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Chapter 37

Women's Rituals and Women's Ritualizing

Juliette J. Day

37.1 Introduction

Why a chapter on 'women' in this book? Surely women participated in the rituals examined in the other chapters? The other chapters are, admittedly, not solely concerned with men's rituals and ritualizing, but far too often women's participation in and understanding of Christian rituals is assumed to be identical. As Teresa Berger (2011) has pointed out, both our ancient sources, and the authorized ritual practices whose performance they describe, provide interpretations from elite men, such that the voice and presence of women, 'men who are just men', transgender or intersexed people, or eunuchs are also barely discernable. Gender Studies has rightly moved on from the binary division of gender into simply female and male; and late antique studies have brought to light the nuances of gender in religious identity especially as they apply to women, for example, as transvestite monks or as displaying 'virility' by their ascetic achievements. There is still room, though, for an investigation of women's ritual activity which transcends their social status: that is, in relation to the physical and biological operation of women's bodies.

Susan White (2003: 29) articulates the position of many feminist scholars that women's ritualizing extends beyond the hierarchical and liturgical, beyond the public sphere, to where women were able to be creative and direct their own lives. This is also the premise of *Ritualizing Women* (Northup 1997), a study of contemporary rituals devised by and for women and which arise out of their unique physical, social, and religious contexts. The question for scholars of early Christianity

is, did late antique women behave similarly? The evidence is scant, but it does exist. Evidence for women's monasteries indicates the presence of strong female leaders (e.g. Macrina, Olympias, Melania the Younger) who directed the prayer and ascetic programme of their institution; although this evidence is hagiographical and the sources display typological features at least the, invariably, male writer acknowledged female-directed ritual practice. For other women, as Berger observes, 'the household arguably was the most basic, daily, and influential site for ritualizing faith' (2011: 44). The activities at household shrines and chapels indicate that even men ritualized away from the formal liturgical gatherings of the church (see Bowes 2008), and instructions were also provided for how wives of non-Christian men should perform rituals around prayer and home communion at home in ordinary domestic space (Tertullian, *Ux.* 2.4–5). Later we will note that in relation to rituals around death, women's role transcended the private and public in socially acceptable ways.

Of course, women did participate in the hierarchically determined and authorized rituals of the church, what we call 'liturgy' (see Taft 1998; Meyer 1999); they were exorcized (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* 14), baptized, heard sermons, sang psalms (some even in women's choirs, *V. Macrina* 29; see Quasten 1941) and received the eucharist (after the ministers, the men, and the ascetics, but before the children in *Const. ap.* 8.13.14); they celebrated feast days and walked in processions (*It. Eg.* 31). Limited liturgical roles were assigned to deaconesses during the baptism of women (e.g., *Did. apost.* 16), and consecrated widows might even be permitted in the sanctuary during the eucharist (*Test. Dom.* 1.19). And as David Hunter has explored the consecration of virgins and widows, and the ordination of deaconesses were public ways of acknowledging their leadership in relation to the authority of the bishop (Hunter 2016). For other baptized Christian women, though, whether married or unmarried, their liturgical participation could be constrained by the social and theological interpretations of women's bodies due to beliefs about inherent inferiority and weakness, and a deep concern/fear about their biological functions, particularly menstruation and childbirth. This could be manifested in ritual restrictions or prohibitions, and by forms of ritualization.

37.2 Women's Bodies

Ritual encodes meaning in and through bodies, and in some key respects women's bodies are different from men's; thus, it should be no surprise to find that women in many cultures have engaged in rituals which relate to their bodily experience and that, because of the otherness of women's bodies, this ritualization could cause anxiety among male hierarchies. As Meyers noted, 'women's religious culture can be considered most relevant with respect to the biological asymmetry of humans. That is, the exclusivity of women's reproductive capacity produced associated religious practices exclusive to women' (Meyers 2005: 16). Textual and archaeological evidence reveals that ancient Israelite culture knew of women-led, non-priestly rituals connected to fertility, pregnancy, childbirth and care of the infant which display specialist ritual knowledge between women which 'empowered them as major religious actors in their households' (Meyers 2005: 69; see also Berger 2011: 45).

Menstruation is a specific feature of women's life experience which is not shared by men. From puberty to the menopause, women have a monthly discharge of blood, exceptions being pregnant women and those with amenorrhea. Despite its near universal female experience, early Christian sources treat menstruation as abnormal and this is evident in the regulations about liturgical participation for menstruating women and in praise for the ascetic body, i.e. the non-menstruating, due to a restricted diet, which aspires to 'maleness'. For ascetic women the cessation of menstruation was, therefore, a sign of spiritual progress. It is interesting that in the legends of transvestite monks their female gender is only discovered after death (Euphrosyne), or when erroneously accused of fathering a child (Margaret/Pelagius of Egypt), or occasionally by spiritual discernment (Hilaria), but never by menstruation (See Anson 1974; Davis 2002; Lubinsky 2013). Although, even those ascetic women who continued to dress as women seem not to have been troubled by menstruation to judge by the hagiographical and ascetic literature. One notable, but not explicit, exception appears in

Augustine's 'Rule for Nuns': 'The washing of the body and the use of the baths should not be too frequent, but it should be permitted at the usual interval of time, that is once a month' (*Ep.* 211.13; Teske 2005: 26).

Discharges of blood by women could render them ineligible for participation in baptism and the eucharist; indeed, in some cases she was even forbidden to enter the church. Early Christian texts present different opinions about the place of menstruating women in liturgical gatherings and on the reasons for and against any prohibitions; these reflect to an extent the theological schools of Antioch and Alexandria. We note that these matters are discussed in the particular genre of 'Church order': texts which claim universal authority for their regulations by appeal to apostolic authorship, while simultaneously displaying their regional and ecclesial particularity (See Bradshaw 2015). In the 'apostolic' ritual regulations, the author's own context and theological preferences are barely disguised. The relevant sections on menstruation and ritual purity are based on the purity code of Lev. 15:19–30, even if this text is not explicitly cited, and thus the issue is not just menstruating women's status in the community, but also the interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures in the Church and the application of Jewish law in Christian life and practice.

In the third century Syrian text, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the writer condemns some women converts from Judaism who are still keeping the purity laws concerning liturgical participation during menstruation (*Did. apost.* 26). These women believed that during menstruation the Holy Spirit left them for seven days, and so they absented themselves from prayer, reading scripture and attending the eucharist. The writer argues that impurity is caused by sin, and that the Holy Spirit is received once-for-all time at baptism and is thus not 'subject to the cyclical habits of their physical bodies' (Fonrobert 2000: 178). The women are mistaken if they consider bathing after menstruation to be a purificatory ritual which will restore the Holy Spirit; to do so would imply that this washing is equivalent to baptism. Over a century later, a similar interpretation is evident in Theodoret of Cyrhus'

Questions on Leviticus (XXI) where he argues that something which is natural cannot be considered unclean (although he supports the ban on men having sex with menstruating women in order to protect women from unwanted attention at this time).

Origen's exegetical method resulted in a spiritualizing of the physical body and consequently 'menstruation becomes a discursive non-event', as Fonrobert puts it (2000: 203); he does not mention it in his *Homilies on Leviticus*, although he does discuss impurity after childbirth (see Berger 2011: 122). His former student Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (died 265), in his letter to Basilides did however assert that the Levitical purity laws are to be applied to Christians.

The question touching women in the time of their separation, whether it is proper for them when in such a condition to enter the house of God, I consider a superfluous inquiry. For I do not think that, if they are believing and pious women, they will themselves be rash enough in such a condition either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of the Lord. Certainly the woman who had the issue of blood of twelve years' standing did not touch the Lord Himself, but only the hem of His garment, with a view to her cure. For to pray, however a person may be situated, and to remember the Lord, in whatever condition a person may be, and to offer up petitions for the obtaining of help, are exercises altogether blameless. But the individual who is not perfectly pure both in soul and in body, shall be interdicted from approaching the holy of holies (Dionysius, *Canon II: ANF 6: 96*).

Menstruants may pray as that does not require ritual purity, but they may not enter the church, nor approach the altar at the eucharist; as Berger comments, although Dionysius finds the answer obvious, it would seem that Basilides is less certain (Berger 2011: 103). Rules which were once applied to the Temple, but according to the Mishnah (*Ber. 3.1–2*) not to the synagogue in this period, are now applied to the church building (see Cohen 1991: 282–3). These restrictions were repeated by Timothy of Alexandria in his *Canonical Responses* (c385).

Question VII. Can a menstruous woman communicate?

Answer. Not until she be clean.

(*NPNF* II.14: 613)

There was greater consensus over the temporary prohibition of baptism during menstruation. Thus, Timothy again:

Question VI: The day appointed for the baptism of a woman; on that day it happened that the custom of women was upon her; ought she then to be baptized?

Answer. No, not till she be clean. (*NPNF* II.14: 613)

Timothy, though, does not say what he means by ‘clean’—does he mean ritually clean by the cessation of menstruation, or physically clean after bathing? The delay before baptism was usually to be only a few days, or from the end of menstruation plus one day as in *Testamentum Domini* 2.6: ‘But if any women be in the customary flux, let her also take in addition another day, washing and bathing beforehand.’ (Cooper & Maclean 1902: 121) The instruction to bathe before baptism should be read in conjunction with the previous general instruction that all should bathe on the fifth day of the last week before baptism, it was not therefore specifically for purification after menstruation.

More extensive ritual prohibitions and restrictions apply after childbirth, both for the mother and even for the midwives, again following the purity laws of Lev. 12. The Egyptian, *Canons of Hippolytus* (dated to ca. 330s) ‘demotes’ midwives after delivery:

The midwives are not to partake of the mysteries, until they have been purified . . . if the child which they have delivered is male, twenty days; if it is female, forty days. . . . If she goes to the house of God before being purified, she is to pray with the catechumens. (*Can. Hipp.* 18;

Bradshaw & Bebawi 1987: 20. See Berger 2011: 124–5).

The practical problems of this are noted by *Can. Hipp.*, although the solution does not entail a relaxing of the ritual prohibition: ‘The midwives are to be numerous so that they may not be outside all their lives.’ The Syrian Theodoret has a more benign interpretation of Lev. 12 that does not mention ritual purity. Here the intention of the Law was to permit women to rest after childbirth and not to be pestered by their husbands wanting to resume sexual relations by telling them she was unclean (*Questions on Leviticus*, IX).

The classical treatment of this subject from an anthropological perspective is that of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Purity and Taboo*, first published in 1966. She connects ideas of pollution and danger to the maintenance of authority, to express the ideal social order, and their reverse for the preservation of the sacred, for atonement and salvation. To conform to the rules is to be ‘set apart’, to be perfect in order to approach ‘the holy’, either God himself or, as in Leviticus, the Temple; to transgress is, therefore, to be separated from God’s blessing and thus from well-being (52). Ideas about holiness are given a physical and performative aspect (53) so that they might act as signs to inspire meditation on the oneness, purity, and completeness of God; ritual purity thereby functioned as ‘a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple’ (58). The regulations and rituals also construct social boundaries by excluding those who infringe the laws who are considered polluted and dangerous. Douglas’ interpretation focussed only on the dietary laws in Leviticus, but if we look back to Dionysius’ response to Basilides we can see that he too is concerned about the danger posed by impure, menstruating, women at the eucharist.

More recent commentators have also reflected on purity laws as a means to assert authority and maintain social cohesion (see Chapter 13). According to Catherine Bell’s taxonomy, rituals around menstruation would be categorised as among the ‘rites of affliction’ which ‘attempt to rectify a state

of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered' (1997: 115). Among rituals concerning pollution, immediate purification is usually demanded to avoid negative consequences, and thus physical purification is linked to spiritual cleansing. These rites 'illustrate complex cultural interpretations of the human condition and its relation to a cosmos of benign and malevolent forces' (1997: 119). They are effective in relation to the maintenance of the social order, and express belief in an ordered cosmos in which the divine and human co-operate to restore harmony.

What is noticeable in the early Christian ritual prohibitions around menstruation is the way that they reinforce the normative, complete Christian community expressed around the altar at the eucharist. The prohibitions seek to avoid a transgression of the sacred presence there, but they can only assert this by delineating the community boundaries of those entitled to be there. On the one hand then, women's menstrual cycle becomes the symbol for the establishment, maintenance, and restoration of the Body of Christ; the emissions are abnormal in a way that is analogous to sin and apostasy. In the *Didascalia* it is most interesting to note that the eucharistic community is not to be defined in this way; the community is formed through the indelible effects of baptism, performed once only. In this community the boundaries are to be drawn in relation to Judaism, even though the women themselves seem concerned to maintain the pure state achieved at baptism. For the Egyptian sources, the implication is that the community reforms itself at each eucharist and the regular exclusion and inclusion of menstruating women serves as a symbol of the necessary purity required by all in order to participate in the sacrament of the altar. But, one can clearly see that the ritual prohibitions place the burden of community cohesion on those women experiencing an unconscious physical event over which they have no control; it is, therefore, quite unlike sin or apostasy, for which the participant has personal moral responsibility.

37.3 Women, Family and Ritual

The social norm, expressed so clearly by many Christian and non-Christian commentators, was that public and official life was the preserve of men, whereas the private and domestic was women's realm. However, since the first Christian communities worshipped in domestic spaces and women appear to have functioned as head of the households, the lines between public and private are blurred (see Osiek & Macdonald 2006: 144–63). Even for the later centuries when the institutional structures of the church were established in the public sphere, Bowes has charted how it was the religion of the domestic sphere that drove the public ritual expressions: there was, she says, an 'eruption of the private into the public' (Bowes 2008: 10).

With such blurring it is interesting to note the ways in which ritual scholars have attempted to separate the public from the private as the focus of their study through definitions of 'ritual' that then constitute what is proper for the discipline of 'ritual studies'. In many instances 'ritual' is distinguished from 'social practice' or 'popular piety', but is connected to 'liturgy'. The ritual taxonomy is often related to the formal and hierarchical, usually patriarchal, rituals linked to the public exercise of power (religious or political). Consequently, chief among the 'non-rituals' are those connected to women's physicality or social functions; here we will investigate just two—rituals around conception, pregnancy and childbirth; and those around death.

Rituals around conception, pregnancy and giving birth in early Christian communities are hard to access. (Even a notable source book about early Christian women has nothing on these subjects: Miller 2005.) Male theologians who frequently use the womb as a theological symbol seem happily oblivious to its actual function in human reproduction. It is somewhat astonishing that the sources are relatively silent about such a commonplace occurrence, especially as Meyers (2005) charted the extensive ritual practices by Jewish women and Alice Mary Talbot has described the 'significant increase in the amount of evidence' for the ritual and spiritual life of Byzantine women from the ninth century. In later centuries, sterile women, or those who were pregnant and feared miscarriage might

wear amulets with inscriptions or icons, have icons of specific female saints for prayer, or make visits to holy men and women, or to the shrines of saints. In labour, some women made their confession and received the eucharist, and, if the birth was difficult, relatives might go to shrines for prayer or to obtain a relic with miraculous powers (Talbot 2006: 206–7).

Some of these Byzantine practices may be glimpsed in the late antique sources. It seems that earlier Christians used a similar repertoire of items: amulets used against sickness was included in a list of things to avoid given by Cyril of Jerusalem to his catechumens (*Cat.* 4.37), although he does not seem to be specifically addressing women. Principally, the hagiographical material suggests that physical anxiety or outright danger is to be alleviated by appeal to a saint or a holy man. Theodoret of Cyrrhus records that Romanos included helping sterile women among his healing activities (*Hist. Rel.* XI.4), and Symeon Stylites responded positively to the sterile ‘Queen of the Ishamaelites’ who sent her officials to ask that she could become a mother (*Hist. Rel.* XXVI.21). But Theodoret has experience closer to home:

My mother lived with my father for thirteen years without becoming the mother of children for she was sterile and prevented by nature from bearing fruit. This did not greatly trouble her, . . . But childlessness greatly distressed my father, who went around everywhere begging the servants of God to ask for children for him from God. The others promised to pray . . . but this man (Macedonius) gave an explicit assurance that he would ask for a single son from the Creator of the universe and promised to obtain his petition. When three years had passed and the assurance had not been fulfilled, my father hastened again to demand what had been promised. The other told him to send his wife. When my mother arrived, the man of God said he would ask for a child and obtain one, and that it would be fitting to give the child back to the one who gave it. When my mother begged to receive only spiritual salvation and escape from hellfire, he replied, ‘In addition to that, the munificent one will also give you a son, for

to those who ask sincerely he grants their petitions twofold.’ My mother returned from there bearing away the blessing contained in his assurance. And in the fourth year of the promise she conceived and bore a burden in her womb; . . .

In the fifth month of her pregnancy there occurred a danger of miscarriage. She again sent to her new Elisha—her affliction prevented her from hastening herself—to remind him that she had not wanted to become the mother of children and to confront him with his promises. . . . So taking his stick, he arrived with this support; on entering the house, he gave as usual the greeting of peace. . . . ‘ . . . drink this water’, said the man of God, ‘and you will feel God’s help’. So she drank as directed, and the danger of a miscarriage vanished. (*Hist. Rel.* XIII.16–17; Price 1985: 105–6)

In rituals around death and commemoration of the deceased (see Chapter 20), women were the ‘primary actors’ as Corely has argued (2010: 17–18), which is reflected in the primary role of women as witnesses to the resurrection in the Gospels. These cannot be relegated to ‘private’ or ‘family’ rituals given the public nature of funerals (Corely 2010: 22). Traditionally, women’s roles were to prepare the body for burial as an extension of their care for the sick, which we can see in the active role of Lampadion and Vetiana in the preparation of Macrina, even though the saint had entrusted the funeral arrangements to her brother. (*Vit. Mac.* 27–34). Palladius reports that women monks in the Pachomian monasteries washed the bodies and then carried them to the river singing psalms where the male monks would take over for the burial on the other side. (*Lausiac History* 33). Receiving communion before death, the *viaticum*, was important (Grabka 1953: 21–43): Melania the Younger received three times during the delayed deathbed scene at the hands of her priest (*Vit. Mel.* 66–8), but more commonly it seems the practice of reserving the eucharistic elements at home meant that it could be administered by family members, even women. Women led the lamentation, although Gregory of Nyssa wished to direct it into harmonious and orderly psalmody at Macrina’s burial: ‘the

other virgins cried out . . . and a disorderly confusion overthrew the orderly and sacred character of the psalmody, with everyone else sobbing at the wailing of the virgins' (*Vit. Mac.* 37.1: Silvas 2008: ?).

It is women who organise funerary banquets. Tulloch (2006) has remarked upon the banquet scenes depicted in frescos in the third to fourth century catacombs of SS Marcellino and Pietro, Rome. Here there is the repeated image of a woman raising the cup at the beginning of a meal for between four and seven male and female participants, alongside are the inscriptions '*Agape*' and '*Irene*' which refer to the toasts offered and are not personal names. In Rome, funerary banquets were held on the day of burial, nine days afterwards (the *refrigerium*) and again annually at the *Parentalia* held in February (see 10.5). Augustine records his mother's practice at the tombs with disapproval, even as he commends her self-restraint:

After bringing her basket of ceremonial food which she would first taste and then share round the company, she used to present not more than one tiny glass of wine diluted to her very sober palate. She would take a sip as an act of respect. If there were many memorial shrines of the dead which were to be honoured in that way, it was one and the same cup she carried about and presented at each place. The wine was not merely drenched with water but also quite tepid; the share she gave to those present was only small sips. Her quest was for devotion, not pleasure. (*Conf.* 6.2.2., Chadwick 1991: 91)

Monica's (and Augustine's) concern about drunkenness was echoed by Ambrose of Milan (*On Fasting and Lent* 17.62), and in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (8.44). Both Corley and Tulloch comment that although all these practices are predominantly 'private' in the sense that they were for family members, they took place in the public sphere.

Are these rituals? We can see in Berger's critique of the way in which liturgical history has

been gender blind, that caution needs to be exercised when using scholarly definitions of ritual. In *Vit. Mac.* there are two references to the evening lighting of the lamps with prayers: in 23.5 ‘the voice of the psalm-singers was summoning us to the thanksgiving at the lighting of the lamps’ and Macrina sends Gregory to join the communal evening prayer in church attended by the monks and virgins; then, in 27.2 the lamp is brought into where the dying saint lay and she ‘gazed towards the beam of light, making it clear that she was eager to to sing the thanksgiving at the lighting of the lamps’ (Silvas 2008: 125). Berger observes, ‘Robert Taft’s comment on Macrina’s recitation of the thanksgiving over the light, namely that it shows that “the domestic lamp ritual was still in vogue in spite of its adoption into the church service”, betrays a supercessionist sense of the relationship between domestic and public ritual space.’ (Berger 2011: 51–2). This chimes in with the work of Kim Bowes who showed how private, domestic ‘rituals’ have, in the scholarship, been relegated to social practice or customs, or habits, or popular piety, etc, in the same way that Macrina’s *private* lamp ceremony is to be contrasted with the *liturgical* celebration of evening prayer. Given the absence of women from ritual leadership in much late antique Christianity, such ancient and modern perspectives serve to remove domestic rituals, in which women figure prominently, from the sphere of ritual enquiry.

Grimes has commented on definitions of ‘ritual’ that, ‘Current writing about ritual tempts one to conclude that the phenomenon is either everywhere or nowhere’ (2014: 188). He notes Victor Turner’s distinction between a transformative ‘ritual’ and a confirmatory ‘ceremony’, Roy Rappaport’s definition of ritual as ‘more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the actors’, and then charts his own many different attempts to define ‘ritual’ over nearly 40 years. In *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (2014), Grimes distinguishes between ‘ritual’ as a scholarly concept, ‘rites’ or ‘rituals’ as that which people enact, and ‘ritualization’ as the act (or process) of creating rites (192–3): ‘in studying ritual’ he says, ‘we need a concept, ritualization, to designate the basic ordinary stuff out of which special rites emerge’ (193). The latter permits ritualization in daily life to be explored, avoids the distinction between ritual and not ritual, while

asserting that there are ‘degrees of ritualization’ (193).

Catherine Bell also noted the tendency to use ‘ritual’ for a ‘special activity inherently different from daily routine’, and ‘ritual-like actions’ where ‘a variety of common activities [. . .] are “ritualized”’ (1997: 138). These she classifies according to their distinctive attributes (formalism, traditionalism, disciplined invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance), noting that what is important is the body and its relationship to the environment around it—both natural and socially constructed (1997: 139). Among the attributes of ‘ritual-like activities’, that of sacral symbolism seems to provide useful way with which to explore the women’s domestic rituals discussed in this section. Such symbolic actions may not have an explicit relationship to a divine being, but they necessarily imply belief in such a being and the necessity of human response. In this section we have discussed regularly repeated non-liturgical domestic activities in which the divine is invoked in a particular way to respond to identified problems with conception, pregnancy and childbirth such that the whole process is removed from ordinary human, especially sexual, activity and reconstituted as a divine action through this sequence of actions:

- appeal to God’s intermediary (saint or holy man)
- divine response mediated in speech, or by miraculous object
- faithful acceptance by the woman (and/or by her husband)
- resolution of the problem

In the textual sources, these are framed as pious actions and faithful responses to God.

Bell observes, ‘In particular, ritual-like activities reveal an even more fundamental dimension of ritualization—the simple imperative to do something in such a way that the doing itself gives the acts a special or privileged status. The style of doing creates a type of framework around the act that communicates the message “this has extra significance”. . . . How they do these things can set these

activities off, both to the participants and to others, as bearing a nonroutine significance.’ (1997: 166). Her attribute of ‘formalism’ is important for women’s ritualizing around death—the lack of grand speeches, overly symbolic gestures, hierarchical leadership—present these rituals in a very different way than gatherings presided over by the bishop in which the community displays its identity to itself and to the divine. But, they do display ritualization in the preparation of the body, wailing as the traditional grief response of women (but not men), the repetition of formalised eating with the deceased, the belief that the significance transcends these actions and the locations (see Bell 1997: 164–9).

37.4 Women and ritual leadership in Christian communities

The issue of women’s liturgical leadership has received renewed attention in the last sixty years as Western churches have looked to the early church for evidence to support the ordination of women in the contemporary church. The sources do indeed indicate that the Fathers disapprove of women in any sort of leadership role, sometimes citing the Pauline injunction that ‘man is the head of women’ (1 Cor. 11:3) and the example of Mary, or simply appealing to social custom and good sense. There is also clear evidence that women did perform officially sanctioned liturgical rituals and had a visible presence in liturgical gatherings; thus, the roles of deaconesses, widows and abbesses were acceptable when under the authority of the bishop. However, women’s liturgical leadership, whether over men or in women-only contexts, is normally considered transgressive and an indicator of heretical beliefs or practices.

In many Western churches from the 1970s onwards, the influence of feminist theologians and critiques of women’s role in traditional religious practices encouraged the development of women’s spiritual and religious groups, whose members continued to participate in the official rites of the

churches, but also formed distinct women-only groups at which liturgical rituals took place (see Northup 1997). It is among these groups that one observed ‘women’s ritualizing’; what Grimes would define as ‘the activity of incubating ritual . . . the act of constructing ritual either self-consciously and deliberately or incrementally and editorially . . .’ (Grimes 1993: 5). Bell considered ‘ritualization’ to be a natural and appropriate response to a specific context in which the actions ‘reorder and reinterpret’ so as to fit the experience of the body, community and cosmos (1992: 109). Thus Northup continues, ‘Through ritualization, then, women “reorder and reinterpret” converting male-oriented symbols and rituals to a female-oriented belief-system’ (1997: 21). Interestingly the impetus for ritualization is a sense of marginalisation within the ritual practice of the parent or dominant religion, but as Grimes comments, the consequence of ritualization is also marginalization because, ‘Ritualization is not often socially supported. Rather, it happens in the margins on the thresholds; therefore, it is alternately stigmatized and eulogized . . .’ (Grimes 1990: 10; quoted in Northup 1997: 22).

In the examples explored in this section, we shall see that a similar impetus which has driven women’s ritualizing in mainstream contemporary churches is also evident in some early Christian communities. Here we shall notice that women are connected to the ritual language and theology of the church, but in women-only groups they ‘reorder and reinterpret’ these to create new rites which, as Grimes has noted, were marginal and stigmatized.

In his compendium of heresies of 375–8, *Panarion*, Epiphanius comments frequently on women’s ritual activity as evidence and proof of the heresies he describes. Demonstrating a continuity with second century opinions, he approvingly quotes Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* (c.175–85) to repeat the accusations that a certain Marcus gave mixed chalices to women for them to consecrate, and encouraged them to prophesy even if they had nothing to say, although his principle aim was their seduction! (*Pan.* III.2,2–8; cf. Irenaeus. *Haer.* 1.13–21) Amongst other scandalous behaviour, the

Marcionites permitted women to baptize (*Pan.* III.42,4); the Phrygians (Montanists) have prophetesses (*Pan.* III.48) and the Quintillianists ‘have women bishops, presbyters and the rest’ as well as prophetesses’ (*Pan.* III. 49.2,3).

The fourth century, though, presents us with two interesting accounts of autonomous women’s ritualizing. The Canons of the Council of Gangra, a provincial council in Paphlagonia of 355 (Barnes 1989: 124) condemn the extreme asceticism of Eustathius of Sebaste and its impact on certain women. In general, they are concerned about transvestism, but they also note that some ascetic women are going even further and forming their own religious assemblies:

Moreover, they were found to be promoting withdrawal from the houses of God and the church, [and] disposed contemptuously against the church and the things [done] in the church, and have established their own assemblies, churches, different teachings, and other things in opposition to the churches and the things [done] in the church. . . . They do not wish to make prayers in the homes of married persons and despise such prayers when they are made; frequently they do not participate in the oblations taking place in the very houses of married persons; they condemn married presbyters; they do not engage in the liturgies when performed by married presbyters. (Miller 2005: 151)

Epiphanius describes some women ‘who came from Thrace and northern Scythia to Arabia’, whom he calls the ‘Collyridians’ (those who offer cakes, *kollyrides*). These women are described as ‘unstable, prone to error and mean-spirited’ (*Pan.* 79,1.6) and their rituals in honour of the Virgin Mary are ‘ridiculous’ (*Pan.* 79,1.2): ‘for certain women decorate a barber’s chair or a square seat, spread a cloth on it, set out bread and offer it in Mary’s name on a certain day of the year and all partake of the bread’. To refute this ‘madness of women’, Epiphanius appeals to the readers’ ‘manly frame of mind’! (*Pan.* 79,1.7). Because, he argues with reference to scripture, women have never offered sacrifices to God, not even Mary was a priest nor did she baptize (*Pan.* 79,31–2); even if, in

Acts, Philip's daughters prophesied he is clear that they were not priests. He does offer a concession:

<It is plain> too that there is an order of deaconesses in the church. But this is not allowed for the practice of priesthood or any liturgical function, but for the sake of feminine modesty, at either the time of baptism or of the examination of some condition or trouble, and when a women's body may be bared, so that she will not be seen by the male priests but by the assisting female who is appointed by the priest for the occasion, to take temporary care of the woman who needs it at the time when her body is uncovered. . . . For the same reason the word of God does not allow a woman 'to speak' in church, either, or 'bear rule over a man'.

And there is a great deal that can be said about this. (*Pan.* 79.3,6; Williams 2013: 639)

Epiphanius' condemnation of the Collyridians' ritual is related to their gender: 'Every sect is a worthless woman, but this sect more so, which is composed of women and belongs to him who was the deceiver of the first woman.' (*Pan.* 79,8.3; Williams 2013: 644). And, 'Whether these worthless women offer Mary the loaf as though in worship of her, or whether they mean to offer this rotten fruit on her behalf, it is altogether silly and heretical, and demon-inspired insolence and imposture' (*Pan.* 79,9.3; Williams 2013: 645).

Joan Taylor reminds us that Epiphanius admitted inventing the name Collyridians and that 'A name given by Epiphanius to a group does not imply that it was, necessarily, an organised body' (1990: 324). Is this a true story? Epiphanius says that he has been told about it but not actually witnessed it. Ross Shepherd Kraemer suggests that 'By a historical principle known sometimes as the criterion of embarrassment (or sometimes of dissimilarity), we might consider such narratives probable. According to this principle, writers are presumed to omit embarrassing or undesirable reports unless they themselves consider them true.' (Kraemer 2004: 10). The account of a ritual bread-offering to Mary by women does not seem so far-fetched, even if we are not talking about an institutionalised cult.

Also from the fourth century, is the most interesting anonymous (pseudo-Athanasian) *Discourse on Virginity*, in which there are extensive instructions for the organisation of formal prayer among a community of virgins, including a prescribed form of private night prayer. The text has much to say about subordination to Christ, and interestingly this is to be ritually expressed when a holy man visits the community:

If a saint should come to your home, receive him in such a way as the Son of God. . . . If a just man should come into your house, you shall face him with fear and trembling, and you shall prostrate yourself on the ground at his feet. For you do not prostrate yourself to Him, but to God who sent him. You shall take water and wash his feet and you shall listen to his words with all reverence. (*Virg.* 22, Shaw 2000: 96)

The very same text, though, encourages the virgin to ‘eucharisticize’ the bread using formulae which can be found in episcopal eucharistic prayers. She is instructed to do this whether alone or with other virgins but, following the custom in the assembly, never in front of a catechumen.

And when you sit at table and start to break bread, while crossing yourself three times, (NB: Berger 2011: 89, asserts that the correct translation is that she makes the sign of the cross over the bread.) giving thanks in this way, say: ‘We give thanks to you our Father for your Holy resurrection, for through Jesus your Son you have made it known to us; and just as this bread, which is scattered, becomes one when it is gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom, for yours is the power and the glory unto ages of ages. Amen.’ (*Virg.* 13, Shaw 2000: 91)

Again, after eating, she is to recite a prayer which is very similar to post-communion thanksgivings:

We give thanks to you and praise you, because you consider us worthy to partake of your goods, of fleshly nourishment. We beg you and ask you, Lord, that you might give us heavenly

nourishment as well, and grant that we might tremble at and fear your awesome and honourable name, and not disobey your commandments. May you store your law and your ordinances in our hearts, and sanctify our spirits, our souls, and our bodies through your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to you be glory, honor and power unto the ages of ages. Amen. (*On Virg.* 14, Shaw 2000: 92)

There are relatively frequent prohibitions on women baptizing and despite there being no concrete examples in the sources, one does wonder if it did, in fact, happen; one imagines by midwives for dying infants, rather than of adults. Not only is this considered improper (following 1 Cor.) but it is viewed as positively dangerous. Thus, *Didascalia* 15 warns, ‘As to whether a woman may baptize, or whether one should be baptized by a woman, we do not counsel this, since it is a transgression of the commandment and a great danger to her who baptizes as to the one who is baptized.’ (Stewart-Sykes 2009: 189). And the *Apostolic Constitutions* augments the *Didascalia*, upon which it is based: ‘And about a woman’s baptizing, we are informing you that there is no small danger to the women who attempt it. Therefore we do not advise it. For it is dangerous, or rather, it is illegal and impious.’ It continues by implying that baptism is a priestly task and states categorically that women cannot be priests, except as ‘an error of Greek atheism’ (*Const. ap.* III.9; Miller 2005: 65–6). Methuen, who argues for situating the instructions of the *Didascalia* in a concrete historical situation in which a bishop sought to reassert his authority, has plausibly suggested that, ‘The specific nature of the instructions that widows should not teach and that women should not baptise implies that the problem, at least in part, was that the widows had been carrying out the functions which the author wished to deny them.’ (Methuen 1995: 200).

In many regions, but by no means all (exceptions are Palestine, Egypt and North Africa), women deaconesses had authorized ritual functions during the baptism of women, but not of men. The *Didascalia*, Methuen has also argued, attempted to take power from widows and give it to the

deaconesses who are to be ‘honored by you as a type of Holy Spirit’ (9.2; Stewart-Sykes 2009: 151). It permits deaconesses to anoint: ‘it is required that when women go down into the waters that they should be anointed with the oil of anointing by deaconesses as they enter the water’ (15.3; Stewart-Sykes 2009: 193). *Const. ap.* 3.16 adds that a deacon should anoint the forehead only of women candidates, and a deaconess the whole body, ‘for it is not necessary that the women be observed by men’ (Miller 2005: 64). However, such a concern for propriety was not evident everywhere: in Jerusalem the newly baptized were reminded ‘you were naked in the sight of all and were not ashamed’ (*Myst. Cat.* 2.2). *Const. ap.* 8.19–20 provides a prayer for the public ordination of deaconesses and the *Barbarini Codex gr.* 336 the earliest liturgical manuscript for the city of Constantinople, attests to the ordination of deaconesses until the ninth century (*Barbarini* 336: 163)

37.5 Conclusion

When women were not barred by menstruation or childbirth, they were of course present in the liturgical assembly, but as Berger has pointed out ‘no gender-free space exists in liturgical history’ (2011: 65). What door women entered and exited by, where they were permitted to stand (on the left, at the back, or in a gallery), what, if anything, they were permitted to say (thus, *Virg.* 23: ‘Keep silent in church, and do not laugh at all, but pay attention only to the reading.’ Shaw 2005: 96), when they were permitted to receive communion (after the men), where was their place in processions; for all these normal liturgical activities, baptized women were the subject of spatial regulations (See Berger 2011: 37-64). This means that although women were present in some numbers in the liturgical assembly, their participation was not the same as the ideal congregant—male, baptized, of moral rectitude and who had not recently had sex.

Victor Turner’s notion of ‘rites of passage’ has been a useful way of examining how an individual acquires a new status in the community through a threefold process of separation, liminality and *communitas*. The liminal phase requires an annihilation of self-identity, a reversal of

social status, through physical and ritual separation, the experience of *communitas*, followed by the identity crisis which is resolved by (re-)admission to the community. Bynum has offered a critique of this based on her study of medieval women's lives revealed in hagiographies and autobiographies. She noted that when women wrote about themselves they did not consider their lives in this processual manner and that 'Turner's notion of liminality . . . is applicable only to men. Only men's stories are full social dramas; only men's symbols are full reversals.' (1984: 118) Women are liminal to men, as Turner himself noted, and as we can see in the early Christian rituals presented in this section, they never fully achieve an equal and full status in the community.

For women qualified to be present at the eucharist, we note some interesting practices related to the physical space and movement through the thresholds within it. Regular and cyclical exclusions because of menstruation or childbirth place women in a revolving door of separation, liminality and incorporation. The almost-permanent liminal status of baptized non-menstruating midwives is asserted by positioning them with catechumens and penitents at the door of the church during the weeks after delivery (*Can. Hipp.* 18). Christian women not subject to these restrictions may still find themselves positioned at the *limens* of the liturgical assembly, expressed by being restricted to specific, inferior, places in the church building. Thus we should consider the women who do achieve incorporation—the consecrated widows positioned next to the presbyters in the sanctuary, the virgins at their veiling—to be exceptional cases. The hesitations about the universal applicability of 'rites of passage' theories to baptism voiced by Bradshaw in this volume (Chapter 31), become even more clearly articulated when one considers that, despite having been baptized, women might repeatedly experience separation and liminality, and only temporary incorporation.

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