Wrestling with Religion

What is the relation of the sacred to religion? Could it be that the sacred is always already sacrilegious? What if the sacred is always already blasphemous, always already on the verge of unbearable? And what if this blasphemous, intolerable sacred is imagined to be the very foundation of religion? What if, that is, the sacred is simultaneously both the fundamental subject matter of religion and the bane of religion’s existence?

In this chapter I will sketch one way that ‘we’ (and by ‘we’ I mean specifically, narrowly, those of us who are relatively privileged inhabitants of the western, still primarily Christian, symbolic universe) might begin to think about this question: What if, in the west, the sacred is hegemonically imagined and enacted as both the fundamental subject matter of religion and the bane of religion’s existence? Why might it matter, and to whom? Before we can think further these questions there are two theoretical issues to be dealt with: what do I mean by ‘the sacred’ and what do I mean by ‘religion’?

The sacred. The following brief conception of the sacred could be read (in sober, measured tones) as a list of key terms. Or it could be read as a whirling mass of metaphors, each one gliding and spinning amongst all the others, each one immeasurably enriched by the presence of all the rest … Because it is not a minor point, let me stress that the conception of the sacred that I am about to offer I wrote after immersing myself in texts by Rudolph Otto, Mircea Eliade, René Girard, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich … For reasons which may or may not become obvious, I’ve attempted an excessively faithful distillation of their thoughts on the subject.

The sacred, the holy. The mysterium tremendum et fascinans, the numinous.¹ Unknown untouched pure wholly other terrifying awful overwhelming presence most alluring of physical attractions … power inescapable all-encompassing dark bloody heat touch burning light
source life madness danger terror death touch trembling longing burning
pleasure presence knowledge gone. Present yet absent. Known yet unknown. Lived, felt, feared, celebrated, yet curiously unthinkable. All but inexpressible. Unpardonably unreasonable. Almost almost almost irrational. But not quite. There seems to be a logic to the sacred, a deep, dark, enfolding, slippery logic. A fleshy, chaotic logic. Contained, yet always bursting forth, erupting, demanding, desirable, dark, terrible … A bloody logic, a threshold logic. The logic of the womb, perhaps. Simultaneously blessed and accursed. And yes it is a gendered logic, a racialised logic, a sensual sexual logic, all together all at once. The sacred, the holy, the numinous. The signifiers multiply, gather and disperse: their single commonality, a resistance to control.

So much for the sacred, what about religion?

Although I am sorely tempted to suggest that religion is just like pornography, we all know it when we see it, I won’t. Instead I will offer the following working definition, cobbled together (not so faithfully) from thinkers like Eliade, Ninian Smart, William Paden, Mary Douglas and Mary Daly, with just a dash of Michel Foucault: as I use the term ‘religion’ refers to the practice of organised, institutionalised expressions of faith. In other words, at the first whiff of Ritual, I smell Religion; I detect a hierarchical (and boringly gendered) division of both labour and knowledge; I sense the closely monitored allocation and distribution of power and authority; I see the construction and imposition of strict boundaries – between the spiritual and the profane, the pure and the polluted, the proper and the improper, the worshipped and the damned, the divine and the flesh. Most of all I witness control, at least the attempt (on the part of some) to control, define, discipline, systematise and regulate the practices, beliefs, behaviours and bodies of others. In short I understand religion to be an institution seeking to impose certain values, practices, rules and meanings upon a most unruly if not downright recalcitrant range of uncertain embodied experiences, events, and ‘ineffables’. At its best I think religion tries to make meaningful, to make somewhat orderly the chaotic confusions of life and death as these confusions course through our different bodies. At its worst I think
religion rules *everything* out. That it denies chaos, denies confusion, denies death, denies entirely the pulsing, raucous profusion of pleasures, pains, multiplicities and differences that constitute shared, entangled life. Monotheisms in particular seem susceptible to this religious tendency toward denial.

If these are plausible sketches of ‘the sacred’ and ‘religion’ as they are imagined and enacted within dominant western culture, then it would seem that the relationship between the two is bound to be somewhat tense, particularly if Paul Tillich is correct and ‘the universal religious basis is the experience of the Holy within the finite.’ As I read him, he really is suggesting that the holy or the sacred is the basis, the foundational subject matter of religion, all religious institutions. If this is true, then it is possible to explain or at least describe the relationship between the sacred and religion in the manner according to Derrida:

A purely rational analysis brings the following paradox to light: that the foundation of law – law of the law, institution of the institution, origin of the constitution – is a 'performative' event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies. Such an event is unjustifiable within the logic of what it will have opened. It is the decision of the other in the undecidable. Henceforth reason ought to recognize there what Montaigne and Pascal call an undeniable 'mystical foundation of authority'.

Think about it. The sacred as the ‘mystical foundation’ of religion, as the originary event so bloody overwhelming that it cannot belong, cannot be contained by any reasonable religion, cannot be justified by either Word or Spirit. It’s an intuitively appealing description of the relationship between the sacred and religion, but perhaps a little too rigidly dichotomous. What I mean is, yes, Derrida can be used to explain the repression of the sacred by religion; he can help us to understand religion’s bent toward denial, but I’m not sure he can explain the *sometimes welcome* presence of the sacred within religion. Nor can he help us to ponder the possibility that the sacred needs religion, albeit
differently than religion needs the sacred. In very Other words, I think Derrida’s ‘purely rational analysis of the institution of the institution’ can help us to think about a hateful relationship between religion and the sacred, but it cannot help us to think a loving relationship between the two. (Note: I didn’t say tender or gentle, I said ‘loving’.)

Is there a theory that might help us to think a relationship of love and hatred and welcome all at once? Well, maybe. It might be possible, and possibly illuminating, to think the relationship between the sacred and religion through Julia Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic and the symbolic.9 I’m busily hedging this paragraph with ‘mights’ and ‘maybes’ because although Kristeva herself associates the sacred with the semiotic and religion with the symbolic, she never suggests that the sacred is the foundation of religion. Nor does she invest the sacred with as much terrifying strength as I suspect it has, or at least has been mythed to have. Finally, recently she wrote, ‘I am convinced that this new millennium, which seems so eager for religion, is in reality eager for the sacred.’10 I fear that this new millennium really is eager for religion; and I think that Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic and the symbolic can, maybe, help us to understand why. With these caveats in place, then, how does she theorise ‘the symbolic’?

According to Kristeva, the symbolic is the realm of clear, distinct and separate subjects and objects.11 It is the realm of grammar, logical structure, systematisation, categorisation; rules are made and obeyed in the realm of the symbolic, for without them chaos and confusion would reign supreme; meaning could never be made clear; there would be no differentiation between self and Other, signifier and signified.12 Kristeva more or less agrees with Lacan, the symbolic is the realm of social organisation ‘according to the imperatives of paternal authority,’ or the Law of the Father.13 But in her thought the symbolic is also always indebted to, dependent upon, and suffused with the semiotic.14 The semiotic, whose originary home is the chora: space of the nurturing maternal body.15 Imaginary space of the not yet signifying, the not yet clearly distinct or separate, the not yet fully ordered.16 What then

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constitutes the semiotic, traces of which, according to Kristeva, are forever pouring forth from the chora and coursing through the symbolic? For a start, sounds. Tones, rhythms, pulsing cadences, sounds flowing mobile liquid sounds all mixed and intermingled driving pounding beats insistent and demanding, soothing and unsettling.\(^{17}\) The semiotic is comprised in part of the physical vibrations of which sound is composed, the material ‘stuff’ of all spoken words, no, more, the material ‘stuff’ of all signifying practices – the movements, the gestures, the waves and the jerks, the unequivocally corporeal elements of language.\(^{18}\) Written language too.\(^{19}\) The muscular chipping of marks into marble, the slippery sticky smearing of blood onto stone, the scratching of any inky substance onto papyrus or scroll or paper, even the tapping of fingertips onto a plastic keyboard. And from whence the urge, the drive, the energy to move the body in order to make such sounds, gestures, marks? In the gospel according to Kristeva bodily drives too are elements of the semiotic.\(^{20}\) In sum, the materiality, the physicality of every signifying practice, every signifying subject, is drenched in semiotic fluid: sounds, movements, bodily drives – all slick and slippery with the semiotic.

If I understand Kristeva even a little, without the semiotic not a single Law of the Father could ever be uttered, gestured or inscribed. And without the symbolic there would be no Others with whom to share, or fight about, those Laws. Crucially, Kristeva insists that the semiotic and the symbolic are always more or (usually) less intermingled.\(^{21}\) As I picture her theory, although all our words might start out wet, they soon dry off. The symbolic is an arid realm indeed, resistant to everything fluid, uncertain, confused enough to escape established categories. And, here’s the thing, as human beings in the plural we do need those categories that enable us to tell up from down, here from there, nectar from ambrosia; we need those logical linguistic structures whose presence enables us to, about their proper order, disagree. The symbolic also gives to all the elements of the semiotic their uniqueness; the symbolic gives to each of us our own uniqueness: I, you. Meanwhile, the semiotic enlivens the symbolic, enables it to hum with meaning, with possibility, with possibilities of the otherwise: I, you, oui?
Within Kristeva’s theoretical framework, either a ceaseless flood or a ceaseless drought would result in our annihilation as signifying subjects. Quite logically, she argues that we need the semiotic, we need the symbolic, and we need them to be intermingled. At this particular point in time I am not at all worried about the non-existent threat of flooding, but I am deeply concerned about the current drought. Interestingly, Kristeva claims there are only three wellsprings of the semiotic powerful enough to soak the symbolic through and through: strong enough, in other words, to affect and change the grammar, the logic, the rules of the symbolic, the laws of the Father. This revolutionary trinity is comprised of poetry, madness, and holiness.\(^{22}\)

It’s telling, I think, that in this our era of Information Technology and the War Against Terror there seems to be no time at all for poetry; there are more and more drugs to manage madness; and religion is returning in the most blatantly misogynist and boringly heterosexual of forms. It’s telling, I think, that the initiator of the war against terror claims to be a born-again christian (being born of a woman not good enough). It’s telling that he cannot seem to abide the Other – any Other, who is, after all, always already tinged with the foreign, the strange, the dark, the feminine, the sensual, the sexual.\(^{23}\) It’s telling that he cannot stand uncertainty, that he seeks to eradicate all that terrifies him. It’s also telling that he mangles the English language, does immeasurable violence to it. Don’t ‘misunderestimate me,’ even when his utterances are grammatically in order they are devoid of meaningful content; ‘I answered all the questions.’ Which tells us precisely nothing.

... 

We are bearing witness, I think, to an enactment of the symbolic almost entirely devoid of the semiotic. We are bearing witness, I am sure of it, to an enactment of religion at war against the sacred. It is time to be blasphemous? Is it time to utter the intolerable, to call upon the sacred to once again infuse religion with a terrible mystery, a sensual allure, an ecstatic celebration of all flesh, all incarnate bodies? Is the western symbolic already so parched, so dry that it is crumbling apart, disintegrating into a jagged jumble of barren signifiers: empty,
meaningless shells? To what does ‘weapons of mass destruction’ refer, exactly? Not to the bombs which are being dropped, but to those that don’t exist? What does ‘collateral damage’ mean? You damaged our bomb when we dropped it on you, so we’re even? The meaning, the very possibility of meaning, and the mattering, the blasphemous possibility that all bodies matter, the simple not-so-simple acknowledgment of all our entangled lives – no life ever fully separate from all the rest – might this be what is at stake right now?

Intolerable questions, admitting of no certain answers.

…

Once upon a time, not so long ago, a bunch of old white men were able to myth the sacred as terribly feminine, frighteningly and desirably Other; their words were, if not dripping, at least damp. And they were able to live with their myths of the sacred, to welcome them, lovingly and hatefully, into their texts upon religion. Once upon a time, now, a bunch of us might want to consider furthering their efforts. Upon insisting, loudly, on the sacred, terrifying, alluring and unutterable flesh. Upon honouring all bodies. And yes, to do so is to risk, perhaps, being named ‘enemy combatants.’ At last, a meaningful term. It means we are all of us already surrounded by a war – a war against the intolerable enemy, a war against the feminine, against the dark, against the sensual and sexual, a war against all unruly, recalcitrant bodies. A war directed against all numinous subjects.

Endnotes


3 Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p. 181. ‘The threshold concentrates not only the boundary between outside and inside but also the possibility of passage from one zone to another (from the profane to the sacred …).’

4 See Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, Second ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), p. 25. ‘Every child that is coming into being rests, like all life that is coming
into being, in the womb of the great mother, the undivided primal world that precedes form. From her, too, we are separated, and enter into personal life, slipping freely only in the dark hours to be close to her again; night by night this happens to the healthy man.’


11 See Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, pp. 52 and 86. ‘The [symbolic] encompasses the emergence of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories: semantic and categorical fields.’

12 Ibid., p. 29. ‘… the symbolic – and therefore syntax and all the linguistic categories – is a social effect of the relation to the other …’


14 Ibid., p. 48-49.


16 Ibid., p. 28.

17 Ibid., p. 26. She writes of ‘gestural and vocal play’ ‘in this rhythmic space.’

18 Ibid., pp. 27 and 40. ‘The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks …’

19 Ibid., p. 100. ‘The text’s semiotic distribution is set out in the following manner: when instinctual rhythm passes through ephemeral but specific theses, meaning is constituted but is then immediately exceeded by what seems outside meaning: materiality, the discontinuity of real objects.’

20 Ibid., pp. 27-28.

21 Ibid., p. 62. ‘… the semiotic, which also precedes it, constantly tears it open … what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic.’
