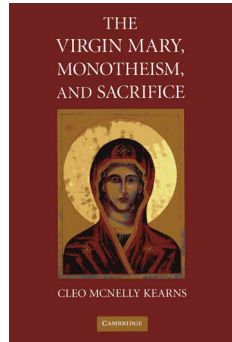


○ **REVIEW OF CLEO MCNELLY KEARNS, *THE VIRGIN MARY, MONOTHEISM AND SACRIFICE***
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In this important book, Kearns addresses three related questions. How can Mary serve as both a symbol *par excellence* for orthodox high church traditions while at the same time being a focus of devotion for those outside of such traditions and even outside Christianity itself? How is it that Mary is both the prime patroness of a masculine hierarchical understanding of priesthood and at the same time is the singular source of solace and comfort for women and others excluded from such hierarchies? How do the different understandings of Mary across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam both bring together and divide these traditions? She finds answers to these questions through exploring Mary's 'ambivalent relationship to a discourse of sacrifice' (x).

At 356 pages, the book consists of nine chapters grouped into three sections together with an Introduction and short Conclusion. The book also includes an Index and endnotes. At the start I want to express how much I appreciated and enjoyed reading this book. Kearns' arguments and expositions I found rich with insight. I say this now because the main criticisms I have of the book relate to its production not its content. The book lacks a bibliography, a serious lack given that it employs the disruptive endnote format for its references. The index also seems incomplete, containing a number of entries without page numbers. The text, too, could stand some serious editing as it contains many spelling errors, word duplications and other typographical problems throughout. It says much for the quality of Kearns' work that these errors serve merely as petty (and, in the case of no bibliography, annoying) nuisances rather than to detract from the worth of the book.

In her 'Introduction,' Kearns sketches some of the issues addressed in the book around the motifs of Abrahamic monotheism and the associations of God, gender and sacrifice. She then introduces her interpretive approach. Termed theocriticism, she draws together anthropological insights and figural or typological readings of biblical texts. Crucial to her analysis is the recognition that 'Mary takes on meaning through a set of associations stretching backward in time to the lives of the patriarchs and at times even to Genesis and forward to the fulfillment of the two

covenants in Revelation, to various later apocryphal and devotional writings and to the Qur'an' (16). Kearns recognizes that the biblical and related texts form a gestalt that is drawn on, sustained and expanded in the writing of each new individual text (be it scripture or commentary).

Moving to the first section of her study, Kearns here develops theoretical links between sacrifice, gender and parenthood and analyses their application in the narratives of the Hebrew scriptures. In Chapter 1, *Sexuality, Gender and Patriarchy*, she reviews a range of anthropological and other theoretical treatments of sacrifice, including the work of Durkheim, Mauss, Levi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas, Burkert, Girard, Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva amongst others. Anthropologically, sacrifice comes in two forms, expiatory and alimentary. Rituals of expiatory, or blood sacrifice are replete with binary oppositions and are 'especially effective in defining social and personal hierarchies and identities' (30). Such rites entail formal priesthoods, these being invariably male. In contrast, with alimentary rites 'thanksgiving and celebratory motifs often predominate' and while 'distinctions of caste and class are also often demarcated ... they may also be loosened and made more permeable' (ibid.). Alimentary rites tend also to allow much greater roles for women and may not 'even require an established priesthood' (53). Two further crucial theorists for Kearns' study are Abdella Hammoudi and Nancy Jay. The former analysed the *tfaska*, an annual sacrifice performed in the Maghreb at the end of the hajj and associated with the story of Abraham and his son. Hammoudi identifies the rite's relationship to patriarchal descent and kinship and outlines its two parts, a public male focused expiatory blood sacrifice followed by a more alimentary celebratory stage within the home and in which women have a much more prominent role. Nancy Jay provides an even more 'explicit analysis of the patriarchal, genealogical and gender-based dimension of sacrificial rites' (51). According to Jay, sacrifice is 'childbirth done better' and establishes and secures 'the intergenerational ties between men and their offspring' to ensure that culture and religion 'are transmitted through a masculine line of descent as well as through mothers' (ibid.). Here's the crux. There can be no doubt a child is born of its mother. The stark fact of pregnancy and childbirth underpin that. But there is no such certainty with paternity. Indeed the womb and childbirth are 'profoundly disturbing as well as enlivening to patrilineal groups' (53). Through sacrifice, patrilineal societies seek to remedy that uncertainty.

Section 1 then continues by applying this theoretical structure to the Biblical world and the Jewish, Western and Islamic cultures that derive from it. The focus of chapter 2 ('Abrahamic Sacrifice'), as its title suggests, is the figure of Abraham and the sacrificial 'dedication of his son to God' in both Genesis and the Qur'an. Drawing on both Jay and Hammoudi, Kearns examines the sacrifice of the son in 'Ancient Israel' and its subsequent Jewish legacy and in Islam. This Abrahamic legacy is also important for Christianity as it becomes a framework for interpreting the crucifixion of Jesus. The story of Abraham deeply shapes 'the figure of Mary in the New Testament' (86) and in Chapter 3, 'Marian Sacrifice,' Kearns provides an overview of the way the Abrahamic and sacrificial gestalts underpin and shape Mary in the New Testament and through subsequent Christian and Islamic traditions. A paradox unfolds here. The events at Mt. Moriah make of Isaac (or Ishmael in subsequent Islamic tradition) not a mother's son but a father's son. However Jesus is very much a mother's son *par excellence*. He has no human father and thus the whole patrilineal edifice is put in jeopardy. However the crucifixion can be understood as 'a form of sacrifice that unites Jesus with his Father in heaven' (93). Mary's virginity, even perpetual virginity, can then be understood as a guarantee of that ultimate patriline. Never-

theless, Mary as Virgin Mother ‘foregrounds the issue of gender itself’ (97) and makes ‘visible the contribution of motherhood’ (96). Not only does she evoke both Sarah and Hagar but in the New Testament she meets the reader as a woman of a ‘high and unusual degree of personal agency and subjectivity in her relationship to the divine’ (94). In subsequent tradition she is called a new Abraham and yet, unlike Abraham, Mary stands silent at the foot of the cross. She ‘is not depicted in the gospels as instructed by any agency, divine or human, to sacrifice her son, and she does not initiate this sacrifice, nor does she endorse it, unless her mere silent ... presence at the event be seen ... as constituting a kind of endorsement’ (98) The Eucharist becomes understood as the key rite of a new sacrificial economy founded by Jesus’ death and resurrection. In iconography Mary seems to preside over the Eucharistic altar and yet the logic of blood sacrifice requires that this be a male ritual. Mary’s (perpetual) virginity guarantees a pure patriline of sorts and yet her female, maternal presence offers different possibilities of lineage, gender, and sacrifice. In Islam, a different sacrificial order prevails. God is One and no other can be associated with the divine. Jesus is an extraordinary man and Mary an extraordinary woman, but the impulse is to the sacrifice of the heart and will in submission of the divine rather than to blood sacrifice. Nevertheless, problems remain: the need to prevent ‘an overwhelming, potentially blasphemous and contaminating contact with an absolute God’ and the need to find ‘a way to specify descent to maintain the theological balance between contribution (sic) of both male and female’ (112).

In the second section, *Mary, Motherhood and Sacrifice in the Gospels*, Kearns closely examines the gospels in light of the ‘theme of sacrifice at Mary’s lineage, her experience of the annunciation and visitation, her relationship to her son’s mission, and her place at his crucifixion and resurrection’ (18). The chapter titles are self explanatory: Chapter 4 – ‘Daughter of Zion in Matthew and Mark,’ Chapter 5 – ‘The New Abraham: Mary in Luke,’ Chapter 6 – ‘The Sorrowful Mother: Mary in John’. Chapter 4 primarily addresses Matthew’s genealogy to focus on the four women identified by Matthew in Jesus’ lineage. Kearns considers these women in light of Esther Fuchs’ work on conception narratives in the Hebrew scriptures. The chapter then examines Matthew’s Infancy Narrative. Chapter 5 gives a detailed reading of Luke’s Infancy Narrative before shifting to his account of the crucifixion. Kearns finds in Luke ‘several universalizing moves in terms of gender as well as ethnic identity’ (165). In Chapter 6, Kearns addresses themes of sacrifice and lineage in John specifically examining the Prologue, Cana, and Crucifixion accounts. In her reading of John she engages with the work of Derrida and Massignon. Prominent themes emerging in Kearns’ gospel readings include Mary’s agency, her *fiat* at the Annunciation (a ‘real’ *fiat* not just a submission to an all-powerful deity), her empowerment and her paradoxical role in terms of strong (blood) sacrifice. She observes of Mary at the foot of the Cross in John:

In witnessing the death of her son, then Mary may be said to witness not only the full entry of her son into his divine identity and patrimony as sole heir of the Father, but the renewed cycle of violence to which this privilege is going to lead. Far from rejoicing, then, or uttering a new Magnificat, Mary bears witness to the full significance of this moment precisely by refusing to greet it with a fiat, a fiat that would be inappropriate from either the maternal or theological point of view. At the same time, it is precisely in not looking away, in committing herself to attend to that suffering, that she offers the possibility ... of its under-

standing as a call to repentance, anamnesis and redemption beyond the closed sacrificial economy it completes' (194).

So Mary stands both within and without the discourse of sacrifice, a pivot point representing both continuity with tradition and its breach with all the possibilities inherent to such rupture.

In the third section, as titled, the author then addresses questions of Mary and Priesthood. In chapters 7 & 8 she examines several ancient Christian texts together with Sura 19 from the Qur'an. In Chapter 7, 'The Order of Melchizedek: Hebrews and Revelation,' the focus is on the Letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation. The former 'becomes an important resource for later understandings of (Mary) among the church fathers' (199) while the latter contains the famous pericope of the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun,' a crucial text for subsequent understandings of Mary. Hebrews is also crucial for later Eucharistic theologies while Revelation is overladen with liturgical, sacrificial and Temple imagery. Kearns then reads the Protoevangelion of James and Sura 19 in chapter 8, Mary, Priesthood and Paternity in the Protoevangelion and the Qur'an. The three Christian texts enable the subsequent move to link Mary with Temple imagery and even to identify her with aspects of the Temple itself. It was interesting to note that Kearns draws on some of the work of Margaret Barker in her reading of Revelation and the Protoevangelion. Barker's work on Temple Theology has many points of connection here. By contrast, while Sura 19 draws on elements of the Protoevangelion, for Islam, Jesus' purpose is 'in part to put an end to priesthood and the temple cult of sacrifice' (252). In the Christian trajectory, however, Mary takes on dimensions, 'in embryo in scripture,' that enable her paradoxically to both 'move at once closer and closer to priestly orthodoxy and further and further beyond orthodoxy, even while she derives her power from operating in its terms' (256). The final chapter of this section, Eucharist and Ecclesia: Mary as Temple of the Temple, further explores these trajectories and surveys a number of patristic texts on both Mary and the Eucharist as well as the beautiful Ode 19 of the Odes of Solomon. Kearns also discusses the work of Catholic theologian, Rene Laurentin, and the various pressures within Catholicism towards a Marian priesthood (something that first manifests with the ancient Kollyridians). Eucharistic practice incorporates both the notions of strong, blood sacrifice and of alimentary, white sacrifice. Mary straddles both of these terrains although ultimately as a woman she is debarred from being the 'sacrificial agent of the immolation of her son' (290). Given that Christianity represents a shift, or opens a way beyond the older patrilineal economy of sacrifice (a quality still more embryonic than realized) Mary's ambiguous status means that she 'not only confirms communal identities and univocal lines of descent but also renders them permeable and capable of expansion and relaxation' (291).

Finally, the Conclusion, Beyond Orthodoxy, briefly surveys some current theological work on Mary, Eucharist, priesthood as well as relationships between Christianity and Islam. Tina Beattie, who draws on Luce Irigaray in her Mariological work, Sarah Coakley, Anglican priest and theologian, and French Catholic (and homosexual) Islamicist, Louis Massignon, 'whose devotion to Islam and to Mary was legendary' (302) are included amongst the authors surveyed here.

To say that this is an impressive book would be an understatement. Sadly, the figure of Mary causes considerable discomfort to both liberal and conservative Protestant scholars and to many liberal Catholic and feminist scholars. This book shows how crucial Mary and the maternal are for any sort of Christian discourse. Kearns' readings are fascinating, insightful, enriching and

may be challenging for many. I have few criticisms to make of her argument. I think she perhaps put aside too readily the work of Girard on sacrifice and I would have liked to have seen her engage with Irigaray at least to some extent. I also think she might have drawn more on Barker's perspectives on the Day of Atonement rituals in giving a backdrop to Christian sacrificial discourse and possible implications for both Mary and Eucharist. And perhaps she relied too much on Nancy Jay's model linking gender inclusion to a continuum from strong sacrifice to alimentary sacrifice in understanding the Eucharist. It is not true that where the Eucharist is understood in less sacrificial or 'white' sacrificial ways that there is a greater gender inclusion and enhanced roles for women. For all of conservative Protestantism the Eucharist is understood in the most alimentary of ways (some even have almost done away with it entirely) but I see no evidence of any greater role for women in those communities. The Sydney Anglicans would be happy to do away with a special Eucharistic priesthood altogether but there's no way they would countenance a woman presiding over the congregation. Of course such Protestant traditions maintain a discourse of very strong sacrifice but it is not associated with the Eucharist at all.

To conclude, I would recommend this book for a range of courses. Clearly gender and women's studies courses would profit from this book as well as comparative religion courses. So, too, courses on Christian thought, Christian theology, early Christianity, Islamic and Jewish studies. I would also recommend the book for biblical studies, both Old and New Testaments. I found her typological/figural theocritical approach very fascinating. It fits well with gender and sexuality approaches and to literary and reception based interpretations, where engaging with scriptural *gestalts* are likely to be more profitable than historical quests to find out what 'really' went on behind the text.