

ON THEOLOGIANS AND THEORISTS

IRIGARAY AND THE ADVENT OF AN EPIPHANY

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Within recent French philosophical discussion of the divine, the work of Luce Irigaray stands out in that the category of the divine is central to her project. In her preface to *Sexes and Genealogies* Irigaray argues that 'God must be questioned, and not simply neutered in the current pseudo-liberal way. Religion as a social phenomenon cannot be ignored.'¹ This is because, for Irigaray, change within the political realm is predicated upon change within the symbolic. And the symbolic, at some level, always invokes the Other. The role of 'woman' as Other leads Irigaray to diagnose women's self-alienation to be a consequence of their lack of a God. Women must therefore imagine a feminine divine in order to fulfill their own becoming. This process of imagining is a constructive exercise, which raises the question which guides this paper: Is a God that we construct no more than a construction? What is the relation between our human expressions of the divine and the divine in itself?

It is my contention that such imaginative constructions can open a space for an excess, that is more than simply 'more of the same.' This position is, I believe, consistent with the positions of a number of contemporary Catholic theologians. Furthermore, I find that Irigaray's project has a precedent in the life of the Church itself. The issues involved are of course larger than the scope of a short paper. What I seek to establish are some family resemblances and the possibility of fruitful dialogue between the contemporary philosophical discussion of the divine - as exemplified by Irigaray - and recent Catholic theology.

Most contemporary discussion of the divine has as its context the question of the Other. It is the concern for otherness that I consider best characterises what we for the moment call postmodernity. In doing so I take my cue from David Klemm who in his essay 'Toward a Rhetoric of Post Modern Theology' argued that 'the challenge of understanding is no longer to reconstruct historical meanings or to address the crisis of history, but to uncover what is questionable in self and other, while opening self to other and allowing the other to remain other.'²

The question of the Other is the critical question of this post-colonial moment. Both God and other are linked to notions of transcendence where the other is invoked as a means of exceeding the totality of the one that is

'more of the same' and, therefore, exceeds representation. This may contribute to the difficulty scholars seem to have in defining the Other. However, the Other does seem to play a double role. Lacan and Levinas, for instance, both consider the other to be prior to, and constitutive of the subject, as well as the beyond of the subject, and the goal of desire.

IRIGARAY'S GOD

For Irigaray, the divine is the emblem of absolute otherness; the horizon of subjectivity and the ideal of perfection. Her divine is also the life between individuals, and the life beyond in that it is the condition of the possibility of becoming. Her work on the divine follows two critical movements corresponding to a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of retrieval or reconstruction. Her constructive discourse on the divine has a strong utopian, even eschatological dimension through which she seeks to envision a radically *different* future. It corresponds closely to Gerard Hall's description of the utopian function of both poetic and religious discourse in its potential to 'break-through the monotony of the mundane / and the pathology of evil that destroy the human capacity to be scandalized by the imaginative vision of a radically different future.'³ Religious discourse, according to this view, seeks to exceed and overcome that which is 'more of the same.' It is from this perspective that Irigaray seeks a new discourse that can 'save women'.

According to Irigaray, it is God that orients us beyond the given and towards infinity. God is the horizon of the becoming of the subject, not merely as an individual but amongst and between subjects. Irigaray's God is the interval and mediator, establishing both subject and society. 'If women have no God', Irigaray argues,

they are unable either to communicate or commune with one another. They need, we need, an infinite if they are to share *a little*. Otherwise sharing implies fusion-confusion, division, and dislocation within themselves, among themselves. If I am unable to form a relationship with some horizon of accomplishment for my gender, I am unable to share while protecting my becoming.⁴

However, it is one thing to talk of the function of the divine within the symbolic and cultural realm, but quite another to seek to change and shape the symbolic. There is no meta-language. We can only work from within. Perhaps it is likewise for God.

But regardless of what one may consider to be the orthodox doctrine on the matter, historically God has functioned as masculine, in relation to which 'woman' has been defined. Woman is other. Such a God it seems has been unable to save woman from the fallen state of her becoming which has resulted in the fragmented dissolution of the female subject. On this point Irigaray's diagnosis has resonances with a number of feminist theologians. Irigaray's God saves by inscribing limits and providing a place for women to dwell as well as defining a horizon for women's aspirations.⁵ What is required, Irigaray seems to suggest, is a God who can relate to what is other than God, without absorbing, and thus destroying the subject: a God who in traditional language is both transcendent and immanent; what Irigaray calls the 'sensible transcendental'; a God who is totally other, and yet bears some likeness to the subject, by which a relation can be established.

This is where the incarnation becomes absolutely fundamental for Irigaray. Spiritual and corporeal becoming are inseparable. Her transcendent is always rooted in the corporeal and the corporeal is always gendered. This seems to be where Irigaray's God differs most from that of Levinas. On Irigaray's reading, a God whose face does not in some way reflect that of the subject becomes a source of alienation.⁶ God cannot simply be other. God must be more than other.

The absolutely unrecognizable transcendent, on the other hand, confronts us as a forbidding void. To hear the invitation of the transcendent, we must recognize in the face of the absolute Other, something, if not ourselves, then at least not totally alien to us. The divine must be both in intimate relation to, and radically different from the subject. As Saint Augustine would have it, the divine must be both the source and the goal of desire.

RESPONSES

From a theological standpoint, the most common criticism of Irigaray's discourse on the divine seems to be that her God leaves no space for God as Other; that it is in fact no more than projected desire. As her use of Feuerbach suggests, God is reduced to a mirror of the same. Furthermore, a God who is a blank screen at the service of woman's becoming has merely been put into the place that has, by Irigaray's own account, been traditionally occupied by 'woman.'

It is true that Irigaray does seem to grant the divine Other a less radical alterity than she does the other gender. Sexual difference is, for Irigaray, the

most fundamental of differences, upon which the recognition of all other differences is predicated. The divine Other, if it is to be redemptive, must have some relation to the corporeal and therefore gendered reality of the subject.

Irigaray's divine does have a mediating role, not just among women, but between men and women, both of whom ideally need to be identified on their own terms and not by the other. It is thus that Irigaray seeks the establishment of sexual difference as the most fundamental difference. As to whether Irigaray's divine is more than a mere mirror of the same, this remains to be argued.

Another response to Irigaray's call for the construction of a feminine divine is that taken by her sympathetic secular commentators who, perhaps uncomfortable with her more theological concerns, consider her concern for the divine to be a purely pragmatic gesture. But along these same pragmatic lines, the question arises: how can a God function if it is not believed in? Both these responses return me to my central question. Can this God be any more than a human construction? Could such a construction actually leave a space for the divine other to manifest?

THE ANTHROPOCENTRIC TURN WITHIN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY.

Contemporary philosophy concerns itself primarily with 'God' as a function of discourse. Questions of God in God's self do not arise, they are bracketed. Likewise, recent Catholic theology tends not to talk about God in God's self, but God as manifest: God's saving works in history. The same anthropocentric turn within theology is announced by Karl Rahner's pronouncement that the economic trinity is the immanent trinity. Edward Schillebeeckx argues that 'there is no other basis for human talk about God's transcendence than our 'contingency.'⁷ At least from the perspective of recent Catholic theology it would seem that a focus on the human dimension does not of necessity rule out the divine. Indeed, the centrality of the incarnation for Christianity could be seen to suggest that God cannot be known otherwise. Even those who concern themselves with God's ineffability, the iconoclast and the negative theologian, also seek to construct a worthy divine image, worthy of their vision of humanity. For Christians, the fullness of humanity and the fullness of divinity coincide in the person of Jesus who is the Christ.

The initial feminist response to the God question, corresponding to a hermeneutic of suspicion, has not surprisingly tended towards the

iconoclastic. The same is true of Irigaray's project. But the iconoclast or hermeneute of suspicion is also, knowingly or unknowingly, driven by a more positive insight or experience to which the criticised given does not match up. The iconoclast is a utopian. The problem for utopians has always been trying to imagine the unimaginable, that the future be more than the past. This may be why the concept of fecundity seems to have become so important in French thought and why for Irigaray the relation between the sexes has such strategic importance.

The vision that drives Irigaray's project is healthy and life-giving relationships among women and between men and women. She concerns herself directly with whatever supports the full humanity of women, which for Irigaray corresponds to their divinization, without which men and women are unable to grow together. For Irigaray, it is perhaps a question of creating a God worthy of belief and worthy of humanity so that humanity may be worthy of its gods.

The Arts could be considered to be an exploration of the worthy. Not merely as subjective expression, but as an attempt to create a space for something more, a space for the possibility of a genuine encounter with the Other. David Tracy's notion of the classic, through which he defends the public character of religious and theological truth, suggests at least one means by which the creation of such an excess could be understood. The classics are those realities whose ongoing interpretation has created or recreated meaning for a particular religion or culture. By such a definition our representations of the divine are also classics. The production of the classic suggests that it is precisely through the finite and the contingent, and its intensification that something of the infinite is expressed. 'The artist, the thinker, the hero, the saint - who are they, finally,' Tracy asks, 'but the finite self radicalised and intensified? The difference between the artist and the rest of us is one of intense degree, not of kind. The difference is one where the journey of intensification - a journey which most of us fear yet desire, shun yet demand - is really undertaken. The journey into particularity in all its finitude and all its striving for the infinite.'⁸

The best model for the infinite, then, is not the general and universal but the particular. This is perhaps the insight that Levinas expresses through his paradigm of the face, through whose particularity the infinite and an irreducible excess manifests. The face in signifying otherness also designates a distance from the subject: the process of distantiation being Tracy's second criteria of the production of a classic.

Similar dynamics can be discerned in the formation of the Biblical canon in the early Christian liturgy. For the Christian church it is the Christ event that is foundational just as for feminists it is whatever promotes the flourishing of the full humanity of women. What is at stake in both the Christian liturgy and for Irigaray is creating a space for the divine in which the divine is able to meet us. Such a meeting is predicated upon some sort of self-recognition which opens us up to the possibility of becoming. Is it necessarily a Pelagian exercise to prepare a space for an epiphany? Louis-Marie Chauvet's examination of the Christian liturgy suggests that the process of self-recognition is in fact an essential element of Christian worship.

THE MIRROR OF SCRIPTURE

In talking of God we talk of ourselves. The language of faith is self-implicating. A statement of belief is expressive and performative. Grace, Chauvet argues, is less something received than a self-reception: a receiving of oneself from God as daughter or son and from others as brother and sister, the two aspects being symbolically distinct but indissolubly linked. This link is manifest in the reception of scripture.

The canonical texts are those that received the authority of public reading. The texts that a community used in worship were those in which the community recognised itself. The words of the biblical authors were adopted by the community and used in prayer because they were felt to accurately express and mirror the faith of the worshipping community. In the case of the Jewish and Christian traditions it is the events recognised as foundational that precedes the formation of a canon. The text seeks to express and interpret the experience recognised as foundational and is deemed successful or inspired if the community owns it through the process of recognition.

The reading of the text in the assembly is essential to the being of the text itself. The appropriation of the text by the community is constitutive of its canonicity. The more the community recognises itself in a text, the more the text manifests its essence as a text. The book is nothing without the community, and the community finds in the book the mirror of its identity. 'The Church thus represents the impossibility of *sola scriptura*.'⁹ Fidelity to the Bible, Chauvet argues, consists in reliving in ever changing circumstances the same process that brought about its production. The *hodie*

of Scripture is essential. 'Hermeneutics, although unwritten, is also canonical.'¹⁰

To seek an adequate expression of the divine, adequate to one's experience and insight is itself an inspired act that is authenticated retrospectively by the reception of the community. To believe in a God of our own imagining, there must be an element of recognition.¹¹ It must reflect not only ourselves, but also that foundational experience or utopian vision through which the Other originally manifest and disrupted the totalisation of the same. It is through the expression, which is also interpretation, that we are appropriated to, and transformed by it. Such an exercise is never *ex nihilo*.

CONCLUSION

Irigaray's attempts to construct a worthy God that liberates women and men is surely one in which theologians should take an interest. If she fails, there are certainly lessons to be learnt along the way. In any case, a definitive judgment of the success of such an exercise rests with the community's ability to recognize itself: to acknowledge the work as inspired, and to recognize an expression of the divine for which it yearns and which holds transformative possibilities for both the subject and the community. It is in the act of recognition that belief arises.

As for God in Godself, I can think of no better response than the one T.S. Eliot gives in *Four Quartets*: 'For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.'

REFERENCES

¹ Irigaray, L., *Sexes and Genealogies*, (G. C. Gill, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. v.

² Klemm, D., 'Toward a Rhetoric of Post Modern Theology,' *American Academy of Religion*, 55:3 (1987), p. 456.

³ Hall, G., *Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism* (Ph.D. diss. Washington: Catholic University of America, 1993), p. 329. Most contemporary theologians tend to identify the core of the Christian kerygma as primarily utopian in its privileging the *ought* over the *is*. However, Paul Ricoeur, drawing on the work of Karl Mannheim, considers both 'ideology' and 'utopia' to be equally constitutive within the religious and cultural imagination.

⁴ Irigaray, op. cit., p. 62.

⁵ Similar limits and horizons can be found operating within the 'canon'. Jonathon Z. Smith has suggested that 'canon is best seen as one form of a basic cultural process of limitation and of overcoming that limitation through ingenuity.' Jonathon Z. Smith, 'Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon,' *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 52.

⁶ Perhaps this is why Levinas distances himself from the idea of a 'direct encounter with

God' which he considers to be 'a Christian concept', Levinas, E., 'Ideology and Idealism,' *The Levinas Reader*, (S. Hand, editor. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). p. 247.

⁷ Schillebeeck, E., *Church. The Human Story of God*, (J. Bowden, trans. New York: Crossroad, 1991). p. 8.

⁸ Tracy, D., *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 125.

⁹ Chauvet, L.M., *Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, (P. Madigan and M. Beaumont, trans. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), p. 209.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 201.

¹¹ One could perhaps fruitfully apply Clifford Geertz' cultural-linguistic model and talk of an 'aura of facticity'.