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Cover Page Footnote
Many thanks to Alice Jardine for encouraging that I bring this piece of reception history to life.

This article is available in Journal of Feminist Scholarship: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol23/iss23/3
What Difference Does It Make? Early Reception Stories about Luce Irigaray’s Writing on Divine Women

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Abstract: This paper examines numerous pre-texts in Anglo-American feminist theology and critical theory seminal to the establishment of feminist philosophy of religion as a distinct academic discipline. Specifically, I trace early reception of philosopher Luce Irigaray’s writing on becoming divine women in Anglo-American feminist circles, arguing that critical attention to the “horizons of expectations” around Irigaray’s person is a necessary step to the myriad readings of her work. I begin by situating my own initial expectations and encounters with Irigaray’s writing on divine women as a graduate student in theological studies cross-registered in a course on “French Feminism” in the neighboring Romance Language Department. I then offer a unique reading of Irigaray’s reception surrounding her early writing on divinity, highlighting ways that Anglo-American theologians and feminist philosophers leveraged Irigaray’s contested status as a French Feminist and philosopher of religion as a way to simultaneously interrogate Irigaray’s claims about the divine as well as mollify generalized Anglo-American anxiety around writing grounded in post-structuralist Lacanian theory. I draw attention to the prevalence of Luce Irigaray’s thought in the 1993 co-edited volume Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists, the special issue “Feminist Philosophy of Religion” in Hypatia (1994), and in the field-defining books of two pioneers of the discipline: Pamela Sue Anderson and Grace Jantzen. I conclude with reflections about the reception of Irigaray’s writing on the divine with regards to her more recent publications, arguing that trans-Atlantic pre-texts paved the way for the development of the vibrant and innovative field of feminist philosophy of religion that exists today.

Keywords: reception history, feminist philosophy of religion, French Feminism, Luce Irigaray

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Introduction

The beginnings of feminist philosophy of religion as an established academic discipline are typically linked with three publications: the 1994 namesake Hypatia special issue, Feminist Philosophy of Religion, edited by Nancy Frankenberry; Pamela Sue Anderson’s book A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief (1998); and Grace Jantzen’s book, Becoming Divine: A Feminist Philosophy of Religion (1999). Reception scholars have more or less agreed on these texts as foundational, and most describe the rise of the discipline as a reaction among feminists who lamented the predominance of analytic thought in philosophy of religion (see Harris 2000; Frankenberry 2004; Burns 2012; and Dickman 2018). In doing so, a sort of mythical origin story unfolds. Roughly, it goes as follows: Anglo-American philosophy of religion was occupied with questions of analytic thought—proofs for the existence (or lack thereof) of God, the nature of belief, and the problem of evil, for example. The discipline was mostly white and male, and many of the thinkers were wary, hesitant, or outright annoyed that reflection on gender could impart
relevant insight to such questions. Feminist philosophers certainly challenged these ideas, but many were already suspicious of religion (or more particularly, Christianity) as a means to engage feminist reflection. However, growing interest in the writing of French feminists in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom offered an opening to introduce continental thought into a discipline dominated by the analytics. As the writing of French feminists was translated into English, the number of feminists in the Anglo-American academy utilizing ‘French feminist thought’ grew. The writing of Luce Irigaray was of particular interest, as her oeuvre explicitly suggests that there is a religious aspect integral to women’s subjectivity. Thus, in a pivot to the French, feminists found in Irigaray an unlikely source of inspiration and means to critique the theories and methods that had so-long dominated the philosophy of religion.

In this article, I offer a partial interrogation of this story, focusing particularly on Luce Irigaray’s influence on the development of the field in its nascent form. I aim to highlight the influence of cultural translations across the Atlantic as feminist theorists, philosophers, and theologians in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain grappled with Irigaray’s relationship to French feminism and her articulation of divine women. I invoke a broad understanding of translation to draw attention to the ways in which culture, particularly story, influences the frames through which one interprets translated texts. Susan Basnett and André Lefevere formally articulated a need for a “cultural turn” in translation studies in 1990, and I share their position that “neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational ‘unit’ of translation” (1990, 8). In so doing, I hope to highlight ways in which readers’ “horizon of expectations,” to borrow a phrase from reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss, are a fundamental aspect of translation itself. The origin story of feminist philosophy of religion thrives on horizons of expectations: perceived antagonism between Anglo-American and French philosophy, preliminary categorization of Irigaray’s oeuvre on the divine as French feminist, and assumptions of difference between theologians, religious studies scholars, and philosophers of religion. This is not to diminish the importance of text-to-text translators, but rather emphasize, as Emily Apter (2006) has argued, that translation occupies a “zone of enabling space” in which the reader, translator, and text interact as interdependent bodies. As Irigaray’s writing has been read and continues to be read in transnational contexts, I suggest that tracing Irigaray’s influence on the development of feminist philosophy of religion requires attention to cultural translations and contestations that occurred around her work on the divine.

Preliminary Pre-texts

Luce Irigaray (b. 1930) is arguably one of the most prolific and influential feminist philosophers of the twentieth century. She has also been considered one of the most difficult philosophers to read. First, her work spans disciplines, genres, and styles. Second, many of her texts operate in conversation with each other, rendering it difficult to make coherent sense of her writing without working knowledge of the theories and methods of her interlocutors, who are many. There is immense secondary literature on Irigaray dedicated to interpreting, interrogating, and critiquing her writing, and such literature is fundamental to understanding why she looms so large in the story of feminist philosophy of religion. About seven years before the establishment of the field, Margaret Whitford (1991) published Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine, the first major book-length study of Irigaray’s oeuvre. Feminist literary theorist Naomi Schor, in reflecting on Whitford’s impact on Irigaray studies in Engaging Irigaray, has noted the significance of Whitford’s politics of location in the academy (1994, 11). That Whitford occupies a position as a philosopher housed in a French department, Schor suggests, should not go unnoticed. Since much of Irigaray’s early reception in the United States occurred via Modern and Comparative Language Departments translating her work, it was also analyzed using the tools of literary studies. Whitford’s analysis departs from literary
readings of Irigaray, and as such, opens the possibility to read Irigaray not only as a French feminist writer, but also a French feminist philosopher.

To examine the context in the United States from which Irigaray’s writing on divinity was being translated is to have a sense of the growing number of academic disciplines around the category of religion. As a unique academic discipline, feminist philosophy of religion did not occur from nowhere. It was, at least in part, a result of trans-disciplinary conversations. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that religious studies began to emerge as its own distinct field separate from theological, divinity, or philosophical studies, and this fracturing was to the detriment of philosophy departments. As Nancy Frankenberry, editor of the Hypatia special issue, has remarked, few women at the time were pursuing graduate programs in philosophy, but numerous women were in newly established religious studies departments and theological schools (1994, 4). From this view, feminist theologians and religious studies scholars were engaging with feminist questions around the philosophy of religion before the label “feminist philosophy of religion.” In other words, feminist philosophers of religion were thriving, just not in philosophy departments.

As a scholar without a clear disciplinary home base of my own, I have struggled with the question of **how** to read Irigaray. While Irigaray may claim the title philosopher, my initial encounters with her writing did not occur in a philosophy department. Rather, they occurred in a nexus of transdisciplinary exchange during graduate studies at Harvard Divinity School. In a desire to maintain my reading and writing competencies in French language, I cross-enrolled in a topical seminar offered by the Romance Language Department entitled “A La Française: French Feminisms Today.” Led by Alice Jardine, I first discovered Irigaray’s writing via secondary literature about **who** she was and **what** she represented, namely that of “French” and “feminist.”1 Such contestations grew as I encountered Irigaray in Toril Moi’s Sexual/Textual Politics (1985) and Alice Jardine and Hester Eisenstein’s volume The Future of Difference (1980). It was no longer just Irigaray I was reading, but Irigaray alongside Hélene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. It was no longer Irigaray in France, but Irigaray as a “French alternative” to American feminism across the Atlantic.

I offer this preliminary anecdote to emphasize the idea that Irigaray’s writing on the divine occurs within a larger narrative in the history of Western feminism: the existence (mythical or otherwise) of a certain French feminism whose projects stand in opposition to the theories and methods of an (equally mythical) Anglo-American feminism. In the same way, Irigaray’s role in the story of feminist philosophy of religion is to a certain extent contingent on the narratives about her as a possible “French” (read: feminist, continental) alternative to “Anglo-American” (read: masculine, analytic) thought. Clare Hemmings has persuasively argued about the negative impact of such essentializing binaries, suggesting that in substituting “literal location for a politics of location,” feminists are downplaying the ways in which feminist theory is a product of transnational and interdisciplinary exchange (2011, 15). Indeed, by the time I read Irigaray’s essay “Divine Women” in Sexes and Genealogies, certain expectations about her work were already present. The categories I associated with Irigaray loomed just as large as her physical texts themselves. My own readings around Irigaray’s articulation of divine women thus carry a heightened sensitivity to the impact that categories like “psychoanalysis,” “philosopher,” and “French feminism” play in certain scholars’ cultural imaginaries, as they certainly shape my own. In this next section, I will trace ways such categories influenced critical readings of Irigaray’s writing on divine women, as well as ways in which such categories conveniently signaled Irigaray’s writing on the divine as an attractive alternative to mainstream feminist theological thought.

**Becoming Divine**
On June 8, 1984 in Venice-Mestre, Luce Irigaray delivered a lecture entitled “Femmes divines” at a conference sponsored by the Women’s Center on Melusine. The lecture was quickly published as an essay in the French philosophical, arts, and literary journal Critique 41/45 (1985), and then later as a chapter in Irigaray’s larger work, Sexes et parentés, in 1987. While the essay was initially available only to a French-speaking audience, it was quickly translated into English by Stephen Muecke and published in the Occasional Consumption Papers of Sydney, Australia in 1986. And in 1993, “Femmes divines” could be widely read as “Divine Women” by feminist theorists throughout the globe, as Columbia University Press circulated Gillian C. Gill’s English translation of Sexes et parentés.

Fast forward ten years, and the idea of divine women was a central thread in the field-breaking special issue in Hypatia: “The Feminist Philosophy of Religion.” In her introduction, issue editor Nancy Frankenberry remarked her surprise by the number of submissions that engaged the work of Irigaray, suggesting that it marked a “new chapter in relations between French feminisms and Anglophone feminisms” (1994, 5). On the one hand, such a claim feels appropriate. Irigaray makes numerous bold claims about divine women: that God is necessary to posit gender; that divinity is necessary for subjectivity; that there is no woman God; that the lack of a God for women impedes women’s ability to become a subject; that in order to do so women need to realize a God in the feminine gender; and that in order to achieve full subjecthood, women must “become divine,” are among them (1993, 55–72). On the other hand, Frankenberry’s narrative of perceived progress between two feminisms in Western theory overlooks the myriad ways feminist theorists, and feminist theologians in particular, had already been engaging Irigaray’s writing on the divine, both before and after the essay “Divine Women” was translated into English.

However, it does appear that early reception of Irigaray’s writing on the divine, at least in Anglo-American feminist circles, was intimately tied to French feminism and all the prickly affect that came with it. In this sense, “Divine Women” did not enter the “zone of translation” alone—with it came an appendage: “French feminism.” A phrase with its own transnational baggage, French feminism has typically referred to the writing of three post-structuralist thinkers in the Lacanian tradition, all of whom lived and studied in France in the context of May 1968: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Unsurprisingly, the term is not without challenges, and numerous scholars have eloquently elucidated the issues with using broad, geographical locations as substitutes for specific, local politics of location (see Rich 1986; Delphy 1995; Moses 1998; Gambaudo 2007; Costello 2016). As American feminist scholar Françoise Meltzer clearly articulates, the “French” in “French feminism” means “white, first world-women in the latter half of the 20th century, who have received an elite education in Paris and who work (or did work) out of the ‘metropole’ as their intellectual and institutional base” (1993, 17). From this view, invoking such a title conflates a small group of thinkers, whose own relationships with the term “feminism” were contestatory, with a national identity, and thus minimizes the myriad other possible ways of being “French,” “feminist,” or “French feminist.”

However, for better or for worse, much of the early feminist reception by theologians in the United States and Britain on Irigaray’s writing on the divine has appeared under the appellation of French feminism. The affect associated with French feminism was not always positive. For example, British theologian Heather Walton (2016) suggests an unsympathetic portrait of Anglophone feminist theologians’ early characterization of French feminists. She writes, “[Anglophone] feminist theologians were most critical of these alien ideas. So much energy had been spent on reclaiming an inheritance excluded by that tradition and creating an alternative foundation for theological thinking based upon women’s experience” (292). The narrative here portrays the French feminists antagonistically; in contrast to the Anglo-American feminist theologians who were working to further their fields, the “alien” ideas of the French were proving to be a stumbling block.
Across the Atlantic, reception of the “French feminists” among certain feminist theologians was also negative. In Marilyn Chapin Massey’s book, *Feminine Soul: The Fate of An Ideal*, Irigaray is described among the “radical French feminists,” who, like divisive American feminists such as Mary Daly, took a strong position regarding sexuate difference and the unique ability of women as women to forge creative activity from their own “divinizing mirrors” (1985, 181). Here Irigaray’s oeuvre is categorized as “French,” “radical,” and “women-centered.” While the book was published before the English translation of “Divine Women” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, it is under these pejorative appellations that Massey offers one of the first interpretations of Irigaray’s writing on sexual difference and its profound implications for theological studies.

Accounts of Irigaray’s amenability to American feminist theology have suggested a mutual distaste. For example, around the same time as the publication of “Femmes divines,” Irigaray (1987) also published a critique of prominent feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s book *In Memory of Her: Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983), arguing that the book failed to create a new subjectivity in the feminine. Since Irigaray considers a unique subjectivity in the feminine the only way for women to be subjects, all other attempts will not suffice (1987, 420–23). Responding to this article (and Irigaray’s other writing on a feminine divine more broadly), Australian-born Religious Studies scholar and French speaker Morny Joy published the piece, “Equality or Divinity: A False Dichotomy?” which lamented Irigaray’s writing as woefully unaware of the “rich complexity of the recent discussions by North American women thinkers in religion” (1990, 16). Questioning Irigaray’s claims that Schüssler Fiorenza’s book operates as a bastion of apolitical, universalist, and neutral “women’s equality” reformist agendas at the expense of recognizing sexual difference, Joy suggests that Irigaray has fundamentally misread Schüssler Fiorenza’s task as a scholar of religion. For Irigaray, women’s autonomy requires divinity; for Schüssler Fiorenza, it requires taking back, owning, and re-writing historical narratives that have been dominated by male thinkers (1990, 22). While both are concerned with ensuring and creating spaces for women’s autonomy, Joy suggests that Irigaray mistakenly assumes that the project of equality and that of divinity are mutually exclusive. She is ultimately quite critical of Irigaray’s project of divine women, casting it as nebulous and thus unsatisfactory, essentialist and thus potentially dangerous, and black-and-white thus narrow-minded (1990, 15–20). Though provocative in form and function, Joy questions the ultimate practical relevance of Irigaray’s project.

Yet important here is that Joy does not finish her analysis by concluding that Irigaray’s writing is thus worthless. Rather, while Joy rejects Irigaray’s project of divine women, she situates her rejection as a matter of detail. In an attempt to reconcile two divergent projects with each other, Joy concludes,

> For is it not a false dichotomy . . . to pose the issue as one of equality versus divinity? For at root, it seems that one necessarily involves the other. True, some feminists will place an emphasis on a social agenda of empowerment and downplay any psychological perspective, but if the path of social justice is followed, it is inevitable that psychological questions of identity, relationship and autonomy accompany the process of social redefinition. Social roles do not exist in a psychological vacuum, any more than psychological questioning arises in the absence of social conditioning. (1990, 23)

By situating Irigaray’s disciplinary context in Derrida, Lacan, and the language of psychoanalysis in contradistinction from Schüssler Fiorenza’s disciplinary context in American theological studies, Joy appears to resolve the divergence in thought not through antagonistic language, but by descriptive difference. The choice to do so challenges narratives that portray “French” and “Anglo-American” feminisms as trans-Atlantic rivals; Joy dexterously creates space for an “all hands on deck” approach feminist inquiry, whatever the tools may be.
In fact, I suggest that there were myriad feminist theologians, theorists, and religious studies scholars who challenged pejorative associations of “French feminism” through their engagement with Irigaray’s thought. Some of the first compiled comments from feminist theologians on French feminisms can be seen in the 1993 volume *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, edited by C.W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville, and Susan M. Simonaitis. The collection of papers, the majority of which were presented at the conference, “Feminist Theologies and French Feminisms: Possibilities and Problems” at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago in 1991, describes itself as an initial attempt towards building a sustained conversation between two seemingly disparate schools of thought, one French and one Anglo-American (1993). The embedded assumption of the volume is that there are recognizable traits of “French feminism” that exist in tension with the primary concerns of Anglo-American feminist theology. Yet unlike previous authors who invoked French feminism as a scorned other, these authors suggest that French feminism cannot be easily categorized into a neat box of thought. In this sense, Irigaray’s writing on the divine is characterized as French feminist, but without the wholly negative connotations associated with the term by numerous feminist theologians in the United States.

Françoise Meltzer is one of the feminists featured who challenges easy associations of “French feminism” with individual writers such as Irigaray, critically asking, what makes a French feminist? Who gets translated, which texts get translated, and when? Which words get translated, and when do they remain in French? Is the word féminin best read as female, feminine, or woman? (1993, 17–19). Further, French terms like *jouissance* and *écriture féminine*, in addition to having no clear corollary in English, have a signifying purpose when left en français: intellectualism, erudition, and worldliness (21). Reading Irigaray’s writing on the divine comes with such questions of translating transnationally.

Also relevant for the theologian is the question of the gridwork around language itself. Should one accept Irigaray’s epistemological assumptions around language, namely that language is not neutral and that because the word “woman” is always bound up in a web of signification, even the use of language itself becomes a predicament? In Meltzer’s words:

[I]t is here that the story of Adam’s rib becomes not only funny but also a narrative of origin that reflects the scandal of woman and how she is to be inscribed in the masculinist (read: metaphysical) text . . . theology becomes a collaborator, and I mean this in the least charitable sense, in the face of patriarchal forces occupying female subjectivity. (1993, 22)

Here Meltzer appears to question the feminist theologian’s ability to translate French feminisms without falling into the same methodological traps that prompted their “turn to the French” in the first place. Indeed, Meltzer’s cautions raise the question: why would a feminist theologian want to use Irigaray in the first place? Even more, why would a feminist theologian want to rely on someone like Irigaray, whose writing on the divine requires deep engagement with her larger philosophical vocabulary and the misogynist language of Lacan, and behind him, Freud? What unquestioned religious suppositions from their writing get transferred to Irigaray’s own vision for the feminine divine? From this perspective, translation consists not only of a textual translation, but also an intellectual and cultural translation.

**Cultural Translations**

One evident, though oft-forgotten consideration is that texts are translated into cultures, not vacuums. The 1993 volume containing early pre-texts to feminist philosophy of religion occurred within greater
conversations in the United States about the state of feminist theology. Up to this point, feminist theology as an institutionalized, academic discipline had largely been dominated by white, Catholic, and liberal-Protestant constituencies. As students of feminist theology diversified during the 80s, also diversified were the theological questions asked. “Womanism,” “Mujerista theology” arose as distinct theological strands, as did the number of feminist theologians (particularly minority feminist theologians) who foregrounded their racial and ethnic identities as part of their feminist theologies. These strands provided a timely interrogation of the theories and methods that relied on woman as a shared category for coalition-building and mobilizing around women’s liberation, and, in feminist theology, the ability for women to re-assert themselves into, and draw attention towards, their ongoing presence in biblical literature and religious thought. It was becoming clear: the “universal” woman was perhaps not that universal after all, blinded by its own alignment with the experiences and concerns of white, Christian, women. Thus feminist theology within the Anglo-American sphere during the 1980s and early 90s has been characterized, like much of Western feminist theory generally, by an interrogation around the question of women’s difference.

Yet on another level, the question of difference facing feminist theologians was also wrapped up in the questions posed by post-structuralist thought, particularly around the limits of language to talk about and describe God (see McFague, 1982; Reuther, 1983). In her contribution to *Theology and The French Feminists*, pragmatic theologian Rebecca Chopp (1993) suggests that the writing of the French feminists, contrary to fueling internal antagonism within feminist theology, should be viewed rather as a useful partner for addressing the ordering of the social-symbolic economy. Chopp takes seriously how Irigaray’s work on the masculinist economy undercuts normative assumptions about language many American theologians hold. Specifically, she highlights how Irigaray’s writing on the masculine symbolic reveals the “underground theological workings of language” that challenge assertions by American feminists that God the Father is just a metaphor that can be changed at will (1993, 25). She suggests that, instead of leaving the American theologian without language all together, Irigaray’s approach to language offers a “self-reflexivity” that lends itself not just to the dismantling, but also the creation of transformative spaces which emancipate the feminist theologian from patriarchal, binary orderings (32). In this sense, to earnestly consider Irigaray’s different context is, on the one hand, what prompts reflection on the normative assumptions in one’s own discipline. On the other hand, it is Irigaray’s critical articulations from a different context that facilitate her use as a tool for an Anglo-American audience grappling with issues in their own discipline. Thus rather than being a post-structuralist adversary who understands Irigaray’s account of language to undercut God-talk, Chopp opts instead to take Irigaray as an essential interlocutor.

However, Chopp maintains a heightened awareness of the impossibility of translating cultural contexts. She asserts that, to that point, the tasks of feminist theology had thoroughly been placed within the uniquely American fields of pragmatism and public theology, and as such, feminist conversations revolve around the assumptions and methods of those fields (33). What’s more, Chopp writes, is the fact that American religious history, unlike that of France, has “particular theological assumptions behind the constitution, the role of free churches, and the persuasive power of religious morality combined to associate the church with the role of forming, through religious beliefs, the kind of persons and associations necessary for life together in the republic” (36). From this view, the distinct cultural priorities of the American and French feminist lead to fundamentally different projects, and the relevance the two may have for each other must be able to overcome these differences.

Another theorist who questions the transferability of Irigaray’s writing for American feminist theologians is Sharon Welch. In her essay “Sporting Power,” Welch makes clear that Irigaray, in her discussion and defense of sexual difference, is not concerned with differences between race and class that occupy the minds of American feminists (1993, 171–98). Welch claims that, while Irigaray mentions differences between women, these differences occur within a particular kind of individual self, namely the
selves of the Western intellectual elite (189). She writes, “the problem of much American interpretation of Irigaray and Cixous is in its identifying particular linguistic strategies as the cause of cooptation: the use of characters, representation, and the unified self” (197). For Welch, maintaining a strong sense of coalition-building and dialogue between communities, particularly different communities of women, is how feminist work gains its political and ethical strength (197). Thus when American theologians use Irigaray’s writings about women’s multiplicity to explain the feminist experience, it risks weakening the feminist political project rather than strengthening it.

On the contrary, feminist theologian Ellen Armour suggests that Irigaray’s work can help the American theologian get past their preoccupation with the liberal woman (read: upper class, white) that womanist theologians have been critiquing precisely because her entire project is based in a critique of the textual economy and general grammar of Western discourse (143–69). Armour suggests that what makes Irigaray particularly useful is not only that her project functions as one of deconstruction and critique, but also one of construction and transformation (163, emphasis mine). Irigaray’s thought is thus presented as a powerful alternative to the liberal subject as opposed to an erratic set of musings devoted to essentialism above all else.

Indeed, one of the reasons the 1993 volume is of particular interest is that it provides a counter-narrative to the typical dueling French feminism versus Anglo-American approach. All analyses offer counter-evidence to feminist reception narratives that paint Irigaray’s oeuvre as part of a larger Western feminist story of initial French antagonism, followed by progress and amenability. None of the readings of Irigaray’s writing on divine women in the volume fully accept nor reject single stories about Irigaray. As the essays demonstrate, one of the early conversations around Irigaray’s writing on “Divine Women” by certain feminist theologians and philosophers of religion working out of the United States was whether or not the essay itself could (or should) be read theologically. From this question, two general approaches emerge: charismatic readings tended to situate “Divine Women” within Irigaray’s broader framework on sexuate difference, suggesting she be read as a philosopher, while more critical readings seemed to approach her writing theologically, focusing on Irigaray’s indiscriminate reliance on Ludwig Feuerbach’s projection theory to ensure women’s divinity.

For example, Elizabeth Grosz, an Australian feminist theorist operating in the United States, appears to offer a more charismatic approach. While she suggests that Irigaray’s writing on divine women is relevant for theological studies, she also contends that it should not be read theologically. Though she does not say this directly, Grosz does argue that 1) Irigaray does not consider God a transcendent reality, and 2) “Divine Women” is not meant to cultivate discussion about the nature of God, for it is not really about God at all. On the contrary, it’s about finding space for women to exist as subjects (202). In this sense, Irigaray’s divine is important insofar as it provides instrumental value for women’s existence, and interpreting the essay as an argument for worship of a female deity constitutes a widespread mis-characterization and misreading of Irigaray’s project. Irigaray is not advocating for “a religious conversion, a leap of faith; [divine women] is a political and textual strategy for the positive reinscription of women’s bodies, identities, and futures in relation to and in exchange with the other sex” (214). To summarize Grosz’ position: Irigaray is a philosopher, not an apologist.

Thus confessionality appears to be an important characteristic of theologians in Grosz’ eyes. The fact Irigaray’s relationship to Christianity is ambivalent at best seems to imply, I would argue erroneously, that Irigaray’s potential as a theologian is limited. Others have thoroughly engaged Irigaray’s specific theological claims about the divine with success. In fact, American feminist Serene Jones has argued that Irigaray has much more than a “casual interest” in God, as she repeatedly refers to and constructs ideas about God in her works (121). To prove her point, Jones goes as far as placing Irigaray in conversation with Karl Barth, a 20th century Swiss theologian best known for his application of a historical-critical method in
Protestant theology. While she acknowledges the two are an unlikely pairing, Jones demonstrates how both of their projects hinge on, on the one hand, critique (for Irigaray this is ‘the logic of the same,’ while for Barth it is ‘liberal theology’) and on the other hand, construction (for Irigaray it is ‘divine women,’ while for Barth it is ‘God’) (110). From this perspective, I find Grosz’ suggestion that Irigaray be read as a philosopher first and foremost to undercut Irigaray’s creative constructive capacity as a theologian. In my view, Grosz’ intent to defend Irigaray’s writing is marred by the assumption that Irigaray’s theological project has no legs. While this may be true in the sense that numerous theologians have challenged Irigaray’s uncritical acceptance of masculinist logic about God in “Divine Women,” it does not preclude Irigaray’s potential to write theology or contribute to theological projects. From my perspective, it opens up new generative questions: What might it mean to consider Irigaray’s project of sexual difference as a theological project? What are the limits of using Irigaray in confessional contexts? In theological discourse? Does Irigaray’s own confessional posture matter?

Another intricacy of reception around Irigaray’s work on divine women is the fact that Irigaray’s definition of the divine was perceived as inconsistent. Penelope Deutscher has described a certain “Irigaray anxiety” around the language Irigaray employs, particularly around the divine (1996). While I refer readers to Deutscher’s text for the nuances of this argument, it is worth repeating that Irigaray’s usage of the term ‘divine’ is not minimal. It promises nothing less than divinity, which for many readers in the United States, felt like an ambitious, if not impossible, endeavor. Indeed, Jones has similarly commented that because Irigaray’s references to the divine are so ‘widely dispersed,’ ‘fragmented,’ and ‘elliptical,’ it can make her work that much more difficult to translate (in all senses of the term, I might add) (121). And Irigaray’s divine is, according to Grosz, “the field of creativity, fertility, production, an always uncertain and unpreempted field...a movement of and within history, a movement of becoming without telos” (210). God is not one; god is the “source and justification of (Western) knowledge,” the framework for how one can become a subject, the ideal of becoming a subject, and the idealized site of ethical love (207). For Grosz, Irigaray’s divine must be read as fragmented and elliptical by necessity, for it is a way to emphasize the fact that God and the divine are different, and that becoming divine unfolds in real time. Thus between the three conclusions about the meaning of the divine between Deutscher, Jones and Grosz alone, it is understandable that feminist theologians seeking to articulate clear and consistent definitions of the divine might find challenges with Irigaray’s grandiose claims in ‘Divine Women.’

A Changed Discipline: Forging a Feminist Philosophy of Religion

Irigaray’s writings on divinity continued to undergo cultural translations with the publication of the field-defining special issue in Hypatia, “Feminist Philosophy of Religion” (1994); the publication of A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief by Pamela Sue Anderson (1998); and the publication of Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion by Grace Jantzen (1999). In her introduction to the special issue, editor Nancy Frankenberry remarked her surprise by the number of submissions that engaged the work of Luce Irigaray (1994, 5). Indeed, the proliferation of Irigaray in an Anglo-American context is evidenced in the published articles themselves, with three of the ten directly citing Irigaray’s writing on divine women. Yet not only was engagement with Irigaray substantial, it also expanded the questions raised in Transfigurations, demonstrating Irigaray’s clear potential to transform the long-standing methods of the field. For example, consider Penelope Deutscher’s essay, “The Only Diabolical Thing About Women...: Luce Irigaray on Divinity.” Here Deutscher clearly differentiates Irigaray’s project from other feminist philosophers of religion. First, she claims that Irigaray’s essay “Divine Women” suggests that transforming a discipline via feminist reflection alone will never suffice.
By feminist reflection, Deutscher alludes to feminist approaches that insert women’s experiences into grand, masculine narratives of History. Yet Irigaray, as Deutscher notes, claims that female subjecthood itself is predicated on an alternative conception of divinity, and thus demands its own reading of the divine (89). In this way, Irigaray offers a unique avenue of thought for feminist philosophers of religion.

Yet more importantly, Deutscher sees potential in Irigaray’s project, writing, “the intertwined concepts of genre, horizontal and vertical dimensions, and divinity, all serve to articulate an ideal for women’s always incomplete ‘identity’” (107). While Deutscher acknowledges that not all may be satisfied with Irigaray’s linguistic gymnastics and rationale for the absolute necessity for society to rethink divinity, she nonetheless highlights how Irigaray’s divine feminine opens novel possibilities for thinking in multiplicities instead of universals. For Deutscher, it is only through thorough engagement of Irigaray’s full body of work and cultural context that one can follow her conclusion that women must become divine (90).

Similarly, Amy Hollywood’s article, “Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical” also takes seriously Irigaray’s claim in “Divine Women” that “divinity is what we need to be free” (1994). In her analysis of Irigaray’s engagement with mysticism compared to that of Simone de Beauvoir, Hollywood builds on Toril Moi’s observations that Irigaray’s mysticism is a site of women’s speech (Moi 1985, 136; Hollywood 1994, 159). What are the possibilities of such a claim? What are the limitations? While Hollywood suggests that Irigaray’s articulation of the sensible transcendental warrants scrutiny, she nonetheless finds value in Irigaray’s textual engagement with mystics like St. Teresa as a way “toward retheorizing the meanings of religion in a world of freedom” (Hollywood 1994, 178).

Thus it is with this critical posture of trans-Atlantic engagement that Irigaray’s influence in defining the tasks and agenda of feminist philosophy of religion come to bear. Returning to the words of Frankenberry in her introduction, Luce Irigaray’s invocation “could very well be read as an important barometer of a new chapter in the relationship between French feminisms and Anglophone feminisms” (1994, 5). A new barometer indeed. Within five years of the publication of the Hypatia issue, two philosophers of religion: Pamela Sue Anderson, then housed in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sunderland, and Grace Jantzen, then a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester, published field-defining books on the tasks, methods, aims, and visions for a feminist philosophy of religion.

On the one hand, their projects are quite similar. Unsurprisingly, most evident is the clear citational and in-text reference to Luce Irigaray (Anderson mentions Irigaray by name 192 times, Jantzen 135 times). Both Anderson and Jantzen contend that Irigaray’s thought is influential in articulating a critique of the masculinist bases of the philosophy of religion (Anderson 1998, 115; Jantzen 1999, 4). Further, both find that Irigaray’s specific attention to sexual difference offers a compelling diagnosis of the patriarchal norms that plague the Western philosophical canon (Anderson 1998, 9; Jantzen 1999, 266). As Anderson puts it, Irigaray’s attention to sexual difference demonstrates the harmful normativity of a certain line of philosophical reasoning in the field of the philosophy of religion: empirical realist forms of theism. This ends up overlooking and dismissing the central role of the body in shaping the “rational subject.” As Jantzen puts it, Irigaray’s attention to sexual differences challenges the notion that humans are “rational, autonomous Cartestian egos” instead of “embodied, sexuate persons” (1999, 42). In this sense, both Anderson and Jantzen embody the fourth posture of trans-Atlantic translations of Irigaray stated earlier that take Irigaray’s foundational claims about Western discourse as a starting point to re-examine and rewrite their own methodologies.

Yet on the other hand, Anderson and Jantzen’s clear positioning as feminist philosophers, not theologians, marks a departure from the postures of translation described before. For as useful as they find Irigaray in deconstructing the philosophy of religion and constructing a feminist philosophy of religion,
both Anderson and Jantzen express that they are not tasked with assessing the theological integrity of Irigaray’s claims around the divine. Anderson writes, “I have not proposed to do theology or to construct an account of the female divine. Instead as a philosopher, I have been concerned with questions of epistemological method and the content of beliefs” (1998, 117). Similarly, Jantzen articulates from the outset that while Irigaray’s writing is influential, her project is not an assessment of Irigaray’s philosophy of religion. Nor is it an attempt to remain faithful to Irigaray’s original articulation of ‘becoming divine’ as expressed in “Divine Women.” Rather, it is to use it to create her own vision for what a feminist philosophy of religion should look like (1999, 4). To this end, Anderson and Jantzen carve a new way to look at Irigaray’s writing on divinity, one that takes creative liberty with the application of Irigaray’s terms and concepts around the divine.

Such liberty can be clearly seen in the vastly different extents in which Anderson and Jantzen appropriate Irigaray’s articulation of “becoming divine.” Anderson, for her part, is thoroughly skeptical, going as far to suggest that Irigaray should not be turned into a theologian. As Irigaray articulates it, Anderson suggests that the project of ‘becoming divine women’ risks turning into the tired theistic models so imbricated in the masculine symbolic that a feminist philosophy of religion seeks to undercut (1998, 117). Yet as evidenced in her title, it is clear that Jantzen takes a different approach to “becoming divine.” Central to her project, “becoming divine” is the primary aim of the philosophy of religion. It is the creative alternative to reinforcing a masculinist project, the unification of the love of God. Contrary to Anderson, who considers the purpose of a feminist philosophy of religion to rethink typical conceptions of “reason,” Jantzen suggests the purpose of a feminist philosophy of religion is to envision and articulate new horizons for human becoming (8). It is in this regard, I believe, that Anderson and Jantzen offer two different “translations” of Irigaray, and thus two different versions of trans-Atlantic feminism by the Anglo-American reader.

That said, their indebtedness to the myriad pre-texts around the topic of French feminism should not go unnoticed. Jantzen, who more enthusiastically adopts Irigaray’s language, addresses the challenges some Anglo-American feminist philosophers of religion might have with her project in the same way Jardine and Moi posit oppositions between Anglo-American and French feminist: the one focused on justice, truth, the empirical subject, and the issues of colonialism, racism, and classism that afflict such pursuits; the other focused on language, symbolic discourse, and creative quests to “become divine” (1999, 6–26). Similarly, in a move similar to Chopp’s acknowledgement of divergent religious contexts between France and the United States, Jantzen acknowledges that, so informed by her own Anglo-American context, and despite her attempts to offer a bridge between the two disciplines, her view of “becoming divine” may distort the writing of Irigaray she attempts to make accessible to an Anglo-American audience (4).

However, such creative appropriation of Irigaray’s terminology is a chance that Anderson appears less willing to take. Throughout her book, Anderson delineates between three different frameworks for a feminist philosophy of religion: a feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemology, and feminist poststructuralism. Of the three, Anderson firmly grounds herself in a feminist standpoint epistemology that concerns the socially constructed and situated location of the individuals for whom the ideas of truth are made normative. Irigaray, while she touches on these ideas, does not find anything short of “becoming divine” sufficient (1993, 68). This is not to say that Anderson should not both be considered an influential bridge between French feminism and Anglo-American sensibilities, or that her work does not creatively engage Irigaray’s writings on divinity; rather, it is to suggest that Anderson more clearly maintains a distance from adopting Irigaray’s alluring, but also elusive frameworks of divine embodiment.

Further, Anderson’s distance from a full rewrite of the tasks of philosophy of religion does not mean that Anderson views Irigaray’s writing, which she places under the umbrella of feminist poststructuralism, to be antithetical to the aims of a feminist standpoint epistemology. Rather, it demonstrates a compelling
middle ground, reminding readers how Irigaray also claims that it is impossible to be a “disembodied epistemological subject” (1998, 217). Just as feminist standpoint epistemology seeks to center alternative perspectives, so does Irigaray in her critiques of the male symbolic order.

**Here’s to Difference: Concluding Thoughts**

Ten years after the publication of the ground-breaking *Hypatia* issue, Nancy Frankenberry, in an introduction to a new volume, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*, commented, “the standard division between Anglo-American philosophy and Continental philosophy, still apparent in mainstream philosophy, is evaporating in the feminist philosophy of religion . . . the influence of French feminisms in the work of Anglo-American feminist philosophers of religion is strong and likely to remain unabated for some time” (2004, 21). Indeed, transnational conversations around Irigaray’s writings on divinity continue to this day, and it appears as though the labels associated with Irigaray as described in the aforementioned pre-texts to feminist philosophy of religion hold less weight than they did before. This is not to say they do not exist altogether; by 2003, two volumes on the relationship between French feminism and religion were published, *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader* (2002), with six essays on Irigaray, and another companion volume, *Religion in French feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives* (2003), with five essays on Irigaray. Alison Martin (2000) published a book-length dissertation on Irigaray’s writing on the divine, suggesting that Irigaray’s placement in the “French feminist” canon has occluded the ways in which she draws on Hegel and Heidegger in addition to Deleuze and Derrida.

However, there also appears to be a growing presence of scholarship that engages Irigaray outside her categorization as a French feminist. Reception around Irigaray’s recent work engaging the divine (see *Through Vegetal Being, Sharing the Fire*, and *A New Culture of Energy*) focused on its potential to address the ails of society today, particularly around the rapid destruction of the planet. Here it appears as though feminist readers of Irigaray are re-discovering what Rosi Braidotti articulated in *Nomadic Subjects*: Irigaray’s project of becoming divine is post-human and deeply political (1994). For example, Stephen Seeley (2017) has examined Irigaray’s critique of Heidegger’s ontology to suggest that an ontology of decolonization (as fundamentally opposed to Heidegger’s ontology of technicity) requires attention to sexuate difference and maternal debt. Seeley suggests that decolonization requires a shift away from Western thought, and that Irigaray’s project grasps in philosophical writing what the Kogi people in Colombia have always known: that environmental preservation comes when there is reverence towards a common Mother. In a similar vein, Michelle Boulous Walker (2022) places Irigaray’s work on transcendence in conversation with Indigenous scholar Mary Graham, who calls for all ethics to be understood via obligation to the land. To do so, one must ground themselves in place, understanding that self is nature. As such, Boulous Walker suggests that Irigaray’s articulation of becoming divine is part of a symbolic re-distribution by which women can “undo the work of sacrifice that positions nature and fertility against culture” (2022, 195). Divine becoming occurs in place—by and through nature.

It is interesting to note that these recent articulations of the divine have not occurred within insular academic disciplinary contexts such as an institutionalized department of “feminist philosophy of religion.” Rather, they promote a broad engagement with the academic study of religion, philosophically, theologically, politically, and otherwise. Irigaray’s oeuvre continues to push institutional boundaries around what a feminist philosophy of religion could be. Feminist philosophy of religion today might do itself a favor to remember the ways in which “divine women” occupy transdisciplinary spaces.

Ultimately, the reception of Irigaray’s writing on the divine in the Anglo-American academy, from the initial introduction of her to writing to an Anglo-American audience by scholars of comparative
literature, to its use in articulating a vision for feminist philosophy of religion, is multifaceted. This paper has suggested that Irigaray's articulation of divinity does not stand alone: its reception has been informed by the labels placed on her writing, whether that be “French feminist,” “essentialist,” or otherwise. From the critical attention to Irigaray's plays with language, to her exceptionally complex engagement with numerous philosophical interlocutors, and to her situated location in the French métropole, it is clear that all reflect the intricacies of translating transnational feminisms. Yet it also demonstrates the potential that translating transnationally offers feminists in the academy: interrogation of the theories and methods normative to our disciplines, as well as avenues for creative construction. The agendas that arose from this history inform feminist philosophy today, and, perhaps most importantly, continue to provide opportunities for scholars to grapple with difference.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that Irigaray's title as a French feminist is somewhat ironic because she was born in Belgium and has rejected the term “feminist” (see Hirsh, Olson and Brulotte 1995).

2. I offer clarification here because I do not believe feminist theology is a mere academic pursuit; I see it rather as a posture of critique and creative construction, that, grounded in a mode of understanding and interpretation of the divine, seeks liberation and freedom for all beings. In this sense, feminist theology is done both within the walls of the academy and outside them.

3. For what it’s worth, Irigaray has suggested that many of her American readers have read her primarily via literature departments and thus through a literary lens, but that she prefer her writing to be understood first and foremost as philosophy (Hirsh, Olson and Brulotte 1995, 98).

References


