

WOMEN AND RELIGION IN DIDEROT'S LA RELIGIEUSE

WOMEN AND RELIGION IN DIDEROT'S LA RELIGIEUSE.  
AUTHORITY, SEXUALITY, AND ALIENATION.

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1, Authority .....	8
Chapter 2, Sexuality .....	39
Chapter 3, Alienation .....	81
Conclusion .....	118
Bibliography .....	125

## Introduction.

The choice of a nun as the subject of a book which deals with the abuse of authority by the family, by society, by the Catholic church, and by implication Christian theology, was an apt choice for a thinker and writer of the Enlightenment whose claims for humanism insisted on individual as well as collective rights. In this thesis I will try to show that Diderot, in the text of La Religieuse, wrote a feminist text which demonstrates the role that society and church played in the oppression of women, specifically but not exclusively, in the convent.

The enclosed convent is a microcosm of society, and the nun is a symbol of the ignorance, prejudice and superstitions that permeated the religious attitudes toward women. Nuns are encouraged to live in ignorance, not just of the material world, perceived as bad in the dualistic good-bad thinking of traditional western thought, but of the self and of each other. Few, if any, in Diderot's convent have a true vocation. The malice and cruelty they show to each other is typical of most people, men or women, in forced confinement, and is a result of the psychological torture and enforced blind obedience inflicted at every level by an unenlightened authority.

A hundred years ago Matilda Gage said : "Power of religious despotism lies in two conditions; First, ignorance; Second, fear. To fear must ever be attributed the great victories of religious despotism." <sup>1</sup> Diderot's nuns are kept in a state of ignorance and fear; ignorance of the truth and fear of damnation in eternity, which she called "slavery of the human mind..." <sup>2</sup> both of which produce results which are then criticised by the very sources which produced them.

The first chapter deals with authority, and how the patriarchal institutions of society have within their very structure the basis for oppression through their foundations on an ideologically-directed interpretation of Judeo-Christian theology. Many feminist writers, male and female, see liberation theology as the basic message of the gospels, and traditional religion as ideologically warped. La Religieuse shows how such a theology, developed in the western tradition, influences the personal lives of women, both in and of itself and through its political application, and denies them the actualisation of any potential they may have.

The second chapter deals with sexuality, specifically lesbianism. Many feminist writers have a much more inclusive, more accepting attitude of sexuality as an integral part of the whole person, of sexuality as a part of life, a part of every self, every being, and not something which can be compartmentalised into one aspect of life, that of reproducing the species. I

think that La Religieuse shows how the fundamentally patriarchal attitude of the church toward sexuality as being sinful in and of itself, for all people, but especially for women, is destructive and alienating. Diderot believed that a person was made up of mind and body together, not mind and body as two totally separate and separable parts. Most critics, including May <sup>3</sup>, Sherman <sup>4</sup>, Monier <sup>5</sup>, Fauchery <sup>6</sup>, and Mylne <sup>7</sup> agree that lesbianism is the result of segregation, of being part of a manless society; at least they believe that Diderot saw it that way. I think he was using the context of a convent as a paradigm of enforced isolation, and exploring various possibilities and results of that isolation. Crocker says: "The chaos of human life is centred, in Diderot's picture, on three factors: sex, moral judgement and the drive toward power, superiority, and exploitation of others. The sexual instincts are an irreducible element of disorder in society." <sup>8</sup> Heyward has a wider and more feminist perspective; she sees "all evil, that is, the malicious violation of creation itself...rooted in our inability to know and to take seriously the holiness of the body." <sup>9</sup> If life is based on relationships with others, as it is, humans must learn to treat all of creation, including bodies and sexuality, with love and respect.

The third chapter deals with alienation; physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual. The theologian Gregory Baum discovered that the study of sociology had a profound effect on his theological thinking. <sup>10</sup> He was impressed by the "central place that the study of religion occupied in the works of the great



thinkers." <sup>11</sup> He notes that religion was a powerful factor without which it would be impossible to account for culture and society as we know them. <sup>12</sup> He is impressed by the moral passion in the works of those who detect and analyse those aspects of society which dehumanise and alienate. I see La Religieuse as one of those works, and Diderot, through his denunciation of institutions which fundamentally alienate people from their true selves and from others, as one of these thinkers.

According to Eberhard, the common denominator of alienation is quest. <sup>13</sup> A person tends to become alienated when trying to become more than he or she is, when his or her ambition is beyond his or her grasp. <sup>14</sup> In a society where gender roles are rigidly enforced, all individual potential is bound to be limited, but because of the nature of the institutions it is female potential which is most restricted. The problems in La Religieuse are more the result of an alienating religion and society than they are of flaws in the characters themselves. Eberhard asserts that Carl Jung went so far as to claim that he had never encountered a personality disorder in a mature adult which did not prove itself to be basically a religious problem. <sup>15</sup>

The basic message of La Religieuse seems to be clear. According to Sherman, the human being is a naturally sociable, sexual animal, who, if placed in an environment inhibiting the fulfilment of these needs, usually surrenders to depravity, or madness, or both. <sup>16</sup> According to many humanist

thinkers, and particularly to feminists, it is, as Mary Hunt says: "...the patriarchal nature of the Christian tradition (which) makes the clearest and most decisive difference in people's daily lives. Moral theology as presently conceived seems, paradoxically, immoral....[it] systematically excludes half of the very people whose lives it pretends to reflect..."<sup>17</sup> Baum found that sociological tradition contains basic truth absent from philosophical and theological thought,<sup>18</sup> and that religion, however spiritual in appearance, has a social impact which may be hidden from the theologian.<sup>19</sup> Diderot's La Religieuse is part of this sociological tradition.

One of his greatest adversaries in his war against society and its corrupt institutions was religion, especially christianity.<sup>20</sup> He offered a sociological analysis to theology in the hope that theology would address itself to real life and to real people. Eberhard would agree. "Theology," he says, should address itself to human experience."<sup>21</sup>

I have been influenced by the theology and feminism of such authors as Matilda Joslyn Gage, Carter Heyward, Joanne Carlson Brown, Carole Bohn, and Mary Daly among others, many others, whose approach I find to be more justice-oriented than traditional church teaching, and by definition less misogynistic. Their writings, like Diderot's La Religieuse, aim to dispel both ignorance and fear by putting a more fully human face, including the feminine face, on the human condition.

## ENDNOTES, INTRODUCTION

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## Authority

In La Religieuse, Diderot clearly shows the abuse of authority in the family, in convents, and in the institution of the Church, aided and abetted by the State. The novel is a plea not only against forced vocations like Suzanne Simonin's, but of the clausturation, particularly of young people, of conventual life itself, and against the isolation from society which he sees as being totally against nature. In this context Diderot must call into question several authorities. Among these figures that of the family.

The family, "a microcosmic unit of the hierarchical structure,"<sup>1</sup> is the first arbiter of authority that a child encounters. In Suzanne's family, the abuse is obvious immediately. Her father, a lawyer, an agent of justice itself, treats her unjustly. Because of her illegitimacy, suspected but not openly acknowledged at first, Suzanne is treated differently from her two sisters: "vous me rappelez une trahison...et la haine que je lui dois se répand sur vous" says Mme Simonin (252).<sup>2</sup> Suzanne is a constant reminder to both father and mother of the mother's infidelity. Her mother says to Suzanne: "Je ne vous vois jamais à côté de lui sans entendre ses reproches; il me les adresse, par la

dureté dont il en use avec vous" (252). Both parents abuse their parental authority by using Suzanne as the scapegoat for their own problems.

Despite her superiority in beauty, character, talent and ability (236), Suzanne is treated as an outsider in the family, a point which will be dealt with in greater detail in the chapter on alienation. Although he could afford it, "il avait plus de fortune qu'il n'en fallait ..." (235), he chooses not to give her a dowry, thereby denying her any hope of marriage or of a family life of her own. The fact that a dowry is necessary is in itself an abusive custom, reducing women to a commodity with a monetary value, but this does not negate the fact that the tyrannous authority exercised by M. Simonin in refusing her what is set up as a custom by society, is supported by the Church and by that same society. Canon law "admitted no other matrimonial regime other than the dowry scheme, which made women legally incompetent and powerless." <sup>3</sup> He forbade his wife to see or speak to Suzanne, with the result that, although living under the same roof, they had to write to each other. Suzanne asks to see her mother, but her mother "avait promis le contraire à M. Simonin (255). As Père Séraphin says, "ce sont les maris qui font tout." (250)

As a lawyer, he was well aware that the vows taken by a nun are binding forever, and that only the state, not the Church, has the power to annul them: "at that time in France the age at which binding vows could be taken was regulated by the state at sixteen and release from them could only be granted

by the state." <sup>4</sup> Abensour cites a young nun who writes from Lyons to Louis XIV: "N'est-il pas surprenant, que nos lois qui ont fixé l'âge d'une fille en état de passer un contrat, aient oublié de parler de celui auquel elle peut faire des voeux?" <sup>5</sup> As Abensour points out, "Bien souvent, on les enferme à un âge où elles n'ont pas eu le temps de réfléchir sur les obligations de leur vie nouvelle."

<sup>6</sup> It is doubtful that time to reflect would make much difference; marriage was often a socially organised contract not always freely entered into, and entrance into the convent was also a kind of contract, often arranged by parents. For some reason, social order seems to need the sacrifice of young women, perhaps to be held up as examples of 'virtue.'

It is a terrible abuse of both legal and parental authority when M. Simonin, in what Rubinger calls "the best despotic tradition", <sup>7</sup> insists that Suzanne write down in black and white that she was becoming a nun of her own free will (255), knowing full well that it is not her choice, and this document would affect her court case later. This forced collaboration in her own imprisonment is a psychological as well as a moral abuse. He uses his legal expertise to draw up legal contracts to reduce Suzanne's share (250); she is legally cut out of the family fortune. It is Père Séraphin who tells Suzanne "...qu'on a pris toutes les précautions imaginables, par les contrats de mariage, par le dénature des biens, par les stipulations, par les fidéocommis et autres moyens, de réduire à rien votre légitime, dans le cas que vous puissiez un jour

vous adresser aux lois pour la redemander" (250). The law supports the father and the father controls the family; neither the mother nor Suzanne can do anything against the combined forces of the Church and State. As Edmiston points out, "disinheritance is a legally sanctioned form of parental punishment."

<sup>8</sup> This reason for wanting to put Suzanne in the convent is a legal one. Her parents are afraid that Suzanne will try to claim her share of the family inheritance: "ma mère craignait apparemment que je ne revinsse un jour sur le partage des biens, que je ne redemandasse ma légitime..." (248).

Whether Mme Simonin would have wanted to do anything to protect her daughter had she been able to is another question. When Suzanne suggests a viable alternative, a possible marriage to "quelqu'un à qui mon caractère, mon esprit, ma figure et mes talents auraient paru une dot suffisante," her mother rejects it, despite the fact that it would have achieved the mother's object of removing her from the house and from daily life. Père Séraphin tells Suzanne that it is her mother's wish that Suzanne enter the convent: "...je ne vous cèlerai pas que l'abandon apparent de votre mère, son opiniâtreté à vous renfermer..." (251). It is this insistence by the mother that confirms M. Simonin's suspicions of Suzanne's birth says Père Séraphin: "votre naissance lui était suspecte, elle ne le lui est plus" (251). As far as Suzanne is concerned, it is "le scrupule" (251) which deprives her of a mother, the total unthinking, uncritical belief in the theology of sacrifice and substitutionary



redemption. Suzanne's whole future is compromised because of this wish to put her in a convent, and the power her parents have to fulfil this wish, to deny her the most basic of human rights, the right to liberty. As head of the family, especially in a patriarchy, the father represents for the child, "both the moral authority and the incarnation of the code of social behaviour."<sup>9</sup> As Edmiston says: "The established order of eighteenth-century France was a patriarchal system, characterised by paternal authority in the family and by a hierarchically organised society. The principal elements of such an order are respect for tradition and obedience to the authorities of father, king and God."<sup>10</sup> Each authority supports the others in order to maintain the status quo. The text of La Religieuse shows that Diderot does not see these elements as positive factors, that it is in fact those authorities and those who advocate the support of these authorities who are corrupt and must bear the blame for the victimisation of Suzanne, and as Diderot sees it, all those in the monastic life.

If the mother has the right to keep her illegitimate children, the husband has the power to revenge himself against them when it comes to decisions regarding their marriage.<sup>11</sup> This gives him an effective way of controlling his wife too, as Markiewicz points out.<sup>12</sup> M. Simonin controls Suzanne by denying her a dowry. If his behaviour seems morally questionable to us now, as indeed it is, he does no more than represent his contemporary social code, itself morally questionable. As Daly says: "religions centred on a

male God legitimise the political and social order by granting authority to fathers and sons in the institutions of society." <sup>13</sup> It is in this way explains Dunfee, in reference to Daly's statement, that "the male-father-God reinforces not only the superiority and God-likeness of the man, but it also, inasmuch as the father is the one who rules and has power over "his" people, reinforces the structures of oppression built upon rulership and power..." <sup>14</sup> The husband dominating the wife represents God himself. So M. Simonin not only has the authority which all men had over their wives, but a willing partner in the decision to send Suzanne to the convent. If, as Schneir claims, "all men, except the most brutish, desire to have...not a forced slave...but a willing one..." <sup>15</sup> he has a willing slave in his wife. She is, as a mother, what Dworkin calls "the primary agent of male culture in the family," <sup>16</sup> the prevailing culture being Catholic and patriarchal.

Mme Simonin, Suzanne's natural mother, is the antithesis of the stereotypical loving mother who is compassionate, loving, and nurturing. In fact she seems to hate Suzanne and uses emotional and psychological blackmail to force her to become a nun as expiation for her own sin: "Songez, mon enfant, que le sort de votre mère, dans l'autre monde, dépend beaucoup de la conduite que vous tiendrez dans celui-ci" (265). This constitutes what Mylne calls an "unjustified use of authority." <sup>17</sup> But does the mother have any true authority?

Does she not just internalise and regurgitate the patriarchal attitudes and values of her husband, her Church and her society?

Mme Simonin's attitude to her husband is what Mylne characterises as one of "respect bordering on fear." <sup>18</sup> She is in an unequal power relationship where the only authority she has is as a spokesperson for her husband and his values. He goes along with her wishes because it suits him; she goes along with his wishes because she does not have any alternative. When Mme Simonin gives Suzanne a little money, "ma conscience ne me permet pas de disposer d'une plus grande somme" (265), it is money her husband has given her "de temps en temps de sa libéralité" (253). This economic dependence is a form of abuse because it reduces her to a kept woman with no freedom to make her own decisions, but it also reflects the warped conscience she has developed. Why would her conscience not allow her to help her daughter financially? Or even just support her emotionally? What little money she has does give her some autonomy which she chooses not to use to help Suzanne at the time when it could be useful.

Hatred of the unwanted child is common according to Simone de Beauvoir: "It is a godsend - literally - to be able to give way to it (the hatred) with righteous anger." <sup>19</sup> This is what Suzanne's parents do. M. Simonin wants her out of his sight where she is a constant reminder of his wife's infidelity, and therefore of a possible perceived failure on his part. The anger

he might feel towards himself and his failure to control not only his wife's feelings, but her behaviour, especially her sexual behaviour, so crucial in a patriarchal culture, is deflected onto Suzanne. Mme Simonin self-righteously demands the sacrifice of Suzanne's liberty to make her life easier, and to avoid the constant reminder of someone whom she had loved and who had rejected her. It seems that her anger at her lover, Suzanne's biological father, is deflected towards Suzanne, and that any authority she has is aimed at removing Suzanne from her daily life. Père Séraphin tells Suzanne: "Mon enfant, plaignez votre mère, plaignez-la plus encore que vous ne la blâmez. Elle a l'âme bonne; soyez sûre que c'est malgré elle qu'elle en use ainsi." (248) He is Mme Simonin's confessor too, so presumably he either knows exactly why the mother is acting this way "malgré elle," or he too accepts the idea of substitutionary redemption. He does not however, offer any alternative, even an impracticable one. The mother is under the father's authority, and as she says, he has already punished her by his treatment of her; what she did was "une faute que je n'ai déjà que trop expiée" (252). The text raises the question, not of whether she has been sufficiently punished for her infidelity, nor even the question of whether her husband has the right to punish her, but whether the treatment meted out to Suzanne is justified. The answer is obviously that it is not.

As well as this psychological reason for Suzanne's incarceration, there is the theology of Redemption that Mme Simonin accepts. She says to Suzanne: "Dieu nous a conservées l'une et l'autre, pour que la mère expiât sa faute par l'enfant" (253). Mylne claims that "this note of selfish anxiety about her own redemption is not in accord with the idea of true repentance,"<sup>20</sup> but Christianity itself is based completely on the idea of the innocent being sacrificed to save the guilty. All human behaviour is supposed to be aimed at salvation of the soul: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark. Ch 8.v 36) Therefore, for Mme Simonin to put the salvation of her soul before everything is maybe selfish, but it is consistent with traditional Christian teaching. That she is willing to sacrifice her daughter has biblical precedent also; Abraham was willing to sacrifice the life of Isaac for no reason other than to show blind obedience, (Genesis 22:v 1-2, v 10) in what Greven calls a disturbing example, a monstrous paradigm for parental discipline.<sup>21</sup> Diderot undermines the authority of the Simonin family, particularly the mother's authority in his revelation of the two nameless daughters behaviour towards their dying mother (265). Their behaviour also supports his portrayal of Mme. Simonin as a non-maternal mother. Suzanne has reason to resent the mother's attitude and treatment of her; the daughters do not.

Christianity traditionally accepts suffering as "the way to salvation, to eternal love,"<sup>22</sup> but to have any validity the sufferer must choose to accept the suffering himself or herself. Inflicted suffering reflects more on the person who causes the suffering than on the victim. Suzanne is not a model Christian, says Edmiston, because her sacrifice was not voluntary.<sup>23</sup> One could say that she is not even a Christian by choice. When she takes her vows she says: "...je me suis trouvée religieuse aussi innocemment que je fus faite chrétienne; je n'ai pas plus compris à toute la cérémonie de ma profession qu'à celle de mon baptême..." (263). But in accepting her father's will, however reluctantly, she is conforming, or being made to conform, to the central religious paradigm of filial obedience. Paul Vernière says that "l'humanité est la première des vertus, et d'elle découlent toutes les autres."<sup>24</sup> If by humanity is meant an empathy and a resulting kindness for other people in one's life, as I think it must, then neither the Simonin family nor the church show much humanity. By showing Suzanne's life as a tragedy Diderot is not only demonstrating the inhumanity of his society, but is actively advocating change.

It is ironic that Suzanne, whose birth was a result of broken marriage vows, is herself expected to expiate the sin by taking her own vows, not unknowingly as at baptism, but totally against her will. The Church, through Père Séraphin at first, and then through the Superior at the first convent,

supports the Simonins in their efforts and thus starts Suzanne's "struggle against repressive civil and religious law, family authority and social tradition." <sup>25</sup>

Père Séraphin, who acts as an agent between parental and patriarchal ecclesiastic authority, and whose behaviour belies his angelic name in that he knows, or should know, that what he is doing is morally wrong, encourages Suzanne to enter because of the money; her family has very little money left to spend on Suzanne: "...vos parents se sont dépouillés pour vos soeurs, et je ne vois plus ce qu'ils pourraient pour vous dans la situation étroite où ils se sont réduits" (237). Even if this were true now, it was certainly not the case when Suzanne was first sent to the convent before either of her sisters were married. He tells her that the convent will take her for a modest dowry; the convent will accept anyone for the "milliers d'écus qu'il en revient à leur maison" (240). When Suzanne tells the priest that she does not have a vocation, he replies "tant pis" (237). Having been denied the means of earning a living because of their claustration, and because of the vow of poverty which all nuns must take, convents were forced not only into a mean form of commerce, but also into living as hypocrites because of it. Suzanne says that she is not afraid of poverty, and the Superior tells her: "Craignez les désordres auxquels elle entraîne" (289), a prophetic warning as the reader discovers at the end of the novel. This economic dependence, a fundamental aspect of patriarchal society, is used as a way to keep women in their place, is abusive

and leads to other abusive situations because of the very impossibility of escape and independence. The guilt then is shared by the whole family, and by guilt I mean responsibility, not necessarily a feeling of culpability; one can be guilty without consciously acknowledging the guilt. Both parents sacrifice Suzanne in favour of the other two daughters: "c'est là que l'ambition et le luxe se sacrifient une portion des familles pour faire à celle qui reste un sort plus avantageux (312). The father legally accepts Suzanne as his daughter by giving her his name but refuses to treat her as an equal member of the family. And the mother persists in believing that she can be saved by the sacrifice of Suzanne, and that with Suzanne gone her life will continue<sup>to</sup> be as if Suzanne had never existed.

The first Superior can be seen as a hypocrite. Suzanne says: "combien ces supérieures de couvent sont artificieuses; vous n'en avez point idée" (238). And yet, as far as she can, she seems to encourage Suzanne's rebellion: "elle m'encouragea à ne point embrasser un état pour lequel je n'avais aucun goût; elle me promit de prier, de remontrer, de solliciter" (238). When she encourages Suzanne to enter the convent on the pretext that it need not be permanent unless she chooses it to be, she is being practical, accepting the restrictions of her very limited authority. She does tell Suzanne that she will do all she can to help her: "comptez toujours sur tous mes secours" (242). The pressure to take her vows, however, comes not only from the Superior, but



from the director of the house, a theologian, the novice mistress, the Bishop of Aleppo, monks, priests, her father and her mother, as well as from her sisters (243); patriarchal religion supporting the patriarchal family. The Superior has little influence against these pressures, so it is unfair to blame her for Suzanne's being forced to take her vows. To say that the original fault is the mother's for having an illegitimate child is also unfair. First, her marriage, to an older man, may well have been arranged, as it seems were those of her two daughters: "ma seconde soeur fut accordée à un M. Bauchon..." (237), like an object given or sold. And second, the same society which allows the father to keep the illegitimate children of his wife also gives him the support he needs to use his authority to punish both wife and child. As Suzanne says, all this abuse of authority constitutes a form of violence: "mon dessin était de finir cette persécution..." (243). Whatever she does or does not do, the first Superior does not actively go out and solicit Suzanne's vocation. She tells Suzanne that "deux ans, c'est du temps, il peut arriver bien de choses en deux ans..." (238). In a way she is right; in a very short time, Suzanne's nameless sisters have big families, and both her parents die within a relatively short period time.

Suzanne points out that, if indeed the Superior and the novice-mistress at Sainte-Marie are devious, it is not entirely of their own doing, "car il ne faut pas croire qu'elles s'amuse de leur rôle hypocrite qu'elles jouent, et des sottises qu'elles soient forcées de vous répéter" (241). It is the nature of the


life itself which forces them to become hypocritical. When Suzanne's nonconformity reveals the disorder within the convent/prison its authority is shown to be an illusion, what Rubinger calls a "mirror image of subjection."<sup>26</sup> The Mother Superior has to invoke and submit to the real power which determines her world. "Faceless, wholly male, it is the outside ecclesiastical structure which will decide Suzanne's fate, and in the process judge - and condemn - the convent also."<sup>27</sup>

Mme de Moni, a mystic, is the first "à exercer sur Suzanne cette séduction mélangée de dévotion et de mystère."<sup>28</sup>

Diderot does not say whether she is in the convent of her own free will, but he does imply that many are not, and shows that the fact that the Church accepts nuns against their will is an abuse of authority and a travesty of Christian principles. Within the confines of female piety as defined by the Church, Mme de Moni tries to find her own autonomy, and to do this - to become holy - within the definition allowed by the Church, she has to negate all physical needs. She tries, with some limited success, to stifle all physical desire: "To obliterate every human feeling of....sexual desire...is to be master of oneself," according to Bell.<sup>29</sup> It is not by accident that most female saints are virgins; for a woman to be sexual and holy is a religious oxymoron. As a mystic, Mme de Moni puts herself outside the bounds of the male hierarchy, and therefore its authority: "To be the servant of God is to be the servant of no

man," says Bell.<sup>30</sup> That is, she rejects the priests and the Church as the sole intermediary of God's word and communicates with God directly, a quest for spiritual equality and a form of rebellion against church authority. The mystic, says de Beauvoir, seeks the "mirage of some form of transcendence."<sup>31</sup> She maintains that "the church sees to it that God never authorises women to escape male guardianship; she has put exclusively in man's hands such powerful weapons as denial of absolution and excommunication."<sup>32</sup> This puts women into what Carol Christ calls a "state of psychological dependence on men and male authority."<sup>33</sup> It is ironic, or maybe it is not, that the church is referred to as "she", like a boat or a car, (objects usually owned by men for pleasure), when in fact it is an institution run by, and mostly for, the benefit of men. That it is called Holy Mother Church may help dupe women into feeling they are an important and integral part of an institution which subjugates them and denies them any but secondary roles. For a nun, the only hope of equality is in the next world, in a heaven dominated by a male God.

In La Religieuse, it is not Suzanne who seeks salvation, but her mother, at Suzanne's expense. The novel, through the ongoing tale of Suzanne's sufferings, becomes a plea against forced vocations and a way of criticising the Church and society which support such abuses. Through the style of writing, which appeals to the emotions as much as to the mind, Diderot creates empathy with his characters and "makes the suffering of an individual



the pretext for a hostile analysis of society,"<sup>34</sup> and shows how "the oppression of some contaminates the entire society."<sup>35</sup> Suzanne is a victim of authority at every level; that of her parents, of the Church through the various convents and the support they receive from the institution in general, and of the state inasmuch as only the courts can give her freedom and they refuse to do so. Rome gives her permission to appeal her vows, perhaps in the full knowledge that she will be unsuccessful, but this permission in no way negates the original abuse of authority involved in the Church's accepting vows so unwillingly given, nor in allowing the State final authority over the renunciation of those vows. The state abuses its authority in allowing a child, as Suzanne says, "de disposer de sa liberté à un âge où il ne lui est pas permis de disposer d'un écu" (295).

[ In a letter to Sophie Volland, Diderot had written; "You all die at fifteen."<sup>36</sup> ] He was referring to women in general, who pass from the domination of the father to their submission to a husband. For a woman, choice was limited to marriage or the religious life, both under male authority, the husband or the Church having the control previously exercised by the father. The convent *could* be a way to achieve at least a limited autonomy, but even there, in a quasi-matriarchal society, a woman was still under male authority, even if only indirectly. It is M. Hébert who decides to have Suzanne transferred from one convent to another, and he has the authority to have his orders carried out. He says to Suzanne: "...de ce jour vous n'êtes plus sous son autorité..." (325).

But both Soeur Sainte-Christine and Suzanne are under *his* authority. It is M. Manouri whose influence, which is but a less obvious kind of authority, is really responsible for the move. It is he who has the resources to provide or arrange for the dowry.

At first, Diderot gives a certain humanity to the confessor at the first convent, Père Séraphin, because he was a late vocation (248). The implication is clear: had he become a priest at a younger age he would not have been as kind. The two young priests, "de caractère tendre et miséricordieux qui est si rare dans leur état" (326). show that they are an exception, that in general priests are not what they should be: compassionate and Christian. The Superior claims never to have influenced anyone to enter the convent, "car c'est un état où Dieu nous appelle (242), but as far as Suzanne is concerned, "il était décidé que je serais religieuse, et je le fus" (248). The decision was not made by her or by God. For all intents and purposes there is no difference between God wanting her to be a nun and her father wanting it. She realises that when there is doubt another mechanism comes into play: "on n'invoque presque jamais la voix du ciel que quand on ne sait à quoi se résoudre; et il est rare qu'alors elle ne nous conseille pas d'obéir (255). There is no question of God speaking directly to a supplicant: rather it is a reference to the indoctrination of the conscience, the sublimation of the will to someone else's will. Once again, better to have a willing slave than an unwilling one.

A vocation is, by definition, an impulsion to follow a certain career path, a call from God for those in religion, therefore it is something internal, private. Yet the novice mistress claims that she has never seen a stronger vocation than Suzanne's, and thereby influences Suzanne when she is waiting for God's advice: "La mère des novices n'avait jamais vu dans aucune de ses élèves de vocation mieux caractérisée" (244). It is not only the lives of women which are manipulated by this assumption of a divine authority, but also the mental processes, the doubts and fears which become the "inspirations de Dieu" or the "instigations de Satan" (244), both interpreted to suit the purposes of the prevailing authority. This manipulation can be seen as hypocrisy and an abuse of authority. As Suzanne remarks: "il me paraissait assez singulier que la même chose vînt de Dieu ou du diable, selon qu'il leur plaisait de l'envisager. Il y a beaucoup de circonstances pareilles dans la religion...le même mal vient, ou de Dieu qui nous éprouve, ou du diable qui nous tente" (244). The "inspirations de Dieu" and "instigations de Satan" are open to interpretation, and whoever has the authority has the right to interpret. As de Beauvoir says, "Man enjoys the great advantage of having a God endorse the codes he writes."<sup>37</sup>

From being an object belonging to a family, Suzanne becomes an object belonging to the convent, and this notion of possession and ownership, along with its concomitant authority, leads to violence. The theme of violence against women runs strongly through the novel. M. Simonin loved his wife, and

to protect what he owned, "il était violent" (254). This notion of violence is carried over into the convent, essentially a feminine world, where each Superior is a tyrant in her own way. De Beauvoir claims that "the tyranny exercised by women only goes to show her dependence...she makes a weapon of her weakness."<sup>38</sup> In a way which parallels the Simonin's anger being deflected from themselves onto Suzanne, the oppressed woman deflects her anger at being subservient onto those under her authority. The malice and cruelty of the convents is to some extent then a result of forced confinement. Convents were under the authority of the Church, and the Church and the State worked very much in tandem, consequently the Superiors were victims of a male authoritarian society and Church which denied them any real autonomy. Suzanne says that Church authorities know from experience that "leur autorité est toujours éludée et compromise" (297), but this is a reference to the daily irritations and petty insubordinations and rebellions: Superiors would know from experience that their real authority was limited to what the Bishop and King allowed them to have: "Les évêques réservent la surveillance de gestion temporelle comme de la gestion spirituelle...une décision de l'évêque fait même priver l'abbesse de l'administration du temporel."<sup>39</sup> Legally "la femme est une éternelle mineure,"<sup>40</sup> even if she has the business acumen to cope with the daily management of a large convent. Suzanne is caught in a conflict between Père Lemoine and the Superior; "Je suis votre Supérieure, vous me devez



obéissance, et je vous ordonne de lui point parler de ces sottises" (365). The Superior even forbids Suzanne to go to confession and takes it on herself to forgive and absolve: "vous n'avez commis aucune faute dont je ne puisse vous réconcilier et vous absoudre" (366). As only a priest has the power of absolution, this is a psychological abuse of authority; she is putting Suzanne between two opposing and irreconcilable authorities. But it is also a rebellion against the authority of the Church, against the priest who has the power to control and regulate even, or especially, the private life of a nun. Abensour notes that it is only since the Middle Ages that superior could no longer hear the confession of her nuns,<sup>41</sup> a fact which puts the superior's rebellion in another light - as a deliberate rebellion against the growing misogyny of the church, and an effort to reclaim some authority.

\* Mme de Moni is "explicitly absolved of trying to seduce her charges into a state of illusory security,"<sup>42</sup> says Mylne. She is well aware of the power she has to influence the young women who are sent to her. She tells Suzanne: "Entre toutes les créatures que vous voyez autour de moi, si dociles, si innocentes, si douces, eh bien! mon enfant, il n'y en a presque pas une, non, presque pas une, dont je ne puisse faire une bête féroce...(291) In fact she does not use her authority to create monsters out of her young charges. This is the one striking example in the novel where power and authority are deliberately and consciously not mis-used, despite the close relationship



between herself and Suzanne which gives her the potential to use her influence however she chooses.

The persecution and the physical abuse to which Suzanne has to submit reach their culmination with Sainte-Christine, and the psychological pressure, which had started with Mme Simonin, increases. Suzanne is put in solitary confinement in a dungeon, and fed only "les mets les plus grossiers...avec de la cendre et toutes sortes d'ordure" (293); she is denied the means to look after her physical needs, "forcée de sortir la nuit pour satisfaire aux besoins de nature" (294), and isolated and alienated from the community. In a truly macabre and cruel scene, Suzanne is made to lie in a coffin in the centre of the choir: "on me fit coucher dans une bière au milieu du choeur; on me couvrit d'un suaire, et l'on récita l'office des morts, après lequel chaque religieuse, en sortant, me jeta de l'eau bénite, en disant: *Requiescat in pace*" (291). These last words have an ominous double meaning; "Pace" is a euphemism for a cell or dungeon.<sup>43</sup>

Even worse, Suzanne then has to undergo a mock execution, "le moment le plus terrible de ma vie" (298) a psychological torture not uncommon in Third-world countries: "Je crus que ces cordes qu'on avait apportées étaient destinées à m'étrangler" (300). This physical, mental, spiritual and psychological abuse is the result of a chain of corrupt authority in the Church which condones

various kinds of abuse in order to maintain its power, and knowingly tolerates such abuses in institutions under its authority.

Diderot does not criticise Christianity overtly in La Religieuse;

Suzanne does not lose her faith; she does not reject church dogma; all she wants is her freedom. She notes that the sermon preached at her profession has "pas un mot qui ne fût à contre-sens" (245), but she always apparently supports the Church. The whole novel however, is a criticism of authoritarian institutions, and of the Catholic Church in particular, in which Diderot "nous a donné lui-même le moyen de discerner sa pensée dominante parmi les contradictions."<sup>44</sup> Thus, it is with an ironic tone that he has Suzanne say, "ce fut alors que je sentis la supériorité de la religion chrétienne" (301), in the middle of the most appalling psychological and physical torture at Longchamp.

*perversion  
unnatural*

Here, once again Suzanne falls prey to a corrupt authority, but an authority corrupted by the unnatural life of the convent. Those with unresolved inner conflict tend to act out mirror image roles of tyrant and victim, says Rubinger. The pattern of oppression and resistance in the convent are but mirror images of the power roles played out in society and therefore the relations between the men and women characters have a significance beyond their obvious role in the plot.<sup>45</sup> Soeur Sainte-Christine's way of resisting the oppression of the hierarchical institution of the Church is to exercise absolute power on those under her authority, She too resists and rebels against the

authority of the church through her attempt at appropriation and imitation of complete authority which manifests itself in her cruel and sadistic behaviour.

What strikes the reader in La Religieuse is the violence and the injustice. Women in eighteenth-century France were on the fringes of society, marginalised from every point of view, and women in religious life even more so. According to many, the mysticism of Mme de Moni, the sadism of Soeur Sainte-Christine and the lesbianism of the Superior at Sainte-Eutrope were reactions to an abnormal life, a life against nature, our first authority. Man and woman are made to be part of society, not subject to isolation and celibacy, and when they are forced into this unnatural life, the best they can hope for is resignation. As the young Benedictine says to Suzanne, "on n'évite pas les chagrins, on se résout à les supporter...la seule chose qui leur donnerait de la valeur, la résignation" (378). The portraits of nuns who have gone mad, become mystics or cruel tyrants or victims, are "the psychological results of a sociological problem."<sup>46</sup> The authority of the Church, of the State, of the family and of society are at best, weak, at worst corrupt, and it is this corruption of authority which makes victims out of Suzanne and all the other nuns, and indeed of everybody in the system. What Diderot is doing is questioning the authority by which such abuses continue.

5 sentences

Corruption in one part of an organism infects and supports corruption in another. The archdeacon shows moral evasion when he says "c'est aux lois

à décider cette affaire (306). If a vocation is indeed a call from God, it should not be up to the civil laws, nor even ecclesiastical law, to decide who has or has not a vocation. Only the individual can know that, and Suzanne at all times maintains her own authority to decide for herself whether or not she has a vocation. If the authority within a given convent is corrupt, one must look to the external authority which governs that convent, and to the institutions which support its corrupt rule, in order to find a solution. If the convent is shown as an environment which breeds hypocrisy and insanity, illness, both mental and physical, and even death, then there is no way in which such institutions can be beneficial to society, and Suzanne's story becomes a plea for change. Davis claims that it is because women are seen as a threat to men and to society as a whole, that "they must be kept in check, controlled, and forced into a subservient position."<sup>47</sup>

Suzanne leaves this convent where she had encountered these "raffinements de cruauté" (298), the red-hot tongs which "emporta...toute la peau du dedans ma main dépouillée"(298), for Saint-Eutrope. She arrives "armed with both ignorance and innocence,"<sup>48</sup> qualities which save her from the machinations of the lesbian Superior. Here, it is the lack of violence which constitutes a threat; the happy all-female atmosphere threatens the male hierarchical order. Suzanne seems to be in a happy convent at last, but instead of directing their spiritual life, the Superior offers to teach Suzanne "le

erol  
cruauté

langage des sens," "un langage bien doux" (351). Hite sees the practical reason for enforced patriarchal heterosexuality as the maintenance of the prevailing form of social organisation, so any other kind of sexuality represents a political threat to the authority of the status quo.<sup>49</sup> This would make the lesbian superiors behaviour a direct attack on the prevailing order. Yet the convent at Sainte-Eutrope functions at least as well as the external society until Suzanne comes along and introduces a traditional church perspective along with its attendant culpability. And if a matriarchal or lesbian community is a threat to society, why continue to have convents? Why are they not only tolerated, but actively encouraged? Why the political fear that "sur le succès d'une religieuse réclamant contre ses vœux, une infinité d'autres ne soient engagées dans la même démarche (310). It seems to be purely a matter of power, authority, and control.

Diderot denounces the very existence of convents which have no historic, legal, or religious basis: "Jésus-Christ a-t-il institué des moines et des religieuses?" (310). His criticism of conventual life then becomes both a political and a social commentary which questions the ideology it articulates. Even when he describes good nuns, those who would stay even if there were no walls or vows to hold them (286), it is done in an ironic fashion. The good, simple nun whose father asked her to wait three years to be sure she had a real vocation became mad (311-312). Suzanne says to Soeur Sainte-Christine:

"vous avez reçu de Dieu les grâces de votre état..." (286); nothing could be further from the truth.

If weakness and submission are seen as an essential part of the female nature, then La Religieuse must be a subversive text. Suzanne is at all times controlled by other people, but she does not submit easily. As Mylne says, we see her either as a subordinate or as a suppliant, sometimes as both.<sup>50</sup> She defends herself successfully before the Archbishop's council (268); she questions the Superior's authority to force her to swear an oath and tell what she did with all the paper she had asked for (273). Through her role as her own lawyer, Diderot reveals the "arbitrary nature of the judgements [against Suzanne] as those of a power structure without reason or common principles,"<sup>51</sup> as Ellrich describes them. "La Religieuse is, in fact, a *procès de couvents*, and the judge before whom the plea is being presented is the eighteenth-century philosophe, morally and intellectually the highest tribunal of the land."<sup>52</sup>

Centuries of misogyny in literature had produced stereotypical female characters as powerless, weak and oppressed. Suzanne, claims Rubinger, is the "personification of powerlessness in revolt."<sup>53</sup> It is the fact that she *is* in revolt which is important in La Religieuse. Fromm says: "To understand realistically and soberly how limited our power is an essential part of wisdom and maturity; to worship it is masochistic and self-destructive. The one is

humility, the other self-humiliation." <sup>54</sup> No matter how hard they try, institutions can only truly control the external aspects of life; they do not realise the limits of their power. They can, and do, exert a tremendous influence on the mind and the emotions, but because institutions are not organised for people, but for the perpetuation of the system itself, they tend to be ruled by people who are inclined to be despotic and addicted to authority for its own sake, and there will always be those, like Suzanne, who will rebel against the abuse of authority.

Men, claims Conroy, see lesbianism as a threat to their authority, as an example of female solidarity which endangers male domination over women. <sup>55</sup> He sees sex as a pretext for "the conflict between men who wish to assert their authority and women who wish to resist it." <sup>56</sup> Suzanne's insistence on maintaining her innocence even in retrospect, an innocence which is stretched to the limits of credibility, is, he claims, a rejection of male authority which tries to impose guilt on her and her superior. <sup>57</sup> In rejecting both male authority which would assign guilt, and the lesbian superior who would impose a different version of sexuality, again, not a lifestyle chosen freely, Suzanne is affirming her own authority.

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## II

### Sexuality

From the point of view of sexuality, Diderot depicts Suzanne as the norm, says Fredman, set against the three superiors, the mystic, the sadist and the lesbian.<sup>1</sup> La Religieuse, then, is a psychological and social study of female sexuality within the confines of convent life, which goes beyond satire or eroticism. What Diderot shows is that denying or repressing sexuality does not make it go away: "...quand on consacre un homme ou une femme à la vie monastique...suspendent-elles les fonctions animales?" (310), he asks. The answer is a resounding no. As Markiewicz says, "the individual who attempts to lead a life of sexual deprivation is probably either a hypocrite or an emotionally disturbed being."<sup>2</sup> Diderot's premise is that it is the monastic life which forces women into hypocrisy and madness: "Ah! monsieur, les méchantes créatures que des femmes recluses..." (298), says Suzanne to M. Manouri. The text shows the dire consequences of living in a manner that Diderot believes is against God's wishes. He says: "Dieu ...a créé l'homme sociable..." (310). And it is not just women who should not be enclosed; Diderot shows some of the same deleterious effects on Dom Morel too later in the novel. He also shows that there is no historical or theological basis for

convents in the New Testament. He asks: "Jésus Christ a-t-il institué des moines et des religieuses? L'Eglise ne peut-elle absolument s'en passer? Quel besoin a l'époux de tant de vierges folles? et l'espèce humaine de tant de victimes? (310). The convent then, is a man-made institution.

Of the four Superiors whom we meet in La Religieuse, the superior in the first convent verbally seduces Suzanne into entering the convent, at least for a while: "Ecoutez, et n'allez pas dire au moins que je vous ai donné le conseil; je compte sur une discrétion inviolable de votre part...Qu'est-ce qu'on demande de vous? Que vous preniez le voile? Eh bien! Que ne le prenez-vous? A quoi cela vous-engage-t-il A rien...?" (238). She adds "tant de caresses, tant de protestations d'amitié..."(238) à "ces propos insidieux", that Suzanne does indeed overcome her répugnances for a while to the point where, briefly, she actually wants to take her final vows. She says to M. Manouri: "Imaginez, monsieur, qu'il y avait des jours où je soupirais après l'instant de me sacrifier" (240). In Suzanne's words, the novitiate is "un cours de séduction la plus subtile" (240), which is in fact followed by a relatively happy time. She says: "...c'est le temps le plus doux de la vie monastique"(240).

When Suzanne goes to Longchamp she meets Mme de Moni with whom she has a very personal and intense relationship, what Rex calls "a verbal romance." <sup>3</sup> Mme de Moni, is a "femme de sens, qui connaissait le coeur

humain (258), whose only fault is "son goût pour la vertu, la piété, la franchise, la douceur, les talents, l'honnêteté..." (258), hardly grave faults in a nun. For Suzanne she is a spiritual guide, a mystic, or at least a woman who wants to be a mystic, who when she prays, "on eût dit que l'esprit de Dieu l'inspirait. Ses pensées, ses expressions, ses images pénétraient jusqu'au fond du coeur..." (259). "Son dessin n'était pas de séduire;" says Suzanne, "mais certainement c'est ce qu'elle faisait: on sortait de chez elle avec un coeur ardent, la joie et l'extase étaient peintes sur le visage" (259). This is a spiritual seduction.

Suzanne herself has moments of elation and ecstasy in church, so much so that the three nuns who are moved to tears by her devotion must wait until "je sortisse de moi-même de l'état de transport et d'effusion où elles me voyaient" (281). "Il est sûr que j'éprouvais une facilité extrême à partager son extase" (282), she says of her similarity to her mentor. Saint-Armand calls this "la perversion mimétique de Suzanne".<sup>4</sup> This characterisation of Mme de Moni begins to take on what Marshall calls "an erotic tone,"<sup>5</sup> and Suzanne, as Marshall claims she does throughout the novel, confuses sympathy and seduction,<sup>6</sup> although Goodden talks of the possibility of a "friendship so feeling that it is barely distinguishable from erotic love."<sup>7</sup> It is only when she is consciously aware that she has sexual feelings for Suzanne that Mme de Moni's spiritual life dries up. Like Suzanne, de Moni denies or devalues the

erotic as part of her identity through the psychological defence of mysticism.

As Bell says, the mystic seeks to communicate directly with God: "To obliterate every human feeling of pain, fatigue, sexual desire, and hunger is to be master of oneself,"<sup>8</sup> and to be master of oneself means not being dominated by another.

Nevertheless, Saint-Armand sees Mme de Moni as a seductress: "Le dispositif conventuel de La Religieuse" he says, "est un dispositif séducteur, dévoilant chaque fois, de nouvelles initiations;"<sup>9</sup> Suzanne says that Mme de Moni "m'aima tendrement" (258). He claims that "la mère de Moni met en place tout un dispositif physiologique de la séduction dans lequel Suzanne, par imitation, se laisse totalement prendre."<sup>10</sup> He quotes Diderot: "d'abord on l'écoutait, peu à peu on était entraîné, on s'unissait à elle; l'âme tressaillait, et l'on partageait ses transports" (259). As a spiritual guide, her job is to help her sisters achieve the mystical union to which she aspires, and as a Christian should, she teaches by example. This attempt at mysticism borders on what Saint-Armand calls auto-seduction,<sup>11</sup> and serves not only to eroticise spirituality, but introduces the theme of lesbianism which Diderot develops more fully later in the novel. De Beauvoir says, "it is not that mystical love always has a sexual character, but that the sexuality of the woman in love is tinged with mysticism."<sup>12</sup> For many, however, mystical love *is* in and of itself erotic, or at least has an erotic component. Suzanne seems to love Mme de Moni, partly

Seduces  
 spiritual /  
 develops into  
 physical  
 love  
 "m'aima  
 tendrement"  
 Cult.  
 zone  
 spiritual  
 physically



because she *is* a mystic, and Mme de Moni seems to love Suzanne, either because she (Suzanne) is such a good nun who is susceptible to mysticism, or because of her natural charms.

If she has a mainly spiritual and psychological effect on Suzanne, Mme de Moni seems to have a similar effect on the other nuns: "Quelques-unes m'ont dit qu'elles sentaient naître le besoin d'être consolées comme celui d'un très grand plaisir; et je crois qu'il ne m'a manqué qu'un peu plus d'habitude pour en venir là," says Suzanne (259). Saint-Armand asserts that one would need "un aveuglement mélangé de pruderie pour ne pas voir que la mère de Moni est la première à exercer sur Suzanne cette séduction mélangée de dévotion et de mystère." <sup>13</sup> Suzanne sees Mme de Moni as a spiritual woman, but she admits to more than a spiritual relationship says Rex, who sees this shared ecstasy as Diderot depicting "passionate love on a basis of equality between two members of the same sex" <sup>14</sup>, although Suzanne obviously does not feel equal: "nous étions toutes ses enfants"(258). If this is indeed, as Rex claims it is, a lesbian relationship, then it is a physically desexualised one, although as Jeffreys says, if proof of genital contact between two women is required before accepting the fact of lesbianism, there would be little lesbian history at all, <sup>15</sup> or at least little recorded history of overt lesbian relationships. I think we need to decide here what we mean by lesbianism. What is it, and when does friendship change and become a sexual relationship?



According to Faderman lesbianism is a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other,"<sup>16</sup> but this would make lesbians out of countless women who would never define themselves, nor be defined by others, as anything but heterosexual. It is possible that many women who are lesbian would not identify themselves as such for various reasons, among them ignorance of what lesbianism is, ignorance of their own true nature, and/or fear of repercussions of revealing a lesbian identity. [According to Jeffreys, radical feminists understand lesbianism as "a passionate commitment to women, a culture, a political alternative to the basic institution of male supremacy, a means through which women have always gained self-respect and pursued their own goals and achievements with the support of other women,"<sup>17</sup> a definition which implies a deliberate choice (although one need not be lesbian, or even female, to be anti - patriarchy).] If we accept sexuality as an integral part of the self, as I think we must, then there is a sexual element in all friendships. Even if one sees the relationship between Suzanne and Mme de Moni as a particular friendship, a term used specifically by nuns, it fits the first definition but not the second. Neither woman, as far as we know, has chosen a female community as a political gesture or as a means of being with other women rather than with men. Jeffreys claims that lesbianism can "...never be simply a sexual practice."<sup>18</sup> In the book Lesbian Nuns what stands out is how many women chose convent

life, a community of women, because even though they did not consciously know it at the time, they were lesbian. What they enjoyed was the companionship and friendship of women in a female community, and nothing explicitly sexual. Often, it was only in retrospect that a relationship was recognised as lesbian.<sup>19</sup> As Manahan says: "We had no language with which to think about our feelings and actions."<sup>20</sup>

As for Mme de Moni and Suzanne sharing mystic experiences, Rex says: "One woman can substitute for the other because she already knows, and loves, the other's thoughts and feelings. She can have them too, and so together - it doesn't matter which is in the lead - they mount towards a sort of ecstasy,"<sup>21</sup> a phallogentric kind of comment. It is true that Suzanne begins to pray like de Moni: "Il est sûr que j'éprouvais une facilité extrême à partager son extase" (282), with the same aspect of auto-seduction, and that she takes on the same power of attraction for others that Saint-Armand sees in de Moni,<sup>22</sup> but I think he is seeing more in the relationship than is there, and certainly more than they would have seen.

Knowing another's thoughts and feelings is more akin to empathy or close friendship, especially of the eighteenth-century kind of friendship as described by Faderman.<sup>23</sup> She describes these friendships as love relationships in every sense except the genital...thus they might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of overwhelming love...and yet

see their passions as nothing more than sublime friendship. Rex claims that Suzanne "drains and destroys the Superior's faith and all the thrilling emotions that went with it," <sup>24</sup> which is indeed true, but what she really does is reveal to Mme de Moni, unknowingly of course, the truth of the psychological game of self-deception de Moni has been playing in order to save her sanity, the game being the subconscious or preconscious repression and sublimation of all sexual impulses, as required of all nuns. "Virtue stems from the human act of choice," <sup>25</sup> says Goodden. (The words "virtue" and "virtuous" in regard to a woman refer to her ability to control her sexual behaviour, suggests Willeford). <sup>26</sup> Goodden also says that "erotic love has the quality of combining desire - the libertine's guiding impulse - with care for the other person." <sup>27</sup> That Mme de Moni controls her desire for Suzanne shows genuine love and caring and, I think, transcends the purely erotic.

To say that Mme de Moni sublimates her sex drive is both true and an oversimplification. There is no indication in the text that she first has "an unavowed (sexual) desire that later takes the form of divine love," as de Beauvoir puts it. <sup>28</sup> I think that she first has a genuine desire for mysticism, for an autonomous spirituality, even before Suzanne arrives at the convent, and this desire may in itself have an erotic component, but it is derailed by her now conscious feelings for Suzanne. Vartanian claims that "Diderot accepted uncritically the notion then common that hysterical behaviour originated in

functional troubles of the uterus, he was also able to appreciate its sexological etiology, as for example in certain trancelike states of mystical exaltation that betrayed all the symptoms of a displaced orgasm." <sup>29</sup> This implies that Mme de Moni's exalted mystical states, and by extension, similar experiences of Suzanne's and many of the other nuns, are but "displaced orgasms," that mysticism is nothing but sublimated or displaced sexuality. The wandering uterus roams again. <sup>30</sup> I am not sure that Diderot believes this; the text is rather an exploration of sexuality under certain conditions. The displaced orgasm theory would deny or at least reduce the spiritual component in mysticism.

The sexual component of friendship, a little understood factor even today, seems to play an increasingly important part in the intimate relationship between Suzanne and Mme de Moni. As this relationship deepens, spiritually, psychologically, and physically, Mme de Moni loses her gift of consolation:

"l'esprit s'est retiré, je le sens: allez, que Dieu vous parle lui-même, puisqu'il ne lui plaît pas de se faire entendre par ma bouche..." (260).

The night before she takes her vows, Suzanne suffers "une mélancolie si profonde..." (259) and goes to Mme de Moni's room, throwing Mme de Moni into confusion: "ma présence l'interdit d'abord: elle lut apparemment dans mes yeux, dans toute ma personne, que le sentiment profond que je portais en moi était au-dessus de ses forces; et elle ne voulait pas lutter sans la certitude d'être victorieuse" (260). She tries, along with

Suzanne, to pray her way out of the situation however, and nearly succeeds. Suzanne says: "Je crus que j'allais partager son transport, je le souhaitais..." (260). I think that this is an example of the confusion of mysticism and eroticism to which Saint-Armand refers.

What is Mme de Moni fighting against? Is the anger she obviously feels towards Mme Simonin the emotion she wants to let build up inside her - she has a meeting with Suzanne's mother that leaves them both upset. Suzanne is told: "Quand elles se séparèrent, ma mère était si troublée, qu'elle ne pouvait retrouver la porte par laquelle elle était entrée, et que la supérieure était sortie les mains fermées et appuyées contre le front" (263). Or is it the feelings she has for Suzanne? Why does she ask Suzanne, who has just said she will be happy as long as Mme de Moni loves her: "N'avez-vous pas pensé à rien pendant la nuit?...Vous n'avez fait aucun rêve?" (261). It seems a question more suited to the lesbian superior.

Mme de Moni feels helpless and realises that all she herself has done as a nun has been to sublimate, not eliminate, that really she is "une femme ordinaire et bornée" (260), with all the needs and emotions of an ordinary woman, including those of love. There are indeed sexual overtones to this scene as Saint-Armand points out; "les personnages baignent dans une confusion érotique."<sup>31</sup> "Elle était d'une mélancolie égale à la mienne. Je me mis à pleurer, elle aussi" (260).

If Suzanne has an equal effect on de Moni, it has negative results:

"Quel effet cruel vous avez opéré sur moi! Voilà qui est fait, l'esprit s'est retiré, je le sens" (260). It is because she has realised that she is and always will be human, and therefore sexual, that Mme de Moni has to face the fact that she has failed, at least in what the Church expects of her - the total desexualisation of the body. Mme de Moni says:

Je ne suis pas venue pour vous entretenir, mais pour vous voir et pour vous écouter...Tâcher de ne pas m'émouvoir; laissez les sentiments s'accumuler dans mon âme; quand elle en sera pleine, je vous quitterai. Il faut que je me taise, je me connais; je n'ai qu'un jet, mais il est violent, et ce n'est pas avec vous qu'il doit s'exhaler. Reposez-vous encore un moment, que je vous voie; dites-moi seulement quelques mots, et laissez-moi prendre ici ce que je viens y chercher (262).

Whatever she seeks, she seems to find, but the recognition of her love brings no relief. The autonomy she had sought demands freedom from the shackles of sexual desire,<sup>32</sup> and once that sexuality is acknowledged it is spiritual death for Mme de Moni. Becoming holy in a way that negates desire as Mme de Moni tries to do is a way that fits male interpretation of female psychology, suggests Davis<sup>33</sup> because it accepts and reinforces the idea that to be female is to be sinful and because it equates essential holiness with bodily purity.

Saint-Armand claims that Mme de Moni's false passivity masks the seduction, forcing Suzanne into a passive, sensual, voyeuristic role,<sup>34</sup> a role in which we see Suzanne more than a few times in the novel. De Moni is as emotionally involved as the lesbian superior but keeps her desire under better control. As Soelle points out: "A woman who lives in opposition to her own wishes exhibits, whether she wants to or not, an existence that is permeated by restraint."<sup>35</sup> [The portrait of Mme de Moni is a portrait of an emotionally restrained woman; restrained because she has made a sincere effort to live up to what she has accepted as Christian ideals for a nun, ideals which are by definition restraining, and she feels she has failed because of her feelings for Suzanne. Diderot shows that the monastic system is corrupting, says Showalter, and Mme de Moni is destroyed by participating in it.<sup>36</sup>] She only regains her gift on her deathbed, when, crucifix in hand to symbolise her acceptance of the sacrifice of human sexuality in favour of a heavenly lover ("elle tenait un Christ entre ses bras" (264)), she submits for the last time to her religion. As a good mother, that is to say a non-sexual mother, she dies a happy death, in contrast with Mme de Simonin who is not only sexual but adulterous, and who dies a "malheureuse mère!" (265). Melnick suggests that La Religieuse is not only an "eloquent attack on convents but on adultery as well, teaching women that only those who have been faithful wives are assured of being constantly good mothers,"<sup>37</sup> a rather patriarchal point of view. From

her own experience Suzanne knows, or at least the reader knows, that being a good daughter does not guarantee just treatment in a patriarchal family, so there is no precedent set for fair and just treatment of females according to their behaviour. There is no evidence in the text to show that anyone is guaranteed or receives just treatment in the family or in society.

After de Moni's death, Suzanne has to contend with the sadistic Soeur Sainte-Christine. Where de Moni had disapproved of mortifying the flesh ( "elle disait que ces pénitences, qu'elles ne corrigeaient d'aucun défaut, et qu'elles ne servaient qu'à donner de l'orgueil" (266) ), Soeur Sainte-Christine encourages them. Says Mylne, "The roots of the action in La Religieuse, lie within the characters themselves,"<sup>38</sup> and Soeur Saint-Christine is a cruel and sadistic woman, with "le caractère petit, une tête étroite et brouillée de superstitions" (266), which becomes "le caractère bizarre de la supérieure" (291).

Dominance and submission, those two linchpins of patriarchy, are eroticised in the punishment and the acceptance of that punishment in her convent. Soeur Sainte-Christine is "a woman who compensates for the frustrations of her sexual drives by exerting power, and whose sadistic tendencies are given full rein when someone {Suzanne} resists that power," says Mylne. She continues: "she is clearly a pathological case, illustrating Diderot's thesis that the unnatural life of the convent is liable to warp the



personality." <sup>39</sup> How Diderot would explain a similarly sadistic personality outside the monastic life is not clear, but the monastic life has warped the personalities of the other nuns. When Suzanne refuses to reveal what she has done with all the paper she had been given, the Superior, afraid that the paper has been used for more than a confession, wants Suzanne to take a vow that she has done no more than write out her confession. When Suzanne refuses, the other nuns encourage the Superior to punish her: "ordonnez que nous la déshabillions et qu'elle entre dans le lieu destiné à ses pareilles...il faut disposer de cette créature..."(275). They too have become cruel and sadistic.

That the Superior, Soeur Sainte-Christine, had sexual drives is hinted at but not obvious from Suzanne's comment: "Je m'étais échappée en propos indiscrets sur l'intimité suspecte de quelques-unes des favorites; la supérieure avait des têtes-à-tête longs et fréquents avec un jeune ecclésiastique, et j'en avais démêlé la raison et le prétexte" (268). Unfortunately she does not share those reasons with the reader, but as all nuns take a vow of chastity, defined as an absence of all unlawful sexual activity, and the only lawful sexual activity is between husband and wife for the procreation of children, it is irrelevant whether her sexual inclination is directed towards men or women. What matters is that she has sexual feelings and that they are repressed, by herself and by the system, and that they surface in a different form. There is no indication that Soeur Sainte-Christine herself is

implicated either with the priest or with other nuns, but the tête-à-tête themselves are disapproved of in a convent. A common saying in convents is that where two people are alone together, the devil makes a third - an idea that implies something both sexual and sinful.

Suzanne's life becomes "une suite continuelle de délits réels ou simulés, et de châtiments" (269), as a result of which she suffers "l'abandon, la solitude et la persécution (269). She is thrown into an underground dungeon, "obscur, où l'on me jeta sur une natte que l'humidité avait à demi pourrie...il y avait, sur un bloc de pierre, une tête de mort, avec un crucifix de bois" (276). Suzanne calls this persecution on herself by her rebellion says Proust: <sup>40</sup> "Je n'omis rien de ce qui pouvait me faire craindre, haïr, me perdre; et j'en vins à bout" (268). Suzanne, seduced by the theology of suffering and redemption, a masochistic seduction, reinforced by the crucifix which she holds and which is a constant reminder of Jesus as willing victim, offers herself as a willing victim, or at least a passive one: "Et à l'instant je leur tendis les bras" (275).

The parallel with Christ is further emphasised when Suzanne stays in this underground dungeon/grave for three days. Sacrifice and death are strong themes in the novel and are linked through the symbol of the crucifix because traditional church teaching is that woman is responsible for original sin, hence responsible for mankind's need to be saved: "Do you not know that you are Eve? You are the devil's gateway...How easily you destroyed man, the image of

God. Because of the death you brought upon us, even the son of God had to die," says Tertullian. <sup>41</sup> So every crucifix reinforces woman's guilt and reminds her of the need for sacrifice to atone for that guilt. "Religious art carries with it a particular norm," says Dyke; "Its value is not only aesthetic; rather it has value through its relationship with a community and the meaning that it evokes within that community." <sup>42</sup> A symbol, by design and by definition, always implies more than it states.

Diderot, says Proust, "a pensé faire de sa religieuse le type de la nonne janséniste, persécutée par la supérieure...", <sup>43</sup> based on real life: "S'il nous était permis d'entrer ici dans le détail de tous les genres de persécution qu'on fait souffrir en différents diocèses du royaume aux religieuses captives dans leur propres maisons...on aurait de la peine à le croire." <sup>44</sup> Does he make her, as Sherman suggests, <sup>45</sup> more of a personification of virtue than a real person? I think he does, in order to make his point, which is that woman's condition is created by society and by its institutions.

Cady Stanton <sup>46</sup> says that a man's idea of womanliness is submissiveness, and although we see Suzanne rebel against authority from time to time, when she refuses to take her vows (246), and when she refuses to swear an oath to her superior (274), we also see her as a personification of the feminine, passive and obedient. Soeur Sainte-Christine has all the power in a relationship based, as Jeffrey says, upon "the very male-female polarity

which supports the heteropatriarchal system." <sup>47</sup> The women in the convent have but replicated the patriarchal model of society. Suzanne is at her most passive and submissive in the cruel and sadistic burial scene (291), the sense of passivity emphasised by her compliance and the use of 'on': "...on me fit coucher dans une bière...on plaça des chandeliers...on me couvrit...et l'on récita l'office des morts..." (291); nothing is more passive than a corpse. In fact that is how the other nuns treat her: "Marchez sur elle, ce n'est qu'un cadavre" (294). Soeur Sainte-Christine's passive chastity becomes aggressive, says Fauchery <sup>48</sup> and her sexuality, which ignores the usual societal reins, becomes despotic. <sup>49</sup>

Suzanne does not understand what all her punishment is for: but she does know that as well as being punishment for rebellion it is sex-related: "aussi n'ai-je jamais bien compris ce dont elles m'accusaient" (295), and "En vérité, je ne suis pas un homme, et je ne sais ce qu'on peut imaginer d'une femme et d'une autre femme, et moins encore d'une femme seule..."(295). She believes that the other nuns know: "il faut qu'avec toute leur retenue extérieure, la modestie de leurs regards, la chasteté de leur expression, ces femmes aient le coeur bien corrompu: elles savent du moins qu'on commet seule les actions déshonnêtes, et moi je ne le sais pas; aussi n'ai-je jamais bien compris ce dont elles m'accusaient..." (295). Whatever these unknown sexual sins are, Suzanne sees them as a result of isolation, and says that normal sexual

impulses are all the more violent for being repressed: " ... ne se réveillent-elles pas dans le silence, la contrainte et l'oïveté avec une violence inconnue aux gens du monde..." (310). Sagan agrees with this theory: "there is no repression of anything without aggression." <sup>50</sup> As all sexual feeling, for men or women in religious life, is supposed to be repressed or sublimated, the aggression has to manifest itself somewhere, and it does. Violence happens when one cannot live out the need for power in a more socially acceptable way.

The punishment becomes even more sadistic as Suzanne, wearing nothing more than a hair-shirt, is led by a rope around her neck into the chapel. The chapel is consecrated to Mary, the very model of passivity for women. Mary's acquiescent: "Be it done unto me according to thy word..." makes of her a role model which Daly claims programs women for compliance. <sup>51</sup> The environment of the convent inspires masochism and sadism, two kinds of behaviour that Melnick claims are usually determined by perverted sexual instincts. <sup>52</sup>

Worse than just being scourged she is expected to do it herself: "on me mit dans la main droite la discipline...Je compris ce que l'on attendait de moi, et j'exécutai" (318). Before she scourges herself however, "on me déshabilla jusqu'à la ceinture, on prit mes cheveux qui étaient épars sur mes épaules, on les rejeta sur un des côtés de mon cou..." (318). Here we see sadomasochism acted out by Christian women in a Christian setting. The

stripped body adds an erotic tone to the scene; the other nuns (and the reader) are voyeurs, Soeur Sainte-Christine is the sadist, and Suzanne the Christian masochist in her acceptance of this as a sacrifice, a punishment whose acceptance will bring her rewards in heaven. After Suzanne receives the last sacraments, and is apparently about to die, she says:

Et pourquoi Dieu ne m'a-t-il pas prise en ce moment?  
 J'allais à lui sans inquiétude. C'est un si grand bonheur!  
 ...Puisse Dieu renouveler encore mes peines, et me  
 l'accorder aussi tranquille que je l'avais! Je voyais les  
 cieux ouverts, et ils l'étaient, sans doute; car la  
 conscience alors ne trompe pas, et elle me promettait  
 une félicité éternelle (320).

She accepts totally the theology of suffering as a path to eternal bliss. As Harrison and Heyward point out, the reason for discipline is to make one worthy to share in the father's inheritance,<sup>53</sup> that is, heaven. In sadomasochism, flagellation is seen as a substitute for sexual release<sup>54</sup>, says Rule, and Millett cites Bonaparte, a Freudian analyst, as saying that "flagellation is but healthy intercourse."<sup>55</sup>

So they all take part in what Harrison and Heyward call the politics of pain and hope, a confusion of pain and pleasure - future pleasure - which is such an integral part of Christianity.<sup>56</sup> The superior enjoys erotic sadistic power in her total control over Suzanne's body, and Suzanne, as a good Christian, passively if not willingly, accepts the punishment. It is against monastic life for

herself that Suzanne fights, not particularly or specifically against the punishment she receives in the convent. Although the relationship between Soeur Sainte-Christine and Suzanne is not overtly sexual, it does have all the components of sado-masochistic sexuality, as defined by Greven, based upon pain and punishment, the essential components of erotic relationships.<sup>57</sup>

If, as Jeffrey suggests, the lesbian community has developed a feminist critique of masculinity and femininity as a cultural entity,<sup>58</sup> and if one accepts that what happens between Soeur Sainte-Christine and Suzanne is sado-masochistic, then it is not difficult to see the male-female role-playing in their interaction, or rather, see the roles of males and female that Diderot assigns to them. It is ironically fitting that this dysfunctional relationship takes place in a religious institution because as Greven demonstrates so well, the peculiar mixture of violence and love has its roots in the Bible: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son, but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes."<sup>59</sup>

The attitude of each convent is dictated, as Fredman points out, by each superior,<sup>60</sup> and indeed the lesbian Superior says: "elles ont pris, les unes plus, les autres plus ou moins de mon caractere et elles s'aiment entre elles"(348). Diderot shows how the environment of each convent acts on the psychology and morality of the characters. Soeur Sainte-Christine is a woman who compensates for the frustrations of her sexual drives by exerting power, and

whose latent sadistic tendencies are given full rein when someone resists that power.

The sadistic atmosphere is replaced by a totally different one when Suzanne moves to Saint-Eutrope d'Arpajon. Even the description of the exterior is more open and friendly: "c'est un bâtiment carré dont un des côtés regarde sur le grand chemin, et l'autre sur la campagne et les jardins. Il y avait à chaque fenêtre de la première façade une, deux, ou trois religieuses" (328). The erratic superior is, as Rex says, distinctly benign,<sup>61</sup> and Benstock sees this use of the erratic as erotic.<sup>62</sup> This is interesting in light of research which shows that symmetry is seen as attractive<sup>63</sup> and the erratic superior is not symmetrical in appearance: "ses yeux, dont l'un, c'est le droit, est plus haut que l'autre..." (329).

Her convent bears more than a passing resemblance to a harem, especially in the tableaux descriptions:

"il y en avait à terre assises sur les coussins qu'on avait ôtées des chaises, qui cousaient, qui brodaient, qui parfilaient ou qui filaient au petit rouet. Les unes étaient blondes, d'autres brunes; aucune ne se ressemblait, quoiqu'elles fussent toutes belles. Leurs caractères étaient aussi variés que leurs physionomies; celles-ci étaient sereines, celles-là gaies, d'autres sérieuses, mélancoliques ou tristes." (359)

There is always a faint perfume of Lesbos when there are many women together says Fauchery,<sup>64</sup> who sees the convent, this "moelleuse



prison"<sup>65</sup> as a feminine space, therefore both exotic and erotic. Markiewicz thinks that the description of the women as so many beautiful objects diminishes the serious message of the text,<sup>66</sup> and in a way I think it does, but had Diderot made Suzanne ugly, her plight may not have been as appealing and sympathetic, and part of the point of the text is to depict injustice and sexism through an appeal to the emotions as well as to the intellect. There is always a danger of voyeurism and exploitation when writing about sexuality, especially of the other sex, but the seriousness of Diderot's treatment of sexuality deflects any risk of the text being seen as pornographic.

In both convents there is attention to physical details, gesture, voice inflections, and tableaux,<sup>67</sup> which all indicate appearance and action as signs of inner emotion, but at Sainte-Eutrope it is more sensuous. The emphasis on the physical body, emphasised from the very beginning, continues, but in a distinctly more provocative and seductive way: "Mais qu'elle a la peau blanche et douce! le bel embonpoint! le beau cou! ...Oh! la belle gorge! qu'elle est ferme!" (329). There is much physical show of affection and of physical attraction. "On vous tâte partout" (332), says Suzanne. Hands, as Stewart points out, have a major erotic function in the text,<sup>68</sup> and he claims that Suzann's seduction in lesbian ways takes place via "an erotic repertory of exterior anatomy."<sup>69</sup>

Suzanne's formal undressing, apparently a conventual custom,<sup>70</sup> is the Superior's first real attempt at seducing Suzanne; we know that she has seduced others. Suzanne says of her first night at Sainte-Eutrope:

elle vint à mon deshabiller; ce fut elle qui m'ôta mon voile et ma guimpe, et qui me coiffa de nuit: ce fut elle qui me déshabilla. Elle me tint cent propos doux, et me fit mille caresses qui m'embarrassèrent un peu, ju ne sais pas pourquoi...elle me baisa le cou, les épaules, les bras...et me mit au lit (333).

The next day the Superior has Suzanne on her knee: "elle m'avait tirée à elle...et je me laissais aller à toutes ces caresses comme une idiote" (335).

The first step in seduction is accomplished, passive acceptance. Diderot's treatment of lesbianism focuses mainly on the psychological and physiological aspects of the Superior and her attempts at seduction.

Miller asks: "How does a libertine get a prude to take the proverbial first step? By talking about it; by talking about love."<sup>71</sup> This is exactly what the superior does. She progresses from looking: "en me regardant de la tête aux pieds, avec un air de complaisance que je n'ai jamais vu à aucune autre femme..." (340), to kissing: "c'était toujours un baiser ou sur le front ou sur le cou, ou sur les yeux, ou sur les joues, ou sur la bouche, ou sur les mains, ou sur la gorge, ou sur les bras, mais plus souvent sur la bouche..." (340), to very direct words: "Soeur Suzanne, m'aimez-vous?" (343) and "qui sait jusqu'ou l'attendrissement peut nous mener?..." (347) She even offers to teach Suzanne

"le langage des sens", "un langage bien doux" (351). They have in effect been talking this language for a while.

This cloister is, as Rex points out, a happy place before Suzanne's arrival,<sup>72</sup> and no doubt would continue to be if Suzanne were not so virtuous, so innocent and so ignorant; perhaps the ignorance and the refusal to be honest are the crucial elements here. Suzanne herself notes that this first night at Sainte-Eutrope is "la seule bonne nuit que j'aie passée dans le cloître..." (333). Rex claims that Diderot is aware of the Superior's lesbianism, but that "he is still hiding from himself the secrets of Suzanne."<sup>73</sup> He notes the difference in the descriptions of the Superior. Suzanne's first impression is as follows:

une petite femme toute ronde...sa tête n'est jamais rassise sur ses épaules...elle oublie toute bienséance...sa figure décomposée marque tout le décousu de son esprit et toute l'inégalité de son caractère...(328-9)

Later, after many intimate moments she describes her thus:

cependant cette bonne supérieure, car il est impossible d'être si sensible et de n'être pas bonne, me parut revenir à elle. Elle était toujours renversée sur la chaise; ses yeux étaient fermés, mais son visage s'était animé des plus belles couleurs. (344)

Rex sees the second description as that of "a woman transformed by someone who loves her."<sup>74</sup> But it is the Superior who is in love, and it is the Superior who is transformed, not necessarily Suzanne, although Suzanne's second description does seem to be somewhat tempered by a change in attitude.

Suzanne does indeed respond sexually to the Superior's advances, and her responses seem quite obviously sexual. She explains (and understands) the Superior's response to the music as *sensibilité*, not as sexual responses: "je n'ai jamais connu personne sur qui elle eût produit des effets aussi singuliers" (341). As Simontin points out, Diderot was very interested in music as an evocative, sensual language, and claims that "a general recognition of music's ambiguous psychological effects will aid us in understanding something of the ambivalent nature of Suzanne's narrative."<sup>75</sup> Leonard Bernstein talks of a love affair with the orchestra, playing music on "waves of love."<sup>76</sup> He says that there is actually something sexual in the experience. It is through music that the first overtly sexual scene takes place. The second evening at the convent of Saint-Eutrope, after Suzanne has shown her skill at the piano, the Superior invites Suzanne into her room for a piano lesson. Suzanne plays while the Superior caresses her shoulders:

Elle avait levé un coin de mon linge de cou, sa main était placée sur mon épaule nue, et l'extrémité de ses doigts posée sur ma gorge. Elle soupirait; elle paraissait oppressée, son haleine s'embarrasser; la main qu'elle tenait sur mon épaule d'abord la pressait fortement, puis elle ne la pressait plus du tout, comme si elle eût été sans force et sans vie; et sa tête tombait sur la mienne; En vérité cette folle-là était d'une sensibilité incroyable....(341). p. 152 (GF édition)

As Mylne points out, Diderot makes his nuns manifest the *sensibilité* of other novels of the period; it is only the lengths to which the Superior goes which

differ from the regular friendships portrayed in contemporary novels.<sup>77</sup>

Suzanne's interpretation is: "Nous nous amusions ainsi d'une manière aussi simple que douce..." (341). The Superior has two more obviously orgasmic experiences, one when Suzanne is sitting on her knee, kissing her. Suzanne says:

...elle paraissait goûter le plus grand plaisir...cependant son plaisir s'accroissait; et comme je ne demandais pas mieux que d'ajouter à son bonheur d'une manière aussi innocente, je lui baisais encore le front, les joues, les yeux et la bouche. La main...se promenait sur tous mes vêtements...elle m'exhortait en bégayant, et d'une voix altérée et basse, à redoubler mes caresses; je les redoublais; enfin il vint un moment, je ne sais si ce fut de plaisir ou de peine, où elle devint pâle comme la mort; ses yeux se fermèrent, tout son corps s'étendit avec violence, ses lèvres se fermèrent d'abord, elles étaient humectées comme d'une mousse légère; puis sa bouche s'entrouvrit, et elle me parut mourir en poussant un grand soupir (343-344).

Suzanne too is sufficiently affected that she finds it difficult to play the piano afterwards: "Je ne sais ce qui se passait en moi; je craignais, je tremblais, le coeur me palpait, j'avais de la peine à respirer..."(344). The third time is when the Superior sympathises with Suzanne's tale of woe in her previous convent:

Et elle écartait mon linge de cou et de tête; elle entr'ouvrait le haut de ma robe; mes cheveux tombaient épars sur mes épaules découvertes; ma poitrine était à demi nue, et ses baisers se repandaient sur mon cou, sur mes épaules découvertes et sur ma poitrine à demi nue. Je m'aperçus alors, au tremblement qui la saisissait, au trouble de son discours, à l'égarément de ses yeux et de ses mains, à son genou qui se pressait entre les miens, à

l'ardeur dont elle me serrait et à la violence dont ses bras m'enlaçaient, que sa maladie ne tarderait pas à la prendre (348).

Again Suzanne has such a strong physical reaction that she says:

"Chère mère, voyez dans quel désordre vous m'avez mise!...Je voulais m'éloigner...mais je ne le pouvais pas. Je ne me sentais aucune force, mes genoux se dérobaient sous moi..." (349).

As Goodden says, there is no doubt that Diderot intended these descriptions to be interpreted as orgasms on the part of the Superior, despite his apparent lack of knowledge of female physiology by modern standards, but what is striking she says, is the similarity with descriptions of hysterical attacks in contemporary medical writing.<sup>78</sup> The fact that Diderot puts this description in a sexual context rather than, for example, into a description of a mad woman, is a genuine attempt to portray female sexuality, and is a practical denial of Galen's belief, as described by Ahmed, of hysteria as the result of "retention of genital fluids in women who suffered from sexual deprivation."<sup>79</sup> Jeannette Foster, a lesbian writer, says "that for clinical accuracy of detail it has no equal ...until...1870."<sup>80</sup> I think that the Hite Report<sup>81</sup> would show that Diderot, Galen, and Foster are all wrong, and all contribute to some degree to the deluge of misinformation with which women have always been bombarded and which contradicts their actual sexual experience.

Suzanne's responses are strikingly sexual: "Rentrée chez moi, je me trouvais rêveuse; j'étais comme imbécile...je fis un petit sommeil, quoique je ne dorme jamais de jour" (346). In her innocence and ignorance she thinks it is a contagious maladie that she has. The next time it happens, after much kissing and knee-pressing, they both feel it:

Je m'aperçus alors, au tremblement qui la saisissait, au trouble de son discours, à l'égarément de ses yeux et de ses mains, à son genou qui se pressait entre les miens, à l'ardeur dont elle me serrait et à la violence dont ses bras m'enlaçaient, que sa maladie ne tarderait pas à la prendre. Je ne sais ce qui se passait en moi; mais j'étais saisie d'une frayeur, d'un tremblement et d'une défaillance qui me vérifiaient le soupçon que j'avais eu que son mal était contagieux (348).

Suzanne notes the Superior's attitude to her: "en vérité c'était comme un amant" (339), but she does not see, at least on a conscious level, the "ironic veracity" of her statement.<sup>82</sup> Nor does she want to. As the Superior becomes more and more open in her talk, with clear references to masturbation and lesbianism, Suzanne still does not understand and does not want to understand. Whether she admits it or not, Suzanne's response *is* sexual in nature:

Je ne sais ce qui se passait en moi; je craignais, je tremblais, le coeur me palpitait, j'avais de la peine à respirer, je me sentais troublée, oppressée, agitée, j'avais peur; il me semblait que les forces m'abandonnaient et que j'allais défaillir; cependant je ne saurais dire que ce fût de la peine que je ressentisse. J'allais près d'elle; elle me fit signe encore de la main de m'asseoir sur ses

genoux; je m'assis; elle étais comme morte, et moi comme si j'allais mourir. Nous demeurâmes assez longtemps l'une et l'autre dans cet état singulier (343).

This makes it more difficult to accept Suzanne's position - we know that she has had some sexual if unarticulated feelings, and as innocent as she is, Suzanne would not even know how to use the word satisfaction in a sexual sense.

Does Diderot present an accurate and realistic portrait of a lesbian woman? What is in fact a realistic and accurate portrait of a lesbian? One could ask what is a realistic portrait of a heterosexual? Rule observes that it is the "basic physiological capacity of every mammal to respond to any sufficient stimulus,"<sup>83</sup> and that "exclusive preferences...come only with experience, or as a result of social pressures." She says that "the knowledge that man is a conditioned animal is morally neutral. Its application is not."<sup>84</sup> Diderot's thesis seems to be that left in a convent, a woman will become conditioned in a certain way, as a lesbian, which Mylne sees as "a typical consequence of unnatural conditions,"<sup>85</sup> and then damned for being lesbian. Rex assumes that one woman responding to stimulus from another woman makes her a lesbian; I am not sure that it does. It makes her a human being in need of physical affection: it makes her a mammal. Suzanne certainly enjoys the physical relationship she has with the Superior, so much so that it is difficult to believe that she does not connect the pleasure she feels with sexuality. Is she



deluding herself when she tells the lesbian superior that up to the present, her heart has never felt anything: "il est resté sans émotion" (350)? I think so.

If Suzanne is indeed lesbian, then Rex would be right, "the whole novel may be a secret - from the heroine and her author,"<sup>86</sup> but the same could be true if she were heterosexual. It is more likely that she is just another woman locked in a convent against her will before she has a chance to find out whether she is heterosexual or lesbian. Maybe that is the whole point - her sexual orientation is irrelevant. What is striking is her ignorance of her own body and the church's attitude to female sexuality.

Melnick assumes that because Suzanne was aware of her possible dubious birth, a result of her mother's adultery, she is also aware of male-female relationships. No doubt she is, but on a very simplistic level. Children know that it takes a father and mother to produce a child, but many have no idea of the biological process involved. Suzanne writes early on in her memoir: "Peut-être mon père avait-il quelque incertitude sur ma naissance; peut-être rappellais-je à ma mère une faute qu'elle avait commise" (236). This would seem to be the level of Suzanne's knowledge, and it does not negate the fact that Suzanne could suspect that her birth was illegitimate and still be totally naïve and ignorant of sexuality, whether it is sexuality which her patriarchal society would consider licit, that is, within the context of marriage, or illicit, which would be any sexual activity outside marriage. Being curious and

intelligent does not necessarily lead to knowledge, especially if that knowledge is deliberately withheld as part of a larger social and ideological agenda, the social control of women through their sexuality. The priest's attitude in the confessional, moreover, indicates that this is indeed the case. Père Lemoine probes and advises without giving any reasons: "il me fit mille demandes singulières...de ne me trouver jamais seule avec elle, et de ne souffrir aucune de ses caresses" (367), and Dom Morel tells her that Père Lemoine was right to turn Suzanne against her Superior, but he too refuses to give any reason: "tâchez d'en ignorer la raison tant que vous vivrez" (380). He does tell her that "il y a des lumières funestes que vous ne pourriez acquérir sans y perdre" (380). Even when Suzanne presses him: "Mais que la familiarité et les caresses d'une femme peuvent-elles avoir de dangereux pour une autre femme?" (380), he refuses to enlighten her. In the same conversation when Suzanne says: "Où est donc le mal de s'aimer, de se le dire, de se le témoigner? cela est si doux!" (380), he agrees with her (380).

Suzanne suspects something is wrong when the superior tries to seduce her (345), but she is unable to articulate it. This conditioning of the instincts, of the deep sub-conscious, is as important a part of indoctrination of any cult as is the official teaching. In Lesbian Nuns it is the ignorance about sex and lesbianism which is the unifying theme in many of the stories. As Gage suggests, and as Père Lemoine shows, the character of the questions the

priest asks during confession, "debasing in the extreme, are designed to undermine morality."<sup>87</sup> It would be interesting to know how Suzanne did articulate the problem to the priest, and how, on a linguistic level, the priest formulated his questions while carefully protecting the the ignorance of the person who is confessing. Illich sees confession as the power to regulate private behaviour,<sup>88</sup> which is exactly what it succeeds in doing in Suzanne's case.

Edmiston claims that if Suzanne truly believed that the superior's caresses were innocent, she would not have run to her confessor for moral guidance: "She claims she does not understand guilt, but that in reality she refuses to accept the significance of what has happened."<sup>89</sup> I think he is right; that on some level she is not as innocent as she wants and pretends to be. She is able to delude herself into believing what she thinks she ought to believe:

Réveillé, je m'interrogeai sur ce qui s'était passé entre la supérieure et moi; je m'examinai, je crus entrevoir en m'examinant encore...mais c'était des idées si vagues, si folles, si ridicules, que *je les rejetai* loin de moi (346).

She accepts completely the idea that sexuality exists only within the confines of marriage, a notion that Diderot dispels unequivocally. Dom Morel refuses to enlighten Suzanne about the dangers of "les caresses d'une femme" when she asks him what is wrong with two women loving each other, and Père Lemoine

had painted these actions "sous les couleurs les plus affreuses" (371). It is, in fact, the church and society which damn lesbians. They put women together in forced isolation and then deny them any outlet for affection, much less sexuality.

If Suzanne is heterosexual, as she may well be, her relationships, limited as they are, seem quite normal for a young girl; when she first arrives at Sainte-Eutrope with M. Manouri and M. Hébert, as she thanks M. Manouri, she behaves in a flirting way: "je tremblais, je balbutais...toute mon action lui parla beaucoup mieux que je n'aurais pu faire" (331). This is not necessarily a matter of physical attraction, although it could well be. She describes Père Lemoine as having "une des plus belles physionomies qu'on puisse voir; elle est douce, sereine, ouverte, riante..." (364), and Dom Morel as "un homme de caractère ardent" (377), again not necessarily a sexual comment, but an observation. If she is indeed lesbian, she rejects it. The question is, why does she reject the first person, who happens to be a woman, with whom she has a close physical relationship, a relationship which she obviously enjoys and could continue to enjoy? Does she in fact prefer men? In essence, Diderot tries to make her into a kind of eunuch, attempting to repress all sexuality - the only way to keep his literary heroine virtuous, despite the fact that she is obviously a sexual being. He has created a paradox which he seems unable to resolve. Conroy claims that Suzanne is aware of the lesbian behaviour around her, but

that she refuses to adopt the male point of view which considers it sinful.<sup>90</sup> So what is Diderot's point? Is he re-writing a matriarchal setting from a patriarchal point of view? Edmiston says that for Diderot the Superior's homosexual desire is a natural instinct which has been perverted and denatured by the clausturation of monastic life, and that Diderot sees homosexuality as devoid of social utility,<sup>91</sup> the only acceptable sexual outlet being in marriage where sexual activity is directed at procreation and the preservation of the family as a patriarchal structure. But the Superior says that she is lesbian by nature: "et je ne conçois pas comment votre P. Lemoine voit ma damnation scellée dans une partialité si naturelle.." (372). If in fact sexual orientation is natural, one would be wrong to try to change it, and the fact that the lesbian Superior is shown to be one of the few kind people in the novel and the only character who seems happy for any length of time, is perhaps Diderot's way of saying that sexual orientation is irrelevant, that what matters is how people treat each other, and that they accept themselves for what they are.

According to anthropologist Lionel Tiger, "Le plaisir n'est pas un luxe...il est même indispensable à notre survie, et l'un des moteurs de notre survie."<sup>92</sup> He claims that there is something subversive about pleasure,<sup>93</sup> which is perhaps why church and state try so hard to regulate it. He says further, that the way society treats its pleasures reveals its political nature.<sup>94</sup> The Church's attitude to female sexuality as revealed in the text of La Religieuse is therefore

no more than a reflection of its political attitude to women; sexuality and political ideology are inextricably linked in a patriarchal society. As Halpern, Tiger's interviewer, says: "Le plaisir, c'est notre espace de liberté."<sup>95</sup> The Superior seeks her pleasure, her liberty, in her sexuality. Suzanne wants nothing less than total freedom from the convent.

In keeping Suzanne so ignorant, and she does remain ignorant right to the end, being called away just as the Superior is about to explain why "Je suis damnée" (383), Diderot deprives Suzanne of the chance to be really virtuous. As Mylne says, Suzanne's innocence and reliability as a narrator depend on the fact that she did not actually hear the rest of the confession:<sup>96</sup> "J'écoutais; le voile qui jusqu'alors m'avait dérobé le péril que j'avais couru se déchirait..." (383). So she does not find out what is the awful sin which leads to eternal damnation, but it also means that she is virtuous, in the traditional meaning of the word as defined by the church, for the wrong reasons. As long as she remains focused on moral rightness in this narrow, sexual sense of the word, the power of patriarchy is not threatened.

The treatment of the lesbian superior in such a sympathetic way is of an originality without precedence in literature, says May.<sup>97</sup> Does Diderot reinforce the notion that women's moral realm begins and ends in sexuality? Hunt claims that "for most women sexuality is not a problem on its own terms. It is made into one by those who deny women's moral agency, "thus preventing

us (women) from exercising responsibility." <sup>98</sup> She also says that the taboo nature against lesbianism is so strong that "not even the boldest of men have tried to circumscribe it or claim it for their own." <sup>99</sup> I would not say that Diderot has tried to claim it for his own, but I do think he made a genuine and bold attempt to understand it. He gave eroticism a philosophic dimension, and an acceptance of sex as natural, says Vartanian. <sup>100</sup> His originality consists in his portrayal of intimacy between women as opposed to just sexuality, and his effort, not always completely successful, to avoid making his interpretation and observation of female sexuality what Hunt calls "a hybrid of male experience."<sup>101</sup>

ENDNOTES CHAPTER 2

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4. Pierre Saint-Armand, p. 46
5. David Marshall, The Surprising Effects of Sympathy.(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p.88
6. Marshall, p.89-91
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9. Saint-Armand, p.43
10. Saint-Armand, p.65
11. Saint-Armand, p.46
12. Simone de Beauvoir, p.720
13. Saint-Armand, p.43
14. Rex, p.191
15. Sheila Jeffreys, "Does it Matter if they did it?" in Not a Passing Phase, (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1989), p.22
16. Lillian Faderman. Surpassing the Love of Men (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co, Inc., 1981), p.18
17. Jeffreys, p.24
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21. Rex, p.191
22. Saint--Armand, p.46
23. Faderman, p.16
24. Rex p.191
25. Goodden, p.81
26. Ann Willeford. The Feminisation of Virtue in Eighteenth- Century France, Women, Ethics, and the Novel, 1700-1750 (Thesis, University of Washington, 1988). p.94
27. Goodden, p.7
28. De Beauvoir, p.747
29. Aram Vartanian, "La Mettrie, Diderot, and Sexology in the Enlightenment" in Essays on the Age of Enlightenment in Honor of Ira O. Wade. (Genève/Paris: Librairie Droz, 1977), p.362
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31. Saint-Armand, p.44
32. Bell, p.116
33. Wm. N. Davis, in the Epilogue to Holy Anorexia, p. 185
34. Saint-Armand, p.45
35. Dorothee Soelle, cited on p 91 of Beyond Servanthood. Christianity and the Liberation of Women by Susan Nelson Dunfee.
36. English Showalter, p.328
37. Gloria Melnick, p.256

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40. J. Proust, "Recherches Nouvelles Sur La Religieuse" in DiderotStudies VI, Otis Fellows, ed., Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1964), p.200
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66. Markiewicz, p. 253

67. Fredman, p. 136

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93. Tiger, p.22
94. Tiger, p.24

95. Sylvie Halpern, Actualité, 1 December, 1993, p.24
96. Mylne, "What Suzanne Knew," p.168
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101. Hunt, 87

Alienation

Alienation can be defined as some kind of broken relationship <sup>1</sup>, as isolation and estrangement from what is happening, as powerlessness, <sup>2</sup> or as self-estrangement <sup>3</sup>, all forms of psychological alienation. La Religieuse is the story of Suzanne's alienation, her mental, emotional, physical and psychological experiences, all of which are conducive to an alienation of self. From her alienation in her own family, shown by its treatment of her before and after she is sent to the convent, to the alienation from society imposed on her by a forced vocation, to the psychological and physical alienation which result from that move, Suzanne never has a chance to realise her potential or to find her own place in life.

Rubinger notes that the philosophical, political and moral debate in French eighteenth-century literature is often set in a social context, "defined by the sexual and/or conjugal relationships between men and women." <sup>4</sup> With the emergence of the patriarchal family founded on private property, woman is subjugated says de Beauvoir, and takes her revenge against her subjugation and economic oppression through infidelity, her sole defence. <sup>5</sup> As the child born of such an infidelity, Suzanne is not accepted as part of the family, and

most certainly not when it comes to arranging, or at least supporting, a marriage for her, which is what she expects.

Despite her natural superiority over her sisters in appearance and intellect, she is not loved as they are, if in fact she is loved at all. She points out that if the children were praised, "jamais cela ne s'entendait de moi" (236). Her father "était violent" (236), and her mother was difficult to please; as Suzanne says, telling her mother about the attentions of the sister's suitor, was "peut-être la seule chose que j'ai faite en ma vie qui lui ait été agréable..." (236), and four days later in an external manifestation of the inner hostility the mother feels for her, she is banished to a convent. Suzanne says: "J'étais si mal à la maison, que cet événement ne m'affligea point; et j'allai à Sainte-Marie...avec beaucoup de gaieté (237). Her alienation from the family, already well-established, is now manifest.

She hopes that her stay in the convent will be short. She says: "Mes deux soeurs établies, je crus qu'on penserait à moi, et que je ne tarderais pas à sortir du couvent" (237). But no matter how she protests "sur cette étrange proposition" (237), her freedom is taken from her; her freedom to choose how she will pass her life, and even the physical freedom to move around as she pleases.

Though her parents are still alive, she feels herself so emotionally removed from them that she says to the first superior: "Hélas! je n'ai ni père ni mère; je

suis une malheureuse qu'on déteste et qu'on veut enterrer ici toute vive" (237).

Her alienation takes the form of reification; she is an unwanted object to be buried out of sight.

This two-fold social estrangement, the denial of marriage and of a life in society and the forced physical separation from family and friends, is sanctioned by the laws which allow her parents, " un père, une mère d'ailleurs honnêtes, justes et pieux" (236), as Suzanne describes them, although they show no signs of honesty, justice or piety at any time, to deny her full participation in society, and is condoned, if not actively encouraged by the church. When Père Séraphin visits Suzanne and "il n'eut pas d'embarras à m'expliquer le motif de sa visite: il s'agissait de m'engager à prendre l'habit" (237).

The tradition of arranged marriage within a class, claims Foreman, removes sex from spontaneous satisfaction to a highly structured social context <sup>6</sup>, and capitalist society reduces women to instruments of pleasure, and female sexuality to a most intimate form of alienation. <sup>7</sup> "Le dispositif d'alliance est fondé sur le mariage, conçu avant tout...comme un contrat, un échange entre familles, subi par les époux," says Monier. <sup>8</sup> In a way, all Suzanne's problems are caused by the alienation between her parents, perhaps the result of a loveless arranged marriage from which her mother took her only possible revenge in adultery. Foreman claims that: "Men seek relief from their alienation



through their relations with women; for women there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are the essential structures of her (sic) oppression." <sup>9</sup> We are told that M. Simonin loves his wife ; "il l'aimait" (253), but not that she loves him. Suzanne becomes bitter and resentful toward her mother. She tells Père Séraphin that she thinks of her mother "avec amertume et ressentiment" (248). He tries to explain to Suzanne "la conduite sévère de vos parents" (249), but does not succeed in doing anything but support the status quo. M. Simonin is resentful towards both his wife and Suzanne; as the maid says to Suzanne when she finally gives in to their pressure and agrees to enter the convent, after being locked up in her own house: "...ils se querellaient sans cesse à votre sujet" (255). It is a very dysfunctional family, where Suzanne's continued presence is a constant reminder to M. Simonin of his lack of control over his wife's sexuality.

Suzanne is the scapegoat for her parents, and as Edmiston points out, "like all scapegoats, she must bear the burden of guilt and be exiled from the community in order to expiate the crimes committed by those within." <sup>10</sup> And as we saw in the first chapter, the theology of substitutionary redemption has much to do with the way Mme Simonin handles her sin. Edmiston claims that Suzanne's liberty would lead to disorder in the home, and later, in the convent too, <sup>11</sup> but as the text shows, there is disorder everywhere already and it is not caused by Suzanne; nor is there any evidence in the text to show that her

continued existence in society outside the convent would constitute a threat of any kind to anyone. Vail agrees with Edmiston that Suzanne's isolation and confinement safeguard the social structure,<sup>12</sup> though I do not understand how a young, powerless girl, legally a minor, can be a threat to the structure of society. Were she to have the same legal rights as a male perhaps she would constitute a threat.

Baum points out that the structure of the family and the experience of childhood depend on cultural factors and the social order,<sup>13</sup> both of which in eighteenth-century France were patriarchal and greatly influenced by the church and its ideology. Diderot's novel is *definitely* cultural criticism, and, moreover, a criticism of the contemporary ruling patriarchal society. In fact the text of La Religieuse can be seen as very subversive in the way it consistently undermines familial authority, paternal and maternal; ecclesiastic authority, both inside and outside the convent; social authority, in its criticism of society's oppressive laws and its treatment of women, including the very existence of the dowry system; its treatment of lesbian sex; and its interesting treatment of the psychological aspects of confinement and stress. It is a fictional method of working through a moral struggle which illustrates how alienating, and therefore immoral, the prevailing culture is to women.

A marriage entered into freely was a threat to family politics and to the patriarchy, so a marriage was in fact an arrangement by the families based as

much as anything on economic and social factors. Without a dowry, a woman of the middle class was almost definitely excluded from marriage, and in some ways was in a worse situation than a woman of lower class who could at least work, even if only at menial jobs or in domestic service. Without money a woman cannot enjoy celibate independence; in fact being a widow with sufficient money was the most autonomous state for a woman in the eighteenth century. The convent was one important alternative which did offer the possibility of a more autonomous life, even if only in a limited way, if freely chosen. But Suzanne does not choose it; an outcast and scapegoat, she is sent to "la sentine où l'on jette le rebut de la société" (312). When the priest presiding over her profession asks her: "Est-ce de votre plein gré et de votre libre volonté que vous êtes ici?" (246), she replies, "Non" (246). She expresses her negative feelings about her forced vocation when she explains that it is not just one particular convent she dislikes: " C'est la maison, c'est mon état, c'est la religion; je ne veux être enfermée ni ici ni ailleurs" (287). Warner sees the nun's state as a typical Christian conundrum, "oppressive and liberating at once." <sup>14</sup> It could secure a degree of independence and equality for women, who, once they "had capitulated to the conditions the Church demanded" were able to exploit the special status virginity gave them to improve the condition of women. <sup>15</sup>

So the family's hatred and physical rejection of Suzanne is condoned by church and society, and Suzanne's position as an economically helpless woman is upheld by her father and by the society which endorses the dowry system, and the church which participates in that system. Suzanne criticises the system and its hypocrisy when she says:

Je n'avais point de père; le scrupule m'avait ôté ma mère; des précautions prises, pour que je ne pusse prétendre aux droits de ma naissance légale; une captivité domestique fort dure; nulle espérance, nulle ressource. Peut-être que, si l'on se fût expliqué plus tôt avec moi, après l'établissement de mes soeurs, on m'eût gardée à la maison qui ne laissait pas que d'être fréquentée, il se serait trouvé quelqu'un à qui mon caractère, mon esprit, ma figure et mes talents auraient paru une dot suffisante; la chose n'était pas encore impossible, mais l'éclat que j'avais fait en couvent la rendait plus difficile: on ne conçoit guère comment une fille de dix-sept à dix-huit ans a pu se porter à cette extrémité, sans une fermeté peu commune; les hommes louent beaucoup cette qualité, mais il me semble qu'ils s'en passent volontiers dans celles dont ils se proposent de faire leurs épouses" (251).

In this passage Diderot criticises the law which attributes children to the man who is the mother's husband, without affording the child the protection of inheritance. He criticises too the lot of women in society whose personal characteristics and talent are not enough to attract a husband unless she also has a dowry, and the impossibility of any kind of autonomy for a woman. Suzanne is in fact sold to the convent "pour une modique pension" (237), a result of her economic dependence on her parents, not just in the past but in the future. Without the means to earn a living, and such means were denied to

women by society, there is no hope for any future independence. It is M. Simonin who has the financial power. The money that Mme Simonin sends to Suzanne is " le reste de ce que j'ai pu économiser sur les petits présents de M. Simonin" (265). She too is a victim of the financial customs which are such an essential part of the patriarchal structure.

Suzanne always hopes to be accepted on her own terms: "...il vient encore ici quelques gens de bien; peut-être s'en trouvera-t-il un qui, satisfait de ma personne, n'exigera pas même les épargnes que vous avez destinées à mon établissement" (253), she says to her mother. She rejects the idea of being a commodity and hopes for a relationship based on character and personal qualities. Soeur Ursule too knows that it is impossible for a woman to make her way in the world alone. When she is alone with Suzanne in the church keeping a vigil just before Easter, she says: "Que ferez-vous dans le monde? Vous avez de la figure, de l'esprit et des talents; mais on dit que cela ne mène à rien avec le vertu; et je sais que vous ne vous départirez pas de cette dernière qualité" (280). The very qualities that are lauded in a Christian woman are denigrated in real life, and yet as a virgin, nuns are a commodity in the church and society. As Markiewicz notes, Suzanne sees the hypocrisy which lies at the basis of man's attitude to woman.<sup>16</sup>

The Virgin Mary is, as Warner points out, one of the few female figures to have attained the status of myth in Western society,<sup>17</sup> yet as a role model

she is inimitable, setting mutually exclusive goals of motherhood and virginity.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, any woman who attempts to emulate Mary, as all Christian women are supposed to do, is automatically destined to fail.

When the first superior asks her what she would like to be, she says:

"Tout, excepté religieuse. Je ne le veux pas être, je ne le serai pas" (243).

But, as she learns: "il était décidé que je serais religieuse, et je le fus" (248).

She has no choice. Emerson, says Lange, believes that people confuse freedom with choice<sup>19</sup>, but Suzanne has neither freedom nor choice. She is not asking for an anarchical or an immoral freedom, but for a personal freedom to live her life within the existing orderly society, and for the chance to conform willingly to its rules. Diderot shows us over and over that by prevailing standards of contemporary patriarchal society she is a very moral person.

The bondage of women to patriarchal systems is "more than being named and constrained within the confining roles of sexual stereotypes," says Dunfee.<sup>20</sup> What she calls the "internalised patriarchal presence" creates the equivalent of a foreign identity which effectively cuts one off from the self, and carries with it feelings of guilt and inferiority.<sup>21</sup> Suzanne, when she refuses to take her vows willingly, is refusing to accept being defined and named by someone else. It is more than a passive refusal. By refusing, Suzanne is defining herself as an individual and a rebel, and actively asserting the right to speak in her own voice and retain her selfhood. So even when she is a nun,

playing a role assigned to her by family and church, the role of professional virgin, she maintains her own integrity. It is interesting to note that while many of the nuns have saints names, Diderot always has Suzanne as Sister Suzanne; she does not take an *other* name. Diderot refuses to have her defined by patriarchy, which as Dunfee says, "alienates women from themselves." <sup>22</sup>

Suzanne has been subject to emotional alienation all her life and when she is forced into the convent it becomes physical alienation also from her family and friends. Not only is she forced into being a nun, she is coerced into putting in writing the fact that she is willing to become a nun. This forced collaboration in her own imprisonment is a psychological as well as a moral abuse, and can only lead, as it does, to further alienation. "L'avez vous écrit librement?", her father asks her. "Je ne saurais dire qu'oui" (61), she replies. This implies that Suzanne does not *want* to be a nun, only that she is prepared to do as she is ordered.

Despite being an emotional orphan most of her life, Suzanne grows up as an intelligent, optimistic, and innocent young girl whose parents choose to sacrifice her, in part to avoid the responsibility for arranging a suitable marriage for her, which they could well afford to do; as Suzanne says: Il avait plus de fortune qu'il n'en fallait pour les établir solidement" (235). Their main purpose, however, is to remove her from their life as she is, and would continue to be, a

constant reminder to each of them of the mother's infidelity. This infidelity can be seen, not only as a cause of the alienation between Suzanne and her parents, but as a result of the relationship between her parents, which one can assume was not perfect if Mme Simonin was unfaithful. Saint-Armand claims that it is the original loss of, or lack of, mother-daughter relationship which throws Suzanne into despair and is the cause of her alienation. He says: "C'est ce dépouillement originel qui la jette dans le désespoir et qui fera d'elle cet être séparé, errant d'un espace à l'autre qu'elle deviendra." <sup>23</sup> But friendship between mother and daughter, in fact between any two people, needs a personal liberty which Suzanne's mother does not have, neither with Suzanne nor with her husband, nor it would seem, with her lover, Suzanne's biological father. Dunfee mentions Chodorow's argument that because a girl identifies with her mother and does not have to go through a separation process, this identity in relationship with her mother sets a pattern for being *self* in relation to others. <sup>24</sup> But as Suzanne and her mother had anything but a close relationship, by this argument Suzanne's sense of *self* would be fractured to begin with, and should become progressively worse as the abuse against her escalates, and yet we see Suzanne as having a very strong sense of self.

As a mother figure Mme Simonin is not ideal; that is, her maternal love is not strong enough to overcome all else in her life. She is, claims Mylne, essentially selfish; her words centre round je, me, ma, mon, <sup>25</sup> and this





selfishness takes the form of moral blackmail based on her acceptance of the theology of redemption and sacrifice which I discussed in chapter 1. According to Fauchery, "la mère de Mlle Simonin est odieuse de pharisaïsme,"<sup>26</sup> as a result of which she passes her life in "une amertume plus ou moins masochiste."<sup>27</sup>

Mothers in novels are usually weak, anaemic characters claims Fauchery: "l'avatar le plus commun du rôle est la mère bienvieillante, mais faible..."<sup>28</sup> Diderot both accepts and rejects this stereotype and subverts it by denying Mme Simonin the archetypal maternal attitude. On the way home in the carriage with her mother after she has refused to take her vows, Suzanne tries to appeal to her mother's maternal instincts:

...mais tout à coup je me jetai à ses pieds, et je me penchai ma tête sur ses genoux...le sang me vint au nez...et l'arrosant de mes larmes et de mon sang qui coulait, appuyant ma bouche sur cette main, je la baisais et je lui disais: "Vous êtes toujours ma mère, je suis toujours votre enfant... (247).

But to no avail. Despite this image of Suzanne as a bloody sacrifice, almost a caricature of Jesus, the mother resists. It is in her monstrous insistence on refusing to love Suzanne and to give her a place in her home and her heart that she is unfailingly strong - a negative image of motherhood. Later, a virtual prisoner in her own home, Suzanne pleads with her mother: "Je suis toujours votre enfant; vous m'avez portée dans votre sein; et j'espère que vous ne l'oublierez pas" (252). Mme Simonin accepts only the biological fact of

maternity: "ma fille, car vous l'êtes malgré moi..." (254), but only pays lip service to her concern for Suzanne's welfare: "Si vous me survivez, vous resterez sans nom, sans fortune et sans état" (254). Her real concern seems to be to remove Suzanne from her life: "Ma fille, n'empoisonnez pas ma vie plus longtemps" (252). She has reason to fear Suzanne's presence; the husband of an adulterous wife had the right to have her imprisoned for two years, after which he could either take her back or have her locked in a convent for the rest of her life.<sup>29</sup> Her attempt to reject an imposed alienation from her own sexuality has dire consequences. As Gilligan says: "for centuries, women's sexuality anchored them in passivity, in a receptive rather than an active stance, where the events of conception and childbirth could be controlled only by a withholding in which their own sexual needs were either denied or sacrificed."<sup>30</sup> Mme Simonin neither denies nor sacrifices her sexual needs and is seduced by a man "qu'elle avait trop écouté" (236), but she is unwilling to accept the consequences.

This subversion of the literary tradition of the self-sacrificing mother of unconditional love reflects reality - it is not uncommon for parents to dislike their own children, especially unwanted ones - and shows the potential for mothers to be as bad or as good as fathers, and shows the social constraints which may cause mothers to be how they are; it also shows that stereotypes are often misleading or downright wrong, especially for women. The novel then, is an

attack not just on the monastic life, but on the patriarchy, the dowry system and the forced inequality in family life, in the church and in society, and on literary tradition, much of which was based on stereotypes and much of which was misogynistic in the extreme.

This sacrifice of Suzanne's liberty as expiation for her mother's sin, may lessen conflict and tension in the Simonin house, but it does not bring lasting peace to her mother. She dies alone, not only virtually abandoned by her two daughters, but when they are present in her life she is treated by them in a cruel and inhuman fashion. From this miserable deathbed she tells Suzanne not to expect any help from anyone:

Adieu, Suzanne; ne demandez rien à vos soeurs...je ne suis pas contente d'elles; elles prennent, elles emportent, elles ont, sous les yeux d'une mère qui se meurt, des querelles d'intérêt qui m'affligent. Quand elles s'approchent de mon lit, je me retourne de l'autre côté: que verrais-je en elles? deux créatures en qui l'indigence a éteint le sentiment de la nature. Elles soupirent après le peu que je laisse...(265-266).

Mme Simonin sees how unnatural her daughters' behaviour is, yet does not see how unnatural her own behaviour toward Suzanne is and has been. Even now, on the mother's deathbed, a time when one would expect a family to comfort each other, to reiterate, perhaps for the last time, their love and affection for each other, the two sisters are not named by the mother; they are but two impersonal creatures. "Their main purpose in the novel," claims Mylne,

"is to function, together with their husbands, as family opposition to Suzanne's bid for freedom." <sup>31</sup> Suzanne too never mentions the forenames of her two sisters, a fact which indicates at the very least a lack of any kind of relationship with them; she does however, mention the names of her sisters' husbands, a M. K..., a lawyer, and M. Bauchon, a silk merchant (237). When Suzanne learns the truth of her illegitimacy from Father Séraphin she asks him about her sisters' behaviour: "comment ont-elles donc pu se résoudre à dépouiller leur soeur? car c'est ce qu'elles me croient" (250). His reply is: "l'intérêt! l'intérêt!" (250). The whole family is motivated by self-interest. The priest does not seem aware that it is "l'intérêt" which fuels the parents' desire to be rid of Suzanne, nor "l'intérêt" which makes the church accept someone who so obviously does not have a vocation. It is the legitimate members of the patriarchal family who are shown to be the most inhuman.

The money Mme Simonin gives to Suzanne is gleaned from the money M. Simonin gave to her. She says to Suzanne: "J'aurai gagné votre dot par mon économie. Je n'abuse point de la facilité de mon époux..." (253). But she also says : "ma conscience ne me permet pas de disposer d'une plus grande somme." (265) She accepts society's attitude that illegitimate children are not entitled to anything. Père Séraphin also accepts this attitude. Just as he accepts without question the idea of substitutionary redemption, he also accepts the idea of substitutionary punishment. Justice is not a factor in his beliefs. He



says to Suzanne: "...considérez, pesez, jugez si madame votre mère peut sans le consentement, même avec le consentement de monsieur votre père, vous unir à des enfants dont vous n'êtes pas la soeur..." (249-50). Mme Simonin does not seem to have much choice in the matter of the dowry, but neither does she try very hard to have any. Vail claims that the mother teaches capitulation as the only way to survive.<sup>32</sup>

Mme Simonin accepts and finds expedient the idea of expiation of her own sin through the sacrifice of Suzanne, a kind of warped theological capitulation which Suzanne rejects.

A Marxist feminist critic would say that capitalism was the cause of Suzanne's being sent to the convent, with the smaller dowry being the reduced price for the object / woman. She is of no value to the family as property cannot be passed on through her. Diderot emphasises the injustice in the law and in society when he has Suzanne say to her mother that she accepts her role as bastard. In an ironic speech she says: "Je ne suis plus surprise des distinctions qu'on a mises entre mes soeurs et moi; j'en reconnais la justice, j'y souscris..." (252). If patriarchy and patriarchal marriage are founded on the idea of ownership, with the wife and children being owned by the husband/father, then patriarchy and capitalism cannot be separated. The value to the family of the commodity, the person/object is paramount. This manifest

injustice is yet another indictment of the society which supports such an injustice.

According to Markiewicz, it is the husband who is directly responsible for the bastard children of his wife, unless he can (and wishes to) provide proof of their illegitimate birth.<sup>33</sup>

This means that the child is legally his and he accepts all the attendant responsibilities. But Markiewicz points out that he also has the power to revenge himself against the illegitimate child by refusing to provide a dowry,<sup>34</sup> thereby eliminating any chance of marriage and integration into society. This is, as she also points out, an effective way of controlling his wife. M. Simonin loves his wife, and for his own reasons, among them psychological control, presumably chooses not to pursue the option to provide proof of the child's illegitimate birth. There is no indication in the text of the marital status of Suzanne's biological father, but as Voltaire points out, adultery is "permis aux hommes par les mœurs et presque par les lois..."<sup>35</sup> M. Simonin punishes both his wife and daughter through his treatment of Suzanne. Mme Simonin tells Suzanne that "je ne vous vois jamais à côté de lui, sans entendre ses reproches; il me les adresse, par la dureté dont il en use avec vous" (252). He is practising substitutionary punishment. Mme Simonin herself is emotionally antagonistic to her ex-lover, whom she characterises as "le monstre"(253), and Suzanne never finds out her father's name. She says: "Je n'ai jamais su ni le



nom de mon père, ni l'histoire de ma naissance" (265). So Suzanne, completely alienated in every way from her biological father, and emotionally and then physically isolated from all three parents, is in fact an abused child.

At one point, while Suzanne is physically imprisoned at home, she says to her mother: "rendez-moi vos bontés; rendez-moi votre présence; rendez-moi la tendresse de celui qui se croit mon père" (252). It is unlikely, however, that she had ever received any 'tendresse' from either of them. When M. Simonin sees Suzanne talking to her visibly upset mother, he reacts aggressively: "il vit le désordre de sa femme; il l'aimait; il était violent; il s'arrêta tout court, et tournant des regards terribles sur moi, il me dit: 'Sortez!'" (254) This is an interesting juxtaposition of love and violence in domestic life which reflects the same confusion of pain and pleasure, ownership and malice as is shown in the convent under Soeur Sainte-Christine. Diderot places at least some of the blame for domestic violence squarely on the shoulders of religion. It is the Church which legitimises the father's authority to dispose of his children as he wishes, to treat his wife as his natural inferior and treat her as harshly as he chooses, and it is the Church which accepts Suzanne despite knowing that she has no vocation, and it is the patriarchal demands of total obedience as epitomised in the bible which set the precedent for the idea of ownership of people and complete unquestioning obedience which ultimately leads to fear and violence.

Even after his death Mme Simonin is afraid of her husband. She tells Suzanne: "n'espérez rien de votre père, il m'a précédée...il m'attend; ma présence sera moins terrible pour lui que la sienne pour moi" (265). For Suzanne too he is a figure to be feared: "Depuis que je savais qu'il n'était pas mon père, sa présence ne me causait que de l'effroi" (254). She has good reason to fear. As Saint-Armand says: "Tout est fait pour que Suzanne ne participe pas à la structure familiale (impossibilité du mariage, refus des dots, etc)." <sup>36</sup> She is completely excluded from any structure other than the monastic one.

Père Séraphin tells Suzanne that even had her sisters been more sympathetic, they could have done little: "ce sont les maris qui font tout" (250), and from his experience, help to the illegitimate is at the expense of peace in the home: " Je ne vois que des choses -là, ou des enfants abandonnés, ou des enfants même légitimes, secourus aux dépens de la paix domestique" (250). This is an indictment of the patriarchal family, where compassion, charity, and justice take second place to keeping the master of the house appeased. The priest does in fact tell Suzanne not to blame her parents, (249) perhaps because they are but a small part of a corrupt system.

From her place of outsider in the family Suzanne becomes an outsider in the convent, because she is not there of her own free will. She tells Soeur Sainte-Christine that she wants to renounce her vows because of " le défaut de

vocation, le défaut de liberté dans mes vœux" (285). It is a generally accepted idea in religious life that upon taking vows one relinquishes all freedom. The decision to become a nun is the last free decision one makes, yet the whole text shows that even this is not always a decision freely taken. Diderot adds yet another dimension to what Baum calls "the social dimension of sin."<sup>37</sup> A convent is what Zimmerman terms an "order of consecrated virgins" in an institution worked out by men.<sup>38</sup> For women in a patriarchy, their calling is to obedience, humility and subservience,<sup>39</sup> not just vis-à-vis God, but vis-à-vis the clergy. For Suzanne the convent is an alien and alienating space. She is always, says Lefebvre, in a hostile space,<sup>40</sup> either at home or in the convent, where the physical space is always enclosed, represented by the constant presence of locked doors, culs-de-sac, and dungeons. It is an artificial and hostile place, where, he continues,<sup>41</sup> "Suzanne ne sait jamais s'orienter. On lui dénie constamment un espace propre."<sup>42</sup> She not only does not have her own physical space, but has to struggle to maintain a healthy mental space.


Suzanne tells the Superior in the first convent that she would rather be anything other than a nun (243), and that she considers forced vocations as violence. The night before she is to take her vows she prays: "j'appelais Dieu à mon secours; j'élevais mes mains au ciel, je le prenais à témoin de la violence qu'on me faisait" (245). She intends to speak out in her own voice. The final stage of women's moral development, says Gilligan, is when a woman "is able

to address ethical situations in her own voice, not one determined by others." <sup>43</sup>

This ability to speak for oneself is part of the journey to selfhood, a journey which we see Suzanne try valiantly to take, but which is denied her by the nuns who are already well-schooled in patriarchy, and who do no more than emulate their oppressors. The silencing of the female voice is encouraged in a patriarchal society, nowhere more than with nuns. Any autonomy they have is limited to their own immediate circle, and is at all times subject to external male authority. At the ceremony where Suzanne is to take her vows, she attempts to speak out in her own voice. When the priest asks her: Marie-Suzanne Simonin, promettez-vous à Dieu chasteté, pauvreté et obéissance?" (246), she replies "Non, monsieur" (246), and attempts to expose the plot to force her into the convent. She is silenced, as women have always been silenced, and still are, in the church. Here, she is silenced by other women who have internalised the patriarchal structure and who are acting out what Russell calls horizontal violence; violence of the oppressed by the oppressed, (as opposed to what she calls vertical violence between oppressors and oppressed <sup>44</sup>). Wherever she is, she is only bodily present; her mind and spirit are alienated. The external world, says Lefebvre, is close but inaccessible. <sup>45</sup> The convents replace spontaneity with routine and the novel becomes what Fauchery calls a study of the psychology of enclosure. <sup>46</sup> Suzanne's role as a nun, her new function, intrudes into her being, her sense of self and results in self-alienation. She

experiences herself as alien, as someone who is no longer the centre of her own world, creator of her own acts.<sup>47</sup> Hegel, says Baum, believed that inherited religion was the source of alienation in society, although Baum himself believes that inherent in Christ is the possibility of a non-alienating life.<sup>48</sup> Eberhard too finds that alienation often seems to be religious in origin.<sup>49</sup> He accepts Rieff's statement that "alienation is originally neither Marxist nor a psychiatric tool of understanding the human condition, but theological and specially Christian."<sup>50</sup> Baum talks about three types of alienation produced by a religion which sees God as a stranger.<sup>51</sup> He sees people being separated from nature, from the self as a person, and from fellow human beings as friends. We see all these kinds of alienation in Suzanne, particularly the last two.

The physical separation from nature is not necessarily inherent in monastic life, even in an enclosed order, if by nature we mean the land alone, but if we mean all of creation, then psychological and sexual alienation is inherent in the way of life. As a woman separated from all of her friends and family, and in a hostile environment Suzanne is bound to become alienated from herself, and we see her on various occasions identifying with the figure on the cross. The other nuns say: "Quel orgueil!...elle se compare à Jésus Christ..." (277). She is stripped (275), scourged, and spends three days in a dungeon (276) before being released/resurrected, and to emphasise the



identification with Christ, she has bleeding hands and feet as a result of torture (298). Her imprisonment in the dungeon for three days, besides reinforcing the symbolism of sacrifice, is a double alienation; already alienated from life in society, she is now alienated from its substitute. She, like Christ, willingly offers herself as a victim to be executed (299). Christians connect with the crucifix and all that that symbol conveys. Women, says Daly, can only identify either with Jesus as a victim or as his murderer. Therefore, she continues, the God of the crucifix cannot save woman from bondage because as male son of male father he is used to reinforce the system of dependence on a male.<sup>52</sup> So all women are spiritually alienated within their religion. Women who become nuns are further alienated by their role which demands that they make a career out of dwelling on their difference, not only from other women who marry and produce children (St Jerome sees the only benefit of marriage as the production of new virgins),<sup>53</sup> but from Christ, their spiritual spouse.

As an outer sign of this alienation, nuns wear habits which strip them of their identity and make them almost interchangeable objects. They lose their own identities, and frequently their own names, and take on, not only new names, a change which is depersonalising enough, but often men's names. When they do take female saints' names, they are often those of virgin martyrs. Separated from society, they must now be separated from whatever makes them unique.

Suzanne's happiest period in the convent is under Mme de Moni, a woman whose alienation takes the form of mysticism, the search for a God outside herself. Hegel, says Baum, sees the concept of God as a being set apart from human life as alienating in itself. He is always the *other*, from a different, alien place which we have no guarantee of ever reaching.<sup>54</sup> If a mystic is always trying to reach God, to communicate with him as de Moni does, that desire emphasises the absence of what she is seeking, the alienation of her present state. As Eberhardt says, alienation is a central part of Christian life.<sup>55</sup> Yet if it is true that "love is based on an attitude of affirmation and respect" as Fromm says,<sup>56</sup> then her love for Suzanne, and certainly Suzanne's love for her, is the closest to real love in the novel. Fromm says: "People believe that to love is simple but that to be loved is most difficult ...the real problem is not the difficulty of being loved but the difficulty of loving; that one is loved only if one can love..."<sup>57</sup> One has no control over whether or not one is loved; the difficulty is more likely to be in accepting the fact of being loved. I think Mme de Moni finds it as difficult to accept loving Suzanne as Suzanne finds it difficult to be loved by the lesbian superior. Both involve a knowledge and an acceptance of the self. The difference of course is that the love between Suzanne and Mme de Moni is less overtly physical. It seems that Suzanne does find it difficult to be loved by Mme de Moni, but even more

difficult to admit loving anyone. She can only really acknowledge her love after de Moni has died.

When she takes her vows at Sainte-Marie, in a depressive trance, she is only physically present, being disposed of like an object in a dehumanising experience; she is psychologically and spiritually alienated. She says: "J'ai prononcé des vœux, mais je n'en ai nulle mémoire, et je me suis trouvée religieuse aussi innocemment que je fus faite chrétienne" (263). Immediately afterwards, she falls into "un état d'abattement si profond..." (263). Her illness, says Rubinger, is a result of "irreconcilable inner conflict, a loveless existence and the loss of self-respect."<sup>58</sup> Escape from alienation can take pathological forms explains Eberhard, and the person can become ill, physically or mentally.<sup>59</sup> Suzanne's moods swing between resignation and despair, both states of disease with the self. Before she is to take her vows, or rather, before she is to refuse publicly to take her vows, Suzanne has a strong physical reaction:

Je tombai évanouie sur mon traversin; un frisson  
dans lequel mes genoux se battaient et mes dents  
se frappaient avec bruit, succéda à cette défaillance;  
à ce frisson une chaleur terrible. Je ne me souviens  
ni de m'être déshabillée, ni d'être sortie de ma  
cellule" (245).

As a means of self-preservation, the mind refuses to acknowledge what the body is doing, or what is being done to the body, and shuts down all memory of the traumatic event. It is the combination of physical, emotional,



and psychological stress which results in her mental alienation. Diderot's treatment of stress here and throughout the novel is surprisingly modern; he links the state of mind to the physical state and probes the obvious direct connection between them.

Tillich claims that illness points to distorted relations between the individual and the social group and that it can be seen as a healthy reaction to a sick society.<sup>60</sup> According to Aarne: "Illness differs from health only with respect to *the form in which the individual relates to his specific environment.*"<sup>61</sup> (Aarne's italics). The symptoms, he claims, "serve only a means of self-expression."<sup>62</sup> Suzanne expresses herself this way: "J'éprouvai cependant, à l'approche de ma profession, une mélancolie si profonde..." (259), and shortly after says:

Je n'entendis rien de ce qu'on disait autour de moi; j'étais presque réduite à l'état d'automate; je ne m'aperçus de rien; j'avais seulement par intervalles comme de petits mouvements convulsifs...on disposa de moi pendant toute cette matinée qui a été nulle dans ma vie, car je n'en ai jamais connu la durée; je ne sais ni ce que j'ai fait, ni ce que j'ai dit...je n'en ai nulle mémoire..." (262-3).

As a result of the stress, and from the moment she realises the gravity of her situation, her mind closes it out: "depuis cet instant j'ai été ce qu'on appelle physiquement aliénée. Il a fallu des mois entiers pour me tirer de cet état" (264). Under stress her fear turns to illness: "Ma santé ne tint point à des

épreuves si longues et si dures; je tombai dans l'abattement, le chagrin et la mélancolie" (269).

It is after each ceremony that Suzanne becomes sick, which leads to the obvious conclusion that there is a link between physical events and her mental conditions. The first time is after taking her vows at Sainte-Marie (263); the second time is at Longchamps after coming out of the dungeon (277); the third time, after the exorcism she feels weak and loses consciousness (299-300), and the fourth time, after she is forced to scourge herself, she becomes so ill that she has to receive the last sacraments (319-320).

Each of these illnesses as Edmiston points out, follows a sacrificial ceremony, and each represents a kind of 'death' of the victim,<sup>63</sup> and each of which is also "a projection of guilt onto that authority."<sup>64</sup> He claims that in La Religieuse the "sacrifices of a pitiful victim evoke criticism of the social order which motivates them."<sup>65</sup> Included in this criticism is the Church which accepts nuns/victims under such circumstances.

When Suzanne persists in her refusal to cooperate and take her vows, she is isolated: "je fus renfermée dans ma cellule; on m'imposa le silence; je fus séparée de tout le monde, abandonnée à moi-même" (243). She is silenced and excluded from the community as women have always been silenced and excluded from the church. Not much has changed since Diderot's day; even now there are men, literally hundreds, who are willing to leave their church

rather than see women become priests and have any kind of active role and voice in the church.

Suzanne, says Mylne, is surrounded by personalities who are inseparable from their functions,<sup>66</sup> and Soeur Sainte-Christine's function in the novel is to illustrate another of Diderot's views on the effects of imprisonment and clausturation. When, in the first convent, Suzanne refuses to take her vows willingly, she is imprisoned : "On me conduisait dans ma cellule, où l'on m'enferma sous la clef" (247). Later, at home, she is once again imprisoned and denied a voice: "ma nouvelle prison, où je passai six mois, sollicitant tous les jours inutilement la grâce de lui parler, de voir mon père ou de leur écrire" (248). But under Sainte-Christine her imprisonment is much worse, in every respect.

What Suzanne describes in the convent of Longchamps while Soeur Sainte-Christine is the superior is total mental, spiritual and physical alienation of self. If a woman knows herself as intimately connected to others as Gilligan suggests<sup>67</sup>, then Suzanne is alienated from almost every one in the convent. The sadistic Soeur Sainte-Christine is only named once, a textual manifestation of Suzanne's attitude toward her. She is referred to as Madame (273,274), "on" (282), "l'hypocrite" (288), "celle qui m'avait précédée", and "la supérieure" (272). She reacts in a powerful and hostile manner to her own clausturation by showing sadistic tendencies. It is she who judges Suzanne to be mad, her

judgement obviously influenced by the specific system of patriarchal values which she represents.

A person who has lost the capacity to relate to others is insane, according to Fromm.<sup>68</sup> Gilligan claims that "a woman comes to know herself through her relationships with others"<sup>69</sup> If Sainte-Christine can only relate to others by exercising her power and control over them, she is merely reproducing the pattern of the master-slave relationship of the outside world. In fact Suzanne uses the word slaves when she talks about convent life. When she rebels against the authority of Soeur Sainte-Christine and her cohorts, she says: "elles ne pouvaient plus disposer de nous comme de leurs esclaves" (267-8). She also says: "on est libre dans une forêt, on est esclave dans le cloître" (342).

Suzanne herself has no doubts that this physical and psychological alienation leads to madness, and she sees her own future in the mad nun who has escaped from the cell where she was kept locked up - a prison within a prison: "elle était échevelée et presque sans vêtement; elle traînait des chaînes de fer; ses yeux étaient égarés; elle s'arrachait les cheveux; elle se frappait la poitrine avec les poings...(241), and she immediately decides "que je mourrais mille fois plutôt que de m'y exposer" (241). Diderot's recognition of the gravity of emotional illness demonstrates a true respect for women, says Marciewicz<sup>70</sup>, who points out that the mad nun occurs so frequently as to be a leitmotiv.<sup>71</sup>

Each time we see a mad nun, it is a very active, energetic representation, madness being what Vail terms an unregulated energy,<sup>72</sup> an observation which can be, and is, interpreted in many ways. The text of La Religieuse shows that it is not the abstinence from sex which causes madness, but the cloistered life and the lack of freedom, a point which Suzanne makes over and over again. (287,288,350). Vartanian sees a definite relationship between homosexuality and madness. He says: "The worsening of the Superior's compulsive actions gradually discloses a relationship between homosexuality and mental imbalance."<sup>73</sup> He also points out, however, "the self-destructive conflict to which homosexuality is exposed in a society hostile to it. "<sup>74</sup> It is the hostility to her lesbianism, and the guilt attached to it, along with the fear of eternal damnation as punishment for it, which drives the Superior mad. Her madness does not start until after Suzanne's remark makes her feel guilty. The superior says: "Qu'elle est innocente!" (351), and Suzanne replies: " Oh! il est vrai, chère mère, que je le suis beaucoup, et que j'aimerais mieux mourir que de cesser de l'être" (351). Suzanne represents the official church attitude that it is better to die than to be sexual, and she is a reminder to the superior not only of what is expected of her and of how she has failed, but of the consequences; eternal damnation. Greven calls the fear of hell the "greatest source of terror and anxiety ever known."<sup>75</sup> It is this fear and terror which drive her mad.

It is cruelly ironic that it is the making of a contract through the vows which alienate them from life, the "disparition et sublimation de son être," <sup>76</sup> as Fauchery describes it, which seems to cause the madness in many of the nuns in the convent; the knowledge that there is no escape from this alienation. It is also ironic that "eternal minors" could be held legally responsible for vows which had a far more serious effect on a person than, for example, a simple legal contract to buy a house. Abensour points out that the state regulated the age at which a female could sign a legal contract, but not the age at which she could take religious vows, <sup>77</sup> whose legal ramifications were even more far-reaching and the personal consequences of which could be, and often were, devastating .

When Suzanne and Dom Morel discuss the Superior, Suzanne reaches the conclusion, based on Dom Morel's contribution to the discussion, that "la disposition actuelle de cette femme ne durerait pas; qu'elle luttait contre elle-même, mais en vain; et qu'il arriverait de deux choses l'une, ou qu'elle reviendrait incessamment à ses premiers penchants, ou qu'elle perdrait la tête" (378). So in fact it is not being lesbian that drives her mad, nor even just the suppression of her natural tendencies, but the combination of mental turmoil and the guilt caused by the church's attitude, and her clausturation which gives her little opportunity to escape the constant reminder of that fear. Dom Morel says to Suzanne:

Elle n'était pas faite pour son état; et voilà ce qui en arrive tôt ou tard. Quand on s'oppose au penchant général de la nature, cette contrainte la détourne à des affections dérégées, qui sont d'autant plus violentes, qu'elles sont moins fondées; c'est une espèce de folie" (381).

When Suzanne asks if that is the fate in store for all nuns, he replies that while some die from madness, others adapt or live in hope. The only hope is that "un jour...les hommes reviendront de l'extravagance d'enfermer dans les sépulcres de jeunes créatures toutes vivantes, et que les couvents seront abolis..." (381).

It is clear that Diderot sees convents as breeding grounds for evil. He asks: "Où est le séjour de la gêne, du dégoût et des vapeurs? Où est le lieu de la servitude et du despotisme? Où sont les haines qui ne s'éteignent point?...Où est le séjour de la cruauté ...?"(311). The text itself is the answer. Diderot sees the life itself as inherently wrong. He says:

Faire vœu de pauvreté, c'est s'engager par serment à être paresseux et voleur; faire vœu de chasteté, c'est promettre à Dieu l'infraction constante de la plus sage et de la plus importante de ses lois; faire vœu d'obéissance c'est renoncer à la prérogative inaliénable de l'homme, sa liberté. Si l'on observe ces vœux, on est criminel; si on ne les observe pas, on est parjure. La vie claustrale est d'un fanatique ou d'un hypocrite (311).

In rejecting the binary oppositions of Western culture, such as good/bad, virgin/whore, body/soul, Diderot rejects the false spirituality which denies sexuality, and criticises a life which demands a rejection of God-given sexuality,

and which turns humans into less than they could and should be; less free, less moral, less sexual, less spiritual in the whole sense of the word.

It is not just a case of liberty, although that is an important aspect. When Suzanne says: "Ma faute est de n'être point appelée à l'état religieux, et de revenir contre les vœux que je n'ai pas faits librement" (306), she is indeed speaking against forced claustration. The whole text demonstrates that for Suzanne, and for Diderot, Christian ideals themselves, as interpreted by a patriarchal religion, are seen as incompatible with happiness or with human nature.<sup>78</sup> Suzanne rejects the Christian norm of sacrificial love. In the end, there is little hope that her life outside will be any better, society too being patterned on a patriarchal, hierarchal model. It is the social sin of alienation of women, economically, emotionally, physically and spiritually, both inside and outside the convent which La Religieuse criticises.



### ENDNOTES CHAPTER 3

1. Kenneth D.Eberhard, p.19
2. Eberhard, p.21
- 3.Eberhard, p.25
4. Catherine Rubinger, "Convent and Harem", p.78
5. de Beauvoir, p.60
6. Ann Foreman. Femininity as Alienation. (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p.106
7. Foreman, p.109
8. Nadine Monier, p.31
9. Foreman, p.102
10. Edmiston, "Sacrifice and Innocence," p.70
11. Edmiston, "Sacrifice and Innocence," p.74
12. Marilyn Vail, "Transformations of Narrative Structure in Relation to the Role of the Female Protagonist in the 18th Century Novel." (Unpublished thesis, Ph.D., Cornell, 1978), p.84
13. Baum, p.122
14. Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex. (London: Pan Books, 1976), p.77
15. Warner, p.76
16. Markiewicz, p.241
17. Warner, Prologue, p. xxv
18. Warner, p.77

18. Warner, p.77
19. Lou Ann Lange, The Riddle of Liberty. (Atlanta: The Scholar's Press, 1986), p.89
20. Dunfee, p.5
21. Dunfee, p.5
22. Dunfee, p.5
23. Saint-Armand, p.42
24. Chodorow, cited on p 10, Dunfee
25. Mylne, Diderot. La Religieuse, p.32
26. Fauchery, p.143
27. Fauchery, p.481
28. Fauchery, p.143
29. Abensour, p.9
30. Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 68.
31. Mylne, Diderot. "La Religieuse." p.29
32. Vail, p.85
33. Markiewicz, p.236
34. Markiewicz, p.236
35. Voltaire cited on Abensour, p.399.
36. Saint-Armand, p.39
37. Baum, p.214
38. Zimmerman, "Neither Clergy nor Laity: Woman in the Church," in Concilium, p.35
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42. Lefebvre, p.74
43. Carol Gilligan, cited in Dunfee, p.76
44. Letty Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective - A Theology, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), p.68
45. Lefebvre, p.73
46. Fauchery, p.350
47. Eberhard, p.28
48. Baum, p.9
49. Eberhard, p.40
50. Eberhard, p.41
51. Baum, p.9
52. Mary Daly, Beyond God The Father, cited in Dunfee, p.17
53. Rosemary Radford Reuther, Sexism and God-talk. Towards a Feminine Theology. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p.143
54. Baum, p.10
55. Eberhard, p.118
56. Fromm, p.87
57. Fromm, p.86
58. Rubinger, "Convent and Harem," p.80
59. Eberhard, p.40

60. Tillich on v, Foreword to The Voice of Illness by Aame Siirala, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964)
61. Aame Siirala, The Voice of Illness, p.7
62. Siirala, p.7
63. Edmiston, "Sacrifice and Innocence," p.75
64. Edmiston, "Sacrifice and Innocence," p.76
65. Edmiston, "Sacrifice and Innocence," p. 68
66. Mylne, Diderot. "La Religieuse." p.27
67. Gilligan 12 cited on Dunfee, p.77
68. Fromm, p.54
69. Carol Gilligan, cited Dunfee, p.77
70. Markiewicz, p.254
71. Markiewicz, p.246
72. Vail, p.94
73. Vartanian, p.365
74. Vartanian, p.365
75. Greven, p.60.
76. Fauchery, p.344
77. Abensour, p.279.
78. Edmiston. "Sacrifice and Innocence," p. 68

## CONCLUSION.

La Religieuse may have started out as a joke, <sup>1</sup> albeit one based on reality, but it is in fact a damning sociological commentary on the political, social, sexual and religious treatment of women. According to Proust, Marguerite Delamare, on whose real life battle to have her vows annulled the story of La Religieuse is based, was in a convent of the same order, le couvent de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie, faubourg Saint-Jacques à Paris, and with nuns of almost the same names, as Suzanne. <sup>2</sup> Diderot was no doubt also influenced by the tragic death of his young sister, Angélique, a nun, whose spirit and health were both broken by a system he found to be "inherently evil and unnatural...a powerful and destructive force." <sup>3</sup> So the book's ideological content is directed against the conventual life. It is rather, pro-humanist, and I think, specifically feminist.

Since most structures of authority are masculine, to question them, as Diderot does, is also to question the men who run them. <sup>4</sup> "His rebellion against authoritarian institutions," says Edmiston "...implied the destruction of the paternalistic system." <sup>5</sup> With the implied destruction of the patriarchal system one has to recognise the failure, for women especially, of the sex-role stereotyping rooted in patriarchy. Plaskow says that an "awareness of the

social nature of sin comes through....the experience of the bankruptcy of sex-role conditioning and all its supporting institutions. <sup>6</sup>

Textually, Diderot makes an effort to repudiate the socially constructed gender stereotypes by giving Suzanne many of the qualities traditionally limited to the male gender. Although we see her as passive many times in the novel, we also see her as being active, independent, worldly and knowledgeable. So, to some extent, Diderot rejects the stereotype of woman as passive, submissive, emotional; what Plaskow calls the chief feminine characteristics. <sup>7</sup> "There is no women's experience apart from cultural interpretation of it," she says. <sup>8</sup> Diderot interprets Suzanne's experience from a feminist, if not a feminine, point of view, although there are times when Suzanne seems deliberately textually seductive, but this too is a reflection of reality. Suzanne says: "...je me suis aperçue que...je m'étais montrée...plus aimable que je ne le suis. Serait-ce que nous croyons les hommes moins sensibles à la peinture de nos peines qu'à l'image de nos charmes?" (392). Since her story shows that they, the Church and the state, are not 'sensible' to justice, perhaps an appeal to the emotions will succeed where arguments based in justice did not.

Miller claims that "the plots of feminocentric novels are of course neither female in impulse or origin, nor feminist in spirit. In the final analysis, moreover, despite their titles and their feminine "I," it is not altogether clear to

me that these novels are about or for women at all." <sup>9</sup> The objection here is that Suzanne is not the subject of her own story, but the object of Diderot's story; that she recounts pseudo-pornographic seduction scenes to an older male reader for his, and the reader's, titillation. Benstock sees the lesbian superior as a fiction of feminine desire <sup>10</sup> and Faderman thinks it was written to arouse the male reader. Maybe Stewart would agree; he feels that the "leg category...is completely uninspiring." <sup>11</sup>

But I think that just as Richardson's Clarissa is a what Ruthven calls "arguably the major feminist text of the language," <sup>12</sup> so too is La Religieuse a feminist text. The fact that a man is writing as a woman is not the most important point to be considered; there is such a thing as imagination, even a moral imagination, and if this imagination can cross the boundary of gender, so much the better. Writing as a woman presents life from a certain point of view. One woman cannot speak for all women, nor one man speak for all men; one speaks to tell a story, to present a truth in a particular way, and the truth that Diderot tells in La Religieuse is one of oppression and the abuse of women in a particular situation. I think the fact that it is a tale of a woman told by a man pretending to be a woman is secondary to the profound ethical questions raised by the story itself. Fredman agrees that the first person narrative puts the focus on the narrator rather than on the narrative, <sup>13</sup> but Benstock claims that

epistolary fiction only poses as feminocentric writing.<sup>14</sup> By definition all fiction poses as something it is not.

According to Gilbert, the meaning is not inherent in the text, but is manufactured by the reader.<sup>15</sup> I think though, that some meaning is inherent in the text, although there is no doubt that often there is more than the author realises or intends. In the case of La Religieuse there is little doubt that Diderot is attacking primarily the conventual system, but also the whole patriarchal system. And just as writing can be a political activity, as was the writing of La Religieuse, so too can reading, says Ruthven.<sup>16</sup> And if, as Edmiston states, for Diderot the function of art is to teach ethical values,<sup>17</sup> then I think a good tale can do that more effectively than a moralising sermon. Diderot turns the personal tale of Suzanne into a political statement, which makes the ideological content feminist. If writing is a search for autonomy, and given the social realities of the time with which Diderot had to deal, what Diderot does is give a voice, through a masculine filter perhaps, but a voice nevertheless, to an otherwise invisible and silent member of society.

Heilbron and Stimpson claim that "The tragic man acts before he thinks; the tragic woman thinks and knows she cannot act."<sup>18</sup> This, I think, is Suzanne's tragedy; she can and does think, and she tries to act, but she knows, as does the reader, that any kind of autonomous life is unlikely for her. As Suzanne says to Soeur Sainte-Christine: "Le passé me répond de l'avenir..."



(289). The fact that she is still alive at the end, albeit in unenviable circumstances, leaves room for hope. Perhaps the past can teach us to improve the future.

## ENDNOTES FOR CONCLUSION

1. M. de Croismare, a real person and friend of many of the Encyclopedists, retired to the country and was missed by his friends. In an attempt to lure him back to Paris, Diderot and his friends decided to write to him, pretending to be an escaped nun in need of help. In 1758 M. de Croismare had tried, unsuccessfully, to use his influence to help Marguerite Delamarre, who had been sent to the convent by her parents, to be dispensed from her vows. These letters form the basis of La Religieuse.
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3. Melnick, p.237
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7. Plaskow, p.49
8. Plaskow, p.29
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10. Benstock, p.96
11. Stewart, p.314
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13. Fredman, p.35
14. Benstock, p.96

15. Gilbert in Feminist Literary Studies. K. K. Ruthven, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984),p.90
16. K. K. Ruthven, Feminist Literary Studies, p.15
17. Edmiston, p.25
18. Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson, "Theories of Feminist Criticism: A Dialogue." In Feminist Literary Criticism, 61-73. Josephine Donovan, ed. (Lexington: University Press ofKentucky,1975), p.68

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