Reflections on the Looking Glass: Religion, Culture and Gender in the Academy

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A story adapted from the Shinto tradition tells how a young peasant man went to market and saw a flat, shiny object: when he looked into it more closely he was amazed to see that it was a picture of his father as a young man. Astonished, he bought it; and taking it home he hid it among his possessions. But his wife found it, looked into it, and saw that it was a picture of a lovely young woman; whereupon she became very distressed. 'Why are you treasuring this picture of a woman?' she wept: but her husband thought she was mad, because no matter how often he looked, he always saw the picture of his father. At last they called on the wise woman of the village to help them. 'Look into it together', she counselled, holding it up to them. And when they saw their reflections in the looking glass, they were able to live in harmony again.²

For centuries, religion in the west, especially Christianity, has been preoccupied with its own reflection. Looking into the mirror, the face of the Father God has appeared, reflecting and being reflected by his sons, who claimed possession of the mirror as their right. The historical Jesus, too, has been found to have an extraordinary resemblance to those who go in quest of him.³ Nor

¹ This essay is the (highly programmatic) text of my inaugural lecture as John Rylands Professorial Research Fellow and marks the launch of the Centre for Religion, Culture and Gender in the Department of Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester, 30 October 1996. I have not removed the marks of its initial presentation, as they help to convey the flavour of the Centre.

² Adapted from Sylvia Brimer (ed.), Themes for assembly (Blackie, London and Glasgow: 1982), 23.

³ 'It was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.' Albert Schweitzer, The quest of the historical Jesus: a critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede (English trans., London: SCM Press, 1954), 4.
is the fascination with the looking glass confined to the overtly religious: Western culture, science, and philosophy has since the Enlightenment been taken up with the mirror of nature, or the reflective, speculative attitude of philosophy, or the mirror stage of psychic development. Indeed, a history of the metaphor of the mirror, from Paul the Apostle’s vision ‘through a glass darkly’ to Alice in Wonderland’s adventures through the looking glass and Snow-white’s ‘mirror, mirror on the wall’, would be a history of the whole of Western culture.

Or maybe only half of it? What happens when women look into this mirror? Are women allowed to? Is reflection — theological, philosophical, scientific — appropriate for women? Women, indeed, are supposed to be very much taken up with looking into mirrors, feeding our vanity and frivolity, and making ourselves as attractive as possible, ‘putting on appearances’ according to the conventions of the time. Remember what happened to the Lady of Shallott? — she was required to restrict her gaze to her mirror and work at her loom. But then Sir Lancelot came riding by, and she got distracted.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces through the room,
She saw the water lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She looked down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side;
‘The curse is come upon me’, cried
The Lady of Shallott.

Clearly she would have been better advised to get on with her weaving.

7 1 Corinthians 13:12, Authorized Version.
9 By the mid-nineteenth century even lower middle class households could be expected to have a large mirror, often located in the bedroom where it served as part of the woman’s dressing table. Cf Roger-Henri Guerrand, ‘Private spaces’ in Michelle Perrot (ed.) *A history of private life Vol. IV: from the fires of the Revolution to the Great War*, eds Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 368.
10 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘The Lady of Shallott’ (1832).
But if women are assigned the mirrors on the private dressing table, the powerful reflections in the public domain have for most of western history been heavily male dominated. Yet, like the woman in the Shinto story, women of late have been peering into the looking glass for ourselves; and what women have seen has been disturbingly different from the complacent reflection of the male gaze: where men have seen their father reflected, women have instead seen a female face. There have been those who have cursed women for this; but not all women are as willing to accept such cursing as was the rather unassertive Lady of Shallott; nor are all men as quick to pronounce it. And the struggle of women and men to see, to see accurately and fairly what has been and still is going on, and to learn a new kind of looking together, requires wisdom indeed, and someone to hold up the glass — not to mention a large dose of perseverance and good humour all round.

The opportunity of looking together at the gendered reflections of Western thought is what delights me in coming to Manchester as John Rylands Research Fellow to work in the Centre for Religion, Culture and Gender in the Department of Religions and Theology. It is all too rare in this era of financial stringency for universities to appoint to the academy people whose specific duty it is to reflect, to research, to seek wisdom. It is even rarer that such an appointment should encourage a specific focus on gender as an essential element of that reflection. I am keenly aware of the privilege of this appointment, and its responsibility; and I thank the University of Manchester and the John Rylands Institute most warmly.

The Centre for Religion, Culture and Gender, building on the foundations of the Centre for Feminist Theology developed by Dr Elaine Graham, is the only one of its kind, and is an exciting place to be. Unlike some other universities, where efforts to develop a perspective which takes gender and multiculturalism seriously are met with indifference at best and hostility at worst, the Department of Religions and Theology has been proactive in fostering the development of the Centre, seeing the need and opportunity for such research and teaching: again, not to be taken for granted in a protectionist climate.

The Centre for Religion, Culture and Gender is one in which the infinite reflections of each upon the other is taken as crucial to our research. It is not simply an 'add-on' approach: studying religion and culture and gender as though these were somehow separable and could be understood individually. Rather, it is precisely their triangulation which is important: it is the way in which religion, culture and gender intersect and refract one another which captures our attention. On a recent visit to Quarry Bank Mill in Styal I saw a set of three large mirrors placed end to end to form a triangular kaleidoscope within which visitors are
invited to stand. Anyone who does so has the disconcerting experience of seeing themselves endlessly reflected and refracted, from many angles at once. If we think of religion, culture and gender as the three mirrors reflecting one another, and the specific topic under investigation as the visitor in the middle, it is a good model of the Centre’s approach.

The Mirror of the Divine Eye
Rather than proceeding in general terms, I propose to pursue one concrete example of such triangulation, complicating things somewhat by reflecting on the mirror itself. The mirror metaphor has been used in the west as a central religious and cultural trope reflecting some of its deepest desires and values. In the medieval period, in modernity, and in what can loosely be called post-modernity, there has run a theme of 'becoming divine', though with vastly different meanings in each era. Yet curiously, the mirror metaphor has been used in all three periods to illuminate the theme; and in each case in a gendered way. I can do no more than offer the barest of sketches here, in a programmatic way: I want to consider anew what can be meant by 'becoming divine', and to use the mirror metaphor to do so.

Although in Greek mythology, reflection could be associated with a refusal to engage with anything else — Narcissus gazing into a pool saw himself imaged, fell in love with his own reflection, and refused to move — for the most part Western texts have supposed a connection between reflection and action. Already in the Biblical text of the book of James, the author castigates his complacent readers for being like those who see their faces in a glass, but straightaway forget what they saw and do nothing to remedy their imperfections.11 Repeatedly in medieval writing the connection between reflection and remedy is taken up in mirror metaphors. It is often coupled with the idea of the human person being made in the image of God, and thus reflective of the divine glory. Here is Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century, characteristically denouncing sexual misdemeanours:

Therefore, O humans, weep and howl to your God, whom you so often despise in your sinning, when you sow your seed in the worst fornication ... for you cast aside the mirror of God and sate your lust at will.12

In the fourteenth century, the 'mirror of conscience' was presented to the pilgrim on life's road, who was meant to be so startled by the hideousness of the sins reflected therein that amendment of life would be the immediate result.13

11 James 1:22–25.
But there was another aspect to the mirror metaphor, partly deriving from the Pauline emphasis that those who ‘with open face behold as in a glass the glory of the Lord’ 14 are changed more and more into fair copies of that divine image. In what has now come to be known as ‘mystical literature’ the mirror metaphor is regularly used to discuss or illustrate the path of union with God, the soul becoming divine. Marguerite of Porete’s *Mirror of simple souls* is about the progress of an individual serious about increasing in godliness and coming to union with God. 15 Although the mirror metaphor does not occur except in the title, its appropriateness would be considered self-evident for her theme. Again, Meister Eckhart, who was much influenced by Marguerite, used the mirror metaphor to great effect in explaining how a soul could be truly one with God and yet remain distinct.

I take a bowl of water and put a mirror in it and set it under the disc of the sun. Then the sun sends forth its light-rays both from the disc and from the sun’s depth ... The reflection of the sun in the mirror is the sun, and yet it is what it is. So it is with God. God is in the soul with his nature, with his being, and with his Godhead, and yet he is not the soul. The reflection of the soul in God is God, and yet she is what she is. 16

Neoplatonic influence is evident in Eckhart’s words: the beauty of the divine fills and is reflected in the purified soul. The blend of Christian and Platonic ideas is even more evident in Marsilio Ficino: with obvious allusions to Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*, Ficino describes the philosopher-lover as one ‘inflamed by the divine splendour, glowing in the beautiful person as in a mirror, and secretly lifted up by it, as by a hook, in order to become God’. 17

‘To become God’, to be so united to God that God is perfectly reflected in the soul: that, indeed, could be taken as the goal of medieval spiritual writing for which the mirror metaphor offers endless possibilities. 18 Sometimes, as in the passages from Ficino

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14 II Corinthians 3:18, Authorized Version.
18 These could be presented according to individual needs: for example the *Speculum Regis*, especially for princes; cf Marjorie K. McIntosh, ‘Finding language for misconduct: jurors in fifteenth century local courts’ in Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (eds), *Bodies and disciplines: intersections of literature and history in fifteenth century England* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 101. There was a special interest for queens in Marguerite Navarre’s *Le miroir de l’âme pêcheresse*, trans. into English by Elizabeth I in her youth: see Anne Lake Prescott, ‘The pearl of the Valois and Elizabeth I: Marguerite de Navarre’s *Miroir* and Tudor England’ in Margaret P. Hannay (ed.), *Silent but for the word: Tudor women as patrons, translators, and writers of religious works* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985).
and Eckhart, the person is the mirror reflecting the divine glory; at other times the mirror of perfection or the mirror of conscience functions precisely to show the viewer disfigurement or vice. However, a striking development was the idea of the mirror as itself the Eye of God, the all-seeing eye that reflects what it sees. Nicholas of Cusa in 1453 wrote *The vision of God*, in which the Divine Eye is likened to a vast mirror reflecting all creation: to understand the world, it is therefore necessary to look to God. This idea had already been used by Dante in the *Divine comedy*: in the ‘Paradiso’ when Dante meets Adam and is hoping to ask him about original sin, Adam by simply looking to God knows what is in Dante’s mind before he speaks:

> Though of thy wish thou utterest no word
> Yet my discernment of it doth surpass
> All certainty of which thou'rt most assured.
> For I behold it truly in the glass
> In which all things their perfect image show,
> Yet which in naught its perfect image has.

> This is thy wish ...

and Adam proceeds to tell Dante what he wanted to ask.19

Perhaps the most visually arresting combination of several of these themes is Hieronymous Bosch’s circular portrayal of the Seven Deadly Sins. Though the seven sections of the table depicting the categories of human wickedness are painted with all of Bosch’s usual intense imagination, this in itself was a common enough theme. But the whole motif is raised to a different level by Bosch’s transformation of the circular table into the Eye of God which mirrors what it sees. By looking into the Eye of God, the viewer encounters the reflection of their own disfigurement. Yet the remedy also is there; for in the centre of the Divine Eye, Bosch has painted the figure of Christ.20 To look to God, therefore, is to be confronted with the immediacy of one’s sinfulness, but confronted at the same time with the divine image into whose likeness one prays to be transformed, to become in turn reflective of the divine. Like mirrors mirroring one another, the reflections are endless.

It would be easy to multiply references to the use of the mirror metaphor in medieval and renaissance texts, but the points I want to draw out can be made from the instances already given. In the first place, reflections on the mirror, though contemplative, were engaged reflections: they were intended to bring about moral and spiritual change. No one was meant to be able to read Marguerite’s *Mirror of simple souls* or look at Bosch’s Eye of God.

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20 Gibson, *Hieronymous Bosch*, 35.
and stay just the same: if they did not become more godly as a result, then this would in fact be a change for the worse. This already implies the second point I wish to emphasize: the change which was looked for was a change toward godliness, toward becoming divine. The human soul was increasingly to reflect the divine image; and that image was beautiful. All else faded in comparison with this glory.

Now all this is obviously far removed from the way in which we in the contemporary academy could engage in reflections on the looking glass. Not only does our engagement occur on the other side of modernity, and therefore in a context where the religious themes taken for granted in the texts that I have cited are themselves a matter for speculation. In addition, these reflections are now deliberately set at an angle with a long overdue focus of culture and gender, as I shall discuss more fully later. But first I want to look fleetingly at the mirror of modernity itself. What I shall suggest — and in one lecture it can be no more than a suggestion — is that the stance of detached secularism reflected in the modern mirror and often taken as a minimal norm for academic research is in fact a pose which distorts rather than clarifies our speculations. Indeed I shall suggest that the goal of becoming divine, though in need of the reflections and refractions and even fragmentations of post/modernity, is a more worthy stance than the detached pose of modern reflection. We cannot — nor should we want to — go back to a medieval idea of becoming divine. But rather than abandon that idea in a detached stance of modernity, we need to reconsider what becoming divine might now mean. And I suggest that the triangulation of religion, culture and gender enables the multiple reflection and refraction that is required.

*Whose Mirror Mind?*

A major transition in the mirror metaphor in early modernity was its application not to the Eye of God but to the mind of man — and yes, it was men and not women who were intended. Thus for instance in 1605 Francis Bacon wrote: ‘God hath framed the mind of man as a mirror or glass, capable of the image of the universal world, and joyful to receive the impression thereof, as the eye joyeth to receive light’. Rather than the medieval commonplace that all truth could be found in God, Bacon suggests that it is in fact the human mind which is in principle capable of all knowledge. It is, to be sure, limited by the shortness of life and the usual ‘impediments’ of finitude, but nothing is intrinsically forbidden or beyond the mirror. The way to knowledge, therefore,

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is to look into this mirror of the human mind, to polish its powers of reflection so that the world may be known, since it is knowledge, for Bacon as for Locke and Descartes and other writers of early modernity, which gives power. Thus Descartes famously turns the mind to reflect upon itself; and in the reflexive self-certainty of the cogito Descartes finds the foundation of all knowledge: even the knowledge of God is secondary to this self-certainty.

This is not to say, however, that the human mind is without error, or that it perfectly reflects reality. Even Francis Bacon, that champion of the advancement of learning, cautioned that 'the mind of man is far from the nature of a clear and equal glass, wherein the beams of things should reflect according to their true incidence; nay, it is rather like an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture, if it be not delivered and reduced'. Thus it is the moral duty of the philosopher — the seeker of true knowledge — to dust and clean the mirror of the mind, to remove its bumps and enchantments, so that 'things should reflect according to their true incidence.'

At first sight this does not seem very different from the exhortations of the mirror of conscience or Bosch's Eye of God: these too, after all, were directed to inner purification. But appearances are deceptive. For in Bacon's view, the enchantment that distorts the mirroring mind is precisely 'superstition and imposture' — code, in Bacon, as for the philosophes after him, for traditional religion. Bacon insisted on a distinction between divinity and natural knowledge, the Book of Scriptures and the Book of Creation, and gave precedence to the latter. We have, he says, '... two books or volumes to study, if we will be secured from error; first, the Scriptures, revealing the Will of God; and then the creatures expressing his Power; whereof the latter is the key unto the former ...' The idea of the two volumes, the book of God's word and the book of God's works, was a common trope in early modern writing; but to insist as Bacon does that it is the 'Book of

22 Bacon, The advancement of learning, 132. Note also the warning of John Locke: 'To think often, and never to retain it so much as one moment, is a very useless sort of thinking; and the soul, in such a state of thinking, does very little, if at all, excel that of a looking glass, which constantly receives variety of images, or ideas, but retains none; they disappear and vanish, and there remain no footsteps of them; the looking-glass is never the better for such ideas, nor the soul for such thoughts.' Essay concerning human understanding II.1.15 (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), i, 134.

23 Robert Faulkner, in Francis Bacon and the project of progress (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), has argued persuasively that Bacon's writings reveal a Machiavellian cynicism toward religion: that he uses its language and concepts to promote his own irreligious ends, which the fostering of science was intended to enhance. Other scholars take a very different view, seeing Bacon as the altruistic and wise champion of modernity while being aware of its possible distortions: cf. Jerry Weinberger, Science, faith and politics: Francis Bacon and the Utopian roots of the modern age: a commentary on Bacon's Advancement of learning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

24 Bacon, The advancement of learning, 41, emphasis mine.
Nature’ which enables correct understanding of the Scripture rather than the other way around is a major move in the changing relationship between science and religion characteristic of secular modernity.\textsuperscript{25}

This idea of the human mind as a ‘glassy essence’ which mirrors the world\textsuperscript{26} became a central metaphor for western philosophical thinking. Richard Rorty, in \textit{Philosophy and the mirror of nature} has discussed how the idea of the human mind as a mirror, once delivered from the enchantment of religion, contains true and accurate representations of reality, and thus becomes the foundation of knowledge. As he sketches it, the model works by thinking first of the mirror of our mind being confronted with an object of belief.

The next stage is to think that to understand how to know better is to understand how to improve the activity of the quasi-visual faculty, the Mirror of Nature, and thus to think of knowledge as an assemblage of accurate representations. Then comes the idea that the way to have accurate representations is to find, within the Mirror, a special privileged class of representations so compelling that their accuracy cannot be doubted. These privileged foundations will be the foundations of knowledge, and the discipline which directs us toward them — the theory of knowledge — will be the foundation of culture.\textsuperscript{27}

I shall have more to say presently about this self-aggrandizing view of philosophy which arrogates to itself the right to pronounce on the foundations of culture. The burden of Rorty's book is that a great many of the themes which have dominated Western philosophy — the mind-body problem, the question of epistemological representation, the problem of how language can refer to things — could not arise unless this model of the mind as the mirror of nature were first taken for granted.

It is pertinent to remember that central to the framing of the mirror metaphor in the early modern period was the issue of control. The aim of Bacon's \textit{Great instauration} was after all not neutral knowledge for its own sake, but the power which knowledge brings; and in the first instance, power over nature.

Nor is mine a trumpet which summons and excites men to cut each other to pieces ... but rather to make peace between themselves, and turning with united

\textsuperscript{25} This should not, however, be read as straightforward conflict: the interplay was much more complex. Indeed Amos Funkenstein, in \textit{Theology, and the scientific imagination from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century} (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986) has argued that the acceptance of the ideals of homogeneity and univocity in the seventeenth century brought about a unique fusion between theology and physics which occurred neither before nor since. For other views about their interrelationship see John Hedley Brooke, \textit{Science and religion: some historical perspectives} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and Hans Blumenberg \textit{The legitimacy of the modern age}, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

\textsuperscript{26} Shakespeare, \textit{Measure for Measure} II.3. line 11.

\textsuperscript{27} Richard Rorty, \textit{Philosophy and the mirror of nature}, 163.
forces against the Nature of Things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and extend the bounds of human empire ... 28

The gendered violence of this quotation should not be passed over lightly. 29 The feminization of Nature, and the insistence that Nature, like women, existed for the sake of men, was all of a piece with the developing quest for scientific knowledge. 30 Whereas in the medieval period one could say that the function of the mirror was to bring about moral and spiritual change in those who contemplated it, in the early modern period the emphasis was on changing and mastering the world by means of the knowledge generated by gazing steadily into the Mirror of Nature. As Descartes described his quest for knowledge:

For I thus saw that one may reach conclusions of great usefulness in life, and discover a practical philosophy ... one which would show us the energy and action of fire, air, and stars, the heavens, and all other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans, and could apply them in the same way to all appropriate uses and thus make ourselves the masters and owners of nature ... 31

For the medieval period the project of becoming divine was linked to a contemplation of divinity, if only 'through a glass, darkly'. Early modernity thought about becoming divine in quite a different way: men were to become as gods, having complete freedom and mastery. Descartes was quite forthright about this, saying,

Now freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects; and so its rightful use is the greatest of all the goods we possess, and further there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us. 32

Human autonomy allows for the advance of reason, which in turn brings about mastery first of one's own body and passions and

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28 Francis Bacon, *De Augmentis* 4.1. Note also who and what he puts in his gallery of fame at the end of his *New Atlantis*: 'In one of these we place patterns and samples of all manner of the more rare and excellent inventions; in the other we place statues of all principle inventors. There we have the statue of your Columbus, that discovered the West Indies: also the inventor of ships, your monk that was the inventor of ordnance and of gunpowder, and the inventors of music, glass, wine, letters, silk, printing, corn and bread and sugars'.


then progressively of all of nature, which is seen as of instrumental value for the advancement of human happiness. Becoming divine means taking control, no longer being subject to anyone, reflecting only oneself.

The progress of the mirror metaphor and its ever increasing complexity in Western metaphysical thought has been discussed in Rodolphe Gashé's book, *The tain of the mirror*. If Bacon's and Descartes' reflections on the mirror mind make them seek omnipotence, the trajectory of modern philosophy to Hegel is a reflection of the quest for omniscience. As soon as one conceives of the mind as the Mirror of Nature, then if one wants to think about that mind itself, to think about thinking, the inevitable image is of a mirror reflecting itself: ‘... reflection is the structure and the process of an operation that, in addition to designating the action of a mirror reproducing an object, implies that mirror's mirroring itself, by which process the mirror is made to see itself'. With Descartes, this self-reflection, thinking of himself thinking and defining himself as a thinking being, *res cogitans*, receives a significant boost. The foundational certainty rests upon this self-reflection, *cogito me cogitare*, the thinking self thinking of itself thinking.

But of course if the self is projected into the mirror, and is known thus by reflection, then the self is to that extent made an object, alienated from itself. Moreover any object in the Mirror of Nature which is reflected upon is involved in a potentially infinite regress of alienating reflections. The result is the series of dualisms characteristic of Western philosophy since Descartes: self-other, mind-body, freedom-nature, and the rest. Even Kant's transcendental reflection succumbs to the noumenal-phenomenal division. Only with Hegel's philosophy of absolute reflection, in which not only the figure and its image, the poles of subject and object are involved, but also the process or operation *between* them can the infinity of alienating reflections be overcome and totality achieved.

Reflection's reflection requires that reflection be contained within reflection, that mirroring itself include the mirror's mirroring. This can be achieved only by demonstrating that the mirror's mirroring of itself and Other is a still insufficient reflection and that in its fixation, which opens a process of endless self-mirroring, the mirror's mirroring is dependent on a positing by absolute

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33 Whether Descartes intended it or not, this also had profound implications for gender relations in modernity: cf Susan R. Bordo, *The flight to objectivity: essays on Cartesianism and culture* (Albany: SUNY, 1987).


35 Gashé, 16–17.

reflection, which at the same time makes this mirroring process an alienated, and thus recuperable, moment of absolute reflection ... Reflection is completed — that is, inclusive of all its constitutive moments — when it includes itself in that form of reflection which is reflection of self in opposition to reflection of Other.37

And before we dismiss this as a trick of smoke and mirrors, we need to take on board how extensively it became a paradigm of philosophical reflection in modernity, whose effects have far from run their course.

Though we may be unpersuaded by Hegel’s totalizing account of Absolute reflection, it is the claim to an understanding of the foundations of knowledge which, as Rorty points out, has served to legitimate fundamental aspects of Western culture.38 In the name of the freedom, mastery and progress sought after by the thinkers of modernity,39 there has been an ever increasing imperative to control Nature, paradigmatically by science and technology. And those who have been seen as close to Nature — women, so-called ‘savages’, all those ‘others’ whose features do not appear when white Western men gaze into the mirror — are likewise, in their gaze, candidates to be controlled.40 It is a commonplace of the science and technology which has been developed to enable this control that its knowledge is detached, objective: the reflections on the mind of empirical sense perceptions are indicative of how the world really is, irrespective of the wishes or subjectivity of the beholder. Reflection is the means of knowledge; and knowledge is power: it is salutary to remember that it was Bacon, not Foucault, who first said so. And thus, in knowledge and power, in mastery and control, men shall be as gods.

Yet already in early modernity there were those who knew that any reflection was bound to include in some way the face of the beholder. There is a striking painting done by Jakob von Ruisdael in about 1665,41 ostensibly a landscape of ancient trees surrounding a still pond. Humans are insignificant in the painting: it is a realistic portrait of nature. Yet what depths of meditation on ageing and death and decay is reflected by those still waters! The painting can perhaps best be viewed as a sombre meditation on mortality: that at least would do it far more justice than would viewing it as a botanical illustration, realistically representational though the old trees are. Indeed there are sufficient doublings and removes here to delight even Derrida’s heart: the reflections on the

37 Gasché, 63-4.
38 Rorty, Philosophy and the mirror of nature, 3-5.
39 Cf. Peter Schouls, Descartes and the Enlightenment.
water are only ‘really’ representations of such reflections painted on canvas; moreover they are (‘really’ again!) representations of gnarled trees. If someone failed to see them as reflections of mortality, it would not help to shine a brighter light on the canvas or to get a contemporary restorer to touch them up a little more realistically. In spite of — or perhaps because of — the doubling effect of the removes, this picture serves to subvert the notion that the subject who reflects can be detached and neutral toward the objects appearing in the mind’s mirror. If the mind itself is the mirror of nature, then the mental contribution to the reflection is hardly escapable.

But if the mind itself is inevitably contributing to the reflections that result, then it is all the more important to ask which minds, whose minds, get to reflect, to look into this putative mirror of nature. Who becomes as gods, and at whose expense? By a conveniently undertheorized assumption, the philosophy of modernity has evaded this question by assuming that all minds are alike, that rationality is univocal. In fact, the unproblematized assumption of equality of minds camouflaged the fact that those who were engaged in the reflections of modernity were privileged white males, who took their own self-portraits as normatively human — indeed godlike.

Yet how trustworthy is this reflection? How is it that men, at one level deeply aware of human finitude and insecurity, can behave as little godlings, seeking domination over nature, over women, over colonised peoples? Virginia Woolf, in a passage which has become classic for feminist studies, points us once again to the mirror:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he going to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?

42 This is surely an astonishing assumption, and astonishingly oversimplified; yet it has been at the basis of western philosophical and political thinking, and provided the basis for liberal individualism’s theory of equality. Some of the less nuanced discussions between theorists of equality and champions of difference get into difficulty precisely because they do not sufficiently probe the assumption. For of course this begs the question: alike in what respect? Certainly not in ability or opportunity, even though in worth and dignity.

43 In this, once again, the intellectual gaze copied material reality. When the palace of Versailles was built in the seventeenth century, its grand Hall of Mirrors caused greatest wonder as the symbol of its opulence: mirrors were expensive (largely because of their silver tain or backing) and only the rich could afford them. A hall of mirrors would bespeak wealth indeed; — which was one of the reasons why Versailles was aped by those who wished to display their wealth.

The idea that women are the ones concerned with mirrors, make-up, and appearances is much fostered by a masculinist society not least because it is a convenient deflection from women's magnifying service which helps men believe in their own wondrous power.\textsuperscript{45}

Mary Daly, with characteristic biting wit, has taken Woolf's discussion and applied it to religion, characterizing the church as an inverted society, a looking-glass world in which women suffer child birth but men have control of the baptism of new birth, women prepare actual meals but men preside over the Eucharist, priests wear skirts and lace and frills and out of their supreme concern for women inculcate in us humility as our first virtue.\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, Western culture was gracefully prepared by its Supernatural Mothers called Fathers to see all things supernaturally, that is, to perceive the world backward clearly. In fact, so excellent had been our education that this kind of thinking has become like second nature for almost everybody.\textsuperscript{47}

But what happens, Daly asks, when women become aware of this situation, stop preening themselves like parakeets in front of the toy mirrors they have been given, and refuse the role of Magnifying Mirrors?

This would be a disaster. It would throw the whole society backward into the future. Without Magnifying Mirrors all around, men would have to look inside and outside. They would start to look inside, wondering what was wrong with them. They would have to look outside, because without the mirrors they would begin to receive impressions from real Things out there ... Dashing back inside, males would find other horrors: All of the other Others — the whole crowd — would be in there: the lazy niggers, the dirty Chicanos, the greedy Jews, faggots and dykes, plus the entire crowd of Communists and the backward population of the Third World. Looking outward again, mirrorless males would be forced to see — people.\textsuperscript{48}

Daly's sarcasm is hardly nuanced, nor does it take account of the multiple refractions of power through 'race' and culture in which

\textsuperscript{45} The same service is performed by Blacks for white people and by colonized people for those who dominate them. And as more women gradually take up positions of power and knowledge, do we do so retaining a sense of proportion, or do we in turn become honorary males, requiring subordinates who will reflect us at least twice our actual size?


\textsuperscript{47} Daly, 196. See Philippa Berry, \textit{Of chastity and power: Elizabethan literature and the unmarried queen} (London: Routledge, 1989), chapter one, for a sober account of the ways in which ecclesiastical men appropriated Mary as a 'speculum sine macula' and made of her an idealized femininity — which, of course, has had oppressive consequences for actual women for centuries.

\textsuperscript{48} Daly, 197. One of the problems of Daly's and Woolf's position here is that they seem to place the responsibility for both the ills and the remedy of the world back on to women: men are what they are because women magnify them, and only when women refuse this role will change occur. Though I think if far from what either Woolf or Daly intended, this easily degenerates into yet another variant of the old theme of blaming the victim.
women are caught up just as much as men: for her, simply, men are the enemy. Yet in her recognition of 'the other Others' projected on to the world from an internal preoccupation with self-identity, Daly's words could be taken as a polemical translation of Lacan's psychoanalytic account of the formation of the subject.49

Lacan, indeed, also uses the trope of the mirror in his account. Put very briefly, Lacan argues that a small child does not yet think of himself (and yes, Lacan is yet another who really is talking about little boys) as a unified subject. He is rather a 'body in bits and pieces', not co-ordinated or under control. When a child of that age begins to see himself in a mirror, there is a 'jubilant assumption of his specular image'50 as the child begins to identify with that Ideal-I which is reflected back to him, and thus comes to constitute himself as a unified subject.

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic — and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.51

But at what price is such self-unification bought? According to Lacan, the constitution of the self as subject52 can occur only by the violent repression of all those things at variance with it: there must be mastery of the fragmented body and its drives and desires, and presently there must be renunciation of the mother and entry into language and society, what Lacan, in a deliberately religious allusion, terms 'the Name (or Law) of the Father'.53 But because of the strong attachment to the mother, such a move requires severe repression of all such feelings, and thereby the creation of the unconscious — chaotic, passionate, and associated with the mother and everything she stands for.54 And since the repressed is always threatening to return, to break the fragile shell of the subject, there must be unending vigilant mastery over anything

49 There is nothing to indicate that Daly had actually read Lacan, and her overall approach makes it seem quite unlikely, though the chronology shows that it would not have been strictly impossible.
53 Strictly, this is of course subsequent to the 'Mirror Stage' and corresponds to what Freud calls the Oedipal phase.
54 Cf Luce Irigaray, 'Mother — matter — nature must go on forever nourishing speculation. But this re-source is also rejected as the waste product of reflection, cast outside as what resists it: as madness'. *This sex which is not one*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 1985), 77.
that could fracture the vulnerable self-image: all that reminds the
subject of the mother: women, the earth, all the other (M)Others
whose very existence can be tolerated only on the condition of
being subjected to the mastery of the violently constituted
subject.\textsuperscript{55}

So here again we have mirrors and mastery, but it is a very
different account from the self-confident quest for mastery that we
found in Bacon and Descartes. The recognition of the
unconscious, so far from authenticating a Cartesian \textit{cogito}, brings
Lacan to say, 'I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do
not think ... I think of what I am where I do not think to think'.\textsuperscript{56}
All this puts a very different perspective on modernity's project of
becoming divine by destroying the old gods. Indeed, in Lacan's
thought 'good old God'\textsuperscript{57} served as the ultimate projection and
 guarantor of masculinity, even in its modern secular guises; and
his work follows in the footsteps of the other masters of suspicion,
Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, who wanted to dismantle not only
religion, but the modernity out of which religion and secularism
as we know them have alike been fashioned.

\textbf{Becoming Divine: Postmodern Projections}

The godlings of modernity, then, come to appear in equal
proportions fragile and dangerous. Yet their attempts at mastery
and knowledge are the products and symptoms of secularism,
which is itself a rejection of a medieval contemplative orientation.
Therefore in the deconstruction of modernity as developed by
contemporary French thinkers, it is arguably just as important to
deconstruct secularism as religion. Both need to be reconsidered,
since a taken for granted secular stance is just as problematic as
an unexamined religious position: indeed it is its obverse in the
economy of modernity. Thus Luce Irigaray writes

\ldots it is crucial that we rethink religion, and especially religious structures,
categories, initiations, rules, and utopias, all of which have been masculine for
centuries. Keeping in mind that today these religious structures often appear
under the name of science and technology\textsuperscript{58}

— than which, what could be more 'secular'? There can be no
return to a safe place under the medieval sacred canopy. Yet,
taking a cue from Irigaray, I suggest that the medieval longing for
godliness, the desire to 'become divine', is part of what needs to
be rethought and reapprropriated in order to topple the hegemony

\textsuperscript{55} For some ways in which this put in Western history, see Teresa Brennan, 'The ego's
\textsuperscript{56} Lacan, \textit{Écrits}, 166.
\textsuperscript{57} Lacan, \textit{Feminine, sexuality}, 141.
\textsuperscript{58} Luce Irigaray, \textit{Sexes and genealogies}, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1993), 75.
of the godlings of modernity. And as we shall see in a moment, here again the mirror metaphor comes into its own.

Irigaray is a close, if creative, reader of Nietzsche. In Nietzsche’s famous parable of the madman, he cries out,

Whither is God? ... I will tell you. We have killed him — you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? ... Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

There we have it again: ‘must we not ourselves become gods?’ This passage has often been read as an account of the usurpation of knowledge and power — the status of divinity — by the masters of modernity: as though, having become secular, modern men must now take the place of God. But surely this cannot be quite what Nietzsche meant, since it is precisely among the unbelievers of modernity that the madman comes seeking God, precisely to them that he bewails the tragedy of divine death. The assumption must be that although these are indeed the self-confident secular men of the world — godlings, indeed — they have not in fact become gods in the way that Nietzsche intends.

In *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche speaks again of becoming divine. He says,

God is a supposition; but I want your supposing to reach no further than your creating will.

Could you create a god? So be silent about all gods! But you could surely create the Superman (*den Ubermenschen schaffen*).

Perhaps not you yourselves, my brothers! But you could transform yourselves into forefathers and ancestors of the Superman: and let this be your finest creating!

This passage, like the one previously quoted, has often been read as arrogant, even blasphemous atheism: and indeed Nietzsche was no friend of traditional Christianity in any form. Yet taking these passages together, it is possible to read Nietzsche more creatively, rethinking both religion and secularism, in a manner which in fact had already been suggested by Feuerbach.

In his book *The essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach had argued that at its best religion is a mirror for humanity, into which ideal human characteristics are projected and which we then strive to reflect.

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59 I am grateful to Joanna Hodge for not allowing me to escape this fact.
... In religion man necessarily places his nature out of himself, regards his nature as a separate nature ... God is his alter ego, his lost other half; God is the complement of himself; in God he is first a perfect man. God is a need to him; something is wanting to him without his knowing what it is — God is this something wanting, indispensable to him; God belongs to his nature.

God, therefore, is the horizon for human becoming, the horizon which Nietzsche fears has been wiped away. In order to become, a divine horizon is necessary, not in the realist or empirical sense made dubious by the critiques of modernity, but as a mirror of ‘that of God in everyone,’ that ideal likeness we may both project and reflect.

In revelation man's latent nature is disclosed to him, becomes an object to him. He is determined, affected by his own nature as by another being; he receives from the hands of God what his own unrecognised nature entails upon him as a necessity, under certain conditions of time and circumstance.

Secular modernity cuts men away from these religious necessities, makes them godlings in a disenchanted universe but robs them of themselves, beyond mastery and mechanics, with no chance of becoming 'supermen'. And leaves women out altogether, on the other side of the looking-glass.

This may well be a travesty of what Nietzsche intended: certainly neither he nor his followers would be happy with all Feuerbach’s talk of ‘natures’ and ‘essences’, nor could Nietzsche easily be read as a champion of women! But if it is a misreading, it is at least a suggestive one, as can be seen from Irigaray’s essay ‘Divine Women’. Yet again, the project is ‘becoming divine’, but this time it is, at last, aware of its gendered dimensions. In obvious debt to Nietzsche and Feuerbach, Irigaray argues that ‘in order to become,’ that is to achieve subjectivity, it is necessary to have a ‘horizon’, an ideal of wholeness to which we aspire. The symbolic of religion, and in particular the idea of God, has provided such a horizon for becoming, whatever else it has also done. It has served as a mirror of perfection, ‘the place of the absolute for us, its path, the hope of its fulfilment’. The divine can therefore be the goal of human endeavour, that against which human thought and conduct must be measured. As such it is indispensable for the achievement of subjectivity.

65 Irigaray, Sexes and genealogies, 61.
66 Ibid., 63.
Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine. There comes a time for destruction. But before destruction is possible, God or the gods must exist. 67

Irigaray is very far from advocating a whole-hearted commitment to the doctrines and practices of traditional patriarchal religion; but in her view to become ‘free, autonomous, sovereign’, to become as human individuals and as a human society, we cannot do without the divine mirror. Human becoming is intrinsically linked, in her view, with the aspiration of becoming divine. 68

Yet as Irigaray sees it, the religious symbolic of the west, the divine mirror as it has been held up, has shown only the face of the Father, the One, the conquering Lord of all beside whom there is no other. Following Feuerbach, Irigaray sees this as a male projection.

Man has sought out a unique male God. God has been created out of man’s gender. He scarcely sets limits within Himself and between Himself: He is father, son, spirit. Man has not allowed himself to be defined by another gender: the female. His unique God is assumed to correspond to the human race (genre humaine) which we know is not neuter or neutral from the point of view of the difference of the sexes. 69

At best, therefore, on Irigaray’s terms, this God could serve as a divine horizon for male becoming, and indeed for a normative maleness which patterned itself after the ‘one’ and constituted everything else as ‘other’ to be mastered and dominated in a tiresomely repeated economy of the same. Irigaray accuses religion in the West of being a patriarchy which ‘has taken the divine away from women [and blacks, and gays, and colonised peoples ...]. It has carried it off and made it an all-men affair, and it often accuses the religious spirit of women of being the devil’s work’ 70 — hence, for instance, the burning of thousands of women as witches in the early modern period. 71

It is certainly true that women are often religious; indeed in most western societies more women than men are regular participants in religious rituals like church services. Yet the religions of the

67 Irigaray, Sexes and genealogies, 62.
68 ‘Every man (according to Feuerbach) and every woman who is not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man, must imagine a God, an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for the abode and for saintliness. God alone can save us, keep us safe ... Only the religious, within and without us, is fundamental enough to allow us to discover, affirm, achieve certain ends’ (67).
69 Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, 62.
70 Ibid., 190.
West with their male God(s) offer no way for women to achieve our subjectivity in relation to a divine horizon. As Irigaray puts it,

We have no female trinity. But as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. She lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming ... If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity.72

The masculinist religious symbolic must be disrupted, the male figure in the mirror must move over and make space for the female divine. ‘This God, are we capable of imagining it as a woman? Can we dimly see it as the perfection of our subjectivity?’73 Feuerbach had said that ‘God is the mirror of man’.74 Irigaray comments,

Woman has no mirror with which to become woman. Having a God and becoming one’s gender go hand in hand. God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without. In order to become, we need some shadowy perception of achievement; not a fixed objective, not a One postulated to be immutable but rather a cohesion and a horizon that assures us the passage between past and future ... 75

What Irigaray advocates is that women begin deliberately to project the divine according to our gender, as men have always done according to theirs. Through the centuries, men have constructed not only the symbolic of the divine, but also that of women’s roles and relationships to the divine: women have been defined as those who are called to be the suffering servants of humanity in the reproduction of the world, and seen as saintly if they accept that position with modesty and humility.76 But this forcing of women into the roles constructed for us by men is in the end a loss for both sexes.

Why would women have no God to allow them to fulfil their gender? So that heaven does not come to pass on earth? So that women should remain the ones who give birth to the child god, the suffering god, the redeemer son? Is this a way for women to become divine in their gender? And man? Neither men nor women are able to grow to adulthood together, to become gods together. Woman’s not becoming God is a loss for herself and for the community. Perhaps for God.77

To reverse this loss requires a deliberate disruption of the masculinist religious symbolic, an effort of imagination by and on

72 Irigaray, 63.
73 Ibid., 63.
74 Feuerbach, The essence of Christianity, 63.
75 Irigaray, Sexes and genealogies, 67.
77 Ibid., 70.
behalf of women. Indeed, it will involve going beyond the mirror altogether, allowing ourselves no longer to be restricted to a speculative or reflective gaze, but to come into contact, to touch one another, to allow each other not merely a flat surface but breath and space and gesture.

The mirror, and indeed the gaze, are frequently used as weapons or tools that ward off touching and hold back fluidity ... Though necessary at times as a separating tool, the mirror — and the gaze which acts as a mirror — ought to remain a means and not an end that enforces my obedience. The mirror should support, not undermine my incarnation.

Though Irigaray does not specifically discuss the philosophy of religion as an academic discipline, it is clear that it is this sort of effort of thought and imagination which would in her view constitute its appropriate domain. A feminist philosophy of religion is not just critical of traditional pursuits of the discipline, but also goes on to the creative effort of developing a feminist imaginary which will enable the divine becoming of women: 'not just opposition to, criticism of but also positing new values that would essentially be divine'.

'Becoming divine' is, for Irigaray, neither a recuperative project of traditional patriarchal religion, nor the playing god which is characteristic of modernity. Rather, it is an imaginative and moral project, in which the resources of the western symbolic are disrupted, reread, refashioned into an imaginary which is open to the Other. 'It is essential that we be God for ourselves so that we can be divine for the other, not idols, fetishes, symbols that have already been outlined or determined.'

Conceiving of the philosophy of religion — and indeed of religion itself — in this way obviously poses many problems, problems of language and reference, truth, morality, equality and difference, culture and sexuality. I have no wish to pretend that there are no difficulties with Irigaray's views, still less to pretend that they can be ignored. Yet these difficulties can also be viewed as opportunities: opportunities to rethink religion and secularism, to reconsider language and the speaking subject in religious

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78 The same applies, mutatis mutandis, to all the 'other Others': Blacks, lesbians and gay men, colonized peoples ... Of this Irigaray says very little, and her occasional remarks are less than satisfactory: cf I love to you, trans. Alison Martin (London: Routledge, 1996), 47, where she dismisses the problem of race as 'a secondary problem'. It seems obvious, however, that the disruption she pleads for should hardly stop with the heterosexual white couple.

79 Irigaray, Sexes and genealogies, 65.

80 Irigaray sees the disruption of philosophy as crucial. '... It is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and disrupt, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse' ... 'without overlooking the mirror, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself'. This sex which is not one, 74-5.

81 Irigaray, Sexes and genealogies, 67.

82 Ibid., 71.
expression, to refuse a procrustean bed of 'world religions' under the narrow rubrics of doctrine and truth claims, and be open instead to their widening horizons for a chastened western imaginary. Above all, what becomes clear, and of the first importance for the academic study of religion, culture and gender, is the vast difference of *aim* in such a pursuit from that which is current in the philosophical projects of modernity, whether secular or religious. Irigaray insists that we — women and men — must look into the mirror together, not as though it is our own private possession reflecting only our own face. Our goal is to ‘become divine’. To discern what that involves is our human and religious project, and the academic study of religion, culture and gender can be its context.

Watch this space!