Introduction

The numinous, the sacred, the holy. Mysterious, dreadful, desirable, alluring, terrifying, soothing, disruptive – all together all at once. The sacred. ‘Not religion or its opposite, atheistic negation, but the experience that beliefs both shelter and exploit, at the crossroads of sexuality and thought, body and meaning, which women feel intensely but without being preoccupied by it and about which there remains much for them – for us – to say.’¹ Being quite preoccupied with the rather elusive notion of the sacred, the preceding words by Julia Kristeva always make me smile. Which is to say, I agree entirely with her characterisation of the sacred as ‘at the crossroads of sexuality and thought, body and meaning’, and I also agree that there remains much for women to say about it. That is exactly what I am attempting to do in this admittedly elusive essay. And *Numinous Subjects* is an essay in the strictest sense of the word, which is to say, it is a limited interpretation of the sacred written from a most particular point of view.

How is the sacred engendered in western culture, that is, how is it given form, shape, flesh, sex, gender, and to whom might it matter? These are the limited questions I have tried to answer in the following pages. In order to pose these questions at all I have revisited in particular Rudolph Otto’s thoughts on the numinous, the lovely term he coined for the sacred. Drawing lightly on feminist theology, in a way I have attempted a ‘theological queer[y]ing’ of the sacred.² At times the text reads as ‘an incantation at the edge of uncertainty’, as a hodgepodge of thoughts drawn, still dripping, out of chaos, thus it might also be a kind of ‘tehomic theology’.³ Or it might simply be an extended, passionate wrestling with the figures of the numinous. The sort of wrestling that leaves one limp, exhausted, not knowing if the resultant scars mark wounds or blessings. That we all have been wounded I take for granted. That we all have been blessed I assume as well. But it is often difficult to tell the difference.
In simplest terms, this is an essay about different sexual and sensual figures of the sacred as they are imagined, mythed and enstoriied (by which I mean ‘told into being and confined’, simultaneously) in western culture. Then too, the entire book is a string of myths deliberately re-mythed, re-wondered, re-stranged – in a figurative attempt to make more disorderly the more established stories of the sacred. Put differently, *Numinous Subjects* is, methodologically, an enactment of ‘figuration.’ As conceived by Donna Haraway, ‘figuration is the mode of theory when the more “normal” rhetorics of systematic critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders.’ At this time in western culture, at the start of the third millennium, religious discourse has returned to occupy a privileged place in ‘the established disorders’. I find three sacred figures entrapped within such discourse to be particularly noteworthy: the virgin, the mother, and the whore. My sense is that the figures of the virgin, the mother, and the whore are unavoidable. They are undeniably present within the western cultural imaginary. Accordingly, they are central figures within this essay. Accompanying them are the following concepts: myth, immanence, transcendence, knowledge, ethics, agency, and corporeality.

Obviously ‘religion’ is deeply entangled throughout these thoughts, and I should stress that I take the fact of religion(s) in western culture seriously indeed. But by ‘religion’ I am not referring to any personal spiritual practices or beliefs about the existence and/or nature of any deity. I mean simply that religious traditions and communal rituals are real, that religious institutions abound, and that western culture is suffused with religious figures, myths and symbols. Grace Jantzen described the situation to which I am alluding in this way:

> If it is the case that human life and culture is saturated with a religious symbolic so that even ostensibly secular positions do not escape religious structuring of consciousness, then the question is not whether or not we are religious, but rather whether we choose to become conscious of the way the … imaginary expressed in the religious symbolic permeates thought
and social structures, or whether we remain unconscious of these ways.\textsuperscript{5}

I take Jantzen’s point to be that all of our lives are affected by our culture’s dominant religious symbolic order – in whichever culture we dwell, regardless of our personal thoughts on the matter (if, indeed, it is even possible to have entirely ‘personal’ thoughts on the subject). Accordingly, each of the following chapters is an attempt to become conscious of and to think through a different configuration of the sacred figures and concepts that slip from the religious symbolic order and suffuse the western cultural imaginary.

For various reasons, I am most interested in those figures, images, myths and concepts which weigh heaviest upon women in western culture. I am not sure that I can define what ‘western culture’ means exactly, and I do not for a second assume that the weight of those figures is distributed equally across the shoulders of all women, but I do assume that it would be nice if the gravity of those images, figures and myths could be lessened. The question is, how to do so? Perhaps, just perhaps, a respectful, playful, intimate familiarity with them can lighten their presence, can enliven and liberate these figures in unexpected, life abundant ways.

Thus throughout the pieces that comprise this text I have attempted to maintain a respectful, playful gaze at the figures of the virgin, the mother, and the whore. At their appearance in ponderous philosophical tomes and on the covers of popular magazines. At their explicit presence in pop song lyrics and implicit presence in, arguably, the most central theological and philosophical concepts. I touch upon their (attempted) mass production and their (attempted) harsh regulation. The conclusion I draw is simple. They matter. These particular figures matter us in ways we, the living inhabitants of western culture, do not yet and perhaps never will be able to comprehend fully. And we, some of us in particular, matter them. Such mattering is a double-edge sword, both curse and blessing, and always both at once.
More specifically, the first part of this book is focused on the myth of the sacred. I begin by trying to convey more fully my understanding of myth-in-general, and then briefly introduce the virgin, the whore and the mother as mythical figures, figures drenched with sacred associations. In chapter two (with the help of numerous theorists, and especially Julia Kristeva) I attempt to think through the relationship between the sacred and religion, and then move in chapter three to thinking specifically about the myth of the sacred, to thinking about the three ferociously feminine ways in which the sacred has been mythed and ‘figured’ in western culture, in part through the christian Marys: the Virgin Mary, the Mother Mary, and that whorish Other Mary. Exalted, denigrated, worshipped, condemned, central, marginal: their status and position in the western cultural imaginary shift and change about, but they never seem to disappear entirely from ‘our’ awareness. (They, or at least the virgin, the mother, and the whore, are present in other cultures too, in a myriad of different guises, but in this book I’m focusing on their appearances in ‘the west’). Sometimes one Mary will be more prominent in the cultural imaginary than the others, yet wherever there is one the other two are not far off. I am trying to understand why this is the case.

Next, in chapter four I ponder those theo-philosophical concepts (immanence and transcendence) which I believe to be most implicated within the myth of the sacred. That these concepts are themselves gendered has been pointed out repeatedly; what I find curious is that when ‘read’ through the lens of the sacred they are not exactly gendered in the way that is usually argued – and the difference matters. With chapter five, ‘Subjects in Abundance’, a marked shift occurs. I am no longer thinking so much about the sacred, but attempting to think with the sacred, through the sacred. Specifically, I am trying to discern how the numinous subjects of the title might answer Michel Foucault’s question: ‘How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge?’ This imaginative foray into the land(s) of subjectivity and epistemology is followed by a quick sideways glance into the realm of ethics, chapter six. Finally, the book concludes with a short reflection on the
corporeality of the numinous – a reflection which is simultaneously a recapitulation of the preceding chapters. By this point the shift from ‘thinking about’ the sacred to ‘thinking with and through’ the numinous is particularly evident; I am telling stories more often than analyzing them, blasphemously attempting to speak from the standpoint of the sacred rather than look at it. It is my hope that these pieces will be read as an attempt to translate Luce Irigaray’s project of ‘philosophy in the feminine’ into the study of religion. Where it succeeds, it has been informed by numinous Others. Where it fails, I bear full responsibility.

Endnotes

2 For the gorgeous notion of ‘theological queering’ I am indebted to Marcella Althaus-Reid. Her vibrant insights pervade these pages, albeit often in ways which are not immediately recognisable. See Marcella Althaus-Reid, The Queer God (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) and Marcella Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender & Politics (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).
6 See for example Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary - the Feminine Face of the Church (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977). Both texts are focused upon Mary as virgin and Mary as mother, yet both texts include an entire chapter on Mary Magdalene. There is no logical need to write about Mary Magdalene when writing about the other Mary(s), but they do …