

**Evaluations of Paper Proposals for the 1999 WTS Meeting  
Southern Nazarene University, March 5-6**

Proposal submitted by: Dianne Leclerc, professor of historical theology, Northwest Nazarene College

Topic: "Two Women Speaking 'Woman'": The Strategic Essentialism of Luce Irigaray and Phoebe Palmer"

Comments by the evaluator:

\_\_\_\_\_ This proposal should not be accepted for use in the 1999 program.

\_\_\_\_\_ This proposal should be discussed during the conference call.

Evaluator's name \_\_\_\_\_

Topic Proposal for the  
Wesleyan Theological Society  
Thirty-fourth Annual Meeting  
March 5-6, 1999 at SNU

"Two Women Speaking 'Woman':  
The Strategic Essentialism of  
Luce Irigaray and Phoebe Palmer

by  
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In an article first printed in 1960, Valerie Saiving asserted that while "it would be ridiculous to deny that there is a structure of experience common to both men and women, so that we may legitimately speak of the 'human situation,' without reference to sexual identity," she goes on to ask rhetorically "whether we have described the human situation correctly by taking account of the experiences of both sexes."<sup>1</sup>

Saiving's question helped ignite the fire of feminist theology for years to come. However, while Saiving's thesis--that theology has been dominated by men for centuries and thus represents an incomplete, if not inadequate perspective--has been embraced by most feminist theologians who themselves have challenged the "orthodox" paradigm, to speak, as Saiving has, of a "basic feminine character structure" is not longer "orthodox" among more recent feminist theorists. Indeed, such an "essentialist" construction has become a rather "heretical" view.<sup>2</sup> The philosophical underpinnings of Saiving's theory have been increasingly called into question over the course of the last thirty years. Even those who want to maintain the "strategic" value of naming a female "essence" for the purpose of "suiting the situation,"<sup>3</sup> do so from a very different place. And that different place is the place where

difference, not essence, is the new and dominant charter.<sup>4</sup> Metanarratives have been replaced by "microresistances."<sup>5</sup> The category of "femaleness" has become tenuous. The "characteristic" distinctions between "men" and "women" are now seen as culturally constructed. Even the casual differentiation between sex (as a biological reality) and gender (as a social construct) is now being questioned by some theorists; sex has itself been identified as a cultural construction.<sup>6</sup>

If gender can no longer be identified with certainty, if the differences and diversity among "women" are now the points of emphasis, and if there is nothing that is "essentially" female, where, many are asking, is the commonality that once fueled the political fires of the feminist movement?<sup>7</sup> Does "feminism" itself stand at the cliff of a theoretical paradox that elicits political despondency? Is it at the brink of a linguistic non-existence? Can there be such a thing as a postmodern, poststructuralist, anti-essentialist feminism?<sup>8</sup> Feminism seems to be looking for a "courage to be" in the face of such anxiety over ontology.<sup>9</sup> In the

midst of such a debate, one that for many feminists has ceased to be productive, the work of Luce Irigaray beckons.

Beneath the of layers linguistic play, philosophical restructuring, and iconoclastic unveiling in Irigaray's oeuvre, one can begin to infer a process of subjectification for women that has both internal and social consequences. Particularly in her more recent works, Irigaray implies that hope in the future depends on humanity's (men and women's) willingness to strive for true subjectivity; ironically, a recognition of *difference* between subjectivities is the means of overcoming the linguistic and psychic patterns that maintain alienation and a destructive alterity. She warns, "It is vital that a culture of the sexual, as yet nonexistent, be elaborated, with each sex being respected."<sup>10</sup> This acknowledgement of difference necessarily implies a kind of "essentialism" for Irigaray; however, this essentialism is anything but naive. Rather, it is an "essentialism which is not one."<sup>11</sup> This essentialism is required precisely because "female" is a gender "which is not one" (meaning, there is only one true gender: "male"); "female," then, is only defined as "not male" under a misogynistic linguistic economy. Thus, when Irigaray "calls" women to "assume the role of women deliberately,"<sup>12</sup> she does so *not* because she believes in a predetermined and universal nature subsequently marked as female, but because she asserts that

it is only when a woman ceases "to identify herself as a 'masculine subject'"<sup>13</sup> that she can begin to "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation,"<sup>14</sup> and regain the "specificity of her relationship to the imaginary."<sup>15</sup> And thus claiming an essential difference is the very means by which objectification is "thwarted." By strategically affirming an essential difference, woman takes a "gender" as woman, and not just as "not male," and in doing so she becomes a subject.

"Any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine,'"<sup>16</sup> according to Irigaray. When masculine rhetoric is directly and violently misogynistic, when it avowed women's essential emotional and intellectual incapacity, women are objectified to suit various male agendas. And yet, when women in leadership are praised in a religious context, they are perhaps even more objectified, for the praise is often for their approximation toward the masculine.

Women in other historical periods did attempt this type of approximation. Ascetic women of the fourth century, for example, became "male" as a means of attaining particular liberties uncommon for women in late antiquity. A key aspect in this gender metamorphosis was the volitional (strategic) "denial" of the maternal body and maternal responsibilities. Similarly, many of John Wesley's female correspondents *found* themselves (figuratively and literally) in (or through) a "single" situation; although an official vow of virginity was not required, Wesley's advice was often quite forceful: God could be better served if a woman was not weighed down with domestic responsibility. Many of Wesley's

female intimates followed his counsel, and as a result they too "ascended" to traditionally male ministerial roles as "female brethren." However, in the case of Phoebe Palmer we see no such defeminizing maneuvers; they are so absent, in fact, that contemporary interpreters have had difficulty deciding whether Palmer should be cast as a feminist or as a champion of Victorian ideals of feminine domesticity. Or to expose the real nature of the scholarly dilemma, could there be such a thing as a "fully" "feminine" "feminist"? If there has been such a woman, it was Phoebe Palmer. In other words, although Palmer's life does in fact evidence a rather extraordinary transcendence of nineteenth-century social roles, she was never attacked for assuming masculine positionalities. In her writings and through her career, Palmer can be seen as a "strategic essentialist."

This paper will explore Phoebe Palmer's "essentialism" through Luce Irigaray's paradigm of female speech and female subjectivity. In doing so, it will give an aspect of the holiness tradition and its theology a quite relevant (and certainly not naive) shape in response to the postmodern world and its poststructuralist paradigm.