Tina Beattie

A Mother is Born: A Reflection in Four Parts

Prepared for the Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation on “Birth and Human Flourishing,” October 2015
As an expert in the interface of constructive theology and psychoanalytic and feminist theories, your contribution will be vital to developing a theological account of birth and its ramifications across the whole of human life (Miroslav Volf, letter to Tina Beattie).

Any investigation of human emergence will be distinctly phenomenological only to the extent that it is committed to describe phenomena from the first-person point of view (James Mumford).

For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant (Is 42: 15, NIV).

This paper feels like an exercise in self-exposure. It is unlike anything I have written before, and I am not sure where it sits in the context of my academic work. The decision to publish it is an act of trust. I hope those who read it will discover new insights and reflect on perspectives to do with mothering and birth that are too rarely explored in theology, despite the fact that the birth of a child is at the very heart of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.

I had not realized the challenge I was taking on when I eagerly accepted Miroslav Volf’s invitation to write about birth and flourishing. I have spent twenty-five years studying that most potent and sublime representation of motherhood – the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. (Admittedly, she had a somewhat unusual experience of conception and birth if we are to believe what we are told, but I shall come to that.) I have immersed myself in theories of gender, embodiment, desire and fecundity. I run a research centre for “Religion, Society and Human Flourishing.” I have four children. I was with my friend when she gave birth. I am a fan of the popular British television series, Call the Midwife. All in all, I thought it would come naturally to me to write about birth – as naturally as giving birth, perhaps. But it is no more natural than giving birth, and childbirth does not in any sense feel like a natural process for a woman’s body to endure.

When I began researching the topic, I realized how little has been written about birth from a maternal perspective. Male philosophers and theologians have throughout history wrestled with the fact of being born, and in the last fifty years feminist scholars have written about different aspects of motherhood, but the process of giving birth has yet to become a focus of significant theological or philosophical reflection. Indeed, to think coherently about birth seems to be even more difficult than to think coherently about sex, and that is proving difficult enough as our queered theories of gender and intersectionality proliferate.

I am discovering that birth resists writing, at least in the way I have been trained to write. It refuses to be written as an academic contribution to knowledge. I lack the words, and therefore I lack the knowledge and the means to analyze, argue, explain, persuade. Does birth have any meaning, except that which emerges long after the event? Of course, it has a certain mammalian
function in keeping the species going, but beyond that? What manner of creature are we, created a little lower than the angels but born between the shit and the piss (Augustine) of a woman whose flesh is tearing apart? And is this all because of a woman’s hunger for knowledge from a forbidden tree? “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in sorrow you shall bring forth children” (Gen. 3:16, KJV).

Adrienne Rich observes that “It is as difficult to think about pain as about love; both are charged with associations going back to early life, and with cultural attitudes wrought into language itself.” Perhaps that is why it is easier to turn to poetry, art and literature than philosophy and theology to bridge the gap between birthing and thinking, between the categorizing, ordering activities of the intellect, and the raw sensations and turbulent passions of the birthing body. To quote Rich again, “To separate sense from emotion, body from mind, is hardly useful when we are trying to understand the whole of female experience, and in particular a function – childbirth – so charged with unconscious and subjective power, and so dramatic in its physical sensations.”

As I prepared to write this paper I found myself gazing deep into an abyss – an inarticulate, fleshy space of inexpressible desire and grief, love and loss, passion and pain, wherein my own maternal self is still being woven on the loom of a lifetime of loving, learning and letting go. These reflections emerge from that deep well of being through and beyond the self to the irreversible reality of (m)othering – of becoming a relational being whose identity will never again feel quite complete because the child always has been and always will be the most intimate and beloved and yet the most alien and mysterious other. To borrow Mumford’s lovely word, he or she will always in some sense remain “the new one.”

I share my half-formed thoughts here in the full awareness that they lack the coherence of a well-digested argument, and the reassuring pretence of objective scholarship. I feel naked writing this – naked as a scholar, a woman, a wife, a mother. I know artists who attempt to give visual expression to the female body in its complex dualities of self and other, of fertility and barrenness, of nurturing and devouring love. This is a shaping of that body in words – a morphology of birth interpreted through the lens of a nascent maternal theology.

**A MOTHER IS BORN (BIRTH ONE)**

It is late at night on the twenty second of August, 1978. I am twenty three years old. I am in a labour ward in Nairobi. Jomo Kenyatta, first President of Kenya, died today, and my elderly white ex-colonial (not to be confused with postcolonial) doctor is in a flurry of agitation about what will happen to people like her. I hear her say that her hands are shaking. Through a fog of pain, I hear her say something about the baby being stuck. I hear her ask for scissors, and then I hear her complaining that the scissors are blunt. I will feel those blunt scissors every time I have sex for years to come.

I heave myself over the endless threshold into darkness, pushing, grunting, sweating, shitting. The irresistible urge to push drives me forward through barriers of pain and resistance, expelling my child’s body into the world through my own flesh and blood and bone. And then – a mighty all-consuming howling heave and the whooshing rush of birth. My baby slithers from my body in a gushing torrent of blood that drenches the doctor.
My first child is born. I did not know the meaning of joy until this moment. It’s a boy. I hear his cries. I welcome his wrinkled, vernix-coated body into my arms. His face is crumpled and twisted with the effort of being born. I hear the flurry of an emergency unfolding around me, as the doctor in her bloodied gown begins to panic. Am I bleeding to death? I only know that I have given birth. I am joy without end. Mine is the joy of "deep, deep eternity." My husband is weeping – through fear or through relief? I am not sure.

I have had a postpartum haemorrhage. They consider a blood transfusion but decide to give me liver injections instead. One day, when the AIDS pandemic pulses through the human bloodstream, I shall be glad of that decision.

Later, I am wide awake in my hospital bed, kenotically empty and filled with that unquenchable joy. Today I want to call it amazing grace, but I was an atheist then so that would be untrue to my past, and I really do want to maintain the indispensible myth that here I am being true to my own story.

I hear a baby crying in the nursery and I know that it is my baby. My breasts know too. I feel an unfamiliar contraction and tingling in my nipples as colostrum leaks through my hospital gown. Like the meconium that my baby will shit for the first few days of life, this is an unexpected substance – a miracle, perfectly balanced to introduce my little boy to the processes of human survival. Birth. Food. Defecation. Sex. Birth. Death. If you’re lucky, they happen in that order. If you’re not, life is birth, defecation and death. I tell the midwife I want my baby. Tutting her disapproval, she brings his cot to my bed. I have just squandered away the last night of sleep for many years.

Body Parts

My life is no longer my own. Milky nights and bleached days blur together beneath a soggy blanket of love and loss. Heavy, aching breasts and the bloody ooze of afterbirth lay claim to my body. My clothes are permanently stained with milk, my shoulders are cheesy and mildewed with vomit. Cramps and pains spiral through me as my uterus fists itself into something resembling normality, though it will never be the same again. My body is a stranger to me. Wendy Wright describes what this means:

One is never the same. After each birth, the body readjusts. But things are never as they were before. Silver-webbed stretchmarks are only an outward sign. More hidden are the now elastic vessels of the vascular system, the pliancy of muscle walls, the flat pouch of the once inhabited womb. Each child impresses upon waxen flesh the unique imprint of its life. Inscribes one’s own life with an image all its own.

Often I have thought how true that is of the heart as well. Each child occupies its own space and in growing presses and pushes out the bounded contours of one’s heart. Each fashions a singular, ample habitation like no other. A habitation crowded with an unrepeatable lifetime of sorrow and joy. A habitation inscribed with a name. How could it be otherwise in the heart of God?

These uterine cramps are called Braxton Hicks contractions, named after the nineteenth century English doctor who discovered them. I suppose he
discovered them in the way that David Livingstone discovered Victoria Falls, though the indigenous people had always known they were there. They call them Mosi oa Tunya – the smoke that thunders.

I wonder what we indigenous inhabitants would call the female body, if we were to lay claim to the right to name? What, for instance, might we call those pimples around our nipples which become more noticeable in pregnancy? They are officially known as “Glands of Montgomery” or “Montgomery tubercles” because they were first described by Dr William Fetherstone Montgomery in 1837. Do we know or care that the darkening of our genitals in early pregnancy is known as “Chadwick’s sign,” named not after the nineteenth century French doctor who “discovered” it (Dr Étienne Joseph Jacquemín), but after James Read Chadwick, another nineteenth century doctor who first drew attention to Jacquemín’s “discovery?”

If men are going to name our body parts, we might wish they were poets rather than scientists. John Donne did it so much more eloquently when he addressed his mistress going to bed:

O my America! My new-found-land,  
My kingdom, safiest when with one man mann’d,  
My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,  
How blest am I in this discovering thee!

The imagery is more seductive, but this is still the conquest of the female flesh by the emperors of language. Our bodies are mapped by the names of our colonizers. Phyllis Trible traces this phenomenon of domination through naming back to the story of Genesis. When God brings the animals to the earthling, ha’adam, he calls them by their names, asserting his mastery over them. On first seeing the woman, he gives a cry of recognition but he does not name her until after the fruit has been eaten, after the loss of innocence, after the fall.

Unto the woman [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee (Gen. 3:16, KJV).

The man asserts his dominance when he claims the power to name the woman as he named the animals:

And Adam called his wife’s name Eve; because she was the mother of all living (Gen. 3:20, KJV).

The power to name. Braxton Hicks contractions. Montgomery’s tubercles. Chadwick’s Sign. Eve. Back in 1978 I could not have named that thick little spot on the vaginal wall that is apparently connected to the clitoris, and which according to the men of science may or may not exist. That was only named in 1981 – the “G-spot” named after German gynaecologist Ernst Gräfenberg.

But men have yet to name some things that are even more elusive than the G-spot. Perhaps they have no name.

The newone creates a volcanic eruption in my soul beyond the power of words, beyond the control of any man. There is the terror that he will die, this
child of mine. I am in the grip of a ferocious maternal urge to protect him, and a
no less ferocious urge to get back the life that he has taken from me. I see the with
resentment that my husband still goes to work, comes home, has some
existential world that has not been dissolved and shattered and remade in the
image of our child.

**Evolving Motherhood**

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy situates these potent emotions in an evolutionary context in
her book *Mother Nature.* She uses the term “mired in maternity.” She explores
the evolutionary struggles, the conflicts and strategies of survival perpetuated in
our animal genes from generation to generation of mothers and babies locked in
a mutual battle and embrace, tensed between birth and death, bonding and
abandonment, survival or annihilation of the species.

Hrdy uses the term “allomothering” to explain the scientific discovery that
primates are communal in their parenting. The more dependent the newborn of
the species, the more collective is the endeavour to protect it and to raise it. In
her book *Mothers and Others* she develops this theory to argue that the
dependence of the infant human and the collaboration needed to ensure its
survival have contributed to the evolution of our species.

A common theme in medieval art is the Holy Kinship group, which shows
Saint Anne with her apocryphal daughters and their children gathered around
her – the Virgin and child, Mary Cleopas and Mary Salome. In some of the
loveliest images the women sit in an enclosed garden that evokes the return to
paradise and the restoration of Eve. “It takes a village to raise a child,” says the
African proverb. Perhaps more often it takes an extended family of
grandmothers and aunts and sisters. Recent research shows that a poor or
vulnerable child has a greater chance of survival if the maternal grandmother is
present. From generation to generation, good mothering is a shared activity – it
is “allomothering.”

Today, the new mother seeking to live out the family romance finds
herself alone with a child who has not yet evolved to adapt to this changed
domestic environment. No wonder so many of us go a little crazy in the isolation
and bondage of those early months, closed up in the loneliness of the nuclear
family home. We are a species created for sociability – “social animals,” to use
Thomas Aquinas’s expression, borrowed from Aristotle. The newone does not
tailor its demands to meet the diminished resources of attention and
engagement that come from this maternal solitude. The mother loves her child
no less, but she alone cannot satisfy the infant’s voracious appetite for care and
attention. Perhaps she even loves it more than those ancestral allmothers, if
“love” is a suitable word to describe the intensity of such a relationship where
the child is not expected to die and the mother can invest in it all her hopes and
dreams and desires, as well as her darkest terrors and anxieties and nightmares.
In cultures where infant mortality is common, a child is often not named until it
has survived the dangerous early months of life. To name and love such a
fragile and ephemeral creature would be to invest too much in one who might be
only a fleeting guest among the living. The naming ceremony constitutes the
transition from primate to person as the surviving child is accepted into the
human world of language and meaning.
Yet the new one, born into such radical and absolute dependence and vulnerability, is endowed with extraordinary capabilities to command the attention and care it needs in order to survive. Hrdy explains how the infant weaves its web of love around the mother and ensures that she will not and cannot escape. It rewards her dedication with feelings of pleasure and desire:

Maternity is inextricably intertwined with sexual sensations, and it is an infant's business, through grunts and coos, touches and smells, to make the most of Mother Nature's reward system, which conditions a woman to make this infant a top priority. Evolutionary logic is firmly on the side of mothers who enjoy the sensual side of mothering for its own sake.15

The pleasure stimulated by the release of hormones during breastfeeding as well as by the infant's sensual nearness, creates in the mother a deep sense of willing bondage in relation to the child's needs. Those are the primordial survival strategies that these small creatures acquired in the apelike infancy of our species. Our capacity to give what the infant needs to survive does not come naturally. It “slumbers” within us, to use Hrdy's expression, and is awakened by a complex process of chemical arousal and emotional interaction in those early weeks.

Hrdy's analysis helps me to understand the strangeness of those early mothering months – the sense of erotic intensity, and the yielding of adoration and exhaustion to libido and lust. The baby has a vested interest, an ancient animal interest, in ensuring that the father stays around, born of its voracious need for bonding and love. Food and physical care might affect the formation of its body, but its earliest experiences of attention or neglect will have a formative influence on its soul. “All you need is love,” so the song goes. The child attains its hold over the father by sexually arousing the mother and making her want him. “In pain shall you bring forth your children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he will lord it over you.” My beloved husband has never lorded it over me, nor has he ever shirked the shared responsibilities of parenthood, but the transition from childless couple to mother and father makes us strangers to one another as well as to ourselves in those early months of learning to be parents.

Who am I, who have I become? I am not. Body is me, revolving in this small orbit of desire and mourning, of sex and food, of milk and tears and skin and touch and passionate, furious love and impotence, with nothing left over but a sense that something or someone has gone missing.

Years later, when my father dies, I will claim the only inheritance there is worth claiming: his poetry. The poems that he wrote himself, and the battered old books that witness to his escape into other worlds because this world never quite fulfilled its promises, never fully compensated him for the struggle of being born into it. Eventually he smoked and drank himself out of it prematurely. I found a poem by Alice Meynell, called “Maternity,” in one of those well-thumbed books:

One wept whose only child was dead
New-born ten years ago.
“Weep not; he is in bliss,” they said.
She answered, “even so.

“Ten years ago was born in pain
   A child not now forlorn.
But oh, ten years ago, in vain
   A mother, a mother was born.”

My firstborn child and I survived that bloody night in Africa, when two of us were born. In that alone, we were fortunate. Today, despite global improvements in maternal mortality rates, sub-Saharan Africa remains the most dangerous region in the world in which to give birth. Of the 800 women who die in childbirth every day, more than half are in sub-Saharan Africa and a quarter of all such deaths are related to severe bleeding during pregnancy and childbirth. But those mothers are poor and black. My deadly flow of blood was stemmed by the privileges of race and wealth on that turbulent night when Kenya too was being born anew into a complex future of promise and pain.

We survived, and we had to move beyond the animality of survival and birth. Just as my little primate son had to learn to be a fully human child, I had to learn to be a fully human mother. Those visceral evolutionary instincts of birthing and bonding must yield to more reasoned practices of virtuous mothering. As Sara Ruddick observes, “Although imbued with intense, ambivalent, thought-provoking feelings, mothering is an activity governed by a commitment that perseveres through feelings and structures the activity.” That is something I understand better now than I did then, when I did not anticipate the lifetime of learning that would stretch ahead of me as far as my own grave, with a love that will never let me go.

**Theorizing Motherhood**

How can those evolutionary skills acquired in primate life adapt us to modern mothering? The books I read now are different from the books I read then. Then I read Penelope Leach and Hugh Jolly. I read a book called *The Continuum Concept* by Jean Liedloff, who used her experience of “Stone Age Indians” in the South American jungle to restore us to more natural ways of parenting children. Those were the first of many books that would leave me feeling guilty, frustrated and inadequate. Those experts on mothering had no concept of “allomothering.” They made a struggling mother feel she must be all in all, bonded by and in bondage to the insatiable needs of her child. Rather than teaching women to cope, they made the burden of guilt and failure almost intolerable.

My inability to live up to those early ideals meant that I was ripe and ready for maternal feminist theorists when I finally went to university at the age of thirty six, the year my fourth child started school. (I had left school at fifteen and become a secretary, following my mother’s advice: “Tina, before you get married and have children, learn to type so that if he ever leaves you, you’ll be able to support yourself.”)

Stone Age parenting is for Stone Age people, but how do we parent in between the ages, when we mistrust the old models and have yet to discover the new? To ask such questions is to challenge the belief peddled by the patriarchs of
theology and philosophy that mothering comes naturally. As Ruddick points out, “Actual mothers have the same kind of relation to maternal practices as scientists have to scientific practice, as believers have to religious practice. ... [A]chievement, in maternal work, is defined by the aims of preserving, fostering, and shaping the growth of a child; insofar as one engages in maternal practice, one accepts these aims as one’s own.”

In other words, motherhood requires an epistemology. It’s not just about what we know but about how we acquire that knowledge and put it to use, how we test it and modify it through experience and reflection. I learned that word “epistemology” in my first year at university. At first I thought they were saying “episiotomy.” That word was in my lexicon. It was part of what I already knew, though I had no theory of knowing it. It was a word that was carved into my flesh, long before I conceptualized what it might mean.

There is a learning curve – an epistemological trajectory – that arcs away from that first birth into maternal life, an umbilical link to lives that in a lifetime of shared endeavour my husband and I have preserved, fostered and shaped, and have also undoubtedly damaged, blighted and stunted in ways we know and in ways we do not. There is a primordial guilt that nests within the maternal heart, about not being good enough. Is this Eve’s legacy? I have never met a mother who has not experienced it, and I have met very few fathers who have. Must knowledge and guilt always go hand in hand in women’s souls?

There can be few stories of maternal guilt as searing and painful to read as Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, a key source for Mumford’s book, *Ethics at the Beginning of Life*. Nevertheless, I find myself wondering if it is valid to invoke a work of fiction by an author who never intends to have children as “maternal testimony.” Can phenomenology rely on fiction as a source, given Mumford’s argument quoted at the top of this essay, that “any investigation of human emergence will be distinctly phenomenological only to the extent that it is committed to describe phenomena from the first-person point of view”? Does the fictionalized voice count as a first-person point of view, as evidence of human experience and practice upon which to build a theory?

Perhaps only the childless woman or the male academic can safely write about birth. Perhaps only fiction will do to bridge the gap between raw experience and the maternal self. Maybe the question should be, as Paul Ricoeur would ask, who narrates the story of my life? Can we fictionalize that which has yet to be described, yet to be narrated by the bodies that live it? Our western culture has been shaped by a birth narrative, but tradition would have us believe that the child was conceived through a virgin’s ear and emerged without rupturing her hymen. That is not a good foundation on which to develop an epistemology of the maternal body.

*Shaming and Naming*

Shriver ventriloquizes the maternal voice well – too well perhaps. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is, as Mumford observes, “a very authored work, a deliberately
deflating, polemical, perhaps exaggerated account of pregnancy."

For Mumford, "we cannot afford to ignore its significance," but I am not convinced of its phenomenological significance as a guide to maternal language and life.

I try to remember if I ever walked down a street thinking, "Every one of these people came from a woman’s cunt." Do we women really talk like that, even inside our own heads, even when we are deliberately using the crudest of words? What does that desire to be crude signify in a maternal voice? Is this not once again allowing ourselves to be positioned by the male gaze, to be colonized by the linguistic empires of others?

The Oxford English Dictionary offers a wide range of meanings for “cunt” and its derivatives. A cunt can mean “a slut,” “a general term of abuse for a woman,” “a term of abuse for a man,” “a despised, unpleasant, or annoying place, thing, or task.” “Cuntish” means “Nasty, highly unpleasant; extremely annoying.” A “cunt-beaten” man is “sexually impotent.” A “cunt-bitten” man is “infected with venereal disease; syphilitic; also as a term of abuse.” A cunt lapper is “(a) a person who performs cunnilinguus; (b) a lesbian: (c) a despicable or highly annoying person.” In 2014, new variations were added to the dictionary: “cunted,” “cunting,” “cuntish” and “cunty.”

As Luce Irigaray observes, “The only words we have for women’s sexuality are filthy, mutilating words. Consequently, the feelings associated with women’s sexuality will be anxiety, phobia, disgust, and the haunting fear of castration.”

In modernity it seems that it is only possible to speak about the female body in the language of scientific or sexual appropriation, in words that reveal the diremption of the modern masculine soul between the abstract rationalism of the scientific mind and the violent repression of the body’s vulnerability and desire. I wonder why the “cunt” never had the honour of being named after the man who “discovered” it, like all those other body parts I have already mentioned. Is it because, as Irigaray suggests, the “two lips” of the female body challenge the phallic singularity and individualism of the masculine subject, the “one of form” that is threatened by “the contact of at least two?”

A woman’s sex organs cannot be counted – like the pregnant body, they are neither one nor two but suggest some indecipherable relationship that, suggests Irigaray, might even be Trinitarian. And if a thing has no number, how can it have a name?

A woman’s reproductive organs are appropriated for sexual voyeurism and abuse by being dissociated from birth. They are purged of meconium and colostrum and shit and blood and mucous and milk and slime and all that bodily “stuff,” splinters of bone and fragments of flesh that cling to the underside of language and threaten to drag it down into silence and madness, into the womb/tomb of the other of the being who makes his home in the house of language and culture.

Feminists speak of reclaiming the word “cunt,” but can we not find a better word for that warm, moist enfoldling of lips and hair and ripened flesh when the labia swell and darken in pregnancy and the vulva protrudes like a strange creature of the ocean depths? We do not come from a woman’s cunt. We come from a womb – our primal habitation of flesh and blood, gurgling and pulsing with watery life, pushing us into the world along the birth canal and out through a bleeding wound into the realm of language and light. For Irigaray, Plato’s cave is a metaphor for the man’s exit from the womb, his turning his back on body and nature to seek the abstraction of the pure source of light. The linguistic act is
always a betrayal of origins, a turning away from the womb. So Lacan tells us. Not surprising then that it is so hard to reattach words to that fleshy organ, to birth meaning out of the raw materials of the maternal flesh.

Yet we must find the words, if we are to emerge from the animal drives of our evolutionary origins in order to become the creatures of language and freedom that we are. I have little time for the appeal to experience in liberal feminist theology. All experience is mediated and interpreted, incorporated into a narrative borrowed more or less coherently from a community, a history and a tradition in order to make sense of a life. To the extent that we resist the narrative, we resist the consolations of tradition and the meanings it drapes over the silence of the void. But communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre and his disciples give too little thought to those lives of resistance that constitute the Ricoeurian refiguration of tradition around different, gendered paradigms of experience, suffering and hope. Academic communitarians are privileged stakeholders within the traditions they romanticize. They fail to ask what happens when the “dangerous memories” of forbidden histories rise to the surface of language, when our scavenging for meaning in the ruins of modernity leads to the unearthing of bodies concealed but not yet dead in the catacombs upon which we have erected our edifices of tradition.

What can one do about experiencing bodies that remain on the edges of language, that resist meaning, that communities and traditions deem “natural” and therefore beyond the scope of incorporation into culture and language? Confronted with women’s emergence from silence to speech, from nature to culture, men find themselves challenged to think the unthinkable, to master the final frontier, and they become frustrated with the impossibility of the task:

We see a pregnant woman and know that we once passed through those straits. But our curiosity thus aroused, we now find ourselves destined for frustration. For as soon as we try to investigate any further the beginning of our becoming we discover our way to be blocked.

Is this the limits of colonization, the sealed border that protects the indigent inhabitant of the womb and keeps the linguistic marauder at bay? Lives have meaning, but birth and death are on the threshold of meaning, fringing our lives with the otherness of silence and non-being. I am writing from my experience of birth, but I have yet to find words that would make grammar out of blood, sentences out of the primal birthing grunts and infant howls of the creature made in the image of God.

**Philosophizing Birth**

Perhaps I lack the language because, as Mary O’Brien writes in her Hegelian-Marxist quest for a philosophy of birth, the childbearing function has been regarded as natural and inevitable, and therefore exempt from historical and philosophical analysis. It is either seen as a timeless truth of female existence that removes women from the sphere of politics and public life and assigns them to a domesticated maternal role to which they are naturally suited (for Hegel — vegetatively suited), or it is seen as a trap from which women must be liberated in order to achieve equal participation to men in social life. As O’Brien observes:
Death has haunted the male philosophical imagination since Man the Thinker first glimmered into action, and in our own time has become the start reality which preoccupies existentialism, an untidy and passionately pessimistic body of thought in which lonely and heroic man attempts to defy the absurdity of the void which houses his consciousness and his world. The inevitability and necessity of these biological events has quite clearly not exempted them from historical force and theoretical significance. We have no comparable philosophies of birth.\textsuperscript{35}

O’Brien continues:

We cannot analyse reproduction from the standpoint of any existing theory. The theories themselves are products of male-stream thought, and are among the objects to be explained, but embedded somewhere in the theory and practice of male supremacy are the seeds of its growth and inevitable decay. What we must therefore do is turn to the fundamental biological process in which reproductive relations are grounded and subject it to analysis from a female perspective. ... There is no philosophy of birth, and yet it is of birth that we must theorize.\textsuperscript{36}

I confess that I envy those three erudite men on the back cover of Mumford’s book. I admire their scholarly ability to recognize and applaud a philosophical theology of birth, when we women still appear to be searching for the words to say what we mean and mean what we say when we speak of the creatures we bear:

[T]he relation sways in gloom, beneath the level of speech. Creatures live and move over against us, but cannot come to us, and when we address them as Thou, our words cling to the threshold of speech.\textsuperscript{37}

I have in my mind an image of the embryo, the umbilical cord attached to the placenta, the small blob of life swaying in the fluids of the uterine sac as a coral polyp sways in the ocean, attached to the reef but dancing to the rhythms of the tides.

In search of mediation, in this search for a language capable of mediating between the birthing flesh and the maternal self, perhaps the placenta has something to offer. It is after all an exquisite organ of mediation, one that has no likeness in any other natural phenomenon.

**PLACENTAL MEDIATIONS (BIRTH TWO)**

Eight years after that first birth in Nairobi, I am pregnant with my fourth child and living in Harare, Zimbabwe. My pregnancy involves many emergencies. I have a condition known as placenta praevia, in which the placenta covers the opening of the uterus.

The placenta is a miracle and a parasite, even when it grows where it should and functions as it should. Hrdy cites research into the placenta, which seeks to explain its voracious plundering of the maternal body. Its development
is activated by the father’s genome, and its complex chemical mechanisms and nurturing functions ensure that his child thrives by commandeering the mother’s bodily substance and her attention, even at the expense of her other children who may not be his. The placenta has been described as “a ruthless parasitic organ existing solely for the maintenance and protection of the fetus, perhaps too often to the disregard of the maternal organism.” An article in The New York Times speaks of it in the language of an invasive military force:

   Every minute, about 20 percent of the mother’s blood supply flows through the placenta. The front line of the invasion is a cell called a trophoblast, from the outer layer of the embryo. Early in pregnancy, these cells multiply explosively and stream out like a column of soldiers.

This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you. A mother might murmur such words to the child in her womb, but ours is a culture of forgetfulness or resistance when it comes to bodies lovingly and willingly shared. Today all is invasion and competition and power. One can kill for vengeance but one must not die for love. All is violence and violation, a struggle for survival or death, as Darwinism overflows the boundaries of established scientific hypothesis to become the explanatory narrative that shapes our economics, our politics, our sex lives, and now even our placental relationships.

The placenta is a wonder. It has analgesic properties, which might explain why many mammals eat it shortly after giving birth. It soothes the pain and enables the mother to tend to her young. Might we think of the Holy Spirit as a placenta, mediating between God the Father and God the Son, soothing the sorrow of love in a placental economy of divine subsistence?

Placental Theologies

David Cunningham appeals to placental imagery in seeking to explain the Trinity. Here is what he writes:

   In a pregnancy, a woman must go forth from herself and become other to herself twice: first in conception, and again in the production of an organ of mediation between mother and child (the placenta). If we were to name the relations that thereby develop within pregnancy, we might call them “motherhood” and “childhood”; and the production of the placenta creates an additional relation of (let us say) “mediating.” Note that these relations are not simply “among” three separate entities; the mother, child and placenta are all interconnected and, at times, not even clearly distinguishable from one another.

The more I reflect on this, the more puzzled I become. I confess I never found it difficult for a moment to distinguish myself from the placenta, even if the embryo made a more complex claim upon my identity. I don’t think I even considered the existence of the placenta, until it threatened my life.

   Is the mother a biological organism on a par with the placenta and the zygote? Did I “go forth” from myself when I conceived? My fourth child was conceived while I was using contraception, and since I bled throughout the
pregnancy, I was four months pregnant before I discovered the cause of my weight gain. I had conceived the same month that my father died. I attributed my irregular bleeding and darkened moods to the process of sorrow, mourning and regret. In this case, the newborn truly did appear “in a state of radical hiddenness, ... its presence ... not necessarily marked by heightened emotion.”

Conception is the most hidden as well as the most momentous of events. There might well be a solitary successful sperm burrowing towards an ovum in the post-coital unknowing of the woman’s body, but she knows nothing about it. There might be an awesome pilgrimage of life going on inside her, as the fertilized ovum makes its journey through the fallopian tubes to embed itself in the wall of the uterus, but how can a woman knowingly “going forth” when she is in such oblivion? As Julia Kristeva writes:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.”

A woman goes forth and becomes other to herself when she accepts maternal responsibility for the newone. This is the transition to maternal human becoming. It is the gradual process that unfolds as she agrees to offer the child a space to grow and become, and to nurture that becoming through the vulnerabilities of infancy and childhood and beyond. The “going forth” is an act of desire and will, not an act of biology.

Not every woman who conceives a zygote enters into the pact that will make her a mother. As Martha Rosenberg observes, “Pregnancy is a sign that resignifies a woman as a mother. Facing this event, there is a social interpellation before which she has to decide (and to do it bringing into play her values and fantasies.)” In other words, the “going forth” of a woman into the socialized reality of the maternal relationship with all its expectations, fantasies and transformations of the self is also the transformation of the conception into the conceptual. A woman who has conceived must now conceive of herself as a mother. A mother is conceived when a woman accepts the one who is to be born. If we want to use this as a metaphor for trinitarian processions, we might well speak as Thomas Aquinas does of the relationality of the language of Father and Son in maternal terms of gestation and birth. However, the Holy Spirit is an active, dynamic person within this triangulated relationship, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son. The placenta, on the other hand, is a biological organism that provides temporary mediation in the form of physical nourishment. It is not in any sense even remotely analogous to the Holy Spirit, for it is completely redundant in terms of the inter-personal giving and receiving of love that will gradually become part of the reciprocal relationship between the mother and the child as they journey through life.

So how on earth can a woman go forth in the production of a placenta, any more than a person might go forth in the production of a tooth or a tumour? The biological process of placental formation might entail an organic coupling of the no-longer-self and the not-yet-other, but the going forth of mother and child will be forged in the afterbirth, in the long post-placental transition from
animality to humanity. This is the process of learning to love and let go, to bond and to liberate, to weave an umbilical cord of attentive solicitude that must be light, invisible, airy, indestructible, capable of stretching from the placental riches of the maternal heart all the way round the world and back again without the growing child ever feeling its tug. Cunningham’s conceptual and placental metaphors fail on many levels.

**Consuming Mothers**

Of course, academic theologians are not always the best sources for inspiration and divine guidance. While researching this essay, I discovered a Christian blogger ("Mennoknight") who admits that, when he got married, "I learned just how many mysteries of femininity are systematically hidden from guys."[46] Mennoknight seeks answers to all life’s questions in the Bible, but was perturbed when his pregnant wife suggested they might eat the placenta when the baby was born. He went to the Bible to find an answer (what would Jesus do?), but the Bible has little to say on the subject of eating placentas. However, after much prayer and searching he hit upon Deuteronomy 28: 56-57:

> The most gentle and sensitive woman among you – so sensitive and gentle that she would not venture to touch the ground with the sole of her foot – will begrudge the husband she loves and her own son or daughter the afterbirth from her womb and the children she bears. For in her dire need she intends to eat them secretly because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege of your cities.

Mennoknight has his answer: “Why would I wilfully choose to participate in an action that is the mark of being on the receiving end of a divine curse?” (Let’s gloss over St Paul’s claim that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” [Gal. 3:13, NIV]. It seems Mennoknight’s biblical quest did not stretch that far.)

That quotation from Deuteronomy tells it like it is. Even the most gentle and sensitive woman might be driven by the instinct of self-preservation, and the maternal instinct does not necessarily override that. There is no guarantee that women will put husbands and children before themselves when starvation and death approach. There is nothing new about abortion and infanticide. From Medea and the woman of Deuteronomy to modern women who abort their unborn children, women fail to be the all that men expect them to be, in those theological and philosophical romances where no shadow of self-preservation falls across the vocation of motherhood. To quote Rosenberg again,

> The idea of the mother-child relationship as a self sufficient functional unit is a social myth corresponding to a typical phantasy of daughters and sons. Many women abort when they realize its impossibility. The social order in which they get pregnant prevents them from carrying this process to term. They cannot adopt their pregnancy.

There is a tragic dimension to pregnancy and motherhood. The maternal is always sacrificial. For the pregnant woman who cannot or will not accept the
maternal role, she must pay for the preservation of her own selfhood with the sacrifice of her child. For the woman who becomes a mother, she must accept the sacrifice of whatever individuality she has managed to forge in the transition to adulthood – already a complex challenge for those raised to see themselves only in the context of self-sacrificing femininity – for she must now forever be more than one and less than two. Her womb might surrender the physical body of the child, but her heart will not so willingly surrender its burden of suffering and love.

To conceive is to set out upon a *via dolorosa*, no matter how much one longs for the child. How does it then help us to acknowledge that we are “facing a choice between an irreducibly religious model of recognition (ascribing rights to human beings regardless of the abilities they happen to exhibit at any given moment) and Nietzsche’s power-play according to which only those strong enough to claim rights are to be ascribed to them?”

We might with Mumford accept that pregnancy, like war, sometimes entails a choice of self-defence that permits the taking of innocent life, but what about those indecipherable areas where the hope of new life washes up against the tragedy and failure of the human condition, where the woman cannot or will not give birth to the mother she is about to become? What laws, what religious prohibitions, what authoritative theological frameworks, must be put in place to force this choice, to make the reluctant woman bear the child she would otherwise abort? What “irreducibly religious model of recognition” helps us in the face of the vulnerability and fear of the pregnant young girl raped by her father, or the defiant autonomy of the modern secular feminist who asserts her right to choose because she is the owner of her body? At this complex interface of life and death, of natality and mortality, of love and loss, of freedom and sacrifice, there are no clear answers, no philosophical arguments adequate to the task of discernment.

*Dying Mothers*

As my unborn child grows and the placenta grows with him, I become prone to sudden and violent haemorrhages. The placenta peels away from the wall of the uterus, severing the blood vessels delivering nourishment to my baby boy. I am confined to a hospital bed for the last weeks of pregnancy. Finally, I am rushed to the operating theatre with what feels like arterial blood pumping from my vagina. I hear the doctor tell my husband that they are doing a caesarean to save the mother. They might not be able to save the baby. Such are the choices we sometimes face.

I am more and more doubtful about some aspects of the feminist critique of patriarchy, which focuses primarily on fear, revulsion and control associated with the maternal body, its potent functions and deadly associations. I have already shown that such claims are justified by the language men use, but that is only one side of the story. A penis does not make a patriarch, and fear is not always a sign of revulsion. It is also an expression of love and vulnerability, of the vulnerability that is love. Maybe men fear the maternal body, but is it not also the terror born of love, the terror that the unborn child will kill its mother, the beloved, in the process of being born, the guilt of those who caused their mothers to suffer and maybe to die by being born? “We are doing this to save your wife.”
We might not save the child.” What if they save neither? What if they save the child and not the mother? Who must he then become?

Tolstoy tells it well in *Anna Karenina*, with its eloquent juxtapositions of birth and death. The peasant Levin recalls the death of his brother a year earlier, when he hears that his beloved wife Kitty is in labour:

> All he knew and felt was that what was happening was what had happened nearly a year before in the hotel of the country town at the deathbed of his brother Nikolay. But that had been grief – this was joy. Yet that grief and this joy were alike outside all the ordinary conditions of life; they were loop-holes, as it were, in that ordinary life through which there came glimpses of something sublime. And in the contemplation of this sublime something the soul was exalted to inconceivable heights of which it had before had no conception, while reason lagged behind, unable to keep up with it.\(^{48}\)

Reason has always lagged behind, unable to keep up.

Two births so far, though chronologically they were my first and my last, with two in between. Two occasions in my life when, despite being born and brought up in Africa, the privilege of my colonial birth gave me access to the kind of medical care that prevented me from becoming one more statistic, one more African woman who did not make it.

800 maternal deaths every day. That is the equivalent of two jumbo jets crashing every day, but these are poor women. Some of them make their last journeys in wheelbarrows and donkey carts, jostling over rugged paths too late to seek the medical attention they need. They matter less in the eyes of the world than those who can afford to travel in planes and very occasionally die as a result. What if we put as many resources into fighting maternal mortality as we have put into airport security? These poor women do not yet count in Pope Francis’s Church of the poor. It might have “the smell of the sheep,”\(^{49}\) but it has yet to acquire the stench of an infected womb resulting from a botched abortion.

Sometimes, the ones who do not survive the birthing process may be the lucky ones. In their book, *Half the Sky*, Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn point out that the majority of maternal deaths occur in the third trimester, as a result of lack of access to emergency obstetric care.\(^{50}\) Here is what happens to a woman when she has an obstructed labour like I did, but with no medical attention – a process that can last for up to a week:

The baby usually dies after the first few days, but is only born much later, when the mother’s body has been so injured by the unrelenting pressure of the child’s body pushing against hers – resulting in a good bit of her living skin and muscle and tissue dying from lack of blood flow – that her body rips apart and frees the dead child at long last. In the best case scenario, the tear opens her bladder and she is left incontinent, unable to contain a constant flow of urine. In the worst case, the tear opens not only her bladder but her rectum, and both feces and urine spill forth from her body in a relentless, unstoppable flow that – without surgical repair – will last for the rest of her life. Some women also have nerve damage and find themselves unable to move their legs properly, or at all. So a child born
dead, grievous untended internal injuries, filth, stench, perhaps even paralysis. Of course, this is only the beginning: who would live with such a creature? She smells, she cannot keep herself clean or dry, she is not fit for society and barely fit for work. Her husband leaves her. The other women of the village shun her. Her child is dead.\footnote{51}

We might take Mumford’s quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus and apply it not to the prenatal newone but to the ravaged mother:

\begin{quote}
\textit{a terrible, pitiable sight, unbelievable to anyone who did not know it was true: human beings both dead and alive, mutilated in most parts of her body, scarcely recognisable either for who she is or where she comes from. ... She has been made in the image of God in the same way you and I have.}\footnote{52}
\end{quote}

God too is torn apart in childbirth – but I shall come to that later.

\begin{quote}
“One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain,” writes Kristeva.\footnote{53} Natural childbirth is not the fantasy of birthing baths and home deliveries that it is made out to be by privileged western women. It is a struggle against the forces of death, and the mother and child do not always win.

I thank God that science has denatured birth. No wonder in medieval devotion and art, Saint Margaret of Antioch, delivered from the belly of a dragon, is the patron saint of women in childbirth. Mothers are birthed through the consuming fire of the dragon’s breath.

But not every birth is so closely associated with death. Sometimes, a birth is indeed a defiant affirmation of life that sends death running for cover to bide his time in the shadows of the passing years.
\end{quote}

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS (BIRTH THREE)

My daughter is being born. This time, we are living in Wales. She is my second child. I am riding the crest of a wave of pain, I am surfing the surface of my suffering. When it becomes too intense, I cling to the midwife and burrow my face in her neck. Thirty six years later, I can still close my eyes and remember the smell of her perfume. Sometimes I wonder, is it possible that my mother wore the same perfume, back when I can’t remember, when I clung to her, wanting more of her than any mother can give? The midwife is mothering me, and I cling to her and breathe in the smell of her.

The other midwife and my husband are cheering me on. Push. Push. We can see the head. Push!

Shut the fuck up. What do you think I am? A Derby day horse that you have a bet on? I can do this. My daughter and I can do it.

\textit{Umbilical connections}

I know she is a daughter – we have entered the era of the ultrasound. Yet here is another vivid memory: the moment they pull her up between my legs in all the mire of birth and tell me, “It’s a girl!”, I think, “No it’s not – it’s a boy.”
The umbilical cord snakes between her legs, giving a fleeting impression of a penis. Later, in my years of studying Lacan, I will discover that the phallus is the opposite of the umbilical cord – one connects, the other severs. One allows for the flow of maternal life into the dependent child, the other buys the child’s independence and paternal loyalty by cutting off that fluidity of the maternal. Lacan calls it castration. Why not call it the cutting of the umbilical cord – not a metaphor that inevitably brings to mind the phallus and its masked power, but a severance and a separation that is the condition for being born, for being free, for flourishing as other than the mother who bore us?

My daughter was born without knives or scissors, on a bright May morning in the Welsh valleys, with little blood and only as much pain as such an occasion deserves. Human greatness – the greatness of being born into humanity – demands and merits pain, though God knows why. Maybe we need to remember Simone Weil’s distinction between suffering and affliction. The former is creative and nurtures growth and enlightenment, the latter sets out to destroy the human within us. Affliction is the condition of people in concentration camps. It is the condition of women with fistulas. I suffered when I gave birth to my children, but I have never been afflicted.

Catholic doctrine teaches that Mary suffered no pain in childbirth, and that she remained a virgin before, during and after childbirth. The term ever-virgin (αιεπαρθένος) is one of the earliest used in the emergent Marian devotion of the ante-Nicene Church. For modern feminists, this bloodless, painless virginal birth is an affront to women, seen as yet another example of the Catholic hierarchy’s attempt to suppress and control female sexuality and the bodily processes that go with it.

Perhaps the virgin birth is an expression of that male fantasy to which Mumford refers, that enduring attempt to transcend and deny the raw fact that we all enter the world through the birth canal by way of a woman’s vagina, coated in vernix, squashed with the pressure of her pelvis, born in the blood and water that flow from her womb. Mumford refers to the indignation of Pliny the Elder, writing in his Natural History of the humiliation of birth and infant dependency:

But man alone on the day of his birth Nature casts away naked on the naked ground, to burst at once into wailing and weeping, and none among all the animals is more prone to tears, and that immediately at the very beginning of life … This initiation into the light is followed by a period of bondage such as befalls not even the animals bred in our midst, fettering all his limbs; and thus when successfully born he lies with hands and feet in shackles, weeping – the animal that is to lord it over all the rest.

Early Christian thinkers understood this philosophical revulsion over maternal origins. They made it part of the glorious scandal of the divinity of Christ that he was born of a woman – his divinity attested to by Mary’s virginity, his humanity attested to by Mary’s motherhood.

Against the abstract perfection of the Greek divine, protected from and insulated against the corruption of the flesh associated with the maternal body and death, Christianity worshipped a God born of a woman and crucified on a
cross. Augustine beautifully expresses the challenge that the incarnation posed to abstract philosophical concepts of divinity and truth:

Truth has sprung from the earth, and Justice has looked forth from heaven (Ps 84:12). Truth, which is the bosom of the Father (Jn 1:18), has sprung from the earth, in order also to be in the bosom of his mother. Truth, by which the world is held together, has sprung from the earth, in order to be carried in a woman’s arms. Truth, on which the bliss of the angels is incorruptibly nourished, has sprung from the earth, in order to be suckled at breasts of flesh. Truth, which heaven is not big enough to hold, has sprung from the earth, in order to be placed in a manger. 56

In “On the Flesh of Christ,” Tertullian refutes Marcion and others who would deny the reality of the incarnation, by giving a visceral account of Christ’s birth that is unique among surviving writings on Mary’s maternity. Tertullian argues that “there is no nativity without flesh, and no flesh without nativity.” 57

Come now, beginning from the nativity itself, declaim against the uncleanness of the generative elements within the womb, the filthy concretion of fluid and blood, of the growth of the flesh for nine months long out of that very mire. Describe the womb as it enlarges from day to day, – heavy, troublesome, restless even in sleep, changeful in its feelings of dislike and desire. Inveigh now likewise against the shame itself of a woman in travail, which, however, ought rather to be honoured in consideration of that peril, or to be held sacred in respect of (the mystery of) nature. Of course you are horrified also at the infant, which is shed into life with the embarrassments which accompany it from the womb; you likewise, of course, loathe it even after it is washed, when it is dressed out in its swaddling-clothes, graced with repeated anointing, smiled on with nurse’s fawns. This reverend course of nature, you, O Marcion, (are pleased to) spit upon; and yet, in what way you were born? You detest a human being at his birth; then after what fashion do you love anybody? ... Well, then, loving man [Christ] loved his nativity also, and his flesh as well. 58

Tertullian’s description has long been overlaid by more ascetic and bloodless version of the divine birth. However, here I want to suggest – against Tertullian though not without appreciating his description – that there is theological coherence to the doctrine of the virgin birth, if we understand that Eve/Mary constitute the existential and eschatological dimensions of womanhood.

As the first woman of the new creation in Christ, Mary does not suffer the agonies of childbirth. Christ does no violence to any body, least of all to the maternal body that bore him into the world. Yet he does take all the world’s violence into his own body on Calvary, and it is there that we must look to see the redemption and transformation of birth. I shall return to that.

Maternal Genealogies
The Virgin herself is conceived immaculately – without sin – but not without sex between her apocryphal parents, Joachim and Anne or Anna. The second century text, *The Protevangelium of James*, tells of the birth of the Virgin Mary to her mother Saint Anne:

> And her months were fulfilled, and in the ninth month Anna brought forth. And she said to the midwife: What have I brought forth? And she said: A girl. And said Anna: My soul has been magnified this day. And she laid her down. And the days having been fulfilled, Anna was purified, and gave the breast to the child, and called her name Mary.59

A mother rejoices over the birth of a daughter. A mother names her daughter. Adam's power to name is undone in this maternal genealogy of rejoicing and naming. Daughters are usually a reason for lamenting when they are born into a world that welcomes only sons. Is this the first moment of female redemption, when the Virgin's mother welcomes her daughter into the world?

When my grandson was born, I discovered a new bond with Saint Anne, God's grandmother. I wrote a poem, imagining her waiting through the long night of holy birth:

> Were you awake
> praying
> through the wintry night
> for your daughter
> giving birth
> to pain?
> Did a refrain
> of the night she was born
> play in your memory –
> your heart’s delight,
> your mystery,
> your star of the sea?
> Did you dream
> of love’s rebirth,
> of earth redeemed
> and God’s delight
> being born for us
> that starry night?
> Did you arise with
> with the rising sun, and
> seeing the lily
> turn her face
> to the dawn, know
> that the child was born?

There is another birthing passage that tells of the birth of a daughter, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The fugitive slave Sethe gives birth in a leaky boat fleeing from captivity, assisted by Amy, a young white woman. After the baby is safely
and bloodily born, “Amy wrapped her skirt around it and the wet sticky women clambered ashore to see what, indeed, God had in mind.” The story continues:

Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river’s edge when the sunshots are low and drained. Often they are mistook for insects – but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe that each one has one – will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps, than the spore itself.

On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn’t care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well. A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws – a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair – wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no pateroller came and no preacher. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well.

In the unfolding of Sethe’s story, that birth is a luminous and thwarted epiphany – a moment of futurity, a gift of hope that the world refuses to allow space to grow and to flourish.

Sometimes a birth can be gentle and lovely, as the birth of my daughter was gentle and lovely. But birth is not about flourishing. Birth is that which a mother and child must endure in order to flourish beyond the trauma. Only if we can incorporate the trauma into the living can we hope to flourish. Birth must be reconciled with death, death must yield to a second birth, if we are to flourish. Feminist theorists such as Irigaray risk inverting but thereby reinforcing the same old dualisms when they assert the primacy of birth over death, fecundity over sacrifice. In the midst of birth we are in death, and every birthing encompasses a dying. To give birth is to make a blood sacrifice, a sacrifice of one’s own blood. It is to say, “This is my body, this is my blood, given for you.”

We are promised that every dying will indeed become a birthing into heaven. We must take that on trust. It is the shape of our hope, which is nothing at all like optimism. Hope is the capacity to discern love’s eternity in the midst of mortality and finitude. Hope is God’s Christmas gift to humankind.

REDEEMING BIRTH (BIRTH FOUR)

My second son, my third child, is being born in Harare on Boxing Day. Christmas night is a night of gentle labouring after that day when we celebrate the one whose birth will one day conquer death.

Joy to the world. The consultant wants to give me an injection to speed up the birth. I’m taking up too much of his time on a bank holiday. Of course he doesn’t say that. He pretends I need it. I know I don’t. I refuse and send him away.
I don't need him. The midwife is enough. I sense her stealthy delight in what I am doing, in the anarchic furies of birth.

I am a wealthy white woman in Africa. Yes, by now it’s postcolonial Africa, but sometimes that just means more of the same without the softening effects of colonial paternalism. This is a private hospital. The white consultant is well-paid. The African midwife is probably not, though I never thought to ask. But she likes the fact that I have told him to leave me alone. She and I will do this together. I am reminded now of that passage from Toni Morrison. There was nothing to disturb that midwife and I in our work, so we did it appropriately and we did it well.

**Maternal Kenosis**

I am naked. Huge belly. Ripe breasts. I suck in life’s energy and bear down on the world to come. I am a force of nature. My son is born to maternal cries of joy. A model pregnancy, a model birth, and a model baby. Sometimes, just sometimes, it all comes together.

Birth can be orgasmic as well as kenotic. Male theologians have long posited an analogical relationship between divine kenosis and male orgasm. We can trace this back to the copulative philosophical relationship between inseminating form and receptive matter. Long after that has become scientifically anachronistic, the male theological establishment is still reluctant to let go of its ejaculatory intellectual wanks, its *logoi spermatikoi*, as expressive of divine initiative. Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses it more explicitly than most when he asks, ‘What else is his eucharist but, at a higher level, an endless act of fruitful outpouring of his own flesh, such as a man can only achieve for a moment with a limited organ of his own body?’

Never having directly experienced a male orgasm myself, I am willing to grant that it might feel like a cosmically kenotic experience, an emptying out of one’s very being into the voracious darkness of the female flesh. That is certainly how von Balthasar describes it, in a chapter titled “Conquest of the Bride” in his book *Heart of the Matter*, where he indulges in a lurid sado-masochistic fantasy of the wedding night between Christ and the Church as a metaphor for the incarnation:

I surrendered to the temptation of … delivering myself up to the obscure chaos of a body, of plunging below the shiny surface of the flesh; the temptation of passing over into this world – this simmering darkness, opposed to the Father’s light. … I dared to enter the body of my Church, the deadly body which you are … But I have defeated you through weakness and my Spirit has overpowered my unruly and recalcitrant flesh. (Never has woman made more desperate resistance!)^6^3

Here is the masculine theological imaginary, reversing the process of birth, individuation and separation, undoing the purity and rationality of form, to plunge into the bloody chaos of the body from which he came, the body that provided him with his first home and birthed him into life. He goes there in the name of Christ with murderous intent – to conquer that body once and for all, to
lay claim to it, overpower it and defeat it, to end forever its viscous capacity to swamp the light of the Father with its fleshy seductions.

Not all theological fantasies move in this direction of the flesh. If for von Balthasar the Eucharistic celebration of the incarnation seems to become a kenotic sex act of violence, rape and conquest, for many of the Catholic Church’s bishops it is rather an escape out of the messy materiality of being to an eternal transcendence of spirit. For example, in a 2004 document produced by the Synod of Bishops, “The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church,” we find a quotation from John Chrysostom about the Eucharist:

> For when you see the Lord sacrificed, laid upon the altar, and the priest standing and praying over the victim, and all the worshippers empurpled with that precious blood, can you then think that you are still among men, and standing upon the earth? Are you not, on the contrary, straightway translated to heaven, and casting out every carnal thought from the soul, do you not, with disembodied spirit and pure reason, contemplate the things which are in heaven?”

Kenosis, birth, transcendence, disembodiment – the perpetual struggle of the masculine imaginary against the flesh – a struggle that takes the form of violent and bloody conquest or rationalized abstraction. Modern pornography and science have their sources deep in the Christian theological imagination in its ancient and modern forms. No wonder western culture is riven today between the idolatry of scientific rationalism on the one hand, and the bloody madness of military intervention and state-sanctioned violence on the other. Lacan has much wisdom to offer about the Kantian roots of this culture of sadism, but these are themselves rooted in a more ancient and enduring tradition.

Yet what of the kenosis of birth? What of the maternal body that empties itself in the giving of life, in the blood and water of childbirth?

*Sacramental Birth*

Let me end with a thought experiment that is not without precedence in the Catholic tradition, as I shall show. Instead of yielding to a banal liberalism that would simply reject these visceral metaphors of sex, birth and death as the symbolic and sacramental context for the incarnation and the Mass, let’s take them even further. Let’s go all the way, as we used to say when I was a teenager.

The sexual metaphor used in the context of the Mass is not inappropriate. It taps into that ancient tradition of the *logos spermatikos*, the inseminating Word, but behind that philosophical term there lurks a hidden and unacknowledged world of symbolic and sacramental associations with birth. For if on the cross there is some sense of an act of phallic insemination, must there not also be a vagina and a birth, if new life is to be born out of death?

There is a strange era in Christian art between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, in which Christ’s torso appears in the form of a phallus, in numerous crucifixes from this period. If we look more closely, we see that the wound in his side is spurting the body fluids of blood and water in the direction of his mother at the foot of the cross. The fluids that flow from Christ’s wound are birth fluids – water and blood flow from bodies in childbirth, not in death. The water
and blood symbolise baptismal rebirth and the Eucharist, and they also symbolise the birth of the Church from the side of the crucified Christ, as Eve was taken from the side of the sleeping Adam. Unless you are born again, you can never enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” Jesus tells Nicodemus.

Fascinated by these artistic evocations of divine fecundity, I probed further. I came across a number of vivid images of Christ’s wound, and it is surely intended to complete the symbolism of fertility – it is a vagina. On the cross, Christ impregnates his own body in order to give birth to the New Eve, the maternal Church in whose sacraments his body will henceforth become food for the life of the world.
Is this interpretation far-fetched? I suggest it is not, if we consider early and medieval writings on the crucifixion which use metaphors of both sexual consummation and childbirth. For example, Liz Herbert McAvoy analyzes Julian of Norwich’s (1342 – c.1416) meditations on the bleeding body of Christ in the context of her appeal to maternal metaphors. McAvoy writes:

Not only do both water and blood flow from Christ’s side during the Crucifixion, they flow also from the similarly opened body of the birthing mother. Just as the mother’s labour brings forth new life along with blood and amniotic fluid, so Christ through his labour on the cross and his exuding of blood and water gives birth to human redemption.69

These suggestions could be substantiated through closer engagement with studies of late medieval art and devotion.70 However, my purpose for invoking such ideas here is because they have powerful resonance with themes of fertility and birth, weaving the body of Christ into the most intimate aspects of female sacramental embodiment.

These prismatic images might lack logical coherence or might even seem Freudian to a modern mind – the death of Christ as both sexual consummation with and giving birth to the body of his bride, the Church. However, they are intended to draw the mind beyond rational conceptualization to contemplate the mystery of redemption. They function as all poetry, art and music do – to remind us that there is a knowing beyond knowledge, a language beyond speaking, a meaning beyond naming. To be Christian is to be twice born – to be birthed from the maternal womb into the world of men, and to be reincorporated into the maternal body of the Church through the wound in the side of the crucified Christ. This is a wound that opens into a plethora of meanings, undoing the power to name by the poetic playfulness of a mystical tradition that liberates the body from its encryption in systems of thought, and gives it back its dancing grace:

Among the most loaded tropes in the history of Christian mysticism is the wound that a lance opened in Christ’s side during the crucifixion. In this unlikely and at once so typically Catholic image, many of mysticism’s predominant themes converge. The wound in Christ’s side is a refuge; a nuptial bedchamber; a womb from which one is reborn into eternal life; a breast that nourishes, infuses the soul with grace, and provides erotic pleasure; a pair of lips that kisses ...71

AN OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSION

I have explored the trauma and the ambiguity as well as the joy of childbirth. If we are to talk about joy and flourishing, we must also talk about the sorrow and the sacrifice that constitute the wordless mystery of the human condition in its origins and endings. If childbirth is not to be the punishment born by women for the sin of Eve, then the suffering of birth must find redemption, must indeed become redemptive. Christ is born of a woman already redeemed, immaculately conceived, the New Eve, the first woman of the new creation who suffers neither
pain in childbirth nor domination in marriage. Yet of course Mary suffers, as every mother does, through the vulnerability of her child.

On Calvary, Mary sees the cost of her own redemption, the taking on of the wounds of birth in order that her own female flesh might be healed, redeemed and renewed. She participates in this redemption in an inversion of those theological fantasies of male disembodiment and female carnality. Christ is the carnal body, the one who bleeds and cries out and shits and dies as his body is torn apart in order that life might be born. The woman is the one who feels her spirit plunging into his flesh, her heart pierced through with the piercing of his body.

On the cross, Christ takes on the wounds of death and birth. His suffering body is a body that is lacerated by the torments of death and the torments of birth. This self-fecundating, polymorphous body redeems the human by experiencing in its own flesh the agony of dying and of birthing, becoming reborn as the maternal, nourishing body of the Church, becoming one flesh with the mother in a consummation of desire that goes far beyond the Freudian myth and the incest taboo.

What then does birth have to do with flourishing? To flourish is to be fully human. It is to manifest the glory of God in the fully alive person. But to be fully alive is to suffer and to have one’s suffering redeemed. We are born by way of sorrow and into sorrow. Suffering is not the opposite of joy but its condition for being. With Tolstoy, we must discover that the sorrow of death and the joy of birth are “alike outside all the ordinary conditions of life; they [are] loop-holes, as it were, in that ordinary life through which there [come] glimpses of something sublime.’

Only the sufferer can recognize joy. Our joy is fragile, our hope is elusive, we must weave meaning over the void but we must also plunge down into that void – womb, tomb, God – in order to become empty with the fullness of love. For once, Slavov Žižek gets it right. Here he is, commenting on 1 Corinthians 13:

> the point of the claim that even if I were to possess all knowledge, without love, I would be nothing, is not simply that with love, I am “something.” For in love, I also am a nothing, but as it were a Nothing humbly aware of itself, a Nothing paradoxically made rich through the very awareness of its lack. Only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love: the ultimate mystery of love is therefore that incompleteness is in a way higher than completion.

The fullness of our humanity is discovered in our being less than all, in the willing embrace of vulnerability and dependence, in the emptying of the individual self in order to experience the relational birthing of the maternal self, a Trinitarian relationality and interpersonal dependence of kenotic love.

Yet if we are to talk of birth and vulnerability, we must speak of the vulnerabilty of the maternal as well as the infant body, for the woman is not invincible in this process. There is a tragic dimension to birth, which needs not moral judgement and philosophical analysis, but the language of healing, compassion, redemption and renewal.

We must learn to speak better of birth and love, of birth and flourishing, of birth and tragedy, of birth and redemption, of that communal activity of
“allomothering” that breathes the spirit of altruism and interdependence into the evolving primate and graces human life with Trinitarian relationality. We must discover, to paraphrase Tolstoy, that in contemplation of this sublime something the soul is exalted to inconceivable heights of which it had before no conception, while reason lags behind, unable to keep up.

Maybe we must listen to the muffled cries of the birthing God, speaking through the words of Isaiah and struggling to be heard above the hubris of the men who speak on God’s behalf:

The Lord will march out like a champion, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies.

“For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.” (Is 42: 14-15, NIV)

Notes:

1 Miroslav Volf, letter to Tina Beattie, 23 March 2015.
2 James Mumford, Ethics at the Beginning of Life: A Phenomenological Critique (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). 29. I am grateful to James Mumford for his gracious response to and engagement with my paper, and for the many insights he offered in the course of our conversations about his own experience of becoming a father.
3 Biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) or the King James Version (KJV).
5 Ibid.
9 Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species (New York: Pantheon, 1999).
10 Ibid., 14.
15 Hrdy, Mother Nature, 538.
16 Leila Haddou, “Maternal mortality down 45% globally, but 33 women an hour are still dying,” in “Global Development Datablog,” The Guardian, Wednesday, 7 May, 2014, at


22 Lionel Shriver, We Need To Talk About Kevin (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2003).


24 Mumford, Ethics at the Beginning of Life, 29.


26 Mumford, Ethics at the Beginning of Life, 77.

27 Ibid.

28 Shriver, We Need To Talk About Kevin, 8, quoted in Mumford, Ethics at the Beginning of Life, 15. Mumford’s italics.


34 Mumford, Ethics at the Beginning of Life, 15.


36 Ibid., Kindle Loc. 1507 of 23407.


38 Hrdy, Mother Nature, 433.


40 See Hrdy, Mothers and Others, 215-7.


42 Mumford, Ethics at the Beginning of Life, 79.


45 For more on this, see Tina Beattie, Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void – a Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 61-70 and 343-63.

47 Mumford, Ethics at the Beginning of Life, 193.


50 See Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, Half the Sky: How to Change the World (London: Virago Press, 2010).


58 Ibid., 170-1.

59 For various translations and commentaries on the Protevangelium of James, see http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html.


61 Ibid., 99-100.


