CHAPTER THREE

A Handmaid’s Tale

This chapter has to do with religious rituals directed at the experience of women in North America and Japan who have undergone abortions. In each case, they are rituals aimed at the healing of a particular cultural construction of grief and guilt predicated upon a particular ethnopsychology of the person. I will first present the North American ritual and then contrast it with a parallel ritual in contemporary Japan.

The North American ritual, or more precisely the ritual technique, is disturbing in the way it taps into one of the most emotionally, ethically, and politically provocative issues in contemporary society. It is disturbing in the same sense as is Margaret Atwood’s powerful novel, A Handmaid’s Tale, from which I’ve borrowed my title. Atwood describes a North American society in the very near and almost-present future in which fundamentalist Christianity has acceded to political power and created a totalitarian state. In this psychic, the act of performing abortion is punishable by death and the public exhibition of one’s humiliated corpse. Because environmental pollution has decreased the population’s fertility to a dangerously low level the Commanders who constitute a ruling elite are assigned Handmaids. These fertile young women complement the Commanders’ privileged Wives as reproductive servants within their sanctified households.

When I first encountered Atwood’s work, I was frankly jolted by the similarity of terminology to that prevalent in some of the Catholic Charismatic “covenant communities” I had been studying. “Household” was indeed a specialized term for a Christian living arrangement that included more members than a nuclear family. There was an office of “handmaid,” admittedly without reproductive function, but understood as a role in which some women had additional responsibilities for community service, particularly regarding the well-being of other women, but always under direct male “headship” or authority. Somewhat ominously, in the leading covenant community, the office of handmaid was itself suspended for a period of several years, presumably because those who held it were arrogating more authority than was regarded as biblically warranted by th
male ruling elite. The ruling elite of these communities, which considered themselves vanguard outposts of a coming kingdom of God (the logical extension of which seemed to me to be Atwood’s Republic of Gilead), styled themselves not as Commanders within a religious police state, but in a slightly more bureaucratic vein, as “Coordinators” (Csordas 1997).

The possibility of seeing the Charismatics as “proto-Gileadean” was entertained during my study of their system of ritual healing when I discovered the rite I will describe below. Let me note from the outset that some Catholic Charismatics are quite active in the political opposition to abortion, prompted by the double influence of embracing the conservative position of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and embracing the fundamentalist conservatism of neo-Pentecostalism. Some are additionally active in a campaign to achieve medical recognition of what they call “post-abortion syndrome,” a fabricated psychiatric syndrome modeled very closely on the definition of “post-traumatic stress disorder” found in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Such a disorder is, strictly speaking, a culture-bound disorder in the sense that it is relevant only within a Charismatic culture that defines the experience of abortion as necessarily traumatic.

Leaving that point aside for the present, note that the healing practices we have been discussing among Catholic Charismatics show a remarkable uniformity across regions and locales, at least within North America. This is in part due to a highly developed distribution system for movement publications including books, magazines, and audiotapes, as well as the existence of a class of teachers and healers who travel to workshops, conferences, retreats, and “days of renewal” at which such practices and their rationales are disseminated. Again, the three principal forms of healing are prayer for healing of physical or medical problems, Deliverance or casting out of evil spirits, and inner healing or Healing of Memories.¹ The Healing of Memories is the ritual transformation of the consequences of emotional trauma or “woundedness” by means of prayer. This prayer often includes imaginal processes in the form of guided imagery initiated by the healer or the spontaneous enactment of a scenario by the patient. At times the memory identified as in need of transformation is that of having had an abortion. In Charismatic culture, undergoing an abortion is presumed traumatic to the pregnant woman, entailing the emotional consequences of guilt and the grief of bereavement, and is also presumed to produce a death trauma for the aborted fetus.²

Healing of memories for the mother and fetus is described in a book by the highly popular Charismatic Jesuit priests Dennis and Matthew Linn and their collaborator Sheila Fabricant (1985:105–139). Their book treats miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions as a single class, beginning with a theological discussion emphasizing that while these unbaptized do not necessarily end up in the “limbo” of Catholic lore and can go to heaven, they are in need of healing. The authors go on to a psychological discussion of prenatal research, arguing for the emotional viability, and hence vulnerability