

## The journey to the Unitive horizon: women becoming divine

Sarah Nicholson, *University of Western Sydney, Australia*

Following the trajectory of feminist philosophy of religion, Irigaray calls for the articulation of a divine horizon for women: a figure that is the goal, ideal and inspiration of womans' becoming. This figuration would be the embodiment of our highest potential and values; the divine revealed in flesh. I explore the significant resonance between the call for this figuration and research on the higher stages of human development as mapped in the work of Susann Cook-Greuter. Also taking the work of the Harvard Girls' Project into consideration, the developmental pathway for women towards the highest Unitive stage of development, is one that reflects, and is historically anchored to, the specific gender hurdles of the contemporary socio-cultural context.

*whether we are female or male, the same work remains of polishing the mirror of the heart, of being in remembrance moment by moment, breath by breath. Each moment, we affirm the inner marriage until there is no longer love or Beloved but only Unity of Being.*<sup>1</sup>

In the contemporary spiritual tradition at the heart of Western culture, the figure of female divinity is Mary. Her divine action is motherhood: birthing, nurturing and bringing to autonomous being her Son, the divine made flesh through the vehicle of her body. Beyond this phyllogenic task, the road of her own journey, becoming divine as a woman, is secondary, at best.

It is well established by feminist theorists that the Christian symbolic is 'notoriously unhelpful' for women. Irigaray responds to this state. She suggests that the figuration of a female ideal - a divine horizon of becoming, "an ideal of wholeness" (Jantzen 1998, p.12) - is required for women to realise their divinity, to be "free, autonomous, sovereign" (Jantzen 1998, p. 14). Drawing from the theological thought of 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Feuerbach, Irigaray takes the premise that 'God is the mirror of man' (Irigaray 1987, p. 67). Feuerbach argues that "at its best religion is a mirror for humanity, onto which ideal human characteristics are projected and which we then strive to reflect." (Jantzen 1998, p. 13). But, Irigaray argues, these ideal human characteristics have been bound up with masculine subjectivity, God functioning to solely ground and facilitate male becoming "by reflecting man back to himself." (Armour 2003, p. 29). Where God has helped man to define his gender and achieve his subjectivity, by orienting "his finiteness" in reference to the infinity of God (Irigaray 1987, p. 61); woman is left without means of divine reference.

*This God, are we capable of imagining it as a woman?*<sup>2</sup>

Irigaray insists that to activate the goal of "becoming perfect women" (Irigaray 1987, p. 67) a figure of the divine in the image of woman is required. It is through this figurative divinity, as and in the human flesh of woman, as men have in the form of Buddha or Jesus<sup>3</sup>, that women might look towards the possibility of "fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being"; of embodying and manifesting the divinity in themselves (Irigaray 1987, p. 61). This symbol would act as a sustaining goal, one that leads, inspires, "marks or establishes" the path to (incarnate as) the goal of becoming, mirroring the possibilities of women's subjectivity back to her (Irigaray 1987, p. 72). Yet this is "not a fixed objective, not a One postulated to be immutable but rather a cohesion and a horizon that assures us the passage between" (Irigaray in Jantzen 1998, p. 272).

Despite the Christian context of her frame, Grace Jantzen notes that Irigaray's spiritual context is not limited to this; for her God is but "a name to describe the possibilities of awareness, and transcendence" (Jantzen 1998, p. 12). Irigaray argues for "the incarnation of all bodies (men's and women's) as potentially divine" (Jantzen 1998, p. 16) and finds an obligation upon us, in this, to reveal our divinity. She is passionate that we must not await God passively; but must grow, flourish and bring the divine to life "through us .... and between us, embodied [and] transcendent" (Jantzen 1998, p. 275).

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<sup>1</sup> (Helminski 2003, xxvi)

<sup>2</sup> (Irigaray 1987, 63)

<sup>3</sup> I differentiate between the act of re-ascribing God (as Absolute) in the female gender and establishing figure of the divine in human form (as transpersonal archetype).

Irigaray (and Jantzen) call for women to flourish: “To refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfilment.” (Irigaray 1987, p. 69). Jantzen, contemplating the projection of the values of the divine horizon, writes they must “embody our best and deepest aspirations, so that we are drawn forward to realize them. In one sense, therefore, they must already be human characteristics, at least in some measure.. yet they are also ideals never fully achieved, always beckoning to ‘become what we are’” (Jantzen 1998, p. 92). In order to more closely examine the possibilities of this horizon, and the presenting of these values, I have turned to contemporary research in the field of Adult Developmental theory.

Susanne Cook Greuter describes Developmental theory as “the unfolding of human potential towards deeper understanding, wisdom and effectiveness in the world” (Cook-Greuter 2004, p. 7). Developmental theory is reflective of the actualities of human being and becoming. Cook-Greuter’s research is of particular relevance as her work is focused on the highest stages of mature adult development. These stages, she notes, are not static end points, but dynamic reference points that are evolving and developing along with human becoming. I would like to pose the possibility that the Unitive stages of development, as Cook Greuter describes them, articulate the embodiment of values that Irigaray conceived of as divine. The Unitive contextualised in a sequence of unfolding stages draws a pathway for women’s development towards this horizon. I am interested to examine gaps and points of commonality between these theorists in order to build bridges and point towards possible areas of expansion, holding at the very heart of these musings, the desire to unfold the possibilities of fully inhabiting subjectivity as a woman.

The model of transformative change in human (ego) development arose from structuralist research conducted by theorists such as Maslow, Graves, Loevinger, Kohlberg, Piaget and Torbert. Beginning with Piaget’s work in the 1950’s on the process through which children developed into young adults, the sixties saw Loevinger, Kohlberg and Graves expand the focus of developmental studies to examine the development of the “mature wisdom and powerful action of ... adults” (Cook Greuter 2004, 4). These researchers outlined four main tiers of adult development in Western society: *Preconventional*, *Conventional*, *Postconventional* and *Post-postconventional*: Each stage was seen to be “more comprehensive, more differentiated and more effective in dealing with the complexities of life than its predecessors.” (Cook Greuter 2004, p. 4).

Contemporary developmental theories, extending on the established research of the theorists mentioned, generally work with a broadly shared set of assumptions. These include the belief that developmental growth occurs in logical, expanding stages and that the transition to a later stage depends upon the achievement of certain competencies in the previous stage. Later stages include and transcend previous ones; as something more complex is added to the existing developmental stage. Healthy development includes and honours the characteristics of the earlier stages; yet, is no longer limited to them.<sup>4</sup> Each higher stage brings an increased capacity for complex thinking, feeling, being and doing (these elements function as interrelated components termed ‘action-logics’). As development unfolds, autonomy, tolerance for difference and ambiguity, as well as flexibility, reflection, and skill in interacting with the social environment increases. Thus, the later stages offer more differentiated as well as more integrated capacities for optimally functioning in the world (Cook-Greuter 2004, p. 7). While “each stage has its own stage-specific achievements and triumphs over earlier stages”, it is important to note they also still hold “specific limitations and vulnerabilities” (Cook-Greuter 2005, p. 10), including the possibility of the manifestation of unhealthy, shadow or pathological aspects.

Cook-Greuter deftly distinguishes between lateral and vertical modes of development. She reports that the most common mode of development is lateral (translation) which occurs with the acquisition of expanded knowledge. Vertical development (transformation) occurs much less frequently: “It refers to how we learn to see the world through new eyes, how we change our interpretations of experience and how we transform our views of reality.” (Cook-Greuter 2004, p. 5). Such transformation may occur in response to the catharsis of an environmental force that requires adaptivity, through the cultivation of self awareness, the force of curiosity, or (existential) questioning. The cultivation of these (as) specific practices drives the vertical development and thus the acquisition of more complex action-logics (Cook-Greuter, lecture notes, 2006).

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<sup>4</sup> Wilber describes development that does not honour the aspects of the lower levels as pathological. A pathological hierarchy occurs when “a particular holon assumes a repressive, oppressive, arrogant role of dominance over other holons (whether in individual or social development).” Wilber 1995:23

## *The first stages of Development*

All persons begin their lives at the first tier of development, termed Preconventional. This stage encompasses the developments typically observed in the progress of a child from birth to around age 12 (Cook Greuter 2005, p.10). Preconventional development in this early period is focused on the movement away from “the undifferentiated symbiotic embeddedness of the newborn... merged with their initial care giver “and towards the development of a separate self (Cook Greuter 2005, p. 6)<sup>5</sup>.

The next level of development is tellingly named *Conventional*, as development in this tier has a strong socio-cultural focus. In the lower stages of the Conventional tier, personal identity is largely derived from strong affiliations with “family, tribe, group, nation” (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.17). While this identity relationship with a larger grouping offers a sense of protection and belonging, it generally requires unquestioning acceptance of, and adherence to, the operational “rules and myths and dogmas” (Wilber 1995, p.226) of the particular socio-cultural masse. In the Conventional tier “normalization” of behaviour (gendered and other) is wrought through the disciplining practices of family and peers (Debold 2001, p.171).

The highest stage of development within the Conventional tier, termed *Conscientious*, is, as Cook Greuter describes it, “widely considered the adult stage in much of Western culture” (Cook Greuter 2005, p.17). Characterised by “rationality, progressivism, positivism and reductionism” through the hallmarks of independence, self authorship and “increased self-differentiation” (Cook Greuter 2005, p.25), the achievement of the Conscientious mode is rewarded and supported by “society and institutions“(Cook Greuter 2005, p.17).

## *Women in the Conventional*

The specific dynamics of the development of sociocentric role identity have been of paramount interest to feminist thinkers. Cook Greuter’s research asserts that the greatest differences in the appearance of developmental characteristics between men and women occur in these first two stages of development, as people unconsciously reflect “the norms and notions shared in the cultural milieu” (Cook-Greuter 2005, personal communication).

Elizabeth Debold from the Harvard Girls Project reflects a common feminist stance on women and development. She notes, after Foucault, that “Development ... can be considered as the process by which we become drenched in, and shaped by, culture-bound assumptions of power/knowledge.” (Debold 2001, pp.170-1). She suggests that, in terms of development, “masculinity and femininity are, in some ways, systems of meaning-making that often cohere as a self.” (Debold in Alev 1996, p.22).

Responding to the perception that “within standard developmental theory, ‘the way women are’ had always been defined as less than, not as good as, deviant from, a male norm.” (Debold in Alev 1996, p.15), in the late 1980’s two influential feminist studies appeared which rocked the solid landscape of developmental studies: one study presented as *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al, 1986), the other, findings of the Harvard Girls Project led by Carol Gilligan, written up as, *In a different voice*(1982).

Exploring the traditionally defined relationship of gender to knowledge: the *masculine* being the sphere of abstract, impersonal ‘thinking’ and the *feminine* being, the ‘emotional’ dimensions of the personal and interpersonal (Belenky et al. 1986, p.7), the authors of the *Women’s Ways of Knowing* asserted that masculine attributes had to that point dominated studies of psychological development. Due to this, they suggested, “we have learned a great deal about the development of autonomy and independence, abstract critical thought and the unfolding of a morality of rights and justice in both men and women. We have learned less about the development of interdependence, intimacy, nurturance and contextual thought.” (Belenky et al. 1986, p.6). Seeking to redress this balance their study set out to illuminate women’s experience of meaning making and knowledge.

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<sup>5</sup> The specifics of this developmental tier have been much discussed by Freud, Lacan and the gender specifics of their assertions, vigorously debated by their manifold critics.

Debold observes that the Women's Ways of Knowing project "pointed to the relationship between cultural authority and the struggles women must endure in order to authorize themselves and their knowledge" (Debold 2001, p.167). It is worth bringing attention to the fact that Women's Ways of Knowing researchers question "universal developmental pathways" citing the variance presented by women of widely different "ages, life circumstances, and backgrounds" (Belenky et al 1986, p.15). While their research is not presented in a developmentalist format and they voice a hesitancy to mark out any "stage-like qualities" of development, their epistemological categories move from the almost subjectless *Silence*, and culminate in *Constructed Knowing*. This state is described as an expanded, integrated, and empathetic state of knowing; a connected and passionate knowledge characterised through the "opening of mind and the heart to embrace the world." (Belenky et al 1986, p.141). They describe the women of this stage as self aware, with the desire to work in the world in a way "that contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of others." (Belenky et al 1986, p.152). These particular values and distinctly transpersonal qualities of *Constructed Knowing* are echoed and expanded upon in the description of Cook-Greuter's higher stages, as we will see.

Gilligan, a renowned psychologist, argued for the specifics of a female path of moral development. Her study sought to redress the predominant view of the individual as separate and of relationships as "hierarchical or contractual" arrangements, tied in with the values of justice and autonomy; a view which she saw as predominant in male moral thinking (Gilligan 1988, p.8). She found that the values of care and connection, salient in women's thinking, implied a view of self and other as interdependent and of relationships as networks created and sustained by attention and response (Gilligan 1988, p.8). She suggests that the gender differences observed in moral reasoning and orientation are tied to different understandings of the self-in-relationship. In women's narrative of self, the process of joining another's story to our own constitutes an understanding of the self-in-relationship which highlights the "relational context of identity formation" (Gilligan 1988, p.7). She writes that in women the "self is known in the experience of connection ... interaction, the responsiveness of human engagement." (Gilligan 1988, p.7). From this observation she asserts that where the 'basic masculine' sense of self is separate, the 'basic feminine' sense of self is connected to the world (and thus more permeable). With this understanding she re-examined the moral domain, broadening the spectrum of moral development to include activities of compassion, care and interdependent attachment that empower all the participants in relationship (Gilligan 1988, p.5).

Delineating three stages of development: *Selfish*, *Conventional Ethical* and *Universal Care*, she reported the tendency for different preferences between men and women: "men tend to progress ... based more on judgement of rights and justice, whereas women tend to negotiate these hierarchical stages based on judgements of care and responsibility." (Wilber 1998, p.588) Each unfolding stage of moral development is "higher and more valuable" because it extends the circle of care (feminine tendency) or justice (masculine tendency) to more people (Wilber 1998, p.588). In terms of higher stage development it is worth noting that Gilligan also perceived the possibility that there was "a hierarchical moral stage beyond the formal operational<sup>6</sup> level." (Gilligan in Wilber 1998, p.588).

### *Adolescence*

Also from the Harvard Girl's Project, Elizabeth Debold's research examined the "psychological dynamics of power, knowledge, and desire" as girls developed into women (Debold et al. 1993, xxiii). Both Debold and Gilligan identified fundamental differences in the course of development followed by girls' and boys'; they assert that the major developmental catharsis of each gender occurs at disparate junctions.

Recent work on young women's experience of adolescence identifies this as a period of "crisis in girls' lives that is equivalent to the Oedipal complex in early childhood for boys" (Debold 2001, p.180). Nancy Chodorow's work on childhood development (1978) suggested that the formation of differently gendered selves (the male separate, the female connected) could be traced back to different childhood experience with the mother (as traditional primary care giver). Where the boy's experience of an early childhood

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<sup>6</sup>Formal Operational is Piaget's term, used to refer to the stage in which the ability to use rational and abstract problem solving skills has been developed.

(Preconventional) trauma of separation from the mother lead to “what the culture understands as masculine personality” (Debold 2001, p.188), the girl’s bond with the mother is allowed to continue; she is taught to be like her mother, leading consequently to the development of a “more permeable ego” (Wright 1998, p.211).

The experience of ‘coming of age’ at adolescence has been described as a disassociative process for girls’. In the face of their growing apprehension of “their relation to cultural power relations”, a “frightening ‘power/knowledge’ about being embodied as young women”, their natural voice and expression is silenced (Debold 2001, p.187). The research showed that girls’ response to their encounter with, and ensuing understanding of, the dominance of social male power “often results in a withdrawal from their bodies’ power and sexuality as a means of securing protection” (Debold 2001, p.188). This withdrawal is part of the process of internalising, or incorporating the construct of the “good woman”: “where goodness equals both self abnegation and safety” (Debold in Alev 1996, p.16, p.19). Debold concludes, “This protective withdrawal is what the culture understands and rewards as feminine personality.” (Debold 2001, p.188).

### *Critique*

It is important to recognise in discussing work on gender and development that Belenky et al and Gilligan had their work criticised for its ‘maximizing bias’, that is, their analysis focuses on finding differences between the sexes rather than commonalities. Their work has also been taken to task for a recourse to “biological essentialism” in the suggestion that women are “naturally inclined” towards particular ways of meaning making (Crawford 1989, p.141). Critics charge Gilligan with false generalization from “perspectives such as class, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity.” They suggest “disclaimers notwithstanding, she described women’s moral development in terms of a different voice; without specifying which women, under which specific historical circumstances have spoken with the voice in question” (Fraser & Nicholson 1993, p.427).

While not ascribing to an essentialist perspective that would suggest women have innate ways of being that are different to men, I argue that the effects of biology, psychology, culture and systemic regulation form an interactive matrix that produces gendered subjectivity. In the socio-temporal space from which I write this means that, differences in the development of men and women are apparent. It is important to draw the specificities of women’s developmental pathway, while not suggesting that any such map would ever be complete or unchanging.

### *Post Conventional*

The next stage in development is termed *Postconventional*. Cook-Greuter notes, “an overall shift from differentiation to integration also marks the transition from conventional to postconventional stages... The postconventional stages.. show an overall trend of assimilation and integration towards an ever more conscious sense of belongingness and unity with the ground.” (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.6). Cook Greuter also notes that while the Conventional stage is completely adequate for mature adult life and, according to her research, encompasses around 80% of the adult population<sup>7</sup>, the Postconventional heralds the arrival of more mature, more powerful and additionally complex action-logics. Important to our focus on the specifics of women’s subjectivity, Cook Greuter suggests that as development progresses into this realm socialized gender differences are increasingly transcended “as individuals consciously expand their own mental models, question unexamined beliefs, and increasingly embrace whatever was seen as ‘other’ at earlier stages.”<sup>8</sup> (Cook-Greuter 2005, personal communication). Specifically in terms of gender, this means becoming conscious of, examining and moving beyond the set boundaries of the cultural expectations of gendered behaviour.

The move into the Postconventional is marked by an inward turn: “one’s old identities [are] no longer accepted without question” (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.30). Adults develop an increased awareness of context and have enough Cook Greuter describes as a search for “unique gifts or [for] pursuing.. burning questions.” (Cook-Greuter

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<sup>7</sup> Figures compiled from research conducted in the USA

<sup>8</sup> Willow Pearson maps a line of gender specific identity development, through the matrix of emergence, health and pathologies of development

2005, p.30); a description that immediately reminded me of Joseph Campbell's oft quoted injunction to "follow your bliss".

The highest stage of Postconventional development, *Construct Aware* introduces an explicit relatedness between action-logics and transpersonal capacities of being. Characteristics of this stage include deepened self awareness through the observance of mental states, the "conscious experience of non-ordinary states of consciousness" (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.41), and increased "access to intuition, bodily states, feelings, dreams, archetypal and other transpersonal material...[and] the capacity to draw from and appreciate insights from" these sources (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.39). One of the characteristics of this final Postconventional stage is a burgeoning awareness of the possibility of dissolving "the vestiges of the conditional self ... the illusion of our enduring separate identity" (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.39). Cook-Greuter reports that, with increased self awareness persons at the Construct Aware stage experience an increasing sense of the transparency of ego and a "dynamic and multi-faceted understanding of human nature and the complexities of human interaction." (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.37). Also reflective of having developed a complex worldview, they are reported to hold awareness of the constructed nature of the symbolic and an understanding of the interconnected and impermanent nature of being in the world (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.36).

### *Post-postconventional*

Moving into the *Post-postconventional*, the culminative *Unitive*<sup>9</sup> stage of development, drawn from information gathered from both "the ancient wisdom literature" and contemporary research (Cook-Greuter 2005, pp.42-3), is described by Cook-Greuter as a "cross-paradigmatic and transrational.. way of knowing" which supersedes and integrates "all previous knowledge and epistemologies" (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.36). Unitive individuals are described as having the ability to "take multiple points of view and shift focus effortlessly among many states of awareness" (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.43). Operating within an expanded frame of time, embedded in nature, unified in body-mind, the Unitive individual experiences reality as an "undifferentiated phenomenological continuum or the creative ground of unified consciousness"(Cook-Greuter 2005, p.44). From this perspective their life's work, characterised by the values of justice, fairness, and benevolence, is understood simultaneously as an "expression of their unique selves" and part of the conscious unfolding of the evolution of humanity (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.45).

The Unitive stage requires a processual embrace of immanence and transcendence: agency and communion, differentiation and connection, the separative and the soluble. As Cook Greuter explains, at this point in development, much freedom has been gained from realizing "the essential inter-connectedness of all phenomena and the constructed aspects of boundaries, objects ... self-identities and our stories about life and nature. Much suffering is alleviated when the automatic habits of mind and heart are unlearned and uncoupled from memory (what was) and desires (what ought to be) and replaced by mindful, non-evaluative attention to what is - now." (Cook-Greuter 2005, p.46). The transpersonal dimensions of the Unitive stage offer significant resonance with Irigaray's call for a figurative divine horizon of higher potential as: "an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for the abode and for saintliness."(Irigaray 1987, p.67).

Utilising the work of both Cook-Greuter and Gilligan, Wilber presents Integral transpersonal psychology, as a mode in which the translative modes of masculine agency and feminine communion with the transformative drives of Eros and Agape are united. He takes the transcendent and the immanent and articulates them as two ultimately inseparable paths of ascending and descending spirit, and accordingly, as two faces of One God/dess. The masculine face he writes "is pre-eminently Eros... ever-striving to find greater wholeness and wider unions... rejecting the lower in search of the higher." The Feminine face "is pre-eminently Agape ... touching each and every being with perfect and equal grace, rejecting nothing, embracing

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<sup>9</sup> Cook Greuter writes that there is "evidence of many more stages beyond the rational, personal realm or postconventional tier of meaning making". She employs the Unitive as a catchall level which "confounds several distinct higher levels of consciousness" (Cook-Greuter 2005, 42-3).

all. Where Eros strives for the Good of the One in transcendental wisdom, Agape embraces the Many with Goodness and immanent care.”(Wilber 2004, p.81).

*In discussing the relationship between adult development and spiritual practice, Wilber notes that both the masculine and feminine principles of Eros (the ability to witness objectively) and Agape (the ability to subjectively engage) are required to reach higher developmental levels. He writes that in balanced development “one ascends via Eros (or expanding to a higher and wider identity), and then integrates via Agape (or reaching down to embrace with care all lower holons)” (Wilber 1995, p.339). Both of these principles (which he ascribes as being freedom and fullness) are increasingly manifest in the higher stages of development. The equanimous principle and realization of emptiness (Eros) can be translated as Gilligan’s highest stages of masculine moral development, the Universal principle of justice, and the compassionate principle and realization of fullness (Agape), as Gilligan’s feminine principle of Universal Care.*

### **The Sensible Transcendental: Immanent and Transcendent**

The arrival at the highest Unitive development stage is made possible, research suggests, through the pathway of spiritual practice. Feminist philosophers of religion have consistently placed emphasis on the way in which the practice and realisation of immanence (as opposed to transcendence) has been devalued in theology and philosophy. This opposition peels off as just one of the list of dualisms central to the western symbolic, which begin: good/bad, man/woman, masculine/feminine. Breaking down the sense of this oppositional understanding and enfolding each with their reliance upon one another, Irigaray conceptualises a ‘sensible transcendental’ in which transcendent and immanent are not seen as opposites but rather as a play of diversities.

In her most recent works, Irigaray talks of the embodied practices of awareness as found in yoga and tantra: awareness of breath, inhabiting the body and being in communion with nature and all things. With the sensible transcendental she conceptualises “a transcendence which is wholly immanent, not in opposition to the flesh but as the projected horizon for our (embodied) becoming.” (Jantzen 1998, 271-2). She notes “immanence is a necessary condition of transcendence, since no one can achieve intelligence or creativity without the requisite physical complexity” (Jantzen 1998, p.271). This is at one with a processual view of subjectivity in which transcendent growth “is dependent for its actualisation upon the concrete, upon that which is established or given.” (Daniell 2002, p.155). That is, quite simply, transcendence, requires, occurs with and in, immanence.

The Integral transpersonal approach to psychology extends the process of ego development beyond the limits of personal self centred identity, honouring the translative dimensions of agency and communion, “covering the physical, emotional, mental, cultural and communal aspects of the human being” and incorporating transformational spiritual practice, with an eye to the Unitive horizon “in preparation for, and as an expression of, the ultimate transformation into the always-already present state.” (Wilber 1998, p.28). An Integral practice of the sensible transcendental, which collapses the distinction between immanence and transcendence, subverts and collapses the boundaries of dualism into the wide embrace of the non dual.

### *Sexual Difference*

Irigaray is critiqued for her assertion that, “the character of male energy is different from that of female energy and that, as a consequence, the two genders relate differently to the sensible” (Roy 2003, p.17). As previously noted, I am not an advocate of this approach and will not argue for such fundamental essential and irreducible difference. I believe that sexual difference is a necessary development step of subjective differentiation, for both men and women. I believe that it is also just part of our pathway and not the end point.

Sexual difference seen as “the non-dual play of gender in the theatre of the Divine” (Pearson, personal communication) is never “final, ultimate or privileged” (Wilber 2004, p.211). It can never be complete; like

the mobius strip the two sexes, two genders, are intimately in relation, coexistent, co-arising; differences which “cannot exist without the other, and find their own true being by dying into the other, only to awaken together, joined in bliss, as the entire Kosmos” (Wilber 2004, p.211).

While, in this way, separating type from gender, we should not collapse our inquiry into the depths of the questions: What is feminine? What, masculine? And how do they relate to man and woman? Woman is not “the feminine” either in positive or negative terms, nor man “the masculine”. We need to hold in clear awareness that the relationship between “the feminine” and woman, is intimate, and actual yet also historical and contingent.

Embracing the expanded spectrum and horizon of development, and taking feminist developmental work into consideration, the pathway for women to towards this highest Unitive stage would have a significantly different flavour, specifically reflective of, and historically anchored to, the contemporary socio-cultural context. Any illustration of the journey towards the divine horizon must address, explicate and analyse the particular reasons for the development, and subsequent effects, of “women’s more permeable ego-boundaries on their patterns of personal and spiritual development.” (Wright 1998, p.210). The journey of women’s development would have to look at the particular “qualities and values that flow” (Wright 1998, p.211) from the action-logics of a ‘feminine’ self. Yet it must remain clear that the traits designated as ‘female’, or ‘feminine’ tendencies, are not essential or exclusive to women, but are specifically related to socio-temporal conditions and arise co-dependently from within a matrix of being in the world. In re-examining the path of development, we might find space not just for the specifics of the journey of the woman (never complete or unchanging), but also for new conceptions (and ideals) of subjectivity.

Which leads me to the question; does a differently gendered path lead towards a different Unitive horizon for women? For me this is beautifully, if perhaps only partially, answered in Tibetan Buddhist lore. There is the story, believed to be many aeons old, of the vow of Princess Yeshe Dawa, or Tara, whose name means Moon of Wisdom. The full moon in Buddhist symbology represents the full realisation of the ultimate truth of absolute and relative truth. In the West Yeshe Dawa is more commonly known as the Buddhist goddess Tara. In this tale the princess, after much consistent and determined spiritual practice “awoke”. Her state drew the attention of monks who came to advise her that while previous good karma had allowed her to manifest in human form: “If you pray that your deeds accord with the teachings, then indeed on that account you will change your form to that of a man, as is befitting.” (Templeman, 1981) Her reply, befitting her state of awakened insight, is astute “ In this life there is no such distinction as “male” and “female”, neither of “self identity”, a “person” nor any perception, and therefore attachment to ideas of “male” and “female” is quite worthless. The weak minded are always deluded by this.” (Templeman, 1981). Another translation suggests Tara’s reply as “Nowhere can I find what is male, nowhere can I find what is female. These are simply forms no more separate from one another than a wave from water.” (Galland 1990, p.50). In accord with her state of awakened compassion Yeshe Dawa vowed to defer her own release from the karmic round by taking the form of bodhisattva as a woman “ There are many who wish to gain enlightenment in a man’s form”, she said, “there are but few who wish to work for the welfare of all living beings in a female form. Therefore may I, in a female body, work for the welfare of beings right until Samsara has been emptied.”(Galland1990, p.50).

In her answer, Yeshe Dawa acknowledges that woman is without separate solidity of being (on the level of the absolute gender is empty) and yet, recognising woman as a less honoured human incarnation she is accordingly, championed. I believe this is a wonderful example of the gendered face of the divine at the level of the Unitive, both wholly beyond gender and wholly present, realised as the divine in female form.

### **About the Author**

Sarah Nicholson is a PhD candidate at the University of Western Sydney; her doctoral thesis “In the footsteps of the heroine” explores the contours of an Integral feminist spiritual philosophy.

### **Contact Details**

Sarah Nicholson  
Writing and Society Group  
University of Western Sydney  
[Sass@people.net.au](mailto:Sass@people.net.au)

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