

Foreword

Gender studies has become very fashionable in academia. At the same time, writing about the topic has become more and more perilous. In some circles, it is deemed unacceptable to write about women's experience in general. Worst, any statement about the feminine runs the risk of being stigmatized as essentialist (the cardinal sin of our post-modern age).

To understand the present situation, we may want to turn to the analysis of the French metaphysician René Guénon, who wrote little about women but was a lucid critique of our age. In his *opus magnum*, *The Reign of Quantity*, Guénon was distinguishing between two stages in the development of secular modernity. The first stage was characterized by a process of materialization and the second stage by a process of dissolution.

It cannot be denied that the first stage seemed to correspond to the strengthening of the masculine values. It was the age of the industrial revolution, nationalism and the rise of modern bureaucratic States. The second stage that we have now arguably reached is characterized by a process of collapse of all the intellectual landmarks and a dissolution of all normative hierarchies. Every-

thing in the world we live in become more fluid and hybrid.

At some level, it may seem that this second phase is characterized by a reassertion, at least in western countries, of feminine values. The masculine and power-oriented conception of rationality would be replaced by a more welcoming and inclusive attitude toward reality and toward the other. This impression, sometimes reinforced by a loud celebration of diversity (regardless of what it means), is however gravely misleading. In the clash of ideologies that dominates the international scene, namely the clash between religious fundamentalism and post-modern neoliberalism, women are often the first casualties.

It seems also very doubtful that the only way to free women from masculine domination is to refrain from searching for some universal common ground and withdraw into relativism and subjectivism (the logical conclusion of a certain form of post-modern deconstructionism for whom any truth-claim is alienating, a mask for an unspeakable "will to power"). In rejecting the very idea of truth, one only radicalizes the anti-essentialist bend that Guénon diagnoses at the root of modernity and that is largely responsible for the



contemporary spiritual crisis. One also finds himself or herself empty-handed when faced with the most revolting forms of violence perpetrated by men against women. As Plato was already reminding us, one cannot at the same time claim that there is no truth and protest against injustice.

Fortunately, it is not the path followed by the contributors of this issue. By interrogating the religious myths about women and the feminine, by looking into the experience of saints or simple believers, they are not seeking to subvert religion but on the contrary to (re-)awaken certain spiritual possibilities buried in the divine revelations or in our collective spiritual unconscious. They are thus inviting to us a form of *anamnesis*, a rediscovery of the deeper meaning of the polarity between the masculine and the feminine.

It was the religious philoso-

pher Eric Voegelin, who was arguing that symbols represent the trace left of certain founding experiences, when human consciousness opens itself to the Sacred. It is through these symbols that human beings can find their place into a meaningful cosmic order. On the contrary, when these symbols are cut from their experiential roots, they tend to turn into (empty) dogmas and even into a source of alienation and disorder. One may argue that it is what happened with the symbols of the feminine. Symbols originally created to express a mystery located in the human soul, and maybe more enigmatically in God, became a means to control women and perpetuate power-structures responsible for the suffering of women, as well as men.

A feminist hermeneutics of symbols and myths is certainly not an invitation to return to some illusory Golden Age, in which tradition-

al religious communities would have treated women more fairly. (On the topic, the historical record of all religions is nothing less than appalling.) The feminist hermeneuticist will not claim either to have decided whether God is less inadequately designated as a “He” or a “She” or should be treated as simply beyond gender (although, remembering the lessons of Feuerbach, he or she will certainly see a correlation between the alienation of women and the tendency of classical theologians to depict God with mostly masculine attributes).

A feminist hermeneutics is possibly best interpreted as a form of utopian thinking. Symbols such as the *Anima Mundi*, Androgyny or the Great Indian Goddess (*Mahadevi*) belong to an alternative imaginary

that has been frequently marginalized or repressed but can become emblems of resistance against old and new ideologies that subdue and very often kill women. In a world in which political and socio-economical disorders are frequently a reflection of a deeper spiritual crisis, a feminist hermeneutics may finally contribute to a kind of collective therapy by restoring a balance between the masculine and feminine in the world, in our soul and, more importantly, in our vision of God.

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