

"ALSO A MOTHER"

Beyond Family Values

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More than a decade ago, in an essay written just prior to the November 1980 election of Ronald Reagan and the beginning of twelve years of Republican leadership in the White House, Rosemary Ruether observed, "'Pro-family' has become the rallying cry of a coalition of conservative movements that can be expected to have a significant effect upon the current election."¹ They did. And North American conflict over the family has continued to influence the political scene. In 1992 the Bush campaign tried to rally support behind so-called traditional family values and failed. Many people, it seemed, were ready to stake their claims on Hillary Rodham and Bill Clinton. Perhaps the sort of relationship that they modeled, despite the apparent ambiguities, was more real to more people than those that came before. Not surprisingly, her standing as a suitable first lady, mother, wife, and lawyer almost immediately became a hotly contested issue. However one reads these events, no current political agenda can avoid adopting some position in the "family values" discussion.

Of greater interest to me than political commentary is a theological analysis of the North American family debate in light of Ruether's very interesting concluding recommendation: the "*imperative need* vigorously to

This paper was delivered at a 1993 AAR session entitled, "Beyond Family Values." In the ensuing two years, the topic of the family has continued to gain public attention in politics, the media, and the academy. While I have made modest revisions to reflect some of that discussion, I have not revised in any thorough way, short of rewriting the entire paper. Parts of my AAR paper appeared in *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 49, no. 1 (Spring 1995), published by permission. My remarks also draw directly upon my book, *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, reprinted by permission), and indirectly upon a jointly authored book, *The American Family Debate and Religion* (Louisville: Westminster, forthcoming), funded by a major grant from the Lilly Endowment. I am grateful to Craig Dykstra, Dorothy Bass, Don Browning, and others for making the latter research possible.

¹ Rosemary Ruether, "Politics and the Family: Recapturing a Lost Issue," *Christianity and Crisis* 40 (September 29, 1980): 261.

contest the claims of the New Right to represent the interests of the 'family.'" Feminists and other progressives would do well to keep the issue of the family in our own camp, she argues, and not allow conservatives to accuse us of being against the values of families and children. In particular, "Spokespersons for reform need to make it clear that they have a more accurate analysis of the crises of the family than the right, an analysis that speaks more meaningfully to the real experience of ordinary people." She concludes, "The home is too important a place for all of us to give it away to the right."²

Among Christian feminist theologians, the discussion on the family has advanced beyond what Ruether proposes. In fact, feminist theologians have been talking about family values of a different sort for longer than many people would like to suppose, though, it hardly seems that anyone has heard or listened. In too many cases, extremely helpful theological reconstructions of families, work, love, and justice have simply not reached clergy and congregations, much less families and the workplace. In other cases, pastors assume alternative values of mutuality and gender justice, but fail to claim and articulate them forthrightly as alternative Christian family values.

In this essay, as in my recent book, *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemmas*, I attempt to work against these tendencies. In a brief first section, I extend the analysis of the dilemmas of families that Ruether hastily sketches at the conclusion of her essay and attempt to characterize some trends in the family debate. In hope of sparking further discussion, the bulk of the essay explores maternal knowing in feminist theology as a source for alternative values. Contrary to popular opinion based on the writings of a few secular feminists, feminist theology has seldom been antifamily, antimen, or antichildren. But it has failed to attend carefully to the problems of mothers, families, and children. Time has come to do so. An important thesis motivates me: feminist theology has important, untapped resources to contribute to the current family debate. Theological analysis must inform public, political discourse on the family and feminist theology must continue to assert itself as an important partner in this process. The better question, in my estimation, is not *who* is pro-family, but *which* pro-family values one adopts and *how* one adopts them. My work is an attempt to move beyond conventional "family values" by offering better alternative values and beliefs, values partially gleaned through the throes of the mothering experience itself.

The American Family Debate

Two distinct, often competing, uses of family-related statistics, social science, history, and theology have arisen recently in response to three

² *Ibid.*, 264 (emphasis added), 266.

significant trends or changes in family structure—the increase in out-of-wedlock births, the rise in divorce, and the increasing numbers of women in paid employment. One particular approach takes “large scale statistics and aggregate sociological trends” on high poverty rates for children, higher risks of alcohol use, depression, suicide, antisocial behavior, sexual activity, obesity, low college-entrance-exam scores, and so forth, and lays the problem at the doorstep of the family.³ These are “domestic problems,” argues Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “closely connected to family breakup.”⁴ There is a tone in Whitehead’s *Atlantic Monthly* essay, “Dan Quayle Was Right,” and much of the “family decline” literature that implicitly and sometimes explicitly blames parents for abandoning the home and children in a self-centered pursuit of their own happiness in the workplace and elsewhere. At least one reason her essay received so much attention is that Whitehead gave readers a straightforward answer to a complicated problem: the declining well-being of children is due to changes in family structure.

The family predicament in the analysis of Whitehead and others, such as David Popenoe, David Blankenhorn, and William Galston, is centered around the declining well-being of children and the rising individualism of adults.⁵ Since Whitehead and others often use the quasi-inclusive term *parents*, it is hard to tell whether they are talking to mothers, fathers, or both. But since paternal presence around children and the home has not changed as much as maternal presence in the last century, it is hard not to hear this as a message directed at women. For example, when Jean Bethke Elshtain justifiably argues that “Government and private-sector efforts should be geared to help parents remain home with their infants for an extended period after the birth of a child,” it is hard to imagine that such action would have any greater consequence for American men that when Sweden created parental leave policy only to discover that men seldom make use of it.⁶ Even if the analysis addresses fathers and does not scold mothers specifically, it is still true that when people declare something wrong with family life, women take these kinds of declarations most seriously and most personally.

Equally compelling statistics and observations can be rallied—this is where I locate myself—to support a contrasting contention that most

³ See Pamela Couture, “Single Parents and Poverty: A Challenge to Pastoral Theological Method,” in *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 59.

⁴ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “Dan Quayle Was Right,” *Atlantic Monthly* April 1993, 48.

⁵ David Popenoe, “Flight from the Nuclear Family: Trends of the Past Three Decades,” *The Public Perspective* (March/April 1991): 19–20; David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); William Galston, “A Liberal-Democratic Case for the Two-Parent Family,” *The Responsive Community* (Winter 1990/91): 14–26.

⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Family Matters: The Plight of America’s Children,” *The Christian Century* (July 14–21, 1993): 712.

women, and some men, are doing more than ever before to keep families afloat and to care for others besides themselves. Alongside statistics, this approach uses experience-near data—case studies, qualitative interviews, detailed ethnographic research on single families, and autobiographical reflections. These data show that women of all colors and classes, continue to carry out most of the indispensable caring labor that both undergirds human life and is peripheral to it as dominant culture has defined it, and is, therefore, without value. Women do more work to maintain an adequate domestic and economic life, it is argued, while the United States government has provided fewer benefits and family-support systems than many other industrial nations around the globe. While having two parents certainly can improve the opportunities for child well-being, it seldom assures it, especially when psychological, economic, social, and moral circumstances work against good enough parenting.

From this perspective, the family predicament is centered not so much on the declining well-being of children and the rising individualism of adults (although these are related concerns), but on the internal struggles to democratize the family and the external struggles to create social policy and cultural images that support democratic families and the care of dependents (by dependents, I mean not just children but anyone within a family with special needs). This analysis shifts the focus from the family to democratic relationships in families and ultimately, to family-related public policy. While the individualistic spirit of much of North American society does pose certain problems, this approach questions how much of the uproar over individualism and outcry over family values is about the collapse of a public-private dichotomy as white women and people of color cross taboo dividing lines and claim some of the fruits of self-fulfillment and individualization. There is a tendency in this analysis to blame men for failing to do enough and to blame inadequate public policies that fail to provide even the smallest incentive to people to shoulder the responsibilities of maintaining strong families.

It is fair to say that a "culture war," to borrow James Davison Hunter's book title, is occurring between various factions in our country. By culture war, he means not simply a conflict over public policies or politics, but a debate over "*how we as Americans will order our lives together.*"⁷ It is a debate over very basic nonnegotiable moral convictions and deeply embedded world views. The divisions are not between various religious denominations, political groups, or economic classes, but take place within the boundaries of these old divisions and concern not so much political commit-

⁷ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 42, his emphasis.

ments as moral and cultural ones. The family, Hunter asserts is "the most conspicuous field of conflict." This is even more true now than when Hunter wrote these words five years ago. The way people answer the most intimate questions of gender and sexual relations is pivotal to the way the other battles will be determined.

Contrary to Hunter's depiction of the culture war, those on the right and those on the left are not equally well organized. Although he claims that at the heart of the culture war is a rearrangement in alliances among those who have not been traditionally allied (for example, the Catholic pro-life with Protestant fundamentalists), this realignment is one-sided. Those on the right have been a great deal more intentional about organizing around family issues than those on the left. In many cases, those on the right have been quite willing to override differences for the sake of acquiring national power on political issues, while those on the left have been busy trying to understand difference and particularity for the sake of greater authenticity and integrity. In a way, the left is in greater disarray by political, cultural, and moral intention. At this particular moment in cultural history, however, progressives need to overlook a few differences in order to contest the claims of those who believe they have all the answers to the core normative questions that concern the way authority, power, responsibility, obligation, and sexuality are ordered in family life.

Feminist Theology and the Family Debate: Reading Between the Lines

If this is the general nature of current public discourse on the family, where do feminist theological voices fit in? Unfortunately, until quite recently it is not clear that anyone in theology, much less feminist theology, has cared much about the family debate. Given the investment that feminists have had in the structure and dynamics internal to women's lives in families, this lack of concern is troubling. At the same time as the academy of religion has ignored the turmoil and debate, mainline or oldline congregations have also made the vitality of families secondary to the other plights they face and the social causes they deem critical. Where then does this leave women and men who have partially incorporated feminist premises about their roles in society and, at the same time, retain a partial allegiance to particular congregations and religious traditions? Moreover, where does it leave women who can barely make ends meet?

Oldline Protestant churches have been especially quiet. In contrast to more conservative traditions, many people in oldline congregations now admit that fathers do not always know best. But they have not determined who does, if fathers don't, or, more precisely, they no longer know exactly what is best. Women and men, most seem to agree, are equal before God.

But exactly what this means for the common life of work and love in congregations, in families, and in jobs is less clear. Women are elders, even ministers, and we may have slightly fewer prayers directed to "Our Father," but who runs the Sunday school program now?

In conversations and interviews, I have found many people in need of family resources that neither feminism, congregational life, nor secular therapies and policies are providing. Having bought into some of the assumptions of religious practice and some of the tenets of feminism, having entered into paid employment and motherhood, many women feel abandoned when they attempt to live out the ideals held up for them, whether they include children and husbands or not. What is missing? Can feminist theology speak once again to the needs of many women?

On this score, feminist theology has been only partially helpful. Most feminist theologians have agreed with the general feminist view that the patriarchal family no longer has a place. For too long it has been the nucleus for the construction of oppressive, unjust relations, enculturating its members into stereotypic gender roles and hiding violence behind a happy veneer. Beyond this critical stance, some have advanced alternatives to conventional definitions of work and love. And in a rudimentary way, black feminists and womanist theologians have helpfully corrected the white feminist discussion by claiming the power of family and mothering as possible sources of liberation and survival.

For the most part, this reflection has not received the attention or codification in relation to the family, congregations, and public discourse that it deserves. Few theologians have actually identified alternative family models and theologies. Even Ruether sidesteps the issue, or perhaps she simply assumes the necessary theological and moral reconstructions of family life when she demands a "restructured social order that locates home, school, nursery and work in some more coherent relationship to each other."⁸ The conversation is even more sparse when it comes to the role of motherhood. Many theologians are mothers but few have investigated in any depth what is learned about theology from this pivotal life experience. Few have made the complex intersection of work and family a primary topic of research. The feminist movement in religion does not write much out of these particular experiences. Consequently, observes Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, it has not paid "sufficient attention to the needs of children and of women with children."⁹

At this particular point in the public debate over the family, however, silence is more harmful than making academic or political blunders by enter-

⁸ Ruether, "Politics and the Family," 266.

⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 349.

ing the discussion. For the debate is proceeding, not just among conservative parties, but on more politically diversified fronts that include a new group of neoliberal voices, on the one hand, and progressive voices, on the other hand. Although the family per se may still be an unpopular subject among some feminists, the question of motherhood and the maternal voice has drawn considerable attention among a growing number of feminists in other fields. In this arena, feminist theologians are routinely overlooked, even when their input seems requisite.

A recently edited volume, *Representations of Motherhood*, is a good example. One of the purposes of this volume was to critique representations in Western culture of the "ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing mother." Although one can hardly confront such representations without confronting ideals that emerge from particular religious world views, there is not a single chapter on religion among the seven or more disciplines included. The oversight of feminists in religion can be partly explained by a problem in the study of religion itself: the neglect of the mother-as-subject or the self-experience of the mothering subject. However, if the editors hope to "push forward a *vision* of the maternal place as generative," some kind of ethical, religious, and theological discourse becomes almost inevitable.¹⁰ Until we wrestle with the religious dreams and ideals about families, parenthood, sacrifice, and responsibility deeply rooted in specific traditions that continue to shape North American culture and psyches, change in the visions of mothering will remain fortuitous and superficial.

At a time when family values rivals economic recovery and health care reform for political air time, feminists, especially feminist scholars in religion, must continue to define what it means to be a "good enough mother." In listening to the largely secular discussion among social scientists and politicians of both neoliberal and progressive persuasion, one critical task of feminist theology will be to distinguish interpretations that play into the hands of societal backlash against women in the name of family values from those that support women and children. An equally critical task will be the more careful construction and promotion of alternative values.

I do not believe that feminist theologians have claimed and capitalized on the alternative family values that have been developing within feminist theology itself. One of the best examples is academic and practical amnesia of Valerie Saiving's pivotal 1960 article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View." With the words, "I am a student of theology; I am also a woman," this article begins an important period of revision and revolution in theology.

¹⁰ Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, eds., *Representations of Motherhood* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 2, 10, emphasis added.

Claims for experiences divergent from those universalized by male standards and fresh views of sacrificial love and sinful pridefulness make the essay a classic in second-wave feminist theology. Few, however, have added and embellished a sentence implicit in Saiving's essay itself: "I am also a mother . . ." Failure to do so is a hindrance, particularly during a time when the term family values has become a distorted and sometimes politically dangerous code for reinstituting male dominance and female self-sacrifice.

In one sense, Saiving's own maternal thinking has to be read between the lines. She writes about the mother who at once "rejoices in her maternal role" and "learns, too, that a woman can give too much."¹¹ Yet she never identifies herself as this mother. Without saying "I rejoiced" or "I despaired," however, she is this "I" upon whom academic standards at that time frowned. It is, I believe, her own maternal experience that furnishes the ground for a revelatory breakthrough on the nature of self-love and agape. In a more recent conversation in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* she tells us, "I wrote out of my own experience—my experience at the time I wrote and before," but only dared to do so through the guise of the third person singular and the writings of other people.¹²

In its explorations of love and sin, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" is a bold and classic essay. I returned to Saiving's remarks, partly out of a preconscious curiosity that new scrutiny would lead to unnoticed details, but also because her reflections on motherhood, per se, have gone largely unnoticed and provide at least a beginning foundation for a reconstructed theology of family life. Not until, with children of my own, I reread her article more than a decade after my first reading did I actually notice the maternal reasoning that had eluded my undergraduate and childless insights. My intrigue with her thesis about the nature of sin from a woman's perspective, and my own disinclination in the 1970s to think about childbearing in my twenties—looking back, I think I did not dare to—blinded me to the central place she gives to the experiences of mothering, and to her critical reevaluation not only of sin, but of familial love. Many women, well acquainted with the profound experience of the love for a child, love themselves not too much but too little.

The sentence "I am also a mother" is not implicit in Saiving's article as much as it is understated. In the later conversation about the essay, she makes this clear. Mary Gerhart asks Saiving how her "feminist consciousness

¹¹ Valerie Saiving (Goldstein), "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* (April 1960): 108; reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979). Citations are from the original text.

¹² "A Conversation with Valerie Saiving," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 100.

was born," at a time in which such thought received little encouragement. While there are many factors, such as six years in an all-girls' school and the model of Mrs. Roosevelt, Saiving's experience as a mother is primary. She had first studied theology in Chicago during World War II, accepted as the only woman there for a doctorate, because "they were having trouble finding enough students [men] even for a ministerial degree." She left the degree unfinished to marry, but returned thirteen years later, divorced and with her child, convinced over against cultural definitions of femininity, that she could indeed teach and still fit the "category 'woman.'" The paper itself was written in 1958 for a class, while she was, in her words,

trying to take care of my daughter Emily who was very small then. She was three, or four, maybe. I was trying to be a responsible student and also a good mother, and *sometimes it just seemed impossible*, especially since I was living in the city, and I didn't have any relatives or anybody like that to call on. I don't know what else to say. . . .¹³

It is not so surprising, then, that Saiving begins her discussion of human experience with the "central fact about sexual differences": "In every society it is women—and only women—who bear children" and who remain "closest to the infant and young child" because of "the physiology of lactation." She struggles to understand the many meanings and implications of this statement. The power of female biological creativity challenges male creativity at this most immediate, fundamental level. That is, a man's "inability to bear children" becomes, in her words, "a deficiency for which he must compensate."¹⁴ Men must strive to achieve what women already have—a role in the powers of creation and the existential confirmation of child bearing. Hence the modern monuments erected to celebrate male achievements, the male temptation for pride and self-promotion, and its hidden underside, envy of maternal powers.

Mothers, on the other hand, participate in biological creation directly, immediately, in a more prolonged and more spontaneous fashion. They very often discover that the "one essential, indispensable relationship of a mother to her child is the I-Thou relationship." This intimate relationship is an "irreplaceable school" for the essentialities of that illusive virtue, love, and an instance of moving past the alienation of life to stand momentarily in the "power of being." However, at the very same time that religious sensibilities of a divine nature are tapped, a critical temptation arises. Hearing a child demands abandoning one's point of view temporarily or at least moving the self slightly off center to meet acute needs. Hence the different temptation for many women, particularly mothers: the temptation to lose oneself. I

¹³ Ibid., 108–109, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Saiving, "The Human Situation," 103, 105.

find few mothers of younger children who do not respond with immediate recognition to Saiving's litany of sins that plague mothers far more often than "pride" or "will-to-power": "triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition . . . in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self."¹⁵

Although Saiving herself later admits the limits of her particular experience in defining a "feminine" view or women's experiences on the whole, her groundbreaking work on sin and love issued an invitation. Her work is a good place to begin in reconstructing alternative family values. It forcefully questions any simple identification of love with selflessness and sin with self-assertion, or with the adult pursuit of "individual happiness," in the words of Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. And, Saiving implies, if our understanding of the essential problem of the human condition is distorted, then solutions and doctrines of love will remain incomplete. Saiving makes one of the first and strongest arguments for more nuanced understandings of human temptation and power based on experiences from the "underside." From the underside, the problem is less the selfish pursuit of one's own happiness and the abuse of freedom, choice and power than human capitulation to and confusion due to the lack of these. Although Saiving does not take this step, her work demands new ways of structuring family life that involve more radically mutual attempts to share power and freedom in the very midst of the dependencies created by children and family life, dependencies that most women are biologically prone to experience with greater intensity than most men. She alerts readers to a theological need to respond to this difference with more nuanced readings of what is demanded for women to love and to parent well without losing themselves; she leaves us wondering what this means for men and for children.

A Feminist Maternal Theology

In *Also A Mother*, I begin to experiment with the contours of a theological reflection that takes the experience of the mothering subject seriously, and the rest of this article draws on a small part of that work. In my cautious exploration of some of my maternal experiences, I drew significantly upon the self-reflective writings of women outside the field of religion. However, among the very small handful of feminist theologians who join Saiving in drawing upon maternal knowing to revise conceptions of love, I have been particularly moved by Christine Gudorf's essay, "Parenting, Mutual Love and Sacrifice."

¹⁵ Ibid., 108, 109.

Distinct from Saiving, Gudorf is explicit about her use of her own struggles as a mother. She calls for revision in how we as a society view children and child-rearing, and, hand-in-hand, revision of Christian views of agape.

After years of grappling with a severe personal uncomfortableness and periodic anger toward the way my decision to parent [two adopted medically handicapped children] was universally perceived—as heroic, self-sacrificing, Christian love . . . I believe this interpretation is very faulty, and results from a radical misunderstanding of parenting, personal relationships in general, and the ethic of Jesus.¹⁶

Contrary to the perception that selfless love must have motivated her to adopt a two-year-old who could not walk, talk, or eat and a five-year-old who could barely walk, dress, or wash himself, selfless love was not a primary factor. The "most revealing lesson the children taught us, Gudorf says, is that love can never be disinterested. Although initially she and her husband gave considerably of themselves, Gudorf recognizes that this giving was never unconditional or self-disregarding. Their love involved a necessary self-interest that actually enhanced their capacity to give. As parents, "our efforts for them rebounded to our credit. Failure to provide for them would have discredited us. And we had expectations that the giving would become more mutual."¹⁷

The ethical dynamics of love are more complicated than the theories of men have known or understood. Gudorf questions the universal presumption that genuine parenting entails heroic sacrifice. This in turn leads her to question the idealization of agape in Christian ethics. Love, particularly the love between parent and child, involves ample self-giving certainly, but self-giving must never become the ideal. As she discovers, "all love both involves sacrifice and aims at mutuality." Moments of self-diminishment, even the moment of sacrifice of the crucifixion of Jesus, are "just that—moments in a process designed to end in mutual love."¹⁸ While Jesus urged sacrificial action, he always connected this demand with the promise of reward in the kingdom to come: the present rewards of mutual love are a small taste of the kingdom.

While no honest mother would ever deny the inevitable necessity of self-diminishment, even in the earliest moments of nurture the nurturer must receive something back. Not only is loving sacrifice impossible as a goal, it denies women the complex realities of maternal labor—that a good

¹⁶ Christine Gudorf, "Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice," in *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf and Mary D. Pellauer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 181–82.

¹⁸ Gudorf, 182, 196.

mother can sometimes hate her children, that a mother may love her children, but hate mothering, that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or even possible.

Gudorf's article appeared in 1985. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it has only slowly received the attention it deserves. Another rendition of this argument by Sally Purvis, entitled "Mothers, Neighbors and Strangers: Another Look At Agape," points out why this might be so. Although it seems odd from the perspective of thirty years of feminist theology, Christian theological and philosophical ethics has always been deeply suspicious of the implications of "special relations" with loved ones in understanding the imperative of agape. No one has articulated a specifically positive role for special relationships, fearing that the power of special relations will "swamp universal human dignity," in Gene Outka's words.¹⁹ In cautious defiance of this skepticism, Purvis writes, "It may be a biographic accident that my richest and most powerful experience of agape . . . has come with my experience of being a mother."

I do not think it is accidental, but I can understand her reluctance to introduce her claim more boldly. She must defy a model of agapic love proposed by Søren Kierkegaard and upheld by a long tradition of theological ethics. In Kierkegaard's words, the highest model of love is found in "THE WORK OF LOVE IN REMEMBERING ONE WHO IS DEAD" because it is the most "disinterested, the freest, the most faithful."²⁰ But Purvis's experiences as a mother force her to question this imperative. The ideal of true agapic love is neither radically impartial nor "utterly disinterested." Purvis implies, and I would argue that the best work of love is in REMEMBERING ONE WHO IS JUST BORN—the child. Love requires the "caring intensity" witnessed in mother-love. This love, which society has grossly romanticized in order *not* to take it and the mothers who attempt it seriously, occurs in the midst of the more ambiguous, chaotic practice of mothers. It is distinctive in its revelatory powers, nonetheless.

Unfortunately, in the weakest section of her article, Purvis attempts to isolate the features of a mother-love that is only fragmentarily and "sporadically" actualized "in the midst of so much else": it is (1) "inclusive", (2) "intensely involved and other-regarding," and (3) "unqualified" and "unconditional."²¹ When Purvis attempts to isolate a pure mother-love from the

¹⁹ Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 272, cited by Sally Purvis, "Mothers, Neighbors and Strangers: Another Look At Agape," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 23.

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 328. Caps in the original. Cited by Purvis, "Mothers, Neighbors and Strangers," 21.

²¹ Purvis, "Mothers, Neighbors and Strangers," 26–28.

mundane tedium of daily living, she recreates the romantic model of agape that she so badly wants to avoid. Indeed, these three qualities, as she defines them, seem nearly impossible to realize. If mothers cannot "manage in any sustained way what I am describing as mother-love," is part of the problem a flaw in her description? Her mistake is to see genuine mother-love as somehow separate from the "inevitable chorus" of "other feelings, immense distractions, deadening trivia" rather than to struggle with how to integrate these "other" feelings into love's possibilities. Love's failures and distractions in the midst of daily demands, I would argue, are a necessary part of love's practice rather than an exception to the rule of love. An adequate model of agape must incorporate the reality of maternal love as a dynamic, difficult, multidirectional process rather than as some static, one-way end-product.

In a footnote, Purvis identifies a problem to which she should have given greater attention, the "problem mothers have balancing their own needs and the needs of their children, particularly small children." Consideration of a mother's needs challenges Purvis' own contention that mother-love can be "unconditional." Mother-love cannot be unconditional. Gudorf, arguing more forcefully in favor of a kind of balancing of needs, asserts that "agape is valuable in the service of eros and does not exist otherwise."²² Unfortunately, Purvis, as many male Protestant theologians, retains rather than questions the implicit conviction that self-interest and love of the other are somehow mutually exclusive. To use mother-love as a model, Purvis must therefore assert that in its purest form mother-love is intensely other-regarding.

How might theologians talk about a love that one can sustain? Or, perhaps better stated, how might we name more carefully the variations in sustaining love of others? One of the biggest problems in religious doctrines of love, as best seen from the intimate context of mother-child interaction, is their very static, isolating quality, the polarization of the bad love from the good and the absolutization of the latter until it becomes nearly unrealizable. Furthermore, the "work of love in remembering the one who is just born" reveals that ideals of love evolve constantly as one moves through the life cycle. While many theologians, working in abstraction from their own lives, have isolated some kind of pure agape, a mother with a child cannot pretend that this is so. Perhaps one of the most startling phenomena of maternal love is the rapidity and intensity with which one moves from angry hatred to heart-filled attraction. Related to this phenomenon is an important maternal hope and expectation: as Gudorf writes, although the "early giving seemed to be solely ours . . . we had expectations that the giving would become more mutual." Almost despite themselves, the "children gave to us

²² Gudorf, "Parenting, Mutual Love and Sacrifice," 191.

... after long trial, love, trust." Rather than idealizing the family as a realm of sacrificial love, the ideal of family love must emphasize the centrality of "give and take."²³ In the action of love is the hope of returned love, measured over time.

Theology has tended to define love with adjectives—unconditional, other-regarding—thereby overlooking the many ways in which love involves action—the "trivia" or minutiae of world maintenance. Maternal love demands far more than certain features or attitudes; it requires an endless tedium of chores and activities that must somehow make their way into love's definition. Defining love in terms of its qualities rather than its actions has also served to disqualify the critical loving role of fathers in securing the good of children from what Saiving identifies as a more physiologically and emotionally distant stance, at least in the early days and months after the birth of a child. Here love requires immediate, protective activity more than an emotional stance.

If "all love both involves sacrifice and aims at mutuality," as Gudorf contends, this has never been an easy ideal to attain between mothers and fathers with children or between mothers and fathers and their children. "Uterus and breasts precluded equal attachment," as sociologist Amy Rositter avows in the preface of a feminist book on early mothering. Physiological disparities in bearing and nursing children need not lessen a commitment to radical mutuality. Nor does the period of physical difference in child bearing last long. But the differences do intensify the ease with which mutuality can be achieved and they tend to set a pattern upon which the trickier patterns of socialized gender differences are built. It is important to name rather than ignore these difficulties of achieving equality in child bearing by a simple act of will, not to excuse or rationalize the disparities but to ameliorate and work through them. As Mary Becker observes, it is silence that perpetuates inequality and not the recognition of the intensity of maternal involvement in the pains and pleasures of their children. "Failing to discuss how difficult it is to equalize the emotional attachment of mothers and fathers to their children will inevitably cause continuing inequality."²⁴ Only by recognizing it can we move toward equalizing paternal involvement.

In having children, my husband and I discovered that the mutuality we wanted to maintain could not be spelled out as easily as kitchen duty before we had children (that itself was not easy). It required a measured and steady response to the constantly emerging, evolving needs of our children for love and our needs to love ourselves as parents and otherwise. Actualizing this

²³ Ibid., 177, 181.

²⁴ Mary Becker, "Maternal Feelings: Myths, Taboo, and Child Custody," *Review of Law and Women's Studies* 1 (1992): 167.

mutuality amidst the flux and disparities between us required constant vigilance, flexibility, improvisation, and outside support—all of which were often in short supply. Daily, when our children were small, we tried to find ways to balance the inequities of the demands that my physical proximity created for both of us and to build avenues for common participation, often with little or no outside encouragement or supportive structures. More recently, with slightly older children, the battle lines have shifted. No longer do we struggle with my physical proximity; we fight the intense pressures of living in a fast-paced society that assumes home, children, and community require little attention or time and that continues to arrange work and school schedules around the persistent fantasy of a full-time homemaker.

These struggles raise a more important question. If I am finding it hard to adjudicate the demands of work and family life, what about those with less flexible, steady jobs, fewer, poorer day care options, lower, irregular incomes, abusive, destructive family situations, and minimal support systems? All people face pressures in a society that provides little support for the intricacies of combining the generative activities of family with the demands of work. But the penalties weigh most heavily upon those who do not have the means to survive. The greatest costs are borne by the children of this generation and generations to come who grow up in a world that allows little time or place for them.

A Christian feminist maternal theology reveals another critical factor about the enactment of love: the necessity to give in response to the needs of a child who cannot give too much, too early depends upon a broader context of give-and-take. Purvis unhelpfully brackets the question of whether "the distortions, the evils" of contemporary society—"racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty, isolation"—have nearly eradicated the possibility of mother-love.²⁵ Although bracketing these issues might simplify the discussion, this step has made religious models of love sterile and limited. In *Blessed are the Poor?*, Pamela Couture moves the discussion of agape, particularly maternal love, straight into the midst of the distortions and evils of public policy. Although the stories of her own maternal experiences remain implicit to the text itself, her book presents one of the best examples of research motivated and shaped by an author's experiences as a divorced mother with two young daughters. The divorce makes apparent the ways in which North American rhetoric about equality, embodied in the legal adversary system and public policy, generally ignores the needs of mothers and their children, promoting a deceptive ethic of self-sufficiency that bypasses the necessary interconnections of life. Her experiences of the "mercy of the church," those who "not only helped, but *cared*," mentioned

²⁵ Purvis, "Mothers, Neighbors and Strangers," 28.

in passing in her acknowledgments, also make apparent the underrated, ignored nets of interdependence that hold North American society together, the "frequently invisible supports which anchor the flourishing of both children and adults."²⁶

Couture makes a strong case for an ethic, not simply of mutual love, but indeed of shared responsibility. By this, she means a position grounded in Christian claims for the worth of individuals, the equal value of domestic and public work, the importance of economic and relational reciprocity in families and society, and the imperative to care for the vulnerable. This ethic rests upon a theological criterion of care for the vulnerable, which includes the maternal vulnerability necessitated by the act of reproducing the human race and the vulnerability of children. Children need less of the self-sacrificing labor that has gone by the name of love, but they need more caring labor than many people have recently acknowledged. In rearranging the family and dislodging women from the home, many subtly dismiss the amount of energy, time, empathy, and moral and religious guidance that children need. Children are immensely more valuable, more vulnerable, and a lot more work than our cultural imagination has conceded and our economic and political policies would like to acknowledge.

From a maternal theological perspective, children are not products or private property; children are gifts. About this Jesus is clear. Nowhere else in scripture or in mythic literature are children invited in, affectionately embraced, and blessed. As fiction writer Mary Gordon observes, "Nowhere . . . is there concern for the education, the upbringing of children, the inner lives of children, the idea that they exist not as possessions, as markers, as earthly immortality, but in themselves." Jesus "seems genuinely to want the physical presence of children, their company."²⁷

Only in industrial and urban society has the job of caring for children gone to the mother alone, the "most unusual pattern of parenting in the world."²⁸ Our competitive, individualistic society has been quick to delimit and isolate the tasks of rearing children, assigning women the tasks of love, children, and home and men the tasks of work. Children, however, literally clamor for a wider range of social relationships than this problematic division of private and public generativity allows. Even small children, I am convinced, who live within a relatively limited sphere of intimate bonds, need many caring "parents," not one or even two. Although the West African

²⁶ Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 9–10.

²⁷ Mary Gordon, *Good Boys and Dead Girls and Other Essays* (New York: Viking, 1991), 247.

²⁸ Elizabeth Janeway, *Cross Sections* (New York: William Morrow, 1982). Cited by bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 143.

maxim, "it takes a village to raise a child," has become quite popular these days, it is not clear that North Americans who utter it so freely fully comprehend the immense transformation that this requires of us.

Ruether's 1980 rallying call largely fell on deaf ears. Broadly speaking, white, middle-class feminist Christian theologians have worked harder to promote the feminist view that the patriarchal family no longer has a place than to actually identify alternative Christian family models. And in the past few years, feminist theology has been slow to enter the debate despite intense activity by the Christian Coalition, the political maneuvering of a new neoliberal group of social scientists, and growing alarm about the well-being of children. Although this is changing as the subject of the family gains political relevance and limited acceptability in academic circles, serious attention to the family and its values has not been an easy discussion to entertain. A feminist colleague in religion who has recently made the family a subject of her writing shared with me her fears about disgrace in the academic community for addressing nonacademics and among feminists for turning to perceived "traditional" values.

While I share my friend's fears, at some point I ceased to care; the sheer tumultuous impact of early mothering compelled me to write. And the fervor with which people like those in the Christian Coalition advocate a return to conventional "family values" as well as the shortcomings of feminism on the family urge me to continue to explore workable, egalitarian family models from within a Christian maternal theology. *Also A Mother* is written, as I say at the beginning of the book, in "the eye of the storm over my attention" as a seminary professor and a mother of three sons, seven, four, and three years old. It is written out of constant, mundane (and not so mundane) conflicts between loyalties and identities. While talking about such conflicts can sound trite in the academic context, it very seldom does in the many personal conversations I have had with those struggling with questions of family responsibilities. Instead, many people ask for more personal stories.

As one committed to these pleas and to the rigor of academe, I have asked myself, How can the twist of the heart and the real burdens of care be described and understood without sounding sentimental or fretful or even bitchy? Why try? Why even risk writing a book entitled *Also a Mother* (instead of something like *Crises of Generativity*)? Why try to claim something as ambiguous as feminist maternal theological knowing? Here, briefly, are four of my many reasons: (1) the need to dispel the deadly silence that surrounds what it means that mostly women mother, a silence particularly characteristic of the academy, including the academy of religion; (2) the need to correct the tendency either to trivialize on the one hand or to romanticize on the other what it really takes to raise a child in a complex, technological, postmodern society; (3) the need to expose and correct the inadequacy of

psychological theories of human fulfillment, economic theories of work, and theological theories of love and vocation that emphasize productivity, discount women's caring labor that undergirds the economy, and continue to promote self-sacrifice as an ultimate value; and finally, (4) a hunch that the burdens about which I speak are not mine alone. Many parents face similar burdens with fewer material and relational resources than I do. If oldline Christianity and Christian feminists do not get clearer about alternative family and work values, then many people will not have a good defense against the nostalgia for the "way things never were," as Stephanie Coontz puts it.

The sentence, "I am a student of theology; I am also a mother," opens a new horizon of theological possibilities and, in light of the current North American family debate, necessary theological claims. Propositions about the nature of love based on instances of maternal experiencing necessitate nothing less than a reevaluation of caring labor and a radical transformation in religious sanctions about family and work for women and men. Christian ideals of motherly self-sacrifice and fatherly hard work not only fail the lives of many people today, they misrepresent both the intent of human creation and the promise of the Gospel itself.

A Christian feminist maternal theology challenges the mores of a society that has selectively divided the burdens and rewards of family and work along gender lines, calls for a rereading of biblical and theological traditions that have been wrongly used to uphold this division, alters the meaning of human love, and reclaims the values of caring labor for both men and women. While Saiving draws implicitly upon her experience as a mother, she did not or could not make the source of her inspiration explicit until more recently. Others are freer to do so partly because women like Saiving opened the doors of theological inquiry and vocational opportunity. If we are to move beyond conventional and oppressive family values, this conversation must continue.