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RETHINKING RELIGION/REWRITING DIVINITY

Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon, eds
Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives
 London: Routledge, 2003, 232 pp., ISBN 0-415-21536-6

Religion in French Feminist Thought should be essential reading for anyone who is concerned with the nature of religion and the contributions that women's writings on sexual difference in particular offer to this contemporary concern. This is also a highly significant text in drawing out and bringing together French thinking on religion, which can be constructive in redefining the central topics related to divinity. Love, life, birth, death, desire, sexual difference and human/divine oppositions come into their own as central topics for rethinking religion in this edited volume of essays. But these would be difficult and dense topics for the readers without the seriously impressive critical work on 'religion in French feminist thought' done by the contributors to this volume: Ellen T. Armour, Charlotte Berkowitz, Amy Hollywood, Luce Irigaray, Grace M. Jantzen, Morny Joy, Mary L. Keller, Dawne McCance, Kathleen O'Grady, Erika Ostrovsky, Judith L. Poxon, Martha J. Reineke, Sal Renshaw and Marie-Andree Roy each take up a new form of thinking on religion – rewriting divinity is one of their implicit goals.

Not only do these contributors meet the critical challenge of rendering accessible what has been described as 'French feminist' thought to both informed and uninformed readers, they confront the unstable dimension of religion in French psycholinguistic writings on divinity. The case for unearthing the productive side of psycholinguistic conceptions of topics related to divinity and the role of religion in human lived experiences is made persuasively in the course of this collection of essays. But this is despite the deep ambivalence on religion also apparent in the primary texts of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Catherine Clement and Monique Wittig – on whom the volume focuses critically. The earlier published companion volume, *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader* (Routledge, 2002), also edited by Joy, O'Grady and Poxon, includes religiously significant excerpts from the writings of each of these women who write in French on religion.

Overall, the serious challenge confronted in the present volume of critical perspectives is addressed in various ways, some more polemical (e.g. Jantzen), others more textual-contextual (e.g. Joy), still others mainly exegetical with careful and clear exposition of concepts. Each is full of original ideas. Such a rich volume is not easy to cover adequately in a book review. The reviewer can only give a taste of the goods on offer and the material for digestion. In addition to focusing upon writings in French by women who each raise gendered questions about the nature of religion, the focus of any reviewer must be informed about the common ground

given to these writings by the ways in which the language they use conditions all meaning and values. A psycholinguistic conception of language assumes that learning a language is the entrance into a social-symbolic order constituting our world, including our religious practices. Each of the topics – including love, life, birth, death, desire, sexual difference – is constituted by this linguistic order of values and meanings. So, religion is not a matter of individual choice or responsibility, but a product of a social-symbolic order that has roots in our psychic and sexual relations – relations that remain linguistic insofar as they can only be changed when the language constituting our world(s) is transformed. Consider the implications, then, for this volume.

The 'Editors' Introduction' is hugely informative concerning the French context of psycholinguistics. This context is primarily informed by post-Freudian, i.e. Lacanian, psychoanalysis and poststructuralist understandings of a linguistic system of differential terms. This introduction is divided into four parts corresponding to four main 'feminists': Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous (and Clement) and Wittig. The difficulties of cultural and theoretical labels are also acknowledged. It is crucial that English-speaking readers are not uninformed about the differences encompassed by the label 'French feminists' – which in fact covers the four women writing in French, who were by birth a Belgian, a Bulgarian, an Algerian and a German. The most positive factor motivating these critical essays on women who write in and on French is that their writings each in their own ways seek to reimagine religion in non-sexist and non-oppressive terms.

Another important factor in these writings on religion is that unlike writings by Anglo-American thinkers, 'religion' does not necessarily mean Christianity and certainly not the English Protestantism of the English-speaking academic world. In French thought, 'religion' certainly covers Roman Catholic forms of Christianity, which have dominated the French-speaking world. But generally the stress on religion in the French feminist thought under discussion here means religio; that is, the ways in which religion binds practitioners together with rituals, symbols and narratives, putting corporate meanings into its practices. Unlike Anglo-American philosophy of religion, the concern is not with belief, including the epistemological questions about the existence of God and the nature of a divinely created universe; it is with the social practices, the fears and hopes, the rituals related to life, love, birth, death, desire, loss, sexuality, and with meaning and its loss. Religion is not, therefore, restricted to the truth revealed in sacred texts or the beliefs held on the basis of religious experiences of a monotheistic deity.

The contributions include scholarly essays on Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous and Clement and Wittig. The editors must be commended for carefully constructed and critical close readings of the French writings. Take Kathleen O'Grady as my example of a stellar scholar on French thinking, who writes brilliantly, with subtle, sophisticated and insightful prose about Kristeva, religion and feminism. O'Grady writes knowledgeably about Kristeva herself, as well as about linguistics, Catholicism and related issues concerning the religious imagery in French texts; with this impressive knowledge O'Grady argues cogently against the many critics who ignore or dismiss Kristeva's remarks on topics related to religion (and women). In particular, O'Grady unearths valuable insights concerning feminine alterity beneath the patriarchal religious imagery of Orthodox Catholicism in Kristeva's texts.

Writing against secular and non-feminist critics is a significant dimension of many of the critical perspectives taken by the scholarly contributors in making their cases that Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous and Wittig offer relevant material for

rethinking religion with sensitivity to 'sexual difference' (or 'gender' in Anglo-American terms). These scholars find gendered insights concerning religion in literary, psychoanalytic and philosophical texts, that is in the imagery, the implicit values, meanings and narratives that appear in the texts of the 'French feminists'. The challenge in their exegetical, interpretative and constructive readings of French texts is readily apparent – but this never seems too daunting because of the skilful command of the texts under discussion by each contributor. In brief, this volume is unique in its courageous scholarship.

To take another example, Amy Hollywood picks up the challenge of understanding the insight for rethinking religion offered by Cixous on mysticism, desire and death. Again, the scholar's task in unearthing the religious meanings hidden in Cixous's texts would be formidable for a less able critical thinker and reader of textual nuances than Hollywood. No matter how well-informed, secular critics would find it difficult to interpret the religious subtext to Cixous's writings on divinity. And divinity is the crucial concept here. For Cixous, as Hollywood demonstrates, 'writing is God'; that's coming to God (pp. 149ff.). But Hollywood also asserts that Cixous insists on the political power of writing. Clearly, Hollywood exhibits the skills of her academic background, enabling her to unpick Cixous's writings to discover the highly significant meanings in what constitutes the politicized and religious nature of Cixous's writing on divinity. And divinity emerges in the context of death, loss and oblivion, which are intimately linked to their opposites. Hollywood finds death and life, horror and *jouissance*, mourning and desire, oblivion and memory, closely linked in the political, religious and ethical nature of Cixous's writing. To miss the meaning of religion as the way to rewrite divinity is to fail to grasp the multiple dimensions of Cixous's texts. These dimensions include the material and spiritual losses suffered by women, including the political and religious meanings of these losses. According to Hollywood, the writings of Cixous compel us to remember and remain faithful to the living and the dead, to love and loss. By rewriting divinity within a politicized understanding of mysticism, at the mystical edge of presence and absence, mourning and *jouissance*, remembrance and oblivion, women in particular who often carry the suffering of personal losses can begin to gain strength in religious and political (w)rites of mourning.

To sum up, this volume contains rich material that remains complex – but so, too, is the subject matter of religion. In rethinking religion via a rewriting of divinity, the French feminists and those women who offer critical perspectives on their thought contribute new concepts and new relations for the renewal of religious practices, but also for revitalizing the political possibilities of women's lives. This volume is essential for creative and constructive thinking within today's feminism, which, as the volume makes clear, can become the crucial politics for regenerating the spiritual lives of women and men in the 21st century.

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