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HEAVENLY BODIES? THE AMBIGUITY OF THE BODY IN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

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I. Introduction

A. Religion and the body

My lecture today is a discussion of three different, but not mutually exclusive, significant approaches to the topic of the body and religion. These are:

- the body as the origin of religious narratives
- asceticism as discipline of the body
- body symbolism in religious discourse.

I have taken the opportunity to play, with due respect, with some of the questions which have raised themselves during my research and which I have had to bracket to a greater or lesser extent. My goal is to raise questions rather than answer them, and to convey something of the complexity of the inquiry into the body and religion in the hope that you will find this stimulating for your own areas of research.

As my own research has focused on religious constructions of sexual meaning, my lecture will lean to that aspect of religious discourse, which is always also discourse about social relations. Many of my examples come from the traditions of late antiquity, when the dialectic between the Hellenised culture of this period, Roman cult, Judaisms and Christianities laid the foundations of western culture, and contributed to the preconditions for the emergence of Islam (Baldick 1988, pp 313-38). Indeed, in the important transition from late antiquity to the early middle ages, the great religions could be said to define themselves not only against a common cultural background, but also against each other. What we need to remember is that texts from antiquity are almost all androcentric. We have virtually no unmediated access to women's experience, or their understanding of their bodies, in this formative era.

B. What is religion?

I have already begged a couple of questions. The brief I was originally given—to speak on the body and religion—implies that we all know what we're talking about when we say 'religion' or 'body'. It especially invites the questions: whose body? which religion? As far as religion goes, I do not plan to enter that definitional minefield any further than necessary here. My starting point is Geertz's definition of religion as a cultural system, which argued that

a religion must constitute a symbolic system, which establishes powerful and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by formulating questions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1985, p 67)

Therefore, I am including Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy within this category. These systems were inherently religious in the sense that they were theistic, were engaged with ultimate meaning, and indeed, they engaged with cultic myths at the level of allegory.

Geertz has been criticised for minimising that role of religious practices and disciplines in reinforcing or disestablishing a religious system, but scholars in the field of asceticism who have built on Geertz's work can compensate for this weakness.

Religion impacts on the body in every sense. It cannot be otherwise when it is an aspect of culture and human beings are embodied. But such a topic can seem to imply that religion and the body is somehow different to religion and the soul, or religion and the person. This is a fallacy. The body is the site where biology, culture and subjective experience meet. Religions transmit meaning through a symbolic system that we articulate in creeds and discourse, experience in ritual, and internalise through the daily disciplines demanded by the philosophy, cult or church to which we belong. Thus a study of this subject benefits from an interdisciplinary framework. Such an approach intersects with the developments in hermeneutical theory, specifically reception hermeneutics, which helps us understand the dynamics through which certain meanings can be accepted, and others must be rejected.

Reception hermeneutics insists that we can only interpret our experience in the light of the concepts and thought systems available to us within our culture and, a feminist perspective would add, informed by a specific social and gender location (Spickard 1991, pp 146-8; Cooley 1989, pp 325-42; cf MacLeod 1993, pp 362-5). Furthermore, reception hermeneutics postulates that textual production is part of an ongoing conversation between authors and readers of texts as new responses, both textual and artistic, are stimulated when a prior set of beliefs becomes problematic. For example, the emergence of allegorical readings when foundational texts and narratives—be they Greco-Roman myth or Judeo-Christian biblical texts—were considered inappropriate to the sacred by scholars steeped in Greco-Roman philosophy. Hence reception hermeneutics calls into question the canonicity of texts because it accepts that texts are susceptible to an ideological critique, by means of theoretically grounded analyses (McCarthy 1984, pp 187-83). Because such scrutiny is itself constrained by its own blind spots, reception hermeneutics recognises any critique as contingent, and hence the language of 'conversation' rather than canon (Jauss 1982, p 15).

A synthesis of interdisciplinary models with hermeneutics permits what Geertz has called 'thick description'. In brief, thick description is 'sorting our structures of signification and determining their ground and import'. In fact, Geertz compares the ethnographer to the interpreter of a manuscript. Both face a

multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted onto one another, which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. (Geertz 1973, pp 10, 6-9)

What is the body?

It is a sign of the post-modern times that we even ask the question 'What is a body?' Pre-feminist, scholarly traditions usually took the body as unproblematic. That stance assumed a normative body that was everywhere the same. The assumption was usually that the normative body was male.

Problematising the body began when questions were first raised about the cultural construction of reality. I would include here the psychological debates about nature and nurture in the areas of intelligence, creativity and the development of identity. Once such questions began to be asked in the context of feminist and cultural studies, the received wisdom that biology determined destiny was under siege. Examples of the opposing poles of contemporary scholarship would be Stephen Hawking's 'selfish gene' and Judith Butler's argument for gender as performance (Butler 1990). In the case of socio-biology, we could say that subjectivity, language, and what we have thought was the cultural transcendence of biology, are reduced to biologically driven strategies dedicated to rationalising and

implementing the genetic agenda. At the other extreme, the body is at the service of language. It has no meaning except that invested in it by social and cultural processes. Sexual difference itself is perceived as a cultural, not a natural, category. In the hands of Foucault, the body was divested of even its sexual instincts. Sexuality became an achieved work of art (Laqueur 1990, pp 12-13), which brings us back to Butler's theory of gender as performance.

My understanding of the debates over the body has been shaped to some extent by a prior acquaintanceship with those earlier arguments in psychology, where the jury has had to record an open finding. There is such a dynamic and often unpredictable interaction between cultural expectations, social location, family culture, class, sex, economic status, race, biology, geography and personal experience, that any univocal understanding of the body is reductionist in the extreme. Indeed, chaos theory might be more appropriate.

Certainly, we do construct our bodies in various ways according to the ideals our society offers us. We might adapt Shakespeare to say, 'Is there a divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them as we may?' So we inscribe them, fast them, shave them, wax them, paint them, exercise them, even pierce them, scar them and excise them. In fact—to use a contemporary fitness term—we give them 'definition'. But as religion is a cultural system, one of the problems that we have is that rituals and disciplines that might be germane to our inquiry appear in contexts quite clearly secular—fasting, sexual continence, meditation, voluntary poverty and rejection of status—however that is understood in any particular context. The same martial arts practised by the monks of Shaolin are practised by the Chinese military. Fasting is practised by the anorexic and the ascetic, meditation by the monk and the New Ager. So how do we define what makes a practice 'religious?' If we sort that out, what freight does the body bear in religious discourse and practice?

Perhaps an analogy might be helpful. In many religious traditions, the body was created from earth by gods. Thus the body and earth can share certain characteristics—both stand at the intersection of nature and culture. A garden looks perfectly natural, yet it is an expression of cultural and individual values. It is usually the fruit of hard work and constant maintenance. It is nature selectively idealised, tamed, crafted and domesticated. Moreover, a garden sets boundaries. It is about power: who controls admittance? who owns its fruits? So too, with the body. Where that body exists in a religious context, then the way that the body is described, prescribed and cultivated will convey religious values. I shall return to this congruence again later in the context of body symbolism.

The contemporary discourse of sexuality also poses methodological problems for the study of the body in other times and other cultures. We can collapse personal identity into sexual identity, defined by sexual orientation. So we speak of hetero-sexuality, bi-sexuality, gay and lesbian sexuality—and sexual meanings can become entirely detached from the entire process of procreation (Delaney 1987, p 36) or socially ascribed gender roles. Yet among the Plains Indians of North America not only anatomy, but work roles and choice of clothing determine gender, so a third category—the *Berdache*—is recognised, which means roughly 'not-man, not-woman'. There are *Berdache* of both sexes. Their role may be ascribed even before birth—if their mother has a revelatory vision or dream—and they may legitimate their choices through the same means. They choose the occupations and dress of the 'other sex', and are not defined by their sexual orientation, though most are homoerotic. Other members of the tribe may well engage in homosexual liaisons without being defined as *Berdache*. Though the Native American culture was a compromise and not a full 'collapse of the gender stratification

system' it offers a salutary example of the complexity of cultural meanings surrounding the body (Whitehead 1989, pp 31-79).

The classical world offers us another useful example concerning the difficulties we face in trying to separate religion and culture when it comes to the body. In Greco-Roman contexts, the object of one's desire did not define one's identity or nature, though it might define one's morality, or strength of character—or lack of it—and thus impinge on honour. Moral questions centred on the management of desire and the appropriate care of the body. Such a judgement depended on specific cultural locations within the Hellenised world. For example, in Rome, a passive homosexual would be seen as a moral weakling, not because he desired another man, but because he was penetrated. To seduce a free adolescent of either sex was a crime, but to use slave children as passive partners was relatively unexceptional. In Greek society, a married man expected to sleep with his wife for the sake producing citizens for the city-state, but ideally, his purest love would be that directed towards men, because true love could only exist between moral equals. In philosophic texts, this idealised love between men should ultimately transcend sexual relations, though sexual love was the accepted starting point. This love would prove fertile in the intellectual and spiritual fruits of the relationship (Power 1995, pp 5-6). In Greek myth, Zeus seduced both men and women, and Eros, the god of love, was a beautiful, androgynous youth. The canonical texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition condemned homosexual activity as a moral imperfection, unnatural in the sight of God, and this stance was not affected by Platonism, even though Platonic metaphysics were happily integrated into both traditions.¹

II Theoretical perspectives

The tensions between biological and cultural approaches to human nature are reflected in the theoretical approaches to the body in its religious context. Now it is time to turn to some of those scholars who have posed stimulating theses for our consideration.

A. Biological origins of religion

The first is classicist Walter Burkert. I cannot claim him as an influence on my work, yet his provocative perspective must be considered. In his earlier work, he proposed that religion developed from sacrificial rituals which emerged from hunting rituals. A further aspect of this argument was that as sexual taboos operated prior to the hunt, war, or certain mystery cults, then killing became sexually charged and sexuality, hunting ritual and aggression became inextricably linked together. Burkert asserted that this was reinforced by the fact that defloration shed a virgin's blood (Burkert 1972, trans. 1983, pp xx; 60). The work of Chris Knight (1991, p 238) and Palaeolithic cave painting (Gill 1989, p 67) certainly support Burkert's argument for a link between sexual intercourse and hunting, but unless we know what meanings the artist understood in both contexts, we cannot know what meaning his symbolism held for his community. We'll return to Burkert's linkage between the sacred, sexuality and aggression in a discussion of the Priapic cult in Rome a little further down the archaeological trail.

In his most recent book, *Creating the sacred: tracks of biology*, Burkert went to bat for the socio-biologists. He argues the thesis that religion has its 'natural foundation based on the great and general process of life which has brought forth humanity and still holds sway over it'. (Burkert 1996, p xi). This argument is fundamentally problematic. We know so little of this 'great and general process' that his thesis cannot be affirmed or repudiated definitively. Well aware, though, of current theories of cultural construction, he argues that

we are part of nature and even if nature has ceased to exist as an immutable essence or matrix and rather appears as an irreversible process of self-organization in transient patterns emerging from chaos, we cannot escape from being involved in this. (Burkert 1996, p x)

This, according to Burkert, would account for the ubiquity of religion and the commonalities which appear amongst cultures: the nuclear family, the role of the father, and the privilege of the first-born son. The way biology gives rise to religion, he says, is that the biological program penetrates language and is turned into a tale through the celebration of ritual. As evidence, he adduces myths which depend on the sexual stages of women: menarche, intercourse and childbirth, and the myths that pertain to the birth of the son—ritualised as the narrative of the 'hero's quest'. We cannot deny that the triple goddesses of the ancient world—virgin, mother and crone—certainly reflect the life stages of woman, and we might add, the natural cycles of the moon and the seasons. Yet such 'eternal truths' are not always so eternal in religious discourse. The triple goddess of antiquity was transformed into a Christian virgin-mother who was eternally youthful, and never achieved the independent wisdom of the crone.

Burkert, however, glosses over the fact, that the hero narratives often distance the archetype from his biological family, as with Moses; or from his biological father, as with the births of Jesus and the Buddha; or from a biological mother in the case of Dionysius, the anarchic Greek god of the vine. The hero narratives are very much about culture, socialisation and authority, one intuits, rather than a man's experience of his body's stages of sexual development. However much Burkert might wish to distance himself from biological essentialism, his argument from commonalities suggests that patriarchy, primogeniture and the nuclear family stem from biological programming.

From this position, he argues what he admits is a paradoxical assertion: namely, that religion is then about the continuity of culture and the transmission of 'eternal truths', which facilitates the survival of its members' genes. As examples he cites Catholicism and Islam, which prohibit reproductive control. However, as Barry Powell (1997) has pointed out, 'religious behaviour is so complex, and ill-defined, that it is hard to be sure that it does have survival value'.

The problem with Burkert's theory is not just that it is unverifiable, but that it doesn't account for differences in culture. Why, for example, do biblical stories such as that of Jacob, Isaac and Joseph subvert the law of primogeniture? Why did the priests of Cybele, the great mother, castrate themselves? This is not the way to guarantee the ongoing existence of the genes! One suspects that the ancient Romans were aware of this when they forbade Roman citizens from becoming priests of the cult, which historians have traditionally seen as catering to the mystical and emotional needs of Roman women. This may, indeed, say as much about Roman men and the historians as it does about the women.

Logically, if religious narratives stem from a common biological process penetrating language, this common process should inhibit the development of alternate paradigms. Yet religious discourses do offer competing paradigms, and different resolutions of ambivalence and ambiguity. At the very least, in a human context, as soon as we weave a story around even the most biologically determined experience, we are interpreting it. Moreover, a biological experience can only be interpreted in cultural categories accessible to us; otherwise, it is inexpressible.

To demonstrate the interplay of biology, culture and religion in the construction of meaning we shall examine some religious texts written between the 5th century BCE and the 4th century

CE, in which men describe their experience of orgasm. They show us how a biologically hard-wired experience and a specific world-view come together to create a religious discourse. These texts are not transparent, even though all authors are describing orgasm. Such is the dependence on cultural meanings that we will not understand their argument if we do not know what these men believed about their bodies.

Greco-Roman culture believed absolutely in biological determinism of gender roles and the capacity for virtue.² Most authors did not know about the ova and Roman doctors did not know about the relationship between menstruation and conception. They drew keen distinctions between soul and body, quite different to the bodily integrity of the Jewish tradition. Post Aristotle, most believed that only men held the power to 'spark life'. Although they used analogies, such as semen is to womb as seed is to earth, they did not, in fact, understand semen as a 'seed' but rather a vehicle to transmit a spiritual principle, *pneuma* or 'vital spirit'. In biological terms, this was the 'vital heat' that initiated life, formed the matter in a woman's womb, and animated it. This essence was, according to Aristotle, analogous to the stars! This was a significant statement because people in antiquity believed that the stars and heavenly bodies were spiritual entities; Plato taught that any soul who lived three virtuous lifetimes (which would have to be in a masculine body) would become stars themselves. Although both men and women created sexual fluids from excess food (this understanding explains the link between fasting and sexual abstinence), only men had enough surplus heat to create the semen that conveyed the *pneuma* into a woman's womb. Proof positive that semen was the vehicle for the spirit was that it was white and foamy—therefore it was pure, filled with the elements of air and fire.

The sex and appearance of the body was determined by the strength and virtue of the spiritual essence animating it. In the dominant Aristotelian model, this vital spirit conveyed the soul into the matter in the female womb. If this vital heat achieved its full potential, a hard upright male body was the result. If the essence had been turned from its ultimate goal, the resulting body was smaller, softer, and could not create semen, but had to let excess food drain off in menstruation. If a body was soft and curved, instead of straight and hard, this reflected the essence within. As the mind was the definitive expression of essence or spirit, then a soft body was considered to house a soft mind and a morally frail soul. Conversely, seminal fluid, which conveyed spirit, was considered to be derived from the brain marrow alone—or in alternate paradigms, from the brain marrow and blood.

This theory of procreation was so taken for granted that it was absorbed into all three non-pagan 'religions of the book'. It is found in Hebrew and Christian biblical texts, and is particularly strong in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, a first century Jewish exegete. It is integral to the anthropology of patristic authors. This same paradigm justifies patriarchy today in the Sunni Muslim communities of central Anatolia (Delaney 1989, pp 35-73). This biological model rendered myths and doctrines of virginal births quite believable. If a man impregnates a woman with a spirit to form a child within her, a god can do the same thing, without the need for a physical tool—though metaphors like 'rain', 'dew', 'showers of gold' and 'the overshadowing of the Spirit' often symbolised this divine impregnation. Biology certainly penetrates language, but it is not so much determinative (for the biological assumptions are, in fact, quite erroneous) as an interpretative justification, which buttressed the whole structure of social relations, access to information, power and resources—based on a presumed moral superiority grounded on the morphology of the body.

With this world view in mind, we can return to men's explanations of their experience. All authors reveal ambivalent attitudes to sexual experience—but their biology enters language through the intellectual categories already available to them. Where there is more than one category, it is their subjective choice of 'canonicity' that determines the argument.

The first is from Democritus, a Greek philosopher of the 5th Century BCE (*Fragment 32*). Democritus was cited by our second author, Clement of Alexandria (2nd century CE), who based his arguments for sexual ethics equally on Democritus, Plato and *Genesis*. I will present Democritus' remarks in that context. Clement was concerned about whether sexual intercourse was really the same sort of necessity as food. That was the received cultural wisdom, but certain radical encratite traditions which Clement sought to refute understood Christ to have freed Christians from this necessity. These texts reveal why some men would see this as an advantage. Clement, however, took *Genesis 1's* command to increase and multiply seriously. Hence, he wrote:

The sophist of Abdera called sexual intercourse a 'minor epilepsy' and considered it an incurable disease. Is intercourse not accompanied by weakness following the great loss of seed? 'For a human being is being born of a human being and torn away from him'. [Democritus, *Frag.*, 32] See how much harm is done: a whole person is torn out with the ejaculation that occurs during intercourse. 'This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh' Scripture says [Gen. 2:23]. By spilling his seed a man loses as much substance as one sees in a body, for what has been expelled is the beginning of a birth...Wise then was the person who, when asked his opinion of the pleasures of the love, replied, 'Silence, man, I am very glad to have fled from them as from a fierce and raging tyrant'. [Plato, *Republic*, 1.329C]. (Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 2.10.94, trans. D Hunter)

Mind you, a further agenda emerges a few paragraphs later when he remarks that a man who is undignified in bed will never earn his wife's respect.

The third is a poignant text from Tertullian, a Montanist who used his personal experience to 'prove' the Aristotelian model.

The entire man being excited by the one effort of both natures [soul and body] his seminal substance is discharged, deriving its fluidity from the body, and its warmth from the soul. Indeed...I cannot help asking, whether we do or not, in that very heat of gratification when the generative fluid is ejected, feel somewhat of our soul has gone from us? And do we not experience a faintness and prostration along with dimness of sight? This then must be the soul-producing seed, which arises at once from the out-drip of the soul just as that fluid is the body-producing seed which proceeds from the drainage of the flesh...even now the two substances...flow forth simultaneously in a united channel. (Tertullian, *On the soul*, 25. *passim*; 27. 5, trans. S Thelwell)

The last is Methodius, who specifies that he is reporting the experience of other men's experience to illuminate the meaning of *Genesis*. Methodius' approach is less traumatic, perhaps due to the lack of the immediacy of experience.

When thirsting for children a man falls into a kind of trance, softened and subdued by the pleasures of generation as by sleep, so that again something is drawn from his flesh and from his bones is, as I said, fashioned into another man. For the harmony of the bodies being disturbed in the embraces of love...all the marrow-like and generative part of the blood, like a kind of liquid bone, coming from all the members, worked into foam and curdled, is projected through the organs of generation into the living body of a female. And probably it is for this reason that a

man is said to leave his father and mother, since he is suddenly unmindful of all things when united to his wife in the embraces of love, he is overcome by the desire for generation, offering his side to the divine creator to take away from it, so that the father may appear in the son. (Methodius, *The banquet*, 2. 2, trans. WR Clark)

Each text retains the experience of debilitation and exhaustion after orgasm. There is a real tension between men's culturally prescribed active, dominant role, and the costs that this exacted or threatened.³ Methodius' language is weaker, but for a man to be softened was also a dangerous thing. Did the distressing experience of losing something vital penetrate language, seeking to name what was lost? But what makes one man name it as soul or reason, and another as disease? What caused these Christian authors to apply a biblical text that originally referred to marriage to their sons?

The same experience of debilitation is found in Taoist texts, but in these texts it does not cause a fundamental alienation from the body. Rather, the Taoist sages developed techniques which heightened their sexual experience whilst retaining their seed, thereby energising their bodies and creating a spiritual meaning for the process. At the level of discourse, men and women could re-balance their own yin and yang by absorbing the sexual fluids of the other; if a man retained his seed, the exchange might be unilateral (Man and Lyle 1995, pp 83-88). Indeed, women also developed techniques to maximise their acquisition and retention of semen whilst minimising their own losses.⁴

Pagan and Christian authors did not find such a resolution to their dilemma. Nor did they differ in their warnings about the dangers of intercourse: reason overthrown by desire; effeminacy through loss of their hotter male essence; and, more prosaically, baldness. Men were even cautioned about the danger of death from too much sex. Literary texts construct the experiences of desire and erotic love as wounds and sexual relationships as war (Kenny 1994, pp 146, 149). Hence, for the elite man, sexual relations had to be strictly controlled, and ritual purity before sacrifice was essential to retain enough spiritual essence to communicate with the gods (Rousselle 1993, p 15).

The Hellenistic sexual construction had further social consequences. Paradoxically, it stimulated the ideal of the 'macho man', the sexually active man who had so much surplus virility that he could afford to expend himself without caution or fear. His penis was a weapon to boast about, a sacred sword. Hence the cult of Priapus, the god of eternal tumescence (Richlin 1992, pp 11-12; Kiefer [1934] 1994, pp 178-295).

Another author who argued from biology was George Ryley Scott. His book, *Phallic worship*, begins with the forthright assertion that the study of religion is the study of phallicism, for 'even in its purely metaphysical aspects, religion is indelibly and closely associated with sex' (Scott [1966] 1996, p xvii). From an entirely different perspective, his argument receives indirect support from Jungian archetypal theory which asserts that 'inflation' is the essential metaphor for masculine creativity (Wyly 1989, pp 11-12). Idiosyncratic to Scott is his argument that phallic worship did not originate as a fertility cult, but as the worship of sexual pleasure—long before human beings had grasped the causal relationship between intercourse and pregnancy. Certainly, Parmenides, a Greek philosopher of the 5th century BCE, wrote that Eros was the first of the gods, because all the gods, even Zeus, were susceptible to his power. Yet Eros was not a phallic god, and he does not appear in the Homeric corpus, compiled between 750 and 650 BC, though Dionysius, a phallic god, does. Phallic cults first appeared around the 5th century BCE, and I find it significant that classical historians have defined this period as

the era when power first began to be revered (Ferguson 1990, p 133). Indeed, it is Eros' power which earns him his status, not the pleasure love brings.

The Mediterranean cultures had a plethora of phallic gods. Even ancient Israel had its phallic stones set up in shrines or holy places (1 Kgs 15:9-15), practised ritual circumcision as the sign of the covenant (Gn 17:9-14) and like Egyptian culture, swore oaths on the phallus, which biblical texts politely translate as thigh (Gn 24:2,9; 32:32). However, the cult we shall focus on is the one which predominated in Rome when Priapus absorbed the roles of the Greek Dionysius, and those of their own god of the vineyard, Bacchus, and their fertility gods Mutinus and Liber (See Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 6. 9 *passim*). The Greek Dionysian cult was more anarchic and ecstatic; Priapus was far more down to earth. As Priapus was a fertility god, votive phalli were offered to him in cult, as well as animal sacrifice and flowers.

The Greco-Roman association between intellectual and physical creativity was made concrete by the omnipresent phallic symbolism in Roman life. The practice of anthropomorphising the phallus by giving it a head or an eye is also seen in the Hindu Lingam, and Greek vase paintings; however the Hindu cult also reveres the Yoni, whereas Romans disdained and feared female genitalia (Adams 1990, pp 77-79). In Roman cult, we might say that that the locus of Priapus in the domestic garden, enclosed within the household, retains the vestiges of the Indian complementarity. The feminine is represented not by a woman but by tilled and fertile earth. The Altar of peace renders fertile earth, and the spirits of wind and water conquered by Rome as female figures (cf. Virgil, *Georgics* 4.111).

Priapus was also the god of the boundaries. Stone or wooden herms served as boundary pillars that rendered property sacred, installed with sacrificial ritual. It was considered sacrilege to move one. To protect doorways, door handles were shaped like phalli. Every intersection had its herms to protect the traveler (Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 7.21). So ubiquitous were these symbols that it is impossible to differentiate the sacred from the profane. They can be relatively aesthetic like the Greek-style herms of Dionysius, or convey a bawdy joke, like the cheeky wall-painting in a Pompeiian doorway, where Priapus weighs his penis in the scales against weights of gold, winking to show that 'it's worth its weight in gold'. Phalli even came with bells on as tintinnabula, wind chimes that had an iatropic function. In each case, it is clear that intellectual and sexual creativity grounded the power of men to take and protect land and women and make them fertile—to domesticate the 'natural'—a category we shall return to below in a discussion of Mary Douglas' work. It is not surprising then, that a culture that revered male headship, and assimilated semen to brain matter, should use 'head' as euphemism for the penis (Adams [1982] 1990, pp 72; 180), and the verb 'to know' as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁵ The herms and priapi present in households and in the temple of the Vestal Virgins (Beard 1980-81, p 13) celebrated male prowess in both areas. The authority of man lay in his ability to author both life and literature. In Richlin's words, 'on the symbolic level, a talking phallus in the middle of a walled garden surely makes a good sign for phallogocentrism'. The textual equivalent of the phallus was the book. The textual equivalent of the female body was the poet's garden (Richlin 1992, p 162).⁶

More sombrely, sexual symbols were the preferred method of expressing domination in Roman culture. Those who invaded Priapus' territory unlawfully were threatened with rape. Verbal attacks were symbolically presented as oral rape—Catullus' satirical attacks on other men and the priapic poetry being good examples (Catullus, *Poem* 97). Conversely, rhetorical power connoted virility, whilst literary (and theological) opponents were stigmatised as effeminate (Richlin 1992, pp 11-12; 27; 59-69; 86; 92; 118; 123; 186).

Priapus also had an iatropic function. He guarded against the evil eye, and magic, protecting especially legitimate children from harm. At birth, after a child had been acknowledged by its father (until then it had no legal existence and no right to life), mother and child were purified to protect them from malignant spirits, and a phallic amulet was placed around the baby's neck. Many of these ancient amulets are virtually identical with modern pendants still available in university markets and popular street markets in Australia, and in Italy they still hold an iatropic function (See Kaltsas et al 1989, pp 144-45). These amulets were worn until a boy reached puberty, or a girl was married. Roman boys did not have a traumatic cultic initiation. On the *Liberalia*, a celebration of virility and fertility, boys who had recently showed the signs of pubescence would return their *bulla* to the god, at the same time putting off child's clothing to don a man's pure white *toga virilis*. There were, however, clearly marked steps towards maturity, codified as the ladder of honour. It marked the order of the magistracies, praefectures and consular positions to which men of rank aspired, and it nominated the age at which the ideal man would reach any specific level. Presumably the youth who set his foot on this ladder no longer needed his amulet—he now possessed the real thing.

In ancient Rome, a young girl's initiation into womanhood was more traumatic than her brother's. Varro and Augustine of Hippo preserve the tradition that a bride used to sacrifice her hymeneal blood on the phallus protecting the door at her husband's family home, to ensure the fertility of the household (Augustine, *City of God*, 6. 9; Adams 1990, p 5). This practice would also have had social functions. It provided proof positive that the girl, who would have been between 12 and 14, was a virgin and also, according to Scott, made a man's wedding night more pleasurable to him because he didn't have to take time to deflower his bride gently—though the notion that women liked a bit of the rough stuff was a popular Roman belief (Adams 1990, p 99, n.1; Power 1995, p 179). Later, imperial Romans found this public ceremony barbaric (Augustine, *City of God*, 6. 9:). By late antiquity, the rite had been replaced by the flame coloured wedding veil, which the husband removed to symbolise defloration. Burkert also reports the habit of parting the bride's hair with a bloody spear, though so far I have not found the practice mentioned in any texts from late antiquity. Certainly, here we do see a continued affinity between the virgin as sacrifice and the virgin as prey. This is common in Greco-Roman myth and cult. Men offer blood; women and animals shed it. Iphigenia and Psyche exemplified the Greek daughter sacrifices, which were one aspect of this affinity. Classical myth does not contain narratives of father-son sacrifice, though Judeo-Christian texts do (Dean-Jones 1994, pp 214-15). In literary texts and in mythic discourse, however, the Greco-Roman man's love object is often depicted as prey of the hunter (Dean-Jones 1994, pp 214-15) and it is notable that in one patristic Christian discourse, we find the unequivocal assertion that Christian virgins are not longer prey but have become soldiers of Christ (Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning virgins*, 2.31), a position Ambrose slowly rescinded over time.

All in all, Priapus was the summation of Roman sexuality: aggressive, defiant, dominant, fiercely protective of land and sexual property—what Reay Tannahill has called the magical multi-purpose obscene gesture (1992, p 118). It is true that Romans could see the ludicrous sides of sex and joke about it, but Priapus should never be taken simply as a joke. A nation that precedes its consuls with lictors carrying axes bound in bundles of rods to signify the power of Rome, and that creates a monument to the rape of the Sabine women, does not joke about territory or dominance.⁷

Priapus was not concerned with desire or love, but rather with the futurance of the *gens*, the tribe, whose spirit the family worshipped. This spirit, often symbolised by the snake, was

manifested in the head of the household, the patriarch called the *paterfamilias*, who officiated at the domestic cult. Any of his male descendants who hoped to inherit from him were obliged to remain dependent on him until he died. In ancient Rome, he had held the power of life or death over his dependents, including his wife. In imperial Rome, alternate forms of marriage exempted women from this dependence; by then sons were rarely beaten, let alone killed. This worship of familial fertility was inextricably tied to patriarchal power and authority, symbolised by sexual dominance. The highest religious offices in the land were held by a married man and a virginal woman—the *flamen dialis* and the Vestal Virgin, respectively the priest of Jupiter, the divine father, and the priestess of Vesta, goddess of the hearth.

It is possible to view this cult as a form of ancestor worship, in which, as in Confucianism, the sexual potency of the ancestor conveyed a profound influence on the living (Man and Lyle 1995, p 80). To Roman men of pre-eminent authority and dignity, the Senate would grant the honour of an *imago* or mask in his own likeness. The image was made from wax, and painted like a portrait. It was kept in the home with the household gods, and taken out on ceremonial occasions to be honoured. It was a specifically masculine privilege, as was a bust until late antiquity, and from this perspective one can see why Roman Christians had such difficulty in according to women the dignity of the *imago Dei*. The privilege of an *imago* was reserved to the man of authority. The civic extension of this was the apotheosis of a philosopher or emperor, who joined the gods after his death. Even such a brief survey offers evidence that the Roman phallic cult was not necessarily about pleasure but the reification of the family, which was identified with masculine potency, honour and power.

B. Asceticism

Scott's claim, however, that the erotic is integral to the religious, is supported by the research into Asceticism, which brings us to our second perspective from which to view the body. Asceticism is commonly perceived as typical of dualistic or world-renouncing religions, but virtually all religions have some form of elitist, disciplined lifestyle which engages with the dominant cultural values, even in a culture where the religion and politics are enmeshed—as in Islamic states for example. Walter Kaelber, who has been influential in shaping working definitions of Asceticism, showed in his earlier work that the body is not necessarily rejected by ascetics, but is always the medium of ascetic values. Asceticisms usually involve fasting, poverty, and sexual renunciation. Yet there are many exceptions, perhaps the best known being the Hindu practice of Tantric sex and Taoist sexual disciplines. There are also strands of Sufi mysticism known for their attempts to integrate sensuality and the higher states of mysticism (Awn 1995, p 370). Even Christian ascetics in late antiquity placed strong importance on bodily disciplines because the body was the medium of salvation.

In the face of such complexities, Kaelber further refined his thought, identifying three cross-cultural and interfaith themes: the ascetics' vision of wholeness, their erotic life, and their relation to culture. This transcendental vision may come in dreams, be expressed in poetry, be modeled to disciples, or preached as the most authentic way to live out a mainstream tradition (Kaelber 1987, pp 441-45; 1995, p 320). The erotic life of the ascetic may be consciously sublimated into a spiritual energy for a temporary period—as Charles Keyes found in his study of male initiation in a Northern Thai Buddhist society, where young men spend a crucial period between childhood and adulthood in a monastic community (Keyes 1986), or it may be displaced onto the deity as divine spouse as we have in Christian monasticism and the Indian *bhaktas* (Joy 1993). Hence, as cultures are particular, asceticisms must be studied as particular and specific to their own cultures.

Despite the need for sensitivity to particularity, if scholars are going to be able to do comparative studies, then there is a need for a definition of Asceticism that can embrace different cultural and religious contexts, as well as different academic disciplines. One of the difficulties in finding a definition of Asceticism is not only the multiplicity of forms but the fact adverted to earlier—that ascetic discipline is not always religious, and religion is not always ascetic. An exciting development in this field at the moment is the co-operation of scholars from cultural anthropology, literary theory, theology and religious studies in the development of such a theory. So far, a satisfactory definition still eludes them, but it has nevertheless placed the spotlight firmly on the dynamic interaction of asceticism and culture. There is agreement that theories of Asceticism attempt to explain the process through which individual persons come to perceive their bodies as fraught with meaning which must be appropriately expressed within their social contexts (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995, pp xix ff).

Geoffrey Harpham's speculative and provocative theory that Asceticism is 'sub-ideological' and as such is common to all cultures, has shaped the direction of much current scholarship. The analogy he used was that Asceticism is the MsDOS of culture, which enables particular and specific ascetic programs to run. The value of his paradigm is that it explains the dialectic between Asceticisms and cultures. For Harpham, the interactions and tensions between these two give rise to meaning—just as the interactions and tensions between reader and text create meaning (1987, pp xii-xvi). This theoretical approach prevents the slide into over-simplistic dualism which can be a temptation, especially for feminist critiques of western culture (Castelli 1991). Such tensions can exist within a religious culture as well as between religions and the dominant culture.

However, Harpham tends to overlook the body. I wonder, if Asceticism is like MsDOS, then does the body provide the hardware to run both the DOS and the programs it supports? We would then have to ask, as Burkert is doing in his own way, does the hardware run certain applications better than others? At the social level, we would also need to ask who is running the programs and writing the applications?

Building on Harpham's theory, but focusing more on ascetic behaviour, Richard Valantasis argued that practical disciplines are the means by which a specific community integrates the individual into the group culture at every level of existence. Valantasis emphasised the performative aspect to demonstrate how a new symbolic system would actually create a new world inhabited by individuals transformed by the incremental achievement of spiritual goals. It is this practical achievement which alters social relationships and power structures (Valantasis 1995, pp 547-50). For example, across religious traditions, ascetic practice frequently gives women not only increased status but access to spiritual power. This formulation means that the traditional wisdom of asceticism as flight from the world might be better restated as flight from one world into another.

Hence Valantasis cautions us that ascetic goals cannot be ascertained through the simple observation of behaviour. We need to understand the experiences and feelings that the behaviour is designed to effect (Valantasis 1995, p 551; Aspegren 1990, p 118). I'd like to illustrate Valantasis's point with two examples from Indian traditions. In Hindu, Buddhist and Jain contexts, shaving the head and the removal of facial hair proclaims that the individual is no longer part of society. It can also connote celibacy, which is not necessarily permanent. It can be either ascetic, or symbolic of widowhood. When Jain ascetics shave their heads, it does signify permanent celibacy and so is understood by some as a ritual castration which returns the initiate to the socially and sexually undifferentiated state of the infant (Olivelle 1995, pp

205-6). But in the case of Mirabai, poet-saint of North India, her shaved head did not signify symbolic widowhood, or asexuality, but her reconstruction of herself as a mendicant yoga, a bride on the journey to search for her beloved Krishna (Hawley 1995, p 303).

For ascetic men shaped by Hellenism—be they pagan, Jewish or Christian—this flight was from a world in which they were enslaved by passion, to one where they were free from its tyranny. By conserving their souls, they were enabled to create spiritually and intellectually; indeed, often the two were seen as co-terminus. The preservation of *pneuma* was construed as building up the water table, so to speak. Instead of vital essence being dissipated, it was channeled so that as its levels rose it carried the spirit to the heavens. To assist this, food was restricted, so that it would not fuel desire. This kind of renunciation is often seen as peculiarly Christian in antiquity, but there was actually a great deal of cross-cultural fertilisation. There is clear evidence that Greek philosophers and Christian writers were well acquainted with the feats of Asian and Indian ascetics, and often stood in awe of their achievements, and that early Islamic mystics derived a great deal of their tradition from Syriac Christian ascetics (Brett 1988, p 324). In Judaism too, the lover of Torah often experienced a real tension between desire for God and his duties as a husband and father. The Rabbis did not adopt the very Platonic stance of Philo of Alexandria, but the tension between sex and the sacred was present none the less, perhaps fuelled by the ritual purity laws of Judaism as well as the classical biological sciences (Boyarin 1991, p 1992).

In both Hellenic philosophic traditions and in Judaism and Christianity, asceticism was allied to martyrdom. It was the discipline that allowed one to overcome fear and face death with equanimity. This fearlessness permitted the philosopher, the bishop and the prophet to confront injustice, chastising kings and emperors without fear or favour (Brown 1992). The ability of Christian discipline to impart this virtue to the *hoi polloi*, instead of reserving it to elite cadres, was one of the apologetic arguments of early Christianity.

C. Body symbolism in religious discourse

By now it is fairly clear that any study of the body and religion really means a study of cultural values, social structures and symbolic discourses. Our third and final perspective is that of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas. Her insights concerning the transmission of cultural values through 'natural symbols' and body symbolism have been particularly stimulating to students of religion (Brakke 1995; Olivelle 1995; Vaage 1995; Kraemer 1992). From a distinguished body of work including *Purity and danger* (Douglas 1988); *Natural symbols* (Douglas 1982); *Risk and blame*, (Douglas 1992);⁸ researchers can draw on several fruitful conclusions:

- Communities metaphorically 'embody' their dominant religio-cultural values through the way they structure and order the ideal physical body (Douglas 1988, p 115). One brief example: in most Greco-Roman texts, the ideal body has a dominant head and a subordinate limbs or members. All human essence, all intellectual soul resides in the head. In different authors, we find images of the body as varied as a city (Plato), a bust on a pedestal (Philo of Alexandria), a fortified city (Ambrose of Milan), a musical instrument (Gregory of Nyssa) (Power 1997, pp 153-70). Note that these are all constructed artefacts and not, in fact, 'natural symbols'. But because the body is experienced as perfectly natural, then, if the depiction is effectively done, the analogy invests the literary construction with the same apparent naturalness. We can't be naive about this. The only way to understand any one of these images is to study them in context. To complicate things further, in Plato himself we find images of the body and soul as different as a man in prison or entombed, as a

charioteer and his horses, and as a citizen of a well-regulated city. In each case, the former is the soul, the latter is the body (Courcelle 1966).

- Because sexual gender is our fundamental experience of classification, gender boundaries become symbols of other significant categories in our social and physical universe. Therefore, when an organisation or culture is faced with defining new boundaries, and expressing identity, sexual difference can be expected to become a paradigm for symbolising other boundaries (Douglas 1988, p 114). To keep our focus on body symbolism—in many traditions, the ideal head-body relationship is symbolised by man and woman, and most commonly as husband and wife, not brother and sister. The controlling, dominant head is husband to the obedient and supportive body-wife. In almost all cultures, this translates to man as symbolic of the heavens, culture, order and intellectual soul or mind; and woman as symbolic of earth, nature, disorder and sensuality.

Sometimes, sexual gender becomes quite detached from the body as is the case with Philo of Alexandria's paradigm of mystical ascent. Plato's disciple expressed the soul's maturation in gendered symbolism which definitively shaped Christian thought. According to Philo, the immature soul is feminine in its vulnerability to sin. As it matures in virtue, it becomes masculine. At this point, God, its father-husband, transforms it into a virgin again. This gender-bending is not so much about sacred sexuality as it is about power relations and gendered virtue. Virtue is kept tied to masculinity, but the ideal soul is feminine in its obedience and subordination to the divine. Thus gender codes prestige.

- Social concerns about bodily boundaries can be read as concerns about the communal body's integrity (Douglas 1982, pp vii-xiii; xx; 1992, pp 55-56).
- The virginal body is particularly apposite to symbolise community boundaries because it possesses a physical symbol of enclosure in the hymen (Douglas 1988, p 158). This is a complex area. Where racial purity or citizenship is a strong value, then women's bodies are literally the entrances to membership of the family, the state or the religious community. On them depend inheritance rights and citizenship rights. Hence female chastity is of prime importance. Still, virginity functions differently according to religious context. Roman Vestals were part of civic cult. Honoured, public figures, they are typically Roman in their orderliness and their subjection to the control of the *Pontifex maximus*, the head of the college of priests. As educated women they served the state as keeper of legal records and deeds as well as officiating a women's cultic celebrations. Greek cultic virgins were ecstatic, disorderly, illiterate mouthpieces for the oracles of Apollo—though these were decoded by a male priesthood. The priestess's very illiteracy and simplicity made her a *tabula rasa* on which the god inscribed meaning. Her very femininity, interpreted as incapacity for independent thought, guaranteed that the word she produced was the fruit of the god (Sissa 1991, p 168). Christian virginity therefore had to distinguish itself from cultic virginity on two fronts. Perpetual vows, spiritual motherhood and withdrawal from public life distinguished the Bride of Christ from the Roman Vestals; an orderly, controlled and disciplined life, characterised by silent enclosure, distinguished them from the charismatic Greek cults.
- Societies code power as 'pure' or 'dangerous', depending on who wields the power and whether they are inside or outside the explicit, religiously legitimated, social structures.⁹ (The underlying rationale here is that pollution is matter out of place.) Thus in patriarchal cultures and religions, clean power belongs to men as male heads of households or heads of the cult—and in some cases, as both. Women's power to subvert male authority, especially through sexual desire, is deemed unclean power and controlled through social sanctions, taboos and religious law. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that the greater the

power of women to affect male honour, the more taboos and religiously legitimated constraints on women's sexuality we will find (Ortner and Whitehead [1981] 1989, pp 13-21). To varying degrees and in different eras, women have had, and continue to be, veiled in public. Islamic women are forbidden to attend the mosque to worship. In certain cultural contexts, female circumcision is given religious legitimation. Greek Orthodox women who are menstruating are forbidden by canon law to receive communion, yet in ancient Greece where they were extremely sequestered, there is no record of menstrual taboos (Dean-Jones, 1994: 226-50, esp. 228-9). Certain Buddhist monks are forbidden to receive anything from the hand of a woman. Catholic women cannot be ordained.

Even when religious traditions share common texts, their use of the same body symbolism can convey very different world views. Let us take an example: the treatment of Song of Songs 4:12 by the people of the book: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Scriptural text reads, 'A garden enclosed is my sister my bride, a garden closed a fountain sealed'.

This garden-woman made of flowers belongs to her bridegroom. Characterised by numinous beauty, she/it is an elite garden, full of flowers, vines, wine, bread and honey. She/it is sealed, and her/its fruits are his for the picking, however gentle the despoliation. In context, it is a celebration of mutual desire, though the bride is often abandoned by her groom without explanation. This much is common to Jewish and Christian readings of the text. In late antiquity, both religions were ambivalent about the overt eroticism of the text and each interpreted it allegorically as a human bride espoused to a divine bridegroom, which fits nicely into the sacred marriage of sky-father, earth-mother category. So much we can garner from the text in the sense that the interpretation does not run against the grain of the text. Yet the Jewish interpretation sacralises human marriage as a reflection of the divine, while the Christian justifies sexual renunciation in favour of a spiritually erotic union with divinity. Islamic law forbids any anthropomorphism, so God is never lover or father. Yet for Islamic mystics, the enclosed garden symbolises paradise regained, just as it does in Judaism and Christianity, and the Sufis have raised garden design to a mystical art.

Douglas' work on organisational cultures highlights the interaction between the beliefs and practices of institutions, and the benefits accruing to their individual members. The benefits include justifying the corporate status quo in terms of power, the structure of social relations, the division and patterns of labour, and access to resources. Simultaneously, through natural symbols, the institution renders the status quo as so natural and obvious that its organisational function is masked and it appears to be simply common sense. Douglas' research reverses the accepted wisdom that organisations take care of the routine necessities and decisions for their members so that members can then expend their energies on questions of meaning. Instead, organisations take care of the big questions of meaning, allowing members to devote their energies to the minutiae of day to day life.¹⁰ By drawing on values already present in the community, the organisation creates a

symbolic system, attracting solidarity, capable of being mobilised in its own defence, holding strong views on correct norms of behaviour...a large part of the energies of members have been devoted to intellectualising their commitment to its forms, and to politicising the forces of nature so that they are seen to uphold the right way of life and to penalise the wrong. (Douglas 1992, p 104)¹¹

Any organisation develops through a dialectical interaction with its members. As long as there is strong congruence between social experience and organisational values, the culture will

flourish. If there is too great a gap between social practice and organisational values, the organisation will lose its constituency. This emphasis on the relationality of organisational belief and membership meets the objection that functionalist research can become too passive and deterministic, and detached from its historical context (Castelli 1991, p 3). From this perspective, we might hypothesise that the process of secularisation occurring in establishment religions today is the result of a shift in members' values, particularly to do with sexual ethics and women's roles, so that the institutions are no longer taking care of the big questions. The increasing interest in Eastern traditions, New Age spiritualities, neo-paganism and Wicca suggests not only where people are finding the answers but that pluralism demands more than one alternative.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I want to summarise briefly the points I have covered. All our theorists agree that religious discourse about the body will reflect cultural meanings and values, whether to affirm or contest them. Theorists such as Burkert would have us be aware that some of the values may originate in our biological hard-wiring, or primal experiences of sex. Others would say that our meanings are constructed cultural artefacts. This is not to trivialise them. We place great value on other cultural artefacts—be they horticultural, artistic, literary or architectural.

Religion is a cultural system, within which the body becomes a cultural symbol. We are now so far from our primal roots that our experiences are virtually never unmediated by something we learnt, something we saw, something we read. I suggest that much religious discourse and practice—then and now—is engaged with the tensions and dilemmas caused because we are creatures who think; who can reflect on their joys, sufferings and inescapable death. Are our only choices to accept either that we are hard-wired and controlled by genetic factors, or that we are at the mercy of social pressures and values? Does religious discourse offer us the capacity to critique and challenge our cultural context, or does it support the status quo? To what extent do we have the freedom to choose our moral path? Can we learn to be freer? In whom should we invest power and authority? Why? Are we most human when the mind transcends the affections and the body, or when our hearts, minds and bodies are most integrated?

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1 John Boswell (1995) has examined extant liturgies for same-sex unions in the Christian tradition which may have been celibate.

2 The following discussion is derived from my doctoral research. Some preliminary findings were published in Power (1995). They are detailed more fully in Power (1997).

3 Cross cultural anthropological study indicates that such attitudes are still current. For an example within Indian culture, see Caplan (1987).

4 I am indebted to Dr. Paul Rule for his help with the Taoist tradition.

5 Sexual penetration as the equivalent of knowledge is the same equivalence as that argued by Mieke Bal (1988: 52-54) for the biblical texts, rather than the Freudian interpretation that knowledge equals sex.

6 Derrida (1982, pp xiv-xxii) sees discourse as still so phallogocentric that women cannot participate in it without being co-opted into male modes of discourse. See Paul Ricoeur's judgement that 'Platonism is throughout a justification of language...if then man is essentially speech, the 'passions' of speech are cardinal passions' (1969, p 340). This poses the problem: 'If man is essentially speech, and proper women are silent, then are they essentially included in the category, man?'

7 The victors are also found in Roman art, for example, preceding the emperor on the Altar of Victory. The sculptural representation of the Sabine women was centrally located in the Roman Forum.

8 For the value of her revised theory in religious studies research, see James V Spickard's excellent critical review of her theoretical development; Spickard is invaluable for his critical insights and his overview of all Douglas' writings (Spickard 1991).

9 Persuasive cross-cultural evidence identifies clean power as characterised by its lawful authority, eloquence, order, form and purity. Dangerous power is characterised by its impurity, speechlessness, formlessness, and disorder. It is hardly surprising that the characteristics of the former are usually attributed to men (with the exception perhaps of purity), and the latter to women. This applies especially in the ancient world (Douglas 1988, p 94; Ch. 6 *passim*).

10 Spickard (1991, pp 151-55) argues that this aspect of Douglas's work is one of her most valuable contributions to religious studies.

11 Douglas (1992, p 105) notes that dissenting minorities are always present in the city/community but they lack an internally structured, complementary and countervailing sections, and they are not organised by ranked, separate compartments. She finds the Christian church offers most of the relevant examples, but secular equivalents do occur.