it becomes three-dimensional, incorporating within itself how women live and how they do not live: it becomes the Iron Maiden. The original Iron Maiden was a medieval German instrument of torture, a body-shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a lovely smiling young woman. The unlucky victim was slowly enclosed inside her; the lid fell shut to immobilize the victim, who died either of starvation or, less cruelly, of the metal spikes embedded in her interior. The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel, and euphemistically

Either way the woman cannot herself be fully, comfortably present in her body at any time, least of all during the physical intimacies of sex. Thus, as Wolf laments, "In only twenty years, the myth has slid a pane of imagery to separate women from their bodies during the act of love."⁴⁷

Furthermore, the potential for genuine connection between men and women through sex is subverted by the woman's sense of alienation from her self and her body. Wolf analyzes the consequences of beauty pornography therefore in terms of perpetuating "heterosexual estrangement" as well, a tendency further exacerbated by the themes of violent beauty pornography which have become so pervasive in mainstream entertainment.⁴⁸

painted. Contemporary culture directs attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women's faces and bodies."

⁴⁷ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, pp. 118-119.

⁴⁸ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 109: "Even if she avoids pornography, a woman will, by watching mainstream, middlebrow plays, films and TV, learn the conventions of her threatened rape in detail, close up.... what is happening now is that men and women whose private psychosexual history would not lead them to eroticize sexual violence are *learning* from such scenes to be interested in it. In other words, our culture is depicting sex as rape so that men and women will become interested in it. These images institutionalize heterosexual alienation by intervening in our fantasy lives." Emphasis in the original. Heterosexual estrangement, Wolf argues, serves the *status quo* interests of consumerism and militarism; heterosexual love and mutual respect, on the other hand, which has only recently become possible on a large scale due to the women's movement and women's growing economic independence, and which is still a very fragile development, threatens to de-stabilize the *status quo*. See pp. 112-116.

Therefore, according to these formulations of the psychic harm to women caused by pornography, one critical result is the destruction of the very type of experience in sex which, as I showed above, feminists identify as making sexual experience sacred. That is, it is the prevention of experiences of connectedness and relationship, both inner and interpersonal. It is the hindrance of any "harmonious integration of body, mind and soul" within the woman, and consequently the diminishment of her ability to reach out and build a deep sense of connection between herself and her sexual partner. The psychic harm culminates in the deprivation of an important source of spiritual experience.

Compounding this sense of spiritual wounding and loss which feminist antipornography arguments express is another, deeper level of grief and hopelessness. Even if women are able to deflect the psychic impact of seeing themselves objectified, and to resist absorbing the sexual self-critical gaze so destructive to their ability to love either themselves or another, so much pornography carries a message about the inherently violent nature of male sexuality that it makes such an effort seem pointless.

Both Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin write eloquently about the hopelessness that pornography expresses, and generates, concerning the violent nature of male sexuality. Griffin observes that the male hero of the pornographic novel pictures himself as "bridled by an uncontrollable lust for sexual violence

... which he can conquer only by acting it out."⁴⁹ The pornographer, too, when he defends his product as offering a form of catharsis, reveals that he shares "the belief that men are inherently and by nature violent. For why else, except that men have some intrinsic need for violence, would a violent catharsis be necessary?"⁵⁰ Griffin notes that the pornographer shares this belief about male sexuality with a whole host of pessimistic philosophers, scientists, and psychoanalytic theorists who posit "human nature as aggressive and cruel"⁵¹ and male sexual potency as incompatible with the tenderness and respect of civilized love.⁵² It is her thesis, in fact, that this belief is ultimately the same as the Christian belief in the sinfulness of human nature. So the pornographer "ridicules feeling, ridicules tenderness, and above all, ridicules hope."⁵³

Andrea Dworkin wrote in 1978, "I hate the pornographers most of all for depriving me of hope."⁵⁴ The cruelty of the images, their ubiquity, and men's refusal to live without them all combine to make life "meaningless, because these celebrations of

⁴⁹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 94.

⁵¹ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 95.

⁵² Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 129.

⁵³ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Andrea Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 290.

cruelty destroy my very capacity to feel and to care and to hope."⁵⁵

If a woman has any sense of her own intrinsic worth, seeing pornography in small bits and pieces can bring her to a useful rage. Studying pornography in quantity and depth... will turn that same woman into a mourner."⁵⁶

The reason for Dworkin's despair is her realization that the "one consistent proposition" found throughout all the varieties of pornography is that "sex and murder are fused in the male consciousness ... that the annihilation of women is the source of meaning and identity for men."⁵⁷ A decade later in her latest book on the subject, *Intercourse* (1987), Dworkin amasses even further evidence from male authors to confirm the depressing view that men cannot help but experience sexual intercourse as a violent domination of their partner, and therefore are simply unable to love any woman with whom they have sex.

For women, this is a "nightmare". Myrna Kostash echoes Griffin when she writes of her despair at the alarmingly sadistic pornographic imagery that women cannot seem to escape, try as they do: "we have somehow to make our way through the city as though pornography had nothing to do with us. For to acknowledge

⁵⁵ Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief," op. cit., p. 290.

⁵⁶ Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief," p. 286.

⁵⁷ Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief," p. 288.

that it does is to let in the nightmare: 'to be unknown, and hated,' as Susan Griffin writes."⁵⁸

The spiritual malaise expressed in these antipornography arguments once more reflects assumptions shared with feminist scholars of religion about the sacredness of sex. That is, the malaise evidently stems from understanding that the male appetite for impersonal -- even hostile and violent -- sex, which pornography presents as a given of male nature, renders impossible the realization of heterosexual women's ideal of relationality through heterosexual sex, an ideal which, as I have shown, feminist religion scholars interpret as sacred.

To summarize, the points in feminist arguments against pornography to which I want to call attention are as follows: First, when women identify with pornographic images of themselves, rather than rejecting them as false, they describe experiencing a painful sense of loss of a part of themselves which they often call their soul. This is a religious, as distinct from political, consequence of the objectification of women in pornography. Second, through women's identification with the pornographic ideal and their attempts to emulate it -- whether successful or not, significantly -- women become increasingly self-alienated both in body and soul. Third, in the

⁵⁸ Myrna Kostash, "Whose Body? Whose Self?: Beyond Pornography," in *Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today*, ed. Maureen Fitzgerald, Connie Guberman, and Margie Wolfe (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982), p. 48. Emphasis in the original.

resulting dispirited state of self-alienation women lose their ability to enjoy sexual experience in the manner which they desire. Sex becomes the situation in which women feel their self-alienation most poignantly, in fact. Rather than being an opportunity for experiencing the "harmonious integration of body, mind and soul," sex becomes quite the opposite. Fourth, and as a consequence of the third point, sex begins to produce a distancing effect between women and their partners, rather than being an occasion conducive to feelings of drawing closer and connecting more deeply.

The fact that women who complain about pornography are profoundly saddened by its effects on their sexual experience suggests how much they value sex for its unifying, integrating powers. It is the loss of these experiences in sex which they mourn, and which causes them so much despair. They grieve for the loss of the opportunity to experience in sex the highly pleasurable, satisfying sense that accompanies the bridging of divisions. They yearn for the euphoria of making satisfying connections, connections within the self of body and soul, connections between self and another person, perhaps even between self and the world. They evidently value sex very highly for the same reasons that other women, scholars of religion, have called it sacred. As Carol Christ said, "In human life, sexuality can be one of the most powerful experiences of eros."

In addition, the fifth point of significance from feminist antipornography arguments that is worth reiterating for the

purposes of my argument concerns the hopelessness and despair that women describe feeling as a result of believing the pornographic message about the inherently violent nature of male sexuality.⁵⁹ If male sexuality really is inherently and unalterably imbued with feelings of hostility, and if male sexual pleasure is necessarily synonymous with feelings of violating their partner, then heterosexual women must admit that their perception, and their ideal, of a mutually loving connection is illusory. The feeling is neither mutual, nor loving. Nor can it ever become so. For women to acknowledge despair and hopelessness upon discovering through pornography that their ideal is mere illusion is for them to reveal how deep-seated is their desire for a mutually loving connection in sex. It would not be inappropriate to call such desire a spiritual yearning or quest. Such feelings of spiritual yearning described by women are further evidence that they share with feminist scholars of religion the same reasons for valuing sex: the opportunity that ideally sex can provide for experiencing connectedness.

⁵⁹ For discussions about the same feelings in response to violent expressions of *female* sexuality, such as in the practice and representation of lesbian sadomasochism, see the anthology, *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E.H. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star (San Francisco: Frog In The Well, 1982).

DOES THE EVIDENCE SUPPORT THE THEORY?

Having thus demonstrated the shared set of assumptions for valuing sex that is perceptible in these two sets of feminist literature, i.e., in antipornography arguments and in religion scholars' views on what makes sex sacred, I return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter. Does this constitute evidence to support the theory that women's sacrality is characteristically oriented toward appreciating as sacred those experiences that foster feelings of connectedness? Certainly the ideas articulated by both groups of authors considered are consistent with this theory. Nothing in what either group says contradicts it. One group explicitly identifies the relational aspects of sex as sacred, elaborating the internal, interpersonal and cosmic levels on which sex can foster feelings of connectedness; the other group implies a similar type of valuation through its expressions of spiritual yearning provoked, in part at least, by pornography's deleterious impact on their ability to experience in sex these same relational aspects. For some in the latter group the prospect that their hope of ever enjoying such experience in heterosexual sex is vain renders life virtually "meaningless". The impact that pornography has on them is experienced as a spiritual assault, then, and it reveals by implication the nature of what is sacred to them, i.e., feelings of internal and interpersonal connectedness.

In sum, some strands of feminist antipornography arguments criticize pornography for destroying their experience of sex as sacred in the same sense that feminist scholars of religion identify sex as sacred. As far as sex is concerned, then, both sets of literature support the theory in question about connectedness as a characteristic quality of female sacrality.

While such support does not constitute actual confirmation of the theory, it does lend credence to the theory. In turn, the theory of women's sacrality offers an alternative systematic framework for understanding women's religious basis for disliking pornography which does not derive, as is so often asserted, from traditional Christian-inspired anti-sex attitudes. The theory helps to explain how women can claim with consistency both to like sex and to dislike pornography, even when it is not explicitly violent.

With the assistance of this theory it may be easier to understand women's negative response to arguments made in defense of pornography by male authors such as, for example, F.M. Christensen. Christensen was interviewed on a recent radio program in which he put forward the same views he expresses in his book, *Pornography: The Other Side*.⁶⁰ Christensen claims that feminist opposition to pornography is based on traditional "antisexualism" (which he asserts they share with "religious

⁶⁰ F.M. Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

traditionalists") and not, as "extremist" feminist critics like Andrea Dworkin maintain, on horror at the misogynist violence in pornography. The feminist focus on violence in pornography, he says, is merely a smokescreen thrown up to hide the real anti-sex basis of feminist antipornography views.⁶¹ Christensen disputes feminist allegations that pornography is permeated by violence,⁶² and denies the idea that male sexuality is inherently violent. He maintains that what is inherent to male

⁶¹ Christensen writes in *Pornography: The Other Side* (p. 41): "It seems quite clear that the most fundamental source of feminist views about pornography and women is the sex-negative conditioning we all have received, but which females receive in greater degrees." But certain "contemptible" people who oppose pornography, he says, "have been working hard to associate sexual portrayals with violence in the minds of the general public" (p. 42). He elaborates this claim a little further on: "The current campaign against sexual explicitness is characterized by a constant attempt to link all pornography in the public mind with the violent sort; it is a massive effort at guilt by association." (p. 58) "As a general rule, people resort to illegitimate means of persuasion when they sense that their honest arguments are weak. One can only suspect that many who present the issue this way realize the old 'explicit sex is dirty' charge would not sufficiently motivate the average person today, so they resort to fear-and-smear tactics.... it is certainly not the case, as some have alleged, that most pornography is violent; only a very small percentage of it is so." (p. 59)

⁶² Interestingly, Christensen attributes the hostility against women that does exist in some pornography to the pornographer's "jeering at those who have maligned them." He considers it the "result of our culture's continuing denigration of male sexual feelings.... the constant message to men that their desires are degrading and exploitive is bound to produce feelings of hostility in some.... a few pornographic portrayals give a distinct impression of a desire to prove women are not such paragons of purity after all, to bring them down to the same level as the nasty animals we have always been told men are." Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 85.

sexuality, which is also the principle theme of pornography, is the desire for casual sex, for sexual relations without any corresponding feelings of mutual love or commitment between the partners.⁶³ Furthermore, he maintains that this feature of male sexuality -- a strong sexual drive that is not dependent on feelings of love or affection -- is an unalterable given of nature, whereas the female sexual drive is by nature more easily repressed. He attributes female desires for love and long-term commitment in sex in part to nature but mostly to structural features of society which make women dependent on men. Since these structural features "may be much harder to change than attitudes toward sex,"⁶⁴ and since "antisexualism is apt to cause the most pain to those whose erotic desires are strongest"⁶⁵ [i.e., men], the logical conclusion of Christensen's argument is that women can, and should, learn to enjoy "commitment-free sex",⁶⁶ in the same manner that men do.⁶⁷

⁶³ Opposition to pornography, Christensen argues, is therefore really just a form of moral denigration of male sexuality. It is anti-male sexism: "One cannot rationally say that sexual portrayals degrade women without holding that typical male feelings do the same thing; whether he uses sexual substitutes or not, a man is being told that an inherent part of himself is bad. Coming from women who do not share that nature..., these charges are blatant sexism." *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 49.

⁶⁴ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 47.

⁶⁵ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 49.

⁶⁶ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 47.

Toward this end, the uninhibited casual sexual behaviour of women in pornography can serve as a catalyst in changing women's attitudes. In the meantime, pornography functions to reassure men who face moral disapproval from women on account of their desires for casual sex. It reassures men that they are not inherently morally bad for having such sexual desires.⁶⁸

Following the broadcast of the radio program which presented Christensen's views, along with the views of other male defenders of pornography, a woman from Vancouver wrote a letter in response. It was aired when the program was re-broadcast, and ran as follows:

I feel angry and hurt after listening to Part 2 of "Pornography and the Social Sciences" on *Ideas* [December 1990]. I do not agree that women generally dislike porn because we are repressed. I like sex and I like men. I don't like my sexuality branding me as a "bimbo" and a "bitch". I have a mind and a soul.

⁶⁷ Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 92: "One ... argument ... alleges that pornography harms relationships by its overemphasis on sex, and also by its underemphasis on companionship or romantic love. It is said to 'teach men' to value the former too much and the latter too little. With its culture-bound and egocentric notions of how much emphasis is too much or too little, this claim ignores the possibility of keeping the sexes in harmony by teaching women to want sex in the same way [as men]."

⁶⁸ "A commonly expressed fear from the antipornography camp is that little girls may suffer distress and damage to their self-image from the sight of the naked women in pornography.... the author of this book can report the effect such exposure had on his self-image as a little boy: aside from satisfying some powerful yearnings that had been denied, it gave him the reassuring feeling that at least some people did not regard him as evil for having those desires." Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, p. 50.

Pornography is the miracle in reverse, the taking away of the spirituality of the person, the reduction of persons to flesh only, dispensable, disposable flesh...⁶⁹

I am suggesting that, with the aid of the theory about women's sacrality outlined above, this response can be seen as typical of the pattern in which women use spiritual concepts to express their resistance to pressures to adapt their sexuality to fit male-defined ideals rather than their own. Christensen would no doubt interpret this woman's response as an expression of her repressed sexuality. He would see feelings of shamefulness or sinfulness associated with enjoying sexual pleasure, and a corresponding need for some sort of redemptive factor. Rather than feelings of shame about sex, however, it is possible to see a different emphasis of meaning in women's objections to sexual relations that are exclusively physical in nature without consideration for the soul. Instead of a traditional Christian anti-sex attitude, this woman's letter may well represent the same set of ideas about the sacredness of sex that feminist scholars of religion have articulated, whether Christian or otherwise. "Pornography is the miracle in reverse" suggests that the "miracle" which pornography reverses is the sexual encounter which is sacred, the encounter in which both spirit and flesh are

⁶⁹ Letter to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation from a Vancouver woman which was read with the re-broadcast of "Pornography and the Social Sciences" on the CBC Radio program, *Ideas*, in May 1991.

combined, in which relations of deep connection are felt. The author's description of flesh as "dispensable, disposable flesh" might suggest to some that she is disparaging the body, but her meaning may be instead that the body by itself is effectively anonymous and readily replaceable by another equally anonymous body, so that only a superficial connection between sexual partners is ever possible when the "spirituality of the person" is taken away.

The theory of connectedness as a characteristic quality of women's sacrality may also help to explain the religious terms women often use to describe how they experience the practice of casual sex, as well as its representation in pornography. As noted above, Christensen urges women to adapt to male sexual ideals because men cannot adapt to women's ideals, and insists that if women resist adapting, this reflects only their failure to liberate themselves from Christian-inspired repression, nothing else. My argument is that, if this theory about women's sacrality is taken into consideration, it is easier to see that women's resistance to adapting themselves is not fully understood, not even properly understood, by the explanation that women's liberation from repression remains uncompleted. Women have, in fact, tried to follow the male model of sexuality over the past three decades, just as they have attempted to follow other male models of behaviour, such as the models of appropriate political behaviour and of good scholarship. And, just as in those other domains, women are beginning to speak out of that

experience, not in ignorance of it. Now, based on that experience, women are in the process of daring to articulate their own ideals and to be critical of the ways in which male models frustrate those ideals.

In the case of resisting pressures to continue to adapt to male sexual ideals, the ideals which women are articulating for themselves do incorporate a strong spiritual component. Although critics like Christensen frequently dismiss women's spiritual arguments as simply lingering puritanical anti-sex attitudes, the theory under consideration here suggests that the spiritual component on which women today are insisting is something quite different. It is something not specific to any particular religion alone, but shared by women of different faiths. However, although common to many women, it appears to be something which most men do not recognize as part of their own experience, and this naturally makes it hard for them to understand. The only way they seem to be able to understand it is to cast it in the familiar puritanical terms. In effect, they persist in misinterpreting women's arguments about sexual ethics out of ignorance about women's spirituality. For the most part, they fail to understand how women's spirituality honours embodied connectedness, how women feel wounded whenever that sacred ideal is dishonoured by others, and a profound malaise, a sense of spiritual deprivation, an emptying out of the soul, whenever they dishonour it themselves.

The novels of Erica Jong may be helpful to illustrate these claims. Erica Jong's first novel *Fear of Flying* (1973) rapidly made her a famous female novelist because it is as sexually uninhibited as any novel by a male author, and it features a Jewish female character, Isadora, who is committed to pursuing her own sexual satisfaction equally without inhibition or emotional commitment. Early in this novel Isadora describes "my fantasy of the Zipless Fuck," as follows:

For the true, ultimate zipless A-1 fuck, it was necessary that you never get to know the man very well. I had noticed, for example, how all my infatuations dissolved as soon as I really became friends with a man, became sympathetic to his problems, listened to him kvetch about his wife, or ex-wives, his mother, his children. After that I would like him, perhaps even love him -- but without passion. And it was passion that I wanted.... another condition for the zipless fuck was brevity. And anonymity made it even better.⁷⁰

In this first novel, Isadora is a character that Christensen would probably find sympathetic. He might be likely to hold up Isadora's fantasy as a model of liberated female sexuality, in fact, since in it she values passion over love, has no desire for an enduring relationship along with sex, nor even to know who the man is.⁷¹ However the tone changes significantly in Jong's

⁷⁰ Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (Scarborough, Ont.: Signet, The New American Library of Canada, 1974), p. 11.

⁷¹ In fact, one feminist literary critic, Susanne Kappeler, analyzes the success of Jong's first novel in terms of its conformity with the literary pornographic model. Kappeler describes Jong's writing in this novel as that of "the libertine

later novels. Her female characters never lose their lusty appreciation for sex, they never become "sex-negative," but they do begin to express an aching dissatisfaction with a diet consisting only of casual sexual affairs. In *Parachutes and Kisses* (1984), Isadora reflects on how the world has changed since her experiences chronicled in the first novel: "sex is ubiquitous and yet also somehow devoid of its full charge of mystery."⁷² In the midst of yet another instance of late-night driving on the freeway "just to get laid" she feels "her soul empty as a thrown-away beer can that suddenly explodes your tire." "At times she is seized with a sadness so profound no tears can release it."⁷³ By the novel's end, having found a man with whom both the passion and affection are deep and mutual, she vows to "give love itself permission to last."⁷⁴ *Any Woman's Blues* (1990) is ostensibly written by Isadora, and is about an

discharging" in the sense that her writing celebrated "not the liberation of women, but the liberation of the female sex-object, which is now expected to orgasm (in response)." According to Kappeler, the sexual story written from the female-object's point of view was welcomed by the literary world as "an enticing variant of the male writing of her pleasure." Jong seemed to provide a counter-example to feminist critiques of male authors' descriptions of female pleasure as they wanted to imagine it, "and men do not tire of pointing it out to us." Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 160.

⁷² Erica Jong, *Parachutes and Kisses* (New York: Signet, Penguin Books, 1985), p. 14.

⁷³ Jong, *Parachutes and Kisses*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁷⁴ Jong, *Parachutes and Kisses*, p. 477.

artist named Leila who struggles with the addictions of drugs, alcohol and sexual obsession. Just how far Erica Jong has moved from the ideal of anonymous sex celebrated in her first novel comes across in the following scenario of *Any Woman's Blues* in which Leila is working on a collage called "Sex in the Age of AIDS" and desperately longing for the man about whom she is obsessed:

As I change and rearrange the snipped pieces, I dream of a lovely boy stud who could be summoned to my side as simply as one summons a masseur. What a flourishing business for busy creative women! AIDS-tested studs for the creative woman (or the busy executive) who doesn't want to get involved. But of course it would never work. Most women don't want studs, AIDS-tested or not -- they want love. They want *romance*. And so the escort business would never work. It wouldn't work for me -- no matter how appealing the fantasy seems. I may *pretend* to myself that I want a stud, but alas, what I want is frighteningly more complex: a lover, a partner, a friend, a daddy, a baby. A stud would be too easy -- even if I had the faintest idea where to find one. So I go on making my collage, like a woman possessed, hoping that all the passion and energy and lust will go into the paper...⁷⁵

Sometimes literature can educate where argument fails. Perhaps it is easier to identify with fictional characters, and to learn from imaginatively sharing their experience, than it is to identify with real people who may feel threatening to us. In any case, the novels of Erica Jong may be illustrative of literature's power. For at least one of her male readers, Frank

⁷⁵ Erica Jong, *Any Woman's Blues* (New York: HarperPaperbacks, HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 257-258. Emphasis in the original.

Gonzalez-Crussi, has written with considerable sympathy about the conclusions reached by the character of Isadora in Jong's later novels. Unlike Christensen, Gonzalez-Crussi seems prepared to accept the possibility that a woman might honestly try the male model of sexual behaviour, yet ultimately reject it for legitimate reasons as inadequate for meeting her own self-defined needs. He is evidently prepared to respect her choices, at least, which is more than Christensen seems prepared to do. His comments on this point, and on the difference in men's and women's "sensibilities" (psychic needs?) regarding what counts as "scoring" in a sexual relationship, merit quoting at length:

Just as militant feminists have tried to suffuse a measure of femininity into the male personality, so, too, some women have tried to adopt what passes for the male model of eroticism. In the masculine capacity for unlimited physical pleasure *without* need to commit their hearts, they have seen a kind of triumphant freedom. They have wished to imitate it. And, save for rare, suspect exceptions, they have lost.

Not that their attempt was wanting in resolve. In Erica Jong's novels, the sexual act becomes "zipless": a deliberate experiment to be like men. Anaïs Nin's confessions detail the same undaunted effort to attain the untrammelled mastery of the senses. Bewilderment or disgust emerges from the promiscuous experience. In Jong's *Parachutes and Kisses*, the protagonist, Isadora, engages numerous men in her obsessive search for the masculine model of eroticism. She cannot bring herself to spend the whole night with any of them. She is seized with an invincible disgust for those "unknown bodies" that lie by her side. It occurs to her to actually push them out the door, to send them home from her apartment at 3:00 in the morning. Biologic predetermination, or centuries of learned behavior? Diderot may have shown stunning prescience when, in 1772, he wrote in his essay on women: "Our organ is more indulgent.... Sovereign [physical] happiness

escapes women while in the arms of the man they adore. We find it easily in the embrace of a complacent woman whom we loathe." Whether the difference in sensibilities is constitutional or acquired, I defy the sages to tell us. If it is the result of inveterate social pressures, it will disappear one day. But it will not be soon.

Not bedding, but "a relationship," is what women seek. And in this difference it is impossible to fail to acknowledge a distinct superiority of the feminine sensibility, however cantish this may sound. Whereas men are overwhelmed by the strong pulsations of the body, women remain free to bestow a wider meaning to the corporeal elements of the erotic. The erotic does not end in spastic contractions and reflex discharges; it transcends them, to reach into the ethereal realms of memory and feeling, like a note that reverberates long after the string was pulsated. Woman may resort to her body in ways congruous with her aims and in a fashion is apt to be ranked as "manipulative." But only when she is long remembered and continually desired, as if by a cyclically renewed, ever rekindled thirst; only when her image fills to capacity the consciousness of the man she has chosen, and stretches temporally beyond the meager boundaries of physiologic immediacy; only then does she claim to have won. When her immanent presence projects across time and space to leave a profound impress on another being: *then* she has "scored."⁷⁶

The man thinks he has "scored", of course, if he has simply bedded the woman he desires, a less impressive achievement by comparison. Unfortunately, despite the admiration Gonzalez-Crussi evidently holds for the more powerful impact a woman has on another being when she "scores" according to her own values, the hyperbole of his prose produces the type of overstatement which shows he has not quite understood a woman like Isadora's

⁷⁶ F. Gonzalez-Crussi, *On the Nature of Things Erotic* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), pp. 137-139. Emphasis in the original.

desires after all. He understands she is not satisfied with pursuing merely physical pleasures, but he wrongly suggests she is therefore indifferent to them, or disgusted by them. He says, "Not bedding, but a 'relationship,' is what women seek." What I hear in women's accounts is that they desire both bedding and a relationship. At the end of *Any Woman's Blues*, Leila (the character created by Isadora, who plays the role of author in this novel), speaks of her frustration about having to turn to one man for sex and to another man for satisfying, intimate conversation. Leila says to her conversational partner, her musician friend, Julian:

"But I want sex and talk in one person. Surely that's not so much to ask."

"I've never found it," says Julian, "except in my chords, so why should you?"

"Because you don't believe in it, and I do. Somehow, against all the evidence, I finally do. And I finally believe I deserve it."⁷⁷

It bears repeating that women's expressions of dissatisfaction, spiritual anguish and malaise arising from their experiences with pornography -- as well as with the "liberated" behavioural model of commitment-free, relationship-free sex, as Erica Jong's novels help to show⁷⁸ -- are expressions of

⁷⁷ Jong, *Any Woman's Blues*, op. cit., p. 343. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁸ Naomi Wolf also writes with palpable dissatisfaction-fueled sarcasm about the "liberated" model of sexual behaviour in *The Beauty Myth*, op. cit. (pp. 106-107): "In the decade during which women became political about womanhood, popular culture

dissatisfaction with both polar extremes of the dualistic paradigm. They accept neither that humans are disembodied souls, nor that we are soulless bodies. We are "embodied". Feminist writers value the body. But in valuing the body, they refuse thereby to disparage the soul. And, by insisting on soul-nourishing components of sexuality -- and of cultural expressions of sexuality -- women are not thereby, as is so often charged, abandoning the importance of the idea of the body's value. They are not reverting to sex-negative views. They are trying to articulate what they feel is necessary to move forward into a truly sex-positive way of living. That is why many are occupied with promoting erotica, as well as with criticizing pornography.⁷⁹

It is true, of course, that there are dissenters to the view that the feminist ideal of sexuality should contain so much emphasis on its spiritual quality, at least in terms of the need for a mutually loving relationship, or for what I have called interpersonal relationality. Mariana Valverde argues that, due

recast tender, intimate sex as boring. Anonymity became the aphrodisiac of the moment: Mr Goodbar and the zipless fuck and one-night stands. If women were going to have sexual freedom and a measure of worldly power, they'd better learn to fuck like men. The soulless bloodrush of synthesized climax over a repetitive backbeat made disco the perfect music by which to score with a stranger."

⁷⁹ Dorothy Todd Hénaut, for example, co-producer (with Kathleen Shannon) of the extremely influential National Film Board of Canada film about pornography and the sex trade business, *Not A Love Story* (1981), is currently working on what she calls "an erotic film" titled *Heartbeats*.

to the scarcity of men whose desires are similar, such an ideal will rarely be met in reality at this point in history.⁸⁰ Her argument implies that women's inevitable failures to realize this ideal under current circumstances will hardly be conducive to their empowerment. Hence it is not politically wise to promote too heavily such an unrealistic ideal. Valverde is quite critical of feminists such as Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan and Mary Daly, objecting to the way they "wax mystical" about female sexuality.⁸¹ Basing her judgment on Mary Daly's treatment of the theme of female lust in *Pure Lust*,⁸² Valverde is led to suspect, moreover, that the whole feminist movement toward the resacralization of sex would channel women's sexuality "exclusively in a spiritual direction,"⁸³ in a manner that would, in fact, only serve to perpetuate Platonic and Christian dualism.⁸⁴ Valverde's suspicions show how necessary

⁸⁰ She refers to this as "the scarcity problem" and "the crisis in heterosexuality." See Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, op. cit., pp. 66-74.

⁸¹ "She [Susan Griffin] waxes mystical about all the values of which women are the true custodian: nurturing, affection, morality. If masculine sexuality equals porn, then feminine sexuality must equal the opposite of porn, i.e. love, affection, 'relationships,' spirituality..." Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, p. 135. Elsewhere (p. 145) Valverde warns against the expectation created by arguments like Griffin's "that female desire and women's sexual ethics are islands of purity and simplicity in a sea of male corruption."

⁸² Mary Daly, *Pure Lust* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

⁸³ Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, pp. 192-198.

⁸⁴ Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, p. 197.

is the task of communicating more effectively the ideas of other feminist scholars of religion, besides Mary Daly, such as those considered in this chapter. For, although Valverde dismisses the need for mutually loving relationship for good,⁸⁵ fulfilling sex, she does insist on "the dialectic of mutual recognition" as "essential to eroticism."⁸⁶ Neither anonymity nor degradation belongs to her recipe as "a legitimate form of erotic desire."⁸⁷ It is possible that Valverde's difference in perspective from that of feminist writers mentioned in this chapter boils down to a difference of degree more than of kind. Not everyone is equally religious by inclination, nor should that be expected. Furthermore, as a thinker who fits most comfortably within the framework of materialist, socialist feminist theorists, it would be surprising if Valverde did not have objections to raise to the views expressed by radical feminists such as Griffin, Dworkin, Morgan and Daly.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ "It is not necessary to use clichéd notions of nurturing love in our solution to the problem of violent, aggressive sex: we could try thinking about good sex instead." Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, p. 135.

⁸⁶ Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, p. 152.

⁸⁷ Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, p. 152.

⁸⁸ For a full elaboration of the various theoretical feminist frameworks, see Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg, eds., *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men*, Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). The editors explain, "Typically a feminist framework is a comprehensive analysis of the nature and causes of women's oppression and a correlated set of proposals for ending it." (p. xii) Socialist feminism has

Despite Valverde's criticism of the over-spiritualization of female sexuality by radical feminist opponents of pornography, it should be noted that her criticisms do not contradict the theory of women's sacrality under consideration. Her criticisms are directed at theory about the nature of women's sexuality, not about the nature of women's sacrality. Her own spiritual needs in sex may not be as important to her as they are to women with a stronger sensitivity to spirituality, but her demands for "mutual recognition" in erotic encounters suggests her needs are not radically dissimilar to theirs.

It is probably no coincidence that another feminist who writes critically about the tendency in much radical feminist literature on this subject to over-spiritualize sex also

evolved from the well-established political tradition of Marxism. "Radical feminism, which is not the inheritor of a long philosophical tradition (and whose strength may lie precisely in that fact), still does not constitute an entirely unified conceptual framework; nevertheless, its theorists have [developed] their analysis of women's oppression in terms of male control of women's bodies, particularly women's sexuality." (p. xiii) Note: A third edition of this valuable text has just been published (1993). The complexity of feminist analyses continues to develop over time along with, as the editors of the third edition note (pp. xvi-xvii), growing awareness of "the ways in which gender is necessarily shaped in conjunction with other systems of domination." And although "feminists used to insist that one or another category had more explanatory power than all the rest, feminists nowadays generally acknowledge that women's subordination can be understood adequately only in terms of several categories." Hence, "few feminists any longer insist on unswerving loyalty to a single theoretical framework." In a similar vein, I would point out that while it can be useful to classify theorists as I am doing here, I do not intend too rigid an application of the labels "socialist feminist theorist" and "radical feminist theorist."

describes her thinking as influenced by the materialist tradition. Lucy Goodison's concern is slightly different from Valverde's, however. She does not see a danger of perpetuating dualistic anti-body ideas; but rather she sees a danger of placing too much emphasis on the sexual component of physicality for providing experiences of the body as sacred. She promotes an approach which recognizes that "sex ... is just another area of living."

Such an approach is important given our cultural legacy in which sexuality has been denied. From its being the most forbidden and secret subject, there is a danger of us over-reacting by exalting it as the most sacred subject. We need to be wary of placing an emphasis on sexuality which is as distorted as the Christian church's denial of it; to exalt and to deny are only different sides of the same coin. Sexuality can carry spiritual energy, but then so can each area of our body; the point⁸⁹ of reinstating it is not to fetishise its importance.

This criticism too, however, does not actually contradict the theory of women's sacrality. It does not deny that feelings of connectedness in sex are experienced as sacred. Nor does it posit a different explanation for understanding sex as sacred. It merely calls attention to additional avenues besides the sexual for experiencing spiritual energy through the body, and urges us to pay more attention to them as well.

⁸⁹ Lucy Goodison, *Moving Heaven and Earth: Sexuality, Spirituality and Social Change* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), pp. 346-347.

SUMMARY

In sum, then, while there are dissonant notes here and there in the feminist chorus of ideas on the spiritual significance of sex, and on pornography's denial of this spiritual significance, the overall effect is hardly a cacophony. And nothing in the literature I have reviewed presents a serious challenge to my argument that, as far as sex is concerned, feminist literature on the subject in the main supports the theory that women's sacrality reflects a characteristically female appreciation for feelings of connectedness, whereas there is little corresponding male appreciation for such feelings as sacred.

However, it must be clarified that this theory makes no pretence to having universal applicability. It is a theory about *gender*-based differences in sacrality, as illustrated by the example of sexual experience, not about *sex*-based differences. Furthermore, it is ethnically and historically specific to white North American culture at the end of the twentieth century. Nothing of the foregoing implies that different cultural patterns than those in place in that specific context might not alter the differential pattern of gender construction, and thereby of men's and women's experiences of the sacred.

In conclusion, in this chapter I have shown that pornography is relevant to the field of women and religion for the following reasons: First, feminist criticisms of pornography include

arguments that lend credence to developing theory about the nature of women's sacrality. And second, this theory, in turn, offers an alternate explanation for women's "religious" opposition to pornography to substitute for the explanation, which still reigns, that women's religious opposition is none other than Christian antisexualism.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARALLELS IN FORM AND CONTENT

The focus of this chapter is on pornography's relevance for religious studies because of its likeness to religion in a structural and functional sense. This is not the same point as was made above in Chapter Three, which outlined similarities between pornography and Christianity. For no one particular religion is the issue here, but the structural, functional parallels with religion *per se*.

Specifically, the parallels with religion that the prolonged study of pornography has brought to the fore for me are their shared content (i.e., a similar scope of meaningfulness) and their shared form (i.e., their expression by means of image and symbol, or their "iconographical" quality). In this chapter I will explain what I mean by each of these parallels. My purpose is to show that, due to these parallels, it makes good sense to think of pornography as *functioning like a religion*.

First, I will explain what I mean by saying that pornography and religion have a similar scope of meaningfulness, raising a few questions with implications for the field of women and religion in the process. After that, I will explore the iconographical quality of pornography.

(1) A SIMILAR SCOPE OF MEANINGFULNESS

Religion provides individuals with a worldview, a basic framework of beliefs about the meaning of life and death. Religion paints "the big picture" and offers individuals a meaningful place within it, whether great or small, joyful or burdensome. Religion tells the original explanatory story about the meaning of existence itself, about the nature of the universe, and the role of humanity. It provides the over-arching context, by making sense of the broadest inescapable parameters of life: our birth, our need for sustenance, our sexual means of reproduction, our death -- the cycles of being, life's grand absurdities, some might say.

When people lose their religious faith, we speak about how they experience "a crisis of meaning." Similarly, a person overwhelmed by a feeling of meaninglessness about life is said to be experiencing a "religious" or "spiritual" crisis. And when people cultivate a consciousness that consistently focuses on "the larger meaning of life," whether or not it is preached by a given organized religion, we call them very "spiritual" or "religious" people. Moreover, people of the same religion have a shared basis of meaning which aids in their understanding of one another. This helps a society to cohere; whereas misunderstanding plagues people of different religious affiliations, all too often fuelling social fractures and strife.

All of this is to say that the quest for meaningfulness is a hallmark of spirituality, and the adoption of a particular religion is the adoption of a particular system of meanings, a particular frame of reference for meaningfulness, the frame within which adherents then elaborate the meanings of their own individual and collective lives. Add to this the insight expressed by Paul Tillich, a preeminent 20th-century Christian theologian (mentioned above in Chapter Three), who writes (in typically androcentric terms) about the fact that meaningfulness is something that human beings simply cannot do without. Our perception of the opposite, i.e., meaninglessness, produces in us an unbearable condition of anxiety:

Ontic and spiritual self-affirmation must be distinguished but they cannot be separated. Man's being includes his relation to meanings. He is human only by understanding and shaping reality, both his world and himself, according to meanings and values. His being is spiritual even in the most primitive expressions of the most primitive human being. In the "first" meaningful sentence all the richness of man's spiritual life is potentially present. Therefore the threat to his spiritual being is a threat to his whole being. The most revealing expression of this fact is the desire to throw away one's ontic existence rather than stand the despair of emptiness and meaninglessness.¹

These concerns are entirely appropriate for a Christian theologian of the 20th century. Tillich's fame as a theologian, in fact, probably rests mainly on his skill at articulating the

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, (1952; reprint, Great Britain: Collins, Fountain Books, 1977), pp. 57-58.

crisis felt by a great many Christians in the modern era for whom the Christian form of religion has become somehow distressingly empty. He articulates their sense that the forms of Christianity have been emptied of their meaningfulness.

Now, it comes as a surprise to many people, I think (it certainly surprised me), to discover that pornography expresses a profound concern with meaningfulness, a search for meaning, and an exploration of meaning, in life, sex, and death -- in the same "big picture," that is, as the one with which religion concerns itself. For pornography, while indeed very much about sex, is not only about sex; and religions are generally also very much concerned with sex in one manner or another, since sex is, after all, one of the broad, inescapable parameters of human life.² Furthermore, pornography, like religion, is also very much about

² All religions have something to say about sex. Generally speaking, religions that have qualified as "world religions" have a complex array of perspectives that may even be self-contradictory, ranging from such ascetic sects as Fakirs and Essenes within the relatively sex-affirmative traditions of Hinduism and Judaism, to interpretations within Christianity that emphasize the incarnation, or the idea of divinity in the body or, at least, of the body as redeemed, and the importance of love, so as to value sex against the weight of Christian tradition that sees sex as sinful. Nonetheless, religions treat the subject of sex. They may express their understanding with explicit erotica and/or sexual rites. Or they may express it with silences, veils, and metaphors. One way or another sex, like death, is addressed by religions. For, like death, sex is a profoundly powerful force to which every human being is subjected. We all must, perforce, adapt our consciousness and our will to this force. We cannot simply ignore it. How we adapt is of course the interesting question, but adapt we must. Recall Herbert W. Richardson's comments on this point (above, pp. 45-46). Also see, O.A. Wall, *Eroticism in Religions of the World* (c. 1896; reprint, Delhi, India: Mayur Publications, 1986).

life and death, about the nature of the universe and the place of humanity within it, and about the self. Some people may dismiss pornography as mere fantasy whatever its concerns with these grand issues, but there are also people who would dismiss religion as simply magical thinking too. I think that both pornography and religion, however, have powerful appeal, which must be respected, and that the basis of their appeal rests, moreover, precisely in this, in their comparable abilities to convey a sense of profound meaningfulness, to provide a meaningful perspective on life's broadest parameters, to give it shape, and meaningful contour. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the meanings that either pornography or a given religion expresses, they are each extremely meaningful expressions. Whether or not one likes the picture of life, and sex, and death, that is painted, a picture is painted, and it is compelling and fascinating on a broad social scale.

Perhaps some sense of the meaningfulness of pornography has already been conveyed by the foregoing descriptions of selected analyses of pornography. Recalling the variety in the range of these interpretations of pornography, it becomes apparent that the very variety itself suggests a certain similarity with the richness of meaning characteristic of religious myths and symbols. Like religious myths and symbols, pornography is multivalent, containing even contradictory and paradoxical meanings. And, as in religious myths and symbols, the meanings

in pornography vary in nature. Interpreters find in both phenomena meanings that are psychological, historical, sociological and political, as well as specifically religious, in nature.

A review of interpretations of pornography considered thus far, plus a brief account of a few not yet examined, should help to make this point clearer.

(1) (a) A Review of the Range of Meanings in Pornography

Specifically religious types of meanings found in pornography, and mentioned in previous chapters, include the satiric denunciation of Christian asceticism (Hefner 1979) which operates as the self-proclaimed, surface level, or face value of meaning, as well as several contradictory expressions, such as the implicit adoption of the Christian view of sex as sinful and dirty (Young 1964), or the implicit acceptance and celebration of the whole dualistic Christian metaphysics (Griffin 1981), or explicit acceptance of the traditional hierarchical Christian paradigm in which the man properly dominates the woman as God transcends and dominates creation (Weaver 1989). Interpreters read in pornography messages about the soulless nature of women on the one hand (Griffin 1981), and about the God-like stature of men on the other (Finn 1985, 1989). One interpreter sees in pornography the expression of the self-alienated, tortured souls of men (Griffin 1981), while another (Christensen 1990) sees the salve that reassures the souls of men by telling them that they

are not evil for having the type of sexual desires that they do. Yet another (Miles 1989) reminds us of the explicitly religious context of the forerunners of contemporary secular pornography, calling attention to representations in medieval Christian devotional texts that depict the sexual torture of female Christian martyrs, and to Hans Baldung's representations of female sexuality -- whether symbolized by Eve or by witches -- as a dangerous threat to men's souls. In the last chapter the interpretation mentioned that was suggested by several feminist analysts presents pornography as "the denial of Aphrodite," or the denial of how women tend to understand the sacredness of sex. Especially significant additional interpretations of a religious type of significance in pornography can be found in the work of Georges Bataille and Susan Sontag, whose ideas I will examine in a moment.

Among psychological understandings of pornography mentioned previously is one which interprets pornography as a rebellion against centuries of sexual repression in a sex-negative culture. As noted before, this interpretation explains pornography's violent excesses as neurotic explosions now able to surface since repression has begun to fail in its effectiveness (Goodman 1961). Susan Griffin's interpretations described in Chapter Three probed other hidden depths of psychological meaning in pornography. Her analysis shows that, besides its broad scope in types of meaning, pornography also has the profundity typical of myth and symbol. For Griffin identifies several levels of meaning, all of which

she argues represent the psychological processes of denial and projection. She interprets pornography as reflecting unconscious inner conflict about the nature of the self that culminates in a denial and projection of despised parts of the self. Its meaning is this very failure to come to terms satisfactorily with the realities of carnal, mortal existence, with each of the basic parameters of life, from birth to death. This meaning expresses itself at the following unconscious levels: (1) the retaliatory intentions of the infant against the mother's breast, either for failing to satisfy the infant's hunger pangs or, alternatively, for imposing itself and threatening to smother the infant; (2) the adolescent boy's revengeful urges against the naked female body when he discovers his vulnerability to humiliating embarrassment through that part of his own body that he finds he cannot control, whereas she apparently can; (3) the desire for revenge against the body-self felt by the mind-self as the latter continues to grow and grapple with all the pains, frustrations, and humiliations of embodied existence, including awareness of the final threat to itself in the death which the body-self ensures; and (4) the revenge of the cultural self, the ego, against all the givens of nature that are not amenable to its control, its illusory reflection of itself to itself as being in complete control over nature. Griffin sums this all up in her book's sub-title: *Culture's Revenge Against Nature*.

Historical interpretations mentioned in previous chapters include Herbert Richardson's (1971) evolutionary model according to which *Playboy*, at least, though not most other forms of modern pornography, expresses the recent historical achievement of the integration of sex with love and friendship between men and women. Reflecting a different perspective on recent history, and also on pornography as a phenomenon with historical meaning, Susan Sontag (1966) repeats Paul Goodman's (1961) analysis and refers to pornography as, in part, an expression of insecurities and uncertainties due to troubling recent historical events such as "drastic dislocations in traditional modes of family and political order and unsettling change in the roles of the sexes."³ In the final chapter I will describe my own historical reading of pornography.

Many feminist analyses of pornography focus on its sociological and political meanings. Only a few of these have been mentioned, however, given the religious focus of my argument. These include Andrea Dworkin's (1979, 1987) concern that pornography provides ideological support for the ethic of violence that is necessary to support male dominance in society, and Eileen Manion's (1991) objection to the political meaning in pornography which says that women are stupid sex objects and therefore need not be taken seriously in the political milieu. Many more sociological and political interpretations could be

³ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," op. cit., p. 134.

added. A few should be included, in summary form at least, for the best appreciation of the full scope of meaningfulness in pornography. For example, Mariana Valverde offers a sociological interpretation when she argues that the humiliating meanings that women receive from pornography derive primarily from the social context of patriarchy rather than being inherent in the material itself. As Valverde says, "a great deal of pornography's impact on us is due not to the images and words themselves but to the social context of men's actual domination of women," and therefore, "anything we do to empower women and increase their sense of dignity and autonomy will help to rob porn of its power to humiliate us."⁴ Articulating a different perspective, Susan Cole (1989)⁵ and Kathleen Barry (1979),⁶ among others,⁷ are more alarmed than Valverde by the inherent meanings they see which are not merely humiliating, but violent. Like Andrea Dworkin and Naomi Wolf (1990), Cole and Barry and others are disturbed by the message conveyed through pornography that violence against women is erotic. They argue that pornography virtually teaches the

⁴ Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1985), p. 144. See also pp. 125-128.

⁵ Susan G. Cole, *Pornography and the Sex Crisis* (Toronto: Amanita Enterprises, 1989).

⁶ Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979; reprint, New York and London: New York University Press, 1984).

⁷ See, for example, the anthology *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980).

eroticization of male violence against women. The inevitable consequence of such teaching, they maintain, undermines the feminist social and political struggle against women's oppression. For, whatever the links between pornography and actual male violence against women (which these authors do not dismiss as insignificant), pornography cultivates women's fear of male violence, thus inhibiting women's inclinations to protest against injustices in order to avoid becoming a target for violent reprisals. Another perspective on the political interpretation of pornography is provided by Susanne Kappeler (1986), who makes the argument that "writing is political, a political act in the real world" and that pornographic literature cannot justifiably claim, as it frequently does, to be part of a separate, aesthetic "non-political sanctuary." Pornography, in Kappeler's view, is a supreme exemplar of the "ideological cornerstone of patriarchal culture," namely, the conception of the "irresponsibility of authorship."⁸ Thus, pornographers may admit that their product is horrific, but disclaim responsibility for its existence, arguing that they are only providing their customers with what they want; responsibility for the product's existence, and any political consequences of its existence, rests with the consumer. Yet another political meaning gleaned from pornography, which socialist feminists tend to emphasize more

⁸ Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 136.

than the issue of violence against women, is the affirmation found in even the most benign examples of pornography of the liberal political ethic of individualism (Assiter 1989).⁹

The foregoing are all feminist analyses of the sociological and political meanings to be found in pornography. To these could be added many others. One that should be mentioned is Michel Foucault's interpretation, since his theory about the relation between sex and political power is very much in vogue currently. Michel Foucault sees pornography as the latest technique of power, or "political strategy regarding sexuality,"¹⁰ that extends the "régime of sex" through which, according to his theory, the subjectivity of individuals is constructed in modern society. Rather than being a sign of liberation from sexual repression, Foucault's theory of the "régime of sex," and of pornography's part in that régime, is one which posits that the "deployment of sexuality" is nothing other than the management and control of individuals and populations through sex.¹¹ Significantly, Foucault also offers an

⁹ Alison Assiter, *Pornography, Feminism and the Individual* (London, and Winchester, Mass.: Pluto Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan and others (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 9.

¹¹ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 107: "The deployment of sexuality has its reason for being; not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an

interpretation of sadomasochistic sex, and its representation in pornography, in sociological and political terms. The meaning Foucault finds in sadomasochism, especially homosexual sadomasochism, is two-fold: it constitutes an elaborate game by which the boredom of sex can be alleviated,¹² and it re-introduces the power differential that homosexual men believe is

increasingly detailed way, and in controlling population in an increasingly comprehensive way." Foucault refers explicitly to pornography in his analysis when he discusses the growth of "perversions" in sexual discourse. He writes (p. 48): "The growth of perversions is not a moralizing theme that obsessed [sic] the scrupulous minds of the Victorians. It is the real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures.... The implantation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct.... A proliferation of sexualities through the extension of power; an optimization of the power to which each of these local sexualities gave a surface of intervention: this concatenation, particularly since the nineteenth century, has been ensured and relayed by the countless economic interests which, with the help of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution, and pornography, have tapped into both this analytical multiplication of pleasure and this optimization of the power that controls it. Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another."

¹² In Michel Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture*, p. 298, Foucault says: "It is because the sexual act has become so easy and available to homosexuals that it runs the risk of quickly becoming boring, so that every effort has to be made to innovate and create variations that will enhance the pleasure of the act." The S & M game of the master and the servant provides a "mixture of rules and openness [that] has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty which the simple consummation of the act lacks." (p. 299)

necessary in order for the passive partner to avoid being demeaned by his role.¹³

Also within the realm of sociological and political meanings in pornography is another whole area that deserves careful analysis: racist meanings. For example, in "Coming Apart,"¹⁴ Alice Walker, a black feminist writer and social critic, builds on the work of Audre Lorde,¹⁵ Luisah Teish¹⁶ and Tracey A. Gardner,¹⁷ to show how racist meanings in pornography perpetuate racist political strategy. Walker tells a story that illuminates how meanings in pornography which are simultaneously racist and

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture*, p. 300: "Even the Greeks had a problem with being the passive partner in a love relationship.... when two Greek men of the same social class made love it was a real problem because neither felt he should humble himself before the other. Today homosexuals still have this problem. Most homosexuals feel that the passive role is in some way demeaning. S & M has actually helped alleviate this problem somewhat."

¹⁴ Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 95-104. Alice Walker is also the author of the novel that was made into a successful film, *The Color Purple*.

¹⁵ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Take Back the Night*, op. cit., pp. 295-300; also reproduced in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Women's Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), pp. 208-213.

¹⁶ Luisah Teish, "A Quiet Subversion," in *Take Back the Night*, op. cit., pp. 115-118.

¹⁷ Tracey A. Gardner, "Racism in Pornography and the Women's Movement," in *Take Back the Night*, op. cit., pp. 105-114.

sexist¹⁸ serve to separate black men from black women and thus to undermine the unity needed among blacks for their own well-being as well as for concerted resistance to white domination. Not surprisingly, racist meanings in pornography, though often blatant,¹⁹ can be very subtle. For example, when pornography is accepted and valued, the absence of a particular race of women

¹⁸ For example, Walker writes that "where white women are depicted in pornography as 'objects,' Black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are at least depicted as human bodies if not beings, Black women are depicted as shit." Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," op. cit., p. 103.

¹⁹ Andrea Dworkin mentions one such blatant example, the video game called "Custer's Revenge," in her discussion about "the role of pornography in creating sexual abuse" (Dworkin's emphasis). See "Letter from a War Zone," in *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men*, Third Edition, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 477-478, where Dworkin writes: "Racist violation is actively promoted in pornography; and the abuse has pornography's distinctive dynamic -- an annihilating sadism, the brutality and contempt taken wholesale from the pornography itself. The pornographic video game "Custer's Revenge" generated many gang rapes of Native American women. In the game, men try to capture a "squaw," tie her to a tree, and rape her. In the sexually explicit game, the penis goes in and out, in and out. One victim of the 'game' said: 'When I was first asked to testify I resisted some because the memories are so painful and so recent. I am here because of my four-year-old daughter and other Indian children.... I was attacked by two white men and from the beginning they let me know they hated my people.... And they let me know that the rape of a 'squaw' by white men was practically honored by white society. In fact, it had been made into a video game called Custer's Last Stand' [sic]. They held me down and as one was running the tip of his knife across my face and throat he said, 'Do you want to play Custer's Last Stand? It's great, you lose but you don't care, do you? You like a little pain, don't you, squaw?' They both laughed and then he said, 'There is a lot of cock in Custer's Last Stand. You should be grateful, squaw, that All-American boys like us want you. Maybe we will tie you to a tree and start a fire around you.'"

from pornographic representations can itself signify a racist meaning. This point was made in the statement "Racism in Pornography," presented to the conference titled "Challenging Our Images: The Politics of Pornography and Prostitution" (held in Toronto in 1985), which makes the observation that,

Penthouse and *Playboy* do not include Native women. In them you find mostly Black women and Asian women. Native women are more often found in hard-core porn books.... It may be that Native women and Native culture have been so oppressed that the very notion of putting them in these magazines would turn white men off.²⁰

This statement also calls attention to the historical uses of pornography for racist political goals.²¹

In sum, this multitude (yet still not exhaustive set) of interpretations of pornography helps to demonstrate that the scope of meaningfulness in pornography ranges widely, dealing

²⁰ Lesbians of Colour, "Racism in Pornography," reproduced in *Good Girls, Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face*, ed. Laurie Bell (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987), p. 60.

²¹ On the topic of the connections between racism and pornography, see also: Ronald J. Berger et al., *Feminism and Pornography*, op. cit., pp. 66-69; Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, op. cit.; and *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E.H. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star (San Francisco: Frog In The Well, 1982), especially the following articles: Audre Lorde and Susan Leigh Star, "Interview With Audre Lorde" (pp. 66-71), Karen Sims and Rose Mason with Darlene Pagano, "Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians" (pp. 99-105), and Alice Walker, "A Letter of the Times, or Should This Sado-Masochism Be Saved?" (pp. 205-209).

with subjects more varied than simply sex. Taken collectively, a comprehensive worldview begins to emerge from the multiple meanings that people receive from pornography. Its meaningfulness is sufficiently encompassing to address conscious and unconscious concerns felt by most segments of society, regardless of whether the meanings themselves are agreeable to everyone.

(1) (b) An Interpretation of Sacred Meaning in Sexual Violence

Before leaving the question of the shared scope of meaningfulness that is found in both pornography and religious myths and symbols, I want to pay particular attention to another dimension in the scope of pornography's meaningfulness, i.e., the profundity of meaning in a religious sense that some pornographers perceive in sex itself. For, to communicate this meaning they use the theme of violence. And their own account of this religious meaning, as it is described by one pornographic writer, Georges Bataille, and sympathetically analyzed by Susan Sontag, offers an alternate interpretation of violence in pornography to those already mentioned.²² As I will show next,

²² Interpretations of violence in pornography that have been mentioned thus far include: (1) violence in pornography expresses the moral condemnation of prostitutes; (2) violence in pornography is a neurotic excess deriving from sexual repression, and is probably a temporary feature; (3) violence in pornography reflects the psychological process whereby the despised carnal aspect of the self is denied and projected so as to become a target against which to vent rage that would otherwise be directed internally; (4) violence in pornography is hate-propaganda directed against women and ideological training for

their interpretation is especially germane for the topic of pornography's relevance to questions of gender within the discipline of religious studies, which this thesis addresses.

In her article "The Pornographic Imagination," which was first published in 1966 and subsequently became very influential, literary critic Susan Sontag defends pornography as a genuine and "interesting" genre of literature. She describes it as a serious form of art with significance of a type analogous to religious art. It is perfectly legitimate and appropriate, she argues, for literature to treat as a subject for narrative,

... the extreme states of human feeling and consciousness, those so peremptory that they exclude the mundane flux of feelings and are only contingently linked with concrete persons -- which is the case with pornography.²³

In fact, the most extensive possible exploration of consciousness in every possible direction is, in Sontag's view, the duty that modern society expects of its artists. She thinks this duty of the artist to explore the "frontiers of consciousness," thereby risking "spiritual dangers," is essentially a sacred duty, and "the nearest thing to a sacramental human activity acknowledged

men in male dominance; (5) violence in pornography is fantasized retaliation against women for their original anti-male sexism; (6) violence in pornography represents the sadomasochistic "game" played to counter the boredom of sex, or to re-introduce a power imbalance in the case of homosexual sex.

²³ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," op. cit., pp. 138-139.

by a secular society."²⁴ In her view, the pornographic artist should be recognized for fulfilling this duty. Pornography "fascinates and enthralls," as does all good art according to Sontag's criteria, by incarnating "the most extreme forms of consciousness that transcend social personality or psychological individuality."²⁵ Specifically, pornography incarnates the "originality, thoroughness, authenticity, and power" of the "erotically obsessed ... 'deranged consciousness'."²⁶ Moreover, in performing so successfully this sacred duty to enthrall, to carry the reader beyond "the mundane flux of feelings" to extreme states of consciousness, Sontag maintains that the genre of pornographic literature reveals itself to have strong affinities with the genre of religious literature in former times.

In some respects, the use of sexual obsessions as a subject for literature resembles that of a subject whose validity far fewer people would contest: religious obsessions. So compared, the familiar fact

²⁴ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 141: "If within the last century art conceived as an autonomous activity has come to be invested with an unprecedented stature -- the nearest thing to a sacramental human activity acknowledged by a secular society -- it is because one of the things art has elected to do is to make forays into and take up positions on the frontiers of consciousness (often very dangerous to the artist as a person) and to report back what's there. Being a free-lance explorer of spiritual dangers, the artist is given a certain license to behave differently from other people.... his [sic] main job is to invent trophies of his experiences -- objects and gestures that fascinate and enthrall, not merely (as older notions of the artist would have it) edify or entertain."

²⁵ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 141.

²⁶ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 143.

of pornography's definite, aggressive impact upon its readers looks somewhat different. Its celebrated intention of sexually stimulating readers is really a species of proselytizing. Pornography that is serious literature aims to 'excite' in the same way that books which render an extreme form of religious experience aim to 'convert.'²⁷

Sontag uses the tradition of French pornographic writers, beginning, as always, with the Marquis de Sade, and including more recent authors like Georges Bataille and the pseudonymous author of the novel *Histoire d'O*, Pauline Réage, to elaborate her case, arguing for further manifestations of a type of kinship between the pornographic imagination and the religious imagination. Speaking of the female protagonist in the novel *Histoire d'O*, a woman whose name is simply "O", Sontag explains that O's purpose is to lose her self, her quest is to become an object, a thing, and that this is virtually a religious quest, as the writing, replete with religious metaphor, is intended to suggest for the reader's conscious appreciation:

Religious metaphors abound in a good deal of modern erotic literature (in Genet, among others) and in some works of pornographic literature, too. *Story of O*, particularly, is filled with religious metaphors for the ordeal that O undergoes. O "wanted to believe." Her drastic condition of total personal servitude to

²⁷ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 144. Recalling Margaret Miles' observation about Hans Baldung's new visual interpretation of "the Fall" (see above, Chapter Three), I am tempted to adapt Sontag's last sentence to read something like, "Pornography that is a serious example of the religious visual arts aims to 'excite' in addition to the way that paintings, drawings, stained-glass windows, and the like, which render an extreme form of religious experience aim to 'convert'."

those who use her sexually is repeatedly described as a mode of salvation.... The whipping, branding, and mutilating are described (from the point of view of her consciousness) as ritual ordeals which test the faith of someone being initiated into an ascetic spiritual discipline. The "perfect submissiveness" that her original lover, and then Sir Stephen, demand of her seems to echo the extinction of the self explicitly required of a Jesuit novice or Zen pupil.²⁸

More than metaphor attracts Sontag's analytical eye for religious significance in the novel about O. She is also intrigued by the depth of meaning in this pornographic novel's exploration of the "spiritual paradox" that is the goal of O's religious quest:

O's quest is neatly summed up in the expressive letter which serves her for a name. 'O' suggests a cartoon of her sex, not her individual sex but simply woman; it also stands for the void, a vacuity, a nothing. But what *Story of O* unfolds is a spiritual paradox, that of the full void and of the vacuity that is also a plenum. The power of the book lies exactly in the anguish stirred up by the continuing presence of this paradox. "Pauline Réage" raises, in a far more organic and sophisticated manner than Sade does with his clumsy expositions and discourses, the question of the status of human personality itself.²⁹

What is this spiritual paradox, this "full void" and "vacuity that is also a plenum" and that has to do with "the status of human personality itself"? In the tradition of writers about whom Sontag is speaking, the heart of the religious meaning that the pornographic artist discovers, and expresses, is this very

²⁸ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 164. Emphasis in the original.

²⁹ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," pp. 152-153.

idea that sexual fulfilment paradoxically entails personal obliteration, the loss of one's "self", of personality. A "full void" is a "sexually fulfilled" "thing". The "vacuity that is also a plenum" is the spiritually satisfying experience (i.e., the "plenum") of personal transcendence (i.e., "vacuity") that is to be found by human beings in this state of "thingness" achieved through sexual fulfilment.

Story of O, with its project for completely transcending the idea of personality, rests on this dark and complex vision of sexuality ... 'O' progresses simultaneously toward her own extinction as a human being and her fulfilment as a sexual being.... What pornographic literature does is precisely to drive a wedge between one's existence as a full human being and one's existence as a sexual being.³⁰

At this point in her analysis Sontag incurs the disdain of some feminist critics of pornography,³¹ for she does not challenge the truth of this spiritual paradox at the centre of human sexual experience, this "dark and complex vision of sexuality." She apparently concurs with this view of sex, and

³⁰ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 155.

³¹ See, for example, Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, p. 226 ff., also reproduced in "Sadomasochism and the Erosion of Self: A Critical Reading of *Story of O*," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. Robin Ruth Linden et al., op. cit., pp. 184-201. See also Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, pp. 86, 89, 91-2, 121, 137. Whereas Sontag's analysis focuses on the French tradition of pornographic literature, Kappeler's attention in this book centres more on the Anglo-American tradition.

therefore with the appropriateness of pornography's representation of its truth.

Normally we don't experience, at least don't want to experience, our sexual fulfilment as distinct from or opposed to our personal fulfilment. But perhaps in part they are distinct, whether we like it or not. Insofar as strong sexual feeling does involve an obsessive degree of attention, it surely does contain experiences in which one can feel one is losing one's "self." The literature that goes from Sade through Surrealism to these more recent books precisely capitalizes on that mystery, isolates that and makes the reader aware of it, invites him to participate in it.³²

In fact, Sontag's analysis delves into meanings deeper and darker still, beyond religious metaphor, and beyond the spiritual paradox of the "vacuity that is also a plenum." For she also writes about how pornography "fascinates and enthralls" through the understanding it presents of "sexuality as something beyond good and evil, beyond love, beyond sanity, sexuality as a resource for ordeal and for breaking through limits of consciousness."³³ Here, once again, Sontag upsets later feminist critics for accepting the pornographers' understanding that violence is an inherent part of human sexuality and therefore forms an appropriate part of pornography, with a literal meaning, not only as a metaphor for the sense -- tranquil by comparison -- of the loss of the self. Indeed, Sontag explicitly rejects "the assumption that human sexual appetite is,

³² Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 155.

³³ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 155.

if untampered with, a natural pleasant function."³⁴ She agrees with the French tradition of pornographers whose "assumption seems to be that 'the obscene' is a primal notion of human consciousness, something much more profound than the backwash of a sick society's aversion to the body."³⁵ For, as she writes,

Human sexuality is, quite apart from Christian repressions, etc., a highly questionable phenomenon, and belongs, at least potentially, among the extreme rather than the ordinary experiences of humanity. Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness -- pushing us at intervals close to taboo and dangerous desires, which range from the impulse to commit sudden arbitrary violence upon another person to the voluptuous yearning for the₃₆ extinction of one's consciousness, for death itself.

Sontag cites the writing of Georges Bataille especially for illuminating this even "darker sense of the erotic, its perils of fascination and humiliation,"³⁷ and its connection with death.

Bataille understood more clearly than anyone else that what pornography is really about, ultimately, isn't sex, but death.... It's toward the gratifications of death, succeeding and surpassing₃₈ those of eros, that every truly obscene quest tends.

³⁴ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 153.

³⁵ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," pp. 153-154.

³⁶ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 154.

³⁷ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 156.

³⁸ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," pp. 156-157.

For his recognition and provocative articulation of the connections between sex and death in primal human consciousness, Sontag admires Bataille's work.³⁹ She writes that Bataille's mind is "in an acute, unrelenting state of agony; but as an equally extraordinary mind in an earlier age might have written a theology of agony, Bataille has written an erotics of agony."⁴⁰

In his book, *Death and Sensuality*,⁴¹ Georges Bataille himself writes about the virtually synonymous meaning of religious sacrifice and erotic activity. In each case, he says, it is through death that the continuity of existence, for which we all yearn, is revealed. In religious sacrifice, the death of the victim is literal, physical and immediate; yet existence itself is revealed to continue. In erotic activity the death experienced is a presentiment of this literal, physical death to come (and is brought to consciousness by the reproductive aspect of sexual behaviour),⁴² but, more importantly, the death

³⁹ Cf. Andrea Dworkin's far more critical treatment of Bataille in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women and Intercourse*.

⁴⁰ Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," p. 157.

⁴¹ Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (1962; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1977).

⁴² Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, pp. 100-101: "We must never forget that the multiplication of beings goes hand in hand with death. The parents survive the birth of their offspring but the reprieve is only temporary. A stay is granted, partly for the benefit of the newcomers who need assistance, but the appearance of the newcomers guarantees the disappearance of their predecessors. Death follows reproduction with sexual beings too [i.e., as it does with asexual beings that reproduce through

experienced in erotic activity is a death of the self, of the human part of a person, the personality, that which makes a person a distinctive, separate human being, or, in Bataille's terms, a "discontinuous" being. "Sexual activity," asserts Bataille, "is a critical moment in the isolation of the individual.... it weakens and calls into question the feeling of self."⁴³ The violence that submerges the self also submerges the discontinuous being, thereby giving a glimpse of continuity.

... continuity of existence is independent of death and is even proved by death. This I think is the way to interpret religious sacrifices, with which I suggest that erotic activity can be compared. Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea.⁴⁴

Thus, in the same vein as Sontag interprets O's religious quest to be the loss of her self, her self-sacrifice through the fulfilment of her sexual being, Bataille interprets the purpose and sacred meaning in all eroticism to be the destruction or dissolution of the participants. He says, "The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives."⁴⁵ Through the

scissiparous division], at a distance even if not immediately."

⁴³ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 100.

⁴⁴ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, pp. 21-22. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁵ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 17.

loss of their discrete, "discontinuous" beings, through this "violence" to the self, each participant acquires a sense of "continuity", however temporary. This is the reason why "all eroticism has a sacramental character,"⁴⁶ for it provides a religious experience. And this is why, for Bataille, true piety uses violence as a "means to probe the secrets of existence,"⁴⁷ for violence in sex, in the form of the loss of the self, is experienced as part of its sanctity, as an element of its religious meaning.⁴⁸

It should be pointed out that the "continuity" momentarily sensed through the death of the self in eroticism, as it is understood by Bataille, is not the same thing as a union between the sexual partners, between self and other, even though he refers to their sexual encounter as a "fusion" and a "mingling". It is certainly not a continuity with the other that would

⁴⁶ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁷ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 91. In Bataille's view Christianity has mistakenly eschewed the pious use of violence.

⁴⁸ In this same book, Bataille explains an additional perspective on the meaning of violence in sex. He sees in it the element of transgression that is inherent in sex as sex is *determined by the demands of civilization*, i.e., as something which must be contained and repressed to permit the work necessary for civilization, as Freud theorized. Since sex is what must be repressed to make civilization possible, sex is always experienced by human beings as a form of transgression. Bataille writes, "In the human sphere sexual activity has broken away from animal simplicity. It is in essence a transgression, not, after the taboo, a return to primitive freedom. Transgression belongs to humanity given shape by the business of work." *Death and Sensuality*, p. 108; see also pp. 49-53.

preclude any possibility of violence against the other. For it is not a continuity with the other at all; it is a continuity of the self.

At the moment of conjunction the animal couple is not made up of two discontinuous beings drawing close together uniting in a current of momentary continuity: there is no real union; two individuals in the grip of violence brought together by the preordained reflexes of sexual intercourse share in a state of crisis in which both are beside themselves. Both creatures are simultaneously open to continuity.⁴⁹

Even while they share the state of crisis in the sense that each is in the grip of violence, both creatures remain radically separate from each other: "Each being contributes to the self-negation of the other, yet the negation is not by any means a recognition of the other as a partner."⁵⁰ And when the crisis is over, their separate identities are restored, "the discontinuity of each is intact."⁵¹ Therefore, in Bataille's understanding of the sacred state of continuity experienced through eroticism, there is no connection between self and other that might serve to inhibit violence against the other. On the contrary, violence is at the centre of their sexual relation. Indeed, it is Bataille's conviction that,

⁴⁹ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 103.

⁵⁰ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 102.

⁵¹ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 103.

When the Marquis de Sade in his novels defines murder as the pinnacle of erotic excitement, that only implies that the destructive element pushed to its logical conclusion does not necessarily take us out of the field of eroticism proper.⁵²

Significantly, Bataille sees a gender-specific pattern in the sacramental violence of eroticism, in the manner by which each being contributes to the self-negation of the other. While he attributes the experience of a loss of the self to both men and women, Bataille sees woman as the quintessential sacrificial victim and man as the quintessential sacrificer.

⁵² Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 18. Even murder does not take us beyond eroticism proper because "Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns ... of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals.... Continuity is what we are after.... What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain.... such irrevocable acts [as murder] only indicate the extremes of practices in the first stages in which everyone must to some extent indulge.... Physical eroticism has in any case a heavy, sinister quality." (pp. 18-19) [Another dimension of the "sinister" and "horrifying paradox" of physical eroticism is the fact that "pleasure is more deeply felt during mortal anguish." (p. 105)] Even "emotional eroticism," or love, for Bataille does not really involve "a total blending of two beings, a continuity between two discontinuous creatures," which he calls "a quest for the impossible." (p. 20) Nor, for the most part, does love mean a tranquil respite from the violence that is integral to all eroticism, as Bataille understands it. In fact, "For the man in love ... the fervour of love may be felt more violently than physical desire is." (p. 19) "The likelihood of suffering is all the greater since suffering alone reveals the total significance of the beloved object. Possession of the beloved object does not imply death, but the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess. If the lover cannot possess the beloved he will sometimes think of killing her; often he would rather kill her than lose her. Or else he may wish to die himself." (p. 20)

In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity.⁵³

For Bataille the woman is dissolved as a separate entity through the actions of being stripped naked ("Stripping naked is seen in civilizations where the act has full significance if not as a simulacrum of the act of killing, at least as an equivalent shorn of gravity"⁵⁴), and through having her resistance, her modesty, her very identity, overcome. In erotic activity the woman, therefore, more than the man, is most obviously comparable to the sacrificial victim due to the manner by which she acquires the state of "limitless, infinite nature," the state which makes a sacrificial victim sacred.

The act of violence that deprives the creature of its limited particularity and bestows on it the limitless, infinite nature of sacred things is with its profound logic an intentional one. It is intentional like the act of the man who lays bare, desires and wants to penetrate his victim. The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim. The woman in the hands of her assailant is despoiled of her being. With her modesty she loses the firm barrier that once separated her from others and made her impenetrable. She is brusquely laid open to the violence of the sexual urges set loose in the organs of reproduction; she is laid open to the impersonal violence that overwhelms her from without.⁵⁵

⁵³ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 18.

⁵⁵ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 90.

Yet the man, too, experiences the sacramental quality of sex in which his discontinuous being, his identity, is dissolved in violence. The difference is that in his case he is overwhelmed by an "impersonal violence" that more typically comes "from within" rather than "from without." Nonetheless, in sacrificing the woman, the man prepares for his own self-sacrifice.

But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution.⁵⁶

In the end, in Bataille's view, both men and women are equally overcome by the "animal" component of erotic activity that overwhelms the self from within.⁵⁷ The personal identities of each are dissolved by the violence that overtakes the will in a "blind convulsion" of organs. Bataille is reminded again of the similarity with religious sacrifice.

Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the

⁵⁶ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ Bataille writes (p. 105): "An animal impulse in us is the cause of the crisis.... In fact the individual splits up and his unity is shattered from the first instant of the sexual crisis. Just then the plethoric life of the body comes up against the mind's resistance. Even an apparent harmony is not enough; beyond consent the convulsions of the flesh demand silence and the spirit's absence. The physical urge is curiously foreign to human life.... The being yielding to that urge is human no longer but, like the beasts, a prey of blind forces in action, wallowing in blindness and oblivion."

considered will of the lovers. Their considered will is followed by the animal activity of these swollen organs. They are animated by a violence outside the control of reason, swollen to bursting point and suddenly the heart rejoices to yield to the breaking of the storm. The urges of the flesh pass all bounds in the absence of controlling will.⁵⁸

Although he understands the dissolution of the self by animal impulses -- the impersonal violence from within -- to be a generically human experience, Bataille again uses the example of a woman, not a man, to illustrate the idea, just as he used a woman to illustrate the idea of being overwhelmed from without. He imagines a sexually innocent person witnessing unseen "the passionate lovemaking of some woman who had struck him as particularly distinguished," and concludes,

He would think she was sick, just as mad dogs are sick. Just as if some mad bitch had usurped the personality of the dignified hostess of a little while back. Sickness is not putting it strongly enough, though; for the time being the personality is dead. For the time being its death gives the bitch full scope, and she takes advantage of the silence, of the absence of the dead woman. The bitch wallows -- wallows noisily -- in that silence and that absence. The return of the personality would freeze her and put an end to the sensual delight she has abandoned herself to.⁵⁹

Bataille's point is that sexual activity for both men and women "has its inhuman side.... alien to the normal run of human

⁵⁸ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 106.

behaviour."⁶⁰ But he evidently thinks that the contrast is most effectively conveyed by using a female to illustrate it.

Clearly Bataille's understanding of how women experience the heterosexual relationship as sacred differs dramatically from women's accounts described in the last chapter. For them, it is worth recalling, sex was felt to be sacred because it is an encounter between two people in which both are most fully present to themselves and each other as whole persons, with body and spirit harmoniously integrated. The sexual encounter was seen as one of profound connection and relatedness, but without any hint that this connection involves a sense of personal violation of the self, such as Bataille describes, whether that violation be in the form of being overwhelmed from without (a rape scenario which was explicitly rejected), or being overwhelmed from within by "animal" urges experienced as "inhuman". In fact, the women authors discussed in Chapter Four would probably refer to these animal urges as "also human" rather than "inhuman". In any case, whereas they describe the sacredness of sex in terms of feelings of pleasurable connections between self and other in which violence is anathema, Bataille imagines the sacredness of sex in terms of the destruction of the self and the other, and of the revelation, through all this violence and death, of continuity.

I think it is interesting to reflect on Bataille's understanding of sacred meaning in the violence of sex, and in

⁶⁰ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, p. 106.

the imaginative artistic exploration of this idea in pornography, in light of the theoretical possibilities raised by Chapter Four about gender differences in sacrality. Is this view espoused by Bataille, his predecessor, the Marquis de Sade, and many other male writers of pornography,⁶¹ this view which celebrates the pious virtues of violence, possibly a quintessentially male perspective? Are these interpretations of sacred meaning revelational of a male form of sacrality? Are they instances showing how, for men, sex is also experienced as sacred, not for offering feelings of connection, of sacred immanence, such as women experience, but for providing feelings of transgression, and violation, of radical separation from self and other, and ultimately the feeling of self-transcendence?

However, if the answer to these questions is "yes", then why do some men write about the sacred quality of sexual experiences

⁶¹ See, for example, Susanne Kappeler's critical analysis of D.M. Thomas' novel *The White Hotel* (Harmondsworth, King Penguin, 1981) in her book, *The Pornography of Representation*, pp. 84-100. A summary conclusion of her analysis is relevant. She writes: "We have seen the writer, D.M. Thomas ... produce and reproduce the pornographic structure in which the male subject imposes a scenario of violence upon the female subject which eliminates the latter and reduces her to object status. The represented scenario featuring Freud, Freud's son, and Nazis in the role of subject, Lisa Erdman in the role of object, is carried over into the structure of representation. Writer and reader bond in the exercise of usurping female subjectivity and experience, moving into the whole available space of writing and of reading which thus become activities predicated upon the male gender, yielding the pleasure of the feeling of life at the cost of the death of female subjectivity." (pp. 103-104)

in terms similar to the above accounts by women?⁶² And why does Sontag, a woman, write with such sympathetic understanding about Bataille's interpretation of sacred meaning in sexual violence?⁶³ And, indeed, why is there a significant group of women, both lesbian and heterosexual, who defend sadomasochistic practices and representations, women who would laugh at the

⁶² E.g., Russell Vannoy sees a connection between self and other as part of the experience of self-transcendence, which Georges Bataille does not see. In *Sex Without Love: A Philosophical Exploration* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1980), Vannoy writes (p. 121): "... a phrase like *vulgar hedonism* or even *pleasure* hardly does justice to the ecstatic state of bliss one enjoys in a really good sex act. One feels transported out of one's finite ego into a state of oneness with the partner and the universe, a state that borders on the experiences mystics say they feel. To refer to this experience as vulgar pleasure or a mere sensation in the groin is surely unjustified."

⁶³ Actually, despite the criticisms levelled against her by some feminists for adopting a "male attitude," it is not the case that Sontag accepts, or agrees with, all the meanings expressed by pornography. In fact, she states her own dissatisfaction with the type of self-transcendence that pornography offers. True, she defends the genre; and she seems to agree that there is a kind of loss of the "self" experienced in sex by both men and women, as well as a potential for violence, which is quite appropriate for pornographic artists to explore. Yet there is some ambiguity in her position on these points, for she also writes about the "pathos" of pornography insofar as it provides only self-destructive ways to understand self-transcendence. She laments the lack of "authentic" alternatives for meeting the need for self-transcendence in "modern capitalistic society": "The need of human beings to transcend 'the personal' is no less profound than the need to be a person, an individual. But this society serves that need poorly. It provides mainly demonic vocabularies in which to situate that need and from which to initiate action and construct rites of behavior. One is offered a choice among vocabularies of thought and action which are not merely self-transcending but self-destructive." (My emphasis.) Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," pp. 166-167.

"sacred ideal" of sex as described by the women authors in Chapter Four, dismissing it as "vanilla sex" (i.e., boring)?⁶⁴

Evidently, whatever the gender differences in sacrality that pornography might help to reveal, the picture is bound to be a complex one. Perhaps we will find that personal psycho-sexual history is a more significant factor than gender identity *per se* in influencing how men and women interpret the meanings in pornography and whether, for example, they appreciate a sacred meaning in pornography's portrayal of sexual violence. Perhaps people who have experienced sexual violence, and we know these are many, derive from violent pornography effective means to meet their own most profound needs for making life's experiences meaningful. I think these are possibilities worth considering and exploring.

(1) (c) Humility in Pornography and in Religion

Finally, before turning to a consideration of the iconographical quality of pornography, there is one further point

⁶⁴ See, for example, the lesbian pornographic magazine, *On Our Backs*, which usually features sadomasochism (and tends to be more frequently censored at the Canadian border than magazines with heterosexual sadomasochism, according to its Canadian readership). Also see several works in defense of sadomasochistic pornography by Pat Califia [including her fictional work, *Macho Sluts*] and by Gayle Rubin. References to these works, and various rebuttals to them, can be found in Robin Ruth Linden et al. (eds.), *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (San Francisco: Frog In The Well, 1982), and in Susan G. Cole, *Pornography and the Sex Crisis* (Toronto: Amanita Enterprises, 1989).

on the question of its meaningfulness that invites comparison with religion. Not only is extreme sexual violence as depicted in pornography (such as rape, mutilation, and murder), comparable in meaning to religious sacrifice for some people, but the case might be made that so too does its milder form of violence, i.e., humiliation, have affinities with religious meaning.

For the idea of humility, if not humiliation, is a key concept in many religions. The Muslim is literally the "one who submits," one who is humble. In Hindu iconography, the god Shiva dances on and subdues the "ego". An important component of the Athenians' sacred procession to Eleusis, the site of the most sacred mysteries of ancient Greece, was a rite of public ridicule, the public humiliation of even the highest-ranking individuals in the *polis*. And the so-called "trickster" character so prominent in Amerindian mythologies ruffles the dignity of just about everyone, including her/himself.

These are various manifestations of a widely shared religious sensibility. The state of humility is an emotional condition that naturally accompanies the religious feelings of reverence and awe. It reflects a perception of the self as insignificant and impotent, by comparison, when contemplating the "big picture" or the infinite power of divinity.

Significantly, the ancient Greeks recognized the inherent connection between the religious attitudes of reverence and respect, such as are owed to the gods and venerable personages,

and the reverse attitudes directed toward the self of shame and modesty, by using the same word 'aidos' to express both ideas. Moreover, they used a cognate of the word, 'aidoia', to name the genitals, which were evidently perceived to bear the quality of aidos in a paradigmatic way. But in which sense? I would suggest very likely in a blend of both senses. For, does our sexuality not evoke in us sometimes the feeling of awe, and simultaneously humility, even shame and humiliation, before its awesome power? Such a combination of feelings might have been more easily recognized by the ancient Greeks, but I don't think they are entirely foreign to us today.

The question might be asked: What is it that makes the meaning of the sexual humiliation of women in pornography different from the meaning of their sexual humiliation in Greek myths, or in Amerindian myths? Consider, for example, in Book 8 of Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus tells the story about the sexual humiliation of not just a woman, but an august goddess. Odysseus entertains his audience by relating the tale about when the love goddess, Aphrodite, was ensnared in the act of sexual intercourse with Ares by her husband, Hephaestus, and then was displayed for all the gods and goddesses to laugh at -- but the goddesses declined to attend and witness the spectacle "out of aidos." (*Odyssey* 8, 324) Or consider the following Amerindian example, a sacred legend recited in the book, *Sacred Legends of*

the Sandy Lake Cree.⁶⁵ In this legend the "trickster" character (whose Cree name is Wee-sa-kay-jac) tricks the women of a camp into providing him with a sexual adventure at their expense. He deceives them by claiming that he was sent by "the great spirit" to warn them about an approaching windigo, a "man-eating monster," and to instruct them on how to save themselves. He tells them,

"When you hear the creature do not try and fight him because the only way all of you can survive is by standing in the doorways, with your skirts pulled high and your rear-ends facing the dreaded windigo. The creature may touch you but remain in your positions regardless of what the windigo does. Follow my instructions and all of you will live to see the sun cross the sky again."

Wee-sa-kay-jac then pretends to leave to warn other villages, but instead he returns in the early morning to fabricate the sound of the approaching windigo outside the women's lodge.

Panic stricken, the women followed the instructions of their guardian. They stood in the doorways with their leather skirts raised and rear-ends facing out into the cold air.

Wee-sa-kay-jac went from doorway to doorway, making love with each woman. When he had entered into all ten of them he decided to make a second journey around the lodge. After servicing them all the second time, the passion of Wee-sa-kay-jac subsided and he was satisfied.

Then he ran off into the forest laughing about the trick he had played on the foolish women.

⁶⁵ Carl Ray and James R. Stevens, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (1971; reprint, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), pp. 29-30.

The differences between these types of examples that can be found in religious myths, and pornography, may be thought to be the degree to which females are singled out over males as targets to receive humiliating messages, with religions presenting a more balanced perspective through which men, too, learn humility. Yet I think that would be debatable on a case by case basis. It is certainly often the case in religions around the world that women learn a greater degree of humility than do men. For example, even though the Muslim, male or female, is "one who submits" to Allah, the *tchador*, the code of dress for women enforced in fundamentalist Muslim contexts, is an ever present reminder to both Muslim men and Muslim women that women as a class ought to be the most humble and submissive. In Christianity the symbol of Mary performs a similar function.

It is worth mentioning that Ginette Paris has insightfully pointed out an underlying similarity between the Muslim *tchador* and Western pornography. She thinks both represent "the same refusal of Aphrodite," i.e., not just the denial of sex (cf. Wayland Young's *Eros Denied*), but the suppression of autonomous female sexuality, the "multiple powers of feminine seduction" when women's sexuality is not subject to men's control.⁶⁶ One

⁶⁶ Ginette Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, op. cit., pp. 72-73. Paris writes: "When male power is no longer associated with its female counterpart and when only men legislate what is permitted and what is not, we have the *tchador*, or the high collar of the bigots, and pornographic display. These two poles express the two sides of the same repressive reality: the *tchador* leads as surely to pornography, when external censorship is relaxed, as

refuses Aphrodite by preventing women from exposing any of their bodies; the other by forcing women to expose everything. In neither case is the woman allowed to express herself. I think Paris' argument could be supplemented with the point that pornography, equally with the tchador, though again by different means, serves to evoke pervasive feelings of humility in women.

In sum, by expressing to women messages that are sexually humiliating, pornography performs what is frequently, indeed, almost characteristically, a function of the province of religion, the inculcation of greater degrees of humility in women than in men.

(1) (d) Summary of Content Analyses

To conclude the first part of my argument in this chapter, I am suggesting that pornography functions like a religion insofar as the scope of its meaningfulness, its content, is as rich and

pornographic decadence leads to a puritanical reaction when the client has tasted the despair hidden within it. Both belong to the same continuum, the same refusal of Aphrodite: the tchador, by withholding, and pornography by violent exhibitionism, as if to convince oneself that 'there is nothing in it.' Through the tchador, the patriarch obviously seeks to confirm his status as exclusive master, mostly out of fear before the multiple powers of feminine seduction.... If the tchador is obviously repressive, the form that anti-Aphroditism takes in our own culture is more difficult to see. How, for example, does the picture of a woman, legs spread apart in a stupid position, convey a demythifying message: 'all women are interchangeable, femininity is not so mysterious, and we give it to you to see and buy.' This femininity reassures because it is so banal and so docilely submissive to the power of money.... Behind the tchador one does not see the woman, nor does one see her in a display of buttocks, breasts, and sex which belongs to no one."

varied in its appeal. The meanings in pornography, like those in religion, concern the most critical moments in life, the necessary, and the apparently necessary, unalterable biological and social conditions of human life. And these include meanings that evoke states of consciousness which are significantly analogous to those recognized as religious states of consciousness, such as profound humility and self-transcendence.

(2) THE ICONOGRAPHICAL QUALITY OF PORNOGRAPHY

In addition to parallels in content there are significant parallels in form between pornography and religion. Pornography has its "sacred texts" such as those authored by "the divine Marquis" and studied by generations of his devotees. But, what is probably more important as a structural parallel of form is the fact that, as is generally the case with religion, pornography reaches its audience most effectively, in terms of both numbers and affective impact, through the form of visual imagery. As Margaret Miles writes about religious images, traditionally their power derives from the fact that such images accomplish "formation by attraction."⁶⁷

The function of art is to identify and articulate a range of subjective patterns of feeling and to give

⁶⁷ Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 152.

objective form to feeling.... Religion needs art to orient individuals and communities, not only conceptually but also affectively, to the reality that creates and nourishes, in solitude and in community, human life.⁶⁸

Alan Watts makes a similar point about the essential role of imagery in religion when he argues that "imagery is far more powerful than rational speech" or doctrine.

For it is the imagery rather than the actual doctrine which creates the persuasive feeling of a religion, and to regard it as relatively trivial is merely to be insensitive to the influence which it holds, not only upon those who believe it literally but also upon those who live within its atmosphere -- however allegorically they may understand it.⁶⁹

One point that is important to recognize here is the integral relation between the visual arts and religion cross-culturally and historically, such that in most cultures the visual arts are typically dominated by religious themes. In secular culture, on the other hand, visual imagery is characterized by commercialism rather than religious themes, and in commercial imagery pornographic themes are ubiquitous.⁷⁰

As Naomi Wolf (1990) and others have demonstrated, the pornographic scenario of the beautiful young woman who is in

⁶⁸ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Alan W. Watts, *Nature, Man and Woman* (1958; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1991), p. 45.

⁷⁰ See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972).

danger of brutal rape and murder, or who actually suffers these assaults, has become standard fare for mainstream media in the last few decades. The attention-grabbing scenario that combines sex and violence is part of nearly every form of advertising that has found a way to exploit it, as well as the film industry, and even television programming (such as the television series *Twin Peaks* aired during 1990-91 and created by David Lynch, famous for his films of this genre, *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart*).⁷¹ The pervasiveness of this scenario is so extensive, in fact, that, as one writer says, pornography "includes just about the whole of the iconography of everyday heterosexual life."⁷²

Because pornography now pervades so much modern commercial imagery, it is experienced in ways analogous to the ways that people experienced religious imagery in former times (and still do in those quarters where secularism has not completely triumphed). Margaret Miles writes about how, for example, medieval men's and women's experiences of religious images are comparable to modern experiences of media images because of the frequent, repetitive, and ritual nature of people's exposure to them: "Both contemporary media images and historical religious images were experienced daily."⁷³ Medieval worshippers "lived

⁷¹ See the articles on David Lynch in the February 1991 issue of *Playboy*.

⁷² Myrna Kostash, "Whose Body? Whose Self?: Beyond Pornography," in *Still Ain't Satisfied*, op. cit., p. 47.

⁷³ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 7.

with [religious images] in vitally interested contemplation on a daily basis throughout their lives,"⁷⁴ much the same as members of modern society seek out commercial images as guides by which to model themselves. Moreover, the guidance which modern people seek from commercial imagery -- or receive unsolicited, as the case may be -- deals with the same basic issues which in a religiously oriented society are provided through religious imagery. To cite Margaret Miles again, a successful religion provides culture with

... effective symbols for comprehending and taking an attitude towards bodily experience: birth, growth, maturation, kinship, sex, life cycle, pain, death. Religion ... must provide ideas and images ... that enable individuals to manage ... a unified psychophysical process.⁷⁵

To be successful, religious imagery must also articulate "the role and significance of particular individuals" and communicate social values so as to attract sufficient support. In brief,

... a symbolic complex must primarily formulate the personal meaning of biological necessity for human beings and secondarily must present an intelligible social structure that organizes all public and private relationships.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 82.

⁷⁶ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 82.

This is precisely the type of orientation that pornography provides, since it too deals with "biological necessity" and "public and private relationships," as the previous section on pornography's meaningfulness demonstrated. Therefore, if the form of the "symbolic complex" provided traditionally by religion no longer successfully performs these cultural tasks in our secular commercial society, pornographic imagery could be said to be providing an alternate "symbolic complex" that does provide such an orientation.

... since christian churches have relinquished the task of providing life-orienting images, secular culture has seized the opportunity of filling the void. In the absence of religious images, secular images function as life-orienting; they do provide messages from which people form self-images, values, and attitudes.... Images, in their ancient role of formation by attraction, are as effective as ever, but churches, in abdicating responsibility for the training of vision, have failed to provide both life-orienting images and training in their critical appreciation."⁷⁷

Hence people are drawn to, or attracted to, "a variety of contemporary images -- from pornography to museum art" in their naiveté about "the capacity of images to attract one to values one does not, and would not, consciously choose."⁷⁸

In fact, it is Miles' contention in her latest book, *Carnal Knowing*, that the orientation provided by pornography in modern culture is so pervasive that it is simply not possible to convey

⁷⁷ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 152.

⁷⁸ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 145.

religious meaning with visual imagery that bears any resemblance to pornographic imagery, such as the image of a naked female body which at an earlier period of Christian history could, and did, carry religious meaning. Pornographic meanings are now so much in the forefront of people's consciousness that they interfere with, and virtually overwhelm, any possible religious meanings that might be intended by an artist using such imagery. The following discussion by Miles of Edwina Sandy's *Christa* figure provides an illustration:

Here a crucified woman droops on an implied cross, thus occupying what is perhaps the position of greatest honor in centuries of Christian depictions of Christ's redemption of the world. The image startles; it makes vivid the perennial suffering of women. As a private devotional image it may have great healing potential for women who have themselves been battered or raped. Yet as a public image, placed for some time in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City, there are fundamental problems with the image. The *Christa*, by its visual association with the crucified Christ, glorifies the suffering of women in a society in which violence against women has reached epidemic proportions. Equally disturbing is its association with pornography, which similarly fetishizes suffering women. The naked and tortured female body has been appropriated by a media culture and cannot therefore be arbitrarily assigned religious meaning.

The first significant parallel that I want to highlight between religion and pornography in terms of their form, then, is their equally heavy reliance on visual imagery as the most effective means of expression, and the tendency that both

¹⁹ Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, op. cit., p. 177.

religion and pornography seem to have to dominate the themes carried by the visual imagery of a culture. In the present predominantly secular cultural context, there is some indication that the two forms of visual imagery, religious and pornographic, cannot co-exist, for the meanings of pornography tend to usurp the content of religious expressions whenever there is any similarity in form.

A second significant parallel between religion and pornography in terms of their expression in visual form, is the potency of the visual form in each case. The viewer of both traditional religious imagery and pornographic imagery experiences in the image a type of "hyper-reality".

Although some modern religious images may wind up succumbing to pornographic meanings when the two forms compete within the same secular cultural context, there is little doubt that religious images historically have been experienced as having a potent effect on their viewers. They were self-consciously employed by the churches for this very virtue.

By their effectiveness in engaging the emotions, artistic representations were considered capable of affecting the will.... The human mind was capable of grasping supernatural truth through visible objects because visible objects both reflect and participate in the being of their prototypes.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 66.

Because religious icons "both reflect and participate in the being of their prototypes" they have been considered as virtual windows on the supernatural. Christians historically approached church icons with the belief that they were literally seeing the transcendent realm of the divine and, by contemplating these icons, were opening themselves to some effect from that realm (forgiveness, blessing, guidance, etc.). Alternatively, sacred images have been perceived in many religions as embodiments of the same energy as the sacred power represented by them, according to the possessor of the image the means for influencing, or gaining control over, the sacred power itself. Religious images, thus, have traditionally been experienced as animated with a kind of hyper-reality, not merely as visual metaphors, as moderns are more likely to understand them.

It is my contention that contemporary pornographic images tend to be experienced in an analogous way to traditional religious images, i.e., as carriers of a kind of hyper-reality. The viewer is affected by them, as much as, if not more than, by reality itself; and the viewer simultaneously controls the reality which the images manifest through their possession. It is above all the photographic form of most contemporary pornography that is responsible for this phenomenon. For, as

Susan Sontag explains when she describes the properties of photographic images in her book, *On Photography*,⁸¹

Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects) -- a material vestige of its subject, in a way that no painting can be.⁸²

It is worth mentioning that Sontag also recognizes the manner in which the modern attitude toward photographic images has affinities with historical attitudes regarding religious images.

For defenders of the real from Plato to Feuerbach to equate image with mere appearance -- that is, to presume that the image is absolutely distinct from the object depicted -- is part of that process of desacralization which separates us irrevocably from the world of sacred times and places in which an image was taken to participate in the reality of the object depicted. What defines the originality of photography is that, at the very moment in the long, increasingly secular history of painting when secularism is entirely triumphant, it revives -- in wholly secular terms -- something like the primitive status of images. Our irrepressible feeling that the photographic process is something magical has a genuine basis. No one takes an easel painting to be in any sense co-substantial with its subject; it only represents or refers. But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that

⁸¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

⁸² Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 154.

subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it.⁸³

This similarity in the perceived "reality" of the photographic pornograph and the traditional religious image, I submit, becomes even more powerful with each new development in the technologies of image-making, such as the audio-visual technologies of films and videotapes, and most recently, computer pornography, which provides the viewer with the opportunity to engage in an interactive relationship with the programmed images, adding further to the impression of control that the viewer receives.⁸⁴

Moreover, though it is not Sontag's concern in discussing photographic images in general, I think it should be recognized

⁸³ Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 154-155.

⁸⁴ See Suzanne Stefanac, "Sex & the New Media," in *NewMedia: Multimedia Technologies for Desktop Computer Users*, vol. 3, no. 4 (April 1993), pp. 38-45. "Some believe this illusion of control can encourage offensive behavior in real life. 'What's wonderful about interactive media is also what's reprehensible about this kind of application: the idea of handing control over to the user,' says Linda Jacobson, editor of *Cyber-Arts* (Miller Freeman, 1992). 'Smut on paper or video is much more benign than interactive stroke books. These products show men that they can have control over women. You can force them to do your bidding and they do it willingly...'" (p. 41) Also see the editorial "What's Sex Got to Do With It?" (p. 8), in which the editor writes, "In my mind, this is the one undeniably valid reason for reporting on the seamier side of multimedia; its interactive nature gives publishers of pornography and violence the power to involve the viewer in new and unsavory ways. Pornographic video is interactive to the extent that someone can control their VCR, but this is very limited compared to what is now possible with multimedia. I believe it is conceivable that interactive pornography and violence really could have a detrimental effect on the people who observe and participate in it."

how the subject of sex itself increases the potency of photographed pornographic imagery. Audio-visual representations of sex convey a sense of reality even to the most sophisticated viewer who understands the artifice and the acting that goes into the production of films and videos, and who understands that these technologies have the ability to alter and enhance their image products as well. For the latest technologies used to produce pornography make it possible for the viewer to witness not just a semblance of sex, but "real" sexual activity, as is "proven" by the one behaviour that it is not possible for pornographic "actors" to simulate: orgasmic ejaculation. Pornographers refer to this part of their product as the "money shot".⁸⁵ It is the real thing, and cannot be otherwise,

⁸⁵ "While the stag film is content to represent the ultimate pleasure of sex in the close-up of genital penetration -- in what the *Filmmaker's Guide to Pornography* would later call the 'meat shot' -- the feature-length hard-core film of the early seventies seems to demand a new level of 'truth,' signified by the emergence of a new convention in the body's confession of pleasure. The visible, external ejaculation of the penis in the 'money shot' is that convention. Although the feature-length porno includes a great many 'meat shots' in many of its hard-core sequences, it rarely ends these sequences with the mere evidence of genital penetration. Now it must have visual proof of the involuntary confession of pleasure that penetration obscures. The stakes of visibility have been escalated to include the precise narrative moment of (male) orgasm. With the 'money shot' we thus appear to arrive at ... the perceptual visual evidence of the mechanical 'truth' of body pleasure caught in involuntary spasm; the ultimate and uncontrollable -- ultimate because uncontrollable -- confession of the body's pleasure in the climax of orgasm." Linda Williams, "Fetishism and Hard Core: Marx, Freud, and the 'Money Shot,'" in *For Adult Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography*, ed. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff, op. cit., p. 200. Emphasis in the original.

providing a quality of "hyper-reality" to pornographic imagery that is as potent in its own way as any experienced in traditional religious imagery. If the human mind once grasped "supernatural truth" through religious imagery, it now grasps the "truth" of the male body's ecstatic pleasure in sex through contemporary pornographic imagery.

In the same vein, contemporary pornography is able to offer the "truth" of torture and murder -- or of sacrifice, depending on one's perspective.

(3) SUMMARY

In this chapter I have argued for the recognition of significant parallels in both form and content between pornography and religion. Because of these parallels I maintain that it is reasonable to think of pornography as functioning like a religion. This structural similarity provides another example, in addition to those in the foregoing chapters, that shows why pornography is a relevant subject for religious studies.

In the first part, I argued that pornography functions like religion by offering a common cultural source of meaningfulness of an equally rich and profound nature. Like multivalent religious myths and symbols, pornography says many varied and sometimes paradoxical things simultaneously to different groups and individuals within society. Its meanings provide an orientation regarding most of the same issues with which religion

is concerned: biological necessity, the self, relations with other selves, with the world, and sometimes even with God.

Whether or not the orientation that its meanings provide is a "life-enhancing" orientation, is a question that is bound to be asked about pornography. But such a question does not imply thereby pornography's ultimate incommensurability with religion, since the same question might equally well be asked about each manifestation of religion. Some religions are arguably more life-enhancing than others.

Furthermore, in the first part of this chapter I argued that some of the meanings perceived in pornography by other learned thinkers are of a type that could themselves be called religious. And some produce states of consciousness analogous to those normally recognized as religious, such as the states of humility and self-transcendence. Some feminist antipornography critics decry the interpretations of pornographic violence offered by the thinkers whose analyses I considered, i.e., Georges Bataille and Susan Sontag. Andrea Dworkin sarcastically labels Bataille, for example, as a "classy guy" with a theory about "classy sex".⁸⁶ But I have suggested that their interpretations may nonetheless prove fruitful as a starting point for exploring further the questions that I raised about gender-specific experiences of the sacred in sex.

⁸⁶ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, op. cit., p. 190.

In the second part of this chapter I argued that pornography functions analogously to religion through its form, in addition to its meaningfulness, or content, especially through the visual manifestations of its form. For pornographic imagery has come to provide an equivalently dominant and pervasive secular type of iconography in contemporary culture. And, although photography, the primary medium in which contemporary pornographic images are expressed, is totally foreign to religious iconography, this technology contributes a comparable animating quality to pornographic imagery. As a result of the nature of this medium and certain potent visual realities of sex (and violence) that it is capable of reproducing, pornographic imagery can be experienced in a manner comparable to religious imagery, that is, as a revelation of the "truth" of a type of hyper-reality with the power to have a profound effect on the viewer. It can reveal the "truth" of male sexual ecstasy, if not the "truth" of a supernatural or sacred reality.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: AN ISSUE OF RELEVANCE AND IMPORTANCE

Each of the preceding chapters provides the substantive basis for one or more facets of the central argument of this thesis, i.e., the argument that pornography is a relevant subject for the discipline of religious studies, particularly for the field of women and religion. To summarize, the foregoing chapters have demonstrated the relevance of the subject of pornography for the following reasons:

It is relevant, in the first place, because pornography often defines itself in relation to religion, specifically in relation to Christianity. It not only defines itself as the antithesis of Christian antisexualism, it justifies itself, excuses its violent excesses, and defends itself against all opposition on this basis as well. An analysis that stems from a religious studies perspective shows the limitations in these claims, and therefore might help to move public discussion beyond the constraints these claims have set as the determining parameters for the debate over how pornography should be judged.

It is relevant, in the second place, because an inquiry into how contemporary churches understand pornography, and what position they take on it, brings to light the significant degree

of impact that the increasingly authoritative voices of women are having in shaping church thought. Like a foil, pornography reflects the fact that women are having an effect in changing traditional Christian thinking about sexual ethics, and about the whole question of the church's role in sanctioning patterns of male domination. This is information of considerable interest to the field of women and religion, confirming expectations that women's participation as authoritative equals within traditional religions would produce profound transformations in these religions.

In the third place, pornography is relevant for religious studies because influential feminist analyses of pornography have presented arguments about its correspondences with Christianity. Their criticisms of pornography, through these correspondences, have therefore been levelled at particular aspects of Christianity as well (aspects such as: Christianity's treatment of sex as shameful, and of sexual violence by men as inevitable; social, psychological, and political consequences of its theological doctrine on the transcendence of God; and historical precedents for modern secular pornography that Christianity provides through its own use of imagery depicting sexual violence against women). These criticisms are properly part of the whole critical discussion about the merits of the Christian religion that is a major focus of interest in the field of women and religion.

In the fourth place, the relevance of pornography for the field of women and religion derives as well from the nature of the reasons that women commonly identify in articulating their objections to pornography. For their objections express ideas about how they experience pornography as a form of spiritual assault, and implicitly reveal information about what women experience as sacred in sex, information which is meaningfully consistent with recent theoretical hypotheses in the psychology of religion concerning gender-based differences in sacrality. Women's objections to pornography, in other words, provide evidence that supports developing feminist theory in the psychology of religion. When viewed in the light of this theory, furthermore, women's objections to pornography can be recognized better as being quite different from traditional Christian antisexualism.

Finally, pornography should be recognized as a relevant subject for religious studies, in the fifth place, because it currently functions very much like a religion in important respects. It provides the main themes which are repeated everywhere, orienting individuals in relation to their own embodied existence, to other individuals, to the various groups in society, and to the world. It provides a means for evoking feelings of humility, and self-transcendence, and for carrying significance that can be appreciated as having sacrificial import. Moreover, it attracts people's attention and emotional involvement through potent imagery that pervades their daily

lives, perhaps even more effectively than any religious iconography before it. These functional parallels between pornography and religion make pornography an obvious subject for further analysis within the discipline of religious studies.

In sum, the preceding chapters have shown that pornography is a relevant subject for religious studies for a variety of reasons, some of which pertain to the provision of information useful for developing theory in the study of religion, especially theory in the field of women and religion, and some of which pertain to the clarifying perspective that religious studies can contribute to the analysis of the problem of pornography itself.

When considered collectively, it is my conclusion that the various arguments in this thesis demonstrate not only the point that pornography is a relevant subject for religious studies, but also the proposition that it is an important subject for religious studies to address. For, insofar as pornography can be described as functioning like a religion in its current manifestations, it might be argued that it is in effect serving as a replacement for religion in modern secular society. As such, it should be recognized as being more than simply one among many cultural phenomena; it should be acknowledged as being of primary influence in shaping most of contemporary culture. Its importance as a factor having psychological, sociological and political implications, therefore, is profound. From a feminist perspective which recognizes pornography as a problem, moreover, its seriousness becomes more evident when it is understood as

having an impact comparable to that of religion. For, whereas the debate over whether pornography has any meaningful influence on attitudes and behaviour seems never-ending as one social science study after another reports conflicting results on this issue, few people dispute the idea that religion influences human attitudes and behaviour even if its influence is rarely measured in empirical terms.

Given the seriousness of the problem which this perspective on pornography helps to explain, some of the questions which were raised by the foregoing discussions are similarly revealed to be of considerable importance and are worth reiterating.

How, for instance, should the question be settled about whether it is strategically advisable to attempt to counteract the influence of pornography by flooding the cultural scene with an alternate form of sexually explicit iconography, i.e., erotica (assuming women had the economic means to do so)? Geraldine Finn argued, it should be remembered, that the construction of a detached, voyeuristic form of subjectivity in women, as well as in men, is likely to be the result of increasing the availability of erotica, and without necessarily thereby diminishing the quantity or type of pornography available, or its effect on the male consumer. On the other hand, as Margaret Miles has argued, the absence of the public representation of women's subjectivity and women's perspective on sexuality may itself produce a dangerous state of affairs. Without this corrective, men's perennial fears and anxieties in the face of female sexuality

seem to have a pronounced tendency to become pathological in proportion. Even Herbert Richardson's account (see above, Chapter One) -- whatever its limitations as an evolutionary theory or as an interpretation of *Playboy* magazine --, acknowledges this problematic tendency in male psychology. While I do not have the answer to this question right now, I do think that its importance should be recognized and more effort should be directed toward seeking an adequate answer to it.

In connection with this question, it might be helpful to consider the role that the revival of goddess symbolism could play. As many scholars of ancient goddess symbolism have shown (e.g., Christ 1979, 1987, forthcoming; Gimbutas 1974, 1989; Paris 1986), the theme of sexuality is often prominent in the imagery of ancient goddesses. While it tends to focus on the fertility aspect of sexuality more than the issues of relationality and connectedness that modern women prefer to emphasize, the obvious presence of a strong female subjectivity in these images, in contrast to contemporary pornographic images of women as objects, might prove useful to explore further. I would also suggest that the issue of sacred prostitution in the ancient world needs more analysis¹ since it is a concept to which modern prostitutes and pornography workers sometimes appeal in defense of the value of their work. Perhaps more feminist scholarship on ancient sacred

¹ For a classicist's analysis of sacred prostitution, see Bonnie MacLachlan, "Sacred Prostitution and Aphrodite," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 21, no. 2 (1992): 145-162.

prostitution would be useful to today's prostitutes and pornography workers in their efforts to gain better control over the modern practices of prostitution and its representation. As I suggested in Chapter One, it may well be that empowering sex workers would prove to be the most effective means for combatting the most problematic features of modern pornography.

Another question I would reiterate in light of recognizing the religious dimensions of the problem of pornography is the question that I mentioned in Chapter One as a major motivating question for my own research. That is, why is there an appetite for imagery of violent sex such as is portrayed by so much modern pornography? What is the appeal of "snuff" pornography? Is it possible that among the layers of meaning accruing to pornography as an equivalent of religious symbolism are such religious concepts as that of human sacrifice? As noted in Chapter Five, Georges Bataille has argued that a sacrificial component is a natural part of all sexual behaviour. Whether or not that is a distinctively male perspective on sexual experience, or expressive of male sacrality, is worth examining further, I think. But I want to suggest another interpretation as well. Recalling Wayland Young's point (mentioned in Chapter One) about the despairing and hopeless perspective on the future that is conveyed by a culture that never represents to itself any images of loving sexual unions which would symbolize the potential of conception and new birth, and, therefore, of the very possibility of a future, I suggest that this is even more true of a culture

that represents sex in such a way as to emphasize its sterile rather than potentially fertile nature. Such a message of sterility is certainly effectively conveyed when violence is part of the picture, such as when sex is either followed by the woman's murder, or preceded by her murder (as in the popular pornographic theme of necrophilia). On some level of symbolic meaning, then, could the appetite for representations of such pointedly sterile sex, as proven by the market for this type of material, suggest a significant cultural preference for sterility? Given the growing awareness in modern society of the destructive impact of the human species in the ecosystem, perhaps it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the appeal of pointedly sterile sexual imagery in the present historical context might indeed be explained by the idea that these images give expression to, or symbolize, a not quite conscious death wish for the human species. While this may not be a particularly attractive idea, I submit that it has a certain explanatory value, though only if pornography is accorded the status by which it might carry such profound symbolic import, only, that is, if pornography is recognized as bearing the equivalent of religious significance. In that case, however, such an interpretation of violent pornography becomes a reasonable possibility, and might be considered as an alternative to the view that violent pornography represents the inherently violent nature of male sexuality. Neither interpretation, of course, presents a cheerful prospect,

but I think the former, if brought to conscious recognition, may actually be less depressing than the latter.

In conclusion, I submit that pornography is not only relevant to religious studies, and to the field of women and religion especially, but it is an important subject for this discipline to address more fully. For religious studies can bring to the subject of pornography insights that are unique to the perspective of this discipline which may prove very useful for dealing with the problem.

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