John Donne Journal
Vol. 30 (2011)

"We're on a mission from God."

Brian Blackley

Mary Papazian, ed., *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008. 377 pp.

Anyone who recognizes this review's title probably recalls the 1980 movie starring John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd titled *The Blues Brothers.* But even those who remember the movie might not think of it as a useful illustration of the sacred and profane. In the movie, Jake and Elwood Blues are former front men for an anachronistic blues band that had disbanded after Jake was imprisoned. Once released, Jake learns that the very orphanage where he and Elwood grew up, Saint Helen of the Blessed Shroud Orphanage in Calumet City, Illinois, is about to go into foreclosure for non-payment of property taxes. First the boys pay a visit to the orphanage:

> Jake: What are we doing here?
> Elwood: You promised you'd visit the penguin the day you got out.
> Jake: Yeah? So I lied to her.
> Elwood: You can't lie to a nun. We got to go in and visit the penguin.
> Jake: No . . . fucking . . . way.[1]

Already here are competing assertions of the sacred and profane as well as the larger problems attendant to their claims. Elwood has the desire to properly respect the sacred, asserting the special nature of God's servants

[1] *The Blues Brothers*, DVD, directed by John Landis (Hollywood, CA: Universal Studios, 1980).

and their access to divine knowledge, but he remains imprisoned by his ignorance and limited vocabulary. He sees through the glass, but darkly. Jake Blues, never reverent or law-abiding, arguably a creature of darkness, would prefer to defy the sacred and deny its significance, *à la* Satan in *Paradise Lost*, choosing profanity in word and deed. But his brother plays the better angel and takes him inside to meet "the penguin" (Sister Mary Stigmata, played by Kathleen Freeman):

> Jake: [to Sister Mary] Five grand? No problem, we'll have it for you in the morning. Let's go, Elwood.
> Sister Mary: No, no! I will not take your filthy stolen money!
> Jake: Well then . . . I guess you're really up Shit Creek.
> [*Sister Mary hits Jake with a ruler for using that kind of language.*]
> Sister Mary: I beg your pardon, what did you say?
> Jake: I offered to help you . . . You refused to take our money. Then I said: I guess you're really up Shit Creek!
> [*Sister Mary hits Jake with the ruler again.*]

The visit to the orphanage is telling since the brothers visibly regress to the third grade as soon as they meet Sister Mary. For Jake, everything can be bought and sold for a price, and the price is all that matters. When his offer is rejected, he is stung as much by the reminder of his fallen nature as by the rejection of his assistance, and thus is defiant to Sister Mary and all she stands for. Elwood follows his brother's example, and soon they both are fleeing the nun's blows. Fallen creatures incapable of self-reform, the brothers are again punished for their behavior just as they had been while students of the orphanage. They cannot see that a sacred task must be done in a sacred way, and again defy the orphanage and church, literally and spiritually the source of their nurture. Jake allows the memory of his failings as a young man (revived by his meeting with Sister Mary) to preclude any attempt at reform as an adult. But after that meeting, the boys talk to "Curtis," played by Cab Calloway, who offers them a path to redemption:

> Curtis: Well, the Sister was right. You boys could use a little churching up. Slide on down to the Triple Rock, and catch Rev. Cleophus. You boys listen to what he's got to say.

> Jake: Curtis, I don't want to listen to no jive-ass preacher talking to me about Heaven and Hell.
> Curtis: Jake, you get wise. You get to church.

They attend the Triple Rock Baptist Church through respect for their old friend Curtis rather than any desire for reform, but do so grudgingly, refusing to be seated. But then, while standing at the rear of the sanctuary, watching the worship service with music, dancing, and choruses of hallelujahs (Reverend Cleophus James is played by James Brown), a heavenly light shines down on Jake and he has an epiphany about how to earn the orphanage's tax money legitimately:

> Jake: The band? The band!
> Rev. James: Do you see the light?
> Jake: THE BAND!
> Rev. James: DO YOU SEE THE LIGHT?
> Elwood: What light?
> Rev. James: HAVE YOU SEEEEN THE LIGHT?
> Jake: YES! YES! JESUS H. TAP-DANCING CHRIST. . . .
> I HAVE SEEN THE LIGHT!

Thus the boys, chastised and beaten by a nun, mentored by Cab Calloway, and spiritually enlightened by James Brown, take up a sacred cause: they will re-assemble the band for a charity benefit concert. Briefly they attempt to leave their selfish lives behind and undertake "a mission from God." They cannot totally leave their bad habits of the past, however, and their old nemeses (usually acting on behalf of law enforcement) complicate their mission as well. They pray, though never as a matter of discipline ("Our Lady of Blessed Acceleration, don't fail me now!") and stake their lives and possessions on this crusade. Saving the city of Jerusalem from the Saracens nearly a millennium ago was similar in many ways. And the struggle between the sacred and the profane has an even longer history—one that is as old as religion itself.

That struggle is the topic, in some fashion, of nearly all the essays in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature*. In the introduction, Mary Papazian anchors the debate in Renaissance Humanism and the Protestant Reformation, explaining how both movements tested the boundaries of the sacred, moving toward or expanding the profane. She also identifies John Donne as a prime

example of this bifurcated world, describing his life account, encompassing an early period as an attorney and writer of erotic verses as well as his later years as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and author of highly regarded sermons: "I can think of no sharper contrast drawn between the sacred and profane in the early-modern period" (p. 15). And therein lies the challenge taken up by this collection of essays: "to move beyond simplistic categories where sacred and profane—and sacred and profane literature—occupied different spheres. . ." (p. 18). Certainly Donne serves as an emblem of the difficulty in keeping those spheres completely separate.

A number of essays in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature* explore the struggle for separation, two directly. Raymond-Jean Frontain reads Thomas Fuller's poem, *Davids Hainous Sinne*, as moving from the private and sacred to the public and political, establishing the text as the "dividing line between the time when the Bible was treated with utmost respect and when it became a text like any other to be appropriated for the writer's secular purpose" (p. 272). He notes that the "omnipresence of the vernacular Bible in Britain" was the event that "ensured its loss of religious authority" and analyzes Fuller's poem in that shifting context (p. 271). Chuck Keim's essay on temple imagery in *Paradise Lost* identifies a similar situation in the priority for and difficulty of differentiating sacred space in the garden and profane space outside, noting that the temple "symbolically recreated the garden where God had walked and talked with his creation" (p. 301). He details the painstaking exactness of the attention to detail in the Hebrew Temple and the priest's garb as well. What is at stake in this separation is the very existence of the sacred—the fact that it is separate is essential to its identification.

One hundred years ago philosopher and sociologist Émile Durkheim posited that the defining characteristic of any religion is its establishment of the dichotomy between the sacred, "things set apart and forbidden" and the profane.[2] As the sacred is created, develops, or changes, the profane must accommodate that space. Durkheim studied the totemism practiced by the Aborigines of Australia as the means to observe the phenomenon, attempting to "yield an understanding of the religious

[2]Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Collier, 1961), p. 62.

nature of man, by showing us an essential and permanent aspect of humanity."[3] Durkheim finds in the sacred the power of the ideal, defining the sacred specifically as

> . . . something added to and above the real: now the ideal answers to this same definition; we cannot explain one without explaining the other. In fact, we have seen that if collective life awakens religious thought on reaching a certain degree of intensity, it is because it brings about a state of effervescence which changes the conditions of psychic activity. Vital energies are over-excited, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. A man does not recognize himself; he feels himself transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds him. . . . In a word, above the real world where his profane life passes he has placed another which, in one sense, does not exist except in thought, but to which he attributes a higher sort of dignity than to the first.[4]

Durkheim describes the energy, passion, and transformation experienced in the sacred which draw us to it, taking the believer to an idealized, divine state. In a mundane example, this means a Blues Brother standing in the back of the Triple Rock Baptist Church can "see the light," finding the inspiration to save an orphanage and do handsprings down the aisle. Turning to the Renaissance, we find in Philip Sidney's landmark of literary criticism and key to Elizabethan literature, *A Defence of Poetry,* a similar inspiration: he did not consider it "too saucy" to compare how in poetry, the "highest point of man's wit" could be compared to divine powers, or "balanced with the efficacy of nature"

> . . . but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings—with no small arguments to the credulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, since our erected wit maketh us know

[3]Durkheim, p. 13.
[4]Durkheim, pp. 469–470.

> what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.[5]

Thus Sidney sees in poetry the attainment of the ideal in a way similar to Durkheim's conception of the sacred, and draws the two concepts closer by his use of the key phrase describing the function of the creative process as a "divine breath." The sacred brings the individual to an idealized state, and the individual can in turn bring poetry to an idealized state—what comes from God is returned to God in forms of worship and regard for words and the Word, *logos*. And yet the "infected will," our human fallibility, keeps us ever separate from and desirous of that idealized state of accord with God. Sidney offers poetry as not merely a way to the sacred, but the best and most effective way. His work establishes the power of "poesy" as a parallel to the power of the sacred in Renaissance thought: in its observance we are closest to the perfection of God. Robert Kilgore's essay on Sidney's *Defence*, emphasizing the generally unacknowledged theological nature of the *Defence* and its dynamic interdependence between the sacred and profane, points out (citing Ann Prescott) Sidney's "envy" of King David: poet, prophet, and King all at once and his aspiration to be likewise (p. 108). That the goal is unattainable without "an encounter of spiritual faith" (p. 127) provides the impetus driving Sidney's call to his readers to "believe, with me" in "poesy" as an experience or observation of the sacred. Thus Kilgore pinpoints the issues in Durkheim as well. While Durkheim's seminal work has been frequently praised and criticized, the debate on its merits—and its strong similarities to Sidney's *Defence*—suggests just how vital and relevant the ideas in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature* are to modern students and scholars.

In the practices of many modern religions, the observation of the sacred is synonymous with the presence of God (as with Chuck Keim's essay on the Temple and priestly garb), that is, a thing (a place, an object, an act, or a word or words) becomes sacred because, according to the tenets of the religion, it invokes the presence of or has been in contact with the godhead. For example, water can be holy, as sanctified by a priest in a baptism ceremony, or as in a special river (such as the Ganges

---

[5]Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 24–25.

in Hindu faith). In each case the sacred thing or observance unites or draws together the individual with the divine. Several essays in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature* focus on sacred "things"; notably, the essay by David L. Orvis examines George Herbert's church furnishing poems (specifically, "The Altar" and "The Windows") and perceives from their descriptions several connections to "both High and Low Church prescriptions for worship" (p. 213) and yet "an unwillingness to surrender their complex meditations and meanings to the strictures of Anglican doctrines" (p. 232). Once the complex signification of static things is appreciated, then the enormous problem in establishing and maintaining the sacred in our lives can be better understood.

Other essays in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature* treat the microcosm of the profane individual resisting and desiring the sacred. Sean McDowell's essay on sacred and profane modes of transgressive desire in the poetry of Sidney and Crashaw identifies the difference of the modes as one of ego (p. 133); he explains that violent sensuality in religious lyricism becomes transformative in that once the ego is removed, the entry of Christ is allowed, thus an act such as the consumption of Christ's body and blood becomes sacrament and blessing (p. 143). Andrew Barnaby examines another dynamic of personal desire in the original fall, posing the question, "If Satan is the cause of Adam and Eve's fall, who, or what, caused his?" (p. 323). Tracing the idea through *Paradise Lost* as well as through attitudes toward devotional poetry from Samuel Johnson, Donne, and Andrew Marvell, he arrives at the conclusion that prior to the begetting of the Son, Satan is not aware "that he exists" separate from God, and once he discovers that existence, he finds himself a "servile adorer, a fawner and cringer" before God. Thus his "shame" breeds rebellion (p. 343). Greg Kneidel takes the examination to the individual level also, analyzing "hard-heartedness" as a dimension of subjective religious identity in connection with "the rock of scandal," finding ironic qualities of weakness, strength, sacred, and profane in both (p. 238). The mysteries of the human soul are perhaps beyond us.

If there has ever been an appropriate time for a book examining the sacred and profane, it is now. Certainly such ideas are "of the moment," and this era of changing social perspectives can benefit from these considerations. If it is true that the sacred, by its delineation, actually

frames the profane, or as Papazian puts it, "the secular is either redefined or absorbed by, or grows out of, the sacred" (p. 13), then the primacy of the sacred is assumed. But the separation is not fixed. The cross, a sacred symbol to Christians worldwide, for example, existed as a thoroughly profane instrument of execution for nearly a thousand years before the crucifixion of Jesus began its transformation into an object of sanctity. We are told that early Christians, still uneasy with the *stigma* of the cross, so to speak, preferred the sign of the fish as their symbol. Even the act of crucifying Jesus would remain a tragic injustice without further significance if regarded as mere historical fact; its identity as a religious mystery, an idea capable of converting the world, requires that its sanctity be acknowledged. And in this case the sacred grew from or transformed the profane, it would seem. Today the cross stands as a universal symbol of the Christian faith, the secular cross almost unacknowledged, "redefined," and displaced by the added sacred meaning—until it is set afire as a threat of violence. Is it then simultaneously both, or immediately transformed?

Robert Lublin captures this problem astutely in his essay on ecclesiastical apparel, noting as an example the change in the people's perception of the monk's robe as the wealth of the monastic orders grew: "The humble attire that was supposed to be the sign of their devotion to a life of simplicity and prayer became instead a symbol of their hypocrisy" (p. 60). Lublin notes Doctor Faustus's first command to Mephistopheles: "go and return an old Franciscan Friar: that holy shape becomes a devil best" (p. 61). Ultimately one wonders, then, what was the exact impression made on the audience when a character took to the stage in ecclesiastical attire. Brett Foster offers a similar problem in his examination of Renaissance travel narratives and their changing perspectives on Rome, noting that as "England's relationship with Rome underwent severe re-definition during the first half of the Sixteenth Century," the "increasing complexity of English reactions" to the Holy City gradually dismantled its consecrated status, but not at all in a simple disregard or rejection (p. 28). In fact, he elaborates a "bifurcated attitude" of enthusiasm and criticism (p. 37). These points depict the unsettled nature of the question and affirm the relevance of *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature*. Exchange and movement between sacred and profane are difficult to describe in general terms.

Rarely has a Renaissance text had more contemporary significance. Mounting external civic pressures, as well as those forming within various religions, have pushed questions of the sacred and profane to the forefront of American consciousness and conscience. And curiosities abound on both sides: what role does the idea of the sacred possibly play in the average non-believer's life? Why do so many couples who have never attended church in their lives want to be married in one? Can a society that, for many years, has allowed civil unions outside of church to stand legally as marriage now invoke its sanctity to exclude homosexuals? Should this be done in a society declaring freedom of religion? Other related questions are inevitably prompted: why does gender matter in questions of sanctity, where men qualify for some sacred roles and women others? And if we change those qualifications, as several religions have done, have we debased the sacred nature of the role? Do we dare define the sacred ourselves, in effect creating our own God? That this occurs is not surprising; people are perpetually re-writing the rules to satisfy their desires and needs. But the results can be the stuff of nightmares. The ultimate sign that people have created God in their own image is that they are certain God hates the same people they do.

Many Americans were shocked this year when a Gainesville, Florida, Christian sect burned a copy of the Koran as an act of freedom of expression, pointedly scorning the Islamic faith. The resultant violent protests killed nine in Kandahar, Afghanistan, twelve in Mazar-i-Sharif. Despite the fact that the burning of books, flags, and political leaders in effigy has a long history as a form of protected political expression, the Koran burning denied the sanctity of another faith, spurning another religion in favor of the burners' own.[6] Even more generally tolerated acts (at least in the West), such as the publication of twelve cartoons depicting Mohammed as a terrorist in the Dutch newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, become acts of debatable trespass on the sacred, offending Muslims around the world and inciting the passionately devout to violence.[7] Both the undeniable human need for the sacred as a means to

---

[6]Lizette Alvarez, "Koran-Burning Pastor Unrepentant in Face of Furor," *New York Times*, 2 April 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/03/us/03burn.html>.

[7]"Q & A: The Muhammad Cartoons Row," *BBC News*, 7 February 2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4677976.stm>.

connect with the divine, as well as the desire to defile the sacred in order to defy or deny the divine, are potent movers in the human psyche. Extremism and violence excepted, it is nonetheless the prerogative of religion to assert its sacred nature, to protect that which is revered, to demand its respect.

So it was with Mrs. Murphy (played by Aretha Franklin) when Jake and Elwood came into her restaurant to recruit her husband for the band:

> Mrs. Murphy: Don't you "Don't get riled, sugar" me! You ain't goin' back on the road no more, and you ain't playin' them ol' two-bit sleazy dives. You're livin' with me now, and you not gonna go slidin' around witcho ol' white hoodlum friends.
>
> Matt Murphy: But babes, this is Jake and Elwood, the Blues Brothers.
>
> Mrs. Murphy: The Blues Brothers? Shit! They still owe you money, fool.
>
> Jake: Ma'am, would it make you feel any better if you knew that what we're asking Matt here to do is a holy thing?
>
> Elwood: You see, we're on a mission from God.
>
> Mrs. Murphy: Don't you blaspheme in here! Don't you blaspheme in here! This is my man, this is my restaurant, and you two are just gonna walk right out that door without your dry white toast, without your four fried chickens, and without Matt "Guitar" Murphy!

Nonetheless, Matt and "Blue Lou" Marini leave with the Blues Brothers, the band performs the charity concert, and the orphanage is saved. And the irony is overwhelming: when it comes to music, how could Aretha Franklin be wrong?

North Carolina State University