CHAPTER 1

Everyday Life and the Sacred: Gender Sensitive Explorations—Introduction

Angela Berlis and Anne-Marie Korte

1.1 Studying the Sacred in Feminist-Theological Perspective: Focus and Shared Perspectives

Feminist theologians and feminist scholars of religious studies traditionally question thinking in dichotomies, in particular, when binary distinctions capture or steer our understanding of religion and gender.¹ Formative theorists of religion like Emile Durkheim, Rudolf Otto, and Mircea Eliade have enthroned the difference between the sacred and the profane in their efforts to touch the heart of religion in and for contemporary times. The need to scrutinize this common and widespread classification has been part of feminist scholarship from the beginning.²

Mary Daly already pleaded for the deconstruction of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, because both often served—where they are extremely simplified or made absolute—to exclude women from religious authority or religious rituals. Daly argued that the sacred is predominantly associated with transcendence and the masculine, while the profane is coupled with the mundane and the feminine.³ Melissa Raphael, the author of several ground-breaking books on the sacred from a feminist theological perspective, provided important new impulses to this debate. She proposes not to consider the sacred and profane as ontological or universal categories, but rather

---

suggests seeing them as historical and prophetic. She is certainly not the only feminist scholar of religious studies who pleads to attend carefully and anew to what can be called sacred and what not, thereby, pointing beyond (the feminist critique of) the “sacred versus the profane.”

At the same time, quotidian life and everyday practices are gaining increased attention as a source for theologizing and studying religion(s), in particular, in connection with a revaluation of women’s experiences. A critical awareness of breaking through the dichotomy or dualistic thinking about the sacred and the profane, an investigative and renewed interest in the meaning and the scope of the sacred, and recognition of the importance of studying everyday life as a category that makes it possible to perceive the interconnectedness between the religious and the secular have all inspired this anthology.

The shared research questions that direct the contributions in this volume do not ask primarily what the sacred is or how it can be defined but focus on the question of where and when the sacred can be found or traced. Where and when, and how, does the sacred appear in women’s (daily) experiences? Which texts are considered sacred and why? When and where do art and culture become expressions of the sacred? Which places and persons, historically identified as “holy”, (can) serve as models for women’s religious interests today? Which daily life experiences do women themselves recognize as sacred?

Both central concepts, the sacred and everyday life, have gained noteworthy scholarly interest during the last years, particularly within the disciplines of women’s and gender studies. However, the systematic combination of these two perspectives is still rare. In this anthology, we aim to combine

---


