



# Female Masochism and the Theology of the Cross<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE CROSS, ALWAYS CHRISTIANITY'S STARTING POINT, IS IN TROUBLE. ALREADY IN Paul's day, it seemed a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others. This is hardly a surprise; the grisly fact remains that the Romans used this instrument of torture and death thousands upon thousands of times to break resistance against the state. Yet theological interpretation speaks very differently; it sees in the cross a sign of God's love for humanity, a love so great that in the cross heaven dared to touch the earth even at its greatest depths.

The feminist perspective looks at the historical fact and sees the Roman history of patriarchal violence continued in the Christian theology of the cross. No loving God is at work here, but a despotic and bloodthirsty patriarch lusting after sacrifices. Only a sadomasochist could worship such a God: the Christians have their cross, but it crucifies the human soul.

## I. PSYCHOANALYZING THE PAST

By now, this controversy between a so-called traditional theology and a feminist theology, between a theological and psychological interpretation of the

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cross is well known. New to me, however, was the after-the-fact psychoanalytical diagnosis recently made public by Georg Baudler, professor of theology at the Theologische Hochschule in Aachen. In his view, the otherwise self-assured women of early cultures, which throughout the world were supposedly matrifoal, were subject to latent sadomasochistic tendencies. Otherwise, according to Baudler, it would be impossible to explain why these women became such easy prey for their cruel patriarchal conquerors. Such an astonishing retrospective argument gives occasion to question more broadly the careless use of psychoanalytical theories.

It is hard enough to retain historical honesty in the face of contemporary concerns while attempting to reconstruct the social and religious worlds of 5000 years ago. Although his admission is generally overlooked, Johann Jakob Bachofen, the chief exponent of a matriarchal feminism,<sup>2</sup> was at least open enough to concede that it would have been impossible for him to bring order out of so much highly divergent ancient material without employing a “basic idea” (*Grundidee*). Bachofen takes his unifying principle primarily from Aristotelian metaphysics, from which Aristotle himself derived his theory of the essential difference of the sexes—a theory that for centuries also defined Christian theology. Relating the female to material things and the male to immaterial or spiritual principles is the basis for Bachofen’s theory of human culture. A feminist reevaluation of Bachofen’s work changes nothing, for if one takes away his basic metaphysical idea, his entire reconstruction collapses. And that calls into question the whole notion of a matriarchal culture.

So, if it is hard to say anything at all historically tenable about *the* women of past millennia, how will it be possible to analyze their psyches? Those attempting to write history from a psychological perspective, to discover the internal psychological dynamics behind the words and deeds of long-dead people, have finally had to admit their methodological difficulties. The judgment of Joachim Scharfenberg, that a psychohistorical perspective says something about the observer but not the observed, may be too negative, but it still remains a worthy objection. Like psychoanalytical conversations among the living, such a conversation with those already dead is, at the very least, in need of material to be analyzed. Autobiographies are most useful here, but who knows anything at all about, say, the dreams of the women of pre-pharaonic Egypt?

Long before Sigmund Freud, Aristotle already claimed to have observed that women had little self-esteem, which he saw as confirmation of his theory of the inferiority of the female. The fact that the social conditions under which the women of his age were compelled to live might have played a role in what he observed did not fit into the theoretical framework of his metaphysics. And centuries later the same fact does not fit into the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis.

Like all theories, psychoanalysis aims at general statements rather than

<sup>2</sup>*Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen*, transl. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University, 1967).

merely statements that are individually or historically conditioned. Freud's theory of the oedipal conflict, for example, claims to be valid in the course of the childhood development of all people in all times. Only with such a presupposition would it make sense to assume that, say, the women of Minoan Crete (or anywhere else) had to come to terms with this conflict—even though the lack of data no longer allows us to determine whether or how they were able to do so. Thus, Sigmund Freud would have had no difficulty in speaking of masochism (the turning of sadism against one's own person) among the women of early matriarchal cultures, since he was convinced that masochism, which his analysis found more often among women than men, was natural to female existence.

But those who assert masochistic tendencies among ancient women do not thereby point to an actual reality; they do say something about their own contemporary theories. Thus, we must ask whether there is anything to the theory of female masochism.

A lack of self-worth or masochistic attitudes among women are certainly not new (we will not consider here the fact that men can also be affected by these things). Freud's concern was to discover the internal psychic reasons for the realities he observed; his result, stated briefly, was that the original anatomical structure of both sexes was male—which remains obvious in the boy (the penis) and in vestigial form in the girl (the clitoris). When children discover the difference between the sexes by seeing the external characteristics, girls suffer a shock: they have no penis. Thus, they envy the boys, lose their sadistic-aggressive tendencies, and develop feelings of inferiority; in the same experience, boys, however, find their aggressive self-confidence. Girls turn to their fathers in order to make up for their deficiencies—but without the "law of the father," which applies only to boys—and are further disappointed. Their feelings of inferiority are nourished, and the fear of not being loved henceforth determines their dependent relation to men. The relation to the other sex becomes associated with resentment; female identity is tied to the loss of maleness, which can only be regained through the birth of a son. If this poor creature is to have anything at all from life, nothing remains other than the masochistic enjoyment of her chain of frustrations. In short: while male masochism is pathological, the female form is the normal psychic consequence of the anatomical difference between the sexes.

## II. KAREN HORNEY ON GENDER DIFFERENCE

With impressive care and objectivity, Freud's pupil Karen Horney (1885-1952) was first to cast doubt on the truth of this theory.<sup>3</sup> Years later, at the assembly of the psychoanalytical society in New York in 1940, her credentials as a teaching analyst were rescinded because of this work. Several colleagues joined her dramatic departure, and one year later they founded their own Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis.

<sup>3</sup>For Horney's work in this area, see her collected essays in *Feminine Psychology*, ed. Harold Kellman (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967).

The first thing that occurred to Horney was the simple fact that Freud's theory of female development, whether correct or not, corresponded exactly to the childhood notions of the boy. Could this theory really be based on the kind of careful psychoanalytical work that was pledged to look objectively behind the scenes? To be blunt, the theory of innate female masochism stems not from Freud, the analyst, but from Sigmund, the boy. Karen Horney, still Freud's disciple, formulated her rebellious question much more gently: Is it not possible, she asked, that this remarkable agreement (between Freud's theory and a male worldview), with its lack of objective distance, might be the expression of a onesidedly male set of observations?

Pursuing her doubts, Horney discovered in her analyses of males an increasingly intense and frequent jealousy of pregnancy and childbirth. Women's penis envy apparently had its male equivalent. The correspondence was not complete, however: being shocked by the external anatomical differences between the sexes belongs to an early phase of childhood that can be overcome by fuller knowledge; but the realization that the male's participation in reproduction is forever less than that of the woman produces a more lasting insult. And Horney, the heretic, sees a connection between this frustration and the observed "greater need" of the man to devalue the woman.

Once again, it was the concrete material of particular analyses that raised for Karen Horney the next question, why female envy of the man is apparently more difficult to overcome than male envy of the woman. She could no longer answer this question with psychoanalytical categories, and thus made her next great unorthodox step, i.e., drawing into consideration the possibility of a social conditioning of psychic processes, including the actual discrimination against women in social life.

In a preliminary way, Freud had already made this move in his paper on "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness" (1908),<sup>4</sup> though, to be sure, without thereby correcting his own developmental theory. Karen Horney did make the correction by making reference to two socio-psychological realities: a male-dominated culture means on the one hand that men more intensively suppress their envy of women or act it out by deprecating the other sex; on the other hand, the same culture offers men much greater opportunity to master their envy through sublimation.

Thus, women's confused desire to be male does not result from early infantile penis envy but from the real limitations that interfere with their psychic dynamics; these limitations also keep alive within women all their early frustrations. In summary, Horney's theory is this: female masochism is not innate, but is culturally conditioned to the degree that women are prevented the development of an "appropriate aggressiveness." Such aggressiveness includes, for Horney, women's ability to work, which requires the following capacities: taking the initiative, laboring over an activity, seeing a thing through to the end, having success, insisting on

<sup>4</sup>In Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth, 1950) 76-99.

one's own rights, and finally recognizing one's own goals and having the ability to direct one's life accordingly.

### III. A MATRIARCHAL GOLDEN AGE?

If we follow Karen Horney, it will not be so clear why women in a matrifocal culture – which, according to Baudler, centered on the wife and mother – should have developed latent (sado)masochistic tendencies. One of the givens of scientific method is that theories are hypotheses of the researcher that still need to be confirmed by objective research – a notion which, however, often falls through the cracks, especially in matters related to women. Theories about the sexes demonstrate all too often a surprising amount of speculation; they are rightly called “head trips” – though more exercises of fantasy than of the intellect. The theory of an early, worldwide matriarchal culture remains tenable only so long as one can maintain a theory of sexual differentiation that is metaphysically grounded. Similarly, the theory of the easy success of the patriarchal conquerors holds only so long as one can maintain the theory that masochistic tendencies are innate to women. The theories depend on one another; if one is called into question, the other is no longer secure.

Those who propose theories, therefore, have the obligation of thoroughly testing any other theories they use in their explanations; at the very least they need to recognize that there is never one single uncontested theory. This may not help solve the present problem, but at least it will protect against the spread of half-truths and prejudices.

In thinking about the idea of matriarchal cultures, another theory must be considered at the same time. This early world is described as a time of total well-being, reminding one of a lost paradise; such a model is followed by both male and female feminist writers. The suffering of present existence is exchanged for what classically would have been called a transcendental reality. According to the literature, which by now could fill libraries, that early time was characterized by unity and wholeness, by the beautiful, the good, and the true – freedom and reason were still in harmony with nature; guilt, to say nothing of sin, were unknown; the coming together of the sexes was a cosmic and holy event; death was merely a gentle transition into sleep. Thus, we are in need of an explanation for why later and present reality no longer comport with this female paradise. Just as do the first chapters of Genesis, this perspective has its own appropriate “fall” story. If in Genesis 3 Satan is the author (and also the puzzle) of evil, in the matriarchal myth, warlike patriarchal tribes show up out of the blue, in no less puzzling a fashion, to lay waste to the female garden of Eden.

Whether thought of more in mythological or historical terms, in both cases the same thing is lost: the era of total well-being. We might once again employ psychology to gain a better understanding of such fantasies of wholeness – not, to be sure, to examine the inner selves of ancient Egyptian or Greek women, but rather to comprehend those who give themselves to this search for a female paradise.

First, it is interesting to note how fully the notions of a perfect world in the past match those held in early childhood, a time of an as-yet-undifferentiated experience of unlimited possibilities, where the self has not yet bumped up against the resistance of objective reality, the refusal of things to comply, or the fact of other people. What psychoanalysis calls childish narcissism finds expression in a sense of omnipotence, of being all in all, complete and undivided. Achieving an understanding of difference—between the self and objects, between the self and the other person—or coming to terms with the fact that not all things are possible does not happen without pain, the continued avoidance of which can result in agonizing feelings of loss, in unrealistic alternatives (if not omnipotence, then powerlessness), or in the escape into fantasies of perfect worlds without limitations.

The American psychoanalyst Irene Fast has related the development of sexual difference to object-relations theory; she sees in the child's discovery of anatomical difference the first narcissistic loss reaction for both sexes.<sup>5</sup> For all children, coming to terms with the fact "that some sex and gender characteristics, uncritically assumed for themselves, belong exclusively to persons of the other sex"<sup>6</sup> brings a first and decisive insight into their own limits. As their lives continue, children will always face the issue of dealing with experiences of limitation in such a way that they do not throw out their feelings of self-worth with the bath water of their failures. The physiological reality that there are two sexes provides one of our first personal tests. It could be freeing for people of both sexes to consider Fast's alternative theory of gender identity.

That fantasies of omnipotence and wholeness are dangerous because they hinder successful living is also an important element of the biblical story of the fall. In theological language, Adam and Eve's temptation, whoever is responsible, is called wanting to be like God: omniscient and immortal. To be sure, their expulsion from paradisiacal childhood and their loss of a childlike relation to God are described in rather brutal terms, but neither are experiences of limitation discovered during the ordinary course of human life easy to swallow.

#### IV. RETURN TO THE CROSS

Let us return again to the cross. Those who suffer from sadistic personality disorders or who turn these against themselves in masochism will no doubt perceive or interpret the cross as a symbol of the same thing. The church will certainly have to reckon with this possibility better than it now does. But different theoretical presuppositions will produce a different interpretation of the cross: it becomes a symbolic indicator of the painful truth that no one can escape guilt and death. This cross can then also be understood as a means of dispelling today's widespread denial of suffering and death. This denial is expressed, among other places, in those theories of a perfect world that, when passed off as historical fact, keep

<sup>5</sup>Irene Fast, *Gender Identity: A Differentiation Model* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic, 1984) 124-126.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

damaged women locked in their present suffering. Lamenting or yearning to reestablish a lost paradise merely perpetuates women's frustrations and blocks their energy.

There are things, however, that produce energy, and foremost among them is giving or making available to another person something the other does not possess. Christian faith sees such behavior, of which all humans are capable, caught up in the larger framework of God's giving to us: God, who walks the human path even into the arena of violence, gives everything to those who are anything but godly—he gives himself. But talk of such radical "wholeness" is possible only where God is allowed the podium. ⊕