Becoming divine
Towards a feminist philosophy of religion

Grace M. Jantzen

Manchester University Press
INTRODUCTION

‘What canst thou say?’
Finding a feminist voice

As long as their situation is apprehended as natural, inevitable, and inescapable, women's consciousness of themselves... is not yet feminist consciousness... Feminist consciousness is the apprehension of possibility. (Bariky 1997: 25)

MARGARET FELL, the feisty champion of Quakers who ascoured seven teenth-century English proprieties by insisting on class and gender equality, once told of how she came to the turning-point which set her on her justice-seeking path. She was brought to confront the question of her own authority: 'You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say?' (Fell [1694] 1995: 20). As she quickly recognized, it was no good knowing only what others have said, no matter how prestigious or authoritative or even religious they were. It was insufficient even if she also knew how they might be criticized. Unless she could find her own voice, discern what she could say, she would be living her life at second hand, speaking in someone else's voice.

The story of the writing of this book is the story of trying to find my own feminist voice in the philosophy of religion. It began as a feminist critique of traditional Anglo-American philosophy of religion, using the standard topics and boundaries of the discipline and attempting to bring a feminist consciousness to bear on them. But that book refused to be written. I wrote hundreds of pages of manuscript several times over in different ways and discarded them all. It was just no good: a prior question would not go away and eventually had to be faced. Why would a feminist start from here - on grounds already chosen on masculinist principles and hardened by well-trodden patriarchal debates? And once I faced that question I had to admit that there could be no good answer, and I was back with the challenge of Margaret Fell: 'what canst thou say?' What would a feminist philosophy of religion look like? Why would there be such a thing - what would be its aim? What would be its topics and problematic? Who could construct it, and from what subject-position? How would the boundaries of the discipline have to be revised? What strategies could be used?

This book is an attempt to respond to those questions, an effort to develop a feminist philosophy of religion in my own voice. As such, it includes critical
response to many of the topics ‘standard’ in Anglo-American philosophy of religion, and a challenge to its boundaries. Its central task, however, is not critical. Rather, I have worked towards the development of a feminist philosophy of religion built upon a feminist religious symbolic and premised upon the possibility of women subjects, albeit discursively formed. I suggest that much of traditional philosophy of religion (and western culture generally) is preoccupied with violence, sacrifice, and death, and built upon mortality not only as a human fact but as a fundamental philosophical category. But what if we were to begin with birth, and with the hope and possibility and wonder implicit in it? How if we were to treat natality and the emergence of this life and this world with the same philosophical seriousness and respect which had traditionally been paid to mortality and the striving for other worlds? My aim in this book is to show that such a feminist approach is philosophically viable, and opens up new ways of considering religion, human flourishing, identity, and difference, and ecological concern.

During the course of this book I explain what I mean by all of this. But one thing is immediately obvious: a feminist discourse in the philosophy of religion, even a symbolic of natality such as I begin to develop, cannot be the work of one person. What I offer is an approach, not the approach to feminist philosophy of religion; and I look forward to the day when feminist philosophy of religion has as many contributors and perspectives as there now are in other fields of study. The fact that this is not now the case shows the acute need to find our own voice in the philosophy of religion. Feminist philosophy of religion is in its infancy in English-speaking countries, and though it promises to become one of the most dynamic areas of the philosophy of religion and indeed of religious studies generally, its work is only beginning (Frankenberg 1994: 2). As this book is going to press, Pamela Anderson has just published the first Feminist Philosophy of Religion (1998). While her approach is quite different from mine, such diversity is to be welcomed as feminists find our philosophical voices.

Feminist scholars are seeking – sometimes inventing – the tools and resources that enable us not only to dismantle the master-discourses in the study of religion in modernity but also to construct new dwelling-places where women can find the space and mutual support which enables struggle for justice. The critiques of modernity developed especially in continental thought, and the rethinking of both secularism and religion which this entails requires an attention to gender which goes much deeper than simple ‘inclusion’ or ‘equal opportunity’, looking rather for radical deconstruction of both religion and secularism to make evident their unacknowledged dependence on alterities of race, gender, and sexuality.

Without a doubt, the dismantling of the master’s house of traditional philosophy of religion is long overdue. The agenda and method of philosophy of religion is heavily male-dominant, and as in other such discourses, serves the interests of the traditional white male elite. With a few notable exceptions, it has ignored feminism almost entirely, and has proceeded with business as usual, with the central debates continuing to be those surrounding the existence of God as conceived of in classical Christianity and how ‘His’ existence can best be defended (Swinburne 1979).
understanding the attributes of God and the coherence of (Christian) theism (Swinburne 1977; Helm 1993), questions of foundationalism and basic beliefs (Plantinga 1986), religious truth, faith, and belief, both within a particular religious tradition and between various traditions (Adams 1987), the way religious language operates (Phillips 1986), and the like. In recent years there has been increasing attention to issues surrounding religious experience (Alston 1991; Pike 1992). as well as to implications of religious experience for interpretation of what religion is and why it is that there are so many different religions (Hick 1989; Wainwright 1995). For the most part, all these philosophers of religion have written with scant reference to issues of gender, race, or sexuality, assuming a universalising tone which is meant to indicate that what they have to say applies equally to all human beings, typically designated as ‘rational agents’, irrespective of their social location. In this way, and without the need for conscious attention on the part of its practitioners, the totalising gesture of philosophy of religion is a gesture of power, which, by ostensibly including all, in fact sets into concrete the gendered tramlines along which thought must run if it is to qualify as ‘proper’ philosophy of religion.

Feminists, however, have been increasingly concerned to call into question the whole idea of universal rationality as it has been constructed in the western philosophical and theological discourses of modernity, and to insist on the importance of social locatedness for all forms of knowledge. Although there are many differences among feminists, there is general agreement that the project of knowledge and how it is to be obtained and evaluated, and by whom, must be reconsidered; and space made for recognition of difference, including gender difference. In the construction of what counts as knowledge, in religion as anywhere else. For such reconsideration and reconstruction, I have used the work of contemporary continental thinkers, though often critically and for ends which were not necessarily their own. I have used the term ‘Anglo-American philosophers of religion’ as a gloss for (primarily) English-speaking/writing philosophers of religion in what is usually called the ‘analytic’ tradition and in contrast to what is often designated ‘continental’ or ‘European’ philosophy. In fact, this is an over-simplification, since there are analytic philosophers of religion on the continent, especially in the Netherlands, and there are a few philosophers of religion in Britain and North America who draw upon continental thought. I have therefore given specific references rather than generalizations; though often these references should be taken to stand as examples of a range of similar views. Nor do I suppose that men and women divide neatly into ‘anti-feminist’ and ‘feminist’ respectively. I have used the term ‘masculinist’ to designate anti-feminist positions, positions against which pro-feminist men are working as actively as are feminist women, often using, as I have done, the ideas and strategies of continental thinkers.

It has been part of my purpose to show that, contrary to what is often assumed in English-speaking contexts, deconstruction is not demolition. Rather, it is a double movement, starting with the careful dismantling of particular structures of thought in order to reveal their underlying but unacknowledged assumptions, and then using that desabilization to create new possibilities which open a passage for thinking
otherwise. Accordingly, I have paid close attention to selected texts and strategies in traditional philosophy of religion to show the masculinist imaginary of death in which they are invested; but I have done so in order to open the way to a feminist symbolic of natality and flourishing, a symbolic of becoming divine. This book is therefore not an explicit critique of every aspect of traditional philosophy of religion, let alone a survey of it, but rather an investigation of some of its underlying masculinist premises and an attempt, thereby, to create the space for alternatives. Moreover, it will be obvious that the work of Luce Irigaray has been of great importance to this project; yet this book should not be read as a study in Irigaray’s philosophy of religion, though such a study would be of great value. Rather, I have used Irigaray’s work, and the work of others such as Julia Kristeva, Adriana Cavarero, and especially Hannah Arendt, to develop my own position as a feminist philosopher of religion. While I find all of these thinkers of great value, it will be obvious that I also differ from them in important ways, as, of course, they do from one another.

The most significant difference is that my approach has inevitably been shaped by my philosophical training and academic life, which has been wholly in the Anglo-American context. Although (contrary to many in that context) I take the work of continental thinkers very seriously, and in this book seek to bring their ideas and strategies to bear on the philosophy of religion, I cannot pretend to be working from within a continental tradition. Rather, this book should be seen as a bridge, a way of making significant aspects of continental thought available to students and teachers of the philosophy of religion in Anglo-American contexts. Thus, my work will use theory and critique as well as deconstruction, operating sometimes from within texts and sometimes at a meta-level. Some of these strategies are more congenial to continental thinkers; some to Anglo-American philosophers of religion: I will try to be clear about when I am doing what. The value of such a ‘hybrid’ approach is that it can serve to make the thought of each accessible to the other. The danger is that I have not always been faithful to the spirit or method of the continental thinkers; I will welcome suggestions that may come for strengthening this side of the bridge.

It would of course be preposterous to suggest that I have created a feminist religious symbolic single-handedly; as I have already said, this could never be the work of one person. Nor, thankfully, does it need to be, since there are many women and men creatively developing a feminist religious symbolic. This is taking place both within the broad contours of christendom (see among many others Heyward 1989; Long 1992; Williams 1993; Resland 1994; Graham 1995; Christ 1997) and beyond it, in terms of ‘thealogy’ and the goddess (Starhawk 1979, 1987; Raphael 1996; Long 1997). For the most part, I have not discussed these various reinterpretations of the divine, since my attention was directed to the philosophical contours of a feminist symbolic rather than to a survey of feminist religious thinkers, and it would have made an already long and complicated book even longer. Yet without their work, my own would be useless, and I acknowledge them with gratitude.
Moreover, such creative effort is not new. The mystics of medieval christendom, for example, especially the women mystics, offered ways of thinking and being which both subverted the dominant religious symbolic and opened creative new paths, paths that were too often blocked by men intent on preserving ecclesiastical boundaries. In my Power and Gender in Christian Mysticism (1995b) I offered a Foucauldian account of the category of ‘mystic’ and showed how women were frequently silenced and sometimes destroyed. Unfortunately, some readers took ‘Foucauldian’ to mean ‘deconstruction’, and ‘deconstruction’ to mean ‘demolition’; and thus assumed that I saw little value in the writings of these medieval women. So far is that from the case that I believe that the writings of these women can be a significant source for a feminist religious symbolic in postmodernity, though this should not be taken anachronistically to mean that they were proto-feminists. Partly because their thought-world was different from ours (not least in that they were not infused with the peculiarly modern virus whose philosophical symptoms are such terms as ‘realism’, ‘evidence’, and ‘justified, true belief’), medieval mystics are worth repeated study as examples of thinking otherwise. Although I have hardly discussed them in this book, I have tried to signal their importance by using something from their writings as the first epigraph of each chapter. I hope in a later project that I may be able to bring together more explicitly the idea of a feminist symbolic of natality and the writings of medieval mystical women, and show how, in a context dominated by death and violence, they kept alive the hope of flourishing embedded in natality.

A note on style, and the book can commence. To reinforce my insistence on the importance of context, I have wherever applicable given the original date of publication of a book in square brackets, as well as the date of the edition I am using in round brackets. Unless otherwise stated, any emphasis found in quotations is in the original. Spelling and capitalization in quotations has normally been changed to British conventions; however, I have not changed ‘man’ and ‘he’ in quotations, since it is often less ‘generic’ than its author might have thought, and I do not wish to give false impressions of inclusiveness. I have, however, sometimes drawn attention to it with a [sic] at its first appearance.
CHAPTER ONE

Becoming divine: aims of a feminist philosophy of religion

God of your goodness give me yourself, for you are enough for me, and I can ask for nothing which is less which can pay you full worship. And if I ask for anything which is less, always I am in want, but only in you do I have everything. (Julian of Norwich [fourteenth century] 1978: 184)

Love of God . . . shows the way. God forces us to do nothing except become. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfilment. (Irigaray [1987] 1991b: 68)

WHAT is the fundamental task of the philosophy of religion? The question receives very different answers, depending on whether one replies from a traditional, Anglo-American approach to the discipline or from a feminist stance informed by contemporary continental thought. And obviously the difference in aim will have vast implications for how each of the topics in the discipline are approached, and even for what those topics should be. For Luce Irigaray, our fundamental moral obligation is to become divine; and the task of philosophy of religion must be to enable that becoming, or else it is ultimately useless. ‘Philosophy’ in its ancient meaning is ‘the love of wisdom’, sophia, which in Greek (as in Hebrew, and many other languages) is female, and divine. According to Irigaray, the wisdom that women and men in the postmodern world most require is the wisdom of becoming divine, without which we ‘shrive and die’.

Irigaray’s exhortation is far removed from the aims normally expressed in Anglo-American philosophy of religion: it is different, too, from the views of many feminists, whether secular or religious. In this chapter I want first to explain in a preliminary way something of what Irigaray means by the idea of becoming divine, and then to contrast this with the aims of traditional philosophy of religion. Insofar as becoming divine is indeed an appropriate aim, I shall show how radically it changes the agenda of philosophy of religion. The rest of the book will explore in

1 Even then we should not deceive ourselves into magnifying its importance. It is love of God which shows the way, not philosophizing about God in the manner characteristic of Anglo-American philosophy of religion.
much more detail what is involved in the aim of becoming divine, and how it resonates with a symbolic of natality. It thus develops a philosophy of religion which begins to think 'otherwise' than the traditional Anglo-American approach which, as I shall show, has been premised on violence and death to a far greater extent than many of its practitioners would care to recognize.

First, however, we need to take seriously possible resistance from feminists themselves. While many feminists would readily agree that traditional philosophy of religion is sterile, this is a long way from acceptance, even by feminists who acknowledge the creativity of Irigaray's thought, of her insistence that we are obligated to 'become divine', that love of God is of central importance. What can she mean? The resistance falls into two kinds. On the one hand are those whom I will for convenience label 'secular' feminists: those who hold that religion has done quite enough damage already, and feminists should have nothing more to do with it. Rather than pursue some pious quest of 'becoming divine', feminists should direct our efforts towards practical and theoretical struggles for justice. In the light of the incalculable consequences of western religion — primarily Christianity — in terms of colonialism, racism, homophobia, and sexism, such a refusal on the part of feminists to have anything further to do with it, even in terms of contestation, is wholly understandable and worthy of respect. Certainly contestation which simply retreads the old ground only hardens it, as I shall explain later: this is why a creative alternative is required, else the ostensible criticism of religious oppression actually reinforces it by a recuperable acknowledgement of its terrain. But perhaps Luce Irigaray is actually offering such an alternative in her insistence on becoming divine? I shall try to show that she is.

On the other hand, those who are conventionally labelled 'Christian' feminists may also find Irigaray's demand off-putting. This is not because Christian feminists accept the patriarchal story of the Big Daddy in the Sky, the One Father God, omnipotent, separate from the universe over which 'he' presides — the concept of God which has been at the heart of western conceptions of deity, the eternal God in relation to whom our mortal life is but a preparation for eternity. In whatever way the divine may be thought, it should not be like that. Nevertheless, the idea that we are to become divine, that this could be conceived of as a task for women and men, may seem both morally and religiously distasteful. Far too many men have done far too much damage acting as though they were godlings for feminists to have much appetite for the role. There has been good reason to respect the religious prohibition against playing God, plenty of justification for the first of the ten commandments: 'You shall have no other gods besides me.' Yet again it is necessary to ask: is this what Irigaray means? How could it be, rooted as she is in Lacanian psychoanalysis which has no truck with 'good old God' (Lacan 1982: 140), and in constant conversation with French post-structuralism?

\footnote{Some of Irigaray's most insightful commentators either do not discuss it at all, or else play it down: cf. Whitford 1991; Burke, Schor, and Whitford 1994; Chaster 1995. Rosi Braidotti explicitly distances herself from it in her foreword to Cavanna 1995.}
Becoming divine

In response to both the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ positions thus outlined, I propose to deploy a strategy of ‘double reading’ which owes much to Jacques Derrida and will be explained in chapter three. I suggest that just as Derrida saw many binary oppositions — being/becoming, speech/writing, reality/appearance — as defining gestures of western philosophy which must be deconstructed, so also the religious/secular divide is a binary constitutive of modernity which cries out for radical questioning. Rather than seeing the secular and the religious as opposites, as they are conventionally portrayed in modernity, I suggest that they should be viewed as two sides of a coin, the coin itself being of peculiarly modern mint. Ever since the ‘sacred canopy’ of the medieval world was shattered, secularism and religion have often defined themselves over against one another; yet they are deeply implicated in each other in the discourses of modernity, especially obviously in the technologies of power surrounding gender, ‘race’, colonialism, and sexuality. Now, if it is the case (as I shall argue) that both secularism and religion need to be radically rethought as mutually imbricated in some of the most objectionable aspects of the project of modernity, then both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ feminists will need to rethink their positions over against one another. The aim of deconstruction is not mere demolition, or even a reversal of values, but rather a destabilization which permits the achievement of new possibilities, the enablement of ‘thinking otherwise’ through the opening of a horizon that emerges through the strategy of double reading, as I shall explain. Thus a feminist philosophy of religion based in the aim of becoming divine does a great deal more than challenge traditional aims and methods of the philosophy of religion, although it certainly does that too, especially in its diagnosis of the necrophilia of western philosophical and religious thought. It actually moves us onward from the project of modernity itself, creating a new horizon for human becoming, a ‘new morning of the world’ (Irigary 1984; 1993: 140), in which nativity can be explored as the opening of new possibilities.

But this is to go too far too fast. Let us step back to consider, first, what Irigaray herself means by the idea of becoming divine. Luce Irigaray is a French psychoanalyst and philosopher whose writing must be understood in the context of what has become known as post-structuralism, the creative and provocative current of French thought situated between the student revolts of 1968 and the turn of the millennium. To understand how she conceives the task of philosophy of religion as enabling women and men to become divine, it is necessary to look briefly at the psychoanalytic background deriving from Freud and mediated to French thought by Jacques Lacan, for it is they who speak of the perils and dangers of becoming a human subject (let alone becoming divine). The themes that emerge will need to be dealt with more fully in subsequent chapters; but a brief overview here will already begin to reveal the vast difference in aim between Irigaray’s feminist stance and the way in which Anglo-American philosophers of religion have usually conceived their task.

As I will explain more fully in chapter two, one of the basic insights of the psychoanalysts which sets them apart from the religious and philosophical tradition of Augustine and Descartes and Locke is that human subjectivity is not a simple
given. Persons are not ready-made souls inserted into bodies by God, nor minds
which could be mature and whole independent of the physical history of the
individual (and which could arguably continue after bodily death). Rather, human
personhood is achieved, and achieved at considerable cost. A human baby begins life
as a mass of conflicting desires. In order to become a unified subject, some of these
desires have to be repressed. This repression of desires is the formation of the
unconscious; and from the unconscious, repressed desires may always threaten to
crump. Therefore strategies have to be in place to control thought, feeling, and
behaviour, lest the fragile subject falls apart once again into fragments. Traditionally,
religion has been the source of some of the most effective of these strategies
of control.

Moreover, the unification of the subject, if it is to bring about successful entry
into society, will have to take place according to the norms of that society, which in
the case of western modernity are heavily masculinist and heterosexual. Thus in
Freud’s famous account of the Oedipus stage, the young boy under threat of castrat-
ion represses his desire for his mother and tries to become like his father, eventu-
ally hoping to take his father’s place in society. The cost of this, however, is a denial
of some of his most central longings, especially those for his mother. This denial
may be so painful that it results in anger, fear, or hatred towards anyone who
reminds him of it: this can be recognized as one of the roots of the misogyny and
homophobia of western modernity and their reinforcement in religious doctrines
and rituals.

Irigaray accepts (with important qualifications) the psychoanalytic doctrine that
subjectivity is achieved, not given, and that this achievement is socially and histori-
cally constructed. However, in her books Speculum of the Other Woman ([1974] 1985a)
and This Sex Which is not One ([1977] 1985b) she demonstrates that when Freud and
Lacan talk about achieving subjectivity, they are talking about male subjects. For
Freud, the female is defined by a lack: a little girl is a little man, only without a
penis. Lacan similarly speaks of woman as the ‘not all’; it is the male for whom
subjectivity is possible (1982: 144). For Irigaray, therefore, and indeed for any
feminist who takes psychoanalytic thought seriously, the twofold question arises:
Can women be subjects? And how can women achieve subjectivity as women, not
by becoming ‘one of the boys’ or trying to be ‘equal’ to men (who are thereby
constituted the norm which women must try to match), but by becoming who we
are in our own right, not defined in relation to men? This question will be explored
in detail in chapters five and six.

To begin to understand Irigaray’s answer in a preliminary way, and to see what
religion has to do with it, it helps to see that according to Freudian theory modified
by Lacan, the achievement of subjectivity (and the repression of unacceptable desires)
takes place according to what Lacan, in a deliberate echo of Catholic liturgy, calls the
Law or Name of the Father. This thinly disguised religious formula indicates the
authoritative nature of social demand, its patriarchal character, and also its religious
structure. Indeed the obverse of the boy’s repression of his desire for his mother is
his entry into the language and civilization and social world of the fathers, which
after Lacan can be referred to as 'the symbolic'. The 'symbolic' in French thought designates far more than what are conventionally called symbols. It includes all of language as well as non-linguistic forms such as music and art and ritual, and in fact can be used to designate the broad conceptual patterns of civilization. Moreover, the symbolic is structured into discourses of calculable influence: formative among these in the modern west are the discourses of law, science, economics, and, of course, religion.

Indeed, religion (and therefore the philosophy of religion which legitimizes it) is of utmost importance in this view, since the masculinist symbolic of the west is undergirded by a concept of God as Divine Father, a God who is also Word, and who in his eternal disembodiment, omnipotence, and omniscience is the epitone of value. Even in a relatively secular society, these traditional attributes of divinity still stand for that which is most highly valued. In other words, it is held even by atheists that if there were a God, 'he' would have to be like this; we will have occasion to consider this further in relation, for example, to the endless debates about the existence of God, a debate in which theists and atheists tacitly agree on the masculinized nature of the God whose existence they dispute. Thus whether it is held that there is a God or not, the concept of the divine serves to valorize disembodied power and rationality. Indeed, the divine is that which guarantees meaning. In the terminology of Jacques Derrida (whose work we will consider further in later chapters), it is the assumption of the divine presence (even when that presence is held to be absent, as in secularism) that ultimately grounds the system of signs, and brings to rest the ceaselessly shifting signifiers, holding them all together in an onto-theological unity (Derrida [1972] 1982: 1–27). One important aspect of Derridean deconstruction is its attempt to discern the suppressed or denied 'other' which is nevertheless essential to the discourse in question. Religion can be seen as the repressed other of the secularist discourse of modernity in just this sense, and hence as the linchpin of modern western civilization. But if this is the case, then simple rejection of religion in favour of secularism would be no more effective than castigating writing in favour of speech (to use one of Derrida's favourite examples): it would already have to be assumed, even in the rejection.

Now, since according to psychoanalytic theory subjectivity is achieved by repression of unacceptable desires and entry into language (and the symbolic more generally) which is identified with the Name of the Father, subject positions must be inherently masculine. Little boys become men. And what of little girls? According to Lacan, to the extent that women take up subject positions, entering into the symbolic, the discourses of western civilization, to that extent women also become masculinized. Either we learn to play men's roles by men's rules, or else we take up the 'feminine' roles of motherhood and service structured for us by men. And it is abundantly clear that, along with discourses such as law and science and economics,

---

1 Strictly speaking, Lacan's use of 'symbolic' is narrower than this, and has to do specifically with the entry into language and thus the achievement of subjectivity. However, Lacan himself frequently slides between this technical sense of the term and the more general sense: we will revisit this in chapter two.
religion as it has been constituted in the west has done a great deal to keep such
subject positions – both subjectivity and subjection – firmly in place, not least in its
emphasis on life after death. And the philosophy of religion has not seen fit to
challenge it.

But then how can a woman speak, or indeed enter the symbolic at all? And what
sort of catatym would occur if women did speak? For Irigaray (as for other French
psychoanalysts) the question of women speaking is obviously closely tied up with
the question of women achieving subjectivity. If becoming a subject means entry
into language, and if language is always already masculine, then, as we have seen, a
woman could achieve subjectivity, if at all, only to the extent that she became
masculinized, entered into masculinist structures of rationality and discourse and
did not rock the boat. Irigaray, however, serves notice that things are not that
simple. Maybe the reason Freud and Lacan could not discover the answer to their
question ‘what do women want?’, the reason they could not admit that women
could speak, was because they were not listening; they were first consigning women
to silence by defining language as masculine, and then complaining that women had
nothing to say.

When we have looked at Derridean strategies of deconstruction in chapter three,
we will be able to see that Irigaray’s reading of Freud in Speculum ([1974] 1985a) is
in some respects a textbook illustration of it. Freud had seen women in terms of a
lack; Lacan had glossed this lack as the impossibility of woman as subject within
phallocentric discourse. Rather than engage in a variety of asserting woman’s
right to equality with men, Irigaray is simply not interested in women becoming
subjects in the old masculinist ‘economy of the Same’, taking up what would in
fact be a male position. As she explains in The Sex which is not One ([1977] 1985b),
the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the
object, but of jettisoning the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the
production of a truth and of a meaning that are exclusively univocal. ([1977] 1985b: 78)

The whole subject-object binary in which women and men have been inscribed in
phallocentric discourse needs to be destabilized: as Ellen Armour puts it, Irigaray
wishes to ‘set in motion a disruption in that discourse that will open it up for a
different discourse, that of the feminime imaginary’ (Armour 1999: 163).

So for woman it is not a matter of installing herself within this lack, this negative, even by
denouncing it, nor of reversing the economy of sameness by turning the feminime into the
standard for ‘sexual difference’, it is rather a matter of trying to practice that difference… (Irigaray
[1977] 1985b: 159)

Irigaray advocates a different, multi-faceted strategy of eliciting women’s voices,
listening for the silences, the lacunae, the sounds from the margins, listening not
just to fathers and sons but to mothers and daughters, even as the question of
woman subject is thereby destabilized. Such a strategy will obviously entail a vastly
different agenda for the analysis and development of religious language than is
standard in traditional philosophy of religion, as we shall see in chapter eight.
For the present, what is important is that Irigaray insists that for women to develop a subjectivity of their own, and not merely take up masculinized subject positions, it would be necessary to disrupt the symbolic, displacing its masculinist structures by a new imaginary not based on the Name of the Father but on new ways of conceiving and being which enable women to be subjects as women. And since religious discourse serves as the linchpin of the western symbolic, it is religion above all which requires to be disrupted.

Contrary to much secular feminist thought, Irigaray is therefore clear that religion cannot just be ignored or written off; it has to be transformed: as Elizabeth Grosz interprets Irigaray: ‘God provides the genre, the context, the milieu and limit of the subject, and the horizon of being against which subjectivity positions itself’ (Grosz 1993: 208). Thus in her essay ‘Divine Women’ Irigaray argues that ‘in order to become’, that is to achieve subjectivity, it is necessary to have a ‘horizon’, an ideal of wholeness to which we aspire ([1987] 1993b: 61); the debt to Feuerbach is obvious and I shall consider it further in chapter three. The symbolic of religion, and in particular the idea of God, has provided such a horizon for becoming, whatever else it has also done. It has served as an ideal of perfection, ‘the place of the absolute for us, its path, the hope of its fulfilment’ (63). The divine has therefore been a goal of human endeavour, that against which human thought and conduct must be measured. As such it is indispensable for the achievement of subjectivity.

Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity; no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine. There comes a time for destruction. But, before destruction is possible, God or the gods must exist. (61)

Irigaray is very far from advocating an acceptance of the doctrines and practices of patriarchal religion; but in her view to become ‘free, autonomous, sovereign’, to become as human individuals and as a human society, we cannot do without the divine ideal. God is in her thinking not the name of an all-powerful super-being in a timeless realm, but ‘a name to describe the possibilities of awareness, and transcendency’ of the personal and interpersonal positions we take up as subjects in space and time (Grosz 1993: 208). Therefore for Irigaray human becoming is intrinsically linked with the aspiration of becoming divine.

Every man (according to Feuerbach) and every woman who is not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man, must imagine a God, an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for the abode and for saintliness. God alone can save us, keep us safe... Only the religious, within and without us, is fundamental enough to allow us to discover, affirm, achieve certain ends. (Irigaray [1987] 1993b: 67)

The debt to Nietzsche and Feuerbach deserves to be explored further in this connection, for Irigaray is a close, if creative, reader of their works.4 In Nietzsche’s famous parable of the madman, he cries out,

4 I am grateful to Joanna Hodge for not allowing me to escape this fact.
Whither is God? ... I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? ... Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (Nietzsche [1882] 1974: 181)

There we have a theme parallel to Irigaray’s idea of becoming divine: ‘Must we not ourselves become gods?’ This passage has often been read as an account of the usurpation of knowledge and power – the status of divinity – by the masters of modernity: as though, having become secular, modern men (and the masculine is deliberate) must now take the place of God. But surely this cannot be what Nietzsche meant, since it is precisely among the unbelievers of modernity that the madman comes seeking God, precisely to them that he bewails the tragedy of divine death. The assumption must be that although these are indeed the self-confident secular men of the world – godlings, indeed – they have not in fact become gods in the way that Nietzsche thinks that we must.

In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche speaks again of becoming divine. He says,

God is a supposition; but I want your supposing to reach no further than your creating will.

Could you create a god? So be silent about all gods! But you could surely create the Superman [‘den Ubermenschchen schaffen’].

Perhaps not, you yourselves, my brothers! But you could transform yourselves into forefathers and ancestors of the Superman: and let this be your finest creating! (Nietzsche [1883] 1961: 110)

This passage, like the one previously quoted, has often been read as arrogant, even blasphemous atheism: and indeed Nietzsche was no friend of Christianity in any form. Yet taking these passages together, it is possible to read Nietzsche more creatively, rethinking both religion and secularism, in a manner which in fact had already been suggested by Feuerbach, whom Irigaray explicitly invokes.

In his book The Essence of Christianity, Feuerbach had argued that at its best religion is a mirror for humanity, into which ideal human characteristics are projected and which we then strive to reflect.

In religion man necessarily places his nature out of himself, regards his nature as a separate nature ... God is his alter ego, his lost other half. God is the complement of himself: in God he is first a perfect man. God is a need to him; something is wanting to him without his knowing what it is – God is this something wanting, indispensable to him; God belongs to his nature. (Feuerbach [1841] 1957: 195)

God, therefore, is the horizon for human becoming, the horizon which Nietzsche fears has been wiped away. In order to become, a divine horizon is necessary, not in the realist or empirical sense made dubious by the critiques of modernity, but as a mirror of ‘that of God in everyone’, that ideal likeness we may both project and reflect.

In revelation man’s latent nature is disclosed to him, because an object to him. He is determined, affected by his own nature as by another being; he receives from the hands of God what his own unrecognized nature entails upon him as a necessity, under certain conditions of time and circumstance. (207–8; cf. Warnock 1977: 283)
Becoming divine

Secular modernity cuts men away from these religious necessitates, makes them godlings in a disenchanted universe but robs them of themselves, beyond mastery and mechanics, with no chance of becoming 'supermen'. And leaves women out altogether – though that might not have troubled either Feuerbach or Nietzsche overmuch.

Though Irigaray's use of her works for a feminist project of becoming divine may well be a travesty of what Nietzsche or Feuerbach intended, it is at least a suggestive one, a 'jamming of their theoretical machinery'. There has indeed, in her view, been a projection of a divine horizon. Even though western society is largely secular, at least in the sense that a high proportion of people do not participate in religious observances, it is in fact the case that the western imaginary is saturated with images, values and symbols derived from the Judeo-Christian heritage; indeed it is with these that philosophy of religion occupies itself. Yet this religious symbolic of the west is, as already noted, notoriously unhelpful to the project of women's becoming 'free, autonomous, sovereign'. In Irigaray's view we need to do more than just recognize that fact; we need also to 'ask ourselves why we have been held back from becoming divine women' ((1987) 1993b: 60, first italics mine). Why is it that although there is a religious symbolic, it has worked against women rather than for us? And what needs to be done about it?

As Irigaray sees it, the reason is that the only gods that have existed up to now, as far as the west is concerned, are male gods, and above all the Father God of Judeo-Christianity who has come to be seen as the One, the conquering Lord of all, beside whom there is no other. Following Feuerbach, Irigaray sees this as a male projection.

Man has sought out a unique male God. God has been created out of man's gender. He scarcely sets limits within Himself and between Himself: He is father, son, spirit. Man has not allowed himself to be defined by another gender: the female. His unique God is assumed to correspond to the human race ['genre humain'] which we know is not neuter or neutral from the point of view of the difference of the sexes. (62)

At best, therefore, on Irigaray's terms, this God could serve as a divine horizon for male becoming, and indeed for a normative maleness which patterned itself after the 'One' and constituted everything else as 'Other' in a tiresomely repeated economy of the same. Irigaray accuses religion in the west of being a patriarchy which 'has taken the divine away from women. It has carried it off and made it an all-men affair, and it often accuses the religious spirit of women of being the devil's work' (190) – hence, for instance, the burning of thousands of women as witches in the early modern period (Janzen 1995b).

2 The same applies, mutatis mutandis, to all the 'other Others': Blacks, lesbians and gay men, colonized peoples. . . . Of this Irigaray says very little, and her occasional remarks are less than satisfactory: cf. I Love to You (1996: 47), where she dismisses the problem of race as 'a secondary problem'. It seems obvious, however, that the disruption she pleads for should hardly stop with the heternormative white couple.
It might be objected that women are often religious; indeed in most western societies more women than men are regular participants in religious rituals like church services. Even so, however, the religions of the west with their male God(s) offer no way for women to achieve our subjectivity in relation to a divine horizon. As Irigaray puts it,

_We have no female trinity. But as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. She lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming . . . . If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity._ ([1987] 1993b: 63)

The masculinist religious symbolic must be disrupted and space made for the female divine. ‘This God, are we capable of imagining it as a woman? Can we dimly see it as the perfection of our subjectivity?’ ([Ibid.]).

What Irigaray advocates — a shocking proposition to those brought up on the view of Feuerbach as a master of suspicion — is that women begin deliberately to project the divine according to our gender, as men have always done according to theirs. At present, men construct not only the symbolic of the divine, but also that of women’s roles and relationships to the divine. women are those who are called to be the suffering servants of humanity in the reproduction of the world, and are seen as saintly if they accept that position with humility and modesty. For this they, like men, may be rewarded with eternal blessedness in a life after death. But this forcing of women into the roles constructed for us by men is in the end a loss for both sexes.

Why would women have no God to allow them to fulfill their gender? So that heaven does not come to pass on earth? So that women should remain the ones who give birth to the child god, the suffering god, the redeemer son? Is this a way for women to become divine in their gender? And men? Neither men nor women are able to grow to adulthood together, to become gods together. Woman’s not becoming God is a loss for herself and for the community. Perhaps for God. (Groz 1993: 70)

To reverse this loss requires a deliberate disruption of the masculinist religious symbolic with its investment in death, and an effort of imagination and action by and on behalf of women. Elizabeth Grosz again:

_For Irigaray, the divine is not simply the reward for earthly virtue, all wishes come true, it is rather the field of creativity, fertility, production, an always uncertain and preempted field. It is the field or domain of what is new, what has not existed before, a mode of transcendence, a projection of the past into a future that gives the present new meaning and direction. The divine is a movement . . . a movement of love . . . . (1993: 210)

As we will see in chapter seven, this understanding of the divine as creative possibility for fecundity and flourishing is precisely what is invoked by a symbolic of natality.

Much of this book will be devoted to showing what this comes to and how it can be done in various areas traditionally the province of the philosophy of religion.
such as the consideration of religious language, the problems of evil and suffering, and the concept of God. In each case it will become apparent not only that the secular/religious divide of modernity is misconceived, but also that both of these rest on assumptions of race, gender, and sexuality which feminists have been concerned to challenge. Although detailed investigation must wait for subsequent chapters, I shall offer one tantalizing foretaste, based on Irigaray's review of Elisabeth Schütsler Fiorenza's book In Memory of Her (1983).

Schütsler Fiorenza's thesis is that women were in fact far more central to the early Jesus movement than subsequent texts would indicate, and that they were written out of history by the masculinist bias of the Greco-Roman world to which the New Testament was presented. Irigaray delights in Schütsler Fiorenza's recovery of the hidden women of early christendom, and sees her book as vastly preferable to the neutral/neuter renderings of the Christian message. However, the question remains: who is this man Jesus at the centre of the Gospels? Is there any way in which a male Jesus can enable women's achievement of subjectivity? Or is this just another rendition of the God-Father limiting the horizon of women's becoming? It is at this level that Irigaray is ultimately disappointed with Schütsler Fiorenza's book: it does not sufficiently challenge or displace the traditional masculinist religious symbolic. As Irigaray says, 'monotheistic religions speak to us of God the Father and God made man; nothing is said of a God the Mother or of God made Woman, or even of God as a couple or couplings' (1989: 71). Although at a sociological level Schütsler Fiorenza has raised important questions about women in early Christendom, at the level of ontology she remains, even if critically and uneasily, within a monotheistic and trinitarian doctrinal system which affirms both the maleness and uniqueness of Christ. And as Irigaray says, 'society quickly bores me when I'm expecting the divine' (74).

Instead of stopping at this point of criticism, however, Irigaray goes on to make suggestions about how Jesus could indeed be understood in a way that would enable the divine becoming of women. She starts by imaginative exploration of what is actually meant by the idea of 'incarnation' — the idea that Jesus was God made flesh. As she points out, the Gospels make much of this: 'every stage in the life of Christ is noted and described in the Gospels as an event of the body' (65), from conception and birth to fasting, healing, and wedding festivals, suffering, and death. Jesus cannot be reduced to speeches or abstractions. His bodiliness is always central. Now flesh, at any rate human flesh, is always sexually specific; and this is true also of Jesus. He was male. 'Why', asks Irigaray, 'is his sexual incarnation denied or treated on a human plane alone?' (69).

At first sight that question might appear appallingly misplaced: has not the maleness of Jesus been used endlessly in western Christendom to bolster the masculinist symbolic, serving to guarantee the superiority of men, to exclude women from priesthood, to identify women with the sinfulness of Eve over against the male Christ, the second Adam? Irigaray is not denying any of this. Her question is getting at something deeper. Maleness is after all only one of the sexes: it is only part of humanity, not the whole of it. So even if Jesus was God made flesh, he was only a
partid incarnation. He could not be the whole, the unique and only one, since he did not encompass all of humanity. Indeed, so far from seeing the incarnation as an endorsement of Jesus as the unique one, Irigaray argues for 'the incarnation of all bodies (men's and women's) as potentially divine, nothing more nor less than each man and each woman being virtually gods' (64). If this is not to be the case, if Jesus is taken as in traditional Christendom as unique, then he 'truly does represent the realization of the Patriarchy, the appearance of the father's and the Father's power' (70), and feminists should have nothing to do with defending him. But if he was partial, then his incarnation leaves room for other incarnations, other trinitaries, other sexualities. The masculinist symbolic which looks above all to salvation from this moral state is subverted from within. Because 'unto us a child is born', the door is open to develop a new religious imaginary which will enable our sexuate becoming, the flourishing of our natality.7

Though Irigaray does not specifically discuss the philosophy of religion as an academic discipline, it is clear that it is this sort of effort of thought and imagination which would in her view constitute its appropriate domain. In Irigaray's view, philosophy has constituted itself as the master-discourse per excellence. In consequence, she says, 'it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and disrupt, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse' ([1977] 1985b: 74). Philosophy of religion is thus the discourse on religious discourse, which determines what can be said, and by whom, about the divine. A feminist philosophy of religion is therefore one which must show the bias and sterility of masculinist (supposedly neutral) pursuits of the discipline. However, it must also go on to the creative effort of developing a feminist imaginary which will enable the divine becoming of women: 'not just opposition to, criticism of but also positng new value that would essentially be divine'.

'God is the mirror of man' (Feuerbach). Woman has no mirror with which to become woman. Having a God and becoming one's gender go hand in hand. God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without. In order to become, we need some shadowy perception of achievement: not a fixed objective, not a One postulated to be immutable but rather a cohesion and a horizon that secures us the passage between past and future... (Irigaray [1987] 1993b: 67)

'Becoming divine' is, for Irigaray, neither the recuperative project of masculinist religion which secular feminists rightly fear, nor the playing God which Christian feminists shun. 'It is essential that we be God for ourselves so that we can be divine for the other, not idols, fetishes, symbols that have already been outlined or determined' (71).

1 Irigaray fails to do so, but it is easy to see how parallel points can be made with relation to 'race'. Jesus was a Jew. In this respect also he was partial, as any human being must be; no one can be all 'races' simultaneously. But by Irigaray's reasoning, this leaves room for other incarnations, other 'radically' specific bodies becoming divine. Various strands of liberation theology have partially addressed this, by proposing, for example, a Black Messiah, though typically this is not carried through to Irigaray's conclusion of 'nothing more nor less than each man and each woman being virtually gods'.
Becoming divine

Conceiving of philosophy of religion – and indeed of religion itself – in this way obviously poses many problems, problems of language and reference, truth, morality, equality and difference, culture and sexuality. We will have to confront these in subsequent chapters. My intention is not to pretend that there are no difficulties with Irigaray’s views; indeed I will on some points part company with her. Yet these difficulties can also be viewed as opportunities: opportunities to rethink religion and secularism, to reconsider language and the speaking subject in religious expression, to refuse a procrustean bed of ‘world religions’ under the narrow rubrics of doctrines and truth-claims, and to be open instead to widening horizons and possibilities of becoming divine. Above all, what is already clear, and of the first importance for a feminist philosophy of religion, is the vast difference of aim in such a philosophy from that which is current in standard contemporary practice of philosophy of religion. Irigaray insists that we – women and men – must ‘become divine’: that is our human and religious project; and the philosophy of religion will either explore what that means and facilitate that project or else, as at present, act as a barrier against it.

Why do they do it?

One could hardly imagine a greater contrast than one finds when turning from the work of Irigaray to that of contemporary Anglo-American writers in the philosophy of religion. Where she is passionate, they are cool, guarded, ostensibly neutral. Where she emphasizes imagination, they emphasize logical rigour. And in her insistence that what matters is to become divine, she is far removed from their preoccupation with the justification of truth-claims and the effort to assure believers of the credibility of their beliefs. Moreover, the beliefs analytic philosophers seek to defend are those of christendom: it is assumed that these are what matter for purposes of investigation. Insofar as there is engagement with ‘other world religions’, the aim is typically to discuss whether or how the truth-claims or beliefs of these religions could be compatible with one another, and above all with central Christian doctrines, perhaps at a ‘meta-level’. The idea that it might be part of the function of the philosophy of religion to project or imagine new religious ideas, a new God or gods as female, or as couple(s), or anything else hardly enters their pages.

So what do contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of religion believe themselves to be doing, and what are their aims in doing it? One of the immediately striking things that emerges as soon as we survey a range of volumes with these questions in mind is how little explicit attention is given to the question of aims, and how perfunctory are the comments explaining the nature and purpose of their books. Some, indeed, don’t bother with any explanation at all. Brian Davies, for example, in a standard Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (1993) says nothing whatever about his reasons for writing it or even how he conceives the purpose of philosophy of religion, save to say, ‘my intention is to look at some of the topics traditionally thought to fall within its scope’ (ix): arguments for the existence of God, the concept of miracle, the notion of life after death. There is no indication that
he has given any thought to why these particular topics rather than others should be central, let alone to whose interests are served by pursuing them. Moreover, although he explicitly assumes that the reader has little or no philosophical background, he does not think it necessary to indicate why we should continue to philosophise in the manner which has become conventional; he simply says that in his book the ‘method of inquiry is largely dictated by the way in which many religious assertions have recently been dealt with by philosophers’ (x) – as though the fact that at present it is usually done in this way is sufficient reason to continue. Anyone who suspects that the philosophy of religion is a tool to bolster an unchallenged masculinist religious symbolic will be unlikely to feel reassured by Davies’s remarks.

Many philosophers of religion are at least a little more explicit than Davies in bringing out their assumptions about the purpose and value of what they are doing, usually couching it in terms of providing a rational justification for religious truth-claims. Thus, for example, Richard Swinburne, in his introduction to The Existence of God (1979), says that:

what has worried ordinary men [sic] down the centuries is whether the evidence of human experience shows that the claim [of the existence of God] is true or that it is false. . . . The book is written in deep conviction of the possibility of reaching fairly well justified conclusions by rational argument on this issue, perhaps the most important of all deep issues which stir the human mind. (1)

Evidently, then, Swinburne sees himself engaged in very important work, which will allay ‘ordinary men’s’ worries about this most important of all deep issues. But are ordinary men – not to mention ordinary women – down the centuries agonized about whether or not God (the very particular God of classical western theism) exists? History is largely written by and about the powerful, so it is not easy to ascertain what the masses did or did not agonize about; but it seems more likely that ‘ordinary’ people (at least in the west) either took the existence of God for granted, or else (judging by the insistence that was necessary to get people to attend church) perhaps shrugged off the question, in either case saving their anxiety for the all too real unpredictability of daily life.

Be that as it may, who exactly are these ‘ordinary men’ whose anxieties Swinburne wants to alleviate? What makes them ‘ordinary’, and in contrast with whom? Presumably ‘extraordinary’ men – philosophers like Swinburne? – do not have such worries, because they can use rational argument, including sophisticated mathematical techniques such as Bayes’s Theorem to calculate the probability of the existence of God (Swinburne 1979: 64–7) – though it is a little difficult to see how this would alleviate the worries of ‘ordinary men’ unless by an appeal to the authority of the clever philosopher. It is hard to imagine anything further from the passionate exhortation of Luce Irigaray to heed the calling to become ‘virtually divine’, sacred for ourselves and one another.

What Swinburne and many others see to be of the first importance are beliefs, beliefs which must be shown to be justified – that is, conceptually coherent and
least probably true. Having correct beliefs about God, and about other religious questions such as life after death, miracles, and revelation is taken as crucial; and it is the task of the philosopher of religion to examine these beliefs, putting them ‘under the philosophical microscope’ (Swinburne 1977: 6). In a recent book of twenty essays by American philosophers of religion in which all of them were invited to recount their own spiritual journeys, virtually all do so in terms of beliefs: coming to beliefs, losing beliefs, justifying beliefs (Morris 1994). Indeed some of them explicitly hold that God imposes ‘the penalty of damnation for failure to believe’ the right things, or for believing the wrong ones (Murray 1994: 70). Such an orientation to beliefs as central to religion is standard also in Britain: David Pailin, in spite of the great differences between him and Swinburne or Davies, nevertheless emphasizes like them the justification of beliefs as a central task of the philosophy of religion:

Philosophy of religion has consequently an important role for believers to so far as it examines, both in principle and in practice, how the assets of faith may be rationally justified.... The aim of the analysis and revisions produced by philosophy of religion is the establishment of what may be called ‘honest belief’. Negatively this involves raising questions about the truth, significance and effectiveness of inherited systems of belief.... Positively what the philosopher of religion seeks to establish is a system of beliefs which may be entertained as justified and significant by self-aware people living in the contemporary world. (Pailin 1986: 5)

The assumption throughout is that religion is essentially about beliefs. Even the much more progressive book The Philosophy of Religion: a Guide for Students by Beverly and Brian Clark (1998), which deliberately proposes a revisionary approach to the philosophy of religion, including a consideration of gender, still operates without much question almost exclusively within the realm of truth-claims and beliefs. Moreover the worthiness of these beliefs is assessed in terms of their rational justification, by which is meant their conceptual coherence and their likely truth, where ‘truth’ is understood as correspondence with reality.

Anglo-American readers, especially those with any background in the philosophy of religion, will be so familiar with this characterization of religion as essentially about beliefs whose truth or falsity is of the first importance that it is only by juxtaposition with a quite different approach such as Irigaray’s that it might even occur to us to question it. But why should we take it for granted? It is arguable that the increased emphasis on beliefs is itself a consequence of modernity and the privatization of religion (Smith 1978: 37–44; Asad 1993: 45–8) and to that extent has clear class and gender implications, as we shall see below. In whose interests, therefore, is it to assume the centrality of beliefs? Will it, for instance, empower or disempower Swinburne’s ‘ordinary man’? Will it enable women to achieve subjectivity? These questions are not simply rhetorical; they point, rather, to a deep division of conception regarding what religion is, a division further exacerbated by disagreement about the nature and status of beliefs.

---

8 Though not necessarily exclusively Pailin, like many of the contributors to the American volume (Morris 1994) would be quick to emphasize attitude and action as well, which, typically, they see as the rational consequences of belief, rather than as, say, its source or impetus.
Anglo-American philosophers of religion such as those just cited are inclined to assume that true beliefs, whether in religion or anything else, are indeed empowering, that 'the truth shall set you free', whereas incorrect beliefs would leave people bound in superstition. Given such assumptions, it can be seen not as arrogance but as a moral obligation for philosophers of religion to apply themselves to a rigorous examination of the 'truth-claims' of religion. Certainly many of those who write of their own personal 'spiritual journeys' (Morris 1994) evidently consider their pursuit of the philosophy of religion as a divine calling or obligation. Moreover, traditional philosophers of religion may well feel that it is incumbent upon believers to try to convince skeptics of the truth of their religious claims; Swinburne for example writes of 'a duty to convert others', which a philosophical justification of beliefs is deemed to assist (Swinburne 1977: 6).

Continental philosophers like Irigaray, by contrast, influenced by psychoanalytic theory, take much more seriously the conception of the symbolic, the system of discourses of which religion is one, which are constructed by and in turn are formative of western consciousness. The post-Enlightenment western cultural symbolic, especially as that has been informed by Protestantism, places enormous emphasis on truth (whether in religion or in science), not in the sense of truthfulness and integrity, but in the sense of true beliefs, beliefs which correspond to 'reality'. (It will be necessary to ask further on what might be meant by such extra-discursive 'reality' and how we could possibly come to know it.) Indeed in much of Protestantism it is precisely whether one has true beliefs or not that is decisive for salvation, where salvation is understood ultimately in terms of life after death. One could burn in hell for ever just for believing the wrong things, or experience the eternal joys of heaven for believing the right ones, even when such beliefs have more to do with where one was born than with any moral choices: we will revisit this in chapter ten. The correlation between the emphasis on truth-claims and the investiture in a symbolic of mortality and other-worldliness could hardly be clearer.

If by contrast we take on board a psychoanalytic perspective, then we will have to ask how, and by means of what individual and social repressions, this belief-oriented symbolic of western post-Enlightenment consciousness has been formed? What compulsions does the preoccupation with truth bespeak? Mainstream Anglo-American philosophers of religion have largely ignored psychoanalysis and continental philosophy generally, on the grounds that it falls into a 'certain sloppiness of argument, a tendency to draw big, vague, general pictures of the universe, without spelling them out very precisely or justifying them very thoroughly, a kind of philosophy nearer to literature than to science' (Swinburne 1994: 2).

But as we will see more fully as we consider what is involved in a religious symbolic, a central point of contention between them is that continental philosophers see the sort of justification and truth-orientation of Anglo-American philosophy as already a part of a particular symbolic structure. Moreover feminists would point out that it is a symbolic structure created by and for powerful white western men. Therefore agreeing to construct the philosophy of religion around meticulously sophisticated and rigorous arguments about the coherence and truth of
Becoming divine

religious beliefs is only to reinforce the patriarchal necrophilia rather than to challenge it or to learn to think otherwise. But if it is the case that religious discourse in modernity is, together with science and economics and law, part of a grand myth of rationality, and if (as evidenced by the destructive nature of that rationality on women, on the earth, on human dignity) that myth is actually necrophilic and needs to be deconstructed so that other ways of thinking which enable flourishing can be forged, then the sterile dance of claim and counter-claim in Anglo-American philosophy of religion is profoundly unhelpful.

It could even be seen as irreligious. Of course, this would depend on religion being more than a matter of true beliefs. But if religious discourse and the symbolic of which it is a part is a way of constructing human reality, a grand myth or set of myths that we live by (where 'myth' does not have 'truth' as its opposite), then restructuring that myth in ways that foster human dignity — perhaps in ways that oblige and enable us to become divine? — is of ultimate value. Nor should it be surprising that this might be 'a kind of philosophy nearer to literature than to science', since it has been more characteristic of literature than of science to try to think otherwise, to provide alternative models of human becoming, to challenge the largely utilitarian rationalism of the contemporary scientific world-view.

It is no accident that Anglo-American philosophers of religion make a strong appeal to science. After all, at least on the popular and technological levels, science as practised in the modern west considers the idea of truth to be hitched closely to how the world really is; truth-claims mirror reality. It is for this reason that Paul Helm, in his book Belief Policies (1994), recommends the epistemological approach of the sciences to philosophers of religion, since he takes for granted that the progress and success of modern science show that scientists 'cannot have been following a wholly mistaken method of acquiring beliefs' (Helm 1994: 1). Helm advocates this epistemology even though the burden of his book is concerned with explicating the 'vulgar utilitarian element in believing' (4). Similarly, Richard Swinburne in his Intellectual Autobiography (1994) expresses his indebtedness to modern science, in particular to the idea of justification of theory through the principles of simplicity and the predictability of otherwise unexpected phenomena. Swinburne continues.

Once I had seen [these scientific principles], my programme was in place: to use the criteria of modern natural science, analysed with the careful rigour of modern philosophy, to show the meaningfulness and justification of Christian theology. (1994: 8)

Peter Van Inwagen goes even further. For him, scientific method is not merely a tool; science is itself part of the defence of Christianity against Enlightenment atheism:

Just as rationality has 'happened' only once in the history of terrestrial life (unlike vision or flight), so science has 'happened' only once in the history of humanity (unlike writing or the calendar). And the unique occurrence of science — real science, which does not stop with precise and systematic descriptions of phenomena but goes on to probe their underlying causes — happened in a civilization that was built upon the Church. (1994: 53)
In Van Inwegen's perspective, China, India, the Arabic world, did not and do not have 'real' science, because it was only from within Christian assumptions (whose truth is thereby bolstered) that science could develop.

But if, as continental philosophers suggest, the 'scientific world-view' is itself a highly dubious grand narrative of modernity, whose consequences for humanity and the earth are far more ambiguous than writers like Van Inwegen seem to assume, then this determined hitching of religion to the scientific enterprise is to say the least not obviously helpful. Even Anglo-American philosophers of science like Feyerabend (1962), Kuhn (1970), and Harding (1991) have shown the extent to which what is taken as scientific knowledge is itself based on socially constructed paradigms, and that these paradigms can undergo shifts so drastic that the assured knowledge of one era becomes the fable of the next. Might the same be true of religion? Van Inwegen would surely not like to think so.

Moreover, a position which made scientific methodology a model for religious epistemology would presumably have to hold it as an article of faith that western science is a Good Thing; it could not possibly countenance the idea that the methodology of western science (and not simply its misapplication) is responsible for many of the evils of modernity. Yet it is hard not to see how science and religion between them have been patriarchal tools which have fostered racism, sexism, and every kind of exploitation of people and of the earth (Humwood 1993; Schiebinger 1993; McClinton 1995). All 'others' -- women, blacks, gays -- have been kept firmly in a passive and submissive role to the powerful men who are able to define and delimit scientific 'truth'. To the extent that the philosophy of religion buys into the scientific methodology of modernity, it is reinforcing rather than re-examining the western symbolic, operating as the Law of the Father, and doing so in the name of God.

The way in which the philosophy of religion as conventionally practised acts as a technology of power stands out clearly in relation to the disciplinary boundaries that are drawn around it, the ways in which the topics which comprise it are disciplined. The same topics come up with predictable regularity: as Brian Davies says, philosophy of religion is about what philosophers of religion usually do! There is no indication in his work, or indeed in any of the others I have mentioned, that the discipline has a history, that it is a social construction which has not always been constructed in the way that it is at present, and that what counts as philosophy of religion (and indeed as religion itself) is closely related to who is doing the counting. This is a topic to which I should like to return in another book. Here I wish only to point to two dimensions of this disciplining of the philosophy of religion, both in striking contrast to Riggsray's approach.

The first is that the boundaries of the discipline are drawn in such a way that although science and mathematics are taken seriously, as we have seen, literature, psychoanalysis, and social or political theory are rarely ignored or treated with contempt. Thus, for example, Paul Helm's defence of a voluntarist position in his Belief Policies (1994) never once considers the role of unconscious desires in the formation of a will or desire or choice to believe. In Richard Swinburne's The Evolution of the Soul (1986) the unconscious makes its appearance only at the end of the book,
as a possible subsystem of beliefs which somewhat complicates the fundamental position 'that the soul has a structure of intrinsically propositional beliefs and desires' (1986: 292). Perhaps even more surprising is the total absence of discussion of the unconscious, or indeed of a cultural symbolic, from William Wainwright's recent book Reason and the Heart (1995). The burden of Wainwright's book is to show the importance of 'a properly disposed heart' for assessment of the claims of reason in religion. He sees passion and desire as crucial to appropriate belief formation, and therefore in urgent need of training and discrimination: hence the subtitle of his book is A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason. Yet even here, where a discussion of psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious and the relationship of passion and desire to belief formation would seem unavoidable, the silence is deafening. In none of these writings is anything at all said about the development or creation of a unified self in relation to the symbolic imposed by the Law of the Father: it is as though psychoanalytic theory were entirely irrelevant to the development of the human subject. Nor is there any consideration of the political implications of such detached philosophizing: the implicit assumption is usually that philosophy of religion has nothing to do with politics — which of course supports the status quo. Feminists who have engaged with issues in the philosophy of religion in relation to their impact on issues of justice have found themselves accused of 'straying' into sociology or politics and not staying within the proper demarcation of the discipline.

Once again, these differences between Irigaray's approach and that of Anglo-American philosophers of religion come back to a question of aim. If the aim is to codify a system of justified true beliefs, then perhaps it is not surprising that literature or psychoanalytic theory which subverts the credibility of the very idea of such a unified coherent system can hardly be admitted. And social and political analysis which shows how such belief-systems have functioned to oppress and dehumanize will be very threatening, say, to philosophers intent on justifying the truth claim that a good God can permit evil and suffering. But if, on the other hand, the aim of philosophy of religion is to enable becoming divine, becoming our sacred sexuate selves in relation to the earth and to one another, then mathematics and rigorous applications of theories of scientific epistemology are less likely to be helpful than are psychoanalytic theory, imaginative possibilities of human becoming drawn from literature and the arts, and careful social and political analysis.

The second striking contrast between Irigaray's approach and that of most Anglo-American philosophers of religion is that (with notable exceptions such as William Wainwright (1994)) their approach centres on the creedal statements and assumptions of western Christianity. Whereas Irigaray looks to other religious traditions and 'pagan' sources for alternative depictions of the divine, and fosters new imaginaries and projections, the currents of mainstream philosophy of religion run along the grooves cut for it by Christian theology, largely of a Protestant and fairly conservative variety. The western medieval idea of philosophy as ancilla theologica, the handmaiden to the queen of the sciences, is often mentioned (though with dubious historical contextualization), and indeed some standard volumes of philosophy of
religion are explicitly stated to be 'an introduction to conceptual inquiry, primarily for the sake of theologians' (Bulmer 1981: 4): small wonder that such books will not stray far from central Christian claims. Thomas Tracey, in his review of Morris's God and the Philosophers, comments with approval on the concentration of its writers on the creedal statements of western Christendom:

In recent years, philosophy of religion has included new voices who apply admirable philosophical skills to a more sympathetic exploration of religious ideas. The range of topics under constellation has been greatly enriched as philosophers have moved beyond the standard arguments in the Enlightenment debate about theism and have begun to address traditionally theological topics and to draw upon the resources of the great medieval Christian philosophers. This rapidly developing discussion has given rise to forms of thought that genuinely deserve to be called a new philosophical theology. (Tracey 1996: 127)

Tracey sees this assimilation of philosophy of religion to Christian philosophical theology as wholly admirable. But how could it do anything but reinforce the western masculinist religious symbolic, if that focus is not disrupted by efforts to think otherwise, informed by other faiths and perspectives?

To be fair, there are some contemporary philosophers of religion, John Hick eminent among them, who place great emphasis on religious traditions other than Christianity. Much of Hick's work has concerned itself with religious pluralism, and his recent book An Interpretation of Religion (1989) draws together many of his insights. While recognizing that no one individual can actually do it, Hick's ideal is 'that a philosopher of religion must today take account not only of the thought and experience of the tradition within which he or she happens to work, but in principle of the religious experience and thought of the whole human race' (1989: xiii). Yet the purpose of this breadth, once again, is the justification of beliefs. Though these beliefs are wider than those of any one particular religious tradition, and though Hick hopes that by resolving problems of apparent incompatibility the religious tensions of diverse groups 'on this small and fragile planet' may be dissipated (xv), there is yet again in Hick's work the assumption that rationally justified beliefs are central and that it is the job of philosophers of religion to sort them out. There is no doubt that Hick moves much further in recognizing and respecting otherness than do many Anglo-American philosophers of religion; but he stays wholly within the project of modernity. The same is true of Charles Taliaferro's Contemporary Philosophy of Religion (1998): even though it takes religious traditions other than Christianity into account, and even though it is meant to present the state of the art in the discipline, it takes the preoccupation with beliefs totally for granted.

From a feminist perspective, it is self-evident that a critique of Anglo-American philosophy of religion is long overdue. Yet in my opinion such a critique can be counter-productive unless it derives from a creative alternative. This is because a consequence of remaining at the level of critique means that effectively we stay at the same old level as those whom we critique: we do not change the ground. But if we do not change the ground, then in fact, though we may not intend it, we are reinforcing it; and if, as I am arguing, that ground is in fact necrophilic, then reinforcing it has deadly consequences. This is not to say that we should always wait
to develop a critique until we can see what the future possibilities are: sometimes it is necessary to do the former task before the latter becomes clear. Nevertheless, the move to develop creative alternatives is both to claim the right to develop our own identities rather than have them imposed on us, and to change the ground of debate so that it may become liberative. It is for reasons such as these that Elizabeth Grosz, in an argument for the need for feminists to create new strategies and positions, gives this warning about engagement, even critical engagement, with dominant models:

if it remains simply reactive, simply a critique, it ultimately affirms the very theories it may wish to move beyond. It necessarily remains on the very ground it aims to contest. To say that something is not true, valuable, or useful without positing alternatives is, paradoxically, to affirm that it is true, and so on. (1990b: 59)

Grosz’s point is not to minimize the importance of critique, but rather to stress the necessity of developing creative approaches which go beyond those currently in place. And such creative approaches, when developed by feminists, will be intrinsically connected with issues of justice, based, not on an economy of the same, but on a recognition of difference: difference of gender, race, and sexuality as well as discrepancies of opportunity and material well-being.

Feminists therefore must keep on finding new ways of ‘speaking truth to power’; new ways also for ourselves to work with revitalized energy and the intellectual resources to back it. As Michel Foucault once said,

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all... But then, what is philosophy today?... In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known! (Foucault [1984] 1985: 8-9)

For feminist philosophers of religion the effort to develop ways of ‘thinking differently’ is not a luxury: we are forced to do so if we are to survive as (female) gendered philosophers of religion. It is an ‘absolute necessity’ which is laid upon us if we are to find ways for the philosophy of religion to facilitate our becoming divine, rather than deadening us in its moribund ways.

Reconsidering the philosophy of religion from the perspective of becoming divine offers, I suggest, a creative opportunity for ‘thinking differently’ about every aspect of the discipline. In subsequent chapters I shall draw out some of its possibilities. Although this necessarily involves a critique of many aspects of traditional philosophy of religion, my intention is not to remain on the ground I wish to contest, but to move forward in a creative exploration of becoming divine, the horizon opened up by our natality.