Introduction

As many people in Europe, I was born and educated in a Christian context. Also as many people, upon becoming an adult, I left my own tradition, at least the conscious part of it. Later, I came to understand that a religious dimension is an important aspect of our culture and that it is crucial in considering both how we have been determined by this dimension and how we can, in the present, situate ourselves with respect to it. I am afraid that, by neglecting such a task, we harm our subjectivity and the relations with our cultural environment and with the other(s). This question is all the more critical in that we are entering into an era of globalization and so we have to situate ourselves in our tradition in order to create possible bridges with other traditions. This work cannot remain an abstract and moral discourse or a simple political interest but has to be a daily behaviour which allows us to be faithful to ourselves and to communicate with the other(s).

I thus returned to my tradition not in order to blindly obey it but to reach some perspectives on my culture and thus on myself. Which permits a conscious becoming of my global subjectivity – see ‘The Redemption of Women’. Intercultural context has helped me in this undertaking, especially the approach of Far Eastern traditions. I also have understood that we have to become adult and responsible towards our tradition and that which it has produced in ourselves: that is, neither to remain children nor to become iconoclasts. I found a means of opening a way between the two attitudes thanks to words like ‘What is important is the spirit not the letter’ and thanks to a cultivation of breathing through yoga.

Thus, I tried to make apparent the main spiritual aspects of my tradition, and to render them fruitful for a becoming divine of my feminine subjectivity. I think that such work was necessary for my own liberation, but also for a human liberation in which the Christian tradition represents a crucial historical step and has still a decisive function to secure when it is faithful to its spiritual message. This could be synthesized with two key thoughts: to assure incarnation between word(s) and body, to practise love towards the other(s) amounts to loving God.

Thus, as a woman, I ought to discover and cultivate a language of my own, and to create bridges between this language and my body. I do not believe that passively receiving the word(s) of the other will suffice to incarnate myself. Perhaps I can, in this way, work towards the incarnation of the other,
not my incarnation. I have to speak a language or discourse in the feminine, becoming active in the expression of my I-she. This requires a faithfulness to the girl in myself and not a subjection to a culture in the masculine. I also have to be attentive to not submit other women to this culture, talking to them as you-she. I must keep alive a feminine language or discourse in relation with all the stages of a feminine becoming: as a girl, adolescent, lover, mother, for example.

The 'sin' of a woman is almost contrary to the sin of a man: she has to care about turning back to herself, respecting the I and the you as I-she and you-she, being faithful to feminine values, in talking and acting in daily life. Woman has also to consider man — beginning with her lover and her son — as different from her, renouncing all kinds of natural empathy or sensitiveness which could provide her with intuitions about them. It is one of the first steps to reaching her cultural identity. Woman also has to praise the grace of being born a woman without being envious of a masculine being or existence. She has to cultivate and promote her own values and to share them with men.

In order to love the other, it is necessary to respect difference(s) between subjectivities and their own participation in exchanges, linguistic or other. Being and remaining two is necessary for keeping love. Woman has to be attentive to that and help man to be capable of such a kind of behaviour which is more difficult for him, and which he escapes through relations scarcely differentiated with many people of the same gender. Listening to the spirit instead of to the letter, it is possible to reinterpret the great events of Christianity in a feminine perspective and to celebrate them as a recognition of feminine qualities. Far Eastern traditions also helped me in such a possible interpretation, as they led me to understand that the time of spirit could be the time of a culture of the breath, that could be shared by men and women beyond particularities of their languages and systems of representations.

Perhaps the best opportunity for a spiritual path today is to consider that we are in 'The Age of the Breath'. By cultivating breathing, we can gain an access to our autonomy, open a way for a new becoming and for sharing with other traditions. The breath exists before and beyond all representations, words, forms, all kinds of specific figurations or even idols, all sorts of rituals or dogmas, and thus allows a communication between cultures, sexes and generations. Breathing can create bridges between different peoples or cultures, respecting their diversities. It is particularly of use in our time in order for women and men to enter into relation in spite of their different subjectivities and cultures.

For this sharing to become possible, even in carnal love, woman has to be conscious of her breathing and to cultivate it. Certain traditions of the Far East have revered as deities a little girl or a virgin adolescent — it is also true for our tradition. This could be understood as recognizing that woman is divine from birth. But to remain divine, she must preserve her autonomy and virginity by cultivating her breath, which is the matter of her interiority, of her soul. Being able to keep her breath in herself, woman can reach her liberty and preserve her integrity, which cannot amount to conserving a physiological hymen but to protecting her own interiority. In this way, she can also welcome the other, especially the lover and the son, in herself without a regression to a natural belonging or a sensitive or carnal fusion, thus a loss of differentiation.

Cultivating her breathing, woman can become a spiritual guide for man who, with more difficulty, maintains his breath inside, using it to make or fabricate outside of himself. Then, making love could be a return to the internal breath and become a spiritual sharing. Our tradition tells us that the woman lover in the Song of Songs leaves her home to search for her beloved. This is also the case for feminine mystics — and for almost all women — who run the risk of losing their breath, their soul. In traditions where breathing is cultivated, rather it is man who seeks to approach woman as a source of life, natural and spiritual. Then solitude and silence get endowed with a very positive meaning: a return of woman to herself, in herself for a meeting again with her own breath, her own soul. Woman takes thus an active part in her spiritual becoming; but activity here does not oppose passivity. Rather, it works for a wanted and awakened passivity, available for an encounter with the other, and a welcome to all sorts of graces. Woman's task is to take care of life — of nature, of other(s) and, of course, of herself — while letting be life to its own growth.

If man has privileged a vertical transcendence to secure his becoming, woman has to preserve a horizontal transcendence through a culture of breathing. She thus seems to be the privileged initiator for the third time of our tradition, the time of spirit, on the condition that it signifies a time in which humanity itself becomes divine through a cultivation and a sharing of the breath. Woman also appears as the best mediator in a multicultural era because of her capacity for sharing before and beyond any image, word, ritual or representation. But this requires that she becomes able to preserve her interiority by cultivating her breath.

The question treated in 'Spiritual Tasks for Our Age' is how to think anew a religious dimension in an age in which many imagine to have put an end to it. Sometimes substituting all sorts of ideologies or idolatries for it is more incarcerating and paralysing than our traditional religious beliefs. Of course we must render to God a fluidity that too often has become an entity at the service of diverse powers, and find towards the divine a liberty and a responsibility perhaps not yet attained. Which justifies a new care about religion or spirituality. The first task seems to consider and cultivate the relation with the other as other — without deferring too quickly our faith in an absolute Other. That presupposes reaching a human maturity which
permits us to go out of all kinds of families in order to meet with the other. Thus we become able to reach a spiritual alliance and not only a genealogical worship. Such an alliance would allow to reunite elements of humanity and divinity artificially divided by the domination of a sex over the other sex. Paying constant attention to the other, the different other, will contribute to a differing of one from the other, what the paternalistic religions often have concealed, making us members of a same community, brothers of a same family. The accent now is put on an ethical attitude between us as different rather than on an individual morality, supposedly common to all people(s).

Consideration for alliance and ethics in fact corresponds more to feminine values, but these can be shared by both men and women, and help them to create bridges between them, not only at the private level but also at the public level. This relationship being the most universal, when taking care of it, we are working for the constitution of democratic societies based on an active weaving of relations between citizens, rather than simply obeying laws or those in power. Such a progress takes root, once more, in the respect for difference(s) which does/do not forget their natural origin. Then, secondary differences become less important and are often regulated by the cultivation of a native belonging, particularly a sexuate belonging.

Transcendence itself in this case escapes fabrication, among others the fabrication of idols. It results from a respect and a cultivation of the real, a natural real: the mine and this of the other, but also the real of nature itself and all the living beings. Articulation between nature or life and transcendence becomes a new task incumbent on us. A transcendence which now remains alive, sensible and even carnal. A transcendence that cannot be reduced to a mental idea or belief, but is incarnate, also in another. Transcendence in this way always remains a mystery for us, but not only because it stays beyond our earthly sojourn, rather because it remains irreducibly other, with respect to us. Approaching the other thus requires a negative and nocturnal path, and the mystical love in part becomes a way for meeting together. Then it does not demand renouncing our sensibility or intelligence but agreeing with the fact that we cannot feel or know the all, especially the world of the other. Negativity and darkness or night do not take place in the same way; it is the irreducible difference of the other and not the unattainable or ideal perfection of the same – named: the Other – which will decide on this negativity and darkness. And they do not lead to an absolute nothingness but to a perception and an encounter with the other as such, beginning with the other who is differently sexuate.

The text ‘Fulfilling Our Humanity’ reflects on the religious elements that we could keep or even promote today. The text first considers the necessity of a culture of energy in order to render a part of it available for a spiritual becoming. Without such a cultivation, we remain at the level of survival and do not allow our spiritual or religious dimension to blossom.

Religious is that which joins, links together. One of our actual religious tasks would be to find how to join earth and sky, body and soul or spirit, and even also cultures, sexes and generations. We ought to discover and to respect in every time that which takes care of each one or each thing while also caring about the totality of where they take place, and about their harmonious reuniting in a whole. From this perspective, we have to take into account the fact that gathering in oneself does not necessarily result from a dependence on an Absolute Other but could be found in meeting with another while respecting our difference(s), and that the other does not simply correspond to the one who belongs to the same group or family as ourselves but rather is the foreigner or the stranger who does not yet take place in our communities. These two points are decisive for entering into a new conception of what is a religious behaviour when it puts the accent on horizontal transcendence and the difference between us. This new economy allows our energy to be more unified and dependent on our own wanting and acting. Which permits us to go from the most elementary of the survival to the most subtle of the spirituality.

Other aspects are to be envisioned anew: for example, the relation between keeping and creating, activity and passivity at the spiritual or religious level, personal evolution and care about the other, or even pardon and vengeance. The thread to be followed is how to work out a transformation of elementary or vital energy without destroying life and previous acquisitions. Contrary to Western traditional habits, I suggest that cultivating our perceptions is a spiritual task, that we have to distrust beliefs which do not favour our life and its growth, that we have to seek for mediations allowing us to become actively receptive while providing for a return in ourselves after opening to the other, and further that it is better to renounce revenge in order to preserve our energy from being captured by negative feelings and projects.

*English version by Luce Irigaray with Laine Harrington*
The teachings of the Roman Catholic tradition, my cultural background, led me to the heart of a moment of understanding. Theologians from the most ancient to the most recent have agreed that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the most profound mystery of our faith. The Incarnation is the act by which God became a human being, sharing our humanity while preserving his divinity. This event is central to our understanding of the nature of God and the purpose of our existence.

For centuries, theologians have wrestled with the question of how God could become human without losing his divine attributes. One common approach has been to see the Incarnation as a way for God to enter into the human experience and to participate in the struggles and joys of humanity. This view emphasizes the humanity of Jesus and his experiences of suffering and joy.

Another approach has been to see the Incarnation as a way for humanity to experience the divine. This view emphasizes the divinity of Jesus and his ability to heal and transform people's lives. This approach has been especially influential in the Western tradition, where the Incarnation is often seen as a symbol of the transformative power of faith.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the Incarnation as a way for God to participate in the world. This view emphasizes the Incarnation as a way for God to engage with the world in a way that is both loving and transformative. This approach has been especially influential in the feminist tradition, where the Incarnation is seen as a way for God to challenge traditional gender roles and to affirm the value of women.

Regardless of the approach one takes, the Incarnation is a central event in our understanding of the nature of God and the purpose of our existence. It is a moment of profound mystery and wonder, and it continues to shape our understanding of the world and our place in it.
doesn’t signify the presence or the absence of a physiological hymen, of course, but the existence of a spiritual interiority of her own, capable of welcoming the word of the other without altering it. Virgin and mother therefore mean: capable of a relationship with the other, in particular with the other gender, respecting the other and oneself. Virgin and mother could correspond to a female becoming, on condition that these words are understood in the spiritual and not just in the material–natural sense. It is with her ‘virgin’ soul, as much as if not more than with her body, that Mary gives birth to Jesus. The figure that she can represent for us is that of a woman who stays faithful to herself in love, in generation. In this, Mary’s virginity surpasses, in divine dignity, motherhood.

This is not exactly the way in which Mary has been presented to us. But, in wanting to ascribe all power to God the Father, haven’t we exempted woman and man from a spiritual evolution of which they had the charge? If we are to believe in certain preaching, it would be enough to keep one’s hymen intact to be a virgin. The matter is a little more subtle! It is Mary’s spiritual virginity which makes her a potential mother of a divine child, a virginity that she herself had partly received by birth, and that she succeeded in protecting and conserving thanks to her relation with the Spirit.

Surprisingly, Mary’s own immaculate conception, even though it is defined as dogma, has been practically forgotten, overshadowed by the virginal conception of Jesus. The birth of Mary, ‘conceived without sin’, preceded that of the one which we venerate too often as the sole redeemer of the world, in spite of Christian theology itself.

Mary is thus the spiritual ancestor and spiritual mother of Jesus before being his natural mother. The divine model which Christian tradition reveals to us most specifically is that of Mary’s immaculate conception and virginity, conceived in grace and remaining faithful to grace.

It is astonishing that many women, in particular women mindful of their liberation, today want to imitate Jesus or his male disciples, rather than Mary. Might it be because the Christian tradition has not been transmitted to them exactly and that, for fear of committing sin, they have not been able to work out the truth by themselves? Or, maybe, because the Spirit breathes differently in our times, inviting us to open another age of history? Perhaps both?

To reach, with vigilance and responsibility, a theology of incarnation and of love requires us first therefore to discover our spiritual path as women. Haven’t we remained too childish, too afraid, too passive with respect to our religious belonging? Assuming, asserting and fulfilling our adult feminine identity, in all its difference(s), do these not represent our first spiritual task? To open the way, I have started to sketch out what could be ‘sin’ and ‘grace’ in the feminine.

‘SIN’ IN THE FEMININE

IN RELATION WITH ONE’S OWN SELF

How could I succeed in sanctifying myself if I am not myself, in myself? I should first be who I am. Renunciation of spiritual becoming stemming from me is already an error, a sin.

For example: to submit myself to the desire of the other without return to myself.

From this point of view, it is necessary to listen to the little girl in ourselves.

Examples of language of a little girl and... a mother:

little girl:

Mummy, do you want to play with me?
(«Maman, tu veux jouer avec moi?»)
Mummy, can I do your hair?
(«Maman, je peux te coiffer?»)

...and the mother:

Bring me some milk on your way back from school.
(«Rappelez-moi du lait en rentrant de l’école.»)
Tidy your things before you watch TV.
(«Range tes affaires avant de regarder la télé.»)

It is advisable that we remember to be faithful to:

• I, but above all to l-she, to a sexuate I; which amounts to self-affirmation, with qualities but also limits.

• A relation of dialogue and doing-things together with the other, a relation underlain, not by complaining and claiming, but by questioning. This presupposes not giving priority to a request for something over a request to be with the other, in a relationship where speaking comes before being and doing-together: Mummy, do you want to play with me? («Maman, tu veux jouer avec moi?»). Pressures, more or less violent, without speaking, are to be avoided, for they nullify the subjects then present.

• A relation of dialogue with our own gender.

The first you for a little girl is the mother: a you-she. From school on, and even in the mixed family context, you becomes, from a gendered point of view, a you-be.

Whether the schoolteacher is a woman or a man does not radically modify things. Indeed, in our culture, the ideal is still in the masculine. Thus, in
religion, the You is almost always a He. It is the same in politics and in most institutions.
So, the little girl’s desire for dialogue evolves in the following direction:

She or she becomes He or he,
1-she becomes 1-one or I-he.


What is left, for the little girl, and even for us, is a great nostalgia for:

being with, together, between,
being two, doing things as two.

But the mother’s you-she has become a you-he. Now, this you-he is interested in other things besides being two and taking part in dialogues. This maintains a perpetual departure from the self by the woman towards the man and towards God, but without return to the self. (Search for the soul by the mystics, search for the lover of the Song.)

Sin, for a woman, is perhaps not to concern herself with:

• return to the self,
• respect for you-she,
• and also for her, the other woman, for them (feminine), women.

In responses to a survey whereby candidates were asked to explain the meaning of the spoken sentences: il[s] s’aime(nt), elle s’aime(nt),1 the enunciation: elles s’aîment, meaning: they [women] love each other, is very rare; the sentence: elles s’amoînt du blé (she is sowing wheat), is frequent and, from men: they love themselves, the sluts, the lesbians.

Our culture, religious culture included, lacks models of woman’s love relations

• with herself,
• with her mother,
• with her sisters, natural or spiritual.

Holiness is often presented to women as being a relation to the other gender through self-abnegation. But how could it be possible to love someone without a return to oneself?

For a woman sin is almost the opposite of sin for a man, who is asked to always stay mindful:

• of himself,
• of his father,
• of the Father, of the He of his gender, of other men.

Whereas a woman too often abandons her own gender, man is too enclosed in his. The ‘sin’ of each is not the same. Their respective failings are dependent on cultural trends from a time of history.

But how can a woman recognize and confess her failings as a woman? Who will hear her, if ‘sin’ has been defined for centuries from a male point of view?

The first type of failings defined from the female point of view are linked up with a lack of respect for the feminine, inside us or outside us: to a lack of respect for I-she and of its relation to you-she as mother or as daughter, natural or spiritual, to a lack of respect for feminine genealogy, to a lack of respect for all other women in social or civil life.

There is another sort of failing possible for us women.

IN RELATIONS WITH NATURE, WITH MONEY, WITH LANGUAGE, WITH IMAGES

Another kind of failing is to lack respect, moderation, holiness and in the first place, humanity in our relations with nature, with money, and also with language, with images.

1. Not to respect and celebrate nature seems to me at least, a threefold failing:

• not to respect the indispensable conditions for life: our own, that of others, present and future;
• not to respect creation, human or divine, not to welcome and praise what has been given and received from the beginning: to find oneself in a beautiful landscape is a kind of grace, so are the light and the heat of the sun;
• not to be faithful to the feminine spiritual traditions which respect and celebrate nature: outside or inside oneself, and are not concerned by word(s) only. Thanks to this, feminine spiritual traditions have allowed the union of nature and grace, of the cosmic universe, the body and the word. This results in the incarnation, of Jesus in particular, born out of the fecundity, of the alliance, of the transfiguration made possible through the meeting of matter and spirit.

2. Being faithful to ourselves as women also requires us not to become alienated when relating to money.
For a woman, for women, the use of money often raises problems. The exchange of the fruits of the earth, of the products of work, should be more appropriate to the feminine gender and world.

But we are in a society constructed according to masculine requirements. How can we live in such a world? To simply opt for voluntary work is not a solution, as a volunteer still serves the excessive development of a producer- and consumer-driven society. Submitting oneself to money is no solution either. To find a just way of relating to money is an important spiritual task. And we women could conceivably make this a subject for meditation and research with a view to discovering how to place our sin, our sanctification.

This problem is all the more relevant as women have left a purely family-centred environment, have entered into the world of work and so have to take part in the management of money, for themselves and with regard to others. Being paid for work at the right price signifies working for justice. Caring about those who suffer from poverty corresponds to a duty of justice and of charity. This presupposes examining the institutional mechanisms which maintain low wages and poverty, particularly for women.

3. Lastly there is potential for failing in regard to language and images.

These are quite similar to those relative to lack of respect for the self and for one’s own gender.

If the word is a vehicle of the divine, we have to take care that it will be defying for us, that it incarnates us, as women, defies us, as women. It is therefore advisable to be mindful, moment by moment, to respect, in our words, our I-the and its links with our own qualities: concern for the sensible, for the tangible and the natural environment, for intersubjectivity, for relations with the other gender, for the future, for being and doing-things together, as two particularly. In our words, we should actively see to it that we respect and protect those qualities of ours which are the place, the places of our humanity and of our exchanges with others, similar or different. We have to safeguard such values because they are feminine, we must not sacrifice them to a world which is in the masculine or the neuter. There is not any universal neuter, notably at the level of discourse, which would be able to resolve problems concerning feminine spiritual becoming. Furthermore, in our relations with the other gender, fecondity comes from differences. To remain, to become women, requires the elaboration of a love with the other-man, with men, a love born from attraction and sanctified.

It is therefore fitting to use a language in the feminine. Not only by saying I, I-the, but in speaking

- to you-the and to you-be,
- about the tangible environment,
- in the present and the future,
- of being and doing-things together,
- with sensible qualities.

Prayer also, has modalities which are particular to us:

- praise,
- poetry, for example,
- are more appropriate for us than rituals.

Our responsibilities with regards to images resemble those we have to language.

Images are a useful support for respecting the self, the other, others. They are an aid for contemplation, prayer. We should care about displaying, in our homes:

- images of divine women,
- images relating to female genealogy,
- images of women that are culturally valued.

These images can help the cultivation of natural and spiritual relations between mother and daughter.

Making such images visible in public spaces, both civil or religious, also corresponds to a spiritual task.

IN RELATIONS WITH THE OTHER

With the other gender

- Any reduction of the duality of genders goes against the alliance between the body and the word in each one.
- Any submission of one gender to the other is a sin against the commandment to love one’s neighbour.
- Loving the other ‘as oneself’ does not exclude respecting the other as other than the self: the quality and the strength of love must be equivalent, but take forms adapted to woman or to man.
- Man and woman must help one another in their spiritual development, without diminishing the singularity of each one.
- If the relationship of desire and love between a woman and a man is subjugated to procreation and to the family, without being cultivated for itself, the love for the other is in fact neither respected nor spiritualized.
- Engendering in difference is not limited to procreation: culture, community, the word are also engendered by two. This presupposes an elevating of sexual difference to the level of a sexuate subjectivity and not to let it remain as a simple biological corporal reality.
To speak to the other requires not reducing the other to the self, neither making the other one's object, nor one's own self. Even words of love have to be thought anew: 'I love to you' is more respectful of the other than 'I love you' which risks making the other only an object of love (cf. I Love to You, especially the final chapters). Listening to the other is the first step to respecting their difference.

With one's own gender

- It is important to respect the singularity of the other, woman, her history, her 'secret', even if this does not amount to the 'mystery' that exists in a relation with the other gender. And also:
  - to be respectful of each subject without submitting each one to multiplicity, to the plural: women, some women;
  - to understand that women are situated in an interlacing of competing pressures concerning desire, love, work, and try to surpass them through friendship;
  - to seek in filial piety a path for resolving conflicts with our mother(s);
  - not to allow masculine charm or personal ambition to destroy our sorority.

With a child

- We have to care about the natural and spiritual autonomy of the child. The role of mediation of the placenta teaches us to do so.
- Holding real dialogues with the child, keeping the I and the you distinct, is also necessary.

And further:
- Teaching the child the existence and the fecundity of sexual difference, that is to say, in genealogy and in alliance, fraternity and friendship.
- Avoiding the authoritarian attitudes that destroy awakening and autonomy.
- Cultivating a dialogical relationship with the daughter, preventing reducing her to a same as oneself, the one who will do later what I do now.

These few suggestions above all aim to provoke reflection, favour meditation and help each woman to be conscious of her responsibilities.

GRACE IN THE FEMININE GRACES RECEIVED OR ACQUIRED

To be born a girl

Being born a woman from a woman, this good fortune gives us, by birth, a privileged position with respect to the forming of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Whereas the boy finds himself before a sort of mystery, his mother, towards whom he has to exist without knowing her knowing engendering within himself, without being able to reverse the situation of his gestation and birth through becoming the mother of a son, without holding a simple dialogue with his mother, the girl here finds herself in a privileged position:

- she is engendered in and will be able to engender in herself like her mother;
- she is born from a woman, and will be able to bring a girl, or a boy, into the world;
- she can engender difference in herself;
- she is, from birth, in a familiar I-you dialogue.

Unfortunately, our culture has changed the initial dereliction of the boy into a rather totalitarian monosexist order: privileged position of he, of He, of they (men); culture where civil and religious values are masculine; representation of authority in the masculine and types of values defined according to a masculine vision of the world:

- preference given to the object and not to relations between subjects;
- importance of the tool, the instrument;
- privilege of the constructed world with respect to the natural;
- connection with others through an object of exchange: women, products, money;
- community composed of little differentiated, implicitly male, individuals: men, people, others;
- a world often in the past.

Woman therefore loses her native chances if she does not cultivate them in spite of surrounding culture.

She is fortunate that language—dialogue in particular—is a matter of course for her. She wants to speak with her mother. She already exists as daughter, in collusion with an other woman. She speaks: in addition. A boy needs language to exist in front of his mother, not only in order to talk with her but to exist in spite of her.

Hence the opposition: nature—language (or logos) that we find in our culture. This opposition is originally masculine, appropriate to the male sex. It is irrelevant for a girl, but she will grow up in a culture in the masculine. She therefore risks losing her own identity, where nature and language are not in opposition but in harmony to communicate, to hold dialogues, to love.

The grace of being born a girl ought to be appreciated, praised. It should continue to be incarnated between a feminine body and a speech in the
How can we maintain this difference, as the cause and the resource of a love which does not amount to

- pure instinct, nor pure drive,
- love of oneself or of the similar, hence narcissistic self-love?

How can we succeed in loving the different – in a sort of horizontal attraction – while staying ourselves?

Such a task is very difficult and it probably corresponds to the most spiritual task of a human being. I tried to speak about this in I Love to You and, before, in Thinking the Difference and in Je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference.

In fact, it is a question of keeping and above all cultivating one’s virginity. This is not received simply by birth. And it should in no way be confused with the existence of a part of the human body (even one representing a symbol of interiority).

Virginity here could be the name for a return of the feminine to the self, for a spiritual interiority of woman, capable of staying woman and of becoming more and more woman despite

- a culture in the masculine,
- the attraction for man,
- the traces of pregnancy,
- the strength of maternal love.

This interiority, or this spiritual virginity, of the feminine seems still to be discovered, to be cultivated.

Virginity has been discussed above all by men, or by women in relation to them, but few women have done so in relation to themselves and in the context of female evolution.

Being, staying or becoming a virgin, is to keep oneself

- I and myself (I gather myself together)
- I and you-she
- I and you-he
- I among female them
- I in the community

Keeping one’s virginity means not losing oneself in the attraction for the other, nor letting oneself be ruled by the other, but without being aggressive, or simply critical towards this other.

It is to give oneself a feminine mind or soul, an internal dwelling, which is not only physical but also spiritual: linked to breath, to speech, to the mind.
CHRISTIAN MYSTERIES AS GRACES IN THE FEMININE

This allusion to female spiritual virginity allows us to propose a new interpretation of the Annunciation, an event which would be, henceforth, destined for each woman, to which we will all be invited or called to take part in, as our feminine path or spiritual journey.

The annunciation, for a woman, could mean neither accepting nor even wanting to conceive a child without a sharing of language with her lover, without a preparation and a reception in oneself of such a sharing.

The Eastern tradition of yoga in part permits some clarification of what I am trying to suggest. The iconography of the Annunciation, in our tradition, also provides some help for this new interpretation.

In the tradition of yoga, one would say that the chakra designated by iconography as being that of the heart, breathing, but also in some way of hearing and speaking, is situated at the junction between the two shoulders, there where the ray of the sun, the word of the ‘Father’ or of the angel, the song of the bird touch, directly or indirectly, Mary’s body. Mary often has the hands crossed on this place.

The spiritual child would therefore be engendered both by the body and by words.

This concerns two chakras in the body especially: that of elementary vitality and that in which breathing, heart, hearing, word, and even sight gather together.

Which explains perhaps the meaning of the Annunciation in patriarchal Christian tradition: this means testifying to a necessary mediation of the word of the Father. The accent is put on the conditions of engendering, by the masculine gender, of the divine child as a son.

On the feminine side, it is more a question of Mary’s awakening and of the possible preservation, for her, of her identity, of her virginity, both in love and in pregnancy or motherhood, thanks to a culture of breathing, of hearing, of speaking.

Tradition furthermore states that Mary herself has been conceived without sin, that she has been engendered chastely. Two women, a mother and a daughter, would thus be necessary in order to bring a divine child into the world.

It also matters that Mary doesn’t renounce friendship with other women, with Elizabeth for example.

To be chaste would be to keep the chakra of breathing free and alive, to keep a part of breath available for a relation of interiority with the self and for a language of communication and exchange with one’s own gender and the other gender, a language of desire, not only of needs.

Such an understanding of virginity permits us to reinterpret most of the Christian mysteries in a very fruitful way.

- I have just done so for the Annunciation.
- I have suggested what this could imply for the Visitation, the occasion of the awakening of the son in one of the women and of the song of thanksgiving (the Magnificat), in the other, as a manifestation of pregnancy.
- The Nativity of Jesus seems to participate in the same mystery, not only as the birth itself of the child but through the various events which accompany this birth: cosmic events (which recall the presence of the sun at the time of the Annunciation?)
- manifestations of grace
  - for the shepherds,
  - for Joseph (through a dream),
  - for the Magi, whose wisdom lights a star over the path for them to discover the divine son.
- The confidence which Mary displays towards her son: she is the one who asks for the first miracle.
- The Assumption of Mary, whose virginity allows her to rise into heaven without any death or resurrection similar to those of her son.
- The Coronation of Mary, happening after the Last Judgement, after the end of masculine discourses about sin and redemption. With a view to a new alliance?
- The wedding foretold in the Apocalypse, wedding of a spiritual man and a woman-spouse, after the victory over the ‘beast’, which evokes:
  - the Song of Songs
  - the creation of the first couple in the Old Testament.

These nuptials could exist for each one, thanks to the preservation of virginity, of an identity of one’s own. This new alliance between a man and a woman will be sealed beyond the imperative, still natural, with respect to conception, to procreation. Such nuptials would be more spiritual than those which are presented to us as such, where woman generally remains subjected to her husband in a couple devoted to reproduction. In accordance with the new alliance, woman and man marry to assist themselves in their spiritual becoming, children becoming the fruits of a flesh divinized by and between them.

Christian tradition, considered together with other traditions – those of the Indian subcontinent, for example – offers us elements able to open up a new age for the advent of the divine, while remaining faithful to the Spirit.

It is possible to call this age the era of virginity, understood not as secular alienation or privations, but as a dimension of preservation of spiritual identity and becoming; within us, within the other and with the other.
As women, we ought to be the messengers of these new times. For us this signifies a grace to be welcomed with humility, fidelity and firmness. What is in question here is our redemption, and according to Christian tradition, this is linked to the redemption of the human species and of the entire universe.

NOTE

Translated by Jennifer Wong, Jennifer Zillich with Luce Irigaray

1. Translator: elles s’aime, elle s’aime, elle s’aime are homonyms in French.

14 The Age of the Breath

The divine appropriate to women, the feminine divine, is first of all related to the breath. To cultivate the divine in herself, the woman, in my opinion, has to attend to her own breathing, her own breath, more even than to love. Breathing, in fact, corresponds to the first autonomous gesture of a human living, and it is not possible to be divine without being autonomous with respect to the mother and the father, to the lover, to the child, to the others in general, women and men.

Becoming divine is accomplished through a continuous passage from nature to grace, a passage that everyone must realize by oneself, alone. Nobody can accomplish this process in my place, for me. The instructions given to me have to remain a testimony of someone else’s experience and way; they cannot substitute my own path. The teachings received from someone else can neither withdraw me from my breathing nor paralyse my breath, my soul, without separating me from my relation with the divine.

IS WOMAN DIVINE FROM BIRTH?

It seems that the woman, in a way, is divine from birth, that she receives the being divine with life, with breath, and that her original mistake – or sin – consists in not remaining faithful to her own breathing, to herself.

When a friend who is interested in theology spoke to me in this way some years ago, I thought he wanted to appeal to me in a rather dogmatic manner. He said to me that all the religious teachings neglect or even run counter to a feminine divine. But this would mean, he said, that women have a soul from birth and that they do not need spiritual education.

In such a discourse, I think there is a part of truth and a part that calls in mind the traditional virginity of the woman, linked to a hymen, received also itself at birth, and which would be preserved without acquiring a spiritual virginity.

I agree to say that woman is divine from birth. Moreover, it is possible to interpret the episode of the original sin narrated in Genesis in this way. Why want to eat the forbidden fruit to gain knowledge, instead of cultivating one’s own breath? Breathing itself incites to an awakening, and the divine knowledge is within me. To awake myself is more helpful for becoming
familiar with such a science than leaving myself to appropriate knowledge that is not mine— even if it is called divine— and that cannot be of much use to me.

The divinity present in the little girl also makes clear why some religions have chosen a little or an adolescent girl to incarnate the divine. It would be interesting here to draw a parallel between the early youth of Mary and the old age of the God-the-Father in our tradition: it is not at the same moment of life that woman or man can join the divine, or being divine.

For the woman, it is thus a question of not losing the divinity received with life. But it is further a question, for her, of making this divinity her own, of accepting the responsibility for it, of incarnating actively in herself the divinity received at birth.

It is, as well, a question of becoming more divine, of growing in divinity, in grace-graces, through faithfulness and attention to her own breathing: a culture that mostly remains without external mediation.

If a woman forgets to cultivate her breathing, if she alienates her breath in words, gestures, in knowledge which do not take care of her breath, which do not respect herself, she runs the risk of becoming diabolic, even in the love—of the lover, of the child, and more generally of the other, including God.

To remain faithful to herself, to turn back to herself, within herself, to be born again free, animated by her own breath, her own words, her own gestures, this corresponds to the most decisive quest for women. And to speak of woman’s liberation, women’s liberation, without such a course, such autonomy, is not possible.

Moreover, in the history of humanity, the one we name God and those who enjoy spiritual powers demonstrate their strength through a creative breath, through the domination of winds, through the capacity of setting, or setting again, in motion that which was motionless, rigid, dead.

The diabolic, on the contrary, delights in enclosure, it avoids the draughts, it can adapt itself to fire but not to air. Miming the living, the diabolic does not breathe, or does not breathe any longer. It takes away the air from the others, from the world. It suffocates with its sterile repetitions, its presumptuous imitations, with its wishes deprived of respect for life. It also annoys with its insistence, its pretension to dominate everything without being able to remain in itself.

Feminine Economy of Breath

Are women’s way of breathing, women’s breath different from those of men? The feminine breath seems at once more linked with the life of the universe and more interior. It seems to unite the subdrest real of the cosmos with the deepest spiritual real of the soul. Which inspires a woman appears to remain joined with the universe’s breath, related to the wind, to the cosmic breathing.

The feminine divine assures a bridge between the human world and the cosmic world, between micro- and macrocosmic nature, the body and the universe. The feminine divine never separates itself from nature, but transforms it, transsubstantiates it without ruining it.

A woman would not have to quit her body, to leave herself—in a material or mental sense, as it happens in the Song of Songs but also in some mystical madness of women inside the patriarchal culture. She would not have to relinquish her natural environment to reach the divine. Woman would not have to renounce to what, or who, she is here and now for a future in another world. Rather, her task would be to make divine this world— as body, as cosmos, as relations with the others.

For woman, the world, beginning with herself, will be redeemed or resurrected not only tomorrow, in heaven as one says, but from today onwards, on earth. Woman would have to reunite incessantly earth and heaven through the breath, this vehicle of the soul, with the wish to accomplish this passage in a better and better way, without any other mediation.

This requires to move but also to remain within oneself, to have exchanges with the outside and then to collect herself, to communicate with the soul of the world, sometimes with the soul of the others, and afterwards to return to the solitude and the silence of the own soul. A silence which consists not at all in a lack of words, but in an almost tactile retouching of the spiritual in oneself, in a listening to the own breathing, appeased and attended.

In this way, a woman can welcome the other in her soul, and not only in her body, as it is too often believed. But this place of woman’s hospitality and spiritual generation is hardly known, even by herself. In order to give being to it, the woman cannot remain solely passive, as asked of her for centuries: she must accept active responsibility for her spiritual life, for her soul. She must become a creature of humanity, generate it spiritually and not only naturally.

OPENING A NEW AGE

In my opinion, this corresponds to the third age of our tradition, an age which would permit to reunite it with other traditions, and to overcome the opposition between matriarchy and patriarchy, with all possible inversions between the two, which are not enough to open a new epoch of history. In this new age the relation with nature will get changed. Indeed, the woman’s almost natural disposition to the divine does not tolerate the domination over nature, over the world, even arrogance towards them.

The removing of woman from herself originates in a man’s domination over nature—micro- or macrocosmic—as we can read in our mythologies, and still in the tragedy of Antigone by Sophocles. Forgetting historically his
way, for Western man, results from a similar dominion over nature, and from a loss of identity for the woman, the only one who is able to lead man again to his being, and to his natural environment.

The path which goes from nature to grace requires the woman to be attentive, available and receptive to a sort of energy, of light, of comfort which cannot be mastered. It is necessary to let grace be. In this way the meaning of the word 'humility' can be heard, too often used against and not in favour of the woman's spiritual becoming. It is not with respect to the man-made world that woman must be humble, it is not to the cosmic or corporeal destruction that she has to say 'yes' or 'amen', but to a spiritualization, a becoming divine of the vital energy within her as well as outside of her.

From such a point of view, it is not pertinent to define as pagan certain cultures that precede, or do not belong to, the Judeo-Christian culture. In part, we will find in these cultures the path to enter the third age of Judeo-Christianity: the age of the Spirit.

I certainly do not refer here to an exclusively masculine Trinity, unless it is heard as three generations of men that would correspond to three epochs of the history of humanity. If the Trinity is understood in another way, the spirit remains enclosed in a masculine world where there is neither room for a spirituality appropriate to women nor for the redemption of the whole of humanity.

In my opinion, the third age, the age of the Spirit, rather corresponds to the age of cultivation, by man and woman, of the divine breath they received as human beings – if I trust the narrative of Genesis as a basic myth of our tradition. The God-Father creates humanity by sending his breath into matter, into earth, the text tells us. Then sin occurs, the loss of divinity for man and for woman, and the necessity of the second age, the age of the redemption through the generation of a woman – Mary – and of a man – Jesus – who are both inhabited by the breath of the Spirit.

In the third age of the history of Judeo-Christianity, after the age of the world's redemption, thanks to Mary and to Jesus, the task of humanity will be to become itself divine breath. Man and woman then must be able to cultivate within themselves, and to give one another, or to exchange, a breath become divine. They have to be able to become divine without expecting this gift from a father or a mother.

This epoch maybe announces the moment in which the whole universe will return to God, be it created or generated: a process which could amount to the age of the accomplishment of the divine in man, in woman, and in the world they inhabit.

The third age corresponds, in fact, to the one which unites the earliest time and the most future time, that is, the beginning of natural life and the accomplishment of spiritual life. In other words: the age which reunites the breath of the woman-mother with the divine redemption of humanity.

Woman’s breathing, woman’s breath, is at the origin of the human gener-

ation. If the gesture of God shows – in the myth of Genesis – the necessity of making matter divine through the breath, this gesture cannot take the place of the woman-mother’s breath. If it were so, God would have to create all the humans one by one. This cannot be the meaning of the creative gesture in Genesis. Nor can it be that of the incarnation of Jesus, in which God entrusts his spirit to the woman twice: the first time as woman-daughter, spiritually virginal, the second time as woman-mother of a divine son.

Such an interpretation permits to impart again to woman and to man the task of realizing by themselves the third epoch of our tradition: the age of the spirit.

Centred on the divinization of humanity incarnated and not on representations of divinity – images, various figurations, abstract ideals, dead words: all kinds of idols – our epoch has to return to an awareness and to a cultivation of the breath before and beyond any representation and discourses. The accomplishment of humanity, its perfect realization, requires the cultivation of one’s own breath as divine presence, in ourselves and between us.

THE REDEMPTION OF LOVE

This necessitates a God who does not stay outside of humanity and finally opposes it – for example in its carnal desire. This demands a God who coincides with the accomplishment of humanity itself, with its spiritual transmutation or transfiguration. God is us, we are divine if we are woman and man in a perfect way.

The divine heard and lived in such a manner opens up the path to a redemption of love, including carnal love that is part of humanity if it is cultivated, spiritualized and not left to a possessive or a reproductive instinct.

The epoch of the alliance between women and men, the epoch of the horizontal union between the sexes or the genders, the third age, overcomes the dependence on genealogy. Human being here reaches its maturity, becomes adult and capable of responsibility towards itself and towards the other, in respect of the difference, of differences, which exist here and now between us, and not only between us and an Absolute of another world.

An absolute difference takes place first of all between us and, thanks to it, we may escape animality, and all sorts of subjection or slavery, and become divine. The acknowledgement of this difference corresponds to the gesture of a consciousness or a conscience, both spiritual and concrete. It allows the spirit to remain soul in the flesh: a necessary path towards the accomplishment of the divine in humanity.

Remaining faithful to the spirit with respect for difference, for differences, also grants access to an exchange between the spiritual traditions, before or beyond the figurations or the rituals with which they have provided themselves to attain their divinity or divinities. One can think of the three
traditions of the Book here, but also of the traditions of the Near, the Middle and the Far East, to evoke those of which I know a little.

For building bridges between different traditions, women are privileged mediatrixes. For them, neither dogmas nor rites, and even not representations are indispensable to approach the divine. The contemplation of the universe, as well as the contemplation of the other, the respect for that which exists outside of oneself, is often more appropriate to their becoming spiritual, to a culture of interiority adequate to them.

The divine gives energy for such gestures, and the divine rises from them as well. Divine is the love for the other as other, divine is the praise of nature as nature.

But the divine does not necessarily signify for woman that an entity called God exists. The relation of the woman with God seems both subtler and more incarnated, less reduced to an object, even sent beyond our world. Women's God does not appear as a hypostasis of another world we have to believe in. That is to say, a God appropriate to the feminine may not paralyse the fluidity of the breath or of the grace through a fixed identity or fixed commandments, on pain of depriving the woman of the relation with her soul. And that would remove the way of breath, and maybe life itself, be it natural or spiritual, from entire humanity.

The difficulty for a woman is to remain both in the fluidity and in herself, in her interiority. Also here, a possible way for uniting these two necessities lies in the cultivation of breathing, in a culture of the breath. I do not know if there is another path, but this one can be (re)discovered and practised. It grants to the woman autonomy as well as interiority, two indissociable dimensions of subjectivity.

Translated by Katja van de Rakt, Staci Boeckman and Luce Irigaray

15 Spiritual Tasks for Our Age

Talking about religion can be hurtful, to oneself and to others. Affect linked to religion is deeply rooted; in some obscure way, it holds together the totality of the self, of the community and culture. Trying to change it can unravel the social fabric, along with subjectivity and tradition.

And yet, when religion is nothing more than inertia ensuring a past cohesion, it no longer plays a dynamic role in the present. It becomes deadening, and no longer infuses an additional life into the individual and collective dimensions that unite the corporeal with the spiritual, the sensible with the mental, and the self with the other.

How can we rethink religion at a time when many believe they no longer have anything to do with it? Even though they substitute all sorts of ideologies for it, ideologies that are sometimes more rigid and stultifying than our old beliefs that used to leave room — somewhat ambiguously no doubt — for mystery, and for a God who was, in a way, more discreet than many of our elected politicians, or our variously mediated spiritual advisers. Following are some suggestions that will, I hope, bring a little light and a little hope to those who read them.

GOD, GODS, OR A DIFFERENT RELATION TO THE DIVINE?

For centuries, in our tradition, God has been conceived as an entity of the beyond whom we must try to approach, even though he remains — so they teach us — radically estranged from us, absolutely other. Texts, of course, do reveal something about him, but texts are susceptible to diverse interpretations that vary according to historical epochs and commentators. Many of the faithful spend their lives listening to these interpretations of the Scriptures, or trying to decipher them themselves, all the while remaining blind to others, and to the world that surrounds them.

God, as an absolutely unknowable entity of the beyond, has often separated us from each other or assembled us into one people, one body without inspiring us to religious behaviour with respect to the universe, to others, or to ourselves. Nevertheless, no one dares touch this God, as if, having replaced the idols, he had acquired for himself, in himself, certain non-metabolized idolatrous affects. It is true that the function of the God of
monotheism is to unify individual identity – the male’s in particular – and this is not an easy task. It seems, however, that God is still too often evoked as a real entity, even if we cannot perceive him. He functions as a kind of idol of the spirit, resistant to perception by the senses, requiring that we rise up to him through our faith, and through renunciations that make us unknown to ourselves – or even our own enemies – as opposed to giving us confidence in our divine possibilities.

Could we not imagine the divine differently? We could abandon the object-entify God – letting him keep his name for the time being – to restore to him a form of energy that would inspire us to develop fully into ourselves, and to live fully our relation to the other, to others, and to the world around us. In that case, there would be no more being, fixed once and for all, but rather a changeable, perfectible way of being, thus an indeterminate absolute that determines us nonetheless. This would be very different from traditional teachings that claim to transmit an already determined truth, guaranteed by texts, dogmas, rites, etc.

We must nevertheless continue to inquire into the letter and the spirit, the spirit ultimately conceived as a kind of energy that must be channelled, or conducted, without reducing it to the letter, which would annihilate it. No tradition, in this way, can claim to possess the religious truth of humanity, until it has discovered the best possible way to spiritualize that energy without crippling it in order to make it impervious to other traditions. While no tradition should want to carry out religious colonization, there should be an effort to liberate other traditions from closure, with an eye to a more fully human spiritual development.

Individual development must not lead to a cult of the self and of its values, to the imperialism of a personal or collective sameness; and collective development must not diminish the individual within the group, in the name of a truth that abolishes all singularity, thus risking fundamentalism and conflicts with other groups. Individual development cannot be closed off in one unique truth, morality, or cult – all offspring of the same religious family, or at times the same politico-religious family – but must be linked to the development of relations to the other as other.

These would not be relations of love for what is the same as the self notably within the context of filial or parental relationships. We need to get away from the family and from genealogy. That would be the first step towards a relationship to the self and to the other that would be both more adult and more spiritual than a relation linked to the natural space of the family – even given all of its transformations into other sorts of groupings, groupings which have never succeeded in transforming this natural link to the benefit of greater liberty and higher achievement with respect to the breath, or the spirit.

From this standpoint, the one who, in Eastern tradition, is reborn autonomously through breathing, through mastery of the breath, is a precious example. Can we apply this example to our relations with the other? The oriental master establishes relationships with compassion, transmitting his or her own experience through a kind of love, or a kind of teaching, that is inseparable from one’s own life. From this master we learn a truth that cannot be dissociated from the experience of the teacher, a compassion that seeks to ensure the other’s access to happiness before one’s own. These are lessons well worth listening to and practising. Still missing, perhaps, are horizontal and reciprocal relations between persons, another step that must be taken towards our liberation from genealogy – from spiritual genealogy as well. Relationships would then be characterized not by degrees of more or less, but rather by difference, the most universal example of which is sexual difference.

We would become capable of mutual transmission of energy, an energy that is not necessarily subject to the same truth. We could experience this through an encounter with practising on other spiritual tradition, supposing that different historically contemporaneous traditions really do exist. We can also come to know it, simply and daily, in the encounter with a spiritually autonomous person of the other sex.

That is perhaps the secret of the attraction between the sexes. Never exclusively physical, it is always spiritual as well, in some ways religious. And, if only for that reason, dogmatic religions are always suspicious of it. In effect, the spiritual attraction between the sexes remains indeterminate; nothing can express it, or fix it into laws or representations without abolishing it. It incarnates itself without ever being definitively incarnate. Its religion would be in maintaining the attraction, that in the life of the relationship, not through the seduction or subjugation of the one by the other, or even through moral regulation, but rather through a spiritual dynamic in each one. This requires that the development of each leave an opening for the encounter with the other as other. Development is thus accomplished through the search for a personal absolute that accepts being questioned, modified, and fecundated by the development of the other towards their absolute.

Some will object that there would not be, in that case, two absolutes, but rather two modes of access to one and the same absolute. In order to be able to prove, or disprove, this, we would need to be capable of imagining the other’s absolute, which would not really then be other. More generally, we should say that a statement like the one above is already dogmatic, and makes the claim that one subject’s absolute, historically the male’s in our culture, is appropriate to another subject. Nothing could be less certain . . . Can we ignore the fact that religions with one unique God inscribed within a genealogy are part of the male tradition?

Female traditions do not necessarily call upon a unique entity defined as God. More attentive to alliances, and to the relationship with the cosmos, they do not inscribe their absolute within a genealogy either.
A spiritual relationship between the sexes would allow us to reunite human and divine elements that have been artificially separated by the domination of one sex over the other, by the dominance of the values of one sex over those of the other.

Besides, in our patriarchal monotheistic traditions today, what a man means by the name of God is very different from what a woman means, even if her quest for the absolute is already oriented by necessities proper to the male subject – which paralyses a part of her spiritual energy into a kind of idolatry or passivity. Fortunately women’s religious feeling, taking root below men’s beliefs and rites, can generally preserve a part of itself.

MORAL OR ETHICAL?

Men often organize their religious conscience around respect for laws that God or his ministers have set down for the faithful of a tradition. These laws correspond to an internalized construct, a ‘moral law’ inscribed, or to be inscribed, on the heart, dictating how to behave towards God, towards oneself, and towards others. Difference between self and others has little importance. The question rather is to behave the same way towards oneself and towards the others, who are assimilated to the self. All are considered ‘children of God’, ‘sons’ of an Absolute who functions as Father, chief, and keystone of a hierarchy beneath which differences are not really worth noting, except as indicating a greater or lesser proximity to the supreme reality, from which all are supposed to be descended, and back to which all are supposed to return.

We know little about this spiritual genealogy, except that, in our tradition, it corresponds to a familial-social model that has oriented religious values towards recognizing and transposing paternity. The religious feelings of the faithful obviously is endowed with a certain plasticity that can adapt to the spiritual model imposed on them with varying degrees of fecundity.

What needs to be called into question in the development of patriarchal spirituality is the loss of differentiation among believers, and the predominance of a model of the Absolute in relation to them. They have first to love God the Father, and then love themselves and each other within the horizons of this unique Absolute. Ideally, the law is thus the same for all, and its more or less perfect application depends on the proximity of the believer to the divine model. Men, more closely resembling the God they have chosen in order to achieve a certain stage in their historical development, are supposed to be more capable in this area than women.

This supposedly universal model, in dictating behaviour with respect to the other, confines itself to the generalities of an elementary construction of personal and collective identity: do not kill; love the other as a ‘brother’, as an equal to yourself (which is not easy for those who have no self . . .); do not commit incest or adultery; bring forth children, etc.

Today, our consciences seek a more subtle spiritual guidance, perhaps because our multicultural times are more attentive to difference, despite resistance to it on the part of blindly egalitarian doctrines and politics. Moreover, acquaintance with other traditions shows us how their moral paths are sometimes subtler, more diversified, less abstract, and less undifferentiated than ours are.

It would be impossible to deal with this issue exhaustively here. However, I would like to point out that almost daily contact with other traditions, like the evolution of relations between the sexes, gradually leads us from a universal morality inscribed within each of us, towards an ethics which takes into account particularities, differences, contingencies, and requires us to rediscover the other as other, and to invent, along with him or her, a style of comportment that could in no way pre-exist our encounter, without risking the denial of the other in his or her alterity. Where a written law was used to dictate to my conscience once and for all what had to be done, I now find that I am required to open up within myself a non-inscribed space, a virgin space, if you will, from which I can listen to and welcome the other, and invent, along with him or her, a relation that goes beyond the elementary imperatives of respect for natural life and for possessions, towards the development of a new kind of spiritual relation to the other. This relation cannot be, at the risk of failing to respect the other as other, remain within the horizon of the Absolute of one and only one tradition. It must be able to open up, towards the other and with the other, a space liberated from the imperatives of one single culture, so that encounter and dialogue become possible.

It seems that ethics must come to replace – or at least accompany – more individualistic morals, since ethics cares about the cultural space, the spiritual space, both contextual and interior, where the other exists as other. Ethics creates appropriate respect for the natural or cultural habitat of the self and the other. Ethics teaches us not only not to kill physically but also spiritually, either ourselves or the other. They require that law not be an a priori universal, except in the case of a law of silence, of attentiveness, of co-existence and communication in consideration for difference and differences.

Women are probably somewhat better prepared for this step forward required for the spiritual development of humanity. Actually, on a daily basis, they are led to respect the life of the other, in maternity and in love itself. Abstract moral behaviour is of little use to them for managing their pregnancies, their motherhood, or their love life. The moral responsibility incumbent upon women is to respect the other as other, that is to respect his or her autonomy – the dwelling of the birth and growth of spiritual development. Women are called upon directly to fulfil an ethical task, to respect the other as other, and that requires the respect of self and a constant relational creativity much more than the application of an already written, and common in its
application, law. Since ethical behaviour with respect to the other is required of them daily, women have an aptitude to invent, or to propagate, a religious attitude indispensable for our times, one that will bring about progress in human development.

It should be noted that this progress once again is rooted in respect for difference, differences. Woman engenders the other within herself, in love she welcomes the other into herself without killing this other. She gives, or gives back, natural life to the other. What she must learn to practise consciously is the respect for the other as other at the spiritual level. That means giving — or giving back — a spiritual life that would not be dictated by her own, but would be appropriate to the other.

This attitude must not lead to a reversal about the source of life, with women supposedly engendering physical life and men cultural life, the natural maternity of women supposedly going hand in hand with the spiritual paternity of men. This scission of human beings into two artificially differentiated parts leads to a dead end in the spiritual development of men and of women. Rather than render one’s own nature divine, each submits to historically marked social stereotypes.

Making cultural progress rather means elevating sexual difference from the natural to the spiritual level without subjugating it to parental roles. It means gaining access to a new transcendental form within a horizontal relationship with an individual of different sex. It means changing sexual attraction, or from a more or less animalistic instinct from a procreative instinct, dictating a division of tasks between male and female, and leading to seduction, submission, and possession and making it a space from which spiritual energy can be cultivated, not towards a cult for the same as the self, but towards respect for the other as transcendent to me, for another I will never know, either corporeally or mentally, and never make into my possession, not even as my hypothetical human ‘other half’.

A TRANSCENDENTAL ANCHORED IN THE NATURAL WORLD

Such a spiritual progress will allow us to overcome two dead ends in our tradition: the nearly idolatrous over-valorization of nature in procreation, and its annihilation in a culture, where the historically male subject appropriates nature, and attempts to dominate it in order to bend its will to his, notably to his technological projects. Culture in this case is opposed to respect for nature; the dialectic between nature and culture is interrupted.

In the ethical behaviour sketched out in this text, each would remain faithful to a nature one is charged with cultivating, without annihilating. We then can no longer overly value natural maternity and spiritual paternity, contrasting them with each other. We must get beyond the functional aspect of sexed identity, since this aspect remains subjugated to nature, even when it claims to be pure culture — for example, in the assignment of roles.

It is necessary to rethink what it means to be a girl or a boy, a woman or a man. Historically, gender identity has been confused with a strictly natural physiological identity, in the service of instinct and procreation. It is undoubtedly this reduction of sexed identity to physical identity that explains the various positions of some religious leaders, as well as of certain feminists, with regard to overcoming sexed identity, or to abolishing it altogether. However, these positions are based on error, error that is perpetuated when children are taught about the difference between the sexes. Culture has misunderstood the character of sexed identity, but that is no reason to persist in our mistakes.

Male and female identity cannot be reduced to physical differences that are more or less visible in their forms and effects. Sexed identity implies a way of constituting subjectivity in relation to the world, to the self, and to the other, that is specific to each sex. This specificity is determined in part by corporeal characteristics as implying a different relational attitude. Engendering inside the self does not lead to the same relationship with the other — either a child or a sex partner — as engendering outside the self. And this relationship is accompanied by, and produces as feedback, a different relationship to the self. To give another example: to be born a woman of a woman, having the same ability to engender as she who brings you into the world, does not have an identical effect on the constitution of the subject as being born a man of a woman, without the ability to do as she did in bringing you into the world. Or another example: to engender within the self not only the same as the self, but also the other from the self, favours behaviour towards the other that cannot be shared by one for whom sexual difference always remains external to the self. One might say the same about welcoming the other in oneself during the act of love.

Other examples could be brought in to illustrate that strictly speaking sexed identity cannot be assimilated with the sexual — even though it is not foreign to it. Sexed identity hearkens back to construction of subjectivity necessarily different for the girl and the boy. In fact, it corresponds to a specific relational identity, creating a different bridge, or different bridges, according to the sex of the subject, between nature and culture.

It goes without saying that sexed identity, which is both constructed and received, cannot be assimilated with social stereotypes founded on a purely natural or functional interpretation of sex. We are currently in danger of trying to liberate women from social subjugation by destroying their identity even more radically than had been done in the past. The extraordinarily creative abilities shown by little girls’ deserve recognition and encouragement, and should not be suspected of resulting from social stereotypes, that could have a positive effect only on them and not on boys. The girl’s creative
precocity and cultural vigour, notably creative, are undoubtedly caused by her more rapidly developed relational identity, the result of having been born of one the same as she, and of her intuition about her hospitable role in taking, in love and in maternity, the other into the self.

The ethical task confronting a spiritual conception of sexual difference is to avoid both the annihilation of nature and its over-valorization. We must thus refuse to divide sex roles into, on the one hand, guardian of nature, and on the other, guardian of culture; we must also refuse obedience to an abstract culture that destroys singularity and diversity in conformance with one model which could be, and even ought to be, unique.

From the beginning, sexual difference is relational for both boys and girls. Failure to take this dimension of subjectivity into consideration encourages sexual regression back to animal instinct in love and in reproduction. Its recognition is the discovery of a new task for our culture, notably in the articulation between nature and transcendence.

That is the way to anchor transcendence in the natural world (where without our knowledge it already is anchored in our tradition, since a Father-God cannot be foreign to an Absolute linked to nature), and to make this anchoring the source of a new relationship to the transcendental. While God the Father remains subject, through his parental role in nature and in the natural world, he is also an Absolute who remains linked to the gender of the subject: transcendent since he is relegated to the beyond, but intuitively similar to the male whose cultural mastery he guarantees through privileged divine filiation.

Leaving sameness behind in order to recognize a different transcendent here and now would mark a new stage in the constitution of consciousness and of the spiritual development of humanity.

The role of women is crucial in this area as well. They are accustomed to respecting the life of the other. What is more difficult for them is to think of the other as inaccessible to them, whatever their relation to the other in love or in maternity.

Men’s need for public power has sometimes been interpreted as compensation, or even as revenge, for their subjugation in private life. The first ethical gesture of a woman is to let the other exist, not through over-valorizing this other in traditional transcendence, but through accepting that the other must remain unknown to her and not appropriated by her, neither as lover, nor as child. This amounts to recognizing the other as transcendent to the self — not superior, but rather irreducibly other. In this way, fidelity to nature within a culture of differences opens up access to a new type of transcendence — undeniably more spiritual than the one we have known up until now, and that can only gain from being rethought from the perspective of a horizontal transcendence between the sexes.

Respect for the transcendence of the other as other within sexual difference will also allow us to relearn to respect the cosmos as having an existence other than ours and that is not at the disposal of our needs and our desires. Cosmic nature, moreover, represents an indispensable universal for having access to the recognition of the other as irreducible to the self, since our tradition cannot serve as third term in arranging a specific identity for each of us.

RELATIONS WITH THE OTHER: FROM THE INTIMATE TO THE COLLECTIVE

Sexual difference is often understood in its strictly intimate dimension, belonging to so-called private life. That is to assimilate it once again with a functional aspect required for the construction of the family — the family conceived as a natural enclave within the cultural public sphere of city and the state. In the family conceived in this way, each member alienates their own identity in order to compose a single undifferentiated unit. The sexual identity necessary for the constitution of the family is not cultivated for itself, but rather for what it can contribute to the unity of the family. Therein lies the origin of our conception of man and of woman as two halves of humanity rather than as different identities, and the reason why they are valued more as father and mother than as individuals who have a relationship to each other.

From this perspective, it no longer seems appropriate to consider today the family as the privileged site of humanity’s religious achievement. Furthermore, in our tradition, the family most often represents the consequences of what we have called original sin — childbirth with great labour and winning bread by the sweat of the brow. The family thus conceived is the site of reproduction and of the acquisition, consumption, and capitalization of goods.

In order to move beyond the redemption of ‘original sin’, we would have to find love’s innocence again, including the innocence of carnal love, between a woman and a man. This love — in Genesis and in certain verses of the Song of Songs — is evoked as having taken place within nature, outside the possession of property, and even of clothing. The family, as we too often imagine it, and as it is generally presented to us as religious model, is supposedly the result of a ‘sin’, and not the fulfillment of the divine within man and within woman.

Moving back before ‘sin’ would require refounding the family on a relationship between a man and a woman capable of loving each other in the innocence of the body and the soul. In order for this to be successful, we must rediscover love within difference, love that is neither possession of the one by the other, nor exploitation of the one by the other in order to satisfy personal, or even procreative, instincts. We must achieve, particularly in regard to the understanding of the divine, a love that respects the other as transcendent to the self, particularly in regard to their understanding of the
divine, thus a love that will help both the one and the other to accomplish their own divinity. This would presuppose the creation of a family different from the one we are accustomed to.

The refunding of the family cannot come about without recognition of the natural and spiritual value of sexed identity. Nor can sexed identity remain simply functional, but it must be considered part of our humanity in its corporeal and subjective dimension.

Human beings are a species divided into two genders. Achieving a relation between the genders that would be different from that of other species could result in the spiritualization of humanity. One of the founding myths of our tradition reminds us of this in its own way: the loss of the divine results from man’s and woman’s inability to love each other without wanting to steal God’s knowledge, his power. However, rather than redeeming the first ‘sin’ – our first mistake – we have reinforced it, through forgetting that gender is a crucial dimension of what it means to be human. Gender has become increasingly inseparable from genealogy, thus hiding from us the work we must do to find the path from the human to the divine.

This error has been perpetuated within the family itself and more generally within society. Man and woman must help each other progress from the natural to the spiritual, not only within the family unit, but in all relations they maintain with each other. Relations between the sexes must not be reduced to intimacy – often understood as belonging to a natural state – within the family. They must be woven into all areas of civic order, and thus elevate it, through each and every exchange between citizens, from the natural to the spiritual, from the empirical to the transcendental. Any culture constructed on the basis of one sex alone is necessarily partial and unjust. What is more, it reduces individuals to the status of abstract entities subjugated to laws that remain external to them, but which must be obeyed in order to form a collective.

Such a society is not founded on relations among citizens, but rather on individual units subjugated to the authority of a leader, or leaders, who represent and execute the law. This opens the way for all kinds of totalitarian excesses; more importantly, however, the citizens of such a society remain children – of God or of state leaders – rather than accomplish as adults their own becoming, either individual or collective.

The recognition of sexual difference thus means the way for refunding the family, but also a truly democratic culture and politics, where the citizens, without having to delegate this role to elected representatives, manage their relations among themselves in the absence of any kind of subjugation or submission. Democracy cannot be reduced to a ballot paper, as we see from the failures of many regimes where representatives are elected by a majority, and where, without even mentioning the most extreme cases, each new election results in abstentions or blank votes on the part of the voters, and in breaches of democracy on the part of those elected. Let us move to a new phase of democracy – a democracy where the citizens themselves manage their own civil and social relations.

If this were to happen, civil and religious life could partly reconverge. This reconvergence would not, however, be dependent on pre-established laws, applicable to men and women alike, laws that abolish singularity, and favour various fundamentalisms. The spiritual development of each citizen, male or female, is then cultivated with respect for differences; this individual progress will gradually spiritualize society through multiple, at each time dual, relations.

Our relations between the two have been limited to the man-God relationship; we have not sufficiently cultivated them between us. The relation with the other, him or her, cannot be cultivated as a living and present relation if it is mediated by enacted law, or by established power. What is most spiritual and religious in human beings is thereby neglected and even lost. The totality of the social fabric should consist of dual relations at different levels, none of which permit the abolition of human relationships with the other as such. Religious behaviour – at least in our times – should begin to exist there, and not with the constitution of groups, families, or peoples. None of these, in any case, should ever interfere with the respect for the other as other. Which actually does occur within many religious traditions, not to mention what happens in relationships between subjects who come from different traditions.

**MYSTICISM AND RATIONALITY**

None of this implies that religion should be based on purely individual intuition or beliefs. Insistence on the importance of the relations with the other as other, and on the two relationships, works to dismantle individualisms rather than reinforce them. Within a group founded on a plurality of individuals governed by a leader, retreat into the self is common. Vertical submission to representative authority encourages this, as does the paucity of guidelines regulating horizontal relations between units within the group. Since, in a community based on relationships between persons, the accent would be on respect for difference(s), singularities would be protected, and individualistic withdrawal minimized.

The relationship between the sexes clearly represents the most universal as well as the most radical site of this relation to the other. It can thus be of use for ethical and religious integration into community life. This then becomes relational in its base, and independently of codes used to assimilate subjects to one sociological order.

The living relation to the other always comprises its share of mystery. This is particularly true with respect to sexual difference, or it should be. The mystery – here also horizontal, rather than located in the vertical relation...
between a man and his God — permits women and men to go along their own spiritual path; it also permits the truly spiritual, and not merely formal evolution of their relation. The word 'mystery' is used differently here from the way we are accustomed to using it, no doubt. We are not talking about a magical reality, a secret guaranteed by a system of rites performed exclusively by the initiated. It is rather a question of maintaining free energy, resistant to encoding or any appropriation.

‘Mystery’ would then seem to mean the opposite of what it usually means, at least in part. Keeping energy free is a gesture very different from bending it in a way incomprehensible to the faithful. In this case, they have no choice but to believe what the authorities tell them to believe, and act accordingly. In the other, accepting that within us, and within each person we meet, some part of lived experience will remain incomprehensible, inaccessible to affect or to thought, strange, and even foreign, means that there is a mystery that we have to respect. Respect for the mystery lies in not attempting to understand, or to encode, everything in not blindly letting authorities presume to know, and not only in a formal way, in not sacrificing the mystery, in our relation to ourselves and to the other, to the mystery of some Absolute we read about in texts and in commentaries, but have never experienced.

Respect for the mystery in our relation to the other does not for all that mean opposition to respect for another kind of mystery. On the contrary, this gesture represents a progressive approach towards a relationship with that which we can neither know nor appropriate. As we constantly and voluntarily assume behaviour whose meaning we understand, we become progressively more capable of truly to be entitled to legislate about mystery; co-existing with the inaccessible, instead of considering it preferable to be able to know all and master all. Within ourselves a space is created welcoming mystery and difference, thus modifying our energy, but not forcing it into compartments or into sharply defined and paralysing forms that prevents us from actively and consciously transforming that energy by ourselves.

Mystery — or mysticism — no longer signifies a blind and solitary advance into what looks like the irrational. Reason itself inspires us to recognize that the other is irreducible to ourselves, that the other must remain a mystery to us if we are to respect him or her as other. The traditional opposition between darkness and light gives way to the discovery that a certain manner of conceiving the light in our tradition has prevented us from perceiving another light, the light that emanates from the other but that we cannot understand. Renouncing possession of the other becomes not just a simple ascetic privation, but the means of achieving a kind of relation we do not yet know, one that is more religious and at the same time more likely to attain beatitude in the here and now. A beatitude not granted to those who make the way alone, but rather to those who try to share the way with the other, in the respect for different identities and journeys.

Certain men and women suffer when accepting neither to be master of,

not to seize hold of the other, nor to reduce the other to the status of a possession, or even of a being they cannot make their own. This pain becomes even more intolerable when we persist in our belief in a rationality where the intelligible, in the guise of light, must overcome the sensible, in the guise of darkness. If we can believe in the existence of another rationality, better adapted to humanity, less hierarchical, more capable also of cultivating the highest human value — that is, the relation between us — it can help us to avoid suffering when we coexist with that which — still today at any rate — we experience as unknowable. Taking another path, using another method, in the approach of the other — and of ourselves as being in relation — would seem necessary in order for us to succeed in relations that have been too often neglected in our culture.

It goes without saying that this does not mean we should feel a persistent blind faith in each and every other that comes our way, making him or her into the potential source of our existence. What we must rather do is have confidence in the other, and find out, through experience, how far we can travel together. Although the other must be respected absolutely as other, that does not mean we should consider him or her as the absolute we seek. What we have to envision as absolute is the perfection of the relation. There are different levels of co-existence with the other, particularly the other gender. That is where the mystery is most opaque, and also where the possibilities for commitment are most diversified, while we respect the mystery and the irreducibility of the other.

Before any relation to God, the relation to the other includes a negative pathway, a nocturnal approach. Conceptual intelligence is of little use when taking this path. Sense perception will sometimes be more useful, provided we continue to respect the invisible in the other, this portion of night that guarantees the other's aliter and freedom. Provided also that the duality of the subjects is maintained, while avoiding the division of one and the same act into two poles: touching-touched, seeing-seen, listening-listened to, etc. Certain of the senses, neglected in our culture, should be educated — touch and being touched, especially at a distance; and listening while remaining attentive to a silence where the other as such, as a mystery, can be revealed and can happen the unexpected event of an encounter with him, or her.

**IN CONCLUSION**

It may seem utopian to propose a more demanding spiritual evolution, when spiritual development as currently defined has not yet been achieved. There are at least two reasons that force me to do so, however.

The problems of our times call for appropriate solutions. Globalization requires consideration for the differences among cultures, and the search for a
feudand co-existence in respect for their respective paths. Advances in the emancipation and liberation of women require that we rework the relationship between nature and culture, and seek for ways we can best symbolize the articulation between them for each sex, and for the public and private alliance between them. This requirement is more radically and universally in line with the respect for what is called the ‘human rights’ than a more or less paternalistic tolerance towards other races and other generations. Advances of sciences and philosophical thought require that expression of religious truths and ethical codes evolve; when they do not, they risk being outdated, thus leaving the way open for theoretical and practical behaviours that are more and more inhuman. The use of technology and the authority it has acquired over the definition of individuals and of communities require that we develop relational behaviours between subjects, alone are capable of ensuring the survival and the evolution of the human as such. The same is true for the growing power of the media, which could henceforth gather citizens together by means of a truth-opinion they take part in without taking charge of, and without inventing the means of exchange among them. Financial imperialism, for its part, creates a proliferation of hierarchies of haves and have-nots where the values of being and of becoming human are not taken into account; reinforcing real relations among human beings is required to counteract this.

Many other reasons linked to the needs of our times could be mentioned. There is, however, another motive for new ethical and religious proposals. If the laws and commandments, either religious or more strictly civil, that have been established up until now are not respected, it is perhaps because they do not appeal to the men and women who we actually are, and do not make us really responsible. They treat us too much like children constrained to obey a master or masters, and not as adults in charge of their own existence, and of that of the community and the world, for the present and for the future.

Awareness of what we are and of the task incumbent upon us as human beings, men and women, can awaken or reawaken our consciences, not to the established order, but to an order yet to be invented, and respected by us: in relation to ourselves, to the other and to others, and to the world.

Might this not correspond to what Judaeo-Christianity designates as the third age of the salvation of humanity: the time of the spirit? That is an advent, in us and between us, which would render us divine, and ensure transitions between this tradition and other traditions, by favouring the breath, the universal principle of natural and spiritual life.

NOTE