Trinity and 'the Feminine Other'

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The notion of 'the feminine Other' is a vexed one for feminists. In the opening pages of *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir asks, 'Are there women, really? Most assuredly the theory of the eternal feminine still has its adherents who will whisper in your ear: "Even in Russia women still are *women*".'[1] For de Beauvoir the verbal symmetry of 'masculine' and 'feminine is merely a matter of linguistic form. In the real world of work and love—in life in general—man is the norm and woman is man's 'other', thus her famous remark, 'He is the Subject . . . she is the Other', the 'not man' defined by men.[2]

Levinas may be a 'recent read' for many of us but already, writing in 1949, de Beauvoir quotes him; 'Otherness', says Levinas, 'reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning.' 'I suppose' de Beauvoir comments, 'that Levinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness. . . . But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man's point of view. When he writes that "woman is mystery", he implies that she is mystery *for man*. Thus his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.'[3] And one which, we can note with de Beauvoir, can stand in a long line of philosophical evocation of 'the female' and 'the feminine' from the pre-Socratics to Nietzsche and beyond.

In the existentialist rubric of *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir sees the problem as this—a woman, like anyone else, is an autonomous freedom, yet she discovers herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as the 'Other'. Woman, philosophically speaking, lacks her own subjectivity. The subject of philosophy is male, whether consciously or not, and 'woman' is constructed as man's 'other'. 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'.

This styling of 'woman' as man's other is , for de Beauvoir, only one example (we might say the paradigmatic one) of a philosophical tradition which can only see otherness as opposition.

The existentialism of *The Second Sex* with its 'boot-strapping' approach to liberation has not worn well, particularly as a tool for the emancipation of women, but De Beauvoir's suggestion that 'woman' is largely a construct, man's 'other', has had an important place in what is

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known as 'second wave feminism'—feminist thought from the 1960's onwards.[4] It is not entirely a new insight. Perhaps the most droll and best written account of woman as man's 'mirror' is given in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, published several decades before *The Second Sex*.

It is sometimes said, usually in criticism of feminism, that it is a product of the 1960s. If there is truth in this it may be not because, as is often suggested, the sixties were a period of great freedom for women (a thesis many feminists would dispute), but rather that the late fifties and sixties were a period in which many western and educated (and thus vocal) women, bombarded by advertising and the media, began to realise how many and how insistent were the ideals of womanhood held out before them—the beach-doll beauty, the stilletto heel, the whiter wash, the germ-free toilet bowl. The early sixties were a time in which such women were told all the time what *women* were like. But by whom?

Kate Millett's successful book, *Sexual Politics*, gave expression to this question in literary terms. Published in 1970, this book's first chapter included long, raunchy excerpts from Henry Miller's, *Sexus*, a book published in France in the forties but censored in the United States until its publication in the mid-sixties. Kate Millet asks her readers to note, in Miller's extensive and excruciating account of sexual conquests (by the man) and degradation (of the woman), that the events narrated are physically impossible, for instance, with regard to the ease with which certain female garments could be shed and so on. Miller's narrative is a particularly vicious fantasy of male potency and female degradation. Following the lifting of censorship and the publication of this book in English, women reading Henry Miller's book (especially if they had also read Kate Millet's) might well ask,

> 'Is this what Miller thinks about some women? Is this what Miller thinks about all women? Is this what many men think about many women—or wish to think about them?
>
> And who are, or rather what is 'woman' anyway—amidst the flood of media representations—visual , verbal, commerical, even those of children's cartoons (remember Wilma in *The Flintstones*)?'
>
> Are there any women in Henry Miller's novels? There are female characters, but he has composed them. Are there any women in Dickens' novels?
>
> Who, in the end, speaks for women?'

Largely in the history of western culture, and not just there, it has been men. And what versions of 'woman' are they that we get from

largely male sources?

Around the same time similar questions were asked of the texts of theology. In 1960 Valerie Saiving Goldstein published an article entitled, 'The Human Situation—A Feminine View'. In this she made the uncontroversial observation that the soteriology of a theologian much depends on his 'doctrine of man'—that is, his anthropology. Descriptions of the nature of salvation are dependent on what one thinks people are like and what they are being saved 'from'. Focusing on the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren she argued that their anthropologies, far from being neutral, were much more appropriate to men than to women. Sin was identified in terms of 'the' human temptations to pride, self-assertion and self-centredness—salvation correlatively in terms of humility and self-abnegation. But these, Goldstein argued, might not necessarily be the temptations of women. The sins of women, she suggested, might be better suggested by terms like triviality and diffuseness, dependence on others for one's own self-definition and so on—what she called an 'underdevelopment or negation of the self'.[5]

We need not take Goldstein's article as proposing an essentialism in which men are universally selfish and arrogant, and women submissive. Nor, as she insisted, was she saying that women do not sin as much as men do. Rather what her article did point out, and graphically for many of its readers, was that the texts of modern theology have spoken with inappropriate ease of '*the* human condition' and invoked without sufficient caution a putatively universal subject who was in fact far more local than was customarily allowed. Generalisations about the human condition are found throughout the historical texts of philosophy and theology. The tendency is exacerbated in Enlightenment texts given to wide declarations on 'Man' and 'his nature'.

We might summarize Saiving Goldstein's insight, and Kate Millet's, as the recognition that texts are 'sexed' or sexuate.[6] 'Man', the subject of so many modern and early modern texts of economics, politics, and even theology is not in fact neutral but already placed by race, class and by gender. And, most importantly, this is so *not only* when the texts in questions (whether they be literary, theological or philosophical) say depressing things about women but even when the texts are, like those of Niebuhr and Nygren, ostensibly neutral—in theory speaking for 'everyman'.

Here we might note shared concerns of some feminist theology and some French philosophy.[7] The point of congruence lies in the shared questions, 'Who is the subject?' and 'How can the Other speak?'

'Woman' and 'the feminine' are considerable topics in French

philosophy, and not simply or even mostly topics for women. Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, Deleuze, Barthes all discuss 'woman'. We need to add in haste that 'woman' here does not necessarily have reference to actual women, but rather functions as a philosophical cipher, representing what has been called 'a new rhetorical space', sometimes also called void, excess, the unsaid, unknoweable lack, the uncontained—all that is 'woman'.[8]

The nature of this 'space' seems to vary from theorist to theorist, as do reasons why it should be called 'woman'. For some, most notably Lacan and those affected by him, it is the impact on French thought of psychoanalysis.[9] Others, like Derrida, undertake critiques of western philosophy as a system in which the One dominates and triumphs over the other. This philosophical tendency to reduce everything to 'the same' is seen by some theorists, women and men, as having a masculine logic (and again this does not mean that it is exclusively males who engage in it). Irigaray, for instance speaks of philosophy's *position of mastery* and says that 'this domination of the philosophic logos stems in large part from its power to *reduce all others to the economy of the Same*.'[10] Attention to 'woman' is thus a strategy by means of which one can criticise what Stephen Heath has called 'the indifference of the existing order, the sameness it asserts through that very fixing of difference'.[11] As Naomi Schor sees it, the feminine becomes an emblem for a new kind of subjectivity which 'does not constitute itself by simultaneously excluding and incorporating others.'[12]

These questions concerning return us to territory which has parallels in mainstream English-language philosophy. The so-called 'Cartesian subject' and more generally modern western philosophical notions of 'self' and 'subject' have come in for attack from Wittgenstein, Iris Murdoch and Charles Taylor, no less than Foucault or Irigaray. And in French philosophy the 'death of man' would seem to refer not to the end of the human race, nor yet to the demise of the male but rather to the extinction of this particular philosophical fiction. Described in pastiche by Irigaray, what ails this 'cartesian cogito' is that it 'is conceived as auto-effective, auto-affecting and solipsistic'. By doubting everything, this 'singular subject' is 'charged with giving birth to the universe all over again, after he has brought himself back into the world in a way that avoids the precariousness of existence as it is usually understood.'[13] By generating himself in an act of rationality, this cogito, or 'Disengaged Man' (to use Charles Taylor's term) detaches himself and is transcendental in the sense of transcending his own material base, even his own body which becomes one more 'object' of study.[14] And because it is, figuratively, '*Man*' who is dead, and indeed the 'Cartesian

man' who constitutes himself by the denial of the '*mater*-ial' (that is, the 'feminine')—that other is named 'woman'

It should be clear that, as Rosi Braidotti insists, 'French theories of the feminine' such as the above, cannot be equated or confused with 'French feminist theory', although the latter is informed by the former.[15] And it is not surprising that feminists have been cautious in welcoming this new-found invocation of 'the feminine' and the so-called 'becoming woman' of French philosophy. It is unsurprising that some women philosophers have responded by casting off the whole neo-Nietzschean, neo-Freudian clabber, with all its unfortunate residual dualisms of male and female.[16] One can sympathise. However some of the most interesting theoreticians of French feminism, notably Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, have not, and for reasons which should interest the theologian and to which I shall return.

Contemporary English-language philosophy and French philosophy share an interest in language and linguistics, although they develop it in different ways. In particular modern French philosophy has been influenced in ways the English empiricist tradition has not, by both psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology, and accordingly importance is given to questions of image, symbol, and the powers of figuration.[17] More specifically within feminist critical theory the contrast has sometimes been drawn between the concern of English and American feminists with the 'oppression of women', and the concern of French theorists with the 'repression of the feminine'. This is recognised, increasingly, as not an 'either-or'.[18] Women's problems, Irigaray's work suggests, are *both* real *and* symbolic[19]—we need better employment legislation, work-place crêches and so on, but we also need to change at a profound level the manner in which we think about self and other, about 'man' and 'woman'. French feminists may be wary of the 'becoming woman' of philosophy while finding some truth in the diagnosis of western modernity as unable positively to think 'difference' or otherness except as 'the other of the same'. On the practical level, any serious attempts to think seriously about difference could not but affect the lives of actual women.

The importance accorded to questions of symbolism means that French feminist theorists are less likely than their Anglo-American counterparts to suppose one can affect lasting change or achieve 'equality' while ignoring the sexed nature of texts which, historically, have informed western intellectual culture and whose values have been exported round the world. (This, too, should make them important reading to feminist *theologians* who have even more reason than secular feminists to be aware of the enduring influence of symbols on present-

day life.) Irigaray, for example, is suspicious of the rush to androgyny she detects in some feminist thought. The so-called 'androgynous ideal' will still be male-formed. What other ideal have we, whether we be male or female in this society, in which to think? And when enunciating feminist aspirations to equality we must also ask, as Irigaray does, 'equal to whom?' If the answer remains 'to men' then the male is still supplying the norm around which the female or the neuter is constructed, with the further disadvantage that this andromorphism is concealed.[20] What we need, according to Irigaray, is to rethink sexual difference.

The thesis that the texts of philosophy are 'sexed', while perhaps initially curious, becomes far more convincing on re-examination of some of the texts of ancient philosophy. Let me illustrate this by reference to an article by Jean-Joseph Goux, 'The Phallus: Masculine Identity and the "Exchange of Women"'.[21] While the 'phallus' is a common notion in modern ethnography and psychoanalysis, Goux reminds us of its place in ancient philosophy. Citing Herodotus and Plutarch, he reminds us of the place of the phallus in ancient myth and cult and its close (and obvious) association with a masculine principle of generation. As such the phallus has close association with intelligence, or formative word (logos). The sexual imagery of Plato's allegory of the cave, with its movement from the womb-like *mater*-ial, through representation to the Forms has, of course, been obvious to philosophers long before Freud.[22] Plutarch writes, 'Plato is wont to give the conceptual the name of *idea, example,* or *father*, and to the material the name of *mother or nurse, or place of generation*, and to that which results from both the name offspring or generation.'[23] Intelligence or reason is that which transcends matter and the material (*mater*). Thus, says Goux, the 'inaugural opposition of metaphysics', a major metaphysical opposition between 'a male principle which is intelligible reason (ideas, model, father) and a female principle which is matter' is quite overt in Plato and Aristotle (46). The female (nurturing, womb-like matter) is that which the male, rational principle transcends.

The Neoplatonists revived these generative metaphors in their idea of the One as first principle, fertile power, and source of all life. (And I would draw the theological reader's attention to the obvious appropriateness of such a paternal metaphor to peoples whose biological conviction and contemporary science told them that only males, as bearers of seed, were truly generative.) In the Stoics 'the masculine sexual signification of the organizing principle stands out even more sharply . . . in the unambiguous notion of *logos spermatikos* . . . the power of sperm fashioning each thing in accordance with its

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species . . . '(48). Logos may be no more gender-neutral a term than is 'father' in these texts, linked as it is to metaphors of male generation.

Goux's target is metaphysical dualism, and that tradition of metaphysics which emphasises presence versus absence, the One and the Other of the same, but theologians with some knowledge of the use of the term *logos spermatikos* in early Christian texts should also sit up sharply. It is almost impossible not to see here, for instance, another reason why, for those whose biological beliefs and symbols were of such an order, the notion of the ordination of women would be out of the question, quite literally 'inconceivable'. For it is not only Jesus of Nazareth who is humanly male, but God as source of generation, and Logos, as seed of generation, who are symbolically male. In a scheme where only males are truly generative then, in a sense, only males can truly give birth. The only true parent is the father, source of seed which it is the female task to nurture. Lest we think this all just 'mere metaphor' we can note that one reason given by Aquinas in the *Contra Gentiles* why we ought not speak of the first person of the Trinity as *Mother*, is because God begets actively, and the role of the mother in procreation is, on the other hand, passive (IV.11).

Perhaps I have said enough to suggest why investigations into sexual and procreative metaphors in the texts of philosophy should interest not only French philosophers and critics of 'the western tradition of metaphysics',[24] but also theologians and students of trinitarian theology. Let me turn now directly to discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity.

There would seem to have been, over the last three hundred years of Western Christianity, equal numbers of theologians who think either that the doctrine of the Trinity has outworn its usefulness and might now be scrapped, or that the doctrine is at the very centre of the Christian faith. If we start from the recognition that the doctrine was developed by Christians, not in order to reject their Jewish ancestry, but to demonstrate why they could claim to stand in continuity with it, we may see why. Trinitarian language, developed for particular purposes, can so often appear to suggest their opposite. For instance, we speak of the One God's 'triunity', but it readily appears to be tritheism. Walter Kasper writes with great caution and accuracy of the absolute unity of God *despite* the distinction of persons, and the absolute equality of the persons *despite* the dependence of the second person on the first and the third on the first and the second, and so on. To many people in the pews, and not just to them, this 'despite' language sounds a little like Orwell's *Animal Farm*: all animals are equal but some are more equal than others. Trinitarian language may be introduced, historically, as a corrective to

the tendency of idolatry, but how successful has it been? How frequently, as Ann Loades has reminded us, do we hear such phrases as 'divine fatherhood does not have masculine characteristics but . . .'?[25] Christians are good at rejecting heresies they never found very attractive anyway, like tritheism, and less successful at rejecting those they quite like, such as various and related forms of subordinationism, monarchianism and deistic sexism, all in their way idolatrous.

Recent years have seen a number of feminist criticisms of classical formulations of the doctrine. These vary from simple rejection of what sounds like a three-man club, to more nuanced critiques of the way in which, despite best efforts, the Father always seems accorded a status superior to the other two persons, with the Holy Spirit as a distinct third. The Trinity appears still hierarchical, still male—maleness, indeed, seems enshrined in God's eternity.

One line of thought has been to emphasise the putatively female characteristics of the Spirit. We can readily uncover a tradition of regarding the Spirit as the maternal aspect of God—brooding, nurturing, bringing new members of the Church to life in baptism. There is, too, the early Syriac tradition of styling the Spirit as feminine, following the female gender of the noun in the Semitic languages, but these evocations have failed to convince feminist and other theologians of their enduring merit for women or, for that matter, for the Trinity. Consider the implications of these remarks of Yves Congar,

> The part played in our upbringing by the Holy Spirit is that of a mother—a mother who enables us to know our Father, God, and our brother, Jesus . . . He (the Spirit) teaches us how to practise the virtues and how to use the gifts of a son of God by grace. All this is part of a mother's function.[26]

Along with deifying one particular and particularly western, version of 'a mother's function' (why is it not a mother's function to raise the crops so that her family may eat?) the Spirit by implication is ancillary to the other two persons who are the ones really to be known and loved.

Even less satisfactory, as Elizabeth Johnson notes, is the valiant effort by the process theologian, John Cobb, to align the Logos, as the masculine aspect of God, with order, novelty, demand, agency and transformation, while the feminine aspect of God, the kingdom or Spirit, is linked with receptivity, empathy, suffering and preservation.[27]

Feminists are surely right to reject what Sarah Coakley has called 'mawkish and sentimentalised versions of the feminine' as both providing warrant for a particular stereotype of the feminine and at the

same time feeding the unorthodox suggestion that there is sexual difference in the Trinity. Furthermore this kind of feminising rhetoric does nothing to counteract the genuine neglect of the Spirit in modern theology, in which the Spirit appears a sort of 'edifying appendage' to the two real persons, those who have faces, the Father and the Son.[28] We must avoid, as Coakley says, subordinating 'the Spirit to a Father who, as "cause", and "source" of the other two persons, remains as a "masculine" stereotype with the theological upper hand.'[29] It is this covert monarchianism which is perhaps the main fear of feminist theologians: a patriarchal 'father-god' who exhibits an exclusive and narcissistic love for the Son. Unfortunately the history of theology resounds with just such deficiencies.

God, we all know, is not male but God's 'fatherhood', equally obviously, has been used to underwrite patterns of male dominance in marriage, family, state, and Church. So what do we do? One strategy ready to hand is to desexualize the language of the Trinity altogether and speak instead of Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. But while this is acceptable and at times necessary as an alternative liturgical usage, it does not carry the relational content of Father, Son and Spirit. The Creator is not the Creator of the Sustainer, and so on. Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer are three names of what God is 'for us' in the economy of salvation but say nothing of the eternal mutuality of the Three-In-One. They can also suggest, misleadingly, that it is only the First Person who creates, the Second who redeems and the Third who sustains when, for instance, creation is properly the action of all three persons. Taking a page from the French feminists, we need furthermore to ask whether neutering texts simply makes their sexual imagery less easy to spot and to recognise as imagery.

I am suspicious of attempts to purge offensive metaphors and 'tidy up' the stories. They veil the historically placed nature of the biblical texts and are especially misleading if, by purging, we think we will achieve a theology that is 'pure': scientific and free of fable. 'Scientific' or ostensibly 'value-free' fables are the most deceptive of all, since they conceal their own interpretive and cultural biases.

In the realm of Trinitarian theology one cannot cease to tell stories, or to remember that they are stories. A refreshing aspect of the great Trinitarian treatises are the admissions of inevitable inadequacy by authors in the face of the divine mystery. Patristic texts like those of Athanasius and Augustine exhibit great precision in thought, while at the same time throwing out a profusion of models, or Trinitarian stories—as though they are saying, 'imagine it is like this, or this, or this . . .'.

Let me then seek not just to comment on previous formulations of

the doctrine but also to tell a Trinitarian tale which takes seriously the language of the economy, with all its gendered relational and procreational imagery.

We can start with the title 'Father'.[30] In a suggestive article on 'fatherhood', Paul Ricoeur notes that whereas God is called 'father' 170 times by Jesus in the Synoptics, God is styled as 'father' only 11 times in the entire Hebrew Bible, and never there invoked as 'father' in prayer. Ricoeur also points out that 'father' is a semantically dependent title—it is because there is a child that someone is called a father. It is, in short, in this *technical* sense, a *relational term.* So the advent of the child, in a sense 'gives birth' to the father. Ricoeur suggests that in the Christian narrative it is with the Son's death that the distinctive nature of God's fatherhood is established for Christians, for the death of the Son is in some sense also the 'death' of the Father who is one with the Son. The French philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, makes a similar suggestion, 'Upon the Cross, the Father expires as much as the Word (Son) since they expire the same Spirit. The Trinity respires from being able to breath among us.'[31] The death of the Son then, and separation of God from God in the cry of dereliction on the Cross, gives way to a new birth, the *ekstasis* which is the mission of the Spirit. It is through the Spirit (and here we can say: styled as feminine) that there is resurrection and the Church born to newness of life.

The trinitarian narrative of the economy, in this telling, moves both ways—The Father begets the Son. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Yet we can also say that the Son is raised in the Spirit. And the Father is Father in virtue of the Son—because it is the child who 'makes' someone a father. The father in this story can no longer have the property, within the economic Trinity, of innascibility (the attribute of being independent of birth) prized by some trinitarian theologians but predicated only of the Father. In this telling of the economy the father, too, 'is born'—or better 'becomes father'—with the Son, and in the Spirit.

This is a vision of a Trinity of complete mutuality, yet it is not one in which all three persons become the same, as three sides of an equilateral triangle. The First person, as Unoriginate Origin, begets the Son (and is thus named 'Father' or we could say equally 'Mother'), and from these two proceeds the Spirit. The Son, by being Son, is the one who makes God Father/Mother. The Son gives birth to the Church in the Spirit, represented figuratively in the high tradition of western religious art by the water and the blood flowing from Christ's pierced side on the Cross—clear birth imagery from which medieval artist did not shrink. The Spirit is the Lord, the Giver of Life, in whom the Son is raised in

resurrected Life.

From the economic point of view, this story has an exitus-reditus structure: Father – Son – Spirit, Spirit – Son – Father, but at the immanent level it is a story of the perichoretic outpouring of love and birth between the Three who only *Are* in relation one to another. All three persons, figuratively, give birth—the First person as Unoriginate Origin begets Son and gives the Spirit, the Second as Son 'makes' God the father and 'gives birth' to the Church on the Cross, and the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of Life, animates the Church in the world. The activity of all three can be styled in the procreative imagery of the human feminine and of the human masculine.

Theories of complete mutuality are not unknown in the history of trinitarian thought, and I am not sure whether this one is another version of those which speak of God as Patreque, Filioque and Spirituque (Patreque indicating that the Son proceeds from the Father and the Spirit, Filioque that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and Spirituque that the Father proceeds from Son and Spirit, and the Son from Father and Spirit.) If so I may attract the ire of Catherine La Cugna whose helpful, recent book, *God for Us*, is an extensive defence of the primacy of the economic (soteriological) Trinity over what she regards as intellectualising, immanent accounts of God *in se*. Her criticism of Patreque, Filioque, Spirituque accounts (at least as deployed by Leonardo Boff) is that it outstrips anything we know of the economy of salvation and as such is, she says, 'an extreme version of scholastic trinitarian theology' (not a criticism one thinks is usual for Boff) with a 'highly reified account of divine substance'.[32]

I am not so sure. Indeed I am not so sure that the much decried scholastic trinitarian theologies were remote from the economy of salvation. But in any case this retelling of the economic narrative seems to fit the Biblical witness and imagery quite well—indeed it draws our attention, in a way neither mawkish nor sentimental, to the extensive and hugely neglected repetoire of birth images in the New Testament, often associated with the Spirit. Might not the theological neglect of this birth imagery and the persisting inability to a find proper place for the Spirit in so much modern theology be connected?

If as Aquinas suggests, 'relation' is the key to the Trinity, and the To-Be of God is To-Be-Related,[33] then the Son cannot be what the Son is except by relation to Father and Spirit, and the Spirit cannot be what the Spirit is except by relation to Son and Father, and the Father cannot be what the Father is except by relation to Son and Spirit. As many classical theologians point out, God is not called 'Father' because he is our father—rather it is because God is 'Father' to the Son that we are

able to pray, 'Our Father.'

The divine persons cannot be thought of as separate from one another. This full integration of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, would go a long way to rectifying treatments in which the Spirit does indeed seem, in Elizabeth Johnson's phrase, to be no more than an 'edifying' (perhaps female) 'appendage' to the self-absorbed life of the Father and the Son, the One and the Other, exhausted in their dualism.

The criticisms of western metaphysics I discussed earlier are critiques of a philosophy governed by inexorable dualisms, economies of the One and the Same. This, I hazard, could never be a Christian metaphysics, although it might be a particular neo-Platonic heresy. It could only be a metaphysics forgetful of the great efforts made by theologians and philosophers to give account of God's Being as *To-Be-Related.* We may now stand at a moment of evangelical opportunity in the west, a time in which people not only need to hear a fully relational account of the trinitarian life of God, but may also be receptive to it.

We frequently read in the texts of modern theology that we need the doctrine of the Trinity in order to teach us how to be relational beings. This often sounds a kind of utilitarian apologetics—'the doctrine doesn't mean much anymore but at least its socially useful'. But, we might ask, what does the Trinity tell us of human relational experiences? Personally I think something has gone seriously wrong if theologians can even ask that kind of question in the way they so often now do. I must emphasise, then, that the sense in which I discuss relation in the Trinity is here a *formal one*. To give a mundane example, a man becomes a father in a technical sense when he has a child. Even were he to have no idea of the child's existence and thus no 'relationship' (in the vernacular sense) with it, he would nonetheless be related to this child as father. 'Relation' is a useful technical term in trinitarian theology, and the water is muddied if we forget the several senses, including the modern psychological ones, in which the term can be used.[34]

As to the way the modern theologians invoke 'relation', I was surprised to find Walter Kasper drawing the following contrast between God and us; whereas God is relational, according to Kasper, we human beings only choose to be relational. He adds, 'relations are essential only to the full self-realisation of the being. A human being is, and remains a human being even if he selfishly closes himself against relations with others.'[35] What can this mean? Surely we need other human beings, notably parents, to come into being at all. Which human being is free of human relations? As infants we are entirely dependent on others for our existence. Those others teach us language, values, stories—in short, a world. Even our very limited capacity to 'close ourselves off from

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others' is only conceivable because we have *already* been socially constituted. I need other people *even* in order to shut myself off from them. We are constituted, not 'auto-nomously', not despite others, but because of and by others. The more we are 'in relation', the more we are likely to be our selves.[36] We *are* relational beings, and if this is not obvious to us then it only shows how deeply we are prey to that most insidious of modern myths, the myth of the self-constituting subject of so much modern thought.

But it is this atomistic, relationless agent, you will recall, who has been the target of some of the most sustained and persuasive philosophical critiques in our century. Wittgenstein showed him to be epistemologically threadbare, Charles Taylor and Alison Jagger show him to be morally and politically bankrupt— and sexist to boot— Foucault showed him to be a social-scientific non-sense, and Lacan and Irigaray present him as psychologically pathological.[37] As a model for human beings this 'disengaged man' is a nonstarter, for human knowing and human being not only are not but could not be self-constituted.

Is it then a coincidence that the period between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries in the West—a period Lacan has called the 'ego's era'—should be both one which has seen a precipitate decline in religious practice in the West and also one in which the affirmation of God as Trinity has again and again been challenged by theologians of deistic, rationalist, or empiricist bent? We could even dare to say the popular image of God in the mind of many faithful Christians is deistic and Unitarian—the God who is One, and who perhaps has a very special friend, his messenger Jesus, who was sent to make things better for us.

In feminist critical theory (not feminist theology) 'God' gets short shrift. Secular theorists are not of the opinion that 'God' has been very good for women. But the 'God' one finds in their texts is a bit player who appears merely as a pretext for the authority of Man and men, the divine guarantor of the veracity of the insights of the Cartesian subject. This 'cogito', self-engendered through the denial of the other, the external world, even his own physicality, speaks in the place of and with the authority of 'God'. Rational 'man', viewing things from a 'God's-eye-view' separates self from other, but there is never any genuine other, always just the 'economy of the Same'.

But the theologian might well object (indeed, should object) that the 'God' thus described is not the Christian God, and not the God of Jesus Christ. This 'God' is a philosophical fiction created by 'Man' for man's purposes, the 'causa sui'. At most this 'God' is a binity where the second person is not Jesus but 'Man' himself. Indeed 'Man' is the senior partner, establishing his 'God' as another self to whom he can relate.[38]

This is indeed a culture of narcissism where the One (Man) gazes on the other he has made (God made in man's image). As Braidotti says, with more truth than she perhaps knows, this 'God himself is not an infinite Being, for the "I" has accorded to him his essence and his existence, according to the order of Reason.'[39]

Unfortunately the 'God' of the philosophers is taken by many to be what Christians understand by God. The criticism of this idolatrous God of philosophy is at the heart of Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical essay, *God Without Being*. And it is at the heart, too, of Heidegger's criticisms of the 'onto-theological constitution of metaphysics' which Marion follows. The God of modern philosophy is causa sui but, as Heidegger says, only therefore an idol before which we can neither pray nor dance.[40] Heidegger rightly says that this 'God can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy . . . requires or determines that and how God enters into it.'[41] But this is because this is not the true God, this 'God' is a precept of philosophy. Christians do not know God as causa sui, but as the God who reveals, as the Gift Given.[42]

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity has ever been a challenge to philosophies of the One, in both their ancient and modern forms. The trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians was formulated over and against just such a metaphysics of the One that contemporary philosophers find so oppressive. The name 'Father', the Cappodocians insisted, does not describe some kind of divine *ousia* but a relation to the Son.[43] Indeed if God's 'To Be' is 'To-Be-Related' then all our most seemingly substantive and static divine titles, including those of Father and Son, are really relational. Even to call the First Person 'unoriginate origin' is to indicate a relation to that which is originated or begotten. Trinitarian theology presents us with a God who cannot be dissected, reified, confined, materialised, controlled, but who is totally present to us, as totally Other. Paradoxically it is with such thoughts that this very Christian doctrine of God's otherness and nearness, the Known Unknowable, to speak in Barthian terms, that one feels also a closeness with our Jewish brothers and sisters. It is not surprising that some of the most productive current thought on a God who 'relates in and through difference' should come from a Jew.[44] 'Subjectivity' says Levinas, 'is not for itself, it is once again—initially for another'.[45]

Let us return to de Beauvoir and her well-founded fears for the 'feminine other'—'no group', she says 'ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over and against itself.' (p. 17) These words sound bitterly across the history of religious sectarianism. Again, de Beauvoir: 'it is not the Other, who, in defining himself as Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in

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defining himself as the One.'(p. 18) But according to the doctrine of the Trinity this is precisely what God does, what God is. God defines Godself as Other it is through *Being-To-Other*, being related, that God is One.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us nothing of how men and women should relate to one another as males and females It does not show that all men should be like the 'father' and all women model themselves on a feminised Spirit. In this sense the doctrine tells us nothing of sexual difference. But it does let us glimpse what it is, most truly, to be. 'To-be' most fully is 'to-be-related' in difference. This tells us a great deal.

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Pan Books, 1988) p. 13.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
3 *Loc. cit.*, footnote.
4 Michelle Le Doeuff gives an amusing and insightful account of the 'miracle' that any kind of feminism might be based on Sartrean existentialism in her excellent book, *Hipparchia's Choice* (Oxford, 1989). Briefly, 'choosing a freedom which invents its own ends' is a difficult philosophical aspiration for the Peruvian peasant woman whose husband has left her with eight children to feed. Le Doeuff speaks of Sartre's 'megalomanical voluntarism' (p. 127).
5 *The Journal of Religion*, 40 (1960) p. 201.
6 'Sexuate' is a neologism now common, because useful, in feminist writings.
7 Although , with a few exceptions, practitioners in these two areas show little interest in, or awareness of, the existence of each other.
8 See Alice Jardine, *Gynesis* (Ithaca, 1985), p. 25.
9 Stephen Heath makes these observations, summarising Lacan's position in *Encore*. For Lacan, the '*woman is that which relates to the Other*. Woman and Other, 'locus of the signifying cause of the subject' (E. p. 841), are not-all, more and less than the order of the phallus, radically other. . .' Heath continues, theologians might take note, '*Thus (the jouissance of) the woman is (in the position of) God*. The Other is the only place left 'in which to put the term God' (SXX, p. 44).' Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen*, 19 (1978) p. 59–60.
10 *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, 1985), p. 74.
11 *Op. cit.*, p. 112.
12 Naomi Schor, 'This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips With Irigaray', *differences*, 1 (1989), p.56.
13 *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 181–2.
14 Braidotti, p. 254. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, 1989), passim.
15 Braidotti, p. 11.
16 This is true of some Anglo-American critics, but also to some extent of the French philosopher, Michelle LeDoeuff, for instance.
17 Jean-Joseph Goux makes this point in "The Phallus: Masculine Identity and the 'Exchange of Women'", *differences*, 4.1 (1992).
18 See Elizabeth Gross, "Philosophy, subjectivity and the body: *Kristeva and Irigaray*," in Carole Pateman and E. Gross, eds. *Feminist Challenges Social and Political Theory* (Boston, 1986), p.133.
19 Braidotti, p. 252.
20 *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (London, 1993), p.12.
21 In differences: *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 4.1 (1992).

22 Irigaray explores Plato's allegory at some length in *Speculum of the Other Woman*.
23 Plutarch, *Moralia*, cit. Goux, p. 46.
24 To speak so generally of '*the* western tradition of metaphysics' or '*the* onto-theological constitution of metaphysics', as though the same story could be told across 2,500 years. It is more accurately one particular, and we could say in the modern period particularly dominant, tradition of western metaphysics that is being criticised. Those who speak of 'the western tradition' often seem forgetful, in a way one hopes theologians are not, of medieval philosophy. Indeed, part of the argument of this paper is that recollection of the delicate philosophical arguments on the Trinity itself might be a sovereign cure against any system which degenerates into *oppositional dualisms*.
25 In a paper given to a conference on 'The Trinity', Trinity College, Dublin, May, 1992.
26 Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (London, 1983) Vol. III, p. 161.
27 Elizabeth A.Johnson, The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female, *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), p. 459.
28 Johnson, 457.
29 " 'Feminity' and the Holy Spirit?" in M. Furlong, ed. *Mirror to the Church* (London, 1988).
30 The following remarks are a precis of another paper, 'Can a Feminist Call God "Father"?' which appears in Teresa Elwes, ed. *Women's Voices in Religion* (London, 1992) and also in Alvin Kimmel, ed., *The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Eerdmans, 1992).
31 *God Without Being*, (Chicago, 1991) p. 142–3.
32 Catherine Mowry La Cugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, (New York, 1991), p. 277.
33 *Ibid.*, p. 153.
34 This does not mean, of course, that God cannot 'relate to us', in the vernacular sense of the term 'relate'.
35 Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London, 1983), p.280.
36 This is one of the main thrusts of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*.
37 On this theme in Lacan see Teresa Brennan's *History After Lacan*. (Routledge, 1993).
38 See La Cugna, p. 251.
39 Braidotti, p. 255.
40 *Identity and Difference*, cit. Marion, p. 35.
41 *Op. cit.*, cit. Marion, p. 34.
42 Marion, p. 36.
43 La Cugna, p. 66.
44 See Morny Joy, 'Levinas: Alterity, the Feminine, and Women', forthcoming in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuse*.
45 Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, cit. Joy.

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