# 7

# Sainthood or Heresy: Contemporary Options for Women

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Sainthood, sanctity, holiness – these words have something of an archaic ring to contemporary ears. Yet, when asked to provide an illustration of sainthood, many would unhesitatingly name Mother Teresa as an exemplar of sainthood because of her self-abnegation in the service of less fortunate humanity. As such, she is an easily recognisable figure. But what does she actually represent – a figure of inspiration and imitation, an alter-ego from another era to which we look back with nostalgia, or merely a projected personification of ideal womanhood and selflessness with whom contemporary feminists, because of this very selflessness, have some difficulty identifying?

It is perhaps because of such inflated idealisations of womanhood that the notion of sainthood is problematic for many present-day women, not necessarily because of the actual ideals involved, but because certain accompanying virtues (e.g., humility and patience) are extolled to the point of caricature, and then imposed or expected of women. So while this re-evaluation should not be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of Mother Teresa, it is indicative that many women today (myself included) are seeking other avenues of expression and involvement than

those traditionally associated with their sex. For many women, it is a time of energy, passion and dedication to causes that seek to promote women's welfare, a time to gain parity with men in professional and social structures (including those of religion) and to eliminate discriminatory practices. Much ground has been gained, but much more needs to be done in areas where archaic attitudes still prevail.

Needless to say, religion is not to be found in the vanguard of reform. This has much to do with the fact that women have been regarded, for diverse reasons in different eras, as second-class citizens within the Western tradition. Maligned or idealised, the figure of woman, specifically in Christianity, has been regarded as inferior to the male. The culprits are many: Platonic dualism, Aristotelian biology, the androcentric theology of Aquinas – the list is long. The old red herring, the fact that Christ was a male, is still being invoked by some of the religious hierarchy as a basis for exclusionary procedures. Is it any wonder that women are losing patience with the formulas of femininity that accompany such prejudices, allied as they are with simplistic stereotypes of women's place, role, and condition?

## Changing the Frame

As women begin to reflect on conventional formulations of a philosophical and theological nature, they bring a new perspective to unilateral definitions. For example, the reconceptualisation of sin in recent religious literature written by women is quite extraordinary. In her book, *From a Broken Web*, Catherine Keller recalls some of the women writers who first brought the anomaly of women and the notion of sin as *hubris* to our attention:

> Theologians Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow and Sue Dunfee demonstrate how the traditional notions of sin as pride and self-assertion serve to reinforce the subordination of women whose temptations *as* women lie in the realm of "underdevelopment or negation of the self" (1989:12).

Anne Carr, in her book *Transforming Grace*, enlarges on this observation:

> Women's temptation or "sin," conversely, relates to *lack* of self-assertion in relation to cultural and familial expectations, failure to assume responsibility and make choices for themselves, failure to discover their own personhood and uniqueness rather than finding their whole meaning in the too-easy sacrifice of self for others (1989:8-9).

Wendy Wright also alludes to this revised notion of women's sins in the book, *The Feminist Mystic:*

> These sins relate to the underdevelopment of self and are described as the lack of an organizing center or focus, dependence on others for one's self-definition, triviality, distractability and diffuseness. These sinful dispositions appear to be caricatures of a feminine receptivity that has degenerated into an unconscious passivity. They are the feminine lulled into weakness or aimlessness, having failed to realize its possible strength (1986:109).

Such a reversal of interpretation should not be construed in a simplistic fashion as it inevitably gives rise to complex issues in the areas of philosophical anthropology and theology. But these questions are not the focus of this investigation. For an even more pressing problem arises with regards to the notion of identity regarding women. In place of such revised assumptions of sin and virtue, what are to be the new ideals to which women aspire? Should they, as Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex*, simply reject their traditional oppression and with it all that has designated femininity as immanent, including motherhood, so as to imitate those qualities formerly regarded as the prerogative of male independence? De Beauvoir's view reflected her belief that women are not born with any essential characteristics, but are indoctrinated, i.e., enculturated into the compliant creatures that society wishes them to be. Her liberal and modernist assumptions are shared by those who agitate for women's rights as well as for equal access to the public domain. In this sphere, the admired qualities of assurance, confidence, autonomy and control are now considered appropriate for women.

There are other women, however, who are not particularly happy with this scheme of things, believing that women are simply aping men. In order to re-right the balance, they strive to affirm that traditionally assigned female dispositions have equal parity with male criteria. The works of Sara Ruddick (1989) and Nel Noddings (1984) are indicative of this approach. Such a re-evaluation is necessary and long overdue. The problem with this contention is, of course, that the patriarchal superstructure is so entrenched, that women will make little headway if they adopt only these tactics. They could inevitably remain identified with the maternal function, or simply re-enact a revamped version of their usual subordinated status as nurturer. As a result, they will continue the role of emotional caregiver and bear the psychological burden for an inflexible male-identified model of humanity that regards feeling as inferior.

Both of the above approaches could be considered as necessary facets of a multidimensional model that reforms received notions of women and feminity. Neither of these options, however, indicates any distinctive or novel way that woman might be described as having come into her own. Perhaps the desire for such a vision, however, is nothing but that – an impossible dream of a bright new dawn, where women's "true"

experience can be expressed, untrammelled by cultural predispositions. In this vein, there are women who believe that such a scenario is possible and that we can reappropriate a once and glorious past when god was a woman, and when feminine qualities prevailed (Spretnak 1984; Stone 1976; Hurtado 1990). Unfortunately, such vistas of golden pasts and utopian futures, while they may bring psychological consolation, do not necessarily alleviate present injustices. Their well-intentioned idealism can also be escapist, rather than dealing as honestly as possible with the nitty-gritty details of the conscious and not-so-conscious oppression and omissions regarding women that still operate in our culture. In the face of such opposition, how is a woman to act for change, how can she define herself, and, ultimately, what could be the standards or models by which she might gauge her worth? Unfortunately, there seems to be a dearth of role models. The question as to whether a recycled notion of sainthood is appropriate is an intriguing one. What sort of figures should women invoke, if any? It is this area that I wish to explore with specific reference to the role of religion.

## The Postmodern Challenge

The postmodern challenge has put many of the cherished assumptions of our intellectual heritage into question. Specifically, it places the conditions of possibility of western metaphysics under a microscope, and all assured absolutes such as Truth, or notions of Self and of Being, come under scrutiny. Deconstruction, a Nietzchean-inspired strategy that sustains Jacques Derrida's postmodern bag of tricks, endeavours to illustrate the contingency of all our certainties and the inherent ambiguity of our cherished assumptions. It does this by the emphasis on *différance*, on multiplicity, instead of identity and unity (1982:3-27). Though unfortunately such interventions have been taken to a nihilistic extreme by some adherents who interpret deconstruction as destructive of any stable meanings, its basic intent is to liberate us from static preconceptions. Yet, in fact, as Derrida has observed, such deployments do not ever free us from metaphysics; for every interplay is parasitic on previous constructions and remains within the realm of metaphysics (1982:26). Thus qualified, Derrida's manoeuvres can have a salutary effect. For we need to recognise our circumscribed condition and, by employing such a critical device, our hackneyed versions of intellectual and cultural conventions that masquerade as timeless truths can be infused with new life.

It is for this reason that many feminists are attracted by a postmodern approach, recognising in its suspicious attitude a similar orientation to their own. While not pursuing an identical agenda, feminists detect an affinity in the doubts that postmodernism raises about the presump-

tions of authority and autonomy inherent in the Western Enlightenment, as well as in the classical tradition (Hekman 1990:189). There are other feminists, however, who are equally suspicious that by aligning themselves with postmodernism, feminists are inevitably depriving themselves of any constructive stance on which to build productive and desperately needed positive images of woman – let alone a base for political activity (Benhabib 1992:228-230). From this latter perspective, postmodernism is viewed as merely reactive, even reactionary, and feminists, in so identifying themselves, could become caught not just in interminable counterchecking movements, but once again become co-opted by the currently fashionable male intellectual model.

How can women escape these dilemmas, if they are to arrive at positions they can claim authentically as their own? I am not so pessimistic as to assert that no negotiations with contemporary culture can be undertaken, though I do not believe that the way out is easy. Women will continue to act, to dream, to work for change in diverse ways, and it is out of this combined effort, both theoretical and practical, that I believe new visions may be embraced and old ones discarded. Such an exploration will inevitably take place in cultural and intellectual settings that are already compromised. Yet, it is the awareness of this precarious position, and of the ability to name the competing forces, that constitutes for me the strength of feminism. As women become the agents of their own destiny (for surely this is what it is all about), it is their responsibility to recognise and name, both in themselves and in others, the impediments to this task. Unflinching honesty is perhaps the term I am looking for – an unflinching honesty – informed by an almost scrupulous self-reflection, that does not hesitate to name abuse of any variety, in any context. The type of self or identity that will emerge from these encounters will be constantly reformulated by changes that result from engagements with unjust social structures. Thus any self or identity so derived will be provisional, i.e., open to further critique and revision. For it is a self of relentless integrity, who further disturbs the peace of any simplistic solutions. To this extent, women can employ postmodern procedures of disturbance without necessarily adopting a deconstructive programme of a more negative variety. In this connection, it is the work of Foucault (and his advocacy of local struggles), rather than Derrida,[1] that perhaps has more productive implications for feminist contestation (Diamond and Quimby 1988; Sawicki 1991).

Against this backdrop of a double-sided agenda – a combination of critique and construct – I would like to undertake a revision of the parameters of sainthood and its applicability today. To this end, I will examine some models that have recently been proposed by two women theorists

– Edith Wyschogrod and Luce Irigaray. Both women elaborate positions that could function as prototypes for new models of womanhood. They may not emphasise honesty as their main criterion, but to undertake the type of disruptive tactics they endorse presupposes equal doses of courage and self-reflection, which amounts to the same thing. Both of these women situate themselves within a postmodern ethos, which they adapt according to their own desired ends. Their use of postmodern procedures assumes a constructive mode and is not simply a reactive type of criticism. Their work thus cannot be classified as simply a mirror of male speculations.

What both these women thinkers now appreciate is that the universality that constitutes the lineage of the Enlightenment, (whether its reference point be reason, liberty, tolerance, progress, or "fraternity") is now obsolete. There is an awareness that the call to justice and reason did not work because, implicit within its structures, is an apparent opposition between subject and object, between self and other. This difference has all too often degenerated into binary positions of superiority and inferiority, of the haves and have nots, of the bearers of wisdom and the ignorant herd. Inevitably women have been relegated to the lesser category and to the status of perpetual outsider.

Postmodernism could thus be further characterised as an attitude that sees through the artificiality of these antithetical postures, yet which realises an irrevocable entanglement with them. As a result, postmodernism can be construed as providing a system of knowledge that acknowledges the complexities and contradictions that result when, in trying to free oneself from such absolutist and elitist posturings, one ineluctably tends to repeat the same configurations. A conscious postmodern position would be one that, realising the unavoidable nature of this conundrum, still endeavours to change the given formations without becoming cynical, and without indulging in reverse discrimination. At the same time, a critical awareness needs to be maintained of the extent to which every new position is inextricably related to the forms and structures that are being contested (Ferguson 1993:87-88).

This complicitous critique involves being prepared to tackle the injustices involved in any system, while at the same time admitting to one's own blind-spots that lead one to perpetrate the same constructs of identity/difference or other unequal dichotomies. One way that mainstream feminists have been wakened to this tendency in themselves is by the various claims of women of colour, of lesbian and lower-class women, as well as of indigenous women and immigrants from other language groups. These women state that they have felt excluded from white, middle-class heterosexual definitions of feminism (Gunew and

Mahyuddin 1988; hooks 1988; Buldin *et al.* 1988; Stasiulis 1990:269-305). What such awakenings would seem to insist on is that, even in feminism's most fervent involvements in reform, honesty requires an admission of the doubt, ignorance and self-deception that can infest our "finest" moments. The claims of the other, insofar as we remain in ignorance of them, will undermine our seemingly most enlightened practices and pronouncements.

Given these qualifications, how are women to contest and change their status as excluded or as subordinate to the one, the absolute, the same (represented by the male) while guarding against similar exclusions themselves. The problem is that such dualistic composition and subsequent consignment to the status of otherness seems endemic to Western thinking and practice. It would thus seem timely to examine more closely the way in which Wyschogrod and Irigaray have treated this problem of the other and its restructuration.

## Saint or Deviant

Edith Wyschogrod, in her book *Saints and Postmodernism*, suggests an interesting postmodern paradigm for sainthood. As such

> [saints'] lives unfold in tension with institutional frameworks that may nevertheless later absorb them. Not only do saints contest the practices and beliefs of institutions, but in a more subtle way they contest the order of narrativity itself (1990:xxiii).

One can indeed think of many saints who have in their lifetimes literally been a thorn in the side of the system. Often they walked a fine line between orthodoxy and heresy – and many paid for it with their lives, only, in a later, less polemically charged era, to be admitted into the ranks of the approved, e.g., Joan of Arc. Perhaps indeed the majority of saints have always existed on the margins, far from the corridors of power, and have exercised a lack of concern for the proprieties. They have often associated with the outcast, the impoverished, the sick or the rejects of diverse stripes and colours. Perhaps they are best characterised by their total disregard of the ideologically pure or of the party line. Very few, if any, had the ambition of becoming a saint in the sense of pursuing a correct career track or exhibiting the appropriate virtues so that they would ultimately attain the approval of the power brokers. This very aspect of nonconformity or contentiousness leads Wyschogrod to compare a saint's activities to those of postmodernism. That is, they both disrupt or confound existing standards, and they interrupt customary expectations by their excessive conduct. Such activity, in an ideal scenario, can lead to re-evaluation, renegotiation of conventional forms.

In this way, it could be said that saints, like postmodernists, never let us settle for the status quo. Instead, all traditions and justifications are put into question. As such, contemporary saints (particularly women) could be regarded as those who no longer settle for the legitimation of conventional practices by outdated appeals to nothing better than habit. Indeed, feminist activism can be seen as a form of saintliness. And thus the refractory conduct of contemporary women marks a revision of the tradional concept of sainthood.

But there is another dimension of Wyschogrod's depiction of sanctity with reference to otherness that needs qualification. Wyschogrod has been influenced by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. And her further elaboration of a saint's demeanour implies the virtual extinction of self-interest by way of responsibility for the other. A postmodern saintliness then is also depicted as an extravagant gesture of self-denial toward another human being. It is "the expression of excessive desire, a desire on behalf of others that seeks the cessation of another's suffering and the birth of another's joy" (1990:xxiv).

This is very sensitive terrain for a "re-visionary" feminist to negotiate, and perhaps a preliminary survey of Levinas' ideas is in order. Levinas' description and elucidation of Otherness is written in elusive prose, inspired by Jewish Biblical and Talmudic thought (1981; 1985). Levinas' aim is to move beyond the constraints of Western dualism that has permeated Christian ethics, where the other is invariably regarded as a mirror-image, and where most altruistic ethics have operated according to a principle of benign self-interest. Levinas seeks to overcome this system of totality (i.e., one that is enclosed, finite, self-sufficient with inevitable repercussions of power and domination) with an infinite one that predates Greek and Christian systems. This infinity is open-ended and boundless in that it precedes all dualistic conceptualisations. It is grounded in a God whom we cannot name, and who surpasses all expectations, needs or stipulations, even those of an ontological variety. God is the ultimately Other (*l'Autre*) who will always put us into question.

The absence of this God, however, becomes for Levinas the basis of a radical form of ethics. The primordial ethical imperative, which precedes any reflective ontology, allows that God or, more specifically, the trace of this absent God, can be discerned only in the face of another human being (1986:345-359). That is, since we can never have a face-to-face relation with God, this relationship is incorporated in the face-to-face encounter with another person. God is thus never revealed directly, but may be witnessed to by our relation to the face of the other. This face, as symbol of the person, is for Levinas the locus of the trace of God. And it is this face of the other that elicits from me a response whereby I will always defer to his or her needs and claims.

And it is here that the nuances must be very meticulously observed by women. The fact that it is the other who has ethical precedence over my own desires does have important resonances for women. In one sense, where it is the other who will always put me into question, there are no immediate problems. In this context, the other functions in a postmodern guise of always challenging my own cherished assumptions in a manner similar to a saint in society at large. In this guise, both women and men can serve as interruptions of each other's self-complacency. But it is in the articulation of the appropriate disposition towards the other that a difficulty arises. Influenced by Levinas, Wyschogrod portrays a saintly life witnessing to two types of negation: 1) the negation of self, and 2) the inherent destitution of humanity manifested by another's need (1990:xxiii).[2] In view of this, contemporary women, trying to articulate what it could mean to have a self, and trying to learn what it might be to no longer exist solely in terms of others' demands, rightfully pause with concern. They are probably justified in doing so, because, in Levinas' work, one of the principal examples of this openness to the other is motherhood. Again, as with Mother Teresa, such a model is not rejected outright, and I do not wish to be misinterpreted on this issue. It is just that many women no longer want to be only and totally identified with the traits of motherhood or self-sacrifice. A distinction is thus in order. I do believe that Levinas' program of deference to the other is an eminently suitable corrective for those prevailing attitudes towards women as object which have resulted either in their totalised effacement or their idealisation in terms of superhuman perfection. From this perspective, Wyschogrod's proposals for contemporary sainthood do have salutary recommendations for the reform of aspects of male conduct. Yet, at the same time, they give rise to debatable implications for the conduct of women. It would seem, given the delicacy of the issue that, at this time, any generalised evocation of sainthood as self-annihilation for women is anachronistic and suspect. And I must admit that I do find it surprising that Wyschogrod does not perceive this discrepancy (citing only traditional exemplars of female sanctity), and does not observe that contemporary men and women could have very different agendas regarding sainthood.

## Invoking the Divine

Perhaps the implications of radical alterity or otherness, as evoked by Levinas, have been explored with greater subtlety, if elusiveness, in the work of the French thinker, Luce Irigaray. In her early work, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray attempted to undermine Western thought's façade of neutrality and objectivity (1985). In Irigaray's view, this tradi-

tion had suppressed or repressed women's experiences from its male-focused proceedings of a philosophical or theological nature. By situating women's otherness or difference as external to such a monolithic construction, Irigaray calls it into account. Her tactics are wayward and elliptical, her language graphic and poetic, as she seeks to dislodge the alleged patriarchal monopoly by postmodern ploys of *différance* that cannot be absorbed into more of the same. Irigaray's intention then is not to subscribe to the paradigm of the one and the many, where every difference is but one more variation on the theme of the same. Instead, inspired by Levinas, as well as by Derrida, she wants to establish a notion of radical plurality, prior to any dualist divisions. But she does not adopt the work of either Levinas or Derrida uncritically.

Where Irigaray surpasses both Levinas and Wyschogrod is in her attempt to establish a distinct place for women that is not limited by conventional restrictions. This may be merely a provisional strategy, or perhaps it may turn out to be a necessary and permanent move, but Irigaray believes that, if women do not come into their own and claim their identity, not only will others (men) continue to define it for them, but also, and more importantly, genuine relationships between men and women will become impossible. To this end, Irigaray employs otherness or *différance* not just in the name of critique, but also to frame constructive relationships. And so it is that a preoccupation with creating genuinely equitable relationships suffuses her later work, specifically *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993a) and "Divine Women" (1993b).

It is here that Irigaray claims that it is not sainthood or sanctity that is a necessity for women today, but divinity itself. This divinity, however, is not to be confused with any anthromorphisms and reclamations of ancient goddesses. Irigaray's conception of divinity cannot be appreciated along customary lines.

> We women, sexed according to our gender, lack a God to share, a word to share and become. Defined as the often dark, even occult mother-substance of the word of men, we are in need of our *subject*, our *substantive*, our *word*, our *predicates*: our elementary sentence, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy (1993b:71).

This is no naive invocation of goddess worship, for her notion of God is suffused by an awareness – also influenced by Levinas' evocations of God as the unattainable, unnameable – of an Other whom we can never know and can never grasp by our human fumblings. While from Levinas' perspective, however, this God, in the aspect of the infinite Other, can only be realised in the originary ethic of relationship to another person, Irigaray has a distinctive interpretation. Even as she agrees that God is

the constant process of relationship, Irigaray will qualify this understanding of relationship, as situated within an infinite realm of possibility. This notion of possibility, however, needs to be understood within a postmodern ambience of non-prescriptive or unpredictable results. Traditional causal or teleological determinations are discarded. In Irigaray's design, if God is understood as a mode of becoming, then becoming god, or rather, divine, is the central task of women today.

This becoming divine is not idolatry, for it is not usurping a godly prerogative. Nor is it an apotheosis of a traditional kind, for God is no longer an entity. God is realised in a relationship as Levinas envisaged, but with an ingenious twist. Irigaray inserts a crucial and innovative step in her intimations of what is involved for women to achieve divinity. God can still be intimated by a relationship to the other, but not, as for Levinas, to the face of another person. For Irigaray, the other is constituted by the unknown dimensions of a woman's own existence, by those facets of herself with which she has never had a relationship. "[God is] an other that we have yet to make actual, as a region of life, strength, imagination, creation, which exists for us both within and beyond, as our possibility of a present and a future" (1993b:72). The primordial relationship for women today, Irigaray implies, is one of reclaiming the otherness within, of entering into relationship with the other of which we are absolutely in need. The other that claims us, and who, on Levinas' reading calls us forth, becomes not another human being, but those alienated parts of woman that have been repressed, rejected, abandoned, despised, and denigrated. To enter into a relationship with these dimensions of her being, is for Irigaray, to become divine. God then is the always unachievable pleroma of possibilities, the realisation of our unrestricted potentialities, the fullness and perfection of all our capacities. This God is at once the goal and process of this exploration. Thus, for Irigaray:

> Love of God has nothing moral in and of itself. It merely shows the way. It is the incentive for a more perfect becoming. It marks the horizon between the more past and the more future, the more passive and the more active – permanent and always in tension. God forces us to do nothing except *become*. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment (1993b:69).

This process must not be construed as narcissistic or self-indulgent, for it is only by so doing, by coming into one's own, that the authentic relationship Levinas posits as an ethical preparedness, as being there for the other without qualification, can be achieved. It is only then that

we can enter into relationships with others. For Irigaray, a relationship with one's self must first be established, otherwise women will remain the romantic fantasies or debased objects of men's desires and hatreds. "It is essential that we be God *for ouselves* so that we can be divine for the other, not idols, fetishes, symbols that have been already outlined or determined" (1993b:71). As already noted, however, this is not a God in woman's image, but a God who enters the process of becoming a woman. As Elizabeth Grosz observes: "Instead of seeing her as a fundamentalist, a `born again' Christo-feminist, a worshipper of the mother goddess, we need to see her concepts of God and the divine sociohistorically and in the context of philosophical texts."(1989:11).

It is also a necessary task to situate Irigaray's understanding of divinity within a philosophical or theological context, for it has distinct ontological resonances. Ontology, it must be remembered, in accordance with Levinas' designs, can arise only as a consequence of the initial ethical *fiat*. And for Levinas this derivative ontology will always be infinite and open-ended, in contrast to the definitive totalisations of most Western onto-theology. But this is where Irigaray demonstrates her eclecticism; because surprisingly, her ontology has a decidedly Christian and Christological (instead of Judaic) flavour. And it is here that Irigaray parts company with Levinas. Irigaray declares that God has been revealed. The fact that God has become a human being implies for Irigaray that humanity as a whole, and not just the male of the species, participates in the divine milieu. Indeed, God's becoming a human being has necessarily entailed the divinisation of humanity.

## An Heretical Imperative

The result is that no longer do we need idealised projections, such as sainthood, by which we aspire to emulate Christ and so incur God's approval. In Irigaray's view, we are already divine, even if we do not realise it. Such a position has certain reverberations. What becomes apparent as I read her exuberant and extravagant language depicting this divine dispensation, this unmerited inheritance, is that Irigaray is indulging, even basking, in an all-too-obvious heresy of the type for which women were burnt at the stake in times past.[3] And as I meditate on this development, I am struck by the fact that perhaps it is this heretical imperative, rather than ideas of sainthood or sanctity, that is a more apt aspiration for women today. This need not mean that women should be solely intent on overturning or simply reversing previous images of feminine decorum without regard to consequences (though in this regard I do feel that a healthy emphasis on the rehabilitation of the body and its functions would not go astray). But perhaps heresy is a more appropriate term

than sainthood or even divinity for the type of subversive contesting of standards that both Wyschogrod and Irigaray have been endorsing.

In the past, the term "heretic" referred to one who, while not deliberately flouting established rules, nonetheless strayed from a prescribed behaviour or mind-set in their quest for a new vision – often with disastrous consequences at the hands of the authorities so offended. Today, however, the terms of reference have changed. As far as feminists are concerned, there is no longer any final authoritative arbitrator of the rules. We have become aware that the male is no longer the measure of all things, despite a recent rearguard action on behalf of certain Freudians to reinstate the supremacy of the phallus as ultimate signifier.[4] In the place of the unwarranted presumption, if not arrogance, regarding a virtual universal male ascendency – it would seem that a deliberate and humorous indulgence in heretical experimentation would have an obvious appeal for women as a compensation for centuries of unremitting exclusion. For, despite Wyschogrod's revisions, sainthood may still too often bespeak pleasing daddy, whereas heresy, especially of a more deliberate variety, is an enticing invitation to err in the service of deviance and experimentation.

I would, however, like to add one proviso to this heretical agenda, for I believe that a subtle distinction needs to be made regarding Irigaray's recommendations for women's conduct. Her main preoccupation has been that of encouraging women to be able to envision themselves as divine, i.e., as the locus of their own power. This, for Irigaray is the source of their energy, the impetus for new life forms of relationship to self and others. As such, she has been interpreted as having no time for activities of a marked political nature whereby women attempt to gain equal status in existing power structures. If this latter task is undertaken dogmatically, Irigaray believes that it renders women clones of men in the service of equality. In a review of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's book, *In Memory of Her*, Irigaray criticises Schüssler Fiorenza's thesis as simply promoting women's identification with men in institutional structures.[5] Apart from Irigaray's literalist appraisal of Schüssler Fiorenza's model, I think that, in this instance, Irigaray dismisses too lightly the practical considerations that women must be prepared to undertake (Joy 1990:9-24). I believe that both critique and construct are necessary and each of these enterprises can be considered heretical. For both the sanctums of male power and the dualistic modalities of thought need to be questioned. A different strategy is required in each case. Unless women agitate for equal access to the power circles of established traditions – be it parliament, the courts, university, the church – they will remain second-class citizens. Women may not want to mimic the present behaviour of men in

these institutions, but unless they gain admittance therein, no change in what is essentially a male hegemony will be felt.

In a more recent work, *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, Irigaray herself articulates something very close to this program (1993c:81-99). Ultimately, however, she postulates that specific rights will also need to be recognised within the cultural structures and discourses to safeguard the special prerogatives of women (particularly with regard to their bodies). These will involve women's symbolic as well as social interests – their spiritual as well as social identities. Such an agenda prefigures a delicate and demanding reevaluation, even upheaval, of many assumptions we take for granted in the fields of law, politics, philosophy and theology, just as a beginning. Certain divisions will need careful renegotiation and articulation, most obviously those categories concerning figurative/actual, public/private, individual/communal, as well as the previously incontrovertible sex/gender distinction. This undertaking will keep many of us busy for a long time to come.

For the present, I would endorse Irigaray's recommendations in the light of a long-term strategy which would allow for two different but related activities. I believe there is need for this two-pronged or double-edged approach by women today. One aspect challenges the bulwarks of entrenched male privilege; the other challenges the mindset that permeates and consolidates these bastions. And perhaps the attitude most recommended for female saboteurs in both fields, heretics or not, is that of irony. The last thing that women should be concerned about today is obeying the rules. Getting it right all too often involves trying to prove that our minds and bodies can conform to the rules of initiation for admission to the establishment. I would advocate as a counter-measure the disposition of a happy heretic.[6] So instead of obeying the distortions of a mind/body dualism, of hypothetical transcendental deductions, of abstract laws dictating concrete non-contradictions, etc., women should indulge the forbidden delights of being the excluded middle, of committing illogical aberrations, of making category mistakes, of following those creative leaks of intuition that are generally branded by men as nonsense (or as evidence of women's incapacity for heavy-duty intellectual work). Of course, this is heresy, or sinning gloriously, or saint-hood, if you prefer. I realise that this exhortation could be regarded as something of a literalist reaction, or it could be said that I am indulging in unwarranted rhetorical gestures. I advocate this stance, nonetheless, mindful that it is a tactic that needs to be undertaken with as precise an awareness as possible of those indefinite boundaries between figurative and literal that have been manipulated in philosophy and theology to restrict women. With such an appreciation, women can confront all these

exclusionary formulas, not just because they have outlived their usefulness and have no resonance for women, but because they have been employed as the very standards which sustained the inhibition of women in many areas.

Finally, and this seems merely a corollary to what has preceded – I feel that women are sorely in need of new inspirational apostrophes. To replace the outworn platitudes of women as representations of sin, sexuality and irresistable temptation, or the old nostrums such as "Frailty, thou art women", or "Vanity thy name is woman", perhaps instead an invocation such as "Women, Thou art infinite possibility" would be more appropriate. For today, whether we claim to be a saint or a heretic, should we so choose, the future is ours to inherit.

## Notes

1 This is a debatable point; Cornell (1993) argues the merits of Derrida.

2 This type of negation is a distinctly postmodern variant of Hegel's notion of negativity. As such, it does not represent simply a form of (negative) differentiation from a primary positive position, but rather an originary and infinite lack that is endemic to the human condition. A saint can never eradicate or absorb this otherness, though her life manifests to an exemplary and inordinate degree the aspiration to assuage it.

3 Though not exactly compatible in all respects with the heresy for which Marguerite Porete was condemned and burnt at the stake in 1310, Luce Irigaray's claims do have certain similarities. Marguerite Porete spoke of reclaiming our original, uncreated being in God. She expressed this as "becoming what God is." To achieve this she postulated that one had to eliminate selfish and earthly attachments so that the soul could then exult in true freedom. Irigaray, who wishes to include the body also as part of the divinisation process, would possibly not be in agreement with this form of spiritual identification which is achieved at the expense of the body. The intriguing question regarding Marguerite Porete's designation as a heretic is whether she claimed she had achieved perfect identity with God while still in the body, i.e., whether her achievement occurred simply by nature or as a result of grace. See Lerner (1972).

4 I think here especially of the work of Lacan and his ubiquitous law of the father (1982).

5 See Schüssler Fiorenza's response to this evaluation (1992:128-129).

6 Perhaps a word of caution is in order here. I am not advocating an innocent or ignorant heresy. It is advisable in this day and age to have taken the measure of the tradition. The other model I have in mind is that of Socrates – both as gad-fly and midwife to new ideas. But it is well to remember what happened to Socrates.

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