

Introduction to Part Three: Irigaray and Theology

A dialogue between the thought of Luce Irigaray and contemporary Catholic theology requires first that there be some point of contact and relation. The most obvious point of contact may be the subject matter of theology itself, although this cannot be assumed as Irigaray's use of the theological lexicon can appear to be quite idiosyncratic. A more promising point of contact lies with the theological method. My argument is that the defining characteristics of contemporary Catholic theological method are consistent with Irigaray's approach. It can be demonstrated that although Irigaray stands outside of institutional Catholicism, the spirit of her work is catholic in the broad sense of the term. By this I mean that Irigaray's work can be seen to be characterised by three interrelated principles that Richard P. McBrien in his book *Catholicism* identifies as the constitutive characteristics of Catholicism. These principles are sacramentality, mediation and communion.

According to McBrien: "A sacramental perspective is one that 'sees' the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical. For Catholicism, therefore, all reality is sacred."¹ Grace and nature are not in opposition, but rather, grace is the fulfilment and perfection of nature. This means that the struggle for justice, peace and authentic human progress are integral to the movement towards the establishment of the reign of God.² The principle of sacramentality affirms that human imagination need not stand in opposition to divine initiative. The Second Vatican Council teaches that "the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grow . . . although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, *such progress is of vital concern* to the kingdom of God."³

¹ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) 9-10.

² Although it is not we who establish God's reign, the human struggle is integral to its realisation. I shall discuss the relation between human effort and the establishment of the reign of God in depth in Chapter Nine.

Mediation, the second principle that McBrien identifies, is a corollary of sacramentality. While extending the principle of sacramentality, it also qualifies it. As the statement above from the Second Vatican Council makes clear, the divine immanent within and manifested by creation is not identical with it. The encounter with God is mediated through history, culture and language. The divine is mediated by the symbolic order as it is in the symbolic that meaning arises. The mediated presence of the divine is an effective presence that brings about what it signifies — which is not to suggest that what the symbolic represents as divine is always worthy of the name. The necessity of mediation need not be read as an affirmation of hierarchy. In the preceding chapter we saw that a space of mediation is necessary to the freedom of the other, to let the other be and remain other. The space of mediation is also a space in which the genuinely new may arise.

This leads to the third principle that McBrien identifies: communion. The principle of communion — especially in the light of the first two principles — affirms the social, historical, and cultural dimension of truth. “Even when the divine-human encounter is most personal and individual, it is still communal, in that the encounter is made possible by the mediation of a community of faith.”⁴ Communion expresses the public character of truth that is both particular and universal. It is particular because it can only be expressed in a particular time and place, in the local Church. It is universal because it cannot be limited to any particular expression. It is not the exclusive possession of any single party, nor is it able to be identified exclusively with any of its parts. One might argue for a certain priority of the particular as the necessary incarnation of the whole, but its catholicity can only be assured so long as it remains open to the whole, to its other in time and space with whom it shares a common faith. Communion is inclusive of difference because it is *kath’ holou*, of the whole.⁵

³ Second Vatican Council, “Gaudium et Spes”, *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery. (Newtown, N.S.W.: E.J. Dwyer, 1992) 938, para. 39. My emphasis.

⁴ McBrien, *Catholicism*, 12.

⁵ Ideally, these three principles are mutually corrective. However, sacramentality can collapse into idolatry, mediation into magic, communion into collectivism. It is against these dangers that the Protestant principle raises its voice. See McBrien, *Catholicism*, 11- 14.

All three of these principles affirm the symbolic nature of human reality. As Louis Marie Chauvet argues, “*consent to mediation . . . is the fundamental human task*”.⁶ It is consent to mediation that underlies the whole of Irigaray’s work. According to Irigaray’s analysis, the content of the symbolic as constituted by the metaphysics of the “one” has functioned to cover over its material conditions of possibility. This has created a situation where the content of the symbolic is at odds with its structure. By situating truth as somehow outside the very structure of subjectivity, the subject is seen as only being able to attain truth or transcendence by denying the very conditions of possibility of both subjectivity and of truth. Irigaray’s constructive discourse, therefore, attempts to symbolise the dialogical nature of both subjectivity and the symbolic. One of the most characteristic features of contemporary Catholic theology is precisely its attention to its methodological presuppositions with regard to the thoroughly mediated nature of the content of its reflection. Irigaray’s thought coheres most closely with contemporary Catholic theology at this foundational level.

1. Anthropological constants

Catholic theology in the twentieth century has been shaped by the turn to the subject. Theology begins with the question of humanity.⁷ According to Karl Rahner: “We must reflect *first of all* upon man as the universal question which he is for himself. . . . This question, which man *is* and not only *has*, must be regarded as the condition which makes hearing the Christian answer possible.”⁸ Reflecting upon this approach William Hill concludes that theology “*is anthropology; less the science of God than the study of humanity as it stands before God*”.⁹ This theological turn to the subject was consolidated by the influence of transcendental Thomism at the Second Vatican

⁶ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Interpretation of Christian Existence*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995)145.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan argues that for theology as for any other discipline, “objectivity is simply the consequence of authentic subjectivity”. *Method in Theology*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 265.

⁸ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 11.

⁹ William J. Hill, “Theology”, in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Komonchak et al. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990) 1022. See also David Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order. The New Pluralism in Theology*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) 17 n.22.

Council.¹⁰ Transcendental Thomism, so called for its post-Kantian stress on the subject's creative contribution to knowledge, was founded by the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal who had his home base at Louvain.¹¹ The adjective "transcendental" includes both the Scholastic sense of the term as applicable to all being and the Kantian sense of the transcendental as the subjective conditions for the possibility of knowledge. The method of transcendental Thomism is characterised by its starting point in the subject's own pre-conceptual grasp "of the Absolute, not as object but as horizon, [as] the a priori structure of human existence as such, yet it exists only as mediation a posteriori in the categorical apprehension of finite existence".¹² However, David Tracy argues that transcendental Thomism has run its course since it is unwilling or unable to break with the concepts of classical theism. "Classical Christian theism", Tracy argues, "is neither internally coherent nor adequate as a full account of our common experience and of the scriptural understanding of the Christian God".¹³ Classical theism, as consistent with metaphysics, has not taken proper account of the thoroughly mediated and symbolic structure of human existence.

¹⁰ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza draws to our attention to the fact that "those Roman Catholic theologians most influential at the Second Vatican Council and in postconciliar times were all trained in the Neo-Scholastic tradition and, with the exception of Hans Küng and Joseph Ratzinger, wrote their dissertation or first major works on Thomas. They sought to reinterpret Thomas Aquinas independently from the presuppositions and views of Neo-Scholasticism." "Systematic Theology: Task and Methods", in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, eds. John P. Galvin and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 37.

¹¹ It was incidentally at Louvain that Irigaray studied for her Masters degree in the 1950s, a decade after Maréchal's death. A further connection between Irigaray and Maréchal can be found in Maréchal's own background which, according to Gerald McCool, included a degree in experimental psychology as well as a thorough grasp of continental philosophy. *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977) 251. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to try to tease out the possible theological influences to which Irigaray was exposed. (Edward Schillebeeckx also taught at Louvain from 1947 - 1958.) Irigaray herself gives very little away when it comes to her own biography. A passing glance at the state of Francophone theology during her youth, however, reveals a character that resonates with Irigaray's own approach. Aidan Nichols describes two major parties in the Francophone debate. The first group turned to the Latin Middle ages for inspiration. In their favour, Nichols notes, was "the fact that a rich and complex religion aiming of its nature at the transformation of the whole of life cannot exist without creating a culture to sustain it". *The Shape of Catholic Theology*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 338. A second group began from the opposite conviction. The theological humanists, as they were called, "have on their side the fact that the secular world in its very secularity contains elements of truth and goodness, and with that secular world the history of the Church as of theology shows a constant give-and-take". (Ibid.) These two groups considered the transformation of culture as intrinsic to their religious agenda. In Irigaray's thought the concerns of the first and second groups are combined. Their common ground is highlighted by the protests of a third party, who "set themselves resolutely against any confounding of the kingdom of God with human achievement". Ibid., 339.

¹² William J. Hill, "Theology," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 1022.

The theologian who I think best exemplifies a break with the metaphysics is Edward Schillebeeckx. Although trained in the Thomistic tradition, Schillebeeckx is exemplary for the manner in which his theology develops in ongoing openness to the insights of other disciplines. There are two aspects of Schillebeeckx's work that are of particular relevance to the current discussion. The first is Schillebeeckx's understanding of humanity. The second is his method of critical correlation which I shall situate more broadly as the primary methodological approach of contemporary Catholic theology. Both aspects of Schillebeeckx's work provide important clues as to the nature of what Irigaray describes as the "universal as mediation". Rejecting positivistic and pre-existing definitions of human nature, Schillebeeckx proposes a theology of human existence based upon what he calls "anthropological constants". These constants point towards certain "human impulses and orientations, values and spheres of value, but at the same time do not provide us with *directly* specific norms or ethical imperatives".¹⁴ Schillebeeckx argues that this is because "we do not have a pre-existing definition of humanity — indeed for Christians it is not only a future, but an eschatological reality".¹⁵

The first anthropological constant that Schillebeeckx describes is our "relationship to human corporeality, nature and the ecological environment".¹⁶ He argues that if Christian salvation is to be salvation for women and men it must forge an essential connection with all the material conditions by which we live. This constant finds an immediate resonance in Irigaray's work and her complaint that the dominant Western world view has been founded upon the disavowal of the material conditions and resources upon which its life depends.

The second constant concerns our identity as a function of our relation with other people. In his discussion of this constant Schillebeeckx refers in particular to the work of Emmanuel Levinas. He discusses the significance of the human face as a symbol for the essential orientation of the subject *towards* and *for* others. This

¹³ Ibid., 172.

¹⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 733.

¹⁵ Ibid., 731.

constant also includes of the idea of the *third* as “the basis for the origin of *society*, which cannot be derived from an ‘I-Thou’ and ‘we’ relationship”.¹⁷ In that the other is constitutive of the identity of the subject our relation to the other will have far reaching consequences for the constitution of subjectivity. The concern of Levinas and Irigaray for a genuine alterity that respects difference goes to the heart of what it is to be human.

Schillebeeckx’s third constant concerns our “connection with social and institutional structures” which, although essential to “make possible human freedom and the realization of values”, are themselves historical products that “do not have *general* validity . . . This gives rise to the specific ethical demand to change them where, as a result of changed circumstances, they enslave and debase men [*sic*] rather than liberate them and give them protection.”¹⁸ This is why Irigaray is critical of those thinkers who neglect ethical concerns in their descriptions of the status quo and dismiss what *should* be the case in their anxiety for the present state of affairs.¹⁹ This constant is analogous to Ricoeur’s description of the ideological imagination which needs to be held in a creative dialectic with the utopian imagination.

Our “connection with social and institutional structures” is related to the fourth constant which concerns “the conditioning of people and culture by time and space”.²⁰ This constant presents us first of all with the dialectical tension between nature and history and the continued intransigence of reality in the face of humanity’s meaning-making endeavours. Because understanding is a historical and even geographical experience, “this means that the presumption of adopting a standpoint outside *historical* action and thought is a danger to true humanity”.²¹ This is, as we have seen, the presumption of the metaphysical standpoint and of the masculine *imaginary* that fails to recognise its own limits in attempting to transcend the material conditions of its existence. Schillebeeckx argues that the recognition of our

¹⁶ Ibid., 734.

¹⁷ Ibid., 737.

¹⁸ Ibid., 738.

¹⁹ As with Irigaray’s protest against Lacanian psychoanalysis: “The problem is that they claim to make a law out of this impotence itself, and continue to subject women to it”. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 105.

²⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 738.

natural limitations should stimulate a critical remembrance of the concrete conditions of our existence in order to find “norms for action which here and now further healthy and realizable humanity”.²² Irigaray’s feminine divine understood as a “sensible transcendental” should be related to this proposal. The feminine divine is itself an imaginative exercise in response to her recognition of the limitations our own cultural and symbolic imagination. A genuine transcendence can only be achieved through negotiation with the sensible. This fourth anthropological constant also reminds us that “the explicit discovery of these *constitutive constants* has only come about in a historical process”,²³ and that these constants are both contingent and provisional. This constant highlights the need for an ongoing and critical dialectic of flesh and word.

The fifth constant concerns the “mutual relationship of theory and practice” which “will be the only humanly responsible guarantee of a permanent culture which is increasingly worthy of man [*sic*]”.²⁴ This has some affinities with what Francis Schñssler Fiorenza, drawing upon the philosophy of science, calls a retroductive warrant. The latter “refers to the fertility of a hypothesis, idea or theory” and its ability “to carry forward the scientific enterprise”.²⁵ Stated more broadly, what “gives life” should be our primary critical principle. “Theological reflection advances when it offers creative metaphors that enable the community to carry forth and reconstruct its tradition in relation to its ongoing experience.”²⁶ These metaphors should ultimately be judged by their fruits. This is Irigaray’s own criterion and ultimately how Irigaray’s own proposals should be judged. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether:

All our images of God are metaphors and projections from our human standpoint of an ultimate ground of being and new being that is beyond all such images. The question is not whether there are some images that are not human projections, but rather what human projections promote just and loving relationality, and which projections promote injustice and diminished

²¹ Ibid., 739.

²² Ibid., 739.

²³ Ibid., 738-9.

²⁴ Ibid., 740.

²⁵ Francis Schñssler Fiorenza, *Systematic Theology*, 77.

²⁶ Ibid., 78.

humanness. Our images of God-self relation may be more than, but cannot be less than, that which promotes goodness in human relations.²⁷

The sixth anthropological constant is the “religious and para-religious consciousness” which concerns the utopian capacity and drive which becomes the impulse of hope for the future.²⁸ According to Irigaray: “to have a goal is essentially a religious move”.²⁹ This is why Irigaray’s constructive discourse is explicitly theological in its orientation. This constant is concerned with ultimate values and the meaningful whole. One might say that this constant is the source of the impulse towards metaphysics. For this reason a note of caution is required. Hellenistic metaphysics, in its desire to grasp the whole, tended to neglect other vital human constants. The concern for the whole, therefore, needs to remain in touch with its own contingency as shaped by “the whole system of co-ordinates”³⁰ that these constants represent. The whole cannot be achieved selectively by an exclusive appeal to one or another constant. Thus, it is not surprising that Schillebeeckx’s seventh and final anthropological constant is precisely the irreducible inter-relation of these six dimensions.

2. *The method of critical correlation*

Theological method should reflect and engage with the inter-relation of all of these co-ordinates. Expressed as a simpler and more manageable principle, theological reflection should be dialogical. At its most basic, it requires a mutually critical correlation between at least two poles. According to David Tracy: “Christian theology is the attempt to establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation”. This method “is in fact nothing other than a hermeneutically self-

²⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Hermeneutics, Scriptural Authority, and Religious Experience: The Case of the *Imago Dei* and Gender Equality”, in *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, eds. Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rilke. (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 103.

²⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 740.

²⁹ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 67.

³⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 743.

conscious clarification and correction of traditional theology”.³¹ For Tracy, the value of such a model is that it draws the attention of theologians to the fact that the Christian tradition is always contextual in its interpretation. It “explicates what otherwise remains implicit: the fact that there is no general model which can be allowed to determine any particular interpretation”.³² In the first chapter I discussed the manner in which the universality of Christian faith is worked out amidst the limits of particularity. The method of mutually critical correlation simply brings to theological reflection as a methodological principle that which has already been operative within the development of Christianity. In discussing this fundamental methodological principle, I shall once more draw upon the more recent work of Schillebeeckx.³³

In his *Interim Report on the Books “Jesus” and “Christ”*, Schillebeeckx describes his method as one of “critical correlation between the two sources of theology . . . on the one hand the tradition of Christian experiences and on the other present-day experiences”.³⁴ The goal of this critical correlation is the critical reflection upon Christian faith and the confrontation with the story of Jesus that elicits conversion. It is a story because it is subject, as is all revelation, to historical mediation. “Meaning is perceived only in the giving of meaning.”³⁵ But it is, according to Schillebeeckx, “experiences of meaninglessness, of injustice and of innocent suffering that have a revelatory significance *par excellence*”.³⁶ I have already noted the significance of the negative for Schillebeeckx’s approach in the first chapter. For Schillebeeckx, the importance of the negative derives from the fact that the “good” can never be positively defined. “The actual threat and attack on the *humanum* — that which is

³¹ Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, Second Edition. (London: SCM Press, 1984) 170. Similarly, Hans Kϋng talks of “a fundamental hermeneutical agreement which is shared not only by most Catholic exegetes but also a number of younger systematicians more adequately trained in exegesis”. “Toward a New Consensus in Catholic (and Ecumenical) Theology”, in *Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Kϋng and Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Leonard Swidler. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980) 4.

³² David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 170.

³³ Schillebeeckx’s more recent discussion of this method appears to have been particularly influenced by Clodovis Boff who speaks of a “correspondence of relationships” rather than simply a “critical correlation”. See Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987). 146-50.

³⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books “Jesus” and “Christ”*. (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 50.

³⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

worthy of human beings — which is desired but can never be defined positively leads to indignation and is therefore a specifically ethical challenge and an ethical imperative, embedded in very specific negative experiences of contrast, of human misfortune and unhappiness, here and now.”³⁷ This suggests that what is ethically good does not emerge out of our sense of metaphysical or natural order but out of the dialectic of praxis and interpretation. “The human inability to give in to the situation offers an illuminating perspective. It discloses an openness to another situation which has the right to our affirmative ‘yes’.”³⁸ It is this yes to life that discloses the possibility of the divine.

For Christians this affirmation is grounded in the resurrection which is God’s affirmation of Jesus and all that he stood for. It is the revelation that “the cause of God as the cause of man [sic] is personified in the very person of Jesus Christ”.³⁹ The Easter experience provides the impetus for the entire Christian movement. But for an experience that is so absolutely central to the Christian affirmation of Jesus as the Christ there exists wide disparity among the New Testament accounts. The New Testament itself is the product of a diversity of contexts with distinct theologies. Matthew’s is a Jewish Christian community whereas Luke’s is Greek. In each instance we have the gospel as it is appropriated by a specific “semiotic cultural system” in which “a history of socio-cultural mediations comes into being”.⁴⁰ This suggests that for us the identity of the gospel cannot be found to reside at the level of the Bible or the earliest Christian tradition, nor even in the present situation in which we find ourselves. The identity of the meaning of the gospel “can only be found in the fluctuating ‘middle field’, in the swinging to and fro of tradition and situation, and thus at the level of the corresponding relationship between the original message (tradition, which also includes the situation of the time) and the situation, then and now, which is different each time”.⁴¹ This would suggest that, as Irigaray argues, the

³⁷ Ibid., 29.

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

³⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. (London: Collins, 1979) 670.

⁴⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 41.

⁴¹ Ibid.

revelation of the divine lies less in the objective content of belief than it does in the encounter.⁴²

Truth does not reside in any single term. Schillebeeckx's earlier elaboration of the two-source method does not make this sufficiently clear, since each "source" is itself a relationship between what is proclaimed or manifested and the context of the proclamation or manifestation. The critical correlation that is the task of theological reflection is a correlation of relationships rather than of terms, the correlation itself also being another relationship. Truth, as we have already seen, is an event of language, or in this case, an ongoing conversation. The unity and the identity of the meaning of the gospel lies in the relationship between all terms. What is normative is the whole, which cannot be identified with any single term. This is made clear by Schillebeeckx in the following diagram:

The given articulation or relationship

Jesus' message -----	=	the New Testament message -----
the socio-historical context of Jesus		the socio-historical context of the NT

is reproduced, for example, in the relationship:

patristic understanding of faith -----	=	medieval understanding of faith -----
the socio-historical context then		the socio-historical context then

and this relationship, given and reproduced, must ultimately be reproduced once

more in the following relationship or articulation:

the present understanding of faith in the year [2000] -----		
our socio-historical and existential context in the year [2000]		⁴³

⁴² See Irigaray, "Belief Itself," *Sexes and Genealogies*, 25-53. In this complex essay, Irigaray argues that truth lies in communication and mediation. She expresses a suspicion that belief "makes us forget the real". Ibid., 26.

⁴³ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 42. It is for this reason that the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, (Lumen Gentium)*, 1. 8, states that the Church of Christ "subsists" in the Catholic Church. The term "subsists" is carefully chosen to suggest that the Church of Christ exists in its fulness in the Catholic Church as a whole but cannot be identified exclusively with any of its parts.

Because of the significance of the entire tradition as normative, Schillebeeckx notes that even those dogmas which appear irrelevant remain important to our understanding of faith to the extent that they point the way.⁴⁴ How much more critical then is the imperative to allow to speak, and attend to, the voices of those who have constituted at least half the Christian community over two thousand years? In the light of this understanding of the identity of the gospel, is not the claim of (less than) half of humanity to speak for the whole an offence to the *humanum*? Allowing the greater half of humanity to be heard, likewise, requires a number of dialectical operations. Irigaray describes the aim of her own work as an attempt to:

construct an objectivity that facilitates a dialectic proper to the female subject, meaning specific relations between her nature and her culture, her same and her other, her singularity and the community, her interiority and her exteriority, etc. *Speculum* and my other works insist upon the irreducibility — either subjective or objective — of the sexes to one another, which requires us to establish a dialectic of the relation of woman to herself and of man to himself, a *double dialectic* therefore, enabling a real, cultural and ethical relation between them.⁴⁵

3. *The rule of faith*

This dialectic that Schillebeeckx describes is not only constitutive of the content of revelation — the “saving Word” — but also of the identity of the worshipping community itself. This is what is expressed by the ancient expression “*lex orandi, lex credendi*”, the rule of prayer is the rule of belief. The subjective response and the objective norm are mutually constitutive. This becomes clear through the paradigmatic example of the formation of the canon of scripture and its relation to the liturgy. Louis-Marie Chauvet argues that it was by narrating and recounting its founding events that Israel reaffirmed its identity. It was in the liturgical setting that Israel most directly experienced and received its identity. Chauvet describes how liturgical remembrance formed the basis by which previous oral and written traditions were preserved. Through their “liturgification” the stories about the earliest times continued to play a foundational role in the identity of Israel.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 43.

⁴⁵ Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 62. My emphasis.

⁴⁶ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 190-5.

The same process is evident in the formation of the Christian identity as expressed in its scriptures, only in this case the originary event is the Christ event. Not only did the memory of the event develop in the oral and written traditions, but the Jewish scriptures themselves were interpreted in the light of this memory. The focus of this process was in the eucharistic assembly. “The Christian meal is the place par excellence where the evangelical composition of history was crystallised. The gospel read in the Eucharistic celebration was born out of the celebration itself.”⁴⁷ The original oral and written tradition is reread and rewritten on the basis of the events recognised as foundational.⁴⁸ The appropriation of the scriptural text by the community is constitutive, not merely of the community, but of the canonicity of scripture itself.⁴⁹ Initially, certain texts were chosen for use in the liturgy precisely because they were seen to express the faith of the worshipping community. Different communities had their own favoured “scriptures” some of which received “universal” acceptance more easily than others. The more the community recognises itself in a text, the more the text manifests its essence as a text. The book is nothing without the community, and the community finds in the book the mirror of its identity. The Church thus “represents the impossibility of *sola scriptura*”.⁵⁰ Fidelity to the Bible consists in reliving in ever-changing circumstances the same process that brought about its production. The *hodie* — the today — of scripture is essential. “Hermeneutics, although unwritten, is also canonical.”⁵¹

The principle of recognition turns out to be critical in the formation of the canon. The formation of the scriptures turns out to be a dialectical/dialogical process in which the scriptures became canonical to the extent that the community recognised their faith and considered it to be accurately expressed in those documents. In the light of this, it would appear that fidelity to scripture and tradition consists in incarnating the process by which the scriptures were constituted in each generation in its own

⁴⁷ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁹ Lee Martin McDonald finds that: “The question of whether a book should be regarded as scripture and placed within the canon seems to have been determined ultimately by early Church use”. *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988)160.

⁵⁰ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 209.

⁵¹ Ibid.

historical and cultural milieu. The text and the experience of the community can only exist fruitfully in conversation. The scriptures are normative not because they possess a privileged metaphysical status but because the early Church and generations of Christians have recognised in the reading of the text the definitive expression of their communal faith. The inspiration of the scriptures lies in the “fluctuating middle field” of which Schillebeeckx spoke. Equally significant is the plurality of distinct theologies that are represented by the New Testament writings. The truth resides in the whole and in the ongoing conversation.

4. Irigaray and “catholic” theology

The truth of the whole can only be found in and through the particular. This brings us back to the question of the universal. Schillebeeckx, like Irigaray, also attempts to retrieve a sense of the universal that is attentive to the particular. In a manner consistent with Irigaray’s critique of metaphysics, Schillebeeckx argues that abstract universalism only serves to make an alliance with the powerful of this earth.⁵²

According to Schillebeeckx:

universality — which in Greek is “catholicity” — means that the Christian faith is open (critically) to all, to every people and to every culture. “Universal” means that which is equally valid for all. This universal must, moreover, be incarnate in each and every one without all the potentialities and virtualities of the universal being exhausted in these particular incarnations.⁵³

The universal is a task to be realised in context. It cannot be realised once and for all, but only step by step. The universality of the Christian message, Schillebeeckx argues, is not to be found in an abstract idea, “but by the power of its cognitive, critical and liberating character in and through a consistent praxis of the kingdom of God”.⁵⁴ Universality, if it is to be truly inclusive, cannot be neutral. The universal must, when seen in social and political terms, be in practice partisan.⁵⁵ One of the ways in which this universality is incarnated, for example, is in what is called the

⁵² Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 178.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

“preferential option for the poor”.⁵⁶ Schillebeeckx considers that an essential part of the universality of Christian faith is that it should aim for the “transformation of the world to a higher humanity”.⁵⁷ Irigaray, for her part, argues that the universal should aid “the becoming of living things as they are”.⁵⁸ Irigaray argues that philosophy’s task is to concern itself with the universal as both “an individual and collective utility”, with a “sense of ethical necessity”.⁵⁹ In applying the question of the universal to the question of sexual difference, Irigaray seeks an inclusivity that “will be such as to make a unique imperialism impossible”.⁶⁰ The universal need not be a covert Platonism or universalism of the type that Michel de Certeau suggests has operated within Christianity as “a compensation against the fact of Christian particularity”.⁶¹ On the contrary, the universal is indispensable to the fulfilment of the particular. It is to this end that Irigaray argues for the need to elaborate a feminine divine.

The recovery of particularity within the Christian tradition also needs to keep an eye on the whole. My discussion of theological method demonstrates that a number of prominent Catholic theologians have become increasingly concerned to establish theological reflection within a hermeneutic of dialogical encounter. David Tracy argues that this methodological shift simply makes explicit what has always been implicit in the tradition. I have concentrated upon Edward Schillebeeckx because his work has been exemplary for the ongoing methodological reflection which continues to shape and inform it. Schillebeeckx’s anthropological constants suggest that human subjectivity is itself a dialogical task to be continually negotiated in relation to the plurality of relationships that constitute the human. Schillebeeckx’s approach affirms Irigaray’s emphasis on becoming in opposition to a metaphysical emphasis on the being of humanity as a template in the mind of God to which actual human beings must conform. Humanity, Schillebeeckx argues, is an eschatological reality. As an

⁵⁶ Such partisan options, however, must remain provisional and should not themselves be absolutised. As Irigaray notes, Jesus “could use strong words to demonstrate his disapproval of the idolatry of the poor”. “Equal to Whom?” *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1994) 67. Cf. Jn 12:1-8.

⁵⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 170.

⁵⁸ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 140.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Michel de Certeau, “How is Christianity Thinkable Today?” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 150.

eschatological reality, the becoming of humanity is oriented towards the divine. In Chapter Nine, I shall argue that this eschatological orientation of the human-divine relation is the key to Irigaray's work.

The theological method of mutual critical correlation likewise establishes theological reflection within the contingencies and the constraints upon the human for which no single term can lay an exclusive claim. This raises some vital questions with regards to the nature of catholicity within theology. All the theologians that I have cited share a non-sacrificial approach to their theology. This is in many respects a product of time and place which has seen an understandable reaction against the one-sided dependence of the post-Tridentine Church upon explicitly sacrificial theologies. However, any claim to catholicity, or the whole, must take account of these sacrificial theologies. The logic of sacrifice, I shall argue in Chapter Eight, is anti-sacramental and exclusive. But, to posit an anti-sacrificial theology in opposition to the logic of sacrifice is to remain caught within the very parameters that such a theology would seek to overcome. A genuine catholicity would suggest that we need to find a solution that is inclusive of both approaches. To bring these two distinct trajectories into a positive and non-exclusive relation would subvert the logic of sacrifice without denying the real human needs for which the logic of sacrifice is a remedy. This is, in effect, the function of Irigaray's double syntax that I shall explore in the context of the Eucharistic celebration. I will argue that at certain points in the Church's history there has operated a nascent and fragile double syntax of the kind that Irigaray seeks to establish.

Before a double syntax can be firmly established, women need to be able to symbolise their own relation to transcendence. For Irigaray, this means that women need a feminine divine in order to achieve their full humanity and divinisation. Women need to recognise their own potential and identity as *imago dei*. Chauvet's discussion of the formation of the canon of scripture suggests that the dialectic of recognition in the constitution of the identity of the community is itself a canonical process. The rule of faith has its foundation in the experience of recognition. But if the Christian tradition aims to speak of the whole, what are the implications of the

absence of the voice of women's experience from the larger part of this tradition? Irigaray argues that when women have been heard it has been primarily within the parameters established by the masculine economy.⁶² The lack of a feminine divine, I shall argue, leaves both women and the Christian tradition as whole impoverished. Not only is the feminine divine necessary for the full humanity of women, but it short-circuits the metaphysical pretensions of the one and the temptation to identify any single part with the whole. Irigaray's feminine divine involves a questioning of the Christian tradition in the light of the contemporary situation in which the poverty of the *humanum* on the question of sexual difference has been revealed. Mary Collins has said that "one of the best gifts for the critical mind and for a living tradition is the gift of a new question".⁶³ The emergence of feminist critical consciousness, Collins believes, is a grace *for* the Church that calls us to authenticity and conversion from all that is not God.⁶⁴ It is in this spirit that I now turn to explore some of the questions raised by Irigaray's argument for a feminine divine.

⁶² Mary Collins argues that where women have been highly visible within the Church it has been at the expense of their actual identities which have been reduced to a number of acceptable types of churchwomen. "Daughters of the Church: The Four Theresas", in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 232 -241.

⁶³ Mary Collins, "Naming God in Public Prayer", *Worship: Renewal to Practice*. (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1987) 215.

⁶⁴ Mary Collins, *Contemplative Participation. Sacrosantum Concilium: Twenty-five Years Later*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990) 34.