

○ REVIEW OF JOY ET AL'S *RELIGION IN FRENCH FEMINIST THOUGHT*

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Peter D. Miscall reviews *Religion in French feminist thought: Critical perspectives*, edited by Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (London/New York: Routledge, 2003).



This collection of thirteen essays, including one each by the editors, discusses the work of five major French feminist writers: Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément and Monique Wittig. Irigaray contributes an Introduction that is a fine statement of her present thought on religion. There are five essays on Irigaray, four on Kristeva, one on Cixous and Clément, two on Cixous alone, and one on Wittig. The depth of insight into each thinker's work varies in proportion to the number of essays devoted to her. The individual essays also differ in their style, focus, length and quality.

The collection is an excellent introduction to the work and thought of each woman and to the ferment surrounding their reception both within and outside France. For readers, both for those familiar with these women and those new to them, there are ample notes and bibliography to pursue further primary and secondary research. (There is a companion volume of primary sources that is not part of this review: *French feminists on religion: A reader* [Joy et al. 2002].) The individual oeuvres of each span at least twenty years. Irigaray, Cixous and Clément begin publishing in the early 1980s while Kristeva and Wittig start in the mid to late 1960s. They are still writing with the sad exception of Wittig who died at the beginning of 2003 just as the book was going to press. They all exhibit change and development across their careers (or perhaps regression in some critics' eyes). Irigaray, for example, has moved from being an incisive critic of the patriarchal underpinnings of Western philosophy and critical thought to being in addition an advocate of personal spiritual regimens; this is obvious in her Introduction to the collection. Her writing style has gone from the academic and systematic to the poetic and engaged.

In the editors' introduction and at many points throughout the individual essays, it is clear that, in varying degrees, the work of these women has not always been warmly received as feminist or as religious. Indeed the main goal of this collection is to highlight the role of religion in the writings of the five women, a role that has been ignored and even deplored in the past. All of the contributors approach their chosen subject with a mix of the critical and appreciative. They do not feel the need to divinise or demonise. Nor do they claim that the women, as a group

or in other pairings, form anything like a school. The five may share much in content and style but their grouping as French Feminists is largely a result of time and geography.

The main stumbling block for many, especially in the work of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, is the consistent and central role of psychoanalysis, essentially Freud as reread by Lacan. Their writings are suffused with talk of the place of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the development and life of the subject. But, for many feminists and others, the very names Freud and Lacan raise specters of the male, the patriarchal, the trans-cultural and the essential. All these terms denote the Western history of the denigration of the feminine and of the oppression of women, the prime object of feminist theory and practice. Add religion to this psychoanalytical focus and the case is made for the critics of these French feminists: they are not feminists but essentialists and phallogocentrists in disguise.

The essayists acknowledge the charges (and others among them) and, in different ways, show that the women adapt psychoanalysis to their own projects and frequently critique Freud and Lacan for their narrowness in regard to the different processes by which women become subjects. Each in their own way develops theories of sexual difference and sexual becoming. (Martha J. Reineke's 'Our vital necessity: Julia Kristeva's theory of sacrifice' is the most thorough exposition of work in psychoanalysis in the collection.) Since violence against women is rooted in sexual difference, any social and political change that addresses that violence must begin with sexual difference. And this collection makes it clear that terms and phrases such as sexual difference, feminine subjectivity, woman and women are multiple and fluid in their reference and use. Multiplicity, fluidity, openness, becoming (rather than being), mobility are all prime signals of the struggle against the patriarchal regime of the same, the one, the static. Kristeva speaks of *le sujet en procès* to counter the traditional understanding that we are preformed, unchanging subjects. For all of them, the struggle is at once personal, philosophical, cultural, religious and political.

Multiplicity is also evident in the forms of their writing that range from abstract philosophical and psychoanalytical analyses to novels, often with a decided autobiographical bent. In between are experimental writings that mix genres. Kristeva's 'Stabat mater' is a prime example. Written in two columns, one in traditional prose and the other in a poetic, evocative style, it is a rewarding meditation on motherhood. She calls it 'writing-as-experience-of-limits' (xxiii, 139). Cixous espouses an *écriture féminine* that in its 'other style' seeks to express feminine multiplicity, to free repressed difference.

Neither the editors nor the contributors offer anything like a definition of religion but leave it as a general category to include all the diverse roles that religion and religious discourse play in the writings. This is to be expected of women who celebrate openness and multiplicity. At no point in these women's writings does religion or the religious refer to belief in or acceptance of a particular religious tradition such as Christianity or Judaism, despite the frequent use of their concepts, terminology and imagery. The writings are a mix of incisive criticism of traditional religion and appreciation of the resources for change that it contains when read and employed in different registers.

Nor is there any attempt to simply replace the male god, The Good Old God, with a female god, some type of goddess. This would be to remain within the closure of a traditional essentialism that regards deity, male or female, as transcendent and Wholly Other, as something that constrains humans and blocks their becoming. Human movement, dynamism and becoming are central

catchwords in the engagements with religious thought and practice. Irigaray speaks of 'a perpetual subjective becoming' (3); unfettered human becoming is divine becoming. Her thought remains in this world and in this life. Religious terms, concepts, imagery and practice are all of great value in as much as they can contribute to this life and world. Cixous asserts, 'God is of my making... God is the name of all that has not yet been said' (147). God is 'what escapes us and makes us wonder' (150). Their critics, on the other hand, fear that any such consistent use of religious discourse always entails the strong threat that The Good Old God will reemerge even if with female characteristics.

Mary L. Keller, in her essay 'Divine women and the Nehanda *mbondoro*', critiques Irigaray from a post-colonial perspective. I found the essay notable because Keller emphasises cultural difference and leaves it as a difference; she makes no claims to cultural superiority nor does she try to absorb the differences into a 'higher' unity. (Morny Joy performs a somewhat analogous critique in 'Irigaray's eastern explorations' where she addresses Irigaray's ventures into Indian religion, particularly the yogic/tantric tradition.)

Keller opens with Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental,' an attempt to question and undermine the sharp Western distinction between the sensible and material and the transcendental. This is a powerful category for Keller but one that is, precisely, Western and Eurocentric in its dependence on the individual and her experience, consciousness, free will and autonomy. She contrasts this with Nehanda, a powerful religious woman and a powerful ancestor, a *mbondoro*, who is mainly known in Zimbabwe. As the ancestor she can take total possession of another person's body to speak through her or him. She did this first in the 1890s against British rule and then again in the 1960s and 1970s in the Pan-African movement. Amongst other specific cultural differences, Keller focuses on the issue of individuality and autonomy, so important in Western thought. Possession stands in sharp opposition. Keller states '[t]he possessed woman [or man] gains social status but only because her consciousness and identity have been overcome; she is a powerful figure of radical non-autonomy' (74). Keller calls for acknowledgement of 'historical and regional specificities' (81) and not for subsuming all in Western or non-Western categories. Her essay is an effective display of such acknowledgement of difference and alterity, so important to this collection and to the five women at its centre.

I close the review with Ellen T. Armour's concluding comment in 'Divining differences: Irigaray and religion':

Some look to religion for security from risk and a safe harbour for self-preservation. Such aims will not find satisfaction in this airy atmosphere. But religion can also be an opening towards alterity. Such openings, if genuine, put us at risk and confront us with what we might prefer not to face. Yet through such openings comes the possibility for growth and renewal (39).

REFERENCES

Joy, Morny; O'Grady, Kathleen; Poxon, Judith L., editors. 2002. *French feminists on religion: A reader*. London and New York: Routledge.