

PÉTER TÖRÖK

IS THE SACRED FEMININE?

CLÉMENT, C. & KRISTEVA, J. (2001) *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. TODD, J.M. (Palgrave: Columbia UP) 22.6 × 12.5 × 1.27 cm, 190 pp., ISBN: 9780231115780, £ 19.99.

Is it worth reading or rereading a book published ten years ago, especially if the ‘manuscript’ – a correspondence between the authors – is a collection of letters written between November 1996 and October 1997? Apart from the actuality of ideas formulated about one and a half decades ago, what could two admittedly atheist authors say about the sacred and women’s spirituality? Especially if they decide at the outset that their correspondence would reach no definitive conclusions. According to these considerations, the odds are against reading or returning to Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva’s book.

However, once the intention of the authors becomes clear, the reader’s attention is instantly captivated. In Kristeva’s formulation the book investigates a new civilization. ‘If, as we believe, it is true that women will awaken in the coming millennium, what can the profound meaning of that awakening, of that civilization, be?’ (p.2) Although the anthropologist Catherine Clément, living in Senegal for most of the time of writing, was not quite certain about this awakening, she nevertheless admits in the Introduction that in the eleven years of living abroad, she saw women everywhere more advanced than they were in the West, notably in France. ‘And everywhere I have seen them use the sacred with more intelligence than we do: in India, Africa, and even in Austria, the beginning of the East’ (p.2).

The result of this correspondence is the confrontation of two controversial topics: the concept of the sacred, often excluded from Western intellectual circles, and the special relationship between the sacred and the feminine. The different disciplines studying religion would agree that the sacred defies definition. They would, however, also agree that women’s spirituality or relationship with the sacred is different from men’s. Clément, based on her anthropological studies in Senegal, believes that women, as a consequence of their oppressed status, are particularly susceptible to trance. For the psychoanalyst Kristeva, the essence of the sacred is the unveiling of meaning, a phenomenon experienced especially by women in giving birth. At such moments, there is a break with mundane perception, as meaning is born on the edge of nothingness. And women have a special, at least a semi-sacred position or role in this process. ‘Woman, a being on the borderline, biology *and* meaning, is likely to participate in both sides of the sacred: in calm appeasement, where nativity finds assurance in eternity . . . but also in the rending of the sacred cloth, where language and all representation are lost in a spasm or delirium ([Clément’s] Senegalese women in trances)’ (pp.15–16, italics in original).

They discuss female icons of the Genesis: such as the *four matriarchs* – Sarai,

Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah –, *women warriors* like Judith, Esther, Deborah, Jael, and Susanna; the *queens* like Jezebel and Bathsheba. From modern times, they discuss Catherine of Siena, Indira Gandhi, Eva Peron, and Maria Callas. The self-identified ‘Jewish atheist’ (p.105), Clément is enraged by the very idea of the Virgin Mary, but the ‘Christian atheist’, Kristeva argues that, in preceding the birth of the Word, the Holy Mother represents the sacred silence that lies before articulation. For all its problems and faults, the concept of the Virgin Mother gave European painters the licence to explore the icon of motherhood and, in a misogynistic culture, propelled them towards the feminine.

While their intention is not to give definitive solutions, Julia Kristeva nevertheless presents her theory of the development of religion, which begins with maternal power. According to her, it is warded off by the two prototypes of filth, namely excrement and menses. Just to mention an example, she refers to the training of the sphincters, overseen by the mothers. Next to filth, there is evil that departs from the logical order and ‘takes the form of a *transgression of every prohibition* – and not only that of an exclusion of excrement or blood’ (p.95, italics in original). This evil may be the collective fault or sin, but it is also individual guilt, whose superb and intimist movement is known as the ‘suffering righteous man or suffering servant’. Thus mercy is induced by the sacred, which links guilt to remission. This theory, while not criticized and at least tacitly accepted, is the reason why Clément calls Kristeva a ‘Christian atheist’. From this, we might also conclude that the origin of the sacred is feminine...

The authors are true to themselves: they do not provide definitive answers. At the end of the book we do not know what the new civilization, characterized by awakened women, will look like. However, their wide-ranging and fascinating dialogue results in raising questions that are as important to formulate as to answer. For those who consider the promotion of mental health as their task, and especially for those who consider religion a resource in their helping profession, being aware of these questions is essential. In this sense, the reading of or returning to Clément and Kristeva’s book is more than recommendable.