

# Re-casting the sacred: feminist challenges to the masculinization of the sacred in social theory

Kathleen McPhillips

*University of Western Sydney*

*One of the aims of social theory in religion has been to explore axiomatically and theoretically the social and cultural dimensions of the realm of the sacred. The work of Emile Durkheim has been pre-eminent in this task. Critical feminist theory has however detailed the ways in which Durkheimian accounts of religion have been heavily gendered, and the sacred masculinized. Feminist theories of religion have responded to this by positing a re-casting of the relationship between gender and divinity. One of the central problematics in this field of enquiry is whether to reclaim the profane as the site of resistance and biophilia<sup>1</sup> and from which to center women's religious agency; or to re-claim the sacred as the primary site for the construction of an ethics of sexual difference and gendered identity. This essay is an initial consideration of this problematic with particular reference to the social conditions of religion in post-modernity.*

'I feel a real urgency to elaborate alternative accounts, to learn to think differently about the subject, to invent new frameworks, new images, new modes of thought'.

Rosi Braidotti

Religion is what makes "man". Victoria Lee Erickson (1993:23)

## Re-thinking the Sacred

One way of reading Durkheim's account of the sacred in his text *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1976) is to consider it as an examination of the relationship between the social construction of the sacred and gender relations. While Durkheim himself may not have intended his analysis to be a critical account of gender and religion, such a reading is clearly sustainable, and useful in generating an account of the social processes through which the sacred becomes masculinised. Several feminist scholars have provided critical interpretive paradigms on the work of Durkheim (Bell, 1983; Erickson, 1993; Jay, 1992), and suggested various responses to his account of the enculturation of sacredness with masculinity. This paper considers these responses, especially in light of the assertion by feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen, that an essential condition of women's [authentic] subjecthood, is access to

a particularized *feminine* sacred. The urgency of this task is not just about theoretical issues: numerous scholars<sup>2</sup> have argued that the foundation of the sacred - in both modern and pre-modern societies - rests on the idea, and practice, of violent sacrifice. Feminist scholars have argued that the violence which generates the sacred - and produces the profane - is substantially and historically, masculinised (Erickson, 1993; Jay, 1993; Magee, 1994). Recent global events implicate religion in practices and systems that are violent and destructive and so a re-positioning of the sacred into more regenerative and productive forms is an essential and urgent task for humanity in creating a sustainable planet and compassionate society.

## **Feminism and the Secular**

One indubitably writes against the master discourse of the secular which thus positions one on the margins of what constitutes "acceptable" knowledge about the social world (Magee, 1995:117).

Understandably, the second wave feminist movement in the West, has been characterised by a strong declaration that religion and religious institutions, are primary sources of women's oppression. Women's limited citizenship in church communities has been well documented, and change progresses slowly in most major religions. However, unlike other social institutions, many western feminists considered religion as hopelessly and essentially patriarchal and therefore unworthy of revolutionary attention. It made more sense for the majority of women, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, to walk away from religion and accept the more transparent and flexible systems of secularism, which appeared responsive to programs of reform and feminist ideologies. Women who remained in religious communities were thus at odds with secular feminism, although they continued to bring feminist agendas and reform programs to church institutions in a solid belief that such institutions were indeed capable of responding to ideas of gender equality (see Tulip & McPhillips, 1998).

During the 1990s, [secular] feminist scholarship began to reconsider religion, and social theory to reconsider the thesis of secularization (Lyon, 2000:20-35). The movement in feminist scholarship was partly due to the influence of postmodern paradigms of knowledge and a collective search for non-rationalized sources of cultural meaning, and largely the impact of the emergence of a strong discipline of feminist theology and feminist studies in religion which resulted in new ways to conceptualize gender and religion, and which drew attention to the question of women's subjectivity and the conditions which would foster the liberation of her identity from patriarchal norms. Within this, a strong critique of secularism developed. Indeed, feminist scholars such as Penny Magee (1993), Grace Jantzen (1998) and Luce Irigaray, (1993), have argued that it is dangerous to embody an identity or sociality that resolutely calls itself 'secular', because to do so both ascribes to and re-inscribes the masculinised sacred in secular guise. Grace Jantzen says :

As Irigaray reminds us, there is strategic value in rethinking religion rather than in acquiescing in an already masculinized secularism, not “awaiting the god passively, but bringing the god to life through us”...Contrary to much secular feminist thought, Irigaray is clear that religion cannot just be ignored or written off: it has to be transformed because it is in the symbolic of religion, and in particular, the idea of God, that a horizon for becoming exists and makes possible, authentic human subjectivity (1998:275).

Also arguing the dangers of secularism, Penny Magee (1995:117) stated that in ignoring the sacred, secular feminism acquiesces to the sacred/profane distinction as a totalising, violent opposition:

‘We must avoid setting up adversarial positions which invoke, by means of Absence, traditional metaphysical certainties. ‘Fear of the God question, fear of ‘divine women’ and fear of their irrelevance to ‘empirical reality’ can only maintain constraints that reinforce the ideology of the sacred-profane ‘opposition’.

For Magee, any theoretical separation between the secular and the sacred operates clearly in the interests of a masculinized religiosity and fragments the project of liberation and subjectivity:

Traditional philosophers, theologians and clergy have already achieved much success keeping the sacred and the profane (as defined by them) at war with one another, and we know who are the colonized. Feminism should not sell arms to the combatants. (1995:117)

Magee, Irigaray and Jantzen all argue that religion is not an ‘optional extra’ on the social scene: rather, it is an essential formation of social life and identity and as such requires special attention. In the late nineteenth century Durkheim, and other social thinkers, came to a similar conclusion. The radical nature of this idea - that religion makes human culture possible – was appreciated significantly by anthropological accounts of traditional cultures but much less so by sociological accounts of western cultures which had accepted that modernity signified the demise of religion as both institution and belief system. However, Durkheim’s account of religion remains important, because it provides a substantial explanation of how religion functions as the authorisation of cultural life through the central positioning of the realm of the sacred. With recent evidence by social theorists such as David Lyons (2000), documenting post-modernity as inclusive of a return to religious sensibilities and the formation of new religious practices, it is becoming clear that western cultures are engaged in processes of de-secularisation, and specifically re-defining and re-imagining the sacred.<sup>3</sup> The question one needs to consider is: what are the gendered dimensions of these new or revitalised religious forms? In Durkheim’s account of the sacred this is a socio-symbolic space which is defined by, and available only for, men. The question for feminist theory is: is it possible to engender a sacred that can be representative of woman? Of sexual difference? To consider this question,

I turn first to feminist critiques of the masculinized sacred.

## **The Masculinized Sacred**

For a long time it has been known that the first systems of representations with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time that it is a speculation upon divine things ... Men owe to it not only a good part of the substance of their knowledge, but also the form in which this knowledge has been elaborated. (Durkheim, 1915:9)

The association of gender with the profane is notorious (Magee, 1995:109).

Religion is the way in which masculine identity is sacralised (Erickson, 1993:48)

According to Durkheim, the primary function of religion is to provide social cohesion and collective identity. The way in which this is established is through the classification of all material and non-material realities into two categories: the profane and sacred, which are then managed by a community (church) as sets of beliefs and rites. Thus the foundation of human society can be said to be religious, in the sense that religion is defined by the distinctiveness of this **particular** classificatory system. The function of myths, stories, dogmas and beliefs is to produce a system of representations which express 'the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each and with profane things' (Durkheim, 1915:37). As Erickson (1993:5) puts it:

People in everyday life think about things real and ideal, and it is through religion (a set of beliefs and rites) that they categorize things (real and ideal) as sacred and profane...Religion, then, is a way of knowing and thinking about reality.

The forms of reality that are produced by such a system of classification are far reaching, according to Durkheim. Notions of time, space, ways of understanding difference, social meaning and individual identity, rely on the on-going generation of sacredness (Erickson, 1993:5). But for the sacred to exist and exert social force, there must also exist the de-sacralized realm from which identity and sociality must be protected:

Sacralization is a "fluid process" that seeks to cover and protect its base identity: that is, the core of social knowledge, understanding, and agreement that secures its survival. (Erickson 1993:5)

This realm of the de-sacralized constitutes the profane: its base function is to stand in as the antithesis of sacredness, as the necessary 'other' in a system of dualistic classification (Erickson, 1993:12). Women's association with the profane means that

the feminine is characterised entirely by what is left after men have constituted the sacred so that 'Women and men are gendered at that point in time when the sacred and profane world come into being' (Erickson, 1993:48). This understanding of the gendered nature of the sacred is re-iterated by several theorists of religion who followed Durkheim including Freud, Otto and Eliade and Douglas (Erickson, 1993:56-61). It could be argued that in social theory, it amounted to the production of a normative representation of the sacred.

Durkheim makes an extraordinary contribution to understanding the phenomenon of the sacred in posing the necessity of sacred and profane realms to human culture, and the various cultural forces that are required to manage these powerful realms. Gender relations are produced and managed within these realms but rather than imposing an absolutist relationship between gender and the sacred, Durkheim proposes a certain reflexivity around such gender boundaries, evidenced where he says women are not *essentially* profane (Durkheim, 1976:138) - it is only in relation to men and the sacred that such a politics is made possible. So although Durkheim's reading of Arunta ceremonies of initiation locates women as symbolic and embodied representatives of the profane, where young boys must leave their mothers and sisters in order to become men, it is the **social** definition of the sphere that determines citizenship, and not essentialised innate, characteristics.

Durkheim also acknowledges and is interested in boundary crossing and slippage between the two spheres. After all, people live in both worlds (Erickson, 1993:12). There **must** be moments of liminality at play between the spheres, and as Turner (1969:166-7), drawing on the work of Van Gennep, argues, liminality is a key factor in ritual life which moderates in function and [symbolic and embodied] space, the relationship between the two spheres. Where ritual strategically creates liminality, it allows passage across spheres. The importance of understanding the power of the connection between religion and the (masculine) sacred, is that as Geertz (1975) argues, religion creates a cultural ethos and world views which establish normative social values, experienced by individuals in rituals as feelings and motivations. And as Turner argues, the function of liminality is that in dissolving border rigidities, it creates a potential for 'a period of scrutinisation of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs' (Turner, 1969:167, also argued by Bell, 1993:248). This provides us with a theory of the generation of patriarchal society and its symbolic cosmos, and it also explains how feminist responses are possible, but it does not adequately explain Durkheim's insistence on the complete alterity between the two realms.

For Durkheim the sacred and profane are completely separate worlds: they have nothing in common. They cannot share time or space and the function of ritual is to ensure they never meet and cause deep disruption. Religion belongs to the sacred; magic to the profane.<sup>4</sup> They are barely comparable. However, culture spans the two worlds and people live in both, thus there are rituals for managing separation, and border crossing is required constantly. Durkheim (1976:39-40) demonstrates that in

Arunta society the initiation rites for young men involve the leaving of the profane world of the mother and the everyday, and the entering of a new sacred society where he is given a new identity and social place. Erickson (1993:21) argues that:

In the Elementary Forms to be a man requires the exclusion of women from social life. By sacralising the masculine community and denigrating the feminine, men become social and women natural beings. Reread, Durkheim's work outlines the exclusion of women from the ideal world as a given activity of social life.

One of the functions of the sacred is to generate power. Power is created by the force necessary to maintain complete heterogeneity between the sacred and the profane. In this sense, power can be understood as a function of religious experience in the sense that force is a natural requirement for maintenance of the separation of spheres. Hence the idea of force is itself religious because the force isolating the sacred from the profane lives in the minds of the believers (Erickson 1993:22). Religious force (the force of collective opinion) creates a collective force (from a membership that upholds the sacred by means of violence) used to legitimate a matrix of domination and subordination, clearly visible in the processes that gender social life. Erickson (1993:23) argues that without this concept of sacralising force, Durkheim would have no theory of social life:

Durkheim reduced religion to collective life; yet behind religion lies the will to exclude the profane, the feminine. Religion is further reducible to exclusive groups that dominate the excluded. Religion is the mechanism through which this exclusion is ensured. Religion is what makes "man".

Erickson (1993:23) presents an important idea here: that it is religion that is 'the primary supporter of gender and gendered power created in the collective conscience of men'. Seen in this light, the insistence of second wave feminism that religion is essentially patriarchal is insightful. However, as Magee demonstrates, secularism does not undo the relationship between the sacred and violence: indeed it tends to veil it and in doing so subtly encourages its continuation. Secularisation then, is not an answer to unraveling the connection between male violence and female subordination.

However, secularism does express a de-centering of the importance of tradition, religion and religious rites, particularly in modernity. This is argued by social theorists such as Max Weber (1993) and Anthony Giddens (1991). Durkheim argued that secularisation does not necessarily mean that religion as a process of classification is lost: indeed he argues in modernity that religion and the sacred is transformed, but still visible in the need for sociality and a collective life. Erickson agrees in the sense that the sacredness of masculinity is continually reproduced as the form of ultimate human expression.

Recent considerations of contemporary forms of religion (Lyons, 2000; Tacey, 2000) have identified a strong cultural shift towards a re-enchantment of the public

sphere and valorization of [new] public expressions of the sacred. Without doubt, there are multiple dimensions to this phenomenon and various sites where such practices are identifiable. The New Age in particular, provides one of the clearest expressions of a de-secularising west. This raises important questions for the sociology of religion and in particular the need for methods that are able to identify expressions of the sacred in post-modern cultures. Questions emerge including: how to identify and understand the sacred in contemporary cultural forms? How do processes of distinction between sacred and profane work? Are contemporary expressions of religiosity bound by gender dichotomies? While numerous social and cultural theorists have taken up the issue of new cultural expressions of the sacred, feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Grace Jantzen, Penny Magee and Morny Joy continue to argue that a central task of contemporary feminist scholarship is to disrupt the universality of the masculinist symbolic, and explore new imaginaries of divinity and sexual difference.

### Re-imagining the Sacred and the Feminine Symbolic

If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of *her* subjectivity (Irigaray, *Divine Women*).

Erickson challenges Durkheim's claim that the collective religious experience is representative. She argues (1993:10-11) that 'the sacred is gendered masculine and the profane is gendered feminine' which carries with it an implicit understanding of violence against women: 'Therefore it is possible to hypothesize that what produced 'religion' was not a collective experience but a masculine one, and that what Durkheim "saw" when he looked at religion was activity produced primarily to satisfy the needs of men.' More than this, Erickson (1993:49) argues that Durkheim fundamentally under-theorised the profane realm, by allowing the sacred to define its alterity. So although he produced a theory of sexual difference, it was one predicated on the feminine as non-masculine (and therefore non-sacred).

This is the same conclusion that Luce Irigaray has come to in her analysis of the relationship between the formation of identity and gender. Beginning with Lacan's thesis on individuation, Irigaray argues that subjectivity must be *achieved* - it is not simply *given*:

What Irigaray demonstrates is that the subject which Lacan and Freud describe, who achieves subjectivity and sexual maturity through the repression of competing desires in the formation of the unconscious, is male. For Freud, the feminine is defined by lack; a little girl is a little boy without a penis. Lacan speaks of woman as the "not all". So it is the male for whom subjectivity is possible. Irigaray then asks: can women be subjects? Can women achieve subjectivity as women, not becoming one of the boys? Becoming who we are in our own right, rather than defined in relation to men. (Jantzen 1997:193)

Erickson asks the same question in relation to Durkheim. How can women gain access to the sacred? Without becoming mimetics of male violence? While both Durkheim and Lacan can explain the lack of women's subjectivity, they cannot explain how women can gain subjectivity, outside of a male symbolic. For both Irigaray and Erickson the starting point is silence, to consider the gaps where women cannot speak, or at least where their voices cannot be heard in the masculine symbolic. Irigaray argues that Freud and Lacan described women's exclusion as silence, but failed to explore the details of these sites. Erickson argues the same about Durkheim. The question of subjectivity for women outside the male symbolic is **the** question: neither theorist is interested in 'women becoming subjects in the old masculinist "economy of the same"...' (Jantzen, 1998:11). However, Irigaray and Erickson come to very different conclusions regarding where subjectivity might be located and negotiated, and the possibilities of re-juvenating the sacred.

Erickson argues (1993:188) that it is to the realm of the profane that women must turn to in search of life affirming spiritualities and justice for marginalised groups. Durkheim was unable to theorise the profane beyond the notion that it constituted the denigrated 'other' of the sacred, the everyday and ordinary. The task of understanding this realm, its possibilities for subjectivity, its relationship to divinity, would not only en flesh the profane; it would also constitute a critique of religion as only ever belonging to the sacred. The first task is to speak into the silence that is the profane. Strategizing around this, Erickson argues in line with de Certeau and Boff (1993:188) that our capacity to appreciate the profane depends upon the development of a language that can talk about the subject matter. Popular religion and magic - characteristically inhabiting the profane - require a language with which to articulate the spiritual experiences of oppressed and marginalised peoples. It might be that "profane spirituality", in the form of folk religion and magic, incorporates values which feminism holds dear: co-operation, ecological sustainability, equality, mutuality, embodiment (Erickson, 1993:192). A second strategy is to look to the imaginary symbolic of profane life - in art, poetry and music - for expression of ethics and values. In this analysis, spiritual feminisms, Goddess spiritualities, neo-paganism, and many New Age practices would constitute the realm of the profane - the religion of the masses - where articulations of the conditions and experience of oppression would emanate. Indeed, casting feminist spirituality as oppositional to a hegemonic masculinised sacred has been a central concern for feminist scholars in religion.<sup>5</sup> Post-modernity can also be characterized as a return or revitalisation of magical and mystical based forms of knowing, as opposed to the rationalized theologies of modernity. But whether the practices that are emerging - loosely identified as New Age - constitute a new 'sacred' is not clear.

In another sense though, a reclamation of the profane could be construed as a dangerous act as it leaves the masculinised sacred in tact - and in power. The feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen take a different pathway to Erickson



and focus their attention on the sacred and how its absolutizing, dualistic hold can be undone and transformed. They recognize a need to unravel the oppositionalism which underpins and encourages the violence that is necessary in the maintenance of the sacred/profane. Like Erickson, Irigaray proposes the development of a ‘multifaceted strategy of eliciting women’s voices, listening for the silences, the lacunae, the sounds of the margins, listening not just to fathers and sons but to mothers and daughters.’ (Jantzen, 1998:193) However, unlike Erickson this process is centred around new visions, new arrangements, of the sacred. It can be initiated by what Jantzen, drawing on Irigaray calls ‘a new feminist imaginary’ which has as its aim, ‘disrupting the symbolic and its powers, by displacing its masculinist structures with a new imaginary, new ways of conceiving and being might emerge which enable women to be subjects as women’ (1998:12). A central process of this new symbolic is the work of women imagining themselves into divinity and therefore authentic subjectivity.

Jantzen (1998:9-12) argues that because religion has been so fundamental to the conceptual systems of the West, it is of paramount importance to disrupt the religious symbolic. The nature of this disruption is the work of feminist imaginaries of divinity where a new idea of God, provides a horizon for ‘becoming’. Although women are often religious, the religions of the West with their male god’s offer no way for women to achieve subjectivity in relation to a divine horizon. Jantzen interprets Irigaray as saying:

...“woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity”. The masculinist religious symbolic must be disrupted and space made for the female divine. “This god, are we capable of imagining it as a woman? Can we dimly see it as the perfection of our subjectivity?” Irigaray signals to the task of ‘subverting the masculinist religious symbolic in every theological doctrine and practice, and developing a feminist imaginary of the divine to enable women’s becoming.’ (Jantzen, 1997:198-9).

What is being proposed here - that women must search for and achieve a specific life-affirming subjectivity according to “self potentiality” (which equals divine-ness) – locates religion and the sacred in a different realm to Erickson’s folk religions and magicalism. For Irigaray and Jantzen, this would constitute a reversal of relations in the sacred-profane dualism, not a transformation of it. However, I do think that Erickson’s argument that magical and folk religions provide an important pathway towards understanding how the masculinised sacred has been resisted, has been clearly visible in women’s strategic responses to and embracing of, new age spiritualities. But her conclusion (1993:196-198) that true liberation - and subjectivity - will only come when gender (and other forms of social division) is dismantled, remains problematic especially in relation to Irigaray’s assertion that sexuality is not just a social construction but an essential element of humanity. The Irigarayan task is to work towards a new ethics of sexual *difference* that can sustain *difference* as productive and life affirming and as the site where identity and sacrality is produced. Is this task

visible in the myriad ways in which women are currently engaged in religious action?

## **Conclusion: postmodern re-castings of the sacred**

...we still do not understand sufficiently what it mean to “sacralize women’s experience”, to call women “sacred”, to name certain activities as women’s “sacred rituals” (Erickson xii)

Feminist endeavours in the project of re-imagining the sacred are premised on the idea that religion, as Durkheim asserted over one hundred years ago, is a foundational structure of human experience, and is elemental in the constitution of subjectivity. As argued above, feminist responses to the reality of a masculinized sacred vary, but there appears to be no disagreement about the integrity of the existence of the sacred as constitutive of religious/spiritual experience.

In general, contemporary responses can be understood as reflective of a feminist religious imaginary whose aim is to en flesh the realm of an alternative cosmology which provides the conditions in which women might negotiate agency through the articulation of a feminine symbolic. There are multiple sites from which to locate the beginnings of this biophillic re-imagination. They are sites that are not owned or complete: indeed they are very much ‘under construction’, and their consummate shape and potentiality have yet to be appreciated. They are clearly intertwined with other projects and ideas, but certainly express a desire and drive for representations of a feminine divine. They include philosophical reflections in language/metaphor; feminist art; re-casting the hagiography of [holy] women; feminist inspired ritual and spiritual practice. The challenge facing feminist accounts of the sacred is to be able to account for women’s religious agency in the particular forms in which it is emerging. This requires analyzing religion in post modern, or des-secularising, conditions.

We can read the emergence of alternative feminist spiritual practices as evidence of both a collective desire for a re-enchantment of the world, and other ways of knowing (about self, body and community) that are not so wholly tied to the discourses of scientific rationalism. New Age practices are however deeply embedded in forms of capitalist consumerism and individualism, which may inhibit the emergence of new ethics governing relations between self and other, and spiritualities that do not appropriate and exploit other cultural traditions.

Many forms of spiritual feminism have ‘post-modern’ qualities. They do not seek to establish doctrines, rules or exclusive texts; their communities are not hierarchically based; and they do not evangelise (Gross, 1996; Hume, 1997). They are skeptical of large-scale organisational structures and their aim is to enfranchise women religiously, by exploring and ritualising female representations of the divine - which have been so repressed by monotheistic religions. Women meet in small groups, at larger ritual events and at festivals. They utilize different forms of technology, and the internet has been a major form of communication and information.

Communities are generally small and locally based, and centred around ritual practices (Northup, 1997). Value systems include power sharing, ecological awareness and political action (Starhawk, 1979). Magic may or may not be used as a technology of religious experience, depending on the group's religious orientation. For example, some groups may be tied to particular religious traditions and utilize the language and ritual life of such traditions (Beecher, 1999). Other groups may be more explorative and less tied to particular traditions. Diversity is a key word. Without doubt, a function of these groups is to re-imagine the realm of the sacred and to re-connect that to the ordinary everyday world in which women live. In this sense, such groups are also re-writing the boundaries between the sacred and the profane and re-situating the location of the ordinary to the sacred Other.

But the function of ritual is not only to re-imagine the symbolic realm, it is also to generate ethics and laws. Dianne Bell's work with central Australian Aboriginal women demonstrates that the sexual segregation around ritual practice is not necessarily founded on the sacred/profane, rather it is concerned with the system of rights and responsibilities within separate domains where sex forms the basis for a *productive* social division (Bell, 1993:248). Within the separate terrain's, there may well be sacred/profane distinctions, but the nature of male-female relations is (as Durkheim suggested) the right ordering of social (and sexual) relations through ritual practice:

It was in ritual that I found men and women clearly stating their own perceptions of their role, their relationship to the opposite sex and their relation to the Dreamtime whence all legitimate authority and power once flowed. (Bell, 1993: 248)

Feminist anthropologists working in other cultural sites confirm Bell's analysis that women's rituals are devalued by western conceptions of gender, and acknowledge a complex politics where the cause of women's devaluation is certainly related to the impact of colonisation and modernity (Seremetkai, 1991; Marcus, 1992). Indeed Seremetakis (1991) argues, in her ethnography of women's mourning rituals in the small Peloponnese state of Inner Mani, that it is the fragmenting politics of modernity that render women's rituals (and women's religious agency) into displaced (capitalist driven), marginalised spheres. Although there is potential for these spheres to generate strategies and techniques of resistance (Seremetakis, 1991:1), there is little doubt that:

The penetration of modernization ideologies aggravated and intensified culturally constructed gender divisions that have been in place for some time (Seremetakis, 1991:221)

For Seremetakis (1991:1) it is the 'poetics of the cultural periphery' that provide a framework of analysis where a reconstitution of women's religious agency acts against the universalising impact of modernity by documenting the historical

conditions of cultural peripheries and their relationship to global forces. Women's ritual on the margins of the so-called centre does not necessarily indicate dependence to that centre 'for it is capable of denying recognition to any centre' (1991:1). Yet there is no doubt that to 'stand in the margin is to look through it at other margins and at the so-called centre itself' (1991:1).

The power of the margin or periphery to generate a resistive politics is not new in feminist theory and has been particularly effective in post colonial accounts of women's agency as well as in re-imagining women's bodies outside of pollution/purity dichotomies (Douglas, 1966; Joseph, 1990). Marginality might also operate as a significant (spatial) site for the development of alternative/radical ideas of sacrality. There is no doubt that it is a powerful metaphor in describing the conditions in which women are religious agents, but as Erickson reminds us, it is also a dangerous location if it continues to leave in tact, the dominant representations of religiosity and particularly the sacred. If post-modernity exemplifies processes of de-secularisation, the challenge for feminist social theorists is to describe and analyse the conditions in which women seek religious agency, and the new transgressive forms that the sacred takes in specific cultural locations.

## References

- Braidotti, R. 1994 *Nomadic Subjects*, New York, Columbia University Press
- Beecher, S. 1999 'The Treasure chest of diversity: Contemporary Australian Women respond to Feminism' in K. McPhillips (ed) 'Feminisms, Religions, Cultures, Identities' Special Issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* Vol 14 (30), pp 255-366.
- Bell, D. 1983 *Daughters of the Dreaming*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Douglas, M. 1966 *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, London & New York.
- 1970) *Natural Symbols*, Penguin Books, Middlesex.
- Durkheim, E. 1976[1915] *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, George Allen & Unwin, London.
- Erickson, V.L. 1993 *Where Silence Speaks: Feminism, Social Theory and Religion*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
- Geertz, C. 1975 *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Hutchinson, London.
- Gelder, K. and Jacobs, J. 1998 *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Giddens, A. 1991 *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Gross, R. M. 1996 *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*, Beacon Press, Boston.
- Hume, L 1997 *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne,
- Irigaray, L. 1986 'Divine Women', *Occasional Paper No.8*, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney.
- Jantzen, G. M 1998 *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

- 1997 'Luce Irigaray: Introduction' in G. Ward, (ed) *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 191-214.
- Jay, N. 1992 *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Patriarchy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 1991 'Gender and Dichotomy' in S. Gunew, (ed) *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 89-106.
- 1985 'Sacrifice As Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman' in C. Atkinson, C. Buchanan, and M. Miles, (eds) *Immaculate and Powerful*, Beacon Press, Boston, 283-309.
- Joseph, A. 1990 (ed) *Through The Devil's Gateway*, Channel Four Television Company, London.
- Joy, M. and Magee, P. 1994 (eds) *Claiming Our Rites. Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars*, AASR Publications, Wollstonecraft.
- Joy, M. 1994 'Sainthood or Heresy: Contemporary Options for Women' in, M. Joy, & P. Magee, (eds) *Claiming Our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars* AASR Publications, Wollstonecraft, 117-133.
- 1990 'Equality or Divinity: A False Dichotomy' in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol.5, (1) Spring, 9-24.
- Lyon, D. 2000 *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Magee, P.M. 1995 'Disputing the Sacred: Some Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Religion' in U. King, (ed) *Gender and Religion*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 101-120.
- Marcus, J. 1992 *A World of Difference: Islam and Gender Hierarchy in Turkey*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Northup, L. 1997 *Ritualizing Women*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland.
- Radford Ruether, R. 1990 'Women's Body and Blood: The Sacred and the impure' in A. Joseph, (ed) *Through The Devil's Gateway*, Channel Four Television Company, London, 7-21.
- Raphael, M. 1996 *Theology and Embodiment: The Post Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.
- Seremetakis, N.C. 1991 *The Last Word. Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Starhawk, 1979 'Ritual as Bonding, Action as Ritual' in C. Christ & J. Plaskow (eds) *Womanspirit Rising: A feminist Reader in Religion*, Harper, San Francisco, 326-35
- Tacey, D. 2000 *Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*, Harper Collins, Sydney.
- Tulip, M. & McPhillips, K. 1998 'Feminism, Religion and Spirituality', Framing Essay in B. Caine, (ed) *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 263-272.
- Turner, V. W. 1974[1969] *The Ritual Process*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Max Weber, 1993 *The Sociology of Religion* Beacon Press, Boston.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Biophillicia* is a term derived from the work of radical feminist scholar Mary Daly and taken up by various feminist theorists. I am using it in the sense that Melissa Raphael (1996) does so: to refer to social, cultural and spiritual processes, actions and ideas that are life affirming and contribute to the production of a new feminist religious imaginary.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the work of Rene Girard, Gil Bailie, Jacques Derrida.

<sup>3</sup> In Australian cultural theory, the importance of understanding the production of the sacred, is taken up by Gelder and Jacobs (1999) and David Tacey (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber also makes this point in *The Sociology of Religion* but suggests that magic is characteristic of pre-modern, pre-rationalist societies, and religion of cultures which institutionalize or routinize religion.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular the work of Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979) and collected works of Starhawk.