

Sacred Spaces: What Makes Them Sacred?

Mary T. Condren Th.D.

In contemporary feminist work on religion, in all its many aspects, the words *sacred*, *holy*, *profane*, *divine*, *numinous*, *religious experience*, *supernatural* are often used. It is assumed, I would say uncritically, that women occupy the realm of the *profane*, which appears to be synonymous with *impure*. It is further assumed that women inherit the negative side of the dualisms of patriarchal thinking.

In addition, words like *sacred* or *God* are used as though everyone meant the same thing. This article challenges these assumptions and argues that to use these words uncritically is to abandon the possibility of producing a more sophisticated analysis of what is at issue.

My argument is this: that in Western culture the sacred is produced by excluding all reminders of the unconscious, semiotic energies; maternal bodies and their fluids for the sake of the profane world of politics, philosophy, Western consciousness, and religion. However, the excluded world does not go away. At times when social and religious renewal is needed, (for instance, the time of sacrifice) the sacred is revisited. To protect themselves from these uncontrolled energies, men wash themselves of all reminders of the maternal (the laws of purity). Thus armoured, they can draw on maternal energies at the same time as they draw up new rules and regulations keeping women out of these arenas.

When we talk about *sacred spaces* we need to understand the profound cultural and religious changes that took place when matri-centred religions were superseded by those of patriarchy and when definitions as to what counted as *holy*, or *sacred* were changed radically.

Let me start with my own roots: Irish Celtic culture. In the old pre-Celtic and early Celtic societies the holy places were the bushes, trees, and places where water appeared unexpectedly, such as holy wells located on tops of mountains. The movements of the sun, moon, and stars were studied carefully to find any clues as to how the humans and the gods might be in better harmony. The old religions were vitally aware of how tenuous our human existence was and how much we depended on the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth.

Even where our early ancestors constructed religious sites they tended to be such that they were in tune with the lunar or solar systems. Places such as Newgrange, Knowth, and

Dowth in Ireland in the Valley of the Boyne, so-called after the Goddess Bóann, were constructed to take full advantage of the summer and winter solstices. Light would enter the otherwise dark chambers at these times, symbolising the renewal of creativity to the earth and the impregnation of the womb of the goddess.

Since women's bodies produced new life it followed that metaphors of cave (womb), mountains (breasts), rivers (uterine fluids), perfectly represented the creative principle of all life. The Mother Goddess reigned supreme in the heavens and co-operation with her life-giving principles would bring prosperity and joy to all her children.

Even the ruling powers were in tune with her. In Old Irish literature there is evidence that the test for a good king was as follows: that fruits would regularly appear on the trees; that the arts of dyeing (sacred arts) would always succeed; and that no woman would die in childbirth. If these rules were broken, this constituted evidence that the rightful king was not in place and he would be overthrown.¹ Similarly, one king was so incensed by the crime of rape that he put it outside of his capacity to forgive.²

Indeed, in Celtic mythology the king had to symbolically *mate* with the goddess in the form of a mare before taking up office.

In other stories, the goddess appeared to groups of men in the form of an old hag asking for sexual union. Only the one who had the wisdom to accept the awful tragedy of her human condition could become the rightful king.³ When they mated, she became young again, symbolising the fact that justice, peace, and prosperity returned to the land.⁴ The goddess often appears in mythology offering the cup of sovereignty to the future king.⁵

Our earliest ancestors knew and accepted our dependence on the earth and our human origins from women's bodies. They sought to co-operate with nature; they honoured women

and at times of social renewal they ritually remembered and celebrated their part in the whole cosmic universe.

Sacred spaces in patri-centred religions

In the patriarchal tradition we no longer honour the earth, or our origins from women's bodies. We strive to dominate nature; we abuse women. At times of social renewal, although (as I will show) the maternal realm is revisited, this is only to prove why we need to continue repudiating (sacrificing) our origins. Rather than celebrating the gift of life, we continually invent new immortality ideologies overcoming death. Creativity is no longer located in the Womb but in the Word.

This process can be seen clearly in Christian history. In the early Christian church the image of the holy place is the banquet table a place where all were welcome, rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, for *all were equal in Christ Jesus*.⁶ Once the church consolidated, however, and especially when it became the religion of the Empire, the holy places changed rapidly. The sacred mysteries were no longer those of life but those of death. Mystery resided in (and was even promoted by) the priestly caste. Increasingly, these mysteries took place behind closed curtains and altar rails, no longer visible to the people. A hierarchy was born, clearly reflected in the architecture. Awesome spires reaching up to the heavens replaced the sacred caves. Rows of seats, arranged hierarchically on behalf of the rich and famous, replaced the table of equality and the bountiful earth.

The deity changed significantly also. The Mother Goddess in most mythologies had reigned supreme. She was gradually replaced by the mother and son. Then the son often seized control, cutting his mother in half to create heaven and earth.

In the Greek tradition the old goddess, the Furies, are banished under the earth to make way for the goddess Athena for whom *no mother gave me birth*.⁷ In Celtic mythology, the Irish goddesses made a pact with the invaders. They would inhabit the places under the earth, while the invaders inhabited above ground.⁸

Then the father god reigned supreme but not until the father god sacrificed his son for the sake of his honour (as traditional Christian soteriological doctrine formulates it) was the revolution complete. Death, rather than life, was now in control. Access to divinity was the prerogative of the clerical caste and only accessible to certain members of the right sex.

Divinity was no longer accessible through the natural earth but was located in the tabernacles. Sacrificial death on the altar, controlled by a clerical priesthood, replaced the mysteries of life itself. The altar of sacrifice replaced the bountiful earth and the Christian banquet table, as the sources of cultural and religious regeneration.

Sacred spaces socially constructed

How did this happen?

Sacred spaces in patriarchal society are socially constructed, rather than *naturally* given. Moreover, such construction is under the control of those in power.

The notion that sacred spaces are socially constructed is perhaps a little startling and needs some further elaboration. Nancy Jay, a brilliant anthropologist of religion, once told a story of going into the Harvard museum and coming across what was called an Australian *churinga*. Under the case holding the *churinga* it read: *any woman who looks up this will die*. Here she was, in the Harvard museum, so many hundreds of years later, looking upon it, and clearly she wasn't dying.

She drew the conclusion that maybe indeed in some Australian societies that, whatever this thing was, a woman looking upon it would have died, just as if I had had, at the age of ten, the temerity to go up and open the tabernacle in the Catholic church and steal the communion host, I too might have died. The taboos and the social powers and forces that would have been against me doing that might have been sufficient to have killed me. In another context, the

churinga certainly had no power to kill Nancy Jay, so she concluded that the sacred is contextually defined.

But how is the sacred socially constructed? And how begin to understand its politics?

To do so we will have to look at several disciplines—psychoanalysis, anthropology, and feminist theory—to develop a composite approach enabling us to understand the complexity of what is at stake.

The theorist of religion, Roger Caillois wrote as follows:

Basically, with regard to the sacred in general, the only thing that can be validly asserted is contained in the very definition of the term—that it is opposed to the profane. As soon as one attempts to specify the nature and conditions of this opposition, one comes up against serious obstacles.⁹

Caillois went on to write:

The sole manifestation of the sacred may be in the forms of taboos, which protect against anything capable of threatening the cosmic regularity, or of expiations and reparations for all that can disturb it. It tends toward immobility, for any change or innovation may be perilous to the stability of the universe, whose development one wishes to control so as to destroy the chance of death. But the seeds of its destruction reside in its very functioning, which accumulates waste and induces the erosion of its mechanism.¹⁰

Like most theorists of his generation, Caillois was not concerned with the issue of gender and yet it is here that his work is so significant, especially when we ask the questions as to the nature of these taboos and at some of the stories that gives these taboos their plausibility. It may be impossible to *define* the sacred, but it *is* possible to see its working in action.

Female Dangers

Patriarchal propaganda thrives on the notion that the greatest threats posed to rationality, order, goodness, justice, or linear thinking—all the things most prized by patriarchal society—are represented by women.

To give but some examples: Eve was tempted by the Serpent; the Irish goddess, Medb, was promiscuous and power hungry; Pandora opened the box causing chaos in Greek myth. Athena's claim to rule justly was made on the basis that *no mother gave me birth*.¹¹

These myths share the common notion that what women represent is antithetical to good order (at least as this order is defined in patriarchal society). Patriarchal forms survive under the illusion that unconscious drives, or other destructive forces are under control (Mary's heel crushing the serpent; God the Father winning the war against the Devil). Theology, ethics, law, appear to have gained the upper hand. In reality, however, the realm of the unconscious (semiotic) threatens to erupt, and a great deal of energy is expended on the part of individuals and cultures to ensure that these energies are kept under control.

In patriarchal society women have been made to appear to be the very antithesis of the sacred or the holy. Only apparently by keeping women out of the realms of the sacred can good religious order reign. But this is not as simple as it might seem, and to understand why this is we have to take a look at some dualisms that have emerged in scholarship that enable us to take a closer look at what is happening. These are political, mythological, and psychoanalytic.

SACRED

Political/ Social Dualisms

nature

Mythological Dualisms

maternal

chaos/Eve/Pandora/Serpent

cyclical tragic vision

mortality

myth of endless gratification/

Garden of Eden

Psychoanalytic Dualisms

breast

pre-Oedipal

abject

undifferentiated

negativity: murder, envy

unconscious drives

pre-linguistic

pre-moral

passions

death instinct

PROFANE

culture

paternal

order/Yahweh

eschatological linear history

immortality

taboos/

delayed gratification/afterlife

phallus

Oedipal

pure

sure identity

stable subject

consciousness

language

morality

ethics

death drives

Uncritical thinking might assume that the *sacred* appears on that side of the dualism traditionally associated with hierarchy and power; in other words, the sacred is the realm of men. But this is deceptive. *In reality, the sacred occupies the space of the maternal, the unconscious, the semiotic.* The sacred is opposed to the profane world of law and order, i.e. culture. How could this be, and how can we tell?

The realm of the sacred is extraordinarily ambivalent. Like the mother's body it is exciting and dangerous, compelling and repulsive, fertile and death-giving. Reminders of the maternal body, through some process of contagion, threaten to irrevocably contaminate the priest. For this very reason, prior to entering the realm of the sacred, priests must engage in strict purification procedures. Those who have freed themselves from reminders of the mother's body (celibate men in particular) are uniquely qualified to perform the rites of sacrifice. In other words, they have freed themselves from abjection. But what is the abject?

Societies define the abject differently, depending on their power structures. But in the Jewish and Christian tradition a startling fact emerges: *that the abject is constituted by reminders of the mother's body: mucus, milk, vaginal fluids, and especially, menstrual blood.*

According to Julia Kristeva, the *abject* is that which opposes itself to the object and is defined by that which *disturbs identity, system, order*"¹²

What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject* on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meanings collapses. A certain *ego* that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away...to each ego its object—to each superego its abject.¹³

Julia Kristeva argues that in order to enter human culture, acquire language, become independent, we need to renounce the primal pleasures of infancy and enter into the social

world. In other words, we need to make a *thetic break* with primal pleasure, often mythologically characterised as the Garden of Paradise.

According to Kristeva, sacrifice ritually re-iterates the thetic moment (the condition of consciousness itself) whether this is envisaged as the killing of the father (Sigmund Freud), or the mother (Melanie Klein). This murder represents the renunciation of primary gratification or aggression for the sake of entry to the Law of the Symbolic, signified by the Phallus.¹⁴ Such renunciation is the condition of the possibility of the social order, its lethal underpinning, and the containment of which, for fear of re-enactment, gives rise to prohibition and repression.¹⁵

Kristeva argues that religious rites have traditionally accomplished on behalf of society the structuration of the speaking subject in relation to the social and symbolic order.¹⁶ In particular, through the rites of sacrifice, the social order is re-iterated and rejuvenated:

The sacred—sacrifice—which is found in every society, is then, a *theologization of the thetic*, itself structurally indispensable to the positing of language. This theologization takes on different forms depending on the degree of development of the society's productive forces [emphasis added].¹⁷

Religion acts to maintain the differentiations necessary for social structuring. But what, in Western culture, are these differentiations and how are they maintained? Kristeva argues that rites of defilement provide the vital clues:

This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's *fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother* [emphasis added].¹⁸

In other words, Kristeva is arguing that as a condition of consciousness we repudiate primal oneness (we leave the Garden of Paradise). However, the Garden of Paradise also

represents fertility, life, and wholeness—all vital antidotes to the sterile logic of taboo or advanced rationality. The Garden of Paradise is revisited, its excesses are tasted again at times of communal regression for two reasons. The first is that we might rejuvenate ourselves, taste the excess, wallow in primal oneness, maternal holding; the other, so that we might remember why we needed to leave the Garden in the first place—independence, consciousness, separation and individuation.

Sacrificial practices are an attempt to find new origins, to supersede the old ones. Specifically, sacrificial rites serve to transcend our ignominious origins: being born of woman. They also serve to transcend the humble lowly origins from the bodies of women, the ignominy of lowly female birth. This, according to Nancy Jay, is the ultimate metaphor for origins. Sacrifice, according to Jay, remedies having-been-born-of-woman, establishing bonds of intergenerational continuity between males that transcend their absolute dependence on childbearing women.¹⁹

In other words, sacrifice is the means through which we supersede our lowly birth, break definitively with the maternal, and enter into a higher order of being. The natural is abandoned in favour of the supernatural.

However, what is natural, unconscious, fertile can never be abandoned. On the contrary, although consciously rejecting the realm of the maternal, patriarchal societies know that this is where the only genuine creativity actually lies. For this reason, on important religious occasions these arenas are revisited.

Priestly practices

If we look at what happens at time of sacrifice, this will become more evident. Priests must literally immerse themselves in the abject for the sake of regeneration. In some sacrificial rituals this is done explicitly: priests immerse themselves in the menstruation hut, or blood of female animals for instance, as a way of *absorbing the female entropy*, which the priest *transforms into energy*. There is, according to Masao Yamaguchi:

An intimate relationship of complicity between a community and its scapegoats. The community's continued existence requires scapegoats; while the scapegoat, whether consciously or not, continues to provoke the community through semiotic excess. Leaving aside the moral problem, the scapegoat's most brilliant moment is at the time when this provocative nature culminates in execution by the community.²⁰

Often at the time of sacrifice or at the rites of male initiation which sometimes accompany these occasions, men dress as women, practice rites of *couvade*; simulate the pangs of childbirthing, or cut their penises to simulate menstruation. For instance, in the West African city of Benin, on the many occasions of human sacrifice, the priests used to masquerade as pregnant women, having sent all the real women out of the city.²¹

Theorists often consider these rites to be a form of misogyny, specifically designed to supersede the birthing of women in favour of that of men. They may well include misogynist practices and attitudes, but beyond that, they are also attempting to wrest or control the origins of life itself through human volition. In this sense, such rites not only represent attempts to *invent* new origins, but also to *control* the origins of life itself.

In an Irish document on how the Communion bread is to be shared, the text reads that the bread can be distributed to bishops, priests and laypersons present in order of

their ranking, but the part in the middle is reserved for the priest presiding because this is the breast with the secrets. ²²

These examples would appear to suggest that the ostensible repudiation of the female body in the laws of purification actually serve the male appropriation of female generative powers.

Sacrificial practices might appear to be a misguided attempt to supersede nature in favour of the cultivation of supernature which then come under the exclusive control of male (preferably celibate) men.

However, even though sacrificial rituals, at least according to some theorists, *contain* the unconscious—negativity, or murder—they also produce and maintain extraordinary propaganda against women. Women are constantly posited as threats to order, sanctity, or holiness. Ironically, the ambivalent character of the sacred makes this possible. As Julia Kristeva asks:

Could the sacred be, whatever its variants, a two-sided formation? One aspect founded by murder, and the social bond made up of murder's guilt-ridden atonement, with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it; and another aspect, like a lining, more secret still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility—both threatening and fusional—of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion? ²³

Conclusions

Summarising the arguments in this article we can come to several conclusions.

Patriarchal culture is constructed and maintained by taboos, especially around facets of abjection—maternal fluids. Such abjection and the unconscious drives associated with them—murder, envy, undifferentiated consciousness—threaten the very being of the patriarchal

subject and must be kept at bay by means of taboos. These taboos *create* the realm of the profane, law and order, ordinary social life.

The realm of the *sacred* is, therefore, the realm of the unconscious, fertile, dangerous energies that must be kept out of the normal working of law and order. They can be revisited at times of festivals, religious ceremonies, and even wars, in order to refresh and rejuvenate culture and provide new sources of legitimation as to why such culture is necessary. This can only happen under carefully controlled conditions such as those surrounding sacrifice. The sacrificial moment is the time when the world is once again divided into good and evil, pure and impure, culture and nature. Scapegoats and victims (usually women) are re-instated.

Because men are in control of the *sacred* in most patriarchal cultures, we women have believed the propaganda that the realm of the sacred is superior to and antithetical to that of *nature*. However, in this analysis, the sacred and profane are two parts of the same coin. Furthermore, the sacred is the realm of all that has been repudiated in order for the profane culture to come into being and be maintained.

If these assertions are true, the consequences are startling. The theologies and philosophies surrounding the socially constructed sacred in patriarchal culture has had devastating effects for our attitudes toward the natural earth, toward women, toward our bodies, and toward the radical *Otherness* that we repudiate as a condition of consciousness. Such *Otherness* is often represented by migrants, the poor, ethnic groups, and homosexuals. Therefore, the work of identifying or visiting *sacred* places is extraordinarily political and should not be approached uncritically.

Given its profound political and social effects, the altar of sacrifice in patriarchal culture must be replaced by a new vision of human community more akin to the banquet table of early Christianity. This vision must be one that honours our origins, honours the earth, reverences rather than problematises women's bodies, and reclaims the *Other* from its scapegoat/victim

status so that the fruits of the earth, upon which all our foundations rest, might once again be available equally to all the people of God.

¹ Gets refs.

² Gets refs.

³ Get refs.

⁴ Gets refs.

⁵ Get ref.

⁶ Galatians 3:28

⁷ Get refs.

⁸ Get refs.

⁹ Roger Caillois, Man and the Sacred p.13.

¹⁰ Roger Caillois, Man and the Sacred p.101.

¹¹ Aeschylus *Eumenides*, line 751.

¹² Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.4.

¹³ Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.1-2.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, La Révolution du langage poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1974), translated by Margaret Waller, with an introduction by Leon S. Roudiez, as Revolution in Poetic Language (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.47.

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, Pouvoirs de l'horreur. (Paris: Seuil, 1980) trans. Leon Roudiez as Powers of Horror (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp.72-73.

¹⁶ Kristeva, Powers of Horror p.67.

¹⁷ Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language p.79.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p.64.

¹⁹ Jay, Throughout Your Generations p.147.

²⁰ Masao Yamaguchi, "Towards a Poetics of the Scapegoat," in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p.187-188.

²¹ Jay, Throughout Your Generations p.116.

²² Cf. *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse* ed. Wh. Stokes and John Strachan, 2 vols. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p.255.

²³ Kristeva, Powers of Horror p.58.