Book Reviews


‘On the cross, Jesus undergoes a passage through blood, pain, and mortality to a new mode of being, no longer maternal, biological, mortal, and literal, but paternal, cultural, immortal, and symbolic’ (p. 181). This sentence, with its clear binary oppositions, provides an entrée into the complex argument of this book, which seeks to illuminate sacrifice, priesthood and Mary through a combination of Freud, anthropology and continental philosophy. Its complexities arise from the anomalies which challenge the binaries, and yet somehow these binaries are allowed to stand, so reinforcing taboos around blood and the feminine, prejudice against women’s ordination to the priesthood, and the refusal to allow Mary, given her uniqueness, to challenge these perspectives. Indeed, the association of sacrifice with patriarchy leads to the suggestion that ‘only if her maternal contribution and feminine identity are not entirely erased by or conflated with that of paternal agency’ can the figure of Mary help to make more permeable the oppositions – now listed as ‘male and female, paternal and maternal, kin and other, orthodox and unorthodox, believer and unbeliever, mortal and immortal’ (p. 301). Indeed, to complicate the argument further, Mary is introduced as a figure belonging not just to Christianity, but also to Judaism and Islam, yet with rather different roles in relation to what is described as ‘the double-bind of monotheism’, namely its concurrent affirmation of God’s Otherness and God’s intimate and disturbing engagement with particulars, risking profanity and blasphemy. It is unclear, in the end, whether Mary is ‘wound’ or ‘medicine’ of the monotheisms (p. 305) and this is perhaps typical of the oscillations that provoke the reader into wondering whether the book offers genuine insights or not.

Part I provides a conspectus of the argument. The first chapter tackles sacrifice, gender and patriarchy, and starts by attempting a definition of sacrifice. Reference is made to classic anthropological studies, but despite
the acknowledged diversity of practices across cultures, sacrifice is then itself made binary, with ‘alimentary or communion’ sacrifice distinguished from ‘piacular or expiatory’ sacrifice. However well accepted in literature to which Kearns refers, this is surely a simplification, compounded further when blood, with its power and taboos, is exclusively associated with the latter, ‘strong’ form of sacrifice, and then the Eucharist, even though it clearly evidences connections with both of these opposed forms, is interpreted as ‘strong’, because of its association with the expiatory death of Christ on the cross. The impact of the early Christians’ repudiation of sacrifice is slipped over, as is their insistence, once they adopted sacrificial language to describe their own worship, on ‘bloodless sacrifice’. The outcome of later typological readings, which took over the priestly provisions of the Old Testament and applied them to Christian liturgy, is simply taken for granted.

Psychoanalysis and social anthropological studies then encourage the interpretation of sacrifice in terms of gender differentiation. ‘Strong’ sacrifice becomes ‘childbirth done better’, ‘underwriting a masculine as well as a feminine line of descent’ (p. 44). In the following chapter these insights are applied to Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, from which Sarah is notably absent. The third chapter, entitled ‘Marian sacrifice’ draws on Mariological motifs from many different eras to underline her ambivalent association with the sacrifice of her Son, and the consequently symbolic role of an all-male priesthood at the Eucharist. The actual exposition of this, however, clouds the gender binary by drawing a clear typological parallel between Abraham and Mary. There are many other admissions of complexity which ought to lead to an explosion of the categories in play.

Like Sarah and Hagar, Mary must testify both to maternal bonding and to the necessity of its transcendence through sacrifice in a paternal religious order ... It is the conjunction of these motifs of mother-son bonding and patriarchal sacrifice that both ‘transpierces’ Mary, as Simeon prophesied, and makes her, with her sacrificial son, a founding figure of a new religious order. (pp. 92-3)

What this chapter eventually argues is that Mary’s uniqueness alone allows this double role: through the virginal conception she is ‘exempted from much that makes maternity problematic in a ritual, sacrificial context’. For she is ‘free from the implications pollution of sex, childbirth, blasphemy, and mortality that might otherwise hover over’ her contact with the deity (pp. 107-8). (This quotation is accurately transcribed, by the way, and