Chapter Four: Irigaray’s Love as Word and Flesh

1. Introduction

In this chapter I explore how “word” (logos) and “flesh” (the body) function in Irigaray’s writing to expose a “logic of the same” within religious thinking. I suggest she redeploy these notions from within a male psychoanalytic symbolic and imaginary to construct a positive sexuate difference. As I have focused in previous chapters on Irigaray’s ability to destabilize other binaries, in this section I explore her examination of the sacred and the secular and the way in which she challenges a traditional dichotomy between the spiritual immaterial realm of abstract ideas and the experienced world of material objects. I suggest that Irigaray’s philosophy offers a unique and vital contribution of a unique spiritual discourse in that she renders an alternative to dualism and monism, insisting on a plurality that refigures old conceptions of humanism, monotheism, and cult religions. This discourse, in the last chapter, I will employ to imagine and inspire an Irigarayan ethic of mutuality—love—on a grand scale, or as the final section indicates, “a new eschaton.”

First, I suggest Irigaray’s call for divine women refigures a transcendental or universal claim that resists absolutization, idealism, or political utopia. Instead, her reading of divine women makes possible a way to think transcendentally or universally about relations that do not result in domination, but rather, augur mutuality. In order to argue that her treatment of the phrase “divine women” is not a consort version of patriarchal religions or male-dominated polytheisms, I develop her notion of radical alterity to guide the process of word and flesh as a spiritual rethinking of traditional theology and explore how her terms break apart from binary ways of defining the religious human condition (immanent/transcendent, inner/outer, sacred/secular). Her resistance to a singular
sexuate dogma is the condition of possibility for the respect of difference so that we may
dwell together with others, a communion that is premised upon radical sexuate difference.

Second, I explore Irigaray's re-reading of body and word within the Christian
tradition. I suggest that Irigaray's interpretation of word and flesh can re-deploy the
Christian theology of incarnation and Eucharist as a feminist metaphor for a new symbolic
imaginary that resists a will to power, while regarding the self, the other, and the divine. I
problematize the inherently masculine readings of traditional Christian incarnation and
Christology, a notion that Mary Daly has denounced famously as Christolatry, and argue
that merely mirroring a female Divine Other functions as a philosophy of the same within
Christian theology, the very gesture Irigaray critiques. To truly respect alterity, I suggest,
even our notion of the divine must be sensible while it is meaningful, and the play cannot
be normativized into a standard format that reduces difference to sexual markers, or
privileges nature over culture, or vice versa. Sexual difference must remain a source of
opening, rather than closure. Namely, sexual difference must be a horizon of possibility
that has real existential force, but resists a metaphysical wholeness or absolute totality.
Cautious of sexuate indifference’s will to power, her disperse, effusive version of female
divinity aligns with her development of sexual difference for women as real, and realizable,
without being whole, total, or subsuming. Again she will destabilize the infinite/finite

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1 Irigaray is certainly not the first to re-appropriate Christian incarnation theology for feminist political
purposes. But her work is unique in that she offers a libidinal philosophical critique and elaborates a spiritual
account of incarnation which seeks to suggest symbolically and imaginatively what a different metaphysical
approach could augur. For a notable example of a feminist theology of Christian incarnation that go beyond
traditional renderings see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique of incarnation with kyriarchal (her
neologism) power and her suggestion that Jesus may be the incarnation of Divine-Wisdom. Elisabeth
Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York:
2 Mary Daly. “Beyond Christolatry: A World without Models,” *Beyond God the Father. Toward a Philosophy of
3 See chapter 2 “Sexual Difference: Beyond Essentialism,” footnote 74.
binary and argue for a “real” identity developed within a metaphysical structure of the negative, or lack, as presence in the midst of absence. Yet, I also note that, for her, sexual difference cannot be so open that it becomes meaningless or nonsensical, or a better projection of the human self. It is within this space of finite wonder that she develops her infinite horizon of sexuate otherness, a horizon I argue cannot be a feminine theistic absolute.

Finally, I suggest that within the human and divine context, sexual difference is best understood through the medium of re-engendering ethical relationships, a thesis with which I conclude this chapter. I underscore that Irigaray’s philosophy of religion is not a mere private practice, but one that offers a robust theory of intersubjectivity, starting with the self, that can ethically and spiritually relate to and with diverse others. In this section I explore Irigaray’s re-reading of the Virgin Mary as an exemplar of ethical-spiritual relations which bring flesh and word together in an incarnation that corresponds to a universal attentive to “spirit,” “life,” and “breath.” These will become important ethical parameters in the final chapter where I suggest Irigaray’s theory offers an alternative ethical framework over and against normative ethical theories which rely on freedom, abstract reason, duty, utility, or a history of rights protecting European propertied males. I explore her notion of gender and how it can offer a new kind of reading for Christian and post-Christian traditions of western thought.

2. Divine Women

In this section I survey Irigaray’s figuration of divine women and explain how her claims bring together in new ways the divergent arenas of philosophy, religion, and theology to argue collectively for sexuate difference as a spiritual affection that any
tradition may exercise as a new orthodoxy or a speculative philosophy. Irigaray suggests that the religious is that which joins or links together.⁴ If her aim has been a spiritual alliance of difference, then the religious ought to be a crucible of change.

But if religion is a deeply personal and cultural expression of our lives, our beliefs, values, and our aspirations, how can an Irigarayan reading unfold a generative feminist critique? Irigaray's first contribution has been to analyze the origin of feminist exclusion and hatred, not to vilify religion, but to imagine it anew. As a philosopher, Irigaray seems to understand religion as a positive cultural discourse (more than a mere private practice), and although stereotypically anti-feminist in its cultural instantiations, she, nonetheless, understands religion as a fruitful and potent discourse for her feminist unfolding of sexual difference. In various religious traditions, such moments of impossible possibility have been portrayed via terms like “redemption,” “shalom,” “struggle,” or “advent” to hearken moments whose future is possible, but human labor and faithfulness is required if it is to be. It seems such a paradigmatic discourse of ideality or universality is consistent with her work toward sexual difference as a universal or transcendental notion. But her unique twist has been to change the very definition of ideality, transcendence, and universality away from the realm of absolute metaphysics aligned with masculinist suppositions of truth, being, and knowledge, and toward unexamined notions which structure immanence, bodies, and the natural phenomenal world. Therefore, it is unsurprising that her version of religion would be connected to bodies, and that such thinking would be inclusive of celestial and earthly indicators, involving human responsibility, ethical deliberation, and love premised upon mutuality.

⁴ She states, "One of our actual religious tasks would be to find how to join earth and sky, body and soul, or spirit, and even also cultures, sexes, and generations." Irigaray, KW, 149.
As with her philosophical writings, Irigaray’s foray into the discourse of the religion resonates with her non-identification with any one tradition, movement or orthodoxy, rejecting any label or “-ism.” While her Catholic religious tradition is explored, she also pursues philosophies where she believes the chasm between spirit and wisdom may be not so far and deep: the Eastern philosophies. But her Western matrix of images and terms may infer a Western-oriented critique of philosophy, theology, and religion as she includes boldly her own twist of the virgin, contra Emmanuel Lévinas, and describes a Johannine advent that, one could easily argue, harkens back to Jacques Derrida’s “viens.” Yet, it is her spiritual humanism, or her conversation with Feuerbach that is a different kind of departure from the sacred/secular split, and she shapes this conversation with her own milieu of terms, symbols, and claims. What I suggest is vitally important to note when reading Irigaray’s works on religion is her declaration that her works must be read as philosophical texts, namely, an intervention into specific canons of thought by which we define our values.5 Indeed to change the political, ethical or perhaps even the religious, contexts of women’s lives is to interrogate the philosophical categories of thought and how these definitions and values are formed. It is the closure of women’s finite existence per the absolute infinite of man’s ideal that presupposes her discussion. If she rejects Simone de Beauvoir’s feminine “Other” as not really escaping this male-controlled dialectic, then she is equally concerned with its function in the religious context as well. Irigaray will argue for a radical “Other” in order to escape this pseudo-Other and its horizon of thought that she believes limits women from accessing philosophically a liberation, as there is no corresponding social-cultural political reality. It is this consideration of a “new horizon”

5 Irigaray, WWC, 141.
culturally and politically that leads her to rethink women and the infinite. Radical Otherness as a dual or multiple position, guarded with a sacred “mystery” that cannot be sublated or surmounted into a Hegelian dialectic, makes her religious maneuvers philosophically centered and religiously dissimilar from traditional religious discourses. Because her philosophy has yet to be realized, her transcendence has no “equal” cultural signifier. She hints that this transcendence will be unlike the “vertical transcendence” that she believes presently ensconces the cultural imaginary of Western thought, a hierarchical culture where the genealogy of parent/child, or man/woman is realized in the Freudian-Oedipal triangulation of a successful wife replacing her husband’s mother and he then becoming her new son (a diagnosis she terms matricide). In contrast, Irigaray will trace a “horizontal transcendence” between two irreducibly different beings, naturally and culturally asymmetrical to one another, allowing her idiom of “sexuate difference” to inspire a new socio-cultural construction of the way we define, value, and cherish beings and becoming.

As I have written previously, much of Irigaray’s work has been to diagnose how patriarchy became the over-arching word, metaphor, and absolute imaginary landscape of our lives and culture. She understands this to be the death of the mother, or the signifying figure of difference that must be denied for a sexuate singular master discourse to prevail. How have women been cast within religious discourses so that pseudo-identities and sexes fill in for the missing generative sexuate identity she claims continues to subsist, but not fully exist? Several diagnostic answers are given.

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6 Irigaray, DBT, 155; TBT, 111, SW, 47.
7 The expression appears throughout her works, but receives a notable treatment in TBT, 18; C, 130; ITY, 118.
First, the male has claimed language as his sacred domain and only means by which to gain transcendent access, or spiritual revelation. Speech, writing, dogma, or words become the most potent and guarded spiritual rites and revelations to the detriment of other notions such as silence and breathing. In many ways, Irigaray personifies these differences in the cultures of West and East,\(^8\) as the Western religions fetishize text, canons, and creeds. It is not that the East does not possess these spiritual artifacts, but she notes within these cultures, there is also an acceptance for breath, silence, and an ontological commitment she has been tracking carefully for decades: sexuate difference. If the West has prized materiality, solidity, and language vis-à-vis the male body and all that corresponds to his identity, then the unwanted remainder is what persists and subsists of otherness, difference, or alterity. These symbols, tropes, and forgotten or excluded motifs are things she believes reference a possible subjectivity that is not constitutive of the Western, rational, propertied, colonizing (warring) male master and his female slave. While she has traced this difference philosophically, she traces these moments spiritually as well. Breath, air, or spirit will become her spiritual tropes that permit us to think the unthinkable—difference. In the West, she tracks breath as Sprit, and in the East, she notes its more overt practice and the reverence students have for those who are masters in a way that might be outside the language game. Breath, air, or spirit might be the philosophical enigma whose potency and obscurity might be our new salvation and yield an age of true coupling, or the appearance of the radical other.

\(^8\) I do want to note the difficulty of making an artificial division between eastern and western religions, particularly when considering a religion like Islam which has a global purview, but relies heavily upon textual revelation and the words of the prophets, undermining any clear division of west as text saturated and east as more spiritually effuse.
Second, woman has been cast as sacred virgin or mother, revered when she fulfills these sexuate identities in relation to patriarchy and she is equally vilified as whore or monster when she deviates or her use no longer fulfills the male patriarch’s desire (sexual or reproductive). To be a virgin has been a role that relates to a woman’s purity for a man, and to be a sacred mother is to be a mother for the son, less the daughter. Irigaray reads these images anew, breathing into these dead or dying roles a self-determination that is truly feminist. Rather than giving those tropes and images up to men, she resurrects these women de novo and wonders what a sacred virgin might be like apart from her patriarchal dominator? Could the virgin be a spiritual guide, rather than a product to be exchanged on the market place of men’s desire?

Third, Irigaray develops the notion that a woman’s deification beyond patriarchy’s control might be a possible strategy for woman to think this impossible possibility of otherness or difference. Her treatment of the notion of divine women has been a controversial maneuver that has caused some to understand her religious language or discourses as more “essentializing” than her philosophical work that seemed open, effuse, and strategically agile. I argue that her work in these religious texts has not changed in

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9 Amy Hollywood is particularly critical of the manner in she fails to understand the fetishization of belief, especially insisting on the primacy of sexual difference itself, meaning we must deconstruct phallic male subjectivity, while believing in the structural possibility of sexual difference as female, which can also be deconstructed, but also must be believed as a realm of ideality that corresponds to the material body. She writes, “. . . Irigaray cannot elide the gap without undermining the very external supports for subjectivity (in language, culture, and society) required by women if they are to become subjects. . . . Irigaray ultimately succumbs to fetishism and demands belief in sexual difference itself (even as she continues, in other places, to demand the deconstruction of belief, arguing for its essentially fetishistic—and hence in irigaray’s view, phallic—structure).” See Hollywood, Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002) 150. Serene Jones is also critical of Irigaray’s portrayal of the divine woman, arguing, “To use irigarayan language, it would seem that female desire has consumed God. Caught once again in the old game of symmetry, God is merely the screen necessary for self-knowledge, the mirror that reflects the narcissistic gaze of the subject, the hand that must touch the phallus (or her lips) for the purpose of self-identification.” See Jones, “This God Which Is Not One: Irigaray and Barth on the Divine,” in Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists, eds. C.W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville, and Susan M. Simonaitis (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002) 138.
philosophy or posture, but that difference as radical disruption within religious discourses becomes a much more difficult conversation given the primacy of religion as a language idiom whose control and sacred authority is almost solely male, a plight of both East and West. Therefore, her foray as a woman into these forbidden places can be more easily maligned, given her more ambitious aim to advance sexuate difference into the realm of the sacred, a region whose hostility toward the “other” has been recorded candidly. Irigaray’s obtuse writing and poetic imagery and use of myth within these discussions add other layers of complexity that make her work difficult, at best, to explicate. But it is in these very difficult or remote or hostile places where Irigaray’s work has tremendous possibility to engender new imaginings. It is a task she takes seriously. As she writes, we are already determined by religion, and it is crucial for us to think this dimension in order to situate ourselves in respect to it; therefore, any disregard of religion, she argues, creates a cascading harm toward our subjectivity and our cultural relations to our environment and others. Part of what makes Irigaray’s work unique is that she does not abandon religious imagery, symbols, or tropes, even as she has removed herself from Catholicism proper. But like her relationship to patriarchy, she takes the remainder or residue or excess of religious language and fashions it anew, with a subversive reading that renders the original meaning as a positive portrayal of women’s subjectivity, identity, and existence, challenging the ways we define and think the terminology itself. And it is not for women (as an essential category), but what woman signifies in her philosophy—difference that unfolds within specific or particular relations, to people, cultures, and bodies. Therefore, it cannot be an “essential” woman or gender, but rather, a place for universal difference that has a

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particular instantiation in women, and if in women, then in others, to determine or engender themselves within this new ontological and ethical age of difference. This difference is her advent, not women or goddess, but the particular acceptance of a/the woman to signify embodied difference as a radical disruptor of sameness. The logical culmination of her work since *Speculum* has been to think man/woman with a radical twoness, and will now be explored via a philosophical interrogation of religion and its theologies.

2.1. *From Fish to Bird*

What makes Irigaray’s work important in philosophy of religion is her reconstruction of female spirituality in conversation with philosophy. But rather than placing the accent upon the divine, I read Irigaray’s divine women as an accent on *women* and what the philosophical category of woman signifies positively as a rethinking of the divine. Indeed, as woman has been portrayed as closer to nature, a categorization meant to remove her from the holy, the celestial, and the sacred, Irigaray will re-read such a relation to nature as a positive account of divinity. I think divine and infinite are two ways she interlaces terms to signify a beyond the finite, but original in Irigaray, is that it is an infinite with the finite. They are not oppositional concepts, the finite and infinite, but the relationality of these terms is to be understood via different sexuate economies, ontologies, and differences. Her task will be to reveal the disruption of traditional theologies of finite and infinite relations, of man and his divine, in order to reveal the existence of a disruption to this logic of sameness—namely, divine women. Within this invisible sacred sense of female sexuate difference, her notions for the infinite and the divine are awash in terms, images, and myths of an alternative sexuate ontology. Particularly significant is her return
to love stories where she asserts that such double avatars of divinity may exist (woman’s corporeal avatar and man’s symbolic avatar), such as the tale of *Melusine, Chevalier au cygne* (swan knight), and the “The Little Mermaid,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*. In such stories a woman is part fish, an animal of the sea, and then a bird of the air. What is unique is the portrayal of a woman juxtaposed to the two elements Irigaray has taken pains to explore: water and air. The women in these myths are telling in their habituations. As transforming animals of water and air they are never the symbolic image of Western celestial life as culturally perceived, such as a grand theophany, a seraphic messenger, or even a suffering male servant. In her investigation of the opacity of the subject and God she investigates this story of transmutational and transfigurational living forms and love between flesh, spirit, and body. It is the blurriness of these distinctions, wherein she discovers woman’s divine disruption. It is the senses of touch and hearing, not sight, that permit us awareness of this divine presence of woman. But her juxtaposition of divine women isn’t an inversion of divine God or men, or even a renaissance of animal worship. Rather, it is a counter-narrative within a narrative of religion that harkens that difference may persist and subsist, and may flourish if we can hear, listen, caress, and dialogue with this “other” sacred way.

What is also important for this thesis is her positive association of woman and animal. In traditional Christian religion, the animal (and woman) serve as the lesser

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11 She writes, “We regress and we progress, way beyond the sense of sight, from the most primitive to the subtlest realm of the tactile. Everything is given to us by means of touch, a mediation that is continually forgotten.” Irigaray, SG, 59. Elsewhere she notes that Jesus’s crucifixion is itself a sense of touch, what she calls the mediatory sense par excellence. Irigaray, ML, 178.

12 In the introduction to the section on art Irigaray writes, “In diverse traditions, the feminine is characterized by the ear and the masculine by the eye, And in religious feminine rituals music is more important than words.” Irigaray, KW, 101

13 She is careful to say she is not instigating a return to self-deification and animal totems. See Irigaray, SG, 60.
variants of the ultimate ideal, God.\textsuperscript{14} Between animal/woman and God, the man aims to leave his animal instinct (or girlish behaviors) and finds his infinite God. The abstract infinite is often portrayed as the location of greatest moral worth. To leave the animal condition of instinct is to depart from a place of moral incoherence and to move toward an ethical state, grounded in metaphysics. But Irigaray’s transfiguration of the bird-fish will allow the animal to become the guide and reveal the ethical damage of such a divine arrangement which deprives us of forming a proper sense of gratitude for natural world.\textsuperscript{15} Her call is for a transfiguration of the human as human and all the living arrangements that surround and nourish the human (including the animal and woman). In a section titled “Neither animal nor god, but not yet man,” she explains how man traditionally uses language (the symbolic) to reassert his superiority over animals,\textsuperscript{16} whom we assume lack language. In this rendering language is the discourse by which men appeal to god(s). But she notes the irony that the way men prostrate before a master God is more like how animals in a herd follow the leader, or circulate around the queen of a hive.\textsuperscript{17} The human bent toward conquering has meant that humans have desired to differentiate ourselves from the animal, but it has been this very gesture of desiring to abandon the animal (caught within the binary), by which we have invoked the very barbarism that is regularly

\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Conversations} she explains, “Sexual difference has remained at an instinctive level while our mind has been trained for very subtle realities. We have thus become split between an animal body and mind longing for ideal, absolute God, without any real unity of our being. Furthermore, most of the time, the animal part has been in store for woman and the spiritual or divine part for man.” Irigaray, C, 136.

\textsuperscript{15} Irigaray, IB, 115.

\textsuperscript{16} She writes in \textit{The Way of Love} that we assume man is animal with language who uses this capacity to state his needs and desires, rather than understanding language as the capacity by which we can transform our “... instincts and needs into shared desires.” Irigaray, WL, 39, 62,

\textsuperscript{17} Irigaray, IB, 75.
associated with animality. She writes, “He uses his mental surplus to his additional mental neurons to go beyond the animal behavior, subduing and consuming still more, at the risk of his life.” While her sexuate trope underscores that humanity is composed of two separate beings, she draws the parallel implication that this twoness permits a broader understanding of and language with the natural world as well. If we can remove sexual difference away from the destructive binary of animal (woman)/divine (man), then we can cultivate a sexual difference which bring the animal and divine into contact. She concludes, “This consideration for a human difference, and not only for a natural or an animal difference, between man and woman could lead us to respect difference(s) in other relations to the other: of a different age, race, tradition, culture and so on.” In this version, language becomes a passageway between two, rather than a place movement toward a master God (away from the animal), and such a modification of language, a way to approach another, would makes language “other and new.”

Using traditional religious themes of sin, redemption, and revelation, she will interrogate and rewrite the very terms and meanings that separate women from the divine, and demand we listen and cease our concealment of difference. What is helpful is that her call isn’t a reconstruction of a new regime, but rather a re-enchchantment of ourselves to hear and sense what already is within the stories, myths, and religious discourses of those who have eyes to see only the masculine symbolic as divine.

2.2. *Irigarayan Sin and Redemption*

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18 In the *Way of Love* she queries if the animal is more advanced in communication than the human, such as the bird’s song, whereby one modules its singing dependent upon what the other is saying. *Irigaray, WL*, 40.  
19 *Irigaray, IB*, 61.  
20 *Irigaray, C*, 136.  
21 *Irigaray, WL*, 41.
For centuries the religious traditions have asked, what is wrong in the world? Within the Christian tradition the question narrows as followers ask what sin is and can suffering and death be sourced in the first act of sin? What is the relationship between sexuality and sin? The spiritual problem of evil, in an Irigarayan account, is the lack of two subjects in proper relationship to each other and how one suppresses the other’s becoming. Irigaray mobilizes sacred terms that veer away from traditional usage. She offers a hermeneutic that reinterprets the great events of Christianity with a perspective “feminine,” listening to the spirit instead of the letter.\(^{22}\) Again, Irigaray draws attention away from the fixation of letters and language (the father) toward the breath, air, or spirit (elemental) of that which sustains language and utterance (the mother). While traditional Christian theology focuses on the writings about sin, Irigaray will listen to the prompting of the spirit and envision a spiritual alliance of difference.

If metaphysics has been the project of an absolute singularity of essence and sex, her first maneuver has been to loosen the knot of the grip of metaphysics and search for the unraveling which may yield difference. Irigaray explains this singularity: “Instead of becoming what he is, man has wanted to become what he is not. Leaping from animality to divinity, he has not cultivated his humanity. Of which reality and value cannot appear to him in the denial of her—or Her—in the ignorance that he represents only part of humanity, and that humanity can be cultivated only by two, and in the respect for differences between the two parts.”\(^{23}\) According to Irigaray, the flourishing of humanity, its felicity and generative growth as species, is contingent upon the recognition that human cultivation requires inclusivity of all its members. Even the question of evil and sin has

\(^{22}\) Irigaray, KW 146.  
\(^{23}\) Irigaray, IB, loc. 1024 of 2057
been aligned to this understood metaphysical singularity and Irigaray, instead of dealing with “the problem of evil” which again reinstates a singular metaphysics, posits referents within the context of ethical relationships. In the introduction to her section on spirituality and religion in Key Writings, she suggests that the ‘sin of a woman’ that may be contrary to the sin of a man is that she may fail to turn back to herself or choose not to remain faithful to feminine values in talking and acting. In her essay, “The Redemption of Women,” she states the sin of woman surrounds an issue of fidelity, or lack being of faithful to herself, her sex, her words, and interweaving this with their bodies to yield a living spiritual flesh, what she earlier called, a sensible transcendental. In fact, any submission of one gender to another is a violation of the greatest commandment to love one’s neighbor.

The Christian tradition renders the story of Adam’s and Eve’s temptation in the garden as the source of “original sin.” But the emphasis has often shifted to Eve, not Adam, as notions of evil in opposition to God are personified as “temptress,” “idolatress,” and “whore,” all feminine in their construction. But Irigaray spies in this account of an early paradise, outside of God’s celestial story, the relation between him and her, and her and him. If the sin was the temptation to be “like God,” she argues,

Surely evil, sin, suffering, redemption, arise when God is set up as an extraterrestrial ideal, as an otherworldly monopoly? When the divine is manufactured as God-Father? . . . With no store of ‘supra-sensatory’
knowledge to separate them from the innocence of fleshly communion. . . .

Destined for the errance of guilty desire, dwelling in bodies that

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24 Irigaray, KW, 146.
25 Ibid., 151.
26 Ibid., 157.
henceforward are masked or veiled. Allotted different tasks and punishment:

toil for him and her the pains of childbirth.\(^{27}\)

The earth, originally the source of paradise, and flesh with two sexes, is the original good she hears in the story, while the denigration of flesh, and punitive gender roles are understood as results of curse. An obvious sign of the curse is the emphasis on the genealogy of patriarchs who are now the sole guardians of the Word transmitted to male heirs alone.

It has been suggested that sin is the twisting or parasitic deformation of the good. If everything in creation began as ‘good’ then the story of sin is secondary. As Irigaray’s references to sin are not directed toward God, they are directed towards one’s self and one’s gender. It is lack of faithfulness to authenticity with the self and the other. In an Irigarayan context one may translate that to the twisted or parasitic deformation of primal sexual difference. By locating sin as a rejection of sexual difference,\(^{28}\) Irigaray also connotes a possibility of redemption as well. The spirit, or breath (elemental), ensures our difference, our autonomy and, according to her words, to sin against this spirit is absolute. As she explains, “Sinning against the spirit can arise from infidelity to a proper identity or from depriving the other of the intentionality appropriate to his or her gender.”\(^{29}\) Different than a patriarchal Christian tradition, Irigaray’s reading of a “proper identity” is not a strict essence but about owning one’s unique singularity. As articulated in my earlier chapter, she is not an essentialist theorizer. Rather, a “proper identity” is one that is attentive to the elemental differences that create conditions of possibility for difference to flourish. This

\(^{27}\) Irigaray, ML, 174.

\(^{28}\) Irigaray, KW, 146.154-55, 165.

\(^{29}\) Irigaray, ILTY, 147.
notion of sinning against the spirit connects with her reading of original sin: “to have mistaken the reason of man for the universal.”

3. The Male Word: Sexuate Theism

If the male gender presides with the Absolute Deity, then it is unsurprising that so much of the language of Western metaphysical religion associates the female gender as the negative of the positive Absolute God: the erroneous lying woman, heretical witch, temptress, or adversarial demonic whore. As Mary Daly noted early in her career, if the second Adam is the absolute power of salvation, Eve remains the “temptress” for all ages.

Several feminists have attempted to expose the harm of an Absolute Theistic Deity whose male gender is understood and interpreted as a gender preference for men to give sacred rites, hold authority, and issue power. Pamela Sue Anderson describes three notable feminist attempts to offer a feminist strategy via diverse approaches: Mary Daly, Sarah Coakley, and Grace Jantzen. Mary Daly, an early radical American feminist in the 1960s and 70s, argued to move beyond male theism, suggesting we overthrow patriarchal religions, rallying for shifts that we have seen partially fulfilled today, but that, at her historical juncture, seemed incredible, such as women clergy and gays openly serving in the church. Rather than restructuring the political arrangement of ecclesiology in order to shift a social consciousness, Sarah Coakley has sought to gender theology, exposing feminine “soft spots” within analytic philosophical texts. In contrast, Anderson notes that Grace

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30 Ibid.
31 See Daly, Beyond God the Father, 44–68.
Jantzen has sought a thoroughly Irigarayan approach, urging that we not only move away from patriarchal theism, but disrupt the hierarchy altogether, *Becoming Divine*, as her titled work implores Irigaray’s earlier essay title “Divine Women.” It is worth noting this “Irigarayan” approach which Jantzen invokes, and it may signal the usefulness of Irigaray’s foray into the religious. Yet, Irigaray, and her interpreters use of the terms “divine” and “women” has also augured critique and caution of essentialism. In this section I want to trace Irigaray’s work and return to how her call for “divine women” offers a fruitful feminist strategy within the field of philosophical religion and theology.

What makes Irigaray’s work unique in comparison to her feminist counterparts is her claim for a metaphysical rethinking of religious difference, a critique at the level of ontology. Irigaray argues that, like the question of Being and Heidegger, we cannot conceive the tectonic shift in philosophy or religion from the already existing representations available to us today linguistically. Much of Irigaray’s early work has been the diagnosis of the singular sexuate male subject and his privileged relationship to language, a status women only have as an “echo” of male control. Women are the other of the same within this view. Male desire, language, and control constitutes a woman’s identity, a place which is no place that has provided no “gender” for woman. Instead, man has used woman as his container, his mirror, and in religion, his virgin, consort, or mother,

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34 An Irigarayan approach, a phrase Anderson employs, connotes the importance of Irigaray’s work in philosophy of religion as her method has inspired other interpreters and thinkers to expand her notion of divine women beyond her original early essays.

35 Irigaray, TD, 50. She cites examples of how difficult it is to form job titles for women and what these unusual linguistic anomalies signal isn’t women’s liberation, but often, the level of access permitted or denied to women by men.

36 I use this term as Irigaray uses it to mean a “genre” or “gender,” which is different than how we think sex/gender. For Irigaray gender means a universal category that has a particular constitution related to culture and nature, which means a negative or limit to each particular gender. Her idea of gender means each gender needs others to engender a fullness of humanity, that no one sex can dominate others. See Irigaray, ILTY, 51, 63-64; LSG, 150;
positions with no innate status, but more a function or means to deify the man. A positive construction of a female gender offers woman a negative or limit that signifies difference, without which she will lack in both finite relationships and a relationship to the infinite.

Thus, in sacred sexual indifference, man must represent the sum of all, “He is father, son, spirit.” She writes that God helps man define his gender, “helps him orient his finiteness by reference to infinity.” One impulse might be to replace patriarchy with a new matriarchy, complete with goddesses instead of God. This is not Irigaray’s call for divine women. She is careful to say that women do not need to deify themselves, “… to regress to siren, goddesses, who fight against men gods,” but as she states, “I think we must not merely instigate a return to the cosmic, but also ask ourselves why we have been held back from becoming divine women.” Like her political work, Irigaray’s position has not been to “bash” men, but to ask why the most powerful forms of investigation, such as philosophy, deny women entry, placement, and dialogue. Correspondingly, why has the thinking of the infinite, in relation to a woman’s particular asymmetrical being and becoming from a man’s ontology, been denied or abandoned by men and women? For Irigaray the term “divine women” signifies something other than the same, which is what a mere reversal would grant. She is not seeking a divinity that is a woman. Within the Hegelian dialectic of ethical consciousness, which I Love to You overtly references and Divine Women problematizes, she understands man’s greatest fault as, “… to deprive one gender of its ethical consciousness and of its effectiveness as a gender.” To be effective, the female gender needs its own infinite in order to define her own finiteness, rather than

37 Irigaray, SG, 61.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 120.
the one handed to her by man and his infinite. She is seeking a gender for women with its own reference to infinity, individually and collectively, or particularly and universally. Such a pseudo-gender for woman has been to place herself finitely within man’s infinite array, as his self-sacrificing mother, wife, or non-autonomous virgin daughter. She has to be double, shadow or complement to a man’s duty and identity. There is no passageway between these genders as the female gender is suppressed from existence, and women die performing their male gender duties and identities as mothers, wives, and virgins. Through disparate positions Hegel and Irigaray note the irony of how Sophocles’ Antigone personifies such a self-sacrificing duty to remain entombed within the singular gender of man and his relation to the infinite or divine. Indeed, Antigone would rather defy the state, thus acting like a man, in order to ensure the proper burial of her brother, the divine law or sacred rite given to women in order to uphold men.

Historically in the Christian tradition, any act of religious subversion from such a deadly role of being a woman within a man’s gender was limited to small enclaves like feminine mystics such as Julian of Norwich or Mechthild of Magdeburg or Teresa of Avila, who may have been prior, but at the time, took no such role or duty, but remained spiritual as they remained physically separate from men’s duties. But these women still relate to a man’s infinite, his God, his Son. In Marine Lover, Irigaray interrogates “The Crucified One,” rejecting what she called the historic Christic model where the God-man mediates between the word and flesh, or between language and bodies. She notes the traditionally passive and non-mutual relationship of the women to the Christ—they hear his teachings but are not heard, they see him, but are not seen. His thoughts are directed toward the Father, not

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41 Irigaray, ML, 165.
them. As interpreters place emphasis on his crucifixion in the flower of life, she notes that death becomes desirable, and the “pain of sacrifice” stirs the senses and blurs the mind from those who attend to living and suffering in daily life.\textsuperscript{42} She critiques the Apollonian artistic effigy of Jesus as one fraught within a binary opposition between “. . . forces of On High and here below, of Heaven and earth, of Truth and error, of Good and evil, of God and idols, of divine and human nature, of Life and its mortal errancy . . . of all those pairs of opposites that continue to tear the world apart.”\textsuperscript{43} In such a rendering only one winner in the dialectic game perseveres, the master conquers the slave, and the winner is “the presumed, imputed, or credited signature [which] is that of the Father.”\textsuperscript{44}

Irigaray rejects an absolute male God and instead suggests a twoness to the accounts of the rendering of the notion of God. She observes two theophanic forms that may be overlooked, such as the porous airiness of the cloud that leads Israel by day, or the space within the ark that is vacant signifying God’s presence as invisible, or she writes, “In the between that has yet to occur” and wonders if this may be a “. . . memorial to a nearness that dwells and remain in the air.”\textsuperscript{45}

It is unsurprising to Irigaray after the bloodshed, besiegement of the temple, and its eventual emptying of God’s glory during the exile, that God’s presence would return in an astonishing semblance—“the womb of a woman.”\textsuperscript{46} If the warriors, kings, and the priesthood failed to be counted as faithful, she queries if the virgin-girl is the only one who has understanding of the divine. Is this co-creation of divine nature, or God returning to

\textsuperscript{42} Irigaray, ML, 184.  
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 168.  
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 175.  
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
God, returning to earth? She writes, “The presence that had been buried and paralyzed in
the text of the law is made flesh once more in the body of a woman, guardian of the spirit of
the divine life.”47 Again, I want to highlight her use of “proximity” or “nearness” to signify a
presence other than a masculinist conception of divinity. She writes that within traditional
Christianity “God is found only in Distance,” and the relationship with the Father is one of
separation, respect that removes man from God, what she dubs, “the Difference.”48 In
contrast she writes the story of Mary’s annunciation is a divine which is “near at hand,” so
near she writes, “it thereby becomes unnameable. Which is not to say that it is nothing. But
rather the coming of a reality that is alien to any already-existing identity. Relationship
within a more mystical place than any proximity that can be localized…. The deepest depth
of the flesh, touched, birthed, and without a wound.”49 I treat more fully the “Annunciation
and figure of Mary later, here I want to highlight preliminarily this attention to proximity. I
understand Irigaray to be advocating a salvation outside the bounds of a sacrificial logic, a
divine conception of nearness or respectful proximity rather than distance or difference,
and an infinite conceptualization of the “near at hand,” a phrase which may hearken to
Heidegger’s notion of the ready at hand. Rather than a sacrificed son as the only image of
salvation, within this story she reads another en-fleshed space for the divine, carried
through the genealogy of a woman’s body. Much like Derrida’s “messiah,”50 she writes that

47 Ibid., 176.
48 Ibid., 171.
49 Ibid, italics mine.
50 For a thorough explanation of Jacques Derrida’s conception of an apocalyptic Messiah “coming” and “to
this divine is one that is “. . . still to be revealed, which doesn’t mean it can never be expressed. But it is always aborted as soon as it is announced.”  

Although traditional readings understand Mary’s body as a chalice or container for the will of the Father, and her annunciation an excess of the Father’s declaration, Irigaray reads the story of the birth of the son with a different accent, the accent of a son born of a woman’s body and what this signifies: “God’s presence reappears in a different way. Having returned to earth, conceived and born by an attentive love, he manifests the miraculous power of that love. Never a slave to the law, making every text contradict itself, elusive in any formula adopted, escaping any prevailing cult or idolatry. . . .” Irigaray reads, following Nietzsche in the Antichrist, sec. 32, the Christ as a person who was to instantiate a new way of life, not a new faith, a certain “practice” of life that “. . . knows not sin, opposition, distance, judgment, penitence,” which are all ways of saying “no” to the present understanding of love as sacrifice and a Father’s Word. She is also mindful that Nietzsche’s Dionysus was also a child, surrounded by maternal figures. In this version of the savior she signals his proximity to the flesh of the mother’s body, an ethos of vulnerability or childlike-ness connected to a woman’s genealogy, and the corporeal connection, a practice of life which displaces the primacy of the word and traditional religion.

She notes how the traditional rendering of Christ was to resolve all things: “The ‘Good News’ is exactly this: love can reconcile antagonisms. Metabolize them without being

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51 Irigaray, ML, 171.
52 Ibid., 176.
53 Ibid.
torn apart.” But this unification with the divine glorifies the very absorption into the divine that she critiques and the Christic figure loses all sense of what she calls “... the practice of eros.” The Christ figure obeys his father to the point of death and the lesson of all-consuming sacrifice is what we inherit. As she continues her reading of Nietzsche's account of Christ’s flesh, she questions the divine connection with the resurrected body, rather than with the body of flesh. Her emphasis will be to re-read these accounts without nostalgia, but an expectation of things to come—a respect for difference and the markers of difference most neglected in religious discourse: woman, flesh, mother, and breath.

Anne-Claire Mulder suggests that Irigaray’s incarnation will not be a Christ incarnating God (male flesh becomes divine and remains within the symbolic), but an incarnation of how sexually different subjects can incarnate the flesh and word. She suggests reading Irigaray’s incarnation of Christ as a dialectical relation which allows us to think of two sexed subjects, neither of which is a complement or supplement of the other—a true respect for the negative. She writes, “The idea of a dialectical relation between flesh and Word safeguards this duality, and therefore enables me to keep thinking of incarnation as a contingent coherence of instinct, heart and knowledge bounded by the location of the subject in time and space. It enables me moreover to present incarnation as an ongoing process of unifications, thereby giving form to the process of becoming.” Mulder’s account of Irigaray’s incarnation as a dialectical relation between the two sexed subjects addresses Irigaray’s suggestion that cultural matricide has resulted in a loss of origins, thus the quest

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54 Ibid., 177.
55 Ibid.
56 She says, “Who interpreted him in this way? Who abominated the body so much that he glorified the son of man for being abstinent, castrated? And why is it necessary for Christ to die and rise again in order for men to believe he is God? Why could his presence in the flesh not be perceived as divine?” Ibid.
57 Anne-Claire Mulder, *Divine Flesh, Embodied Word: Incarnation as a Hermeneutical Key to a Feminist Theologian’s Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Work* (Amsterdam: Universiteit Van Amsterdam, 2006), 204.
for the divine origin, instead of the maternal. By bringing the woman back into relation with the man as a subject in her own right, the Christ figure no longer has to incarnate the metaphysical absolution of flesh and word for all men and women.

Clearly, Irigaray rejects an incarnation and resurrection of another “supra-sensory” God, or a crossing-over to another life, which closes off the space-time in which the divine can occur and within and between bodies.\(^{58}\) Her remedy will be the development of gender with an infinite horizon for each. The refusal to do so is the hatred of the “other” and of the self as the other.\(^{59}\)

The spiritualization of two genders would mark, according to Irigaray, “... the place where spirit entered human nature, the point in time when the infinite passed into the finite, given that each individual of a gender is finite potentially infinite in his or her relation to gender.”\(^{60}\) The use of spirit (\textit{Geist}) within this conversation of Hegel’s natural and ethical consciousness means more than the words alone convey. Indeed, Irigaray is critiquing a historical, natural, ethical, and ideological dismissal of a finite group of sexed people categorically subsumed and premised upon the predilection for a self-perpetuating male identity, genealogy, and his infinite relationship to God (preference for vertical transcendence), where woman is a mere by-product of that narrative and (his)tory of philosophy and religion.

Indeed, man’s vertical transcendence as a spiritual orientation perpetuates this sublation of difference, precluding dialogue and foreclosing difference. This is why her

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\(^{58}\) She writes, “Might the effect of the Christian message depend upon the degree in which it is being constantly repressed? With the ‘Good News’ of the incarnation being constantly misunderstood, censored, rejected, forgotten. Always aiming to be overcome in the anticipation of a resurrection after death, in the hope of another life?” Ibid., 185.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Irigaray, SG, 139.
incessant theorization of a woman’s gender, genealogy, and infinite is not an essential language for women’s status as goddesses or matriarchs. Instead, divine woman signifies a radical disruption in the flow of a singular sexuate idealism that found its own self-justification for egregious ethical action via its universal philosophy of right. In contrast, her horizontal transcendence explores the ways beings can relate without the compulsion for vertical hierarchies that dismiss. Instead, the horizontal transcendence she considers is a communion of many physically and culturally asymmetrically different “saints.” Her transcendence isn’t all welcoming and therefore all-encompassing (another kind of wholeness). Instead, the negative will require each gender to be critically reflexive, meaning that it is determined, defined, and revalued as sexuately asymmetrical beings return back to themselves. They then safeguard the individual from the collective, and within this safety, create the conditions of communal life without absorption or isolation from their own gender and other genders. The negative of each gender and their affirmed differences will become the basis for their connection. Therefore, understanding ourselves sexuately, or as natural-cultural-social beings who constitute our identities individually and collectively, we create ideals or universals of/for each gender. These genders, which are not equivalent to cultural gender stereotypes, are closer to the term “generative” or life-giving, and make up the basis for humanity. Faithfulness to a multiplicity of properties and roles within a woman, and yet remaining singular to her gender appears, for Irigaray, to be the spiritual task for women. But a sexuate monopoly of spiritual becoming overtakes this difference in several ways: the preference for words (rather than silence), and the hatred of mother (rather than reverence for father) and the preference for the immaterial soul (rather than the material body).
3.1. The Dominance of Words

One way Irigaray proposes that sexuate (gendered) subjectivity remains singular religiously is via the fetishization of language and words in spiritual practices and legal enforcement. She calls such a privileging of language “subject-object language” which she differentiates from a “language of intersubjectivity of relations between subjects.” The former she understands to control malevolently religious thinking and the latter she argues urgently needs to be developed. Within a paradigm of subject-object language women will despise their own bodies in comparison with “spirit,” “language,” or “logos,” terms she argues that were developed only for those who benefit from such thinking. Given her remarks on the gendered markers within language (male, female, and neuter words), Irigaray argues that we are already forced into a sexed preference for male markers (particularly in her native French). The dominant spiritual tradition within the West that still fills our cultural matrix of the divine is theism, or a belief in an absolute God. She explains, “This same sex has in fact taken over the most highly valued truths: God in most, or even all, languages today is a masculine noun.” Man takes up all the important markers with his gender and leaves the remainder for a woman’s gender. The supposed neuter, via terms like duty or objective detachment from sexual bias, are actually neutered laws in service of male gender, as most laws protect his divine authority, rights, and property, of which woman is the double, shadow, or object of his gender. Any departure from such male-controlled gendered thinking in religion is still in relation to the term or idiom of male theism (God), such as atheism, non-theism, or polytheism. Undoubtedly one of the

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61 Irigaray, KW, 160
62 Ibid.
63 Irigaray, SG, 173. She also writes that sun is also a masculine noun, and in countries where the moon is important, it too is masculine.
most powerful organizations of Western theism is Christianity, a tradition rested upon and advanced by words, texts, and dogmas. It is not surprising that dominant sexuate relationship within this tradition is singular: the Father and the Son and sacredly guarded with its sexual preference for the male gender.

In Sexes and Genealogies she explains this connection between the male gender, God, and word: “We women, sexed to our gender, lack a God to share, a word to share to become. Defined often as the 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.”\(^{64}\) In these lines Irigaray weaves together the Aristotelian division of substance from form, flesh from word, and female from male incarnation. Arguing for a radical alterity of female otherness, as previously argued, isn’t an essential identity, but a performative disruption of subjectivity itself. Via the negative, she forms a subjectivity out of subsistence of identity, the no place, non-location of women’s identity within a patriarchal metaphysical structure. In the same way, her call for divine women may be understood as a disruption of the word, its sexuate wholeness, and its absolute God, in order to permit a negative of female incarnation in the most positive sense to emerge. The phrase “divine women” connotes a finite horizon of alterity, difference in cultural and physical morphology, and difference of rhythm, a deliberate trope she uses to evidence a physical or material difference that may exist or subsist that patriarchal regimes of power tend to ignore.

3.2. Mother to Monster

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 71.
A second powerful motif she understands to condemn or deny sexuate difference is the cultural and mythological hatred of the mother, or a vertical genealogy of mother to daughter that stands in the way of the necessary Oedipal triangulation of man’s infinite. Irigaray speculates that the symbolic forgetting of mother is typified in the cutting of the umbilical cord, or the physical bond between child and mother (body), a cord the father (language) often severs. What is left is the hole in the belly of the body, a hole to remember the sacrifice of language over body. Mother, like the earth, becomes the substratum for the male to delineate a sacred space or hole in the earth to offer sacrifices. Women are tolerated in these sacred spaces as non-active by-standers. Throughout history and across religious boundaries, reproductive rights have been revered and guarded. Fertility gods and goddesses often require alarming sacrifices in order to ensure the rhythm of life continues unhindered. While the power of reproduction is venerated, Irigaray argues, the bodies of women who embody reproduction have largely, at best, been tolerated, dismissed or forgotten, and at worst, murdered. In the psychoanalytic cultural tradition, which we in the West particularly inherit as part of our cultural milieu, the penis or phallic symbol has become the point of all envy and the center of language, the instrument of power to dominate maternal power. Why is maternal power so feared?

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65 In Je, Tu, and Nous Irigaray writes that women are in need of a civil law which protects their lives and identities. She claims that they are often treated as “hostages of the reproduction of the species.” But their right to life is often ignored. She calls for penalties for domestic violence, partial and provisional protection of abortion rights, protection from abusive pornography, and examination of the use of a woman’s body, image, and language as form of discrimination. She notes the kidnapping, murder, and exploitation of children, often referred to as the “fruits” of a woman’s labor. These reasons form a partial list of why she argues women need greater civil representation of their own. Irigaray, JTN, 78-9.
Mythologies of human becoming, from the ancient to the Greek, portray woman as a monstrous deity, a feared thing. In the Babylonian mythology of the *Enuma elish* Tiamat, a bloated female dragon, symbolizes chaos and the origin of all life. When her saltwater mingles with the fresh water of her lover and child, Apsu, the co-mingling becomes the substance from which the gods, her children, originate. In order to avenge her husband’s murder at the hands of his children, she attempts to kill her rival children through the efforts of her new consort and son, Kingu. Marduk, another young god, opposes her power and in battle, slices her in half like a clamshell. From the two halves of her dead carcass he orders the separation of the sky and sea. Her tears become the source of the life-giving Tigris River that flows through the ancient region. Other mother-goddesses-murderesses include Euripides’ Agave, the mother of Dionysus who, cursed by her husband Zeus, in madness, tears apart her son thinking him a wild beast. As already recounted, *The Odysseys’* Clytemnestra murders her husband, Agamemnon, who at the conclusion of his nearly twenty-year absence sacrifices their daughter, Iphigenia, in order to make safe passage home. Their son Orestes must kill his mother in order to reclaim the rule of the father.

The fear, hatred and mythology of motherhood and woman, according to Irigaray, are not the true stories of woman or mother. She urges, “it is a matter of urgency not to submit to a desubjectivized social role, that of the mother, governed by an order subordinated to a division of labour – man produces/woman reproduces – which confines us to a mere function.” At the same time she is careful to say that one does not have to renounce being a woman in order to be a mother, nor does one have to renounce being a

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67*Irigaray, IR, 42*
mother in order to be a woman. What she does suggest is that women reappropriate these cultural images, “engendering” or “bearing” something other than children into the world: “love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious.” She wants women to be intimately connected to their female genealogies, which include mother, grandmother, great-grandmothers and daughters, giving the symbolic and cultural relationships between and among women new life and new meaning. These genealogies are a vertical transcendence, but one toward their gender or generative humanity, rather than an absolute theism or the(a)ism. To reclaim and reappropriate these relationships would be tantamount to “shaking the foundations of patriarchy.”

“Why can’t a woman cut her own umbilical cord?” seems to be a question Irigaray posits. Clearly, the ties of dependency cannot nor should they be held indefinitely, but the first breath of the baby could be a unique moment for self-autonomy of the mother and the child, where dependency moves into interdependency, and borders are established in order to assure the flourishing of two individuals who are free at last to breathe together. Ensuring the species does not merely mean engendering children, but the preservation of human life implies, “life endowed with consciousness, with soul,” and this task belongs to women as well as men. A woman’s role isn’t to bring bodies into the world for men to educate; it is the commission of both men and women “to engender children who are both natural and spiritual.” The spiritual tasks are the interior places for self and thus the

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68 Ibid., 43.
70 Ibid., BEW, p. 78
71 Ibid.
flowering of difference in human genders and relations with other others, sentient and non-sentient.

3.3. *The Sacred Body and Breath*

According to Irigaray our ethic of disregard for mother and confusion of self with other can correlate to our breathing. She notes the weakness of our breath; she claims our breathing encroaches on others and becomes confused with others. In so doing, we fail to safeguard our own life. Instead, she argues that we aggregate into groups, where we begin to participate in a sexual division of breathing, particularly in the family: “This breathing remains closer to nature—to the mother, to woman, to the family—or closer to culture—to social or civil life, more tied to the father, to the masculine world in our tradition.”72 This division then further severs the body from the spirit. She laments a separation between the corporeal and spiritual life, and insists both participate in the flourishing of one’s life and becoming, particularly when associated with breath.73

She laments this spiritual quest that leaves the body behind, as she writes, “The culture that we have been taught says that it is necessary to despise the body in order to be spiritual; the body would be the nature that we have to surpass in order to become spirit, in order to become soul.”74 Rather than overcoming the body, she urges a transformation of the breath, and instead of breathing to survive, she suggests a breathing that connects the words we speak to our heart and thoughts.75

When Irigaray writes about the tradition that separates the body from the practice of the soul, I suggest she refers to a Western Christian tradition that she believes

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72 Ibid., 75.
73 Ibid., 75.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 76.
mistakenly syncretizes Christian belief with Greek theology and philosophy, primarily the
dualism of body and spirit or body and soul. Gnosticism, a doctrine of salvation by
knowledge, influenced early Christianity, heightening a disdain for the material body while
elevating a reverence for the immaterial soul. Only those who were spiritual had the spark
of the spirit to apprehend the gnosis, the secret spiritual knowledge necessary to free the
spirit from its imprisonment in the material human body, where it is subject to the needs
and passion of the flesh.

Gnostic myths (like many religious mythologies) are difficult to clearly interpret as
they can dismantle and aid feminist outcomes. The myths revolve around the female figure
of Sophia, the emanating eternal life whose desire cast her out of Pleroma (Gnostic heaven)
and gave birth to God. As one sources writes, “Sophia is thus simultaneously part of
patriarchal myths that devalue women (she is the cosmic ‘fall’ just as Eve is the material
‘fall’) and represents liberation from them.” The link between knowledge and the divine
has been a discussion of fervent feminist debate, and writers like Michèle Le Doeuff have
noted the link between original sin and the desire for knowledge, a position that has
historically limited women’s access to knowledge based upon religious authority.
Knowledge was considered elsewhere, and women lacked the spiritual and material
authority to harness, gather, comprehend, or disseminate it.

But Irigaray’s work brings the body to the fore as the central point of spiritual
ideality and the breath as the passageway between exterior and interior, between natural

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or material substance and spiritual substance, between affection for the self and affection for the other. Indeed she will confound the logic of the same with a cultivation of perception, touch, love, sexuality, and sensuous language. I want to suggest that an Irigarayan reading affirms women's knowing as it revalues the material maternal body out of the wreckage of the phallogocentric symbolic and imaginary, which she deconstructs to reveal a positive horizon for women and their subjective ideality. Irigaray's notion of breath is a vital contribution in that it affirms the body as the site of spiritual knowing and becoming. The body and its breath are the porous and circulating location of interior and exterior knowledge of the self, the other, and the world. And such spiritual and material knowing is the *site par excellence* for knowing, being, and becoming that resists the logic of the same.

4. *Multiplicity of Affection: Love of Self and Love for Other*

   But as argued, Irigaray’s writings on religion are not merely private spiritual practices, they are ways to establish ethical-spiritual relations with others. In this section I expand the importance of Irigaray’s definition of the self a crucial component by which we can ethically relate to others. As mentioned, Irigaray’s chief work is to develop the possibilities for the other gender to articulate itself, philosophically and religiously. I surmise that Irigaray supposes infinite relations to correspond with a sense (or affection) of self, a self in relation to others and a self alone. Originally, Irigaray senses a multiplicity within each person, an interior affection for the self and an affection for others. Particularly, she examines how an adolescent would develop this different sense of gender and she lists the following: “It is rise to the time of love: having a body to sanctify body: to sanctify for oneself, and for the other; It is to know how to hold dialogues with one’s gender
and with the other gender respecting their corresponding limits; It is to receive the grace of potentially being two in oneself: in love, in pregnancy, and becoming capable of sharing this grace with an other . . .”79 In this passage I hear Irigaray invoking how a young person can sanctify, or set apart, one’s own body, but for one’s self and for an other. True to her spiritual analysis, we learn to speak anew, using words to bridge rather than enclose; and we are capable to receive and extend a gracious twoness.

What will safeguard this passageway between self and other, gendered same and gendered other, and love between self and others, will be an unfolding according to a “unity of belonging to a gender,”80 or, Irigaray writes, “… the woman that she is.”81 Rather than an infinite male God, she is seeking a female infinite or universal on the level of sexuate difference. To be clear, this isn’t a romanticism of nature or a woman’s body. She writes without the development of a gender, woman would be subjugated to nature, to the evolution of her body, and man’s gender.82 To develop a sense of gender is beyond simple biological destiny or anatomical essentialization, as some have criticized her work to convey. The sustaining of this alternate gender means the sustaining of other ways of speaking, knowing, and being, such as dialogue rather than dogma. If we do not underscore and safeguard these differences, we are in danger of vilifying, denying, and dominating them, the Hegelian master-slave paradigm of self and other she is seeking to move beyond. Indeed, recognizing the differences is the basis of human fertility, not human reproduction, but fertility difference that creates the conditions of possibility for love to and with others and the self.

79 Irigaray, KW, 160.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
But since the female “she” as subject “I” continues to be denied, much of her project is to help women understand and sustain this “I/she” subject in order that full intersubjectivity may flourish. But the “I/he” model is one that masters over others, hardly the answer for budding intersubjectivity. Instead, she argues that women need an interior life that safeguards and sustains them, especially given the powerful culture of masculine ideals, heterosexual attraction, pregnancy, and the strength of maternal love. A man’s interior life, signified often by the term “soul” connotes an interior life that transcends toward the heavens and seeks fulfillment and unity with a God/Father/Son/Spirit. But Irigaray’s interior relation isn’t other-worldly; it is connected to the phenomenal world of mind and body. It is an orientation to the world through minds and bodies that are generatively (gendered) asymmetrical to one another.

It is now unsurprising that her trope for gendered spirituality at the level of universality will reconfigure old terms, echoing a residue of the past, but subverting them in new ways. Such an exemplar of her strategy details well with regard to her work on the virgin and the annunciation.

4.1. Rethinking the Virgin

Irigaray writes that we need a new kind of virginity, a safeguarding of the twoness in one body. Her virginity is not in relation to men’s sexual desire, or the commodification of women’s sexual reproduction as a form of exchange. Rather, her virginity is “… a return of the feminine to the self, a spiritual interiority of woman, capable of staying woman and of becoming more and more woman …”\(^8^3\). She continues to explains this kind of virginity as, “It is to give oneself a feminine mind or soul, an internal dwelling, which is not only

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\(^8^3\) Ibid., 161
physical but also spiritual: linked to breath, to speech, to the mind (italics mine).” I want to note the use of her word “dwelling,” which may be a nod to Heidegger’s dwelling. Much of Irigaray’s work has been to theorize the idea of place or space for a sexuate ontology of difference. The first place for woman, has been to understand or develop a place for herself within herself (twoness in one body), or an interior place or spiritual dwelling that requires attention and priority, a place where women can return to themselves, which permits exterior relations to be fostered without fusion or fissure to and with others. These are places of spiritual shelter.

Therefore, physical space isn’t enough, political space isn’t enough. Spiritual space involving breathing, words, and the mind help make this place of interior life. It is a dwelling that requires women to have a political right to a physical space and the spiritual wherewithal to nurture it within themselves as well. It is not possible to share in love with a partner or children, without this first faithfulness to the interior life of the woman. It is not possible to argue for political rights with others if women do not develop their interior self and, in response, they must be faithful to its “otherness” or sacred pathways beyond the symbolic male divine avatar. To borrow from Aristotle, the political animal requires the depth to be a spiritual animal, and all the genders, rooted in exterior and interior relations, create a fullness of life, diversity, and sustainability. It is an invisible and earthly interior soul sustained via the breath and the mind. It is this spiritual interiority or centeredness that makes mutuality authentic and rights meaningful. Culturally and politically, much of this interior life can be ignored since its markers are internal (they resist the economy of

84 Ibid.
ocular privilege) and are silent, sustained via a strategy of invisibility: breathing and the relation between breath and the mind.

4.2 A Virginal Relation to Breath

Spiritual feminine virginity thus becomes a new way to understand the annunciation in the Christian tradition, where formerly, a woman understood the story as Mary receiving word from a divine messenger of her immaculately conceived pregnancy, and thus glad for her divine stature as the mother of God. Instead, Irigaray re-reads this as a woman selecting to have a child (gives birth with her body) once she can share a language with the other, which first requires a kind of “spiritual interiority” (“faith to herself in love, in generation”) within herself for such a sharing to occur.85

In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray resists the typical portrayal of Mary as the silenced mother, the divine vessel of the Christ.86 Instead, she connects her spiritual mystery away from the son-man, and with the more ancient story of being a woman, the “m” or “ohm” from which all life flows from the lips/tongue (perhaps an intentional allusion to her section in *Martine Lover* titled “Veiled Lips”?), which may be read as distinguished from the western fetish for the male sacred phallus/word. As previously noted,87 in *Marine Lover* she suggests that the divine for Mary, occurs “near at hand,” which she contrasts with “God . . . found only in Distance.”88 Irigaray observes Western theology’s attempt to keep her a “receptive-passive female extra,” or a “chalice,” but Irigaray heralds her as a “divine source.”89 Irigaray does not elide that, within the tradition, Mary is also

85 Ibid., 152..
86 Irigaray, SG, 115.
87 See section 3 The Male Word: Sexuate Theism
88 Irigaray, ML, 171.
89 Ibid., 172.
immaculately conceived, capable of prophecy, and it is her flesh that is chosen, which Irigaray wonders, may be due to her ability to perceive ("listens silently," “feel the music of the air trembling”).

Irigaray portrays a woman engaged in her bodily senses and thus aware of the proximity to herself, and thus to the proximity of the other, even the divine other. She describes the virgin as “sensitive,” “open,” aware of even the most delicate vibrations, and thus capable of guarding the spiritual or divine life, a co-creator of a fleshly Christ.

In an important essay, “The Redemption of Women,” which first appeared in *Le Souffles des Femmes*, and is reprinted in *Key Writings*, Irigaray offers a substantive re-reading of the Catholic perspective on incarnation, thus speaking directly to her own religious origins, while attentive to other religious traditions as well. She writes the essay in order she may, “... progress towards a more accomplished feminine identity.” But rather than reflect on the son, she turns our attention to the mother. She re-reads the iconography of the annunciation of Mary with the markers of the Eastern yoga tradition in order to uncover what Western thinking may try to exclude, a feminine interiority, a universal apart from the universal transcendence of the Absolute Father. She writes:

> In the tradition of yoga, one would say that the *chakra* designated by the iconography of the being that of the heart, breathing, but also in some of hearing and speaking, is situated at the junction between the shoulders, there where the ray of the sun, the word of the 'Father' or of the angel, song of the bird touch, directly or indirectly, Mary's body. Mary often has the hands

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90 Ibid., 172, 173, 175-6.
91 Ibid., 176.
92 Irigaray, KW, 151.
crossed on this place. The spiritual child would be therefore be engendered both by the body and by words. This concerns two *chakras* in the body especially: that of elementary vitality and that in which breathing, heart, hearing, word, and even sight gather.\(^9\)

In a patriarchal Christian rendering, the inflection is on the Divine Father mediating the word, identifying himself with the masculine gender, engendering the divine child/son. But in Irigaray’s re-reading Mary’s virginal breath, not the word, anchors the account: “To be chaste would be to keep the *chakra* of breathing free and alive, to keep a part of breath available for a relation of interiority with the self and for a language of communication and exchange with one’s own gender and that of the other gender: a language of desire, not only of needs.”\(^9\) Mary emerges as an agent, able to “hear” the message, to “sing” her response, and to “ponder” all these things in her heart.

In order for Mary to be a divine mother, the Catholic tradition teaches she had be begotten without sin, which signals a daughter (Mary) who requires a mother (Anne), often overlooked in Christian genealogies that often record patrilineal heritage alone. What Irigaray also notes is the record of Mary’s friendship with other women, such as her cousin Elizabeth, as part of the annunciation story, thus affirming Irigaray’s triangulation of female matrilineal relations, gendered relations with others of the same gender, and an interior life of the woman. The annunciation no longer becomes a story of patriarchal mediation of fathers and their language. With an Irigarayan twist, it becomes a new telling of how women can engender their virginity and love for self, other, the divine. Irigaray’s version of

\(^9\) Ibid., 162.
\(^9\) Ibid.
chastity would be to render one’s self chaste to keep the chakra of breathing alive and free the self and connection with others. She speaks of desire that moves beyond needs.\textsuperscript{95}

Irigaray suggests that Mary is the chosen mother, not because for her virginal relationship to a physiological hymen,\textsuperscript{96} but because of her virginal relationship to breath and the exchange or words that occurs before and after the announcement. In Between East and West, a later account, she writes,

Mary, the Tradition teaches us, would atone for Eve’s offense. I understand the message in this way. Eve wants above all to know, which includes knowing things that have a relation to the divine. Now God cannot be reduced to knowledge. Wanting to appropriate knowledge of the divine, Eve consumes a breath that is irreducible to knowledge. Conserving her virginal breath, free and available, Mary retains a relation to life, to the soul, to love, particularly divine love, that is neither appropriation nor consumption of the self, nor of the other, nor of God.\textsuperscript{97}

Irigaray’s reading of the Eve and Mary relationship positively notes how the corporeal is spiritual. Irigaray has identified the soul as tantamount with the breath, and to lose one’s breath can be understood as losing her soul.\textsuperscript{98} Women leave their homes, their husbands, to recover their beloved, the natural and spiritual source of divine life. The unique cultivation of natural breathing as a spiritual orientation allows a physiological function to take on a religious meaning. Mary conserves her breath in a way that allows for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[95] Ibid.
\item[96] Ibid., 152.
\item[97] Irigaray, BEW, 78.
\item[98] In the introduction to Part IV: Spirituality and Religion in Key Writings she says, “Our traditions tells us that the woman lover in the Song of Songs leaves her home to search for her beloved. This is also the case for feminine mystics—and for almost all women—who run the risk of so losing their breath, their soul.” Irigaray, KW, 147.
\end{footnotes}
her life and soul to be seen together, and therefore life and soul must be guarded for the self, the other, and the divine. The self is not lost or sacrificed, but like breathing, a portion retained for the self, through the body and exhaled and shared with the other, both human and divine. Irigaray observes that women may be the best spiritual mediators in a multicultural era because of their “...capacity for sharing before and beyond any image, word, ritual or representation.”

If Irigaray is correct, then beginning with Eve and extending to Mary is a consecration of breath, life, and spirit that offers the reader a glimpse of humanity with deity in bodily form, without a theo(a)phany outside of human experience. In both female exemplars we see life, breath, and spirit cooperating in corporeal form and motherhood becomes a secondary function of the woman (ishah) or the young girl (virgin), neither of them referencing the man as the source of that ground of being. Instead, it is the air (elemental), breath (ruach), or spirit (pneuma) that distinguishes their position and role in the story of humanity. Could breathing well become the new indicator of sanctification, a form of spiritual renewal from within, which veers away from the language of patriarchal orthodoxy, but permits a neo-orthodoxy of body in relationship to the elemental to be the central stage for the drama?

5. *A New Eschaton*

In the Christian tradition, Irigaray provides insights into how we can re-read the stories of patriarchy anew. Her quibble has not been to dethrone the absolute God of theism *per se*, but to discover how different relations to infinite universals help orient us to the world, to ourselves, our human responsibilities and why these differences should be

99 Ibid.
sustained, cultivated, and recognized, lest we build a kingdom of political rights and lose our spiritual sexuate souls. God is dead as much as the masculine ideal seeks to overtake the whole of the religion. But Irigaray reads persistently, even in the Christian account, a subversive hum, rhythm, or echo of another way to read these sacred texts.

Much of her work notes an advent of the age of the Spirit and the bride, a Johannine reference to a new age where alliances will be made without regard to social constructions of marriage that presently exist. Irigaray has created such a compelling case of the vice-grip of male sexuality that one wonders if woman can be without reducing herself to the reflection of the male gaze. Can Alice stop seeing herself in the looking glass, holding the glass, or being the looking glass? Does bi-multi-sexuality exist, and if so, where, what, and how? To do so, one must remove the phallus as the master signifier, which has startling ramifications for religion and theology, a discourse she argues that colludes with metaphysics to yield a unification of Being, a first cause, a first principle, a Deity which subsumes all others.

Can non-phallic-centric religious discourses emerge as significant cultural discourses, and if so, what does it mean for women, science, and philosophy? In an interesting and often misunderstood maneuver, Irigaray does not replace phallic religion with nonphallic religion, thus creating an alternate female master signifier. As stated, matriarchy does not replace patriarchy. Instead, she considers the possibility of two religious discourses, one unifying and phallic and another that is multiple, diverse, and perhaps the abyss of the waters of chaos, the very notion that those who perpetuate the dominance of a master signifying religious discourse abhor. She allows the mystery of darkness, plurality, and heterogeneity to exist with the discourses we already know. She
isn’t trying to replace or reverse phallic religious discourses with an alternate, or female
religion for male religion. But as I have argued previously, she is not advocating a switching
of places within the universal, but the notion of the universal itself. In her words, “For it is
not a matter of changing this or that within a horizon already defined as human culture. It
is a question of changing the horizon itself—of understanding that our interpretation of
human identity is both theoretically and practically wrong.”100 As I read Irigaray, we
wrongly define human identity, and our present notion of the divine serves this erroneous
view of human identity.

Fundamentally, she is a genealogist, looking for an ancestry or origin. She traces
another position that may exist and asks individuals and communities for mutuality,
respect, and attention to the divide between two genders. She asks that the different
genders, which she names masculine and feminine, respect, and touch in mutual alliances
that yield common flourishing. By respecting these differences, female autonomy, differing
ontologies and trajectories, organic and nonorganic matter can flourish and share the
world and universe. I believe she identifies these genders as being male and female in
order to demand that embodiment be central in metaphysics, reducing the dominance of
the mind over the body, and, thus, giving a phenomenological feature to her work, which is
psychoanalytically framed.

5.1 Be(coming) to/in Love

Irigaray’s account of gender at the level of universal is a criticism of the Hegelian
ethical structure itself. While Hegel’s ethical structure aimed at a “singular, individual, but
not the contingent individual,” Irigaray suggests that “This noncontingent individual is

100 Irigaray, ILTY, 20.
traditionally the province of woman, guardian of gender.”\textsuperscript{101} Within the Hegelian ethical family, women become the divine guardians of contingency and the natural family, pure passivity, and a male singular individual must abandon natural contingency in order to become an active citizen of the State. Like Antigone, woman is entombed within this structure that denies her singularity and distrusts any behavior that leaves the realm of natural immediacy (unless she behaves ironically as Antigone does, behaving “like a man” in order to strengthen her role in the realm of natural immediacy and contingency). If we fail to sexually differentiate the structure of the universal itself, women are left with a gendered identity that she claims leads toward a false liberation, where one achieves feminist ends if women attain, “… an undifferentiated state of universality to be shared in a masculine or neutral world.”\textsuperscript{102} She identifies such a neutral and asexual community as “disturbing . . . a society (which has lost) sight of the line separating life from death.” She identifies a culture of life as sexed, but a culture of death she claims needs no such sexual distinction.

I understand Irigaray to establish a universal positive feminine sexuate ontology whose horizon is life, creation, and fidelity to one’s body and the socio-cultural differences that transform that existence. If Heidegger’s project articulated authentic existence as “being-toward-death,” Rachel Jones characterizes Irigaray’s project of sexuate ontology as a “being-towards-life”\textsuperscript{103} which begins with a person’s relation to the mother. I would add

\textsuperscript{101} Irigaray, SG, 112.
\textsuperscript{102} Irigaray, DBT, 37.
\textsuperscript{103} Rachel Jones notes the Heideggerian approach of Irigaray’s project, a thesis I also suggest frames Irigaray’s work. Jones explains, “To elucidate Irigaray’s concept of genre, it is worth returning briefly to her relation to Heidegger. For Heidegger, an authentic mode of existence, that is, one characterized by the fullest inhabiting of what it means to be, involves taking up an active relation to the possibility of one’s not-being and appropriating the (always ungraspable) possibility of one’s own death as one’s own in what he calls ‘being-
that if we consider Irigaray’s emphasis on love and becoming, it may be more Irigarayan to rephrase “being-towards-life” as a “be(coming) to/in love,” which ultimately recognizes her thesis that sexuate life moves beings “on the way to love,” as we are “in life/love” respecting the space between us. Living beings, not men and women in the abstract, originate from a mother’s body, and thus, the bodily and cultural experiences of being born male or female (taking into account one’s body and specific genealogy), being naturally and spiritually like or unlike the mother, figure distinctively into constructing a “relational identity” which informs how we love, procreate, desire, and think. Being born a woman is as Simone de Beauvoir noted, a “passive” construction of woman as Other. But Irigaray refigures this passivity into an active “fidelity” where gender is “regulated on the basis of my natural identity,” but is also “spiritualized” in order to create, “... a liberation of the reality of sex and gender from subjection to a metaphysics or religion that leaves them to an uncultured and instinctual fate.”

It is this bridge between nature and culture that she will forge. It is necessary for any genuine alliance between the sexes to affirm this difference. She argues “Man has not pulled himself out of his immediate-being-there to consider himself as half of humanity.” She writes further, “The subjectivity of man and that of woman are structured starting from a relational identity specific to each one, a relational identity that is held between nature and culture that assures a bridge starting from which it is possible to pass from one to the other while respecting them both.”

Irigaray’s proposition is of course to retain “natural immediacy” and spirit. This alliance of towards-death'. However, as we have seen, Irigaray’s sexuate ontology takes birth, rather than death, as the horizon of Being.” Jones, *Irigaray*, 191-192.

On the Way to Love is of course her titled work and brings back the ethic of love toward self and the other. In the next chapter we will see that be(com)ing together with others in love includes diverse non-human others.

Irigaray, ILTY, 39.

Ibid.
particularities, would replace our traditional notion of marriage or love between man and woman, where natural or drive-related attractions culminate in contracts of property and divisions of tasks according to cultural partitions of sexual labor that produce children in service of the State.

She argues that genital sexuality is actually a ‘partial’ sexuality that is a slave to technique. She explains, “Partial sexuality touches, hears, sees, breathes, and tastes of ‘technique,’ of something prefabricated, reliant on technical means. . . . Today man would like to be equal to a machine, . . . a sexuality of drives, an energy governed by tensions and discharges, in good or bad working order. . . .”107 Rather than love as physical or natural inclination toward sexual activity, love, in an Irigarayan scheme, indwells the person as divine, helps the individual to not overly regard immediate attraction and allows the person the capacity to become.108

Simply, two subjects constitute the world, according to Irigaray, who both regard the other as wholly other, not other of the same. The chief problem is when both sexes are faithful to their gender and one sex dominates the other, obliterating or ignoring another alterity, and failing to tend to this difference of mutuality. Indeed, according to Irigaray, man has concealed sexual indifference through his many dwellings: woman, language, house, or city. His longing for a first and last dwelling prevents his ability to access the threshold of flesh. According to Irigaray, he cannot live or meet with the other as, “His nostalgia for a first and last dwelling prevents him from meeting and living with the other.

107 Irigaray, E, 143.
108 Irigaray, ILTY, 150.
Nostalgia blocks the threshold of the ethical world."\textsuperscript{109} She concludes that man uses the “currency-tool” to reside and dwell with the other, but the money cannot furnish life.\textsuperscript{110}

To turn away from a “being-toward-death” and cultivate a “be(coming) to/in love,” her resolutions will deal with the countless themes of life, starting with the autonomy of male and female genders. She argues the male cannot cling to the maternal body and call himself master of humanity, nor can he subsume her body as his substratum for creation. With female gender autonomy, he cannot assign the female the following roles: to reproduce babies; to keep his dwelling tidy and supplied; to guard the dead as a mute tomb for the sign-body, or keeper of the hearth; to become a kind of mechanical doll for lovemaking with no affect save seductiveness; and to become the incarnation of man’s or mankind’s fantasies, a living sculpture, or goddess.\textsuperscript{111} I would add that the freedom of autonomy is what is at stake. Some of the listed items may be necessary and positively assumed as domestic labor that can have meaning.\textsuperscript{112} But what is not necessary is for one sex to prescribe for the other sex is its identities, behaviors, or customs for life. What is needed is an alliance or exchange of shared lives where the intentions and limited particularities of the sexes can agree to come together for a good that is common but not singular.

But the exacerbating problem is that we are trapped within a discursive world whose symbols, laws, and language ignore the natural, cultural, and spiritual reality of a female other that is other. According to Irigaray's research, the effects of sexual

\textsuperscript{109} Irigaray, E, p 142.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} I am paraphrasing her list for brevity. See Irigaray, E.146.
\textsuperscript{112} I refer to the excellent article of Wendell Berry, "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine," \textit{What Are People For?} (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 178-196.
indifference are felt in at least two profound ways: first, the poor mental health of our humanity and its psychic neurosis of a severed or schizophrenic self, where a man’s diseased memory forgets the flesh and moves toward the machine.\textsuperscript{113} Second is the social crisis or those competing to have access to discourses that produce truth.\textsuperscript{114} Third is the end of culture or the death of God.\textsuperscript{115} For Irigaray, the death of God means a cessation of abuse by those who use absolute transcendental signifiers to kill the becoming of peoples.\textsuperscript{116} To posit a truth claim, an individual often attempts to distance his or her bias, such as sex, and defers to a neutral or neuter “one.” In this supposed neutral stance, women are kept at the threshold, retrieving the utterances of speech that are almost devoid of meaning: “they chatter, gossip, laugh, shout. . . . Whatever the deep significance of this denunciatory practice may be, women wish to achieve a praxis of meaning.”\textsuperscript{117}

To share means for Irigaray that we understand and identify what has been ours, what the other may possess, and what it means to hold some of these things together. As woman has remained in the communication of man, a message rather than a messenger, she has attempted to reproduce or mimic the closure of the male ontology and his language. Irigaray notes with lament that the ultimate speech direction of the male has been aimed toward God, rather than the female other. The world is a world of language and the male God orders it (at the behest of the male subject). She says, “The creator is at the beck and call of his creature or his creation. . . . No longer by his will, his want. Man has built

\textsuperscript{113} Irigaray, E, 136, 142-144.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{116} She writes, “Does the ’death of God’ not mean, therefore, the end of the security lodged with, of the credit accorded to, those who thus suspend meaning in the letter? Those who immobilize life in something that is merely the trace of life? The preachers of death who paralyze the becoming of peoples? Those who indefinitely repeat the identical, because they are unable to discover difference?” Irigaray, ML, 169.
\textsuperscript{117} Irigaray, E, 138.
himself a world that is largely uninhabitable. A world in his image?” But Irigaray argues that while male language dominates, we have forgotten the voice of those who speak the words. Words cannot be spoken without voice, or the air and body that transmit the words. She says,

   In our culture, the voice has been abandoned to song, as if speech could remain without voice. From the voice of Yahweh to that or those of Antigone, or Persephone, of the Erinyes, the voices have been silenced. The text of the law, of all laws, holds sway in silence. With no trace inscribed in the flesh. Outside of current dialogue. Is law merely the memory of a passage? Awaiting an incarnation? Or reincarnation?

   If God and women have been held within the closure of the male subject, woman has not created her world, her truth, or her mode of questioning the truth, world and the whole. She is merely an object appealing to another object. She is as effective as Echo, trying to speak or ask a question of her own but trapped within the communication of the male speaking subject. For Irigaray, woman, faithful to her gender, has a different basis of language, and therefore has a different relation to being, human and divine. For Irigaray, God has been merely “He who forms the transcendental keystone of discourse used by a single gender, of a monosexed truth,” and for this reason, he should die. Instead, she anticipates the divine return of which Nietzsche and Heidegger obtusely penned, “... the

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118 Ibid., 143
119 Ibid., 141.
120 Ibid., 140.
121 In “Divine Women,” Irigaray traces the writing of Feuerbach and proposes that he understands God as sick or human faith in God waning because there is no faith in the mother of God. She explains, “Feuerbach writes that without the woman-mother (but he seems to take little account of the difference between woman and mother, hence there is no correspondence with a possible state of identity for the woman as woman) there is no God. The mother of God is the keystone of theology, of the Father-son-spirit relationship. Without the mother of God, there can be no God.” Irigaray, SG, 69.
divine return as festival, grace, love, thought.”¹²² This kind of advent is the incarnation or reincarnation of divine women.

6. **Conclusion**

As already elaborated, Irigaray has critiqued the Christic incarnation and instead offers an incarnation of flesh and word in and between sexually different subjects. In this final section I elaborate further how this incarnation furthers ethical relations. The idea of incarnation is one that is used in religious and cultural studies, and its both secular and sacred deployment can help bridge the divide between these positions. In a nonreligious sense, anthropologists use the idea of incarnation to denote a discourse to image the constitution of human identity and subjectivity. I ‘incarnate’ an identity, or as Irigaray explains in “Divine Women,” the serpent-woman is an ‘incarnation’ of Melusine, but she is not just a serpent-woman, she is an intersection of bodily matter and discursive order. Incarnation theology allows us to wrestle with God in flesh, but the flesh, I have argued, is naturally and culturally inscribed with meaning, the divine is informed by sexual difference, but not determined therein. The human and the divine must also be “both/and,” rather than, “either/or.” As Irigaray has conceptualized through her symbolic imagery of female sexual libido, there must be a caressing and touching, but never a subsuming of one against the other. For true difference to be maintained, even notions of the divine and the wo/man must be allowed to find their way home, but not determine what that home may be or look like. Sexual markers, while culturally relevant and vitally important to the human experience, lack uniformity. Rather, they are distinct and rich nuances of difference that are vital to individuation and community flourishing.

¹²² Ibid.
Irigaray’s examination of the Christic incarnation questioned the submission of the flesh to the Word, and instead asked for the Word’s faithfulness to the flesh.\textsuperscript{123} I think Irigaray’s critique questions any orthodoxy that targets or diminishes the world. Simply, orthodoxy ought to nourish us physically and spiritually. With a similar ethos of care for flesh and the Word faithful to the flesh, Irigaray’s incarnation is critical of an authoritative declaration of God’s truth, mimicking God’s gestures, in order to please him, become him, toward an effusion without regard for life itself. Life, as conveyed via the mother, is sadly diminished for the preferable spiritual guise of the power of the father. She suspects within such a discourse, not the glory of God, but the power of the patriarchs, censoring the message of the proliferation, transfiguration, and resurrection of \textit{bodies} in and with the Word. Those patriarchs rightly fear the disclosure of the censored truth that the Christian message might be an invitation to “become shared flesh.”\textsuperscript{124}

I suggest we must allow the messiness of sexual difference to be with our understanding of distinct rights for certain people. We must resist these markers as pre-determinates of what it is or is not to be a woman, or a man, or intersexed in our world, whether that world be noumenal or phenomenal. I believe Irigaray’s scheme when paired with Christian incarnation theology, moves beyond a traditional rendering, offering the space between two distinct selves as sacred or divine. Irigaray has called this sacred space love and reminds the reader that love is a \textit{daemon}, an intermediary, a chiasm, a volume, a fluidity, an irreducible space that creates space. I want to extend her imaginary of love between two lovers whose bodies inform a sexual desire and create a space of love between and among them that is sacred and secular. That is to say, it is actual and spiritual,

\textsuperscript{123} Irigaray, ML, 169.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 170.
as well as, something that the body can experience with the mind, evoking the best within each of us, namely, the true self, or what some may call, the soul.

In my mobilization of Irigaray's theology, the soul or spirit is that which responds to the breath of life and behaves according to the call of love. It is typically apparent to humans when housed within bodies that breathe and becomes visible when love is present with the self and with the other. In my rendering of Irigaray's work, God is love, but love is not God. Love is the relationship that brings human and divine together, and love allows the sexual difference of human and the divine to experience the love of the other in bodily form, dwelling among and with, allowing the veil between heaven and earth to be torn.

Irigaray's spiritual divine incarnating love between sexuately different persons without sacrifice becomes a foundational approach for her ethics which I elaborate more fully in the final chapter. Her spiritual re-reading of theology points toward a way of spiritual nearness with the self, others, and the divine between. When paired with the negative, it directs spiritual affection away from an absolute metaphysical being (God), and instead, allows us to mediate affection and spiritual expression, through sexually different symbols, words, and rituals, rather than a sacrificial mediation. She offers us an ethics of belief without grounding that belief in a single story. This ethics without singularity, an ethics of immaterial belief that connects to corporeal bodies and social symbols, will become an expansive and effusive ideal or ethical principle by which we can assess our moral claims. Irigaray’s humanism is one that takes seriously the existential human experience but can also conceive or imagine ideals that are specific to and effusive of the diverse sexuate bodies that exist, and their relation to the human and non-human world.
Irigaray’s critics note a potential contradiction when she argues for a divine for
women while rejecting an absolute transcendental signifier. That to me is a mistake. As I
read Irigaray, “a sensible transcendental—the dimension of the divine par excellence”\textsuperscript{125} which comes into being when, in the interval, “we discover the divine between-us”\textsuperscript{126} is a quasi-transcendental calling for actualization in as many forms and incarnations as there are people of flesh and blood.

I think Irigaray is useful when we allow her recommendations for self, others, and gender to take root, and grow wildly. As she writes, “This divine is still to be revealed. Which doesn’t mean it can never be expressed. But is always aborted as soon as announced. Never expected or recognized in its coming into the world.”\textsuperscript{127} No person comes from a singularity of sexuality; indeed bodies themselves are historical constructs or artifacts which have meaning only within a cultural matrix of sociology, psychology, and religious belief. Thus, Irigaray is helpful in drawing attention to the body, not as a biological essential or static natural thing, but a site of power and life, an ethic to guide us, repose us to ourselves and one another. Sexual plurality is needed; therefore, plural sexual images are needed within a community of love. That is not to say a heterosexist ideology must be a normative ideal or the logical outcome of Irigarayan thinking. But that sexual difference is a desire to embrace a wholly other and engender something that unites love and words of commitment in a community context. But to say that difference is sexed and that sex and gender are terms which have markers both biological and sociological means is a call to responsible and thoughtful naming of sexual markers which must be expanded, charitably

\textsuperscript{125} Irigaray, ESD, 115
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 13
\textsuperscript{127} Irigaray, ML, 171.
offered, and communally and individually named in trust and love. To be clear, Irigaray’s
term of sex is different than the Anglo-American feminist debate regarding sex and gender
(see chapter 2), and Irigaray’s sexual difference is more a critique against metaphysics, as I
have explored previously. It is a knowing otherwise, or wisdom attentive to the cultural
artifact that is the body, and bodies that nourish life, which is more than reproduction, but
rather, an engendering of a culture of respect for difference and love with difference.

Irigaray has been careful to refuse to say what sexual difference is, and in a
Derridean manner, as a quasi-transcendental has left it open, in play, in the flux, but has
rendered it to be corporeal, psychically and socially experienced, spiritually valuable,
ethically necessary, linguistically relevant, and politically powerful. Her call for divine
women is distinctive in the academy and has spawned new deployments and trajectories as
others refine and expand her notion, but her early work into the field of religion continues
to inspire others to transgress the boundaries of word and flesh, or secular and sacred, and
listen to an “otherness” deep within and all around. These are the lessons an Irigarayan
approach still offers to teach those who will listen. Indeed, Irigaray’s be(com)ing-towards-
love will be the motivating dynamic in my elaboration of an Irigarayan ethic, not only for
interpersonal relationships, but for institutional and international relationships, and in
particular for relating to the host of non-human others—animals, stars, trees, etc.—that
make up our universe. That will be the focus of the final chapter.