

# Unholy? Trinity: Desire, Sexuality and the Divine

By Karen-Claire Voss

[karenclaire@bnet.net.tr](mailto:karenclaire@bnet.net.tr)

## Abstract

In this paper I will develop an ongoing exploration of a phenomenon I chose to call 'feminine' gnosis (first set forth in "Is There a 'Feminine' Gnosis?: Reflections on Feminism and Esotericism," *ARIES* 14 (1992), 5-24, and further developed in "Feminine Gnosis: Forms of Gnosis in Modern Feminist Thought," presented at The Amsterdam Summer University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, August 15-19, 1994, and "'Feminine' Gnosis and the Eroticization of Culture," presented at the International Conference, "Nature Religion Today: Paganism, Shamanism, Esotericism," Lancaster University, Great Britain, April 9-12, 1996, and now the topic of a book in progress entitled '*Feminine' Gnosis: An Other Way of Knowing*.)

It is my view that, by definition, 'feminine' gnosis is able to carry women (and, to the extent that they are able to connect with it—an issue which I will touch on in this paper—men as well) beyond the space of dichotomization: the gnostic finds the Divine neither exclusively without or within, but at a point of the subtle intersection of both. Moreover, and very importantly, on this view, desire is assimilated to Eros, which at base constitutes the enlivening, empowering energy of the universe itself, and sexuality, rather than presenting a problem, becomes a vehicle par excellence for the manifestation of the divine. (In contemporary times, writers like Nancy Qualls-Corbett and others have taken up the idea of sexuality being a vehicle for the manifestation of the divine as rooted in the phenomenon of the *hieros gamos*.)

I also want to explore the analogy I see between the process of a woman setting out to identify with/manifest/embody the divine and the dual nature of gnosis described by Antoine Faivre, a process that entails a journey inward, to plumb the infinite depths of oneself, and outward, to plumb the equally infinite depths of the universe beyond the self. In other words, this form of gnosis possesses a dual impetus which serves to turn us inward to probe the nature of the relation of the self to the divine and also moves us outward, to discover the nature of the relation of the self to the natural world. In contrast to Faivre, however, in my paper I will break away from the exclusive use of what Rosa Braidotti has termed a "logos-intensive" discourse of philosophy and use a form of discourse that is an amalgam of the "logos-intensive" and the "pathos-intensive" one found in literature.

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I have written several articles on the topic of what I call 'feminine' gnosis, and in one I set forth a spiritual feminism identifiable because of the presence of a five-fold awareness:

- 1) that Reality is inherently processual and dynamic; *i.e.*, fluid;
- 2) that Reality is multi-dimensional, multivalent, and also multi-leveled;<sup>1</sup>
- 3) that Reality is subtle; it is not comprised of rigid categories neatly corresponding, for example, to the charming particularity of male and female genitalia;
- 4) that there is an ontological relationship between the self and the universe: and

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<sup>1</sup> This comes from the writings of Basarab Nicolescu, most notably, *The Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, translated by Karen-Claire Voss (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002). I note that the same idea is explicit in mystical Sufism. See the discussion about modes and levels of reality in Christian Bonaud's *Le Soufisme: al-tasawwuf et la spiritualité islamique* (Paris, France: Maisonneuve et Larose and Institut du Monde Arabe, 1991), pp. 26-27.

5) therefore, to be human is necessarily to participate in Reality (a participation which is potentially active, conscious, intentional and creative) <sup>2</sup>

Throughout that article I took great care to make my language as precise as possible. My mode of presentation was conventional (even though the substance of my remarks was not), and (for the most part) I used the analytic voice. When I wrote it I was not sure whether or not ‘feminine’ gnosis was inevitably linked to female persons. Now I suspect that by its very nature gnosis is always ‘feminine,’ and that, like the Spirit, is something which goeth where it listeth, first here, then there, something which permeates and enlivens all things, not only those which happen to be biologically female. That there is a real connection, perhaps even a privileged connection, between ‘feminine’ gnosis and women seems true, but I think the focus of any discussion must be on clarifying the nature of that privileged connection and the reasons for it. I will return to this issue presently.

Here, in this presentation, I want to pick up where I left off, as it were, and look more closely at the enlivening force that drives all of the processes of Reality and to articulate the striking analogies I have come to see exist between the process of a woman (or a man) consciously embarking on a way of being that will allow him/her to move beyond the dualistic categories that are the stock in trade of so-called normal existence, to explore the commonalities between that intentional process of setting out to become fully participatory with Reality and the dual nature of gnosis following Antoine Faivre’s analysis. I also want to look at how desire is assimilated to Eros, which at base constitutes the enlivening, empowering energy of the universe itself, and thus how sexuality, rather than presenting a problem, can become a vehicle *par excellence* for the manifestation of the divine.

It will become apparent very quickly that I observe only some of the conventions of academic discourse. I am deliberately not going to attempt to present this material in a solely logical way—by using the kind of discourse Rosa Braidotti has aptly termed “logos-intensive,” but instead will employ an amalgam of “logos-intensive” and what she calls “pathos-intensive.” <sup>3</sup> This variation in the mode of presentation and in voice is self-referential; this mode of speaking is the outward form of a way of knowing which entails method inextricably woven together with substance, a method which reflects the substance of what is being said. This mode of speaking, this speaking, is itself a way of showing what “feminine” gnosis is, or at least, of showing one form of ‘feminine’ gnosis. There are infinitely many more. <sup>4</sup>

What I call ‘feminine’ gnosis is certainly the *modus operandi* here, while what I call Eros and the dialectic of gnosis acts as a golden thread of connection that weaves

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Voss, "Is There a 'Feminine' Gnosis?: Reflections on Feminism and Esotericism," *ARIES* 14 (1992), 5-24, p. 7. For an explanation of levels of reality see "Levels of Representation and Levels of Reality: Towards an Ontology of Science," by M. Camus, T. Magnin, B. Nicolescu, and K.-C. Voss. Presented at the *Fifth European Conference on Science and Theology*, Munich, Germany, March 23-27, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Rosa Braidotti, "Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject," *Hypatia* 8:1 (Winter 1993), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger's description of how "*The essential being of language is Saying as Showing*", in *On the Way to Language*, translated by Peter D. Hertz. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), p. 123 et *passim*.

together different approaches, themes, and ideas. I want to try and follow its glimmering traces, to see where it leads, by deliberately mixing my voice with other voices, and by moving back and forth between the realms of logos and pathos; in other words, between the voice of analysis and the voice of story. If nothing else, it is my hope that this presentation will be something that will leave my listeners teeming with ideas of what is possible, rather than merely dazed by the ponderous weight of some kind of intellectual brilliance.

### **Women's Connection to 'Feminine' Gnosis**

While I do not believe that 'feminine' gnosis as I describe it is inaccessible to men, I do think that women indeed have a privileged connection to it. Why? It is partly because of our physical beings and partly because of our evolution as a species in patriarchy. Both are real. With respect to woman's physical being, our bodies change, sometimes subtly, sometimes very obviously. Physically, we are continually in flux. At the onset of puberty our body begins to change. Then we begin to menstruate. That entails huge physical changes—each and every month, month in and month out, for decades. If we become pregnant, we grow big with child. After the birth, our body changes again. Initially, even if we do not nurse the child, our breasts swell with milk. If we do nurse the child, this happens several times every day. When we are older our menstrual cycles stop, and that too results in bodily changes which are evident to us, if not to others. Men's bodies do not change in this way because on completion of the process of puberty, for them things stay pretty much the same way. In striking contrast to men, women are physically constituted so that we are sensitive to change. This has nothing to do with culture—it is simple, biological fact. Our sensitivity to physical changes means that we also have a tendency to be sensitive to nuance, to small details, in many areas besides the physical. In at least this one respect (and there be more), women are more complicated than men. So, that is one thing about women that is inevitable. Secondly, our sensitivity has been enhanced by centuries of living in a context comprised of negative cultural attitudes about what our particular physicality and our much-vaunted sensitivity imply. Like animal species who over centuries have adapted to their environment by developing the ability to see in the dark, or by acquiring protective coloration, women have had to become almost preternaturally sensitive, simply in order to survive. There is an unforgettable passage in Susan Griffin's book, *Woman and Nature*, which alludes to this sensitivity to nuance. She calls it grace.

And if we find this grace through our labor, our ears late at night hearing the cries no one else hears, the body bent over rocking, the grace of crisis, the fever, the steady application of cold clothes, or the seeing of the barely seeable, the unnamed, the slight difference in the expression of the eyes, the mood, the slow opening, the listening, the small possibility, barely audible, nodding, almost inarticulate, yet allowing articulation, words, healing, the eyes acknowledge, this grace of the unspoken, spoken in movement, the hand reaches, the blanket is wrapped around, the arms hold this daily grace without which we do not choose to continue, and if we find this, we have something of our own.

This is our secret grace, unnamed, invisible, surviving.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

Of course, in another possible world this might not have happened, but in this world, the heightened sensitivity I have described has happened; now, it has the character of necessity: it has become genetic, inevitable. Both of these things are what result in women's privileged connection to "feminine" gnosis. This does not rule out the possibility of men accessing and manifesting 'feminine' gnosis, but I believe that it does mean it is harder for them to do so.

These are the facts about what it means, biologically, physically, to be a female being, and they are inevitable. What is accidental is the way in which these facts have been combined with cultural attitudes about women and the nature of women. What is accidental is that the conceptual framework that I described has almost never, until recently, been distinguished from ontology. This framework has not only shaped and distorted our thinking about women, but also about the body, about Nature, about sexuality, and about Eros. Each has been devalued.

### **'Feminine' Gnosis and the Dialectic of Gnosis**

The term 'feminine' gnosis refers to a particular way of knowing. While 'feminine' gnosis as such is a-historical, it is by no means disembodied; it is a phenomenon; thus, just as any other, it can only be embodied, *i.e.*, manifested, actualized, in time and space. Less a method of knowing than a fluid way of knowing, 'feminine' gnosis is deeply rooted in the body and in Nature, from out of which emerges the body and which subsequently supports and maintains the body.<sup>6</sup> 'Feminine' gnosis is produced by Nature and supported by Nature. Like Nature, it is characterized by emergence, process, and infinite creativity. Like esoteric gnosis, 'feminine' gnosis approaches Nature as a repository of signs, a book which must be read, interpreted; more than that, however, 'feminine' gnosis approaches Nature not only as a repository of actual signs, but as a repository of potential signs, like a book which is still being written by us in participation with Nature. 'Feminine' gnosis places great value on personal experience, *i.e.*, the subjective. It is a way of knowing which entails opening, not closing. It is a way of knowing in which a subject opens onto an object, and thereby enters into relation with it, and experiences a change in being as a result.<sup>7</sup> The opening of a subject onto an object is a dialectic movement; it does not occur in only one direction. In other words, it is not simply a matter of a subject reaching out towards an object, but rather, of a mutual, reciprocal, exquisitely nuanced movement, on all levels, whether they are seen or unseen, said, or unsaid.

Here is what can happen between two people:

*Their eyes locked and they stood there for what seemed a long time. She reached out to him. His arms enclosed her. She felt his breath. Warm. Hot. Their breathing*

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<sup>6</sup> I openly admit that I am not of the school that holds that things like 'Nature' and 'Reality' are mere conceptual constructs. The statement I have made here regarding the body and Nature is unabashedly an ontological statement.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed explanation of esoteric gnosis see Antoine Faivre and Karen-Claire Voss, "Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions." *Numen*. (January 1995).

*gradually became synchronized. They moved closer still, and were as one being then, as they loved each other through that long night, a night that would never end, but that she would always hold inside her, way down, locked in the depths of her being..*

And here is what can happen between a person and ideas:

*She opened the book, frantically searching for the passage that she remembered reading. Ah, yes. There. And as her eyes scanned the words, as the words formed sentences, as the sentences formed meanings within her, she felt herself expanding. Following the ideas arising from that printed page as if they were birds, she reached higher and higher and then found new thoughts forming. Like so many mythic, multicolored birds one flock rose above all the others. She followed it, until she was compelled to close the book, put it on the table, run to the desk, and write at white hot speed until she had added three pages to the work she had been laboring on for months.*

You see, this is indeed where desire comes in—we find strikingly similar dynamics are at work whether we undertake to study something or to get to know another person. As I have already stated, the enabling power of Nature (which I understand in the broadest possible sense, to mean all of reality, the entire universe) is Eros. The movement of Eros is the dialectic of gnosis, which in the *Tabula Smaragdina* is called ‘*thelema*’, meaning ‘the will of the world.’<sup>8</sup> Eros is fluid, processual, emergent, the source of infinite creativity; it is that which transmutes. Perhaps most importantly, in spite of the usual reduction of meaning that Eros is subjected to, it is Eros that is the enlivening force that enables all of the processes of Reality. I want to look more closely at this force.

On account of the fact that this form of gnosis is used by women, as is attested to by their choice of themes, questions, approaches, language, and writing styles, far more often than by men, I have called it ‘feminine’ gnosis. As I explained in my first article about ‘feminine’ gnosis, when certain persons want to study something, to come to know it, it is because they are attracted to it, because of their personal experience, their disposition, and their temperament. There is a dynamic relation between the object of study and myself. In Whiteheadian terms, the object of study possesses “causal efficacy” such that it is not only intelligible and attractive in itself, but is intelligible and attractive to someone. Its nature is such that it reaches out to that person; he or she is drawn to it; and he or she reaches out to it subsequent to (or perhaps simultaneously with) its reaching out. Personally, for example, I find enormous difficulty in studying and becoming familiar with things that do not hold an attraction for me. We all speak, by way of illustration, of subjects that do not excite us, and sometimes, we call such subjects “dry.” But surely this is an example of projection! Such subjects are “dry” because they do not arouse us; putting it another way, they leave us cold, and therefore we do not desire intimate knowledge of them.

In esoteric gnosis and in ‘feminine’ gnosis, when we seek to know something, it is rather like falling in love—whether it is from the realm of the divine or of the world—we seek to become one with it. It is not that we become identical with it, but intimately

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<sup>8</sup>*Cf. thelema* (in the *Tabula Smaragdina*) as the will of the world.) See Appendix I of this paper for my English translation of the Latin text of the *Tabula Smaragdina*.

joined with it, so that we finally experience ourselves and that which we seek to know as participating in a single ontological condition. In each case we are enlarged, so to speak, by our knowledge of what was previously the "other"; in each case we become transformed by that knowledge; in each case, there is a change of being.<sup>9</sup> This is by no means unfamiliar territory, although it is not often discussed in a purportedly "scholarly" context. It is this that leads us into the area of Eros.

### **The Process of Gnosis**

It is clear that there are striking analogies between the process of a woman (or a man) consciously embarking on a way of being that will allow him/her to move beyond the dualistic categories that are the stock in trade of so-called normal existence and gnosis as described by Antoine Faivre. When commenting on the etymology of the word 'esotericism' Faivre notes that the meaning "refers to an 'interiorism'" that entails an individual entering or descending into him/herself while interacting with "a series of intermediaries" that "may be known as angels or spiritual entities" that help teach the workings of nature and the mysteries of the universe.<sup>10</sup> This is important. What he describes is a phenomenon; *i.e.*, gnosis, that has a dual character. There is the movement inward, into the interiority of the self, and given the nature of the self, this is infinite. In other words, the gnostic journey leads inward, and that inward extension is by definition infinite. Then there is the movement outward, with the help of these "intermediaries" to explore the nature and mysteries of the universe. This exterior movement is also infinite because the universe is infinite. We see that Faivre quite aptly describes how the path of gnosis goes far beyond what Gregory Bateson called "the boundaries of the skin."<sup>11</sup> The gnostic experiences the Divine neither within nor without but at a point of the subtle intersection of both.

Any conscious movement towards integration and wholeness—and this is precisely what 'feminine' gnosis is—requires us to abandon dualistic categories. It also means going deep inside the self to discover the Self, the great 'I', the one truly connected with all of humanity and with the universe, as opposed to the small 'I' that is identified with details: particular family history and upbringing, particular incidents, relationships. And it means embarking on a never-ending process of exploration and learning: about the nature of Nature and the nature of the universe itself.

One difference between the gnosis Faivre describes and 'feminine' gnosis is that I think it is important to designate it 'feminine' for the reasons I explain above for the sake of precision. Another difference is that I allow much more feeling to enter my writing than does he. In that respect, there is a self-reflective quality in my writing on the subject because I allow myself to be moved by the very thing I am describing. This is why I commented earlier that 'feminine' gnosis itself was the *modus operandi* I am using to write.

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<sup>9</sup> Voss, "Is There a 'Feminine' Gnosis?", *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> See Antoine Faivre's "Esotericism" in *Hidden Truths: Magic, Alchemy and the Occult*, edited by Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology* (Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts, England: Granada Publishing Limited, Paladin, 1973), p. ?

## Eros and Desire

On account of its characteristic encompassing movement with respect to the ‘object’ of study, ‘feminine’ gnosis can carry women (and men) beyond dichotomization. What does this mean exactly? Again, our answer inevitably leads us into the realm of desire, and from there, to Eros. This is all to the good because, given the nature of Eros, once we connect with it we immediately set in motion energy that functions to support what we are doing, rather than resist what we are doing.

In his *Symposium*, Plato credits Diotima herself with teaching that Eros is neither heavenly nor vulgar, but one of the intermediary spirits “halfway between god and man.” Such spirits

Are the envoys and interpreters that ply between heaven and earth, flying upward with our worship . . . and descending with the heavenly answers . . . since they are between the two estates they weld both sides together and merge them into one great whole. (my emphasis)<sup>12</sup>

Diotima understood Eros as something that did not belong exclusively to either heaven or earth, but was an intermediary force which “welds” the spheres together; similarly, the *Tabula Smaragdina* so beloved of the alchemists tells us that “the power of upper and lower are combined . . . neither one is complete without the other.”<sup>13</sup> Eros, then, is neither sacred nor profane and Eros is the enabling force of the universe. Thus, ‘feminine’ gnosis is by no means a term used to describe some new phenomena, but refers to a phenomenon that was part and parcel of an approach to life that was normal during an entire epoch of human history, but was gradually lost over the centuries.

When one embarks on the process of knowing something deeply, there is an immediate connection between oneself, the one seeking to know, and the object one seeks to know. This is by no means a trivial observation. The reason it is not trivial is because that connection signals the beginning of an ontological change: one begins to experience oneself as an entity separate from other entities; one begins to experience oneself as a part of a whole. This is indeed where desire comes in, and we find the same dynamics are at work whether we have undertaken to study a new subject or get to know a new person. A word of caution is in order here. In contemporary circles there has been talk of things being whole since the early nineteen sixties. I can remember being told to “flow with it,” to “go with the flow,” whenever some young man decided he wanted to have his way with me. Of course, this kind of talk constituted a cheap use of something that stems from an inarguably profound insight into the nature of everything, but then, I was young, relatively uneducated, and I remember that I used to feel guilty when I resisted. After all, even at that point in my life, I was already convinced that being at one with the universe was certainly a desideratum. You know, it has always seemed to me

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<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Symposium* 202e, trans. by Michael Joyce. in *Plato, Complete Works*, edited, with Introduction and Notes by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> “*Tabula Smaragdina*,” trans. by Karen Voss. See “The Presence of the *Tabula Smaragdina* in the *Musaeum Hermeticum*,” paper presented at the American Academy of Region, Western Region conference, San Jose State University, March 25, 1988.

that Giordano Bruno was on to something, and this was as recently as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For Bruno, not unlike many of us today, the cosmos was conceived in materialistic terms, yet unlike many of us, for him it was nonetheless thoroughly divinized, magical, and alive. In Bruno's universe everything is not the same as everything else; there is a qualitative difference between the One and the Many, and between each of the Many. But withal that universe constitutes a seamless whole, a continuum ranging from absolute Unity, pure being—in which act and potency are one—to the plethora of its manifestations.<sup>14</sup>

Bruno's understanding of what it means for the universe to be whole was one thing. The contemporary conversation about wholeness has, for the most part, always been subject to one fatal flaw: it almost invariably leads to our accepting a form of relativism that is as mistaken as it is cheap. You see, to experience oneself as being part of a whole does not entail thinking of oneself as but one drop of water in a vast, undifferentiated sea: rather, it requires thinking of oneself as an utterly unique entity, like a star, or a snowflake, inextricably linked to, an indispensable part of, an infinite whole. That whole, of course, is the cosmos.

The process of being drawn to something and having a response from the thing to which one is drawn is indeed Erotic, in Diotima's sense of the term, and it has an ontological effect. I remember, for example, when I was an undergraduate and the professor in my anthropology class introduced what was for me then a totally new concept—that of the spectrum. He went through an unpacking of the idea and its implications, and I was sitting on the edge of my seat, alert, almost literally drinking in everything he said. I saw the possibilities, and left the class that day in a kind of daze, walking around the campus until I found a quiet patch of grass under a tree where I could just sit and think. I was stunned, and my head was churning, considering the implications of what he had said. Later, in grad school, I remember how I woke up one day resolved to finally finish the comp exams that had been hanging over my head for far too long, and embarked on a period that lasted two, maybe three months. I still had a young family, I was teaching part time and taking care of the house and children, but every evening, after making dinner for the family and washing up, I would go to the university office where I would immerse myself in Proclus and Plotinus, Giordano Bruno and Marsilio Ficino, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Bingen, and write, printout, read, rewrite, and printout again. I would leave campus at three or four in the morning and walk from the office to my car. I still remember the rich smell of magnolia trees, and the warm air wrapping around me. Arriving home, I would take my clothes off, cast them on a chair, and throw myself into bed to sleep for a few hours, and then rise, wash, dress, gulp down a cup of coffee, get the kids off to school, and go back to the campus to teach classes. “You guys,” I might say, walking inside the classroom where my undergraduate students of religious studies were waiting, “you will not believe what I found out last night about X. It is totally connected with what we were discussing the other day,” and then I would launch into an explanation tying our current subject of discussion into what I had contemplated in the middle of the night before. What I was doing was to allow my students into my thought process.<sup>15</sup> And for that entire period, I

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<sup>14</sup> Giordano Bruno, *Cause, Principle, and Unity*, translated and introduced by Jack Lindsay (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1962), p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> In fact, this is something that I still do with students, and I find it to be one of the most effective teaching “methods.” It also leads to a genuine, mutually respectful relation with one's students.



was stoned, high. There is really no other way to express it. I was drunk on ideas. I finished the papers, and one of the professors who sat on my committee told me, after my reading them, that he saw they had all been written in a kind of “white heat.”

This is what the scholarly life should be. Unfortunately, however, there is a lot less life in the contemporary academy than there was in Plato's. To be sure, we are all capable of embarking on a form of study that is purportedly objective, but this can hardly be called ‘gnosis.’ Now we have the tyrannical phenomenon of ‘publish or perish.’ We have various posturing at usually masturbatory conferences to show how very clever we are. We have department meetings where the main topic on the table is often how to increase the numbers of students in classes, rather than how to enrich curriculum. I recall that when I was in grad school, a fellow student remarked: “You know, once you actually get through grad school, you’ll lose that enthusiasm of yours. It’ll be drummed out of you,” he said. “Never,” I responded. Turns out I was right and he was wrong. I have never lost my enthusiasm. I still periodically get drunk on ideas. There are still times when I walk into classrooms excited, brimming over with enthusiasm, wanting to share my thought processes with my students, and show them how I arrived at the state I am in over a particular living idea. At present, though, as a friend of mine commented recently, “on the whole, academia gives the people a cheap hamburger, and a bottle of brown fizzy water.” For almost thirty years now, I have been trying to remedy that.

This is all well and good, and perhaps also interesting, but to return to the idea that ‘feminine’ gnosis can carry us beyond conceptual dichotomization, the way in which this happens is quite simple. It is that in the process of reaching out to the object of knowledge/desire, we enter into that object and it simultaneously enters into us. And it is at this point that the dichotomy between subject and object dissolves. It is at this point that subject/object become one. The dichotomy we perceive between subject and object is only ever conceptual, not ontological. To return to the point I made earlier, it is important to realize that in spite of their union, both the subject and the object are distinguishable one from the other. Each becomes but a facet of a whole. To my mind, this is incredibly important. We are talking about a union in which each element is able to retain his/her character. It is a union, yes, but each element in the union remains him/her Self.

### **Desire, Sexuality and the Divine**

Why did I choose to use the word ‘unholy’ in the title? I used it simply because the common view is that desire and sexuality do not go together with the divine. However, when desire is assimilated to Eros sexuality then becomes a vehicle for the manifestation of the Divine.

In the history of religions, the term *hieros gamos*, (sacred marriage) refers to the union between two divinities, or between a human being and a goddess, or between two human beings. When it takes the latter form, it is often accompanied by a belief that the human partner becomes divine by virtue of participation in the union.<sup>16</sup> According to Samuel Noah Kramer, the *hieros gamos* rite in Mesopotamian religion and appears to

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<sup>16</sup> Kees W. Bolle, “Hieros Gamos,” in Mircea Eliade, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, VI, (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 317-321.

have persisted from around the third millennium b.c.e. until at least 500 b.c.e.<sup>17</sup> The rite may well be much older. Nancy Qualls-Corbett points out that there is mention of sacred prostitution in the epic of Gilgamesh, which is from about 7000 b.c.e., but may have preceded from a much earlier oral tradition.<sup>18</sup> Going further, many scholars specializing in ancient Near Eastern studies now agree that Sumerian literature was a significant influence throughout the ancient world. When I first became familiar with the translation of the love songs of Inanna and Dumuzi (in which the juxtaposition of Eros with the divine is explicit and non-problematic) I immediately noticed their resemblance to the Song of Songs and soon learned that there is a basis for their similarity. In an article devoted to the Sumerian myth of Inanna and Dumuzi and its influences, Samuel Noah Kramer explains that the Sumerian form of writing was a *lingua franca* of the ancient world, and its use necessitated the acquisition of a solid knowledge of Sumerian literature. Sometimes Sumerian scholars went to other lands in order to teach, sometimes foreign visitors came to study in Sumer—the effect was the same and Sumerian culture and literature was widely disseminated.<sup>19</sup> According to Kramer's theory, one of the people thus influenced were the Palestinians. If his theory is correct, its significance for the present discussion cannot be overestimated because it means that the culture that produced the Song of Songs was directly influenced by the culture that produced the love songs of Inanna and Dumuzi. This song, together with others, was part of public religious ceremonies celebrated at the time of the New Year in which the primary ritual—intended to insure the success of the coming year and also to help legitimate the political power of the king—was the *hieros gamos*.

From Kramer's translation of a text of ancient Sumer about Inanna, the goddess of love and Dumuzi, the shepherd king who was joined to Inanna in the *hieros gamos*, comes the following:

The king goes with lifted head to the holy lap,  
He goes with lifted head to the holy lap of Inanna,  
The king coming with lifted head,  
Coming to my queen with lifted head . . .  
Embraces the Hierodule . . .<sup>20</sup>

The connection between the *hieros gamos* and the Song of Songs may well be traceable to Solomon's devotion to the goddess Astarte whose worship entailed the ritual of the *hieros gamos*. Kramer explains that the "Canaanite rite itself had Mesopotamian roots" and that it goes back to the Tammuz-Ishtar cult, which it turned into a Semitic-Akkadian counterpart of the Sumerian Dumuzi--Inanna cult. Moreover, he continues, "a considerable amount of the amount of the Sumerian literary material has come to light

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Qualls-Corbett, *The Sacred Prostitute: Eternal Aspect of the Feminine* (Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Kramer, "Cuneiform Studies and the History of Literature: the Sumerian Sacred Marriage Texts," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 107 (1963), p. 487.

<sup>20</sup> Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, *op. cit.*, p. 83. The word 'hierodule' literally means 'sacred servant.' See Qualls-Corbett, *op. cit.*, n. 9, p. 25.

which tends to confirm the thesis that at least some of the songs in the book of Canticles reflect Sumerian origins.”<sup>21</sup>

Although it is not generally acknowledged, the *hieros gamos* is a phenomenon that is manifested (albeit in veiled form) in each of the three major western religious traditions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide detailed examples from all three, but I do want to touch on some illustrative material.

To begin with, the inclusion of the apparently anomalous text of the Song of Songs in the scriptural canon of both Judaism and Christianity has been the topic of heated contention, as well as learned commentary over the centuries. Marvin Pope has compiled an excellent study of this controversial text. His book contains a translation with copious notes, several indexes, and three bibliographies—including one which lists pre-1800 work on the Song of Songs and another covering the period from 1800 to the present. Also included in this work is a well-documented consideration of issues related to the dating of the text as well as an exceptionally valuable discussion of the whole range of treatments that the Song of Songs has received at the hands of various interpreters (which include literary analysts, historians of religions, theologians and religious thinkers of every conceivable persuasion). After this thorough survey, Pope sets forth his views about the origin of certain aspects of the Song of Songs, showing how they are linked to ancient funeral observances that commemorate death by celebrating life in the fury of orgiastic activities.<sup>22</sup> He concludes by observing that the line between the Song of Songs and the funeral feasts is an indication of “the deepest and most constant human concern for Life and Love in the ever present face of Death and demonstrates belief in “the power and persistence of Life and Love.”<sup>23</sup> Pope's words serve as a reminder that love, sex and death form a complete web of interconnections within human experience. While these funeral celebrations include behaviors that may shock modern sensibilities, they are indications that love, sex, and death and even divinity have always formed a complex web of interconnections within human experience. It is not my intention to articulate those interconnections, but only to point out that there is evidence in the funeral feasts in Mesopotamia as well as some Christian mystical writing. While it is quite obvious that the form of their expression and the emphases change, an exciting direction for future study would be to determine the nature and extent of the relationship.

Hadewijch of Bingen is but one of many western mystics who found inspiration in the Song of Songs,<sup>24</sup> but none could have been aware of the connection between the Sumerian tradition and the Song of Songs. Moreover, we can find thematic resemblance between the ancient Near Eastern material and material which is apparently their own. One of the most striking examples comes from one of Hadewijch's letters, entitled “He in Me and I in Him,” where we read:

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<sup>21</sup> Kramer, *ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>22</sup> Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1977), pp. 210-229.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>24</sup> Others are Mechthild of Magdeburg and Bernard of Clairvaux, to name but two.

With what wondrous sweetness the loved one and the Beloved dwelt in the other, and how they penetrated each other in such a way that neither one of the two distinguished himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition—mouth to mouth, heart to heart, body in body, and soul in soul.<sup>25</sup>

Lo and behold, from the "Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi" comes the following:

Inanna spread the bridal sheet across the bed. She called to the king: "The bed is ready. The bed is waiting!" He put his hand in her hand. He put his hand (heart?) in her heart. Sweet is the sleep of hand-to-hand. Sweeter still the sleep of heart-to-heart.<sup>26</sup>

How can we account for this similarity? I think that the only possible explanation is that in their experience of divinity, Hadewijch was unwittingly repeating an idea almost as old as humanity. The belief that human beings could participate in the sacred through sexual union, through the body, is exceedingly ancient and apparently widespread. It is a belief that has arisen at various times and in various places, among disparate peoples who lacked the dubious vantage point derived from studying the history of religions. The *hieros gamos* was an important element in a religious mentality that began over a thousand years ago, the central rite in a tradition that was itself the context within which Judaism arose, which in turn has been understood as the context for the development of Christianity. And although the *hieros gamos* did not find its way into the official teachings of Christianity, and its presence was not doctrinally correct, it nevertheless, as I have attempted to demonstrate, was there.

The *hieros gamos* is only one form in which we find the erotic impulse combined with the religious impulse. These two impulses have been, and continue to be, entwined from the beginning of human experience. Each of them involves ecstasy; that is, a transformative movement that moves us out of ordinary experience, into the realm of the extraordinary, the sacred—yet neither one entails a complete severance from that tie which binds us to ordinary life.<sup>27</sup> The appearance of the *hieros gamos* theme and the presence of Eros in love mysticism in the medieval period are therefore not anomalous. What is remarkable is not that these ideas persist. The really noteworthy fact is that their presence has been consistently distorted, suppressed, or even denied throughout Western Christendom.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of a work like this could take many forms. It could suggest areas for future research. It could sum up the material that has been set forth and argue that a particular conclusion is called for. Or, it could ask and attempt to answer the question

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<sup>25</sup> *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans., with an introduction by Mother Columbia Hart, O.S.B, and a preface by Paul Moomaers (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (London: Rider, 1983), pp. 42-43.

<sup>27</sup> See Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 7.

“So what?” And, unfashionable—even, unscholarly—though this may be, I intend to do precisely that.

So what? What possible difference can what I have said here make? Of what possible import and significance can it be?

I think this. I think that if each of us really makes an effort to embark on a process of connecting with ‘feminine’ gnosis that this will go a long way toward healing the wound that festers at the heart of 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity. That wound is now so grave that I cannot in all good conscience use the word ‘should.’ I have to use the word ‘must.’ It is imperative for ourselves and for the sake of the planet that we take seriously the fact that Reality is dynamic, multivalent and multi leveled—and contemporary physics tells us that this is so—in order not to fall into the trap of treating conceptual dichotomizations as if they had an ontological base. That we remember to honor the relationship between our Selves and the universe so that our actions will inevitably acquire a different character than would otherwise be the case. That we remember that there is nothing unholy about combining desire, sexuality and the divine for these are in fact fundamentally linked. And ultimately, that we remember to celebrate our humanness we will find that by virtue of it we can render our entire life a *hieros gamos* by virtue of the fact that each and every thing that we do—no matter how small, no matter how subtle—will function as an angelic intermediary that will take us closer to *what is*.

I also think that what I have said we must do will not be easy. I realize that we are most of us, perhaps all of us, in deep pain from something that has caused us terrible suffering. I realize that many of us are afraid even to try. After all, we are no longer children, but adult. We must be reasonable. Has what I have said here been within the realm of the possible, or is it idealistic impossibility? To quote Basarab Nicolescu, “All the interest of our life is to render possible the impossible. For the rest, Life is in charge.”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, I think, we can but try.

12 June 2005  
Helensburgh, Scotland

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<sup>28</sup> Translated from the original French: “*Tout l’intérêt de notre vie est de rendre possible l’impossible. Pour le reste, la vie s’en charge.*” Preface to Gaspard Hons, *L’Impossible* (Paris, France, Babel Éditeur, 1994).