I love contradiction. There’s always a mystery, always a whole other life going on.

Madonna

1. Introduction

Although the three scriptural religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam officially put a theological ban on the iconographic depiction of their god, a superficial glance at the history of these religious systems suffices to show that in them an image of the divine prevails that is formed along the Genesis concept of “in the image of the human”. On closer investigation, of course, it becomes apparent that the underlying model is not anthropomorphic but ultimately andromorphic (“in the image of the masculine”). Thereby, societal conditions and relations of power are transferred to the image of the divine.

Along with the question of the divine gender comes the question of divine bodiliness. This involves the theological problem that the god cannot be conceptualized anymore as a transcendent god who is beyond the material, created world, but as a god whose bodiliness is immanent to the world. In fact, this alternative underlies the heated discussions about pantheism—or, in a weaker form, panentheism—that since the early modern period have occupied Western theology and philosophy. At the one end of the spectrum we find theological doctrines that insist on God’s transcendence and thus on his being bodiless and genderless; at the other end we see “materializations” of the divine in the created world, as in pantheistic models of interpretation.¹

¹ Such an idealtypical construction of two poles should of course not hide the fact that theological and philosophical discourse has produced a number of concepts that claim to solve exactly this problem. The philosophies of F.W. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel, for instance, can be read as systematic attempts to unite in one philosophical model the immanence and visibility of the divine on the one hand, and its detachment and transcendence on the other.
As will become clearer in my discussion, these alternatives are themselves part of a discourse of gender; it is not by chance that the bodiliness and sexuality of the divine are particularly stressed in concepts of divine femininity—as in the modern goddess movements—; at the same time, God’s transcendence and the independence of his mind are masculine stereotypes that are informed by an androcentric image.

Despite the androcentric orientation of Jewish and Christian images of god there have been several attempts in European history of religion to conceptualize the femininity of the divine, either as a counter-model against the masculine god or as a gender polarity that ultimately aims at transcending the bodiliness of the divine altogether. While in Christianity the figure of Mary could take on divine features, in Judaism discourses on the body and gender of the divine very often crystallized around the concept of the Shekhinah. In a history that lasts more than two-thousand years—even though during the first one thousand years the concept had no pronounced feminine significance—the idea of the Shekhinah has been given a variety of different meanings and has been influential in many different ways. Therefore, this idea is a good yardstick for the construction of femininity, which provided possibilities of identification and role models for women and men in concrete societal contexts.

The following analysis is based on interpretational approaches in gender studies that are informed by theories of discourse and by post-structuralist reflections. These, in turn, are responses to older concepts prominent in gender studies. There can be no doubt that the analytical distinction between the biological “sex” and the socially constructed “gender” in the 1960s and 1970s was an important step toward a better understanding of what can be termed the cultural production of gender and bodiliness. That distinction, however, has itself been critically addressed by subsequent generations of scholars. Joan W. Scott, for instance, demonstrated that although the distinction between “sex” and “gender” intended to overcome binary models of masculinity and femininity, it ultimately perpetuated them. With

2 On Marian piety see Delius, Geschichte der Marienverehrung; Warner, Alone of All Her Sex; Pelikan, Mary Through the Centuries; Fulton, From Judgment to Passion.


4 As Joan W. Scott puts it, referring to Carol Gilligan’s work: ‘By insisting on fixed differences […], feminists contribute to the kind of thinking they want to oppose. Although they insist on the revaluation of the category “female” […], they do not