

THE POSTMODERN “SAINTS” OF FRANCE

- Topic: The Postmodern “Saints” of France
 Convener: Colby Dickinson, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
 Moderator: Christopher Ruddy, Catholic University of America
 Presenters: Colby Dickinson, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
 Phyllis Kaminski, Saint Mary’s College
 Petra Turner Harvey, University of Virginia

This session based on the various turns to “sainthood” in contemporary French thought centered around its three presentations on the work of Jean Genet, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-Luc Marion. The selection of these three diverse figures over a range of time periods further provided evidence that the notion of being a saint in French “secular” thought plays a pivotal though often undisclosed role. Accordingly, following the presentations, there was a substantial engagement with the attendees as to the impact of French thought on our theological conceptualizations of sainthood in general. Additionally of note, each of these papers, along with a number of other related essays, is currently being collected as an edited volume set to be published sometime (most likely) in 2012-2013.

Colby Dickinson’s paper on “Jean Genet versus *Saint Genet*: Seeking redemption on the edges,” brought to light the often neglected literary efforts of the French novelist Jean Genet, someone who had once scandalized French culture with his openly homosexual and criminal protagonists in the middle of the last century. After the publication of Jean-Paul Sartre’s study *Saint Genet*, his work quickly rose to prominence and introduced the world to the “inverted” moral order of his theologically inflected writings. In his presentation, Dickinson drew upon both Genet’s novels and his later political activist writings in order to illustrate not only Genet’s conception of the saint as one who finds an interior world of solitude to support them in contrast to the world, but also, and especially in his later years, how this solitude became for him something translatable to the other among us, even if this is registered as a “betrayal” of our solitary selves. Indeed, for Genet such a putting of the self at risk is the only way to achieve love, let alone a socially recognizable subjectivity. As such, Genet’s work was shown to contain some pertinent and revolutionary seeds for defining “the saint” within a theological context, no matter how distant at times his work might seem from a particular context of faith.

Phyllis Kaminski, in her paper “Holy Mary, Holy Desire: Luce Irigaray and Sainthood Daughters,” approached the question of saintliness through the work of Luce Irigaray and the multiple strategies she proposes to transform the constructed position of daughters/women in Western culture and religion. She used Irigaray’s reflections on Mary to sketch three interrelated aspects of embodied holiness: women’s fidelity to incarnation “according to their gender”; the cultivation of an interiority proper to them as women; and relations between the sexes that foster justice in this world. Kaminski showed how Irigaray appropriates and deconstructs these traditional ideals and corresponding religious practices to suggest a

different way of being and becoming for women. Her critical reading of Irigaray's feminine subjectivity linked Irigaray's philosophy to contemporary discussions of post-modern identities, the divine fulfillment of human becoming, and social transformation in a global world. Although Irigaray never speaks of saintliness as such, Kaminski suggested that her radical approach to incarnation has much to offer theological understandings of holiness and the communion of saints.

Petra Turner Harvey's essay, "Jean-Luc the Great? The Academic Reception of a Marion Spirituality" explored the way in which Marion's phenomenology lends itself to its current academic reception as a spirituality of sorts. Although Marion has resolutely proclaimed that he is doing phenomenology and not theology, theologically inclined scholars in several disciplines have taken up his phenomenology as a way of exploring religious themes and phenomena that are traditionally excluded from philosophical discourse. However, although the adoption of Marion's construal of the saturated phenomenon was initially enthusiastic, the phenomenologist's devotees quickly became aware of certain limitations within Marion's structure of the relation between the phenomenon and its perceiver, namely, Marion strips the perceiver down to a purely receptive receiver who retains no intentionality prior to the impact of a given phenomenon's intuition. Using Shane MacKinlay's book *Interpreting Excess* as representative of devoted and yet critical scholarship, Harvey shows both why Marion's phenomenology remains so compelling for academics, and also why the inclusion of a hermeneutic dimension in the structure of the receiver renders the saturated phenomenon more robust. Not only does the inclusion of such an interpretive mechanism allow the receiver to be hospitable to the phenomenon, it also more accurately reflects how human beings relate to the things of the world as well as how they make space for the way individuals *ought* to relate to the world. Indeed, seen more as an intentional method of interacting with the world, Marion's phenomenology naturally evolves into a spirituality, which in turn points toward a way of being holy in the world. In this fashion, Marion points to new avenues for thinking the activity of holiness, and what indeed makes one a saint, even if he is reluctant to step into that territory himself.

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