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Editorial

Introduction to special issue: Irigaray and religion

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In 1974, Luce Irigaray published *Speculum de l'autre femme* (translated into English in 1985 as *Speculum of the Other Woman*). A critical feminist intervention in Western philosophy and psychoanalysis, *Speculum* marked the beginning of Irigaray's sustained consideration of the question of sexual difference and its implications for theorizing subjectivity, ethics, and politics. Although it faced a critical reception, the text also became a classic work of French feminist thought, and of continental and feminist philosophy more generally. Fifty years, more than 20 monographs, and dozens of edited volumes, book chapters, and articles later, Irigaray's work continues to inspire scholars across multiple disciplines, ranging from art and architecture to film, gender studies, literature, political theory, and philosophy, as well as religious studies and theology. In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Speculum,* this special issue of *Body and Religion* seeks to explore the way in which embodiment is entangled with religion across Irigaray's writings, beginning with *Speculum*, but also following the thread through her subsequent works. We are particularly interested in the implications of Irigaray's philosophical, political, and, at times, theological interventions, and the significance of her writings for religion and religious studies more broadly.

Trained in psychoanalysis and with doctoral degrees in philosophy and linguistics, Irigaray is most well known for her philosophy of sexual

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difference or, as she often describes it in her later work, sexuate difference.[1] In her work, Irigaray argues that human life is constituted on the basis of an irreducibility of (at least) two sexes.[2] But this originary human difference, this sexuation, she contends, has been covered over by a phallogocentric Western metaphysics that is grounded in sameness and assumes the idea of a universal human subject – the one, the same, and the always already masculine subject. Irigaray thus begins her philosophical project by pointing to the 'blind spots' in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and journeys back through Western philosophy to Plato and the pre-Socratics, revealing the maternal matter that subtends the masculine subject. In short, she suggests that the maternal origin has been occluded and must be recovered by exposing the phallocentrism of the discourses that constitute and reproduce a culture of sameness.

Irigaray's deconstructive interventions include complex and, at times, playful references to what is often hidden in Western thought – bodily features of lips, placentas, mucous, maternity, natality, porosity, breath, materiality – and these elements abound in her writings. In its very title, *Speculum* signals Irigaray's philosophical engagements with the intellectual traditions that have informed her thought: 'speculum' plays on the specular economy of human development in Freudian psychoanalysis and in Lacan's innovative reframing of psychoanalysis in relation to language. In Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage,' for example, a child's recognition of himself in a mirror (his self-reflection) marks the beginning of alienated subjectivity, identifying himself with a mirror image (Lacan 1977:1–29).[3] The Lacanian interpretation of this moment as the beginning of subjective becoming ultimately posits subjectivity as a cutting off from one's others – especially the child from his mother. As Irigaray interprets it, subjectivity in the mirror stage emerges by ignoring or forgetting the material conditions of that subjectivity – the matter of the mirror and the body of the mother holding the child – in favor of a specular image.

'Speculum,' as an instrument of gynecology, further entrenches philosophical investigation as both a reduction of woman to reproduction and an instrumentalization of female desire to construct a universal knowing subject. In the hands of the (male) gynecologist, the speculum allows him to gaze inside the woman's body. Irigaray's title implicitly asks what it would mean instead for the other (or woman as other) to be seen by another woman, instead of a male subject. In this sense, 'speculum of the other woman' refers to woman as both the object and the subject of speculation – the one who sees and is seen – as a way to interrogate the conditions of reflective knowledge based on the metaphor of vision. But perhaps most significantly, Irigaray's *Speculum* also refers to the mirror

genre of medieval texts, known as *specula*. These books represent a proto-encyclopedic attempt to present the sum of knowledge on various topics – nature, the church, astronomy, or alchemy, for example – as a way to reflect the world in words.[4] The titles self-consciously indicate both an attempt at objective or accurate reflection of knowledge and subjective reflection or speculation in the modern sense of the term. Among the many medieval examples, Irigaray almost certainly had in mind two early 14th-century women writers: Marguerite d'Oingt, a Carthusian nun and author of *Speculum*, and Marguerite Porete, who was burned as a heretic for her book, *Le mirouer des simples âmes*.

At the heart of Irigaray's *Speculum* is 'La mystérique,' a fiery chapter that mirrors the writings of the Christian women mystics, and it includes allusions to Marguerite Porete and Marguerite d'Oingt, along with Angela of Foligno, Teresa of Avila, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Hadewijch of Antwerp. Here, she examines the way the feminine, suppressed and constrained by religious and philosophical regimes, nevertheless emerges in the desire-saturated texts of the mystics, who saw themselves reflected in Christ, their 'wound' mirroring his wounded body. Their encounters with God, both apophatic in their darkness and transcendent in their shimmering brightness, manifested in physical symptoms that resembled the hysteria at the origins of psychoanalysis: convulsions, pain, aphasia, and inedia.[5] In the context of the larger philosophical project of *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray reads the mystics as representing the possibility of female desire and subjectivity, but one which was still constrained within a symbolic order that could not recognize it as such. A radically different culture would be required to acknowledge human difference, including the recognition of women's subjectivity and desire, and the possibility of an ethical relationship between two different subjects.

Since *Speculum*, Irigaray's works have turned to the task of developing a culture that would recognize sexuate difference, in language, politics, and in religion.[6] Here again, themes of embodiment are entangled with religious imagery: in the reception of the Eucharist and sacrifice of the maternal;[7] in the significance of Mary's virginity in her role as mother of God;[8] in the representation of women, mothers, and daughters as divine;[9] in the cultivation of the breath and practice of yoga;[10] in the invocation of angels as mediators;[11] and in the incarnation and teachings of Jesus.[12] These are just a few of the many religious themes of Irigaray's work – too rich to be captured in this brief introduction – that provide entry points into her thought for scholars of religion and theology around the topic of body and religion. They allow us to reconsider embodied existence beyond reductions of the body to either the subject or object of knowledge, and

to reconsider the religious beyond reductions to either material culture or other-worldly experience, and to do so with a view to the religious lives of women and the representations of woman in religious discourse.

The reception of Irigaray in religious studies

Following the publication of Irigaray's early works in English in the 1980s, Anglo-American feminist theologians and philosophers of religion engaged with her work as part of a wave of feminist critique and reconstruction of the dominant Christian theological traditions.[13] Irigaray's early development of religious themes entangling visceral and spiritual language increasingly became a source for constructing new paradigms for thinking about human-divine relation, human-human relation, and self-other relation.[14] Feminist philosophers of religion such as Grace Jantzen gravitated toward Irigaray's call for women to become divine, rejecting divisions between immanence and transcendence as symptoms of a patriarchal culture.[15] Despite this appeal of Irigaray's interventions into theological territory, Irigaray's work was also subject to critique for its perceived essentialism, heteronormativity, and Orientalism. Influenced by broader post post-structuralist returns to materiality in fields like speculative realism and new materialism, 21st-century receptions of Irigaray among scholars of religion and philosophers of the transcendental phenomenological tradition have prioritized embodiment in Irigaray's work, as exemplified in her invocations of the language of incarnation.[16]

As this critical engagement suggests, Irigaray's work has appealed primarily to scholars of religion and theologians already invested in studying Christian thought, texts, history, and praxis from feminist perspectives. While her writings also refer to elements of Hinduism (primarily yoga) and Buddhism,[17] these were initially subject to critiques of Orientalism; more recently, her writings on the breath across religious traditions have inspired constructive and creative work (see the contributions in this issue).[18] Much remains to be written about Irigaray's integration of non-Christian religions in her own philosophy of sexuate difference. There is also opportunity for consideration of how her thought might contribute to religious studies in these areas, especially concerning questions of gender and sexuality.[19] Indeed, Irigaray's diagnosis of the phallocentrism of discourse, her deconstruction of Western metaphysical renderings of the body as an object of knowledge, and especially her sustained constructive efforts to reimagine a culture beyond sameness continue to make her work a rich resource for the study of the body and religion.

The question(s) of sexuate difference

Throughout the various foci that have occupied Irigaray across over a half century of work – from her earliest philosophical critiques of masculine genealogies of the Western philosophical tradition, to her calls for sexuate rights in her more explicitly political writings, to her continued efforts to bring about through writing and teaching a pedagogy reflective of sexuate becoming, to her more contemplative and reflective works, to her most recent re-engagements with ontology – sexuate difference remains the primary concept that guides her understanding of human relation to self and to others. Her work asserts that Western culture has never imagined living in relation to others, because we have never imagined a self that is not built on mastery of others. And this failure of imagination, she contends, is the consequence of a culture that has not allowed sexuate difference to blossom.

Irigaray's dogged insistence that sexuate difference is a fundamental condition of human being to which we must return, in order to reimagine ourselves and our relationships to all our others (human and non-human), has invited critiques of essentialism. Her prioritization of a sexed couple (which she describes as male and female) as the figure of a dynamic relation that could transform a culture of sameness has been criticized for its heteronormativity and for an uninterrogated whiteness in her work. Increasingly, these criticisms are being undertaken with care, in order to acknowledge the complexity of Irigaray's philosophical project and to differentiate the sometimes-competing claims that emerge when Irigaray's sexuate ontology is put into conversation with theories that prioritize the sociality of being and the social construction of identity.[20] These debates challenge us to consider the continued relevance of her work.

Thinking with and beyond Irigaray

This special issue of *Body and Religion* was born from the premise that Irigaray's work is not only still relevant, but is also an essential conversation partner for the study of religion, particularly as it confronts questions of embodiedness and transcendence raised in discourses of new materialism, decolonial thought, and philosophies of race. Following the journal's mission to foster diverse methodological and epistemological approaches to the study of religion and to advance critical inquiry into the very notions of 'body,' the essays assembled in this special issue collectively engage questions of materiality and embodiment in Irigaray's work and situate Irigaray's thought in relation to a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary engagements with religion, broadly conceived. Furthermore, the essays in

this volume contribute to the existing literature by offering fresh insights from a diversity of methodological approaches and perspectives. They use Irigarayan frameworks – philosophical, psychoanalytic, and political – to engage the body and religion together in critically innovative and constructive ways. Perhaps most importantly, these authors think *with* Irigaray to push her work into new territory – bringing her into conversation with their own respective expertise in therapeutic practice, theology, aesthetics, and political justice – to reimagine embodiment and religion.

We open this special issue of *Body and Religion* with an innovative interweaving of Irigaray's philosophical framings of sexuate ontology with Mitchell Damian Murtagh's interdisciplinary work on Irigaray and quantum physics. In 'The coming of the flesh in human and cosmic relations: (re)thinking incarnation with Luce Irigaray,' Phyllis Kaminski analyzes Irigaray's early essay 'Belief itself' (1993 [1987]) and her more recent publication *Sharing the Fire* (2019), artfully reading Irigaray's discrete notion of materiality and transcendence in terms of Irigaray's theological impulse to gesture to a shared embodied experience of 'ineffable mystery' through metaphor. Drawing on Murtagh's extension of Irigaray's maternal metaphors to frame an origin of the physics-metaphysics relation, Kaminski argues for a notion of an incarnational dialectic – a dynamic individuated space and time of embodied encounters of transcendence, replete with the perpetual reaching of desire. In this dialectic, incarnation is not simply a word desiring flesh but a flesh desiring to become word, which Kaminski claims is the possibility of a materiality that manifests a mode of linguistic expression that could support a more expansive appreciation of human and divine relations in Christian theologies and beyond.

Cheryl Lynch-Lawler, psychotherapist, psychoanalyst, and professor at the St. Louis Psychoanalytic Institute, critically engages Irigaray's notion of embodiment by way of Sufism scholar Henry Corbin in her article, 'In the beginning was the relation: the divine as a ternary agential field (of love).' Lynch-Lawler reads Irigaray and Corbin together, as Western theorists whose engagements with non-Western traditions have informed their theorizing. Accounting for the neo-colonialist and Orientalism of their moves, Lynch-Lawler argues that the cross-cultural engagements enable a theorizing of the divine as an 'agential ternary field' – as a continuously unfolding wholeness of the spiritual, corporeal, and the space-time in between of the imagination. She applies this framework of the divine as agential ternary field to interpret a case study from her psychoanalytic practice, offering an inspiring reading of the transformative capacity of the embodiment of such a notion of the divine.

In the third article, 'Embodied encounters: exploring Irigaray's philosophy in art and activism,' Cara Judea Alhadeff offers a performative Irigarayan-inspired narration of her creative works as a praxis of dynamic and relational identity. Invoking Irigaray's mother-daughter relation to deconstruct patriarchal genealogies and to repair the metaphysical rift between body and spirit, Alhadeff reflects on a series of her Irigarayan-inspired artwork (visual images and performances) created in collaboration with her mother. These collaborations serve as embodiments of what she refers to as Irigaray's mother-daughter idiom, through which she puts forward a mode of thinking the ecology of human, 'natural,' and cultural relations that prioritizes the autonomy of breathing alongside the sharing of air. Inspired by Irigaray's emphasis on the at-once shared and autonomous breathing between mother and child in the womb, Alhadeff concludes by meditating on her own maternal genealogy as a praxis, exploring her Sephardic Jewish heritage and Ladino language as a disruptive, non-linear, fluid relation of body and spirit that can confront the calamitous meta-crises in the world today.

In the article, 'Inner and outer potentialities: a spiritual approach to the problem of regenerative architecture and design,' Andrea Wheeler considers embodied aesthetics of spirit inspired by Irigaray's work through the lens of the architectural theory of regenerative design. Incorporating Irigaray's engagements with both ecology and Eastern religious traditions (e.g., 'Towards an ecology of sharing' (2015), *A New Culture of Energy* (2021), *Sharing the Fire* (2019), etc.), Wheeler critically examines Irigaray's use of religious concepts, especially within the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, to argue for an expansive concept of sensory experience that reframes how humans relate to each other and the world around them. Wheeler's innovative and interdisciplinary engagement with architecture, religion, and philosophy thus establishes an Irigarayan reading of embodiment, in order to rethink human-ecological connections, and to theorize regenerative architecture as an embodied sensory relation that cultivates embodied spiritual energy.

In 'This legal subject which is not one: Luce Irigaray, reproductive justice, and a jurisprudence of sexual difference,' Jena Jolissaint draws on her background as an attorney and on her work in the reproductive justice movement to use Irigaray's philosophy of sexuate difference to examine abortion discourses in the United States. Jolissaint considers both the religious and pseudo-scientific rhetoric that resulted in the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Jolissaint argues that in a post-*Dobbs v. Jackson* world, an Irigarayan turn to sexed rights – which challenges liberal feminist discourses of equality as based narrowly in associations of personhood

with absolute autonomy – is needed to transform the discourse of personhood used in abortion rights discourse. Jolissaint therefore proposes a new model for thinking about abortion rights and reproductive justice, invoking Irigaray's contemplative focus on the generative sharing of breath as a defining dimension of sexuate ontology that reframes the singularity of personhood as necessarily relational.

Together, these articles confront some of the most foundational assumptions about embodied experience of space and time, perception, subjectivity, knowledge, and transcendence, and ways to open new frameworks for rethinking embodiment and religion and their relation to one another. For these authors, Irigaray's work on sexuate difference has provided the possibility of such an opening, and we are honored to present their methodologically and perspectivally different works, in order to expand the conversation about body and religion and its significance for both examining and reimagining the world today. On the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Speculum de l'autre femme*, we remain grateful to Luce Irigaray for inspiring these conversations.

Notes

1 We will use 'sexuate' in this article, because Irigaray now uses this term consistently in her work, and because 'sexuate' makes clearer a distinction of her philosophical project from associations of sexual difference with biological discourse and social determinism.

2 The complexity of Irigaray's sexuate difference epitomizes the speculative dimensions of her philosophical inquiry, which is situated at the intersections of the late 20th-century ethical turn in philosophy, the related accompanying turn to the religious in Continental philosophy, and the linguistic turn in psychoanalysis with which Jacques Lacan is associated. Mary Rawlinson and James Sares' (2023) *What Is Sexual Difference?* offers a comprehensive exploration of multiple dimensions of sexual/sexuate difference in Irigaray's work and its broader implications for contemporary philosophical and critical theory discourses.

3 For a careful analysis and contextualization of Lacan's mirror stage in relation to his own life and work, as well as in relation to Freud, see Jane Gallop (1985) and Catherine Clément (1983 [1981]). There are many engagements with the mirror stage in relation to Irigaray. For a brief but careful contextualization of Irigaray's project with respect to both Lacan and Freud, see Elizabeth Weed (1994:79–110); see also Maggie Berg (1991).

4 On *specula*, see Ritamary Bradley (1954:100–115) and Mary Franklin-Brown (2012). On the mirror as a physical object and philosophical concept, see Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet (2001) and Rodolphe Gasché (1986).

5 On the hysteric as proto-feminist, see Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément (1986).

6 In earlier works, Irigaray offers pointed criticisms of the enterprise of theology and religious studies. For instance, Irigaray directly challenges the feminist theological

interpretive work of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her essay, 'Equal to whom?' (1989:59–76). See also Irigaray's reflection on Feuerbach's definition of God in her essay, 'Divine women' (1993 [1987]).

7 See Irigaray's *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993 [1987]), especially the essays 'Belief itself' and 'Divine women.'

8 See Irigaray's 'When gods are born' in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991 [1980]); *I Love to You* (1996 [1992]); 'The redemption of women' in *Key Writings* (2004); and 'The mystery of Mary' in *A New Culture of Energy* (2021).

9 See Irigaray's *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993 [1987]), *Key Writings* (2004), and *A New Culture of Energy* (2021).

10 Irigaray makes early allusions to the relationship between breath and the divine in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (1999 [1983]). She develops the significance of breath more fully in *Between East and West* (2002 [1999]). See also Irigaray's 'The age of the breath' in *Key Writings* (2004) and 'Humanizing our breath' in *A New Culture of Energy* (2021).

11 See, especially, Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993 [1984]); see also *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993 [1987]).

12 See Irigaray's 'God becoming flesh, flesh becoming divine' (2023:505–16), *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991 [1980]), *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993 [1987]), and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993 [1984]).

13 In philosophy and literary theory, Gail Schwab, Ellen Mortenson, Diane Perpich, Ada Jaarsma, and Elizabeth Grosz, among countless others, have explored Irigaray's invocations of religious imagery – from the Garden of Eden to angels – as necessary to unpack her philosophy of sexuate difference. Among receptions by feminist philosophers of religion, Pamela Sue Anderson's *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1998) and Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine* (1999) are formative for the reception of Irigaray in feminist theology. For an extensive discussion on the early reception of Irigaray in the philosophy of religion, see Elsa Kunz (2023:24–38).

14 There are many engagements with Irigaray by scholars in theology and religion that use her work for such constructive reimaginings. See, for example, Tina Beattie's (2002) use of Irigaray to reimagine salvation. See also Serene Jones (2000) and Jenny Daggers (1997:35–50).

15 The Irigarayan paradigms for engaging religious language and symbolism also opened doors for rethinking representations of women in religion more broadly. Irigaray's forays into Christian mysticism, as well as her arguments that women's differences would have to be mined from the annals of history and culture (Irigaray 1993:9), made her a central conversation partner for Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy* (2002) and *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays* (2016). Theologian Morny Joy has also consistently brought Irigaray into conversation with religion by way of its entanglements with transcendental phenomenology and what is often described as the religious turn in Continental philosophy. See Joy (2013) and Joy, O'Grady, and Poxon (2003).

16 For further reference, Anne-Claire Mulder's *Divine Flesh, Embodied Word* (2006), Emily Holmes' *Flesh Made Word* (2013), and Rebekah Pryor's *Motherly* (2022) are excellent examples of using nuanced engagements with Irigaray to retheorize embodiment in the Christian tradition.

17 See, especially, Irigaray's *I Love to You* (1996 [1992]); *Between East and West* (2002 [1999]); and *A New Culture of Energy* (2021).

18 Ana Laura Funes Maderey is a scholar of Hindu and Jain philosophy who substantively engages Irigaray in her presentations and published work, particularly in relation to breath. See, for example, Maderey's 'The power of shared breath' (2020:389–406). Lenart Škof's work on body and religion uses Irigaray's writings on breath to think the shared embodiedness of breathing in relation to the philosophy of religion, ethics, and political philosophy. See, for instance, Škof's 'Democracy of breath and fire' (2022:117–33); see also his introduction with Emily Holmes, 'Towards breathing with Luce Irigaray,' in *Breathing with Luce Irigaray* (2013:1–14).

19 Substantive integrations of Irigaray's thought in religious studies and studies of non-Christian religious thought and practice are nascent yet offer significant contributions to both their fields and Irigaray studies. Morny Joy's *Divine Love* (2006) offers a sustained engagement with the intersection of philosophical and religious themes in Irigaray's work by focusing on Irigaray's pre-Christian religious thought (i.e., Greek). Joy also critically analyzes the 'excursion' into both yoga and Tantrism that Irigaray makes in *I Love to You* (1996 [1992]) and *Between East and West* (2002 [1999]). In Jewish studies, see Melissa Raphael (2009), Randi Rashkover (2006:104–116), and Jonathan Cahana-Blum (2020). Shaireen Rasheed consistently integrates Irigaray studies into her talks and published work on Muslim identity. See, for example, her 'Islam, sexuality, and the "war on terror": Luce Irigaray's post-colonial ethics of difference' (2014: 1–15). Nathan Eric Dickman has written on Irigaray as presenting a methodological critique of traditional Western models of philosophy of religion (as a discipline) (2018:113).

20 Ellen Armour's *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference* (1999) remains a formidable representation of the nuanced readings of Irigaray that constructively use her work for theology, while also critically examining her prioritization of sexual difference over other differences. In philosophy and critical theory, see Penelope Ingram (2008) and Penelope Deutscher (2002).

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