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# Feminist Theology

## *Aims and Objectives of the Journal*

The journal *Feminist Theology* aims to engage a wide readership of women and men, of all ages and walks of life, who seek to discover and share in Feminist Theology in all its various forms. The editors start from the understanding that Feminist Theology is a theology of liberation

- to provide a space for women to discuss religion and spirituality
- to empower women who feel marginalized within their religious tradition
- to provide a forum for lively academic exchange
- to include poetry, liturgy, reflective and experiential writing
- to encourage writers and artists in these areas to value their work and to contribute
- to name and challenge those things which are oppressive to women
- to engage the establishment in debate.

The editors intend *Feminist Theology* to reflect its founding principles of experience, mutuality, creativity, respect, joy, nurture, accessible scholarship and 'hearing women to speech'.

## Introduction

Lisa Isherwood

This volume has its genesis in the growing unease that appears to exist between theologians and theologians – I say appears because as with most things the story is not straightforward and the circumstances as ever are nuanced. It is also worth making clear at the outset that the British, Irish and American situations are very different. At the time of writing Christianity in the USA is taken more seriously by a large number of people than it is in UK and the Christian Right has formed over years an extremely powerful political lobby which has its finger in many pies, including, of course, university education. Therefore the claims by some theologians that they are discriminated against in terms of university employment in the USA may well have foundation – it would of course be more than unfortunate if their feminist sisters were part of that discriminatory practice.

I am not aware that the same perception exists in Britain and Ireland – there are a number of theologians and pagan scholars employed within the academy- and in wondering why I have been led to reconsider the pagan roots of my own culture which have never in truth been completely erased despite the very strong influence of Protestantism. In the USA ‘paganism’ also carries a racist overtone since those who were wiped of their own land were viewed in that light and part of the colonisation was justified by the God who was completely ‘other’ from the inhabitants and their land. While the words pagan and witch trigger off a warm glow in the depths of the Celtic soul I can quite understand why this may not be the case everywhere! [My elderly chapel going neighbour will never discard hair from a hairbrush in case someone wishes to put a spell on her, it always has to be flushed away or burnt. There is no suggestion that the spell would be necessarily bad – just a spell. She is not alone in these practices that only thinly veil a heritage much older than Christianity. How different it all would have been if that great Celtic thinker Pelagius had managed to overcome the bully boy Augustine – the veil would be ever thinner!]

In writing this I am not trying to suggest that there may not be prob-

lems only that any that may exist have their own context and therefore their own solutions. Now seems to be the time to look hard at the relationship between thealogy and theology. Now is a good time to gather our mutual concerns and methods to move again against an increasingly alarming backlash in the academy against us all. It is also a very good time to signal the maturity of the feminist debate through an open discussion of those issues between ourselves that are causing us disease. We have it seems been so concerned about finding a voice at all within the academy that we have been afraid to show what we see as weakness in the movement.

I think this debate which will go on far beyond the edges of these pages offers us a real opportunity. We, more than most, know the power and pain of words, the way in which they can dismiss and marginalise. In finding our voice and embracing another step in our maturity how will we use words? I think this collection of essays will stand to some degree as a judge of whether we have learnt to use words wisely, kindly, yet firmly, in the process of our becoming. I am not suggesting that we hide real difference and difficulty behind a thin veneer of global sisterhood, a concept that many find increasingly untenable, but rather that we find another way of engaging creatively with one another. What is the purpose of our critique, it surely can't be the age old 'I will batter you with words and intellectual gymnastics until you surrender' – that is what we have suffered and I hope do not wish to perpetuate. Should critical analysis become creative engagement in the academic lexicon? After all we are trying to develop greater clarity not set down yet more grand narratives.

What we need are more open forums in which misunderstandings as well as academic debates can be aired. What does seem apparent is that, even if we do not have disagreements with each others stance, we do not state publicly enough our respect for one another. I am convinced that much of the slighting that appears to happen is nothing more than a genuine oversight – that is to say if we are not writing on a topic that has overlap we do not think to acknowledge each other. I am also aware that when we have opportunities we do not always take them. Perhaps this should be a resolution for the future, that we do acknowledge one another.

As this volume illustrates the disease does go deeper than this with a suggestion that there is, at times, misrepresentation of one another. If this is true then it is yet another unfortunate patriarchal trait we need to be mindful of and eradicate from our dealings with one another. Feminist times move on and so do people's positions and despite lives that make it almost impossible we could take time for each other and enquire

into current positions. There is so much richness between us that this time would be precious—can we develop this forum? What are the chances of having a triennial gathering to catch up, to debate and to move forward in solidarity? Thealogy offers a creative critique that theology would be unwise to overlook and while many of those who are theologians have left Christian theology behind and may not wish to look back—a quick glance now and then may act as a good counter to repeating the same patterns of thought.

Some of the articles in this volume respond to an article by Naomi Goldenberg which appeared in 'Embodying Feminist Liberation Theologies'<sup>1</sup> in which she suggests that there has been a domestication of witches and a routinization of goddess talk yet at the same time the goddess is under attack from some within the academy. Goldenberg mentions Cynthia Eller and Rosemary Ruether [the latter offers a reply in this volume] in this respect. Other articles came into being as a result of Carol Christ's concerns about misrepresentation—Mary Grey has responded privately to Carol and is aware that this volume contains detail of their conversation. What emerges is a rich tapestry of opinion and a debate that is further enlivened. Of course, this material has been in the air for quite some time and so conversations have also taken place which will not be in these pages but which also move us on.

I am amazed and delighted that material and opinions that could be seen as utterly divisive are able to appear in the same volume with the consent of all the authors—this alone must be a tribute to feminist method and the way that theologians and theologists lead their lives, even if we don't always get it just spot on. There is so much that unites us but it is time that this be transformed from a naïve desire for unity into a creative and even loving engagement with the fruits of each others labour. Dare we use loving support as an academic method?? I suppose it is this kind of friendship that Mary Daly and Mary Hunt have spoken about in the past, one that crates an environment where we are all safe enough to express our opinions and all challenged enough to express the very best that is in us.

Unlike some of our male colleagues feminist theologians and theologists write from their hearts—not just to get the best academic profile—and we do well to remember this. By creating a loving and supportive environment we can bring forth the best in one another and this is to be encouraged as the brick walls we face have been erected for centuries and will take a lot of trumpet blowing before they fall down. Lets bring

1. *Embodying Feminist Liberation Theologies: A Special edition of Feminist Theology* 12.2, pp. 203-211.

out the best in one another and then blow each others trumpets!!! We have moved from the certainty of universal sisterly unity to a much more diverse and in my opinion exciting place—we would have lost interest in each other a long time ago otherwise. Diversity is a very creative dynamic and feminists have been very good at encouraging its emergence, the next step is to nurture it and live creatively with it.

All the articles in this volume present much food for thought pointing out the strengths and the weaknesses of various positions. Crucially what none of them lose sight of is that women still need to be empowered and to live easily in their own skin and on the planet—we are despite rumours to the contrary, very far from that goal. While engaging, refining and moving all it seems we are all still clear about what this is all for—it is for the continued liberation of women which comes from choice and the ability not only to make it but to see it come to fruition.

I am delighted that this volume has happened and I hope that it will be just one strand in the continuing, creative interchange between thealogs and theologians.

### *The Articles*

This volume opens with a poem written by Asphodel Long, as many of you will know she is one of the Britain's leading thealogs, which poses the question for much of this debate, what language shall we choose?

Carol Christ opens the exchange with her concerns about misrepresentation and a reminder that thealogs have been at the forefront in issues of ethics and sexuality. She wonders if theologians are in fact afraid to engage with the goddess since it comes at a cost.

Rosemary Ruether offers her reply to Naomi Goldenberg along with a consideration of Naomi's point that goddess talk is being normalised. While she fully acknowledges just how dominant discourses have a way of co-opting alternative discourses that they find threatening [just look at Christianity and the Roman Empire!] she nevertheless wonders what is to be gained by making goddess worshippers strange and dangerous.

Kathryn Rountree reflects on Naomi's article largely through the lens of her research amongst New Zealand goddess women. She cautiously celebrates the idea that witches and feminists are becoming more acceptable suggesting that this must mean that the goals we are working for are becoming more mainstream. Rountree is an anthropologist and her insights are extremely informative for thealogs and theologians alike.

Anna Simon's article examines the perception that the goddess movement is in some way self indulgent and not political enough in its ethics.

She clearly shows that much of the work that could be thought of as self indulgent, that is the work on the unconscious and self esteem, is rather foundational work for the political fight. With this extra grounding in the self which much goddess ritual offers women are able to engage more passionately, creatively and effectively with the ethical concerns of the world.

Marguerite Rigoglioso's interview with Starhawk clearly illustrates that far from being self indulgent many of those in the goddess movement are politically active and fuelled by sound theological analysis.

Max Daschu's article is critical of the most recent work of Cynthia Eller in what she sees as a strategic u-turn on Eller's part. Daschu's thorough engagement highlights the strengths and weaknesses of Eller's position. She points out that there are very exciting times ahead with the opening up for a wider audience of the findings from indigenous cultures where the female divine was present but as ever, the understanding of her was nuanced.

Kirsty Coleman examines why people are both attracted to and in equal measure repelled from the female divine – she believes that in both cases the answer lies at the level of semiotics. The world shift that is required when we speak of the female divine is bound, she argues, to provoke very strong reactions – one's world can never be the same again.

Norvene Vest explores the idea that the work of Marija Gimbutas is best understood through the concept of 'the imaginal'. This is a mode of knowledge based in the conceptual and ideational and not in the sensory and empirical – it lies between senses and ideas, a space that is largely forgotten today but is a space that offers significant insights.

Beverley Clack wonders if a pragmatic approach is the most productive way to deal with the apparently conflicting perceptions that theologians and theologists are grappling with. In her paper she offers a consideration of the work of Nancy Frankenberry and Richard Rorty and suggests that a pragmatic approach keeps us all open to the possibilities of change and in that way movement.

Marcella Althaus-Reid considers many of the concerns that sparked the creation of this volume concluding that there are many variations on both in theology and thealogy. In characteristic way she then calls theologians to move on to queer the goddess. In searching for a god/dess who is a 'stranger at the gate', that is one who always subverts the norm, Marcella suggests that queer theory is the way to keep the radical edge. She is concerned that what was once radical is now softening and her call is for a queer thealogy that propels us ever to the edges, a place from where we can make a difference.



## If Women Could Speak, What Language Would They Choose

Asphodel Long

### I

If I could speak, Lady, my first words are for you.  
My first words are of first things which are yours.  
To You, Lady, the leaves in the warm wood,  
The heavy summer leaves against the sky,  
Stirring in a slight wind, shaking sundrops on my body,  
Giving haven to the white butterfly,

My next will be to you, who met me there,  
Who, passing through the spiral, comes each turn and meets me there.  
To you, my love, who are, if you are there,  
Who are you, my love, who is there, are you there,  
Are you my love, you there, are you still there,  
Where are you, my love; my love, you are not there.

Who are you then, lying fallen there  
Trampled and buried, burned and tortured there,  
And each turn of the spiral murdered there,  
Who, humped under the chalk, remembers there,  
The axe, the stake, the spike, the wire, the snare,  
The pestilence of men you suckled there.

Within your sky, your leaves, your sand  
They pick the gun up in their hand  
And bomb and flash and knife and roar  
And laugh and scream beneath your sun  
And lizards run and lizards run  
The old snakes writhe but no-one sees  
They rape and pound with filthy joy.

Let the stones speak who guard the dead.  
The dead here rest within your care.  
The stones look at the screaming wind:  
"The men are there, the men are there".

Lady, if I could speak, what language could I choose?  
From beneath the harrow and the stone  
Below the everlasting heel

Lady, to You, I speak, but wait to hear your voice;  
 Along the warm soft earth, the twittering chaff,  
 Beside the cricket, and the burrowing ant,  
 With the cut corn stalks shaking in their laughter,  
 And a fierce dark moon rising.

If you would speak, what language would You choose?

Black Demeter is neighing like a horse.  
 Persephone offers jonquils for the dead.  
 A scream of Morrigan, Annis waits for blood.  
 Tiamat's severed body calls her son  
 Who laughs away and cuts again for fun.

What language will I choose?  
 I give the sun  
 The warmth the blessing of the daily turn  
 I hold the moon in place.

Your words are yours, your language is your own  
 Your throat speaks what your heart says, knife or not,  
 But knives strike when you speak, the choice is yours.

I speak now Lady, at last, to bring you praise  
 My voice from now shall be for you, my language Yours.  
 And over-run, I'll breathe the earth's moist air  
 And move the sun with you. And, buried there,  
 My ridged body will speak into the air.  
 And who shall hear and who shall hear  
 And who shall hear

## II

If you go walking in a wood in winter,  
 And speak to the stones, half buried in the snow  
 Watch twirling leaves and dry sticks floating  
 Tread into muddy bracken, see still branches,  
 Thin skeletons of bodies yet to flourish,

If you go walking in a winter forest  
 Hear me, sisters, hear me speak again

If you go walking in your silence  
 Stretching your skin to the cold air  
 Stomaching your silence, your acquiescence, your solicitude,

Bearing your guilt, the guilt of too little patience,  
 Your guilt of the wish to speak,  
 Of the wish for a tear of loving,  
 A tear of communion you know can never happen

If you go walking, sister, in a wood in winter  
Stumbling into mud, knee-high,  
Vision a bird scuttling, then flying,  
Winging on to a low horizon;

As I shall speak, my words are meant for you.  
For you sister, weeping in the long grass,  
For you sister, lying on a hard bed  
For you, sister, whispering, hoping, playing, praying,  
Whimpering, imploring, shrilly crying  
Burning with a hard guilt,  
Silent and screaming out your silence.

Who are you, dear sister, image,  
Dressed and undressed, to play, to pay, to be made nothing of,  
To be made into nothing, to become no-one  
To keep silence?

Find a half-buried stone and rest there;  
Stand in the stone's huge shadow and rest there;  
Hide in the stone's curved form and rest there;  
Hear the stones speak for me and rest there.

I was everything who went down into nothing,  
They wrenched my earth and my moon, drowned me into nothing,  
To be forgotten, to be annihilated from time,  
To be no-one, nowhere, no person  
No voice.

I do not exist.

Except in the hard pain in your body,  
The clench at the heart,  
Head throbbing, high pitch of tears,  
The bruise, the cut, the stumble, the bowed head,  
The silence.

### III

Who are those women, standing there and laughing,  
Those women standing there, dancing,  
Those women, singing, talking, speaking, shouting,  
Speaking in some language that some understand  
Speaking with eyes and tongue and head and body  
Speaking.

Who are those women, speaking out, in some language  
Singing with music of flute and strings,  
Walking in spirals through the stone circles,  
Shouting, in my mazes?

Shall the moon see, shall the moon rise  
The serpents move in unison, the snails in circle,  
The goats sing  
Again?

Shall the stones whistle, bound in harmony,  
To be heard, to be contemplated, to be reciprocated.

Shall the slit throat be healed,  
To let sound through  
And the breath come noisily?

Women, defend me.  
I am the dark river bearing your flowers.  
Defend me

I am the night where the dead live,  
The luminous heart of the dark  
Where glistens a whirl of day,  
Defend me.

Your voice is my white seed of creation,  
That I dropped into the garden,

Your voice is the cauldron  
That brews knowledge

Your voice is the satisfied sigh of a contented child;  
The volcano of ecstasy;

Your voice that speaks in language  
(That all understand)  
Defends me.

Brings me up through the thick earth to smile on my daughters.

Who are me.

Blessed Be.

**Musings on the Goddess and Her Cultured Despisers  
Provoked by Naomi Goldenberg<sup>1</sup>**

Carol P. Christ

When I was visiting England in the spring of 2001, Mary Grey invited Ruth Mantin and me to visit her at her university in Salisbury. When we met in a local pub, Mary handed me a copy of her book *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, just published by the Sheffield Academic Press.<sup>2</sup> Mary had inscribed the book, 'To Carol, Thank you for the trail you have blazed, and courage in the quest'. She was eager to tell me that she had found my work inspiring and that I was mentioned in her new book. I should have resisted the temptation, but I thumbed through the Index and turned to pages 32-34 where my work was discussed before I looked at the menu. While waiting for our dinner to arrive, I skimmed the pages, noting that Grey characterized some of the 'excesses' of Goddess practice as 'self-indulgent rituals affirming female sexuality' and that she found contemporary Goddess religion's 'views on evil and tragedy unconvincing'.<sup>3</sup> Summing up the seven pages (in a one hundred and seventeen-page book) that she devoted to Goddess religion, Grey concurred with views she attributed to Rosemary Radford Ruether. Contemporary Goddess religion is likely to 'fail' because it has 'no adequate role for

1. Naomi Goldenberg, 'Witches and Words', in Beverley Clack (ed.), *Embodying Feminist Liberation Theologies: A Special Issue of Feminist Theology* 12.2 (January 2004).

2. Mary Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

3. Grey discusses this issue further on pages 95-97. There she gives an account of my work that confuses Kathleen Sands' summaries of positions found in my earlier work with the full fledged theology presented in *Rebirth of the Goddess* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998 [1997]). She fails to note that in *Rebirth* I responded to Sands in a section called 'Irretrievable Loss and Tragedy' (*Rebirth*, 130-32). Her assertion that I 'blur the distinctions between Goddess as metaphor for nature... and the goddess as reality' (Grey, 32) also suggest that Grey did not carefully read *Rebirth* where I clearly affirm the Goddess as 'the intelligent embodied love that is the ground of all being', (*Rebirth*, 107). Grey's patronizing reference to my use of process philosophy (Grey, 32) contrasts strongly with leading process theologian John Cobb's positive response on the front page of the paperback edition of *Rebirth*.

men'<sup>4</sup> and because takes a 'quiescent attitude toward the global need for structural justice'.<sup>5</sup> I saw that my Goddess theology, *Rebirth of the Goddess* published in 1997, had not been cited in this section, while Melissa Raphael's *Introducing Theology* published in 1999 in the same series as Grey's book merited a footnote but no substantive discussion.<sup>6</sup> Both Raphael and I had responded to the charge that that rituals affirming female sexuality are self-indulgent, and we had each devoted an entire chapter to Goddess ethics. In my book I specifically discussed the structural nature of injustice and offered Nine Touchstones of Goddess ethics as an alternative to the Ten Commandments of Biblical religion. 'Nurture life. Walk in love and beauty. Trust the knowledge that comes through the body. Speak the truth about conflict, pain, and suffering. Take only what you need. Think about the consequences of your actions for seven generations. Approach the taking of life with great restraint. Practice great generosity. Repair the web'.<sup>7</sup> The ethical concerns of leaders and participants in the Goddess movement – for example Starhawk's direct action protests against the nuclear industry and globalization and Charlene Spretnak's involvement in the Green Party in California – were not mentioned.<sup>8</sup> Instead the familiar charge that the Goddess movement has no concern for social justice was repeated. It seemed incredible to me that a feminist scholar would omit important facts and the most substantial theoretical work from her discussion, especially when her intent was to discredit the work of other feminists. I was surprised that the other editors of the series would let her get away with it.<sup>9</sup> Imagine if someone had tried to write that Christian feminism lacked a social ethic. It is an understatement to say that I lost my appetite for the English pub food that soon arrived at the table.

A work titled *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (not for example *Introducing Christian Feminist Images of God*) might have provided the opportunity to engage in an even-handed discussion of feminist work on

4. Not noting that Starhawk's Reclaiming movement includes men.

5. *Rebirth*?, 2-33.

6. Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

7. *Rebirth of the Goddess*, 167.

8. I mention these actions solely as examples; they do not exhaust the list of Goddess feminists' social concerns. I am not arguing that everyone who is interested in the Goddess is a radical social activist. But this is true of every group. Not all Christians are radical social activists either. I am certain that the proportion of those who support feminist, liberal, and left-wing causes is higher in the Goddess movement than in Christianity.

9. Editors of the series *Introductions in Feminist Theology* are Mary Grey, Lisa Isherwood, Catherine Norris and Janet Wootton.

images of divinity from Christian, Jewish, Goddess, and other perspectives. In such a discussion the work of Goddess feminists might well have been central, given that Goddess feminists have devoted a great deal of attention to the question of imagery. Such a discussion might even have provided a chance for a Christian feminist to acknowledge the many ways in which the Goddess movement has influenced Christian feminist rituals and efforts re-imagine God as Sophia. Yet the strategy of Grey's book was to introduce the Goddess movement in order to dismiss it. Having done so, she could get on with the real subject of her book, which (though it includes a token chapter on Jewish feminism) is focused on Christian feminist work on images of God.

What Grey did in her book is something that many Christian feminist theologians have been doing for a long time – closing off dialogue with Goddess feminists and denying the importance of our work. Mary Grey's work is not unique. I would not feel the need to respond to it publicly if it were an isolated instance. But it is part of a trend that can be traced in part to the influence that the lectures and writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether<sup>10</sup> have had in shaping the contexts in which the Goddess movement is understood. In *Gaia and God* Ruether symbolizes religions that celebrate the body, nature, and a 'sacramental' view of the world as religions of 'Gaia'. In contrast, the monotheistic religions of 'God' are characterized by 'prophetic judgment' on selfishness or egocentrism in the lives of individuals and nations. Ruether asserts that an adequate religious worldview will include both 'Gaia' and 'God'. For Ruether religions of God without Gaia run the danger of sacrificing the world to the (alleged) judgment of God, while religions of Gaia alone lack the principle of prophetic judgment which (Ruether believes) is the ground of ethics.<sup>11</sup> In terms of this scheme, it is easy to see that the conclusion that contemporary Goddess religion is narcissistic or egocentric and lacking a satisfactory ethic could be inferred *a priori* – without examining the evidence. Examination of the evidence would reveal that participants in contemporary Goddess religion have strong ethical concerns.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary feminist Goddess religion roots ethics

10. Sometimes quoted out of context so that they appear to be more negative toward Goddess religion than they would seem if all of Ruether's work were considered.

11. See *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

12. See Kathryn Rountree's excellent anthropological study, *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-Makers in New Zealand* (London: Routledge, 2003) and her essay in this issue of *Feminist Theology*, 'The Lion, the Witch and the Celebration of Discursive Diversity'.

in reverence and love for life and the web of life — not in a transcendent or prophetic principle of judgment. Recognizing that ethics do not have to be rooted in a transcendent principle of justice uncovers the fallacy (or phallacy?) of theories that assume that earth-based, Goddess, or 'Gaian' religions are unethical.

Compared to many other Christian feminists, Mary Grey stands out for the fact that she read and engaged some of the thea-logical literature. In contrast, in *Introducing Feminist Theology*, Anne M. Clifford's discussion and dismissal of the value and importance of Goddess movement is set entirely within the context of her summary of Rosemary Radford Ruether's critique of it. Indeed a large and attractive photograph of Ruether dominates the pages where Clifford explains the Goddess movement away.<sup>13</sup> Another indication that Goddess religion is not being taken seriously enough is a 2002 Conference on Religion and the Feminist Movement was held at Harvard University. Its stated purpose was to gather information for writing the history of feminism and religion in North America in the late twentieth century. Yet the conference was held on one of the major holidays of the Goddess movement and its invited participants included two representatives of the Goddess movement, three Jews, and two Muslims, along with *eighteen* Christians.<sup>14</sup> I estimate that there are at least as many Goddess feminists in North America today as there are Christian feminists. Sally Roesch Wagner has documented the way in which Susan B. Anthony wrote Matilda Joslyn Gage out of the history of the women's suffrage movement because of her radical critique of Christianity in *Woman, Church, and State*.<sup>15</sup> I fear that history is about to be repeated.

Something strange is going on in this process. Privately, Mary Grey tells me that she is grateful for the trail I have blazed, while in print she accuses me and the movement of which I am part of not having the same kinds of concern for global justice that she and other Christian feminists have. Unfortunately, Grey is not alone in this kind of private-public split. Throughout the years, many Christian women have told me of their great respect for the bravery and courage evident in my work, perhaps

13. Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 93-95.

14. The conference began on November 1; for many Goddess worshippers the night October 31 is holy. The conference also included Mary Daly, who refuses to be categorized, and a post-Christian humanist.

15. Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church and State: The Original Expose of Male Collaboration Against the Female Sex* (Introduction by Sally Roesch Wagner; Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1980).



even gesturing to their own Isis earrings or Nile River Goddess pendants. Yet at the same time they speak of their fear that if they are too open about their interest in the Goddess they might lose their positions in the academy or the church.

I wonder what Mary Grey had in mind when she spoke of the excesses and self-indulgence of feminist rituals that affirm female sexuality. What does she imagine we are doing? In a world where women's bodies are despised and commodified, where women's bodies are raped, beaten, and sold, is it excessive and self-indulgent to imagine that the female body is sacred? Is it brave, bold, and liberating for Christian women to affirm themselves in the image of Sophia saying, 'with nectar between our thighs, we invite a lover, we birth a child; with our warm body fluids, we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations',<sup>16</sup> but excessive and self-indulgent if the same words are spoken in a Goddess ritual? What is the difference? Is it that one group of women claims connection to Christian tradition while the other does not?

Since the ethical concern of Goddess feminists is well documented, why is it that the movement continues to be caricatured as 'quiescent' and unconcerned about social justice? Is it self-indulgent narcissistic navel-gazing when Starhawk and members of Reclaiming are arrested in the direct action movement against globalization in the name of the Goddess? Is the same action done in the name of the prophets or Jesus expressive of a deep concern for social justice? Or is it that Christian feminists really do not know that Goddess feminists are concerned with social justice? And if not, why not, when it is a matter of public record? Starhawk's *Dreaming the Dark* in which she describes the anti-nuclear work of the Reclaiming movement has sold over 100,000 copies. Charlene Spretnak is editor of *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* and co-author of *Green Politics*.<sup>17</sup> Shouldn't Christian feminists who generalize about the lack of ethics in the Goddess movement have been aware of these and other books and the activities related to them?

16. This is the famous prayer from the first Re-Imagining Conference held in Minneapolis, Minnesota USA in 1993. See Nancy J. Berneking and Pamela Carter Joem, (eds.), *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 19-20.

17. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982 [1997]); an excerpt from this book was printed in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (eds.), *Weaving the Visions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) bringing evidence of Starhawk's actions to an additional 50,000 readers. Also see Starhawk, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002); Charlene Spretnak, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1982); Fritjof Capra and Charlene Spretnak, *Green Politics* (New York: Dutton, 1984).

Over the years I have speculated about why Christian feminists insist on calling the Goddess movement narcissistic and self-indulgent while characterizing themselves as concerned with social justice. Sometimes I have concluded that insofar as this false dichotomy keeps women from exploring the Goddess movement, it serves the interests of religious institutions, including the seminaries where many academic feminist Christians are employed. At other times I have wondered if Christian feminists have a psychological need to dismiss the Goddess movement, because if they took it seriously, they might be tempted to join it (and then they might lose their jobs and invitations to participate in events sponsored by Christian institutions). Reflecting on the way Mary Grey characterized the 'excesses' of the Goddess movement, another explanation comes to mind. Grey's discomfort with 'rituals affirming female sexuality' eerily echoes the Biblical prophets' judgment against the people of the land who sacrificed on every high hill and under every green tree. For the prophets it was an either-or matter: *either* rituals celebrating sexuality and the fertility of the land *or* ethical concern. When Christian feminists worry about the potential 'excesses' involved in celebrating female sexuality in Goddess rituals, are they simply repeating the prophetic judgment against the people of the land, while reserving the moral high ground for themselves? Is this the source of the contrast between 'Gaia' and 'God'? Is it possible that some Christian feminists have learned the lessons of patriarchal religion all too well – and that they become uncomfortable when attention is paid to the female body and female sexuality?

At the pub in Salisbury, Mary Grey defended her characterization of the Goddess movement and my work. But after further discussion over a lovely lunch at her (very 'Gaian') thatched cottage on the edge of a stream in rural England, Mary apologized to me for misreading my work and for misrepresenting the Goddess movement. She offered to make 'public amends – in both writing and in lecturing'.<sup>18</sup> This demonstrates the fruits that may come of difficult conversations between Christian and Goddess feminists. Yet the apology of one individual will mean very little if other Christian feminists continue to distort the work of Goddess feminists in order to dismiss it. What is required is that the work of Goddess feminists be taken seriously and evaluated fairly by Christian feminists and vice versa. Whether we are Christian, Jewish, or Goddess feminists, we are all interested in creating positive images of female power including female sexuality, and we are all interested in changing the

18. Email from Mary Grey to Carol P. Christ, 8 May, 2001.

symbolic and social structures that dictate that women and children are the poorest of the poor the world around. We are all questioning whether we can ever go to war with God on our side.<sup>19</sup> As Mary Grey and I have learned, there are fertile grounds for dialogue.

19. See for example, Mary Hunt, 'War: A Feminist Religious View', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18.1 (Spring 2002), 51-52, and Carol P. Christ, 'Can We Ever Go to War with God on Our Side', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18.2 (Fall 2002), 79-82.

## Response to Naomi Goldenberg

Rosemary Radford Ruether

What is unfortunate in Naomi's is that she then turns to a diatribe against Cynthia Eller's recent book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* and then against me that is largely a caricature that misrepresents both of us. Cynthia Eller's book largely reflects the consensus of contemporary feminist archaeologists, such as Margaret Conkey, that the work of 'Goddess' archaeologists, such as Marija Gimbutus, represent poor historical and archaeological work. But Eller does not simply argue against the historicity of the thesis of Paleolithic matricentric cultures, but also raises an equally important second agenda; i.e., whether the work of such matricentric historical theory is not itself based on an essentialist view of male and female that is unhelpful. Goldenberg ignores this second half of her argument.

In reporting on my talks in Ottawa Goldenberg indulges in a systematic misrepresentation of what I said that is astonishing to me. She presents me as 'mocking' the word 'thealogy'. I did no such thing. I stumbled over the pronunciation of this word and some people giggled in the audience. This had nothing to do with mocking the term, but rather with referring to it as an important contemporary movement. Nor did I say that this movement has no ethics. On the contrary I have long appreciated the way in which Wiccan leaders, such as Starhawk, have powerfully united Goddess spirituality and social justice and am presently working on a book that celebrates her work among others.

In my comments about Goddesses as 'not necessarily feminists' I was referring to a major book done by feminist scholars of Indian Goddesses, entitled *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses* (ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen Erndl; New York University Press, 2000). This book explores what these feminist scholars well know, namely that much of the profile of South Asian Goddesses have been shaped mostly by males for a male spirituality that largely continued to marginalize Indian women. This doesn't mean, as they make clear, that Goddesses cannot be helpful for feminism, but that much of the traditional image of these Goddesses needed to be reinterpreted. How this is reinterpreted,

especially by Western feminists, coming out of a very different society and history, can sometimes be problematic and smack of a kind of cultural exploitation.

I am presently working on a book about ancient Near Eastern Goddesses and the remnants of feminine language for the divine in Judaism and Christianity. I would make a somewhat similar argument about these traditions as well, including the Goddesses of cultures, such as ancient Babylonia, Egypt and Greece. Most of these Goddesses, as they are known from surviving texts, have been shaped by men for male interests. Appropriating them for modern feminism entails a reinterpretation. This does not mean that such reinterpretation is illegitimate. It simply means acknowledging that it is a modern reinterpretation. Most contemporary Wiccans would be quite comfortable with that recognition.

Goldenberg faults me for not acknowledging that the basis for my ecological theology lies in ideas taken from Carol Christ. The reason why I did not acknowledge this is because, in fact, my work in this area is not taken from Carol Christ. It is taken from a long process of reinterpreting some of the alternative lines of thought in the Jewish and Christian traditions, as is quite evident in my book *Gaia and God*, published in 1992. I also am deeply influenced by Brazilian theologian, Ivone Gebara, and it was she that I was referring to in my suggestions about alternative immanentist readings of the Trinity.

If Carol Christ's more recent work, particularly her yet to be published work on theological process theology (**due in June 2003**) is similar to my and Gebara's ideas, that is wonderful! It reflects what I see as a convergence of ideas across many different traditions, all of whom are working from similar concerns for an ecofeminist critique of patriarchy. The reasons why these patterns of thought are similar is not because I am 'stealing' from Carol Christ and not acknowledging my debt to her, but because we are all responding to similar threats and finding somewhat parallel solutions.

Goldenberg's diatribe strikes me as a throw back to the 70s in which my critique of the Goddess movement was misinterpreted by her and others. It does not reflect my views of the Goddess movement either then or now. My acquaintance with ancient Goddesses and my appreciation for them goes back well before that to my early studies in classics in the 1950s. I do not reject and have never rejected women deciding to leave Christianity or other patriarchal religions to explore other options, including re-created Goddess religions. I did and do object to bad history and to claims about what 'all women need' that do not reflect my own experience.

I think the time is long overdue to listen carefully enough to each other to actually represent fairly what each of us is actually saying. This is certainly the state of the dialogue between Christian, Jewish and Goddess feminists today.

## The Normalization of Goddess Religion

Rosemary Radford Ruether

In a recent article, entitled 'Witches and Words' Naomi Goldenberg expressed her regret that witchcraft and Goddess religion are becoming normalized.<sup>1</sup> She wished that witches would continue to speak in 'witchy' ways that would be strange and spooky to the dominant culture. Witches should retain their 'otherness' to this dominant culture. I initially felt sympathetic toward this plea. The dominant culture has enormous power to 'coopt' every new movement and integrate it into its system in a way that deprives it of any critical power. But I soon came to reflect on the contradictoriness of Goldenberg's plea. Had she not herself made a major contribution toward this normalization of witches and Goddess religion in academe by inviting its leaders to speak at universities and at the American Academy of Religion?

Perhaps it is all too easy for academics to wish others to remain strange. Perhaps those who wish to worship the Goddess and form Wiccans covens do not want to be regarded as strange and dangerous? On the contrary, their many overtures to both the academy and to the dominant society in North America express the intention to present themselves as an acceptable option within American religion. To appear strange and dangerous is for them to be misrepresented in ways that falsify their beliefs; for example, to be characterized as worshipping the Devil, and also to be persecuted by those who fear them. This they do not see as in their best interests. Rather they wish to explain what they are about in ways that, if not acceptable to everyone, at least fall within the dominant definitions of 'good' values. This is evident in the actual history of the Goddess movement in the last thirty years. I will trace this process of seeking normalization in the history of the Covenant of the Goddess group in the last thirty years.

In the mid-1970s the neo-pagan movement began to organize on national and regional levels and to seek legal status as a recognized

1. This article appears in Beverley Clack (ed.), *Embodying Feminist Liberation Theologies, A Special Issue of Feminist Theology* 12.2 (January, 2004).

American religion. On March 1, 1975 some forty witches from fifteen California covens came together in Oakland to explore their differences and commonalities. They decided to found the organization of the Covenant of the Goddess on that day. A committee was designated to draft a charter and by-laws. On the summer solstice of that year 150 witches and pagans gathered at a retreat in Mendocino county for mid-summer festival. The charter and by-laws of the Covenant of the Goddess was unanimously ratified at that time.

The covenant sought to carefully balance centralizing functions and local control. A National Board handles issues of legal standing and questions about the Craft as a whole. The governing body is the Grand Council made up of representatives of all member covens. Board members cannot vote at Council meetings. There are also Local Councils for covens in areas close enough to get together on a regular basis. These sponsor festivals, set up training programs and establish the credentials of member covens. The Covenant does not ordain, but issues ministerial credentials to members whom particular covens have designated. The Covenant does not pronounce about the legitimacy of any group that does not join them, but it has 'determined that we who are members of the Covenant are of the same religion and respect some essentially identical Craft Laws'.<sup>2</sup>

Representatives of the Covenant of the Goddess participated in the meetings of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993 and 1999, and also in Capetown, South Africa in December of 2000. The participation of the Covenant, as well as other neo-pagan groups, aroused criticism from conservative Christians, such as the Orthodox, but their presence was affirmed by the organizers of the Parliament. The Parliament, first held in Chicago in 1893, has typically been a forum for smaller religious groups seeking recognition in American culture vis a vis dominant forms of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Groups such as Sihks, Jains and Baha'i were also well represented.

The Covenant of the Goddess held workshops and prepared papers and pamphlets for distribution at the Parliament to explain to the other participants and the general public who they are. One of these papers, written by Selene Fox, leader of Circle Sanctuary of Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, is titled 'I am Pagan'.<sup>4</sup> This is a two page description of her faith as a

2. This is taken from a pamphlet prepared for the Parliament of the World's Religions (Berkeley, CA: Covenant of the Goddess, 1993, 1999), p. 2.

3. In the 1893 Parliament in Chicago had representatives of Hinduism and Buddhism.

4. Circle Sanctuary, Box 219, Mt. Horeb, WI 53572, [www.circlesanctuary.org](http://www.circlesanctuary.org).



pagan designed to present paganism as a reasonable and attractive religious option.

I am Pagan. I am part of the whole of Nature. The Rocks, the Animals, the Plants, the Elements, and Stars are my relatives. Other humans are my sisters and brothers, whatever their races, colors, genders, sexual orientation, nationalities, religions, lifestyles. Planet Earth in my home. I am part of this large family of Nature, not the master of it. I have my own special part to play and I seek to discover and play that part to the best of my ability. I seek to live in harmony with others in the family of Nature, treating others with respect.

This description goes on to talk about the eight seasonal festivals celebrated by the Covenant and the celebrations that mark the seasons of life.

I celebrate the changing seasons, the turning of the Wheel of the Year... I also honor the seasons of life within my life's journey, beginnings, growth, fruition, harvest, endings, rest and beginnings again. Life is a Circle with many cycles. With very Ending comes a new Beginning, within Death there is the promise of Rebirth.

Fox then describes Magic as 'intentional consciousness change'. Citing the Wiccan Rede, 'And it harm none, do what you will', magic is discussed as healing rituals, 'to help and to heal others, myself and the Planet'.

Theologically Fox defines herself as a Pantheist, 'acknowledging the Divine is everywhere and in everything'. All that has a physical body also has a spiritual body. The physical and the spiritual are intertwined. Creator and Creation are interconnected. Although honoring many manifestations of the divine in gods and goddesses, there is also a oneness underlying all things. 'I honor Divine Oneness, the Unity of All'. Paganism is also seen as a tolerant, non-proselytizing religion. Although open to sharing its faith to anyone truly interested. There is no one 'right way for everyone. There are many paths up the mountain of spiritual understanding'.

Paganism is also described as a religion concerned about ecology, militarism and social justice:

I hear the cries of Mother Earth who is upset with the harm being done to the environment by humankind. I am dismayed by the pollution of the air, the soil and the waters, and by the domination games being played by nations with the fire of nuclear missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. I am also concerned about the spiritual pollution on the Planet – selfishness, hatred, greed for money and addiction, violence and despair. Yet as I perceive these problems, I also perceive cleansing and healing happening on Planet Earth at this time. I know that I can help in at least a

small way to bring Planet Earth into greater balance by seeking balance in my own life, by being a catalyst for restoring balance in the lives of others, and by working for a better environment.

Fox concludes with the words:

I am pagan. Nature spirituality is my religion and my life's foundation. Nature is my spiritual teacher and holy book. I am part of Nature and Nature is part of me. My understanding of Nature's inner mysteries grows as I journey on this spiritual path.

In their ecumenical outreach the Covenant of the Goddess and other groups, such as EarthSpirit in Massachusetts<sup>5</sup> define themselves as seeking solidarity with any spiritual path that embraces similar concerns about the sacredness of all life. One does not find in this literature diatribes against Christians or Jews as inherently patriarchal or anti-nature. A special affinity is seen with the indigenous shamanist religions found throughout the world, such as those of American Indians or Africans. Wicca itself is defined as a revival of the 'ancient, pre-Christian indigenous religion of Europe'.<sup>6</sup>

As Wiccan or neo-pagan groups became more public, they also faced virulent attacks led by fundamentalist Christians. The most serious of such threats to Wiccan religious freedom came from the 1985 attempt by Senator Jesse Helms and Representative Robert Walker to deny tax exempt status to any group defined as 'promoting satanism or witchcraft'. 'Satanism' was defined in this amendment as 'the worship of Satan or the powers of evil' and 'witchcraft' as 'the use of powers derived from evil spirits, the use of sorcery or the use of supernatural powers with malicious intent'.<sup>7</sup>

Although Wiccans reject Satanism or the worship of evil powers completely, declaring that Satan is a Christian idea that they do not accept, they realized that this amendment would very likely be applied to themselves. There was concerted nation-wide organizing to block the amendment, which eventually was defeated. Wiccans have also sought to rescind local laws against fortunetellers, used to discriminate against Wiccan Tarot readers, astrologers and 'metaphysical advisors'. They protest when Wiccans are deemed unfit, simply because of their religion, in particular fields of employment, such as teaching.

5. PO Box 723-N, Williamsburg, MA 01096: [www.earthspirit.com](http://www.earthspirit.com).

6. High Priestess Phyllis W. Curott, 'A Portrait of Wicca', [www.silcom.com/~origin](http://www.silcom.com/~origin).

7. H.R. 3036, Amend. 705, 99th Congress, 1st session, 131 Congressional Record 25074 (1985) (Appropriations Bill for 1986); see Catherine Cookson, 'Reports from the Trenches: A Case Study of Religious Freedom Issues Faced by Wiccans Practicing in the United States', in *Journal of Church and State* 39 (Autumn 1997), p. 738.

The Lady Liberty League was organized in 1985 under the Circle Sanctuary to defend Wiccans against all forms of legal and privately organized discrimination and to promote their acceptance in various public sites, such as schools, prisons, the army.<sup>8</sup> They have been aided in these struggles by groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union. Through its attorneys and communications network, the Lady Liberty League has taken on an array of cases. Among these are the rights of students in grade schools or high schools to wear symbols of their faith, the rights of pagan students in high schools or colleges to have status as student groups for worship or study, acceptance of Wiccan ministers as chaplains in the military or in prisons, state recognition of Wiccan as clergy for weddings and the right to gather in privately owned camp grounds for festivals or worship without harassment.

Considerable progress has been made in the last fifteen years in the acceptance of Wiccans as chaplains by the U.S. Army. The Military Chaplain's Handbook has incorporated an accurate portrayal of Wiccans in Chapter 7, under 'other groups', a category which includes the Native American Church, the Baha'i Faith and Scientology.<sup>9</sup> Wiccans have also been included as prison chaplains in some prisons, such as priestess Rev. Jamyi Witch at the Waupun Correctional Institute in Wisconsin.

The Wiccan religious liberty network also keeps its eye on the media, protesting when they are equated with Satanism or Nazism. In the Spring 2001 'Intelligence Report' published by the Southern Poverty Law Center, an article entitled 'the New Romantics' discussed Asatru or Odinist pagans as dangerous racists, in a way that could easily be construed as including all Wiccans or pagans. Although Odinists, who seek to revive what they regard as 'Norse paganism', do have elements of white supremacy, this type of racist paganism is repudiated by other pagans.<sup>10</sup> The Liberty League won a clarification of their position on racism from Mark Potok, editor of the SPLC Intelligence Report.

The Covenant of the Goddess generally supports considerable tolerance between member covens on differences of interpretation of paganism. Some pagans are strongly anti-militarist and reject any participation in the army, while others see a warrior ethic as a part of historical paganism. But pagans as a whole do not take a stand on pacifism. Some even seek to be chaplain in the military. Thus this issue of war is

8. For reports see [www.circlesanctuary.org/liberty](http://www.circlesanctuary.org/liberty).

9. Cookson, 'Report from the Trenches', p. 728 and n. 11.

10. See [www.circlesanctuary.org/liberty/report/summer2002.htm](http://www.circlesanctuary.org/liberty/report/summer2002.htm), 2. On a general account of Odinism or Asatru, see James R. Lewis (ed.), *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 208.

regarded as one in which differences of opinion are to be tolerated. On the other hand, racism is not a tolerable difference. On this question the Covenant of the Goddess have drawn boundaries and rejected paganisms that are racist. In this the Covenant of the Goddess follows lines that are similar to that found in liberal religion in the United States generally.

Despite constant efforts to define themselves as peaceful, life-affirming nature worshipers, who do not believe in, much less worship, the Devil, Wiccans and Pagans continue to be attacked as 'Devil Worshipers', by Christian conservatives. The use of the terms 'witch' and 'witchcraft' as names for this movement continues to lend themselves to be defined by Christian conservatives in the language drawn from the witch persecutions of the late medieval and Reformation periods. The media commanded by Christian fundamentalism greatly outweighs that to which pagans and Wiccans have access and puts them at great disadvantage in public self-definition in American public culture. Nevertheless their successes in the Army, prisons and schools suggest that they are on their way to being accepted within the rubrics of American constitutional religious liberty.

In the view of this author it is also the duty of liberal or progressive Christians to defend the religious liberties of Wiccans or pagans. This is the case for several reasons. First, it should be clear that Wicca is not only a generally harmless but also a positive movement that affirms the life values which Christians should also affirm, even if Christians might not agree with them on some aspects of their theologies or on some historical details, such as the existence of an ideal original matricentric civilization overthrown by patriarchal warriors or that the witchhunts in Christian history targeted a Goddess-worshipping religion.<sup>11</sup> (Wiccans are becoming much more nuanced in these historical claims in any case).

Secondly, although the witchhunts in the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries may not have actually targeted pagan Goddess worshippers, they were an egregious crime against innocent and largely poor and powerless women, men and children. Christians have never repented of this crime and publicly repudiated it. It is high time to do so and to make clear that the people targeted in these persecutions were not Satanists, but harmless people. In the process Christians must also reject the use of the language of witch persecution of that era against a contemporary

11. For a critique of Margaret Murray's view of witchcraft as a survival of Goddess-worshipping paganism and a historical account of the witch persecutions in Europe, see my article in *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 2nd edn, 1995), pp. 89-114.

religious movement that seeks to be life affirming and to promote peaceful harmonious relations between all peoples and the earth.

Beyond the question of religious liberty of Wiccans, there are many common values that are shared by Wiccans and ecofeminists merging from Christianity, Judaism and other 'main stream' historic religions. Is ecumenical dialogue possible between Christian ecofeminists and Wiccans? Is there a new frontier of religious vision emerging in response to the challenges of ecological crisis and militarism in modern societies and the questioning of traditional patriarchal religions that is largely shared across these feminist religious communities today? We all as ecofeminists concerned about a peaceful, just and sustainable earth society have much to gain by trying to understand each other, little to gain by making pagan Goddess worshippers appear strange and dangerous.

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## **The Lion, the Witch and the Celebration of Discursive Diversity: Reflections on Reading Naomi Goldenberg's 'Witches and Words'**

Kathryn Rountree

As an anthropologist I am unaccustomed to finding myself in a field of lions, grizzlies, gophers, rodents, worms, feminist theologians and theologians.<sup>1</sup> Goddess and God forbid that any of the above, any of us, should be 'de-fanged and de-clawed', become superfluous, lose our dangerousness, or our 'ravenous desire for survival'. For 13 years, though, I have been in the field with hundreds of witches, specifically New Zealand witches, and it is from this standpoint that my perspective on this debate is formed.<sup>2</sup> I wish to comment on the perception that Goddess rituals constitute self-indulgent, narcissistic navel-gazing. Before I do that, however, I would like to comment on several of Naomi Goldenberg's points, all of which have a broad bearing on understanding what Goddess rituals are about.

Goldenberg says that her lack of belief in any deity of any gender means she 'can not be a witch in an orthodox sense'; for her 'all religions are important fictions... We make religions and we live and die within their narratives and designated behaviours'. I think that a great many feminist witches also know and explicitly claim this. Starhawk called modern witchcraft a 're-creation', Barbara Walker wrote that 'every ritual *is* a human invention', and more recently Kristy Coleman has explained that 'What the movement provides is not a 'belief system', so much as a system of valuation that has broken through the male-constructed metaphysic on which Westerners have been raised' – which of course is highly pertinent to the debate about whether Goddess femi-

1. See Naomi Goldenberg's discussion of 'feminist theology as a huge discursive ecosystem' towards the end of 'Witches and Words', in Beverley Clack (ed.), *Embodying Feminist Liberation Theologies, A Special Edition of Feminist Theology* 12.2 (January 2004). I like the fact that Goldenberg collapses C.S. Lewis's dichotomy and re-invents the witch as a lion!

2. My book dealing with New Zealand feminist witches and with issues which exercise witches and Goddess feminists globally is *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-makers in New Zealand* (London, Routledge, 2003).

nism has an ethics.<sup>3</sup>

For the majority of the women I have worked with in New Zealand, feminist witchcraft is not primarily a system of religious beliefs and practices centred on a female deity. Rather, 'the Goddess' is a symbol which or who is given a vast array of meanings by different women at different times; the one shared meaning of 'Goddess' would seem to be that 'She' functions as a metaphor through which the infinite, eternally dynamic inter-connections of matter and energy which constitute our universe are sacralised. 'She' is all that there is, all that there was and will be, all that there can be, all that we are. Sometimes 'She' might be a deity that women (and men) consciously create because deities are known to be politically, poetically and personally useful to societies and individuals. But many feminist witches I have come across do not 'believe in a deity'. I think feminist witchcraft is unique as a religion not only because it is being self-consciously created by its practitioners, but also because this fact is openly articulated, heartily celebrated, and, at the appropriate times, in the deep and sacred moments of ritual, deliberately forgotten.

Goldenberg suggests that one of the main attractions of neopaganism seems to be that it permits individuals 'to speak about an "unmediated connection with the divine"'. For the New Zealand witches I studied, the attraction was that they were permitted to *see themselves* as divine, as 'Goddess' or as aspects of 'the Goddess'. In practice this meant they learned to locate authority within themselves, to give themselves licence to construct and conduct their own spirituality (unmediated by minister, priest or priestess), to recognize their beauty and value, to use their power, to trust their own judgements and intuition, to take responsibility for their lives, to love themselves and others.

Goldenberg is disappointed that the witch has become respectable, has lost some of her provocative power. Ironically, one of the goals of feminist witchcraft was to de-exoticize the witch, re-appropriate and re-invent her, strip away the stereotypical trappings of evil and danger and assign her new (or her former) positive values. This project is working, and that means, nostalgic though some of us (myself included) might feel, the witch is no longer quite the stropy radical she once was. When I began including lectures on witches in my anthropology 'Ritual and Belief' classes, there used to be a frisson of excitement amongst the

3. Kristy Coleman, 'Review Article: Matriarchy and Myth', *Religion*, 31 (2001), 247-63 (248); Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 200; Barbara Walker, *Women's Rituals: A Sourcebook* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 3.

students who would roll up early with their friends from other disciplines in tow, while some of the Christians stayed away for fear of being contaminated. Nowadays hardly anyone bats an eyelid, including the Christians. Quite a number have friends, girlfriends, sisters, daughters or mothers who are witches; witches are becoming normalised.

One of the reasons why the witch has been losing her subversive edge is that feminism itself is losing its edge; feminists are also now respectable members of our societies. This is not to say that feminists have got lazy or sold out (although today feminism is not attracting so many young women); rather that society has changed in the direction feminists have been working for, and feminist voices are no longer so marginal or radical (although there is still much for us to do). Many feminists are today working towards their political goals through new channels, often from positions of power within the institutions and career fields from which they were largely excluded 35 years ago.<sup>4</sup>

Goldenberg says that 'By celebrating both women and the natural world, the Craft sets itself up as both competitor with and critic of mainstream religions'. In terms of its theology this might be so, but I really do not think that most women in the movement today see the Craft as 'competitor and critic' any longer. The ones I studied mostly ignore mainstream religions (which is possibly equally or more effective as a strategy for destabilizing their hegemony). It's true that a decade ago I used to hear a lot of bitter and angry comments directed at the Church, but New Zealand witches seem to have got beyond this and now scarcely ever mention Christianity – it simply doesn't figure in their lives or, presumably, their thoughts – especially as the latter appears to be losing ground while Paganism grows.

Meanwhile, as Goldenberg says and the debate in this issue reveals, the Goddess is still under attack. Despite its flourishing popular appeal, Goddess feminism has been under attack from within academic feminism's own ranks – from feminist anthropologists, archaeologists and theologians – since its infancy. On the one hand, it has been criticised as 'romantic, solipsistic and politically lethargic',<sup>5</sup> abandoning politics for

4. At present New Zealand has a woman Prime Minister, woman Chief Justice, woman Governor General and many women in other positions of influence. Of course this is not to say that women in general have equal opportunities in all spheres of New Zealand life or that all women in powerful positions are feminists, but it certainly helps that there are some women with feminist values in key positions in our society.

5. M.J. Weaver, 'Who is the Goddess and Where does she get us?' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5.1 (1989), 49-64 (62).



mysticism,<sup>6</sup> while on the other it has been accused of deliberately ‘using’ the Goddess to pursue a feminist political agenda.<sup>7</sup> Adherents are seen either as escapists who have opted for a personal, spiritual solution to the problem of patriarchy and the world’s social ills, or as reconstructing (wrongly) and exploiting the past to support contemporary feminist struggles.

Elsewhere I have answered the accusation made by some feminist scholars – especially feminist anthropologists – that Goddess feminists are a-political by showing that politics have been a part of the movement since its inception and by suggesting that such a charge seems to rest more on a Marxist theory about the relationship between politics and religion than on the demonstrable failure of Goddess feminists to be as politically aware and active as other feminists.<sup>8</sup> But when other spiritual feminists criticise members of the Goddess movement for being a-political, lethargic in the face of social problems, self-indulgent, narcissistic navel-gazers, that argument obviously won’t do. Here Goddess feminists are also being accused of not being as politically and socially active as Christian feminists.

I have to say that I am very surprised that Christian feminists make this accusation, that they do not know enough about Goddess feminists to know that it seriously misrepresents these women. I imagine that if the hundreds of women with whom I have worked heard it they would, after recovering from astonishment, be insulted – or perhaps they would not care what theologians say about them. It is difficult to understand how feminist theologians could not know about the well-documented social, political and environmental work carried out over many years by high profile witches and Goddess women like Starhawk, Charlene Spretnak and Carol P. Christ. It is perhaps easier to understand how they might not know about the contributions made by those who are not well-known and who live their lives far from the contexts where such discussions take place.

Most of the New Zealand feminist witches I came to know had broadly the same political goals as other feminists: in their personal and professional lives they worked for the transformation of patriarchal

6. J. Evans, *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second Wave Feminism* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 80.

7. See, for example, Lynn Meskell, ‘Goddesses, Gimbutas and “New Age” Archaeology’, *Antiquity* 69 (1995), 74-86; and Lynn Meskell ‘Twin Peaks: The Archaeologies of Çatal Höyük’, in L. Goodison and C. Morris (eds.), *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence* (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 46-62.

8. Kathryn Rountree, ‘The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate’, *Social Analysis* 43.2 (1999), 142-68.

gender relations and all relations of unequal power. Some witches came to the Craft through feminism; for other women it was the other way around. Within the coven I joined to do fieldwork, there were women who worked voluntarily for Greenpeace, the AIDS Foundation, a People with Disabilities network, Rape Crisis, and as a Youthline counsellor. In this respect they resembled the American feminist witches Griffin describes, who are involved in activities like working in rape crisis centres, family planning centres and women's resource centres.<sup>9</sup> These women's spirituality seems to underpin rather than undermine their political activity, and is far from being a cop-out from political work.

Having said that, when witches in New Zealand engage in various types of feminist, environmental and other political activity, they do so as individuals rather than as members of a community of witches, and they do not openly identify as witches when they do. There *are* some witches who have tucked themselves away in isolated parts of the country, alone or with children or like-minded others, to grow herbs and commune with nature in relative seclusion. These women might well claim that feminist politics are not very important to them compared with living spiritually connected to nature, or they might claim that they are not opting out of political work but out of a patriarchally dominated rat-race. Or they might have a strongly ecofeminist political consciousness and be in the habit of joining with other ecologically minded groups of women and men in Green protests. Most of the witches I worked with, however, were urban feminists who seemed no more or less politically committed or active than other urban feminists, and certainly no more likely to seriously propose religious, separatist or utopian solutions to the problem of patriarchy.

It is true that women involved in Goddess spirituality devote considerable time and energy to understanding their own psychological and emotional processes and to working with them during rituals. The business of contacting, affirming and working with one's 'power from within' was an important preoccupation of the women I met. Rituals often incorporated space for women to deal with problematic issues in their domestic, social and working lives or with decisions or transitions they were facing. It is this preoccupation which has undoubtedly given rise to the accusation that witches are self-engrossed, apolitical navel-gazers.

But in my view these women are not inept, wimpish or megalomaniacal. The sorts of issues they deal with using ritual are the ordinary sorts

9. Wendy Griffin, 'The Embodied Goddess: Feminist Witchcraft and Female Divinity', *Sociology of Religion* 56.1 (1995), 35-49.

of issues and problems that many people come across in the course of their everyday lives. Through ritual Goddess feminists confront, gain an increased understanding of, and find a way of coping with, solving, or moving through a problem, issue or transition. My observation is that witches and Goddess women do not have more problems and are not more obsessed with these problems than anyone else in society. In fact, they probably spend less time fretting about and returning to problems in their lives than other people, because through ritual they have an efficient, structured means of dealing with whatever arises in their lives.

Rather than seeing women's concern with their inner processes as an unhealthy and apolitical self-absorption, I see it as being motivated by a desire for personal autonomy and responsibility, which in turn motivates and sustains their activity in the 'outer world'. To call feminist witches self-indulgent or narcissistic suggests that they are pre-occupied with themselves to the extent that community concerns and goals are unacknowledged or unimportant to them. This is very evidently not the case.

Griffin says that a recurring theme in Goddess rituals is reconnecting the material with the spiritual self, liberating female sexuality from its association with sin, and celebrating the erotic feminine in all its forms.<sup>10</sup> The notion that nature and the body need to be denied or transcended and dominated is seen by Goddess feminists as a legacy of Judaeo-Christian ideology. They are intent on confronting somatophobia and reclaiming the female body. This does not mean that their beliefs or rituals that affirm female sexuality are excessive or self-indulgent, and nor, in my view, should they be placed in the female essentialists' camp. Their ideas about the female body have much in common with those feminist theorists – Irigaray, Grosz, Frye, Kirby, Schor and others – who have been rethinking essentialism, difference, feminine specificity and the body.<sup>11</sup> In *Addressing Essentialism Differently*, Kirby writes of feminism's anxiety about 'returning to the body', of the 'fear of being discov-

10. Griffin, 'The Embodied Goddess'.

11. M. Frye, 'The Necessity of Difference: Constructing a Positive Category of Women', *Signs* 21.4 (1996), 991-1010; E. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (trans. C. Porter; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); V. Kirby, 'Addressing Essentialism Differently: Some Thoughts on the Corpo-real' (Hamilton, New Zealand: University of Waikato Women's Studies Occasional Paper Series, no. 4, 1992); N. Schor, 'This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray', in N. Schor and E. Weed (eds.), *The essential difference* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 40-62.

ered unwittingly behind enemy lines'.<sup>12</sup> Clearly Christian feminists are not alone in this respect. In Kirby's view this somatophobia 'underpins the legacy of phallocentrism's mind/body split' and needs to be exorcised. Embracing and assigning positive meanings and value to the female body, female sexuality in whatever form it takes, and female biological functions (such as menstruation) is an important preoccupation of Goddess feminists not simply to reverse the patriarchal devaluation, but because they are important to women, give women pleasure and pain, preoccupy women from time to time, and are essential to women's being.

Greenwood says that for English feminist witches 'healing the wounds of patriarchy' is a priority, and that the 'practice cannot be separated from politics – a politics of re-clamation and re-invention of lost tradition'.<sup>13</sup> The idea that divinity is immanent potentially liberates women from the legacy of a religious and cultural tradition which invokes a conflict between the spirit and the flesh and tells people, especially women, that their bodies are dirty and sinful. In the course of my fieldwork I met many women who began to take small and large steps towards liberation and empowerment, usually at the level of healing and reclaiming the self, but often also at the broader social level. For example, a woman might leave or take steps to change a problematic relationship, undertake a task she previously did not feel confident to do, deal with an eating disorder, confront someone who had previously seemed intimidating, help set up a women's health collective, lobby a school to change the way it teaches about women in history, or raise her children to have a feminist consciousness.

Two areas in which New Zealand feminist witches have been particularly active have been feminist and environmental activism. I would like to give the example of one New Zealand woman who has had a significant role in the Goddess movement here through facilitating workshops in many parts of the country and through her published works.<sup>14</sup> Juliet Batten is a feminist artist, psychosynthesis counsellor and writer. She has been deeply involved in feminist projects for over 30 years, especially through the women's art movement. She was a founding member of the New Zealand Association of Women Artists and

12. Kirby, 'Addressing Essentialism Differently', p. 6.

13. Susan Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 109.

14. Juliet Batten, *Power from Within: A Feminist Guide to Ritual-making* (Auckland: Ishtar Books, 1988); *Celebrating the Southern Seasons: Rituals for Aotearoa* (Auckland: Tandem Press, 1995); *Growing into Wisdom: Change and Transformation at Midlife* (Auckland: Tandem Press, 2000).

instigator of its radical spin-off group: Feminist Art Networkers. There was a time, Juliet told me, when to get on the cover of New Zealand's leading art magazine, a woman had to be nude or dead. FAN lobbied effectively to change this and the group's work had a profound effect in increasing the visibility of women artists and changing the sexist views and practices of art funding bodies, curators, magazines and critics.

Juliet has also been deeply involved in the environmental movement in New Zealand from its earliest days. In the early 1970s she was voted onto the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust (the youngest and only woman member at the time) to represent environmental organisations. She was later the director of this Trust for ten years. The Trust's task was the preservation of open space, bush and natural habitats in New Zealand. Juliet's work as a Goddess workshop facilitator, which is how I met her, has been deeply interwoven with her feminist and environmental work.

I want to stress, in concluding, that I have never heard New Zealand feminist witches criticise Christian feminists on any grounds. They greatly admire the work these women do in the areas of social justice, their stands against racism and poverty, and their enormous commitment to transforming patriarchal institutions, especially the Church. It seems that they are a good deal more gracious and generous in this respect than some of their spiritual sisters.

Carol Christ wonders if Christian feminists have a psychological need to dismiss the Goddess movement because if they took it seriously, they might be tempted to join it and risk losing their jobs and invitations to participate in events sponsored by Christian institutions. If these are the reasons, the 'need' is more than psychological; it is political and all the more invidious. In this context the dictum that the personal is the political rings dishearteningly true. I would say that this debate is a storm in a cauldron were it not for the fact that hegemonic processes involving the misrepresentation and disempowerment of some women appear to be operating.

What is heartening, though, is that the great majority of witches and Goddess women do not know they are being falsely accused, and therefore the accusations do not drain their energy or exercise power in their lives. Ultimately, arguments about whether we are mummy's girl or daddy's girl are much less important than the recognition that we are sisters and have urgent work to do.

## Is the Goddess Movement Self-indulgent?

Anna K. Simon

At this time in our history when violence and oppression seem to be growing on a global scale, under the cover of freedom and liberation, it is important for feminists in all fields to work together on social and ethical issues. It is therefore disheartening to find that a number of Christian feminists, while their own work involves the changing of societal systems that dominate women and nature, deem it necessary to exclude and even discredit Goddess feminists working in the same pursuit for social justice and for the wellbeing of the earth. Similarly to Christianity, the Goddess movement is very diverse in its practice, beliefs, rituals and membership. However, while it shares with Christian feminists the ethical vision that truth, love and liberty are the birthrights and blessings of all humans, and it believes that affirming women's bodies, spirituality, and female sexuality and its power, are essential on the path in doing so. Nevertheless, the Goddess movement has been critiqued as self-indulgent and without ethics comparable to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This is utterly ridiculous, yet it fits in with the interests of both patriarchal Christianity and the larger patriarchal culture in suppressing and controlling women's power/voices and sexuality. But to hear this critique from other women is disturbing and distressing.

In *Sexism and God-Talk*, Rosemary Radford Ruether described Goddess religion as a movement that demands the subordination of the male to the female. She depicted the female participants as self-indulgently power-hungry in their need to overcome the evil tendencies they

1. See Mary Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), on her discussion of Goddess imagery, and the contemporary Goddess movement and rituals as self-indulgent (pp. 32-35). Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993 [1983]), where she argues that contemporary Goddess feminists seek a Goddess religion that is the inverse of patriarchal religion. Hence, she seems to declare that they naively seek the reversal of the dualism of Western consciousness by drawing on a romantic view of paganism (pp. 39-41, 52).

projected onto men.<sup>2</sup> Mary Grey writes in her book *Introducing Feminist Images of God*<sup>3</sup> that the Goddess movement fails to take an active approach of resistance to global injustice. Yet she goes on to list what is helpful about Goddess images. To her credit, she emphasizes the healing value of rituals focusing on reverencing the female body,

...which religious traditions have vilified and despised at worst, and controlled at best...connected with this is that care and attention are given to all aspects of nature, her rhythms and settings...diversity of the creatures. Thus an ethic of care and responsibility for creation is manifested by, for example, vegetarianism and care for animals, protection and planting of trees and protests against new roads, and in a multitude of ways working for a sustainable lifestyle.<sup>4</sup>

I find it confusing and troubling how Grey affirms the attraction and benefits of these life-affirming aspects of the Goddess movement, yet can claim that it lacks an active position on global injustice. For example, an examination of Starhawk's work as summarized in her powerful new book *Webs of Power*<sup>5</sup> would prove otherwise. Here Starhawk reports on the events, challenges and impact that the global justice movement has had. She writes:

...All of my writing and activism comes from an alternative vision of power. Power-over, or domination, is the power we're all familiar with, the power of a small group to control the resources or to limit the choices of others. Ultimately, it stems from violence and force and is generally backed by the police and military power of the state. But the word 'power' itself comes from a root that means 'ability'. We each have a different kind of power: the power that comes from within; our ability to dare, to do, to dream; our creativity. Power from within is unlimited... The global justice movement challenges the greatest amassing of police, military, political, and economic power the world has ever seen. To do so requires great courage, and the faith that ultimately creativity must triumph over violence.<sup>6</sup>

Equally alarming is Grey's notion that by focusing on the healing of individual women, in her view corresponding with an inactive attitude to global injustice, the Goddess movement will fail.<sup>7</sup> Carol P. Christ

2. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 230.

3. Mary Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

4. Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, p. 33.

5. Starhawk, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2002).

6. Starhawk, *Webs of Power*, pp. 6-7.

7. Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, p. 34.

describes in her book *Rebirth of the Goddess*<sup>8</sup> how a woman can experience the image of the Goddess as ‘...a remembering, a recollection of something she already knew about her own power, as well as a “remembering”, that gives her a “new relation to her body, to female sexuality”’.<sup>9</sup> This remembering corresponds to a longing and knowing that many contemporary women seem to be searching for. It tells women that we have never lost our power or our authenticity; we have only ‘forgotten’ it for a while. It tells us that it was never missing even if it has been deprived from us by a hierarchical male social structure. This knowledge is an embodied experience felt by our bodily senses. Women’s sexuality encompasses and is an expression of this power.

By tradition, in Christianity and other monotheistic religions, female sexuality and its reproductive powers have been ‘claimed’ and put under the authority and power of males. Women’s bodies have not then fully been their own. Women within these traditions have often been burdened with the responsibility of the fall from Eden and God’s grace, and at certain points in human history their sexual organs and physical features have been deemed sinful. In contrast, the Goddess movement regards the female body with respect and honor, and in extension, making all human bodies and creation holy.

However, even within Christianity and Judaism, feminist theologians like Phyllis Tribble are in the process of re-reading and re-interpreting the creation and fall in Genesis 2-3, and find a more equal role and meaning. In her observation, the narrative does not hold the judgment that woman is weaker or more cunning or more sexual than man, but that both have been made by the same Creator,

...who explicitly uses the word *good* to introduce the creation of woman (2.18). Both are equal in birth... If there be moral frailty in one, it is moral frailty in two. Further, they are equal in responsibility and in judgment, in shame and in guilt, in redemption and in grace. What the narrative says about the nature of woman it also says about the nature of man.<sup>10</sup>

This view has not been shared by the many male religious scholars that have held the authority to write and interpret the Bible. Then again, the suppression of female sexuality and power has not only come from within a religion but has become part of a larger message that, sadly,

8. Carol Christ *Rebirth of the Goddess; Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

9. Christ *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 8.

10. Phyllis Tribble takes an extensive look at this Biblical passage in ‘Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread’, in *Woman Spirit Rising; A Feminist Reader In Religion* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 74-83 (78-79).



most girls grow up under.

The 'toxic niceness'<sup>11</sup> that women are socialized to perform and live under represses women's own power on all levels. This niceness is a socialized phenomenon that most women have witnessed or performed. It happens when one wants to say 'no' but says 'yes'. When women with lifelong habits of performing 'toxic niceness' are told that it is self-indulgent to focus on themselves, the message they receive is that when women say 'no' they are selfish and self-seeking. Are Christian feminists who call rituals affirming the female body self-indulgent forgetting how strongly women are socialized to be self-denying? Without meaning to, are feminists who call other women self-indulgent colluding in the processes that make women into martyrs in their quest for pleasing others, and can lead women on the familiar path of self-effacement? Is this not another way of keeping women from claiming their own voices and power? It is an urgent necessity for women to discover our own authority and capacities in an effort to reclaim the power that a choice of action has (to say 'yes' or 'no'). There is great danger in stating that the path to self discovery and reclaiming, for women, is self-indulging, and will *not* benefit the whole. That is a step backward.

In my experience, the Goddess movement calls for deep healing work and for personal responsibility for one's spirituality, body, and power, consequently, for how these are to be used in and for the world. Is this individual inner work deemed self-indulgent? It seems to me that this type of work is sacred and would lead to better self-awareness, better self-esteem, better understanding of self-destructive behavior, therefore better use of our power, better parenting skills, and larger and deeper self-love, which ultimately creates a better and more just world. At present, it is what is called for today's women and men. The Goddess movement is a reflection of this organic process of change and maturation.

The venerable Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, although not a Christian or female, (but a feminist in this reader's view), works and teaches world-wide on non-violence, peace and justice. He writes in his book *Peace Is Every Step*:<sup>12</sup>

If we face our unpleasant feelings with care, affection, and nonviolence, we can transform them into the kind of energy that is healthy and has the

11. This useful and insightful expression comes from Elisabeth Hilts book *Getting In Touch With Your Inner Bitch* (Bridgeport, CT: Hysteria Publications, 1994). Here the author calls women to access their *Inner Bitch* in order to end *Toxic Niceness* and its damaging effects on women.

12. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

capacity to nourish us...our unpleasant feelings can illuminate so much for us, offering us insight and understanding into ourselves and society.<sup>13</sup>

This transformation is done through mindfulness and love, and by working on sustaining our internal peace everyone including our entire society will benefit. The way to global justice comes from looking inside first to see and recognize the negative or shadow aspects of ourselves (unpleasant feelings), and to then heal and transform these destructive parts that are a part of us all. To me, this mirrors the personal and social ethics of the Goddess movement, as it involves work on the self along with an active compassionate approach to changing social injustices.

There is a risk in Christianity's dualistic separation of good and evil. When our unpleasant, destructive feelings and actions (evil) gets projected on the outside, and onto other people and places, we can see 'evil' in others, but may refuse to acknowledge it in ourselves. I cannot imagine anything more difficult and courageous than to dare to recognize these parts of ourselves and the roles we play in protecting and projecting them. Similar to Thich Nhat Hanh, Starhawk describes the inner work that is required to transform the *Shadow on the Threshold*,

...which is the embodiment of all the impulses and qualities we have thrust into the unconscious because the conscious mind finds them unacceptable. All that we feel we are and feel we should not be—sexual, angry, hostile, vulnerable, masochistic, self-hating, guilty, and even, perhaps, powerful, or creative—squats in the doorway between Younger Self and Talking Self, refusing to let us pass until we have looked it in the face and acknowledged our own essential humanness. No fear is stronger than our fear own our own Shadow, and nothing is more destructive than the defenses we adopt in order to avoid the confrontation.<sup>14</sup>

This work should be carried out, as Starhawk points out, only in safe and private places; whether in a protective women's circle, through mindful meditation, or with a professional therapist. Although the importance of this inner work can not be emphasized enough, none of it can be forced or hurried.<sup>15</sup> It must happen on its own time and while our individually developed defenses need to be acknowledged, and need to emerge in their own time and pace, they also need to be honored and welcomed. Our defenses have taken root in our bodies and they have in fact been created for our survival, to protect and shield in time of fear or trauma. It is often the power of a women's group that this transformation can take

13. Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, p. 52.

14. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1999), p. 171.

15. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 173.

place. The women's groups and circles often found within the Goddess movement can embody such a place.<sup>16</sup>

The Goddess movement supports the development of the power from within, and models self-search and self-healing. Yet, it is but within the support of a community that this process can be nurtured and where participants can safely explore their own inner shadows. When this atmosphere is created, it can provide a place where members can share deep feelings and be grounded through rituals and transformations. One can plant a seed in a community, where one can dream its shape, and through rituals it can be fed in its growing power. As Starhawk says so eloquently '...and our visions grow strong when we no longer dream alone'.<sup>17</sup> The Goddess movement, when it works best, provides the necessary elements of safety and support where members can go through their own internal journey. Ultimately, this thinking can bring wholeness to both women and men.

Carol P. Christ speaks about how women often differ widely in their ideas about the Goddess, as some view her as a personality who can be invoked in prayer and rituals, while others see her as nature or the energy within nature, or yet as a metaphor for the deepest aspect of self. Goddess rituals, therefore, do not require that one have a specific form or belief or faith in the Goddess. She goes on to explain that through rituals one can articulate a deep familiar sense of connection to natural processes and rhythms.<sup>18</sup> I have taken part in a women's group that includes such diverse beliefs, where our rituals have become powerful experiences with opportunities to draw from the strength and power of a community. We have created an environment where each woman's own potential can emerge, where one has the opportunity to share and support one another. The act of performing rituals together has been both healing and transforming. It has been an astounding feeling to be able to rest in these women's 'lap' while exploring difficult places within. Remarkable as this personal encounter is, it is essential that it grows into something that is functional in the world, which becomes expressed and lived in relation to others.

16. A circle is, however, only as safe and supportive as its members allow. Great care should be taken in finding the right group, circle, work-shop, or practitioners; which could safely create and hold the sacred space that this type of inner work requires.

17. Starhawk, *Ritual as Bonding: Action as Ritual*, in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (ed.), *Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1989), pp. 326-35 (335)

18. Carol P. Christ *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 28-29.

If the conversation and interchange between feminists become strained, the benefit of exchange of ideas will suffer, but more importantly, it will be damaging to the work of feminists all over since it does more to set women apart from one another, and when we are separated and disrespect each other, we lose our power and integrity as a group, which leads to further disenfranchisement. Is this not when female disempowerment works best? Who benefits? Certainly not women.

## Interview with Starhawk

Marguerite Rigoglioso

*It has been suggested that some feminist theologians, among them Rosemary Radford Reuther and Mary Grey, allege that the Goddess movement is self-indulgent and lacks an ethic of social justice. As one of the Mothers of the Goddess movement, how do you respond to that?*

Well, as somebody who just spent the day organizing for International Women's Day, catching up on the national anti-war activities I'm involved in, planning a strategy meeting for an anti-war coalition, advising a young student who's trying to plan a walkout at her high school next week how to do it, and arranging for my trip to Palestine to do trainings for the international solidarity movement, I say to that: Where is their evidence?

And then there's the mobilizing and coordinating that Reclaiming, which is the Wiccan group I work with and co-founded, is doing for International Women's Day. They've also done anti-globalization actions in Seattle, demonstrations against the IMF and the World Bank in Washington, DC, demonstrations against the FTA in Quebec City, and in many, many other actions over the last three years. For many of us, all of whom are participants in the Goddess movement, this builds on a whole history of activism that goes back to the Vietnam War.

As with any other movement, sure, you can find goddess worshipers who are self-indulgent, and you can find many who are apolitical, but you can't say that the movement, as a whole, lacks any kind of orientation toward social justice unless you basically deny the evidence. And the fact of the matter is, I've never seen any of the scholars who level this kind of critique at any of these actions. I've never heard of any of them being involved in any of this organizing. So maybe they just don't know who's actually doing what! They aren't out there on the streets putting their bodies between the young anarchists and the cops who are trying to attack them. They aren't in Genoa, watching people getting their heads beaten open and trying to figure out how to help them get out of the street. I don't see them standing in front of the tanks in Palestine.

*What percentage of the Goddess movement do you think is involved in direct social action?*

Well, for example, Reclaiming really came together specifically around joining our spirituality and our activism. So we have a large number of people who are activists. Some of them are organizers, and some of them are people who are simply willing to show up for actions. Others are activists in the sense that they work with battered women, run some kind of social program, or they take action in their own home communities. It's hard to give numbers, because we don't have a membership roster, but it's in the thousands. We have various linked communities all over the United States and Europe. These are people who consider themselves to be part of a Goddess movement. The large majority are politically active in one way or another, and the ratio of women to men is about three or four to one. And, of course, there are many, many other women and men involved in the Goddess movement who are not a part of Reclaiming and who are also involved in creating social change in one way or another.

*I'm also thinking of the two graduate programs in women's spirituality in San Francisco at the California Institute of Integral Studies and New College, where you teach, which both have strong community activism components. And then there's the fact that simply conducting ritual as a woman and venerating female deities are highly political acts. So perhaps the matter also has to do with how one defines 'political?'*

Yes. Certainly when those of us in the movement began doing anything associated with the Goddess, we felt it was very political, in that it was about empowering women and also about challenging men to move beyond gender stereotypes. One of the reasons I got into the Goddess movement as opposed to, say, becoming a rabbi, is because it offered a place where women could take on roles of responsibility and authority and leadership. And we found that a religion that affirms sexuality was also in and of itself very political.

*Why do you think the Goddess movement continues to be caricatured as unconcerned about social justice?*

Partly I think that women who are mounting those charges have simply not done their homework. I've written or co-written nine books on the Goddess and various forms of activism, and my works are rarely referred to by these scholars, apart from maybe *The Spiral Dance*.

I wrote two books in the 1980s, *Dreaming the Dark* and *Truth or Dare*, which are highly political and refer to a lot of the political action the Goddess movement was doing then. The novels that I wrote, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *Walking the Mercury* {?} are also highly political. *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying* and *Circle Round* [?], the latter of which is about raising kids in the Goddess tradition, are not overtly political but, again, they have to do with taking charge of our own dying, reconfiguring our theology around death and dying, and looking at how we raise our children, all of which are certainly political in the larger sense. *The Twelve Wild Swans*, which is a compilation of material that Reclaiming has developed over the past 20 years, has three tracks within it. One has to do with the elements of magic, one has to do with inner healing, and one has to do with activism and service to the community. And the most recent book, *Webs of Power*, is all about the political work that Reclaiming and I have been doing over the last 10 years.

These books are not hard to find. They're all still in print and they're all listed on my Web site. And there are many other scholars, writers, and activists in the movement whose work involves creating social change, as well. So anyone who spent even half an hour doing research on the Goddess movement would readily be able to find this information.

*Perhaps part of the issue is that the most vocal detractors seem to be basing their critique on what feels like a superficial and dated snapshot of the Goddess movement. Their comments generally reveal an apparent inattention to much of the literature and to many of the ongoing developments in the field. Do you have this impression?*

Yes. What surprises me is not that there would be women who, for whatever reason, would want to attack the Goddess movement, but that reputable journals actually publish them without calling them on their scholarship. And most of these women are fine scholars who should know better.

The same dynamic is at play in the controversy around the work of Marija Gimbutas, the archeologist who studied finds from the Neolithic period in Europe and concluded that Old European societies were Goddess venerating, matrilineal, earth revering, and peace loving. Again, there are critiques of Gimbutas that are quite thoughtful and valuable, but there's a whole lot of criticism—and a great deal of discounting—from people who haven't actually looked at her work. And then these people cite and re-cite one another, giving the critique a kind of weight that it really doesn't have. So you have to ask: Why this backlash? Who's threatened by the Goddess movement? Who's threat-

ened by conclusions that Marija came to that basically tell us, oh yes, we don't actually have to live in a cutthroat society of domination. That even people of Europe, home of the great oppressors, actually once knew how to live cooperatively, venerated the earth, and weren't too interested in warfare.

*So do you think that some critics of the Goddess movement are being complicit with the patriarchy?*

Yes, they're ultimately serving the ends of a system that wants us to believe that war is inevitable – especially right now, which is what we're being told every day – and that men have always dominated women, and that if you explore spirituality beyond the bounds that are set by some authority, you're being somehow self-indulgent or bad or dangerous or stupid. And that very much serves the system as it is.

*What's almost even worse is that some of these scholars, such as Cynthia Eller, go so far as to lampoon the Goddess movement.*

Yes. There's no denying that there's some silliness in the Goddess movement – but the same goes for any other movement, or any religion. You can't simply dismiss it because of that. Another critique that has been leveled against the Goddess movement is that it is essentialist – that it too narrowly defines what women and men are. Again, you can certainly find women in the Goddess movement who take that approach, but if you did your homework you'd see that, first of all, that kind of viewpoint was never characteristic of everyone in the movement, and, second of all, in has evolved over time.

*What do you think is at the root of all this?*

I feel that some of that critique actually comes from a deep discomfort with the body. From the belief that to acknowledge that women have bodies, and to acknowledge all of the things the female body can do as being valuable, is somehow dangerous territory. And this has to do with a deep discomfort with sexuality. To say that sexuality can also be liberatory and celebrated and wonderful and an avenue of deep connection with spirit, again, I think is a political act.

*The critiques being leveled against the Goddess movement are primarily coming from either women who are invested in Christianity, or women who are invested in secularism, meaning that they seem to be denying that there is any validity to*



*the spiritual planes of existence at all. So what is taking place is a theological argument on the one hand, and an epistemological argument on the other. What are your thoughts on this?*

I'm thinking about when I was in Balata in the summer of 2002 in a refugee camp right outside of Nablus in the West Bank. We were trying to get to Balata because it was under siege by the Israeli Defense Forces and we were trying to do human shielding work for people who lived there. The checkpoints were closed on the regular route, so we had to get dropped off in the hills and hike up over the mountains down to the town. And it was getting dark and we were trying to decide whether we should try to get to the refugee camp or go to the hospital and instead make our way into the camp the next morning. It was very dangerous to be out after dark. So I said, well, I'll pull out the Tarot cards to help us decide. I pulled the Star card for going to the refugee camp, so I said that looks good, that's where I'm going. We were a group of 16 people from all over the world, and half of the group thought I must have been nuts.

We got to the gates of the refugee camp, and the tank there fired on us, so we found another way in. And just as we walked in, what did we see but the evening star, right up there in the sky! We were taken in by families for the night. By the next day, everyone in the group was calling me from their cell phones every time they had to make a decision, asking me, could you pull a card for me?

*So you've experienced the power of 'alternative' ways of knowing and interacting with the cosmos in your political work.*

Most definitely. And I'm thinking about when I was in New York in 2002, helping to organize for the protest against the World Economic Forum. New Yorkers are notoriously secular and cynical but after September 11th, they were really hurting and really needed something, and asked the pagan cluster if we would start the protest off with a ritual. Part of it was that we had all been in many actions together and they knew that we weren't just 'woo woo', dance-and-sing spiritual people, but that we were also hard-working organizers.

*In a recent issue of the journal Feminist Theology, Naomi Goldenberg points out that Christianity is often assumed to be better at fighting poverty and promoting social justice than any other tradition. Implicit in the Christian feminist critique against the Goddess movement is the notion that the movement is not sufficiently involved in issues concerning 'the poor' to have a legitimate social ethic. Others dismiss it for being predominantly a white, middle- and upper-middle-class phenomenon. What do you say to all of this?*

What people think of as the Goddess movement and Wicca are definitely predominantly white movements. This issue is something we've talked about and addressed for many many years. But if you include in the broader spectrum of paganism traditions such as Santeria, Lucume {?}, and other kinds of indigenous spiritualities, then 'paganism' is obviously not predominantly white. Still, people in these traditions don't necessarily identify with the Goddess movement or paganism. There are a lot of reasons for that. Part of it is that people of color have drawn more strength in community from the established church and have maybe seen it more as an agent of their survival and liberation than white women have.

In the Latino community, there is a revival of some of the old Aztec indigenous spiritualities, and certainly we in Reclaiming have strong alliances with friends in Mexico and with the Latino community in San Francisco, and we're always part of the Day of the Dead celebration. But it doesn't necessarily translate into more of a racial mix in our rituals, I think because these rituals derive mainly from European or Middle Eastern sources. Also because for people who are already marginalized, choosing another marginalized group probably doesn't seem like the most attractive move. And within our own community, as with most communities, there's a lot of work still to be done about our own internalized racism and insensitivities.

However, while it's true that the bulk of the Goddess movement is white, I don't think that the majority is middle-class or upper-middle-class. I would say that the Goddess movement, much more than some other parts of the New Age movement, draws a lot of people who are working class or of working-class origins. And, basically, once people are in the movement, they're more likely to end up in some kind of voluntary semi-poverty than a nice house in the suburbs! Particularly because as a result of their involvement they often decide to choose careers in areas like healing or teaching or social work, which are not lucrative.

As to providing options for the poor, it's one thing to have an option for the poor if you're the Catholic Church, and you are deeply implicated in the poverty of hundreds of millions of people all over the globe, many of whom are your worshipers. In terms of the Goddess movement, our option for the poor has been around fighting about these global economic issues, which have huge impacts on the poor all over the world. And that's precisely why we've been out there on the streets engaged in these battles, because we see the issues as being structural in nature.

*How has your connection with the Goddess motivated your own political activism?*

Many years ago, I was on a panel with a Native American woman named Ines Talamantez. She said something I've never forgotten. She said that people were always coming around wanting to have a vision of this and that. She said, in my tradition, if you have a vision of the Goddess, you have to work for Her for the rest of your life. And that's definitely been my experience. She works me hard.

My conception of the Goddess is a living being who is the earth. She is alive not only in the Gaia-hypothesis sense, but also in the sense of being conscious. And that consciousness may be different from yours are mine, but it is still very real. And we're all part of Her. As Luisah Teish says, coming from the Yoruban tradition, we're all cells in the body of God. So as someone who experiences the world that way, I don't see how you could *not* be an activist. Because clearly the life of that Being is under threat all around us. Other human beings, as precious parts of that Being, are under threat all around us. And I don't conceive of spirituality as something removed from this world that gets acted out in other realms. To me, *this* is the realm in which our spirituality is enacted.

Just today, I was trying to write something about why we need engaged spirituality and what that means. Because I think people coming to political action who are spiritual often perceive it as somehow uncomfortable or threatening. And, to me that derives from a false sense of spirituality. I'm not talking about people involved in the Goddess movement, but sometimes people in other areas of the New Age movement. Part of spirituality is definitely about healing and self-soothing, about creating a safe space in which you can heal and renew yourself. But that's not all of it. To me, real spiritual development is about taking on challenges. Being uncomfortable. Facing the things that disturb us and that shake us up. Because that's where change happens.

Spirituality is also not about conflict avoidance. Conflict is a really interesting spiritual place. Because it's a very high-energy place and it's also a place of potential change. One day I was out meditating in the forest on the question of whether we make change from within or a from outside of ourselves. And the forest said to me: Systems don't change from within. Instead, they try to maintain themselves. They seek equilibrium. So if you want to change a system, you first have to shake it up to disturb its equilibrium.

*Do you consciously use magical techniques in your work?*

All the time. If I'm teaching a direct-action training, I always start by teaching people grounding and awareness. Basically, that has to do with how to breathe and ground and get into a state of consciousness in which

you can make a decision about what you want to do instead of panicking and reacting. I've taught it to people who are open to spirituality and people who are totally resistant to it; I've taught it to punks in Brazil, and hard-core anarchists in Prague. And I hear over and over again people saying, thank you, that saved my life in Genoa, or wherever.

Depending how open the group is, I'll teach a lot about energy sensing or how to use your energy to protect yourself. In New York, we were in a student march that wanted to take to the street. I was about a third of the way back and there was this mass of people, and I suddenly knew I had to get to the front of the march to slow them down, because they didn't realize that when you move a march onto a street, which is a wider space, if you keep going at the same pace the people in the back can't catch up with you. So I was aware of grabbing a little energy current to flow through this mass of people and get to the front.

When I teach non-violence and how to deescalate conflict, a lot of that is about being grounded, staying in a core anchored place that is neither inflated nor deflated. A lot of times with groups that are open we'll teach natural magical activism, how to use all those energetic techniques and also things like trancework to get a vision of what we want to do in an action or the outcome that we want. Often in the actions we'll do a spiral dance and we'll have some sort of magical image that we're working with that embodies our intention that we'll be pouring energy into. We do Tarot readings to understand what the factors are that we need to take into account. We call it strategic Tarot.

*What is one of your favorite all-time moments in which the political and the spiritual came together?*

It happened in February 2002, after a march to protest against the World Economic Forum meeting in New York. The march was organized by the anarchists, because the usual groups that would organize a legal permitted march were afraid to do it that soon after September 11th. After the march was over people were really feeling kind of discouraged, because the police had herded everybody into pens with metal barricades to split the march up. So we hadn't really been able to have an effective rally. People felt that the space had been completely controlled. A lot of us ended up in Grand Central Station, and the pagans were downstairs eating, in true pagan fashion. And some of the New York activists who were upstairs came running down and said, oh, Starhawk, come upstairs, we want to do something under that beautiful dome. So the pagans trooped upstairs, and we all held hands in a circle and began chanting

and dancing. And all of the anarchists joined us. And pretty soon the cops came over and tried to tell us we couldn't do what we were doing, but we kept doing it anyway. And more and more anarchists showed up and joined the dance, and more and more riot cops showed up, until we discovered we had cast a perfect circle around us of riot cops!

I had a few twinges there, because at the time I was on federal probation from a blockade at Vanderberg {?} Vandenberg? Airforce Base against Starwars the year before. But we just kept dancing, and finally the original policeman who had approached us came and threw up his hands in frustration. I took that as a cue and threw up my hands, and everyone started to chant 'om' and raise a cone of power and turn our chant into a wordless sound that filled the dome and rang into the rafters. There were people on all of the stairwells just watching. And then somebody began singing 'Amazing Grace'. At the end of it, we just looked around and I said something about sending the healing out to New York City, and also to the police, who had lost people on September 11th. At that point, they just gave up any thought of arresting us.

It was a wonderful experience because a lot of the day had been simply about the issue of space and who gets to control public space. And a lot of the issue around globalization is a really about public space. So we succeeded in reclaiming public space on a day when they were preemptively arresting a lot of people and being very hard-nosed. And we delighted everybody.

*What other kinds of social activism have you been involved in?*

In January 2002, I taught with my friend Penny Livingston an earth activist training, a two-week long course on permaculture design, which is a very ecological design approach to agriculture and human systems. We combine it with skills concerning political strategy and activism, and an earth-based spiritual framework. Right after that, I flew back to New York and helped with the organizing for the protest against the World Economic Forum meeting in New York.

From there, I went to Campina Grande in Brazil for an ecumenical council. It was quite refreshing going from being in New York, where I was a kind of enemy of the state, to being an invited guest of the city. After that, I went up to Fortaleza [?], where a group was preparing a blockade against the Inter-American Development Bank, and I spent a week training them on how to do non-violent political actions. Afterward, I went back to Sao Paolo, where I had done trainings the year before in direct action, and met with the groups to check in on how they were doing.

I next went to Mexico, where we had a week-long workshop on magic and activism. Mexican and North American witches came together for that. Then I returned home to northern California and spent much of March and April on my ranch where we were organizing a community land trust. Following that, I went to Calgary and did trainings for protests against the G-8 summit meetings, which were scheduled for June. That was also the time of the invasion of Jenin, when whole situation in Palestine really deteriorated, so I was very eager to go there and get involved. I first, however, went to Ireland to take a group of women to sacred sites. I also did a week of trainings for friends in Ireland, one day political and one day spiritual.

*That brings up a question: To what the extent is the Goddess movement international?*

It's very strong in the United States and Canada, and in parts of Europe like Ireland, Wales, England, and Germany. It's beginning in some other places, like Spain. In 2003, the very first book of mine to be translated into French came out, *Dreaming the Dark*. There's also a big Goddess movement in Australia and Brazil. One of my friends in Israel also tells me that now there is a pagan movement in Israel.

*What came after your trip to Ireland?*

In May I flew to Israel, and went off into Balata and the refugee camps. In June, I flew back to Germany and did a five-day training, and then I went to Calgary for the G-8 meeting and helped to organize around that. After that, I flew back to Germany and did witch camp workshops. Then I flew back to Palestine for another 10 days to work with the international solidarity movement in Jenin. I subsequently went back to England and did a witch camp and an earth activist training, went to Holland and did a weekend workshop there, and came home in September. Ten days later, I was off to Washington for an IMF/World Bank action, where our entire pagan cluster got itself arrested. There were about 50 of us. It was just like old times when we did actions and we *expected* to get arrested.

Before leaving, I got involved with Medea Benjamin and the Code Pink women's preemptive strikes for peace, in which we were trying to use the values of compassion and nurturing in situations of serious danger. And we've been encouraging women to do women-led anti-war organizing.

So I came back and we organized a beautiful action for the night they voted on the war in Iraq, where we marched down from Diane Fein-

stein's office to the Federal Building, took over the plaza, camped there all night long, and then blockaded the building for three hours. I spent a lot of October and November around anti-war organizing. Reclaiming also had the big Spiral Dance celebration on Samhain that we always have.

In December we had another earth activist training. In January 2003, I went back East, took on helping the women's Caucus of United for Peace and Justice to plan a women's day of action. We had a vigil and a teach-in and took part in the march on Washington. I then came home with the firm intention of staying home, but. . . I went to Arizona to do a week of trainings in early February, and when they denied the permit to the February 15 march and it was clear that was going to become more of an action than a peaceful march, I decided to go back there and help them out with the direct action part of it.

*So that takes us up to the time of this interview in March 2003. Wow, you are busy!*

And so are the other Goddess women and pagans who do this work with me. I spent 30 years doing all of the spiritual work, learning to take time and space. But now everyone tuned into what's going on with the earth feels this incredible sense of urgency.

*Any parting words?*

It would be nice if in the extended feminist community we started to practice more solidarity, which means actually figuring out how to support each other. That doesn't mean that you never critique each other. But there are ways of critiquing that are constructive and are about furthering the work and the goals of the people you're critiquing. And there are other ways of attacking people that are about trying to make yourself look good and them look bad. And we really don't need to be doing that to each other as women. When we do that, we really are furthering the structures of 'power over' and domination, which, in theory, all of us are opposed to.

*I applaud your courage in really putting your life on the line time and time again in all of the work you are doing. May you be safe in all of your endeavors.*

Thank you.

**Knocking Down Straw Dolls:  
A Critique of Cynthia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal  
Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*  
(Boston: Beacon Press, 2000)**

Max Dashú

*Suppressed Histories Archives*

In the past thirty years an uproar has grown over ideas that women once had power; that people traced their descent through the mother; that ancient religions embraced Goddess veneration. Academia rejected these interpretations of history in the 1960s. Their massive comeback as a result of the women's movement has caused an alarmed reaction. The straw doll of 'matriarchy' is again thrown up, its impossibly narrow definition shot down, and the matter is declared settled. Robert Schaeffer of <patriarchy.com> can then proclaim that 'The feminist/New Age 'Idyllic Goddess' theory is not an intellectually respectable hypothesis'.

All this polarization and oversimplification avoids the real issue, which is not female domination in a reverse of historical female oppression, but the existence of egalitarian human societies: cultures that did not enforce a patriarchal double standard around sexuality, property, public office and space; that did not make females legal minors under the control of fathers, brothers, and husbands, without protection from physical and sexual abuse by same. We know of many societies that did not confine, seclude, veil, or bind female bodies, nor amputate or deform parts of those bodies. We know, as well, that there have been cultures that accorded women public leadership roles and a range of arts and professions, as well as freedom of movement, speech, and rights to make personal decisions. Many have embraced female personifications of the Divine, neither subordinating them to a masculine god, nor debarring masculine deities.

Evidence for such societies exists, though there's no agreement on what to call them. 'Matriarchy' connotes a system of domination, with the 'archy' meaning 'rule over'. Identified with early anthropological theory and, more recently, slams against African-American women, it



has been overwhelmingly rejected. 'Matrilineal' is inadequate, focusing on the single criterion of descent. 'Matrifocal' is too ambiguous, since it could be argued (and has been) that many patriarchal societies retain a strong emphasis on the mother. My preferred term is 'matrix society', which implies a social network based on the life support system as well as mother-right. Others refer to 'matristic' or 'gynocentric' societies, or Riane Eisler's 'gylany'.

Old-school academics as well as post-structuralist upstarts like to scold refractory feminists about evidence and certainties. Their pretense to disinterested objectivity reminds me of what Gandhi said when asked what he thought about Western Civilization: 'I think it would be a very good idea'. The notion that mainstream academia is somehow value-free, but feminist perspective is necessarily ideological and agenda-driven, is still widely held. Covert agendas pass easily under the banner of objectivity.

The project of reevaluating history with a gender-sensitive eye is in its infancy, and necessarily allied to indigenous and anticolonial perspectives. An international feminist perspective views history as remedial – because sexism and racism have obscured, distorted and omitted what information is available to us – and provisional, because new information keeps pouring in. History has changed rapidly since the 60s, in every field: Africana, Celtic studies, West Asian studies, American Indian scholarship. Thousands of new books come out every year that look deeper into women's status and stories in a huge range of societies and periods, at a level of detail not possible before. Fresh interpretations are being advanced from voices not heard before. It's way too soon for sweeping dismissals.

The deliberately provocative title of Cynthia Eller's book spells out her approach in a nutshell: it's not about history, but ideology. The ideas under fire are the insurgent feminist histories that reject the assumption of universal patriarchy throughout history. The author aims to critique the views of what she calls 'feminist matriarchalists', but in process she commits the very offense of which she accuses them. History – detailed, in-depth analysis of historical evidence – takes a back seat to theory (in this case, of the post-structuralist gender studies variety) scattered with ethnographic remarks.

Eller's standpoint differs from that of the most ardent opponents of matrix history in being avowedly feminist. But this does not get in the way of a no-holds-barred polemic, beginning with the title itself. Eller styles the matristic histories as a 'myth' – not a thesis or theory. She makes no distinction between scholarly studies in a wide range of fields and expressions of the burgeoning Goddess movement, including novels,

guided tours, market-driven enterprises. All are conflated all into one monolithic 'myth' devoid of any historical foundation.

Though Eller acknowledges that the vast majority of feminist thinkers in this area reject the word 'matriarchy', she has chosen this loaded, hot-button label as a descriptor. Throughout the book she refers to a variety of feminist researchers as 'feminist matriarchalists', tossing out broadbrush generalizations along the way: 'Feminist matriarchalists' interpretations of ancient myth are rather transparently driven by ideology'. Since Eller's label is more polemical than descriptive, I will abbreviate it as 'fm's' in this review.

There are feminist scholars who use the term 'matriarchy'. Heide Gottner-Abendroth prefers to confront the frenzied reaction the term generates, as a strategy to expose the sexist bias still engrained in academia and the media. Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday is quite conscious of 'the disdain that the term matriarchy evokes in the minds of many anthropologists', but chooses to reframe it etymologically. Instead of using the standard derivation of the -archy stem from 'rulership' (as in hierarchy), she turns to another Greek word, -arche, meaning 'beginning, origin, first principle'. Sanday notes that the Minangkabau people of Sumatra have adopted the European term matriarchaat to describe their own social order. [See her article 'Matriarchy as a Sociocultural Formula: An Old Debate in a New Light' at <[www.sas.upenn.edu/ per cent 7Epsanday/matril.html](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/per cent 7Epsanday/matril.html)>]

The introduction to *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* acknowledges 'substantial dissension' within the 'matriarchal myth', but the body of the book paints a different picture, relegating more diverse opinions mainly to the footnotes. Eller goes for the easy targets and steps well around those that look like they'll sit up and bite back. She relies heavily on poems and interviews, quoting from scholarly writers only in brief snippets. Gimbutas is identified as a major influence, but not heard from directly on her historical thesis. Gerda Lerner is barely alluded to, which is strange given her prominence; evidently she would interfere with the desired impression of a wacko fringe. And where are Miriam Robbins Dexter, Mary Condren, Asphodel Long, Paula Gunn Allen, Patricia Monaghan, Pupul Jayakar, Aurora Levins-Morales, Joanna Hubbs, Ruby Rohrlich, N.N. Bhattacharya, David Bakan, or the Africanists Sheikh Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga?

The book's tone is sardonic, often openly sarcastic: Heide Gottner-Abendroth's book is 'a four-volume opus on matriarchal prehistory'. Eller treats the proliferation of products, publications, and classes as harmful, portraying them as a growing threat spreading into all areas. The youth are being corrupted, too, by teaching of a pernicious 'myth' to

innocent first graders, and even younger girls.

Cynthia Eller has taken feminist spirituality as her anthropological subject. Her earlier book, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (1993), contains a chapter on the same material ('The Rise and Fall of Women's Power'). In both books, Eller believes her informants define women 'quite narrowly' as mothers, as bodies, sex, nature-embracing, she says, the preconceptions of the patriarchy they are trying to escape. Her critique of what she sees as 'essentialism' is a major theme of *The Myth*. The author has no problem positing that all societies have been male-dominated, but considers any and all proposals of sex-egalitarian matrilineages 'essentialist'. This is the 'invented past' of her title.

Eller recounts her first encounter with these ideas in an academic setting, when a male archaeologist suggested that Crete had been a matriarchal society. She reports an overwhelmingly negative response that seems to have impressed her deeply: 'If a lot of mockery was all that prehistoric matriarchies could get me, who needed them?' Historical evidence apparently was not the consideration here. Instead, Eller has chosen to join the camp of the mockers: 'For those with ears to hear it, the noise the theory of matriarchal prehistory makes as we move into a new millennium is deafening'.

The author does her best to portray this theory (and for her there is only one) as weird, unfounded, extremist, and its proponents as blithely unconcerned about historical veracity. She says that 'fm's' want the theory to be true so badly that they will believe it despite all the evidence. Eller is 'appalled by the sheer credulousness they demonstrated toward their very dubious version of what happened in Western prehistory'. She implies that the evidence preponderates on the side of neolithic patriarchy, but as she gets into the meat of her argument later in the book, it turns out to be inconclusive, unproven and (by her own admission) unprovable.

Eller's account of how the 'matriarchal myth' originated follows the interpretation of nonfeminists such as Ronald Hutton: feminists are copying ideas that originated with Johan Jakob Bachofen in 1861. The Swiss philologist proposed an era of 'unregulated hetaerism' in which women were sexually degraded and defenseless, followed by an Amazonian revolt that inaugurated an era of mother-right. In this stage, women created marriage to tame the male. This supposedly still-animalistic and 'backward' era was superceded by a 'higher' stage of human development: patriarchy. But Peggy Reeves Sanday points out that Bachofen never used the word 'matriarchy'; it was American translators who plugged in this term in the mid-20th century. Bachofen's own favored

word was Mother-Right, the very name of his book. He used a different term, gynecocracy, for 'rule by women'.

Nevertheless, because Bachofen and other elite white male theorists of the 19th century saw patriarchy as an evolutionary advance, Eller contends there is 'nothing inherently feminist' in the 'matriarchal' thesis. Worse, since it was proposed by 'the enemies of feminism', she believes that it is against women's interests to pursue this theory. (In that case, consistency demands that we also pitch analysis based on Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault overboard.) The fact that history was still firmly in white men's hands in Bachofen's time does not somehow obligate women today to follow their interpretations. Anyway, it's hard to see how a matriarchal thesis advanced the patriarchal agenda in a world where male domination was already a given. In fact, the initial reception of *Das Mutterrecht* was hostile. After several decades, the book became influential, but its pull was indirect (it didn't appear in English until 1967) and diffuse (the idea of mother-right itself eclipsed the particulars of Bachofen's analysis).

Sexist preconceptions aside, the Swiss scholar seems to have been trying to account for information that didn't fit the picture of universal male domination. It wasn't Bachofen's heroic view of patriarchy that attracted several generations of women researchers, but his anomalous suggestion of prehistoric female power. By pulling together hard-to-find information to make this case, he stimulated discussion of the question of female status from a new angle.

It's worth looking at the history of this idea more closely. Earlier writers had already begun to address the issue of female power as they encountered non-European societies in colonial contexts. Their accounts present a tangle of European projections based on everything from Greek Amazon traditions to Christian colonizers' claims that indigenous peoples worshipped devils. They also record their culture shock at encountering senior priestesses (as in the Philippines and Siberia) and female chieftains (as in Virginia and Delaware). In the *Jesuit Relations* (1724), the French missionary Lafitau expressed astonishment at the power of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) matrons: 'All real authority is vested in them...nothing is more real than the superiority of the women'. Lewis Morgan spent four decades studying the Iroquois and spinning his own theories about matriarchy, published in 1877 as *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization*. The unconscious but patent racism of these categorizations stained the new 'science' of anthropology, as also history and all other disciplines.

Morgan's work in turn had a tremendous impact on Engels, who put

forth its outlines in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), and on Marx, who began writing along similar lines before his death. Eller's brief summary indicates that Freud and many other thinkers of the late 19th century were influenced by these theories of matriarchy, barbarism and civilization, and that feminists—notably Matilda Joselyn Gage and Charlotte Perkins Gilman—also began to draw on them for their own sociopolitical analysis.

With Gage, however, we come back full circle to the Iroquois—but not as anthropological informants, grist for an elite white theoretical mill. For Gage they acted as teachers who inspired a different vision of human relations than the patriarchal European model, and as elders who honored her with the rank of matron of the Wolf clan in the Mohawk nation. Sally Roesch Wagner has fleshed out the direct impact of Iroquois culture on Gage, Stanton, and other founders of the US women's movement. Her research shows that these early feminists had frequent contact with the Haudenosaunee and were deeply impressed by the contrast in women's status in the two cultures.

While US women were legal non-persons lacking rights to vote, hold property and child custody, and even rights over their own persons, Haudenosaunee women spoke in council, participated in decision-making, selected the men who would be chiefs, and had the authority to 'knock the horns off' a chief who failed the people. The chiefs themselves upheld the traditional respect for women, staunchly defending it to white men over the centuries. It was not a coincidence that the first women's rights conference took place at Seneca Falls. Even the 'Bloomer' dress reform movement, with 'an uncanny resemblance to the loose-fitting tunic and leggings' of the Haudenosaunee women, started in this region. [Roesch Wagner's groundbreaking article 'The Untold Story of the Iroquois Influence on Early Feminists' appears in *Awakened Woman* (February 2000) at <[www.goddessaltar.com/iroquois\\_women.htm](http://www.goddessaltar.com/iroquois_women.htm)>]

Barbara Mann's phenomenal *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas* [New York: Peter Lang, 2000] is the must-read exposition of Six Nations history. She synthesizes oral tradition with all the key written sources with insight, wit, and a trenchant critique of 'Euro-forming the data'. Paula Gunn Allen laid out indigenous antecedents for the European-American women's movement in her essay, 'Who is Your Mother: The Red Roots of White Feminism'. She points to 'the informal but deeply effective Indianization of Europeans' that seeped in from many directions, including the second- and third-hand accounts of Morgan, Marx and Engels. These influences went unrecognized, since Indians were 'officially and informally ignored as intellectual movers and shapers in the United States, Britain and Europe'. [Paula Gunn Allen, *The*

*Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 211, 220].

Apparently unaware of these studies of American Indian influence on European-American feminists, anthropologists and leftists, Eller portrays the matrix theories as indebted only to male chauvinists. She moves on to a discussion of anthropologists' repudiation of 'matriarchy' after 1900. Her explanation is that evolutionary theory came into disrepute and armchair anthropology gave way to fieldwork. Still, the eminent classicists Jane Harrison and George Thomson, as well as the anthropologist Robert Briffault, continued to mine the cultural record for evidence of early female power.

Eller admits that scholars who did not adhere to the new doctrine of timeless patriarchy were subjected to 'the jeers of most of their colleagues'. It's strange that she so quickly passes over this subject of ridicule, which has persisted to the present day in academia. In college during the late '60s, I experienced it full force before I even had a position on 'matriarchy'. It was made quite clear that certain questions were not to be raised. The negation was so pervasive as to be doctrinal, a trigger for shouting-down rather than reasonable discussion. Breaches have appeared in the wall since then, but the threatened behavior persists. Many of its targets are non-academics, but the most visible challenge emerged from within the ivory tower, in the eminent person of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas.

#### *The Furore over Gimbutas*

So polarized has this debate become that, as Wendy Griffin has observed, '[Gimbutas'] theories tend to be judged as either absolutely true or absolutely false...'. It is impossible to mention her work in academia without being caught up in a heated dispute. A positive mention is immediately assumed to indicate total agreement with every interpretation Gimbutas ever wrote, and to warrant heated attack. In this charged atmosphere, the content of her work invariably gets lost, and the documentation she provided is never evaluated.

By any account, Marija Gimbutas had an illustrious career as a major 20th-century archaeologist and a primary founder of modern Indo-European studies. She excavated sites of the Vinca, Starcevo, Karanovo and Sesklo cultures. Her ability to read sixteen European languages enabled her to read virtually all the archaeological literature on both sides of the Cold War split, a crucial skill given that most key publications in her study area were written in eastern European languages. It was Gimbutas who laid pivotal groundwork for integrating archaeologi-

cal data with linguistic studies of Indo-European origins.

Her model for Indo-European origins is still the leading theory in the field. Its basic outlines are upheld – minus the Goddess interpretations and focus on women’s status – by her former student J.P. Mallory, now one of the top authorities in the field.

Eller acknowledges the ‘tremendous linguistic expertise’ Gimbutas possessed, and her ‘encyclopedic knowledge of Central and Eastern European archaeological sites that permitted her to speculate effectively on ‘big picture’ questions’. However, she completely sidesteps the Lithuanian scholar’s heavily footnoted analysis of why she thinks the kurgan-builders were invaders, and why patriarchal. Eller never describes Gimbutas’ theory in its own right, or quotes from her historical analysis. Instead she assails it through a pastiche of descriptions by her detractors and supporters.

Eller also declines to compare Gimbutas’ work to theories of the archaeological establishment, claiming that it would be ‘ultimately unfair to all parties involved. There is no archaeological consensus...’ and furthermore, everyone has an agenda, even the traditionalist men. (No kidding, but what happened to the thorough debunking promised in the introduction?) Nevertheless, the book declares that the argument that IE spread from steppes through military conquest ‘is completely speculative’.

At this point Eller resorts to outright misrepresentation. She writes, ‘As J.P. Mallory summarizes, “almost all of the arguments for invasion and cultural transformations are far better explained without reference to Kurgan expansions”’. Reading this came as a shock, because my understanding of Mallory’s position is quite different. I had to look it up; sure enough, he says the opposite: ‘One might at first imagine that the economy of argument involved with the Kurgan solution should oblige us to accept it outright. But critics do exist and their objections can be summarized quite simply’ -and here follows the phrase Eller so misleadingly cites.

Mallory spends pages laying out the evidence for a Pontic-Caspian steppe origin for the Indo-Europeans: ‘the present formulation of this theory owes much to the publications of Marija Gimbutas who has argued for over 25 years that the Proto-Indo-European homeland should be identified with her Kurgan tradition’. Mallory explains that the region she proposes (southern Ukraine/Russia) ‘evidences all the attributes of a putative Indo-European society reconstructed from linguistic evidence...a warlike pastoral society, highly mobile...’ which expanded into Europe. In support of the invasion theory, he notes key evidence of change in Balkan mortuary practice:

there appear alien burials morphologically identical to those on the steppe. These are generally confined to males and are accompanied by weapons – arrows, spears and knives... The rite of suttee, the sacrificial execution of a woman on the death of her husband, is indicated in some burials suggesting the patriarchal character of the warrior pastoralists who superimposed themselves on the local agricultural populations.

Other changes occur: population displacement (in every direction but east), abandonment of Old European tell sites, dissolution of the tradition of fine painted ceramics, and 'infusion of a new physical type into the Danube region which can easily be traced back to the steppe region'. Mallory calls this 'something of a Balkan "dark age"', and further writes of 'unequivocal evidence' for steppe intrusions into the Balkans in the mid-3rd millennium BCE. [Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*, pp. 183-84, 239, 251] All this is straight out of Gimbutas.

Mallory does not follow Gimbutas in every detail (for example, he disagrees with her analysis of the northern Globular Amphora cultures) but he draws heavily on her synthesis of archaeological and linguistic studies. Her influence is also strong among eastern European scholars. The prominent Russian archaeologist Nikolai Merpert wrote in 1997 that 'generally, new archaeological data continues to confirm the conception of Marija Gimbutas concerning the Indo-Europeanization of southeastern Europe'. [Marler, *From the Realm of the Ancestors* (Manchester, CT: Knowledge, Ideas and Trends, 1997), p. 76.]

Cynthia Eller, on the other hand, is dismissive: 'Neither is there any positive evidence that the Kurgans from the Russian steppes were an exceptionally brutal, supremely patriarchal people'. She makes no mention of the women executed for burial with the dominant males around whom these early kurgan graves are centered, nor of the absence of kurgan burials of women in their own right. At this point, I started to question if Eller had actually read Gimbutas' extensive documentation of the kurgan 'suttee'-burials. Civilization of the Goddess details their appearance in the Sredny Stog and Yamnaya steppe cultures, and their westward spread with the kurgan graves. It is her bold attention to issues of women's status that made Gimbutas stand out among her contemporaries. For anyone who has waded through archaeological monographs that bury this kind of information, her writing contrasts sharply to the traditional silence about the social position of women.

Eller concludes that Gimbutas' thesis is a 'house of cards', and that we can't say that Indo-European conquest brought about a more patriarchal social order in the Balkans. Her omission of the burials with executed women is striking in light of a suggestion she makes elsewhere in the book. While claiming that there is no real evidence for 'matriarchy', Eller



proposes an example for the kind of evidence that would really prove female 'dominance': a rich woman buried with murdered men! By her own criterion, the archaeological evidence demonstrates that the kurgan-builders belonged to a male-dominated society – even if she refuses to discuss that evidence. (It is buried in a short footnote.) Her projection of a patriarchy-in-reverse shows that Eller has failed to grasp the basic points made by the feminist historians she is attacking.

It is true that many feminists have seized on Marija Gimbutas as an academically viable feminist prehistorian. It's understandable, since most women don't have access to the higher echelons of academia, and even less to a white-male-dominated field like archaeology. The accusation is often repeated that Gimbutas made interpretations without supporting evidence – unlike other archaeologists. This is just not credible. Interpretation goes on all the time, and it is charged with political ramifications. Brian Hayden, one of Gimbutas' most vociferous critics, has gone out on a long theoretical limb with his claim that Old Europe was dominated by Big Men. But interpretation of 'princely' or 'priestly' complexes are never as controversial, even in the absence of all evidence, as calling female figurines goddesses.

Jean-Pierre Mohen's attempts to contort west European megalithic societies to his preconceptions would be funny if they weren't so depressingly typical of stuff I've read for years: 'The standardized design of neolithic houses indicate a largely egalitarian society: but could this not have included a dominant family, even if it lacked some or all the material signs of power?' The eminent Mohen also assumes, without offering any evidence, that the megaliths were the seat of power of a chief endowed with divine authority. [*The World of Megaliths*, New York: Facts on File, 1990.]

For all the glaring flaws in his Indo-European origin hypothesis (and it has attracted much criticism from linguists and archaeologists) Colin Renfrew has never encountered the contemptuous response that Gimbutas received. (In his version, it is the Indo-Europeans who bring agriculture to Europe from Anatolia and are responsible for the civilization of neolithic Old Europe.) Women scholars who challenge doctrines of gender hierarchy can expect a much harsher reception. Some critics have attacked Gimbutas for calling the kurgan culture (c. 4400–3500 BCE) patriarchal, since women warriors have been excavated in kurgan burials (circa 600–200 BCE). The 3000-year time gap (and probable ethnic discontinuity) between the two societies is simply not taken into account, as if we are talking about the same society.

Naomi Goldenberg vividly illustrates what Gimbutas was up against in her description of a 1972 symposium she attended in Italy. She was

deeply impressed by Gimbutas' learned, precise presentation, but found that male colleagues not only did not share her enthusiasm but didn't take her work seriously, laughing behind her back. By contrast, a Swedish archaeologist who had dismissed Gimbutas out of hand (while commenting to Goldenberg that 'She used to be quite a sexpot') was applauded for 'one of the more absurd papers of the conference', based on his speculation that Norse priests had stood on two dents in a rock. [in Marler, p. 43].

Eller dismisses charges that Gimbutas was put down for concluding that neolithic Europe was matricentric and goddess worshipping. Well, - yes...she was seen as passé, condescended to, and ignored rather than debated. But then, asks Eller, why did earlier archaeologists who proposed prehistoric goddess veneration, and even powerful priestesses, retain a high standing in their field? A puzzling question: Who does she mean, what did they have to say, and why are they missing from her historiography of the subject?

Eller appears to be referring to O.G.S. Crawford, Gordon Childe, and Jacquetta Hawkes. The first two held back from interpreting symbolism in megalithic European sites for several decades, while the anthropological reaction against 'matriarchy' was still fresh. By 1938 Hawkes was chafing under her seniors' admonitions to withhold her ideas about a widespread megalithic goddess: 'caution has been enjoined and it must be observed'. [Hutton, 'The Neolithic Great Goddess: A Study in Modern Tradition', *Antiquity* 71 (1997), p. 94]. Hawkes broke her silence in 1945 with a book describing the megalith builders as worshippers of the Great Goddess, a religion she envisioning as spreading to western Europe from the Balkans and Canaan via the Mediterranean. By the 1950s, Crawford, Childe, and Glyn Daniel also advanced theories of a neolithic goddess religion across Europe and west Asia. Ideas about an era of goddess veneration became widespread in the early 1960s, when James Mellaart excavated Catal Höyük.

Although Eller is reticent about it, it seems clear that another wave of 'matriarchal' theory swept through in the mid-20th century, this time in the field of archaeology. It appears to have been fueled by the realization, as a result of many 20th century digs, that neolithic iconography was predominantly female. *The Myth* acknowledges this second wave (barely) by including a 1963 quote from Jacquetta Hawkes: 'there is every reason to suppose that under the conditions of the primary Neolithic way of life mother-right and the clan system were still dominant... Indeed, it is tempting to be convinced that the earliest Neolithic societies throughout their range in time and space gave woman the highest status she has ever known'. [*History of Mankind*,

quoted in Eller, p. 34].

By the late 60s, a reaction against interpreting female images as goddesses set in. The 'New Archaeology' turned away from cultural analysis to an emphasis on scientific process and technology. The trend was simply to ignore the female figurines, although they were often classified in passing as 'fertility idols', 'dancing girls', 'pretty ladies', and 'concubines'. Most were squirreled away in obscure journals as tiny, poorly reproduced black-and-white shots, while warriors got full-page color treatment in *The Dawn of Man*-type coffee table books. There was more than a reluctance to call them goddesses; details were typically omitted about the sites where they were discovered, and in what contexts, even about dates. Most readers did not notice this blank amidst the extensive analysis of weapons and tools: how is it possible to evaluate information that's withheld? Such structural omissions are by no means a thing of the past. Amnon Ben Tor's survey of Israeli archaeology (Yale, 1992) is a paradigmatic example of this studied inattention.

Other than Gimbutas, Eller claims, no other archaeologists support the 'matriarchal myth'. This is easily disproven by naming a few: Gro Mandt of the University of Bergen; Jiao Tianlong and Du Jinpeng of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Kristina Berggren of the Swedish Institute of Classical Studies in Rome; and Jeanine Davis-Kimball of UC-Berkeley, who excavated the famous 'Amazon' burials of the Sauromatians at Pokrovka.

The range of opinions is not as monolithic as *The Myth* portrays. Davis-Kimball, for example, has said, 'I think Gimbutas may have been wrong about the mother goddess *per se*. But she may have been right about an underlying, unbroken tradition of female cultic power and wisdom, which has been suppressed since the Middle Ages and especially since the Industrial Revolution'. [Osborn, Lawrence, 'The Women Warriors: For Decades, Scholars Have Searched for Ancient Matriarchies. Will They Ever Find One?' *Lingua Franca*, <[www.linguafranca.com/9712/nosborne.html](http://www.linguafranca.com/9712/nosborne.html)>].

There's no question that the dominant paradigm in archaeology is hostile to interpreting the ubiquitous female figurines as goddesses, and to matristic interpretations of prehistory. Eller writes that most feminist archaeologists and anthropologists are also critical of the popular trend toward interpreting the wealth of ancient female images as goddesses. Unfortunately, we don't get to hear from them.

### *Deconstructing 'Matriarchal Myth'*

The outlines of the book's critique will be familiar to any well-read per-

son. Feminists have invented a 'golden age', a utopian narrative fantasizing a time when women were free. Eller calls it 'a universalizing story: once things were good, everywhere; now they are bad' -an account based on dualistic thinking and 'a reductive notion' of who women and men are. (Wait, which is the reductive idea: that women have always been subordinate, and men dominant; or that other models have existed in human society, and that even patriarchal societies show a significant range in the degree of domination?) The simplistic charge of a 'golden age' avoids having to look at evidence for a more complex picture.

Feminist historians are not the only targets of this characterization; it has also been leveled at indigenist accounts of European conquest and slavery, for looking back to a culture of reverence for Nature, in which the sacred permeates daily life. Eller makes this connection, comparing what she calls 'essentialist' feminists to people of color who embrace a positive vision of their 'race'. (Actually, 'blackness' and 'Indian-ness' are used for their cultural rather than biological significance.) She finds these identifications 'discomfiting' because race has been a tool used against people of color. The oversimplification doesn't serve her analysis well. Reasonable people will acknowledge that there is much more to Afrocentrism than theories about 'sun people' and 'ice people'. The arguments are more usually based on culture and history, addressing the ideological underpinnings of racism.

*The Myth* seems to admonish that the issue of identity under oppression should not be engaged directly; to speak of groups with common history comes too close to 'essentialism'. On those terms, it's hard to see how to stop the dominant groups' ideology from continuing to define reality. As Chris Brickell comments, 'the term 'essentialism' has become something of an epithet', and even a term of abuse. ['Radically Speaking', in *Feminist Journal of Aotearoa* 59 (December 1998) <[www.massey.ac.nz/wwwms/59.html](http://www.massey.ac.nz/wwwms/59.html)>] Most often it is levelled at feminists, whose analysis of historical/situational patterns and behavioral conditioning is equated with biological determinism, no matter how often and explicitly they reject it.

To hear Eller tell it, matristic historians have fixed on a theory that women's original power was based on male ignorance of conception, and its overthrow followed men's discovery that they had a part in generation. This claim has been made, but it's a minority viewpoint. The rest overwhelmingly reject the assumption that archaic peoples were ignorant of the basics of reproduction. The sparse citations that Eller supplies don't come close to proving her contention that this explanation for patriarchal revolution 'reigns supreme' over all others. (A rich irony here is that Bronislaw Malinowski, whose functionalist interpretation of

patriarchal takeover myths Eller espouses, himself interpreted the cultural unimportance of paternity among Trobriand Islanders as ignorance of how children were conceived.) [See his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1950, pp. 52-55, 71-72].

Eller believes that 'virtually all feminist reconstructions of matriarchal society' focus on childbirth. She finds it significant that many childless women celebrate birth or, failing that, menstruation, as a central mystery of matrix cultures. However, the feminist resacralization of the body was driven by more than a reaction to current politics. The rediscovery of ancient art and surviving traditions celebrating women's embodied power played a crucial part.

For Eller, this approach is a centerpiece of 'essentialism'. There is to be no reclaiming of female experiences which have been so deeply marked by patriarchal definition and control. Eller concedes that it's reasonable to rehabilitate degraded categories which have been defined as feminine, but objects to continuing to define them as female. In the brave new world of deconstruction, heaps of cultural baggage calling the feminine 'bad' and 'inferior' can be disposed of at will. The positive images associated with 'woman' must also be stripped away, in hopes that this will somehow make oppressive realities disappear. (It's hard to imagine the world's women going along with this prescription.) Women looking for positive female images in history are just deluding themselves: 'inventing' a past.

Eller throws out charges of 'biological determinism', then backs away, qualifies them, and reasserts them again as fact. At one point she says 'the myth of matriarchal prehistory could almost be read to say that gender, at least as we know and experience it, is a cultural invention'. But on the next page, she asserts that even though feminist theory is reacting against the idea of biological causes for patriarchy, 'yet its basic approach is to accept these biologically determined sex differences' in the guise of 'timeless' femininity. Some pages down the line, it's a settled question: 'Despite their claims of biological determinism and robust sex difference, feminist matriarchalists recognize the cultural determinants of gender'.

No perspective on historical patterns enters into this muddled and distorted picture. The vast majority of matrix historians say that patriarchy emerged out of historical processes, not biological necessity. Turning this problem around the other way, isn't declaring patriarchy a historical universal a kind of biological determinism? To insist that, amidst all the luxuriant variation in human culture, that egalitarian societies never emerged, seems to be equivalent to positing male domination as an inherent trait.

*Among the Anthros*

Although the book is titled *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, its true subject is anthropological theory. Having rebuked matristic historians for using ethnographic data to buttress their case, Eller goes on to do just that. She writes that 'it makes good sense' for anthropologists to use ethnography to speculate about prehistory. For her the salient point is that 'Ethnographic analogies to contemporary groups with lifeways similar to those of prehistoric times... show little sex egalitarianism and no matriarchy'. A further disproof is 'the fact that matrilineal kinship systems are found at all levels of social complexity, not just in groups judged to be most like the social model we conjecture for prehistoric times'.

Eller's covert assumption appears to be that modern foragers or horticulturalists can be taken as representative of some primeval order. This kind of theoretical leap has been rejected by American Indian critics, among others, as giving off more than a whiff of the racist evolutionary ideas that modern anthropologists find so embarrassing. Because the foraging peoples' technology/economy has not changed dramatically does not mean that their social organization remained static over the millennia. They live within history, like the rest of humanity.

Given the paucity of material evidence, how would we know if these peoples' social structure had changed? The primary source would be their own oral histories. But these have been primarily available through anthropological mediators, due to the way information is organized in 'Western' institutions. They are presented as ethnography, not as history. There has been a strong tendency to analyze them as mechanisms of societal function, rather than on their own terms.

This is Eller's approach as she turns to the widespread legends that female power was overthrown by men who took over the primary rituals, lodges, and sacred objects. Such traditions have been recorded among Australian peoples, the Dogon and Mende in west Africa, peoples of the northern Amazon and Tierra del Fuego, among others. Eller upholds Malinowski's functionalist thesis of 'charter myths', which interprets these legends as a means of maintaining male dominance and defining morality.

But this would be no less true if these traditions do contain a memory of actual shifts in social organization. In fact, they would be more necessary. If male dominance is universal and existed from the beginning, what need is there to justify it in 'charter myths'? Eller's suggestion that they relieve social tensions falls flat. If anything, they emphasize them. Reenactment of the takeover story involves an element of enforcement, shown by her example of men disguised as demons terrorizing noncon-

formist women by tearing through their property and even beating or stabbing them. (Where? We aren't told.) Eller thinks these myths function to reconcile women to their status through a fantasy of former power, but the threat of violence seems a much more convincing reason.

Eller fails to consider a possible relationship between these traditions of male seizure of ritual power and widespread ceremonies in which men imitate birth and menstruation, or wear fake breasts and other female regalia. She also disregards historical patterns of men taking over spheres originally presided over by priestesses. Some will argue that references to Apollo's priests taking control of the female oracles in Greece and Anatolia are more mythical than historical. Yet the historical record does reflect an escalating encroachment of male priests on female turf, even in later periods. For example, a Greek inscription of the 4th century BCE shows the high priestess of Eleusis fighting in court to stop the male priest from usurping her traditional privileges. [Zaidman, p. 372]. We can also roughly track the elimination of priestesses from public authority in Mesopotamia, China, and Europe.

Nor are such accounts limited to ritual offices. Columbia River legends of Tsagaglallal speak of a time when female chieftainship ended. The Aztecs remembered a challenge thrown out to the male chiefs by the female warrior Quilaztli. The high Aztec office of Cihuacoatl (Serpent Woman) was named after her, though it had become a males-only position by the time of the Spanish conquest. Historical documentation proves that such female leaders existed in many American Indian societies. In Angola, the BaChokwe say that the female ruler Ruwej was overthrown by her brothers. (Another version says that Ruwej married a BaLuba chief who took over her political functions and imposed patrilineal descent.) To preserve their matrilineal ways, BaChokwe oral history says that they split off from the BaLunda and migrated south to Angola. Among the BaLunda themselves, the name Ruwej remained as one of the titles of female officers in court councils. The names of other court offices – Mwad Mwish, First Female Pillar, and Mwad Chilab, First Courageous Woman – indicate that they originally belonged to women. [B. Crine-Mavar, 'L'Avant-Tradition Zairoise', *Revue Zairoise des Sciences de l'Homme* 3 (1974).]

*The Myth* insists that all known human societies have valued men over women, and points to anthropological studies which say that matrilineages are just as male-dominated as patrilineal societies. Sherry Ortner is cited for her claim that lower female status is 'one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact'. If so, Ortner's highly-theoretical paper does not demonstrate it; she assumes it as a given, with only two shallow paragraphs on the Chinese and the Hidatsa offered as examples.

Eller has a basis for saying that matrilineage alone doesn't guarantee an absence of patriarchal customs. The problem with her analysis is that it's based on an either-or proposition, with no perspective on historical shifts to patrilineage and patriarchal law. For example, Elamite inscriptions show there was once matrilineal descent in western Iran, and Duga, the oldest recorded epic of West Africa, proclaims: 'Descendance from the woman, descendance from the woman has ended...' But there seem to be few examples of patrilineal systems shifting to matrilineal reckoning; the traffic is in the other direction. In the early '60s, Kathleen Gough documented signs of shifts away from matrilineal descent reckoning under heavy colonial pressure. Today indigenous matrilineages face even more intense pressures as they battle for survival on all fronts.

Anthropologist Barbara Joans has observed that the subject of 'matriarchy' was long considered 'a closed chapter' in her field, until feminists like Sally Slocum (author of 'Woman the Gatherer') opened it up. Joans thinks it likely that 'some matriarchal systems' have existed. She points to the few known examples of polyandrous societies: 'Had not several of them survived into the 20th century we would probably be arguing the improbability of their existence'. It would have been declared a myth 'because it contradicts so much current anthropological data'. (And ideology.)

What is completely missing from Eller's book is any discussion of matrilineal societies with high female status, such as the Khasi (NE India), Innu/Naskapi (E Canada), Musuo (SW China), Tuareg (Sahara), Keres (New Mexico), Minangkabau (Sumatra), Haudenosaunee (New York/Ontario), Amahuaca (E Peru), Seri (NW Mexico), Vanatinai (Pacifica). Even bilateral societies with significant female spheres of power are not discussed. Also missing is any historical perspective – whether written, oral or archaeological – on female spheres of power in the Two Thirds World. *The Myth* considers indigenous women only through the lens of Western ethnography.

### *Where's the History?*

Although evidence from prehistoric times is 'comparatively sparse', we are told that 'matriarchal myth fails completely on historical grounds'. If so, this book doesn't provide them. There is little history and much theory. Citing the early deaths of women at Catal Höyük (average age in the 20s) and high infant mortality, Eller concludes the situation was unlikely to cause reverence for miraculous pregnancy and birth as 'the gifts of a munificent goddess'. (On that analogy, world suffering precludes beneficent deities in any religion.) It would be just as easy to con-



clude that the danger of childbearing intensified the impulse to appeal to its goddess for protection, and might even have given it the charge of a shamanistic passage.

Eller rejects the idea that women's burial under the central platforms carries any implications of high status. After all, the men might still have owned the platforms and 'buried their wives and children under them' out of affection – or to underscore their ownership of them as property! The unlikeliness of these interpretations is pointed up by the fact that the men are buried on the peripheries. If they had been found buried in the shrine centers, archaeologists would have held that up as confirmation of their importance and authority.

The statement that 'most remains are not detectably gendered' may be true. The problem is that until recently archaeologists paid scant attention to evidence about gender. They made big assumptions about the kind of grave goods that would go with males or females, sexing burials by grave goods rather than by skeleton analysis. Often they failed to record relevant data. I'm reminded of how medical researchers (in another male-dominated field) took men as the norm and extrapolated about women's health from that. Eller concedes that archaeologists 'typically rely on ethnographic analogies' to interpret remains. The question is: which cultures are to be used for comparison?

The book's skeptical stance fades as Eller turns to the 'third gender' option now in fashion. Not only is the evidence for female power problematic, but 'we cannot assume that a female skeleton is a woman'. She may have been biologically male but socially female. But if it is difficult to prove female authority from prehistoric remains, it is an even more daunting task to prove 'that gender was a pronounced category in prehistory and that it was characterized by 'variability, permeability, changeability, and ambiguity'. Maybe so, but here the stern demand for evidence is suddenly missing in action.

Eller writes that theories for the cause of patriarchy 'tend to find fault with men', who are described as awful and wicked. But elsewhere we are told that 'narrators of the myth are generally reluctant to blame men...' It's enough to make your head whirl. The book's discussion of the rise of patriarchy centers mainly around theories of sudden patriarchal invasions. Of course, patriarchy by conquest is only one model. Others have described a gradual change in which male dominance builds up within a society over time, but Eller has little to say about these. She alludes briefly to theories that the advent of plow agriculture or animal husbandry had something to do with the development of male domination. The case Gerda Lerner made in *The Creation of Patriarchy* is barely mentioned. Nothing in *The Myth* hints at the extensive discussion

of historical indicators of this shift in the last thirty years.

Eller's summary of the kurgan invasions narrative is miles removed from Gimbutas' detailed, data-studded analysis. She asks where the invaders came from and, sarcastically: 'How did they carry out their nefarious mission?' Stooping to conspiracy theory, she proposes that questions of historical evidence aside, 'fm's' picked the Ukrainian steppe because it's large, within striking distance of Europe and 'the Near East', and with a poorly documented prehistory. Best of all is its sparse modern population 'since no one wants to come from the place where patriarchy began...' Whew. (In the footnotes, we learn that Cold War demonization of the Russkies was also at work.) The documentation Gimbutas assembled is nowhere in sight.

Eller is critical of the assertion that early neolithic sites were peaceful, but her discussion of weapons and fortifications is extremely thin. She cites the presence of maces, but without comparative data, or names of sites other than Catal Huyuk. Her discussion of the Aegean is particularly disappointing. We're offered one scholar's speculation that Crete may have been 'warlike', but his evidence has disappeared, since all the alleged battles took place at sea. Surprisingly, Eller claims that 'fm's' minimize the intensely patriarchal character of ancient Greece. Her own account blurs the distinctions between Cretan, Mycenaean, Homeric and classical Greek societies.

On the other hand, there is plenty of room for Eller's criticism of a chronic overemphasis on Europe and West Asia (though she is unjustified in implying that this is true of all 'fm's', or that the problem is unique to feminists). The fixation on the so-called 'West' comes from the dominant Euro/American culture which continually broadcasts its own myths in education, the arts and all media. Intellectual culture is awash in this bias: the books published and the influential review magazines, the over-representation of European subjects in the canon, and prestigious web sites which equate 'antiquity' or 'the ancient world' with the Mediterranean and the southwestern edge of Asia.

There is no question that the nature of available sources, especially those that openly address women's status, has shaped the content of much feminist analysis. Some have accepted these structural blinders too readily, and end up reproducing the stereotypical spotlight on the Mediterranean. Eisler acknowledges the problem of limited focus in *The Chalice and the Blade*, but doesn't go beyond recommending that further study is needed in other world regions. (However, she did inspire Chinese scholars to take her up on it.) In turn, Eisler's book became a primary source for many women who had no other historical background. They elevated her examples of Çatal Höyük, Malta and Crete as

the primary models of prehistoric female power. Thus it's common to hear women extrapolating from European and west Asian chronology to make declarations about 'when patriarchy started'. But there is no one chronology, as some of us have been saying for years, and a wide variation in degrees of patriarchy. Sumatra and Niger and Ontario and Venezuela have their own chronologies and their own constellations of social custom and change.

A similar pattern has occurred in response to the work of Marija Gimbutas, creating the impression that once again, it's all about Europe. But to stop there is to give a very incomplete picture of the range of feminist research going on. There is an explosion of investigation into these questions globally. My own work in the Suppressed Histories Archives has involved 30 years of intensive research into women in the archaeological record and oral histories of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the islands. There are many others, some of whom are named above.

Amidst all the talk of bad scholarship, I was surprised to see no examples of my pet peeve: writers who make uninformed speculations about the derivation and relationships of ancient names. I've seen some pretty strange linguistic comparisons over the years, especially in some of the older feminist books: attributing 'Abraham' and 'Brahma' to a common linguistic root, for example, or saying that 'Kali' and 'Cailleach' are the same name, or even that 'Cailleach' derives from 'Kali'.<sup>1</sup>

Carelessness or indifference to historical and linguistic evidence has been a problem, and just adds fuel to claims that all feminist history is spurious. However, the fact that such all-encompassing smears are so easily believed is even more problematic. All scholarship should be taken on its own merits.

### *Arguing about the Goddess*

Eller claims that 'feminist matriarchalists almost always posit a form of goddess monotheism for prehistory...' She doesn't seem to have a clue to how controversial this idea has been in goddess circles. Already in the '70s feminist pagans objected to anything that smacked of a monotheist Big Daddy in the Sky. More recently, Asphodel Long wrote, 'for Goddess people generally the term 'the Goddess' describes all aspects of female divinity, goddesses singular and plural: academic determination

1. Cailleach comes from the same root as the Latin pallium: a word meaning 'covering, mantle'. Kali is from an Indic root meaning 'black'. Irish and Indic are distantly related, but the two names have different meanings and etymologies – even though both refer to unfettered goddesses of the people, and the Cailleach is occasionally described as blue-black.

to impose a monotheism on us is misplaced and counterproductive'. Daniel Cohen remarks that archaeologists 'perceive 'the goddess' and 'goddesses' as being opposing notions', but he points out that pagans use them interchangeably, 'with the same person referring to 'the goddess' in one sentence and 'goddesses' in the next'. [Long and Cohen, reviews of *Ancient Goddesses: the Myth and the Evidence*, in Wood and Water, *Winter Solstice* 1998].

Eller uses the problematic claim of goddess monotheism to sidestep the prehistoric preponderance of female iconography. She acknowledges 'a huge number of anthropomorphic figurines, many of them clearly female'. Putting aside the normative masculine assumed by 'anthropomorphic', it is not 'many' but 'most'. These overwhelmingly female statuettes are found on a global scale, from Ecuador and Colombia to Ohio and Utah and Alaska, from Chad and Egypt to Kazakhstan and the Punjab and Japan. Their femaleness has not been controversial, even if they have often been ignored.

However, Eller contends that only 50 per cent of the ancient Balkan figurines that Gimbutas studied are indisputably female. If all the rest are assumed to be male, she says, then the gender breakdown would be 50-50. An illustration shows one of these 'sexless' images: a statuette from Vinca in the stance of the obviously female figurines: hands on belly, feet together. Its rounded hips are wider than the shoulders, the body violin-shaped, but Eller thinks it may be male since it is breastless. Her interpretation is hardly compelling, but even if we conceded that such images were male, how many male-dominated societies do we know of that make nude figures of masculine gods, lords, warriors, or fathers-sans penis?

Conversely, Eller believes the female images are the neolithic equivalent of porn: after all, 'how do we know' they aren't? To make her case, she uses drawings by Hubert Pepper comparing paleolithic art and modern pornography. He pictures an archaic sculpture from the rear, with its buttocks turned up, in order to compare it with a doggy-style photo. A butt is a butt, but the figurine is not on its hands and knees, neither does the reclining female relief in the second example resemble the splayed modern photo. None of the ancient figures display the simpering coyness of Playboy pinups, nor do people bury their dead with porn. Female nakedness does not equate to pornography, and the old sexist assumption that a vulva signifies a sex object while a phallus indicates power should be tossed out.

Eller proffers other possible interpretations of the figurines: they may have been used in curative rites and then disposed of, since some were found in garbage middens. (Didn't men also get sick, or do the figurines

then represent healing goddesses?) The sacramental context of many finds hardly comes into consideration, although Eller concedes that the figurines had 'protective or magical functions in some cultures'. She runs through other theories that they were dolls, toys, or were used to teach boys. (Why not girls?) None of this explains how they ended up in so many burials, or why they were buried under thresholds, or in temples from Malta to Niuheliang to the North and South American mounds.

We learn that feminist researchers are prone to see vulvas everywhere (though a male archaeologist also comes under fire for interpreting signs in cave art as vulvas). The symbols in the book's Figure 7.3 'said to be vulvae' seem to fit the bill quite well, and so do those on the phallic baton in Figure 7.9. The author expects 'fm's' to object to interpreting a multivalent Cypriot seated-woman/phallus/vulva sculpture as a dildo. Yet for decades now, feminists have speculated that phallic-headed female figurines were ritually used to stretch hymens open in womanhood initiations.

Eller thinks that most of the images regarded as female, including the famous plaster reliefs at Catal Huyuk, 'are not definitely or even probably female'. Her short discussion of Malta states that evidence for widespread goddess worship 'is practically nonexistent'. Why? Because certain archaeologists have declared the larger statues to be of uncertain sex, or even eunuchs. (One guy has likened them to Sumo wrestlers.) Common sense should apply here: the sculptures have huge hips, round feminine arms, and tiny hands. There is no penis. The breasts are small, but similar proportions are found, with the same ridge of belly fat, on female figurines from Sardinia and, from an earlier period, at Sesklo in north Greece. A smaller Maltese sculpture from Gozo shows a pair of seated women, identical in shape, holding children in their laps.

Eller also discounts the idea that the Maltese temples are shaped in the form of a goddess. She admits that their outlines resemble the amply proportioned sculptures. But two exceptions at Hagar Qim and Tarxien depart from the shape of the earlier temples at Ggantija, Mnajdra and Gozo, with extra chambers added on. Both of these date from the later phase of temple-building; Tarxien also has earlier temples of the classic fat-woman shape.

Although I usually disagreed with Eller on issues of interpretation, some of her points are well taken. For example, she criticizes a woman who called some four-fold cross-like symbols 'moon signs'. I **could not** see any basis for the claim myself. The same symbols have elsewhere been interpreted as 'sun signs'; who's to say? I think Eller's right that the paleolithic 'Venuses' are not pregnant, but that's hardly startling: everyone I know thinks they are simply fat. Gimbutas' interpretation of

the 'egg-shaped buttocks' is a more prevalent one; although I'm not convinced, neither do I find it ridiculous. What I find striking about these clay sculptures is their resemblance to Nile Valley contemporaries, as well as Saharan and South African rock art.

Eller observes that the Greeks did not regard their various goddesses as 'aspects of a unitary goddess'. That's true for classical Greece, but a case can be made for a syncretic Mediterranean goddess in late antiquity. An aretology of Isis identifies her with Artemis and various west Asian goddesses such as Astarte (Palestine) and Nanaia (Iraq). Apuleius' famous invocation is one of several treating primary national goddesses as manifestations of one Great Goddess: 'My name, my divinity, is adored throughout all the world, in different ways, in variable customs and in many names, for the Phrygians call me the Mother of the Gods; the Athenians, Minerva; the Cypriots, Venus; the Candians, Diana...' and so on at length, ending with the Egyptian veneration of Isis.

Another example of a 'unified' goddess is found in the Shakta (Goddess-oriented) stream of Hindu religion. Devi (Goddess) is worshipped under a myriad of names and forms. Numerous litanies of her Thousand Names are still being chanted today, the most famous being the Sri Lalitambika Sahasranama. They approach all the classic Indian goddesses as aspects of Devi. One of her names is Ekakini, 'the One, Only'. Litanies of the ancient Kemetic goddess Neit include the same title. Neit is also called Mother of the Gods, a concept found in many other cultures, including the Phrygian, Ugaritic, Aztec, and Calinya Caribs. While not 'monotheistic' or exclusive of male gods, these traditions clearly do envision a Great Goddess.

Naturally, Eller counters the assertion that goddess veneration proves high female status by bringing up goddesses who are violent or support patriarchal custom. They exist, and her example of Anat wading in the blood of battle is to the point (although I'm curious what she'd say about Anat bearding her father El, king of the gods, and coercing him to do her will). Eller's observation that 'Goddess worship has been reported for societies rife with misogyny' is also true. She points to low female status in Hindu, Buddhist and Catholic societies.

Clearly, goddess worship alone cannot be used as a measure of women's social power. But is it meaningless as an indicator? The examples given all come from post-imperial societies, which combined many strands of indigenous traditions with the religion of ruling elites and their priesthoods. The ancient goddesses persisted in the ancient empires like Babylon and Rome. Much has been written about the pronounced gap in values between folk religion and state theology.

Western feminist analysis turned to goddesses partly because they are

so strongly anathematized in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures. In the Christian world, their erasure was linked to suppression of priestesses. In Judaic scripture their worship was condemned as 'whoring after false gods', with a recurring metaphor of Zion as a adulterous wife punished by a wrathful god-husband. Islam's triumph resulted in outlawing of the old Arabian deities, among whom a trilogy of goddesses was prominent: 'instead of him, they worship only females'. The idea that patriarchal religion is pervaded by sexual politics was inescapable.

An extremely strong case for religious pluralism in ancient Judah and Israel has been built in the past thirty years. In *The Hebrew Goddess*, Raphael Patai marshalled much evidence from the Bible itself to show that ancient Jews worshipped the goddess Asherah, and that her image stood in the Temple itself for two-thirds of its existence. Archaeologists have turned up female figurines in great numbers, but Eller scoffs at discussions of Hebrew goddess figurines, because 'we know that the religion of that place and era was adamantly monotheistic'. Her assumption is seriously outdated. (Unsurprisingly, the sole footnoted source for it is Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, who has been fighting a rearguard action against the idea that Asherah was a goddess.) The weight of scholarly opinion has shifted as more information emerges – including the Asherah inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom – indicating greater religious diversity than conventional Biblical scholarship was prepared to concede until recently.

Eller is correct that some feminists (most notoriously Elizabeth Gould Davis) advanced a thesis that the Hebrews were patriarchal invaders and destroyers of goddess religion. Many expressions of this theory unconsciously incorporated anti-Semitic tropes of the old Christian blood libel, replacing the old charge of 'Christ-killers' with some version of 'Jews destroyed the Goddess'. But these ideas have been roundly attacked and not the all-pervading theme the book implies. (The only reference to feminist opposition to them is buried in the footnotes.) Jewish women such as Phyllis Chesler, Naomi Goldenberg, and Starhawk are left out of the picture, though elsewhere described as supporters of the 'myth'. Starhawk refuted Judith Antonelli's accusation that the Goddess movement was inherently anti-Semitic in her 'Response to "The Goddess Myth"', but the Utne Reader refused to print her excellent rebuttal. [Read it at <[www.reclaiming.org/starhawk/utne.html](http://www.reclaiming.org/starhawk/utne.html)]

The story is even more complex: feminists did not make up the Hebrew invasion narrative, or the stories of prophets smashing idols. The Book of Joshua describes a conquest with genocidal destructions of Canaanite towns. Like many others, feminists took the Biblical account at its face value as history, but identified with the Canaanites (often over-idealiz-

ing their culture as egalitarian). In recent decades, archaeology has contradicted the Bible, showing Hebrews gradually assimilating to their Canaanite relatives. Some excavators have even stated that it's difficult to tell the two cultures apart. It's become clear that the Hebrew states were never a great regional power.

### *Pomo Prescriptions*

Eller sees 'fm's' as reinforcing patriarchal gendering by insisting on the classic feminine traits. On the other hand, she doesn't seem to entertain any possibility of redefining 'female' in a positive, flexible and diverse way. For her it represents – can only represent – a negative, constrictive category imposed by a patriarchal system. In support of this, she uses a great quote from the 19th-century British feminist Millicent Fawcett: 'We talk about 'women' and 'women's suffrage', we do not talk about Woman with a capital W. That we leave to our enemies'. Nonetheless, many estimable feminists such as Matilda Joslyn Gage used this syntax to articulate very radical ideas.

Eller writes that 'both the category of feminism and its context are to a large degree determined by prior discrimination against the very people who are forced to occupy that category'. That seems tautological. Why else would a women's rights movement come into existence at all? Her formulation seems to deny any voice, creative shaping or subversion of ordained identity to the women themselves. Her solution to the problem is simple: vacate the category of women, as meaningless, illusory, and confining.

Post-structuralism proclaims that it is pointless to look for commonalities, since there are none: 'The only femaleness that is characteristic of all women as a class is the experience of having the label 'woman' affixed to one's being'. (Are all identities as meaningless as this?) Eller skims over the performance theory of gender without addressing – except for a mention of pink and blue blankets – the heavy social/cultural/economic enforcement that underlies these 'performances', and the retaliation and repression dealt out for the 'wrong' behaviors. As Stevie Jackson has pointed out, 'Regarding meaning as entirely fluid can mean denying even the starkest of material realities'. ['The Amazing Deconstructing Woman', *Trouble and Strife* 25 (Winter 1992), p. 92.] And, because it recognizes no group interests, a post-structuralist worldview also entails abandoning solidarity and collective action.

The program seems to be: make gender disappear, as in no previous human society. The structural realities of patriarchy – physical and sexual abuse, low female status combined with heavy caregiver responsibilities,



economic insecurity, legal inconsequence, women's reactions to violent and degrading treatment: can all that be made to vanish by declaring gender irrelevant? Quoting Vicki Noble's remark that 'We have to create the feminine', Eller asks, 'Why can't we just ignore it and see if it goes away?' (She must not have been to a toy store lately.) The naiveté of this approach is staggering.

Eller proposes the Sisyphean project of overcoming a pan-historic male domination of men through... moral choice. She doesn't address the problem of whether the will to achieve this exists on a society-wide basis, amidst the anti-feminist backlash against women's recent gains. But even if this goal is unreachable, we can still try really hard, hoping for a better future in spite of a bleak past. And 'We can comfort ourselves with the thought that many of the conditions we suspect have worked to create male dominance are no longer with us, or need no longer produce the same response as they did in the past'.

Hmmm. What might conditions might these be? This is the first mention of male dominance having to be created, it having existed since the dawn of time and all. Now Eller points to Richard Leakey's argument that the hunting and gathering division of labor is the culprit in women's oppression. She hopes that 'the farther we grow from those roots, the less we need to be affected by social roles that made sense only in the past'. This assumes that they ever made sense – that they were not based on sheer coercion of women, children, and non-dominant males.

But if patriarchy originated in foraging societies, why do so many of them – the Agta, Mbuti, Semang – display relatively egalitarian social relations? And why is it that the most patriarchal systems are found in the highly organized feudal, imperial and capitalist societies? More than one anthropologist has proposed the reverse of Leakey's thesis: that hunter-gatherer gender parity gave way to patriarchy within the settled agrarian societies. None of this has been settled.

There's another problem. Eller puts this era of leaving behind foraging lifeways (at least for 'the West') at some 10,000 years ago. It seems as if that would be more than long enough to outgrow any functionality of old hunter-gatherer roles (were we prepared to concede them) which would then just 'go away'. She tries to explain away the problem: 'social systems can continue to thrive long after the conditions that formed them have become irrelevant'. Indeed. This is what any number of feminist thinkers have been saying about the persistence of goddess veneration in patriarchal societies, but Eller doesn't apply the principle in that case.

Another inconsistency is that although Eller posits male domination throughout history, she hedges toward the end of her book with the question 'Why is it that where gender hierarchy has developed, women

have always been the dominated gender?' (my italics) Which is it to be: is male domination universal or not? *The Myth* gives an impression that patriarchal social systems serve no interests, entail no power or benefits: 'Male dominance may be perpetuated through inertia and have no better reason to exist than tradition'.

At the end of the book, Eller offers an unconvincing sop to the objects of her inquiry: 'The care and imagination feminist matriarchalists have devoted to these 'origins' questions is in itself an impressive achievement'. There is cold comfort in this, as she immediately reverts to accusing 'fm's' of 'sloppy or wishful thinking'. She must continue to protest against 'the myth' even after it is 'stripped of its pretensions to historical truth'. Not only does she consider the entire spectrum of matrix theories escapist and nostalgic for patriarchal archetypes, she thinks they are dangerous and ultimately serve the enemies of feminism.

The only problem is, those enemies just love her book. On the Net it's being gleefully hailed by outright and covert anti-feminists alike. Lawrence Osborne's article on <salon.com> trumpets: 'False Goddess: Despite what believers in prehistoric matriarchy proclaim, women never ruled the Earth'. [June 28, 2000] Osborne gloats that Cynthia Eller is 'unravelling the pretensions of matriarchalists' and 'middlebrow feminists'. According to him, they are 'sentimental, gawky', and 'woozy, sexist romantics', whose 'twaddle' is probably a 'pathological reaction' to corporatist society. (Osborne can't bring himself to acknowledge the existence of women's oppression.) The more cautious types on scholarly listservs won't be caught in such extreme language, but some are still holding up this book as the definitive refutation of those pesky 'feminist ideologues' and goddess 'fantasies'.

So *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* fails Eller's own 'enemies' test. Instead, it's looking a lot like Camille Paglia all over again. That's an old, familiar story. But we don't have to choose between the extremes of pan-historic masculine domination or a utopian negation of the human capacity for violence and oppression. The differences between the Hopi and the Nazis do count; or between the Chinese and the Musuo, Arabs and the Tuareg, mainstream US society and the Iroquois... There's a vast expanse of variation in human culture, with much more to be learned about the history of women's power, oppression and resistance.

More nuanced scholarship is on the way. Some of the most exciting contributions will come from indigenous perspectives, with histories never been published before. The task of synthesizing and analyzing information from archaeology, oral history, linguistics, and written records is just beginning.

## Who's Afraid of 'the Goddess Stuff'?

Kristy S. Coleman

I share with many a fascination with the concept of the divine as feminine. My thirteen years investigating the significance of this concept has exposed me to people's at times hostile reactions to the idea of the divine feminine.\* Scholars from both sides of the debate about Goddess spirituality assert that the symbolic order is a significant element of the problem with patriarchal religions. I assert that it is at the level of the symbolic order or semiotics<sup>1</sup> that we can find the source for both the repulsion from and attraction to Goddess religion.

To substantiate this claim I examine some of the issues that are frequently highlighted by the traditions' antagonists, drawing in particular on examples in the writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Cynthia Eller. I seek to demonstrate that these contentions are only shallowly rooted; instead they are symptomatic of a deeper issue. In addition, I challenge Cynthia Eller's employment of 'relative deprivation theory' to diminish and explain away the empowering effects and attraction of Goddess spirituality. I conclude with a semiotic hypothesis, drawing primarily on the strategy of deconstruction and the concept of the transcendental signified. My methodological approach elucidates this topic on two levels. First, it offers an explanation as to why women in the Goddess movement often believe it is inconsequential if the theory of a prehistorical past—where women were valued and a concept of the divine as female celebrated—is disproved. Their claim, while seriously stated, has been too readily passed over as insignificant. I propose that the weight of the significance of the divine feminine lies in what this signifier means now—within the midst of a religious and cultural milieu in which 'God' is predominately understood as He. Second, my theory explains why the debate over this religious tradition often becomes particularly fierce. I will show that there is at times a compulsion to 'debunk' or annihilate (the other) rather than an objective scholarship

\* My thanks to Dr Cynthia Humes for her advice on this article.

1. Semiotics is the study of signs.

intrinsic to Religious Studies.<sup>2</sup> Prior to engaging in this semiotic proposal, I first review several areas of contention about the Goddess movement that are repeatedly raised by some of its antagonists. I conclude that these repeated issues defer the argument from a more core contention.

### *The Fall into Patriarchy*

Over the years, Rosemary Radford Ruether's writings on the Goddess movement have shifted toward greater tolerance and a lessening of the tendency to disparage superfluously, though perhaps not consistently so. In 1986, she questioned the 'feminist goddess-centered religion', claiming that 'to make up a history out of misinterpreted evidence is a dubious procedure'.<sup>3</sup> In her *Gaia and God* (1992), Ruether writes '[e]cofeminist theories of the lost paradise often include the idea of original matriarchy. This story envisions a time prior to patriarchy, in which women ruled over men'.<sup>4</sup> Though such depictions of the claims have been readily challenged by many,<sup>5</sup> she also tempers her earlier claim in this text. For instance, after emphasizing the uncertainty in the pre-historical evidence, Ruether affirms that '[n]one of this [ambiguity] disproves the possibility of some aspects of these Old European cultures that might have been more egalitarian and also more female-identified, at least culturally than those that succeeded them in the eastern Mediterranean'.<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Eller also makes occasional remarks, despite the evidence she stacks up to the contrary in *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*,<sup>7</sup> that she agrees there is a 'possibility of a prepatriarchal prehistory'.<sup>8</sup> Yet her clear overall thesis is that such a view is an implausible 'house of cards'.<sup>9</sup>

At this point these two critics of the Goddess movement may sound as

2. Eller admits that her 'constant bickering about the myth's historicity [held] something more than a lofty notion of intellectual honesty'. Eller, p. 6.

3. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism', *The Christian Century* 97.5 (1986), p. 844.

4. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 145.

5. See for instance Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), pp. 56-59.

6. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 154.

7. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* is referred to simply as *Myth* from this point on.

8. Cynthia Eller, 'Response', *Religion* 31.3 (2001), p. 268.

9. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, p. 180.

though they are in agreement – indeed Ruether is quoted as endorsing the *Myth* on its back cover. However, at times greater similarity can be found between antagonist and target than between these allies. The black and white portrayals of the issues begin to seem marbled and gray when scrutinized.

In *Gaia and God*, Ruether provides a sweeping survey of human development ranging from early humanity to present. This outline proffers a fairly balanced survey of some of the key evidence, theories and issues affecting interpretations of western culture's prehistory. Moreover, I suggest, it presents a view of prehistory that is shared by many Goddess spirituality folk and Wiccans. In strong contrast, in *Myth*, Eller claims women of the Goddess movement commonly believe a more eccentric view of prehistory. Her sources are 'enthusiasts', authors who produce 'glossy art books', novels, poetry or even email. Eller constructs a discredited straw woman of such sources, labeling them 'feminist matriarchalists', and includes scholars who have written of a less patriarchal past or who have seriously considered goddess traditions in ancient times.

Interestingly, Ruether's uncritical portrayal of certain aspects of prehistory might well place her at risk of being labeled a 'feminist matriarchalist' herself.<sup>10</sup> For instance, in her analysis of the creation myth from Babylon, she suggests that there are social messages surmisable from the *Enuma Elish* story, including the view that the earliest world was seen as 'matriarchal', and that the earliest model of generation was 'parthenogenetic gestation'.<sup>11</sup> She proposes that the likely historical correlation between political struggle and the conquest of younger states over older states and villages is reflected in the myth.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Ruether's outline includes some of the very arguments and evidence by

10. In her response to my review (cf. Kristy Coleman, 'Matriarchy and Myth: An Exchange', *Religion* 31.3 [2001]), Eller describes a feminist matriarchalist as earning this title by 'telling the story of the myth of matriarchal prehistory with the avowed intention of empowering women', Eller, 'Response', p. 266. The 'myth' she clarifies is a story of 'enviably harmonious prehistoric societies that were matricentric and goddess-worshipping'. In response to my inquiry, Eller explains that Gerda Lerner is not a feminist matriarchalist because Lerner denies the existence of prehistoric matriarchies. Eller, 'Response', 266. Note that in one statement the terms 'matricentric' and 'matriarchal' are interchangeable, in the other it is a key defining point determining on which side of the drawn line one's scholarship will stand. Such slippery application indeed confirms her admission that something more lies behind her 'bickering' than 'a lofty notion of intellectual honesty'. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, p. 6.

11. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 18.

12. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 16.

anthropologists and religion scholars that I referenced in my review of Eller's *Myth* to counter what I perceive as a rather skewed presentation of the evidence. Ruether characterizes the diminishment of women's power in various societies in ancient history and more egalitarian social structures amongst tribes such as matrifocal hunting-gathering societies.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, she suggests that indigenous cultures can give us insight into 'factors that may have undermined matricentric societies and led to patriarchy'.<sup>14</sup>

Based on Eller's thesis, we might expect her to refute much of the argument presented by Ruether, such as Ruether's claim that women were probably the creators of the first tools, developed fire to cook, and were the first agriculturists.<sup>15</sup> Ruether does not dispute these theories but instead reports them without qualification. Eller treats the same hypotheses with derision and fails to acknowledge that scholars outside the Goddess movement also support many of the theories she discredits by associating those theories with 'feminist matriarchalists'.

Although Ruether resists the theory of an overthrow or Kurgan invasion, and hedges that to call Minoan society totally egalitarian 'is probably exaggerated', she agrees that women likely stood as peers with the men at the Minoan palace.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, unlike Eller, Ruether does not dispute that patriarchy is a social construction that emerged at some point in history, though she acknowledges that we might never be able to define this development's specific course.

Eller would likely argue that Ruether is not a 'feminist matriarchalist' because she disputes a paradisiacal prehistorical past and the claim of a matriarchy. Yet, similar refutation from pronounced 'feminist matriarchalists' are ignored. In my review I put forward, and restate here, that in my experience with the Goddess and Wiccan community, most do not have such an extreme or monistic perspective of prehistory.<sup>17</sup> I continue to maintain that the portrayal of the Goddess community in Eller's *Myth* is not representative. Eller's description of her methodology is telling. The inaccuracy of her enthusiast-based profile of the community and its beliefs is demonstrated by Ruether's interpretation of the tradition in her review of Eller's *Myth*. Ruether relays a doctrinal understanding of the Goddess religion that she obtained from *Myth*: '[t]he belief in a

13. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, pp. 158-59, 176-77.

14. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 165.

15. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 158.

16. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 181.

17. My PhD dissertation included a four-year ethnographic study of a Dianic Wicca/Goddess religion in Los Angeles.

matriarchal stage of human history almost became dogma among some women's spirituality groups. To doubt this was seen as a betrayal of faith'.<sup>18</sup> Yet this is a noted non-doctrinal religion, with perhaps the exception of the Wiccan Rede.<sup>19</sup> Such portrayals cause me to wonder if we study the same subculture. Recently I had an opportunity to test my view.

At the pre-screening of *Signs Out of Time*, a documentary on Marija Gimbutas,<sup>20</sup> I distributed a questionnaire that asked attendees about their perspective of prehistory.<sup>21</sup> I contend that this crowd might well be considered a representative sample of the Goddess movement in Southern California, and it is revealing that their responses in no way reflect the portrait of the Goddess movement that Eller promotes in *Myth*. Their views of prehistory are more akin to that reflected by what Ruether outlines in *Gaia and God*. One salient indicator, for instance, is that 100% of the respondents rejected a view of prehistory in which society was 'matriarchal' and Goddess worship was universal.<sup>22</sup> As I suggested in my review, drawing from the texts of 'enthusiasts' is not a valid methodology for a representative view of this tradition's culture, which is the commonly understood goal of ethnography.

18. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future', *Anglican Theological Review, Inc.* (2001), p. 894.

19. This in general states, 'And it harm none, do what ye will'.

20. Produced by Belili Productions, available at [www.belini.org](http://www.belini.org).

21. The prescreening was held March 8, 2003 at the Bodhi Tree Bookstore in West Hollywood, California.

22. About half of the audience completed a questionnaire. Of the 30 respondents: none (0) selected '(a) In ancient, pre-historical times the global worship of a shared idea of the Goddess existed. The social structure was matriarchal'; 7 selected '(b) In ancient, pre-historical times the global worship of the Goddess existed in different, culturally specific forms; the social structure was matrifocal (meaning woman-valuing and the mother-child relationship was central)'; 18 selected '(c) In ancient, pre-historical times there were a variety of religious expressions and social structures, but many societies definitely imagined the divine as female and many societies viewed the female in valuing ways and were structurally more egalitarian'; 5 selected '(d) In ancient, pre-historical times there were a variety of religious expressions and social structures. A few imagined the divine as female and were more egalitarian; however, masculine gods and patriarchal social structures were prevalent'; and none (0) selected '(e) In ancient, pre-historical times throughout the world the masculine was a dominant presence, both in society and in the cosmos, and was basically as familiar in the ancient past as it is today'. While more study would be helpful perhaps, this survey at minimum questions the accuracy of Eller's portrayal of the Goddess community.

## Recycled Critiques

In her review of Eller's *Myth*, Joan Marler proposes that

The key elements in this book are not original and were presented three decades ago in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's anthology *Women, Culture, and Society* (1974). The main thesis of *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* is stated in the concluding sentence of Joan Bamberger's article, 'The Myth of Matriarchy', from the same volume: 'The myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place. To free her, we need to destroy the myth'.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, I have noted eight primary arguments in Eller's (2000) text that had been presented two decades earlier in Sally Binford's (1979) article 'Myths and Matriarchies', including the accusation that the religion's beliefs harm feminism's reputation.<sup>24</sup> These observances suggest that the same criticisms are re-used without acknowledging responses to the criticisms or more contemporary viewpoints. For instance, numerous writings in the past decades clarifying the differences between matriarchal, matrifocal, and matrilineal social structures were ignored by Eller's choice of the now-outdated—but politically strategic—term 'matriarchy'.<sup>25</sup> Eller's use of a term prevalent in the 1970s parallels her outdated depiction of the Goddess community and its beliefs.<sup>26</sup> In

23. In Joan Marler, 'The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's *Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*', 2003, p. 1, **this issue**. See Joan Bamberger, 'The Myth of Matriarchy', in M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 280.

24. See **Coleman, p. 260 n. 1.**

25. On April 21st, 2003, KPFFK, the Los Angeles Pacifica radio station, broadcast a feminist Seder recorded in 1976. Two of the names of women associated or in attendance that I recognized were Gloria Steinem and Phyllis Chesler. Women are asked at one point to name their matrilineal descent and a 'matriarch'. Jane Goodall is named as a 'matriarch' by one woman. I realize from this replay of a feminist moment in the seventies that the use of the term 'matriarch' in that period does not denote an oppressive structure that we associate with the term today. In this feminist Jewish Haggadah, they were not calling for a 'rule of women', though the term 'matriarchy' was used, but for women to be recognized as fully human.

Consider, in contrast, the amount of argument generated about the importance (or impossibility) of understanding the archaeological evidence of prehistorical female figurines within their cultural context. Yet, Eller does not attempt to place the use of the term 'matriarchy' within its cultural context, though it is within our living memory.

26. In actuality, though Davis in her 1971 publication *The First Sex*, was invoking 'woman dominated' societies, the differences between matriarchy and matrilineal and matrifocal were being distinguished by 1976. See Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Dorset Press, 1976), p. 32.



contrast, following two decades of analysis by the Goddess community as well as scholars such as Ruether, it appears as though both cohorts have arrived at very similar views on the complexity of prehistory, recognizing a process in some areas and eras where women and goddesses were diminished while patriarchy expanded.

Although Eller describes her methodology as 'ethnography', for the most part, she is an armchair anthropologist whose predominant source for both her books on the Goddess community are texts, not common participants.<sup>27</sup> This method poses at least two problems. First, Goddess spirituality is not a religion of the book. Many of the teachings, especially among Wiccan practices, are oral. Second, most of the texts Eller selectively references do not reflect current viewpoints. Her upcoming book, *From Motherright to Gylany* suggests that she is not unaware of changes in the discourse: rather, she simply does not disclose that awareness in *Myth*. Lastly, but significantly, malice is readably detectable in her writing; as Ruether notes in her review of *Myth* when she observes Eller's treatment is presented 'with an unnecessarily snide tone at times'.<sup>28</sup>

Many criticisms of the Goddess tradition seem intent on maintaining the view that the religion is 'beyond the limits of serious discussion'.<sup>29</sup> With publications such as *Myth*, attitudes like this are understandable and no doubt perpetuated. Eller's *Myth* reproduces an eccentric version of 'the story they tell' about prehistory. It portrays the women in the goddess community as daft and fails to describe their complexity or acknowledge them as serious or intelligent.

In *A Magic Still Dwells*, Kimberly Patton describes scholastic reductionism as 'methodological condescension'. Patton criticizes scholars who "overwrite" the claims about reality made by those who were or are themselves directly involved in the phenomena being considered...<sup>30</sup> She writes,

To discount as politically coded 'pretexts' the theological, cultic, or philosophical motivations offered by participants themselves in religious

27. Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. ix. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, p. 11.

28. Ruether, 'The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future', p. 895.

29. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Female Symbols, Values, and Context: Moving Beyond "Who Killed the Goddess?"', *Christianity and Crisis* (1987), p. 460.

30. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 164.

phenomena, movements, or controversies, is arrogantly to disenfranchise those we purport to understand.<sup>31</sup>

I believe that the undue focus on this issue of true prehistory, and the selective practice of naming Goddess stories (as opposed to Christianity for example), not disprovable but nonetheless 'myth', ultimately leads to questions about the relevance and motives behind such a criticism, particularly within religious studies. Perhaps for Christians – whose faith is strongly dependent upon a belief in an historical event, however that event is later interpreted – the view that an historical origin could be unnecessary for a religion is simply too unfamiliar and so is often ignored or denied.

### *Historicity, Verisimilitude, and Myth*

Throughout the years, Ruether has charged the Goddess movement with failing to differentiate between myth (a tradition's purported beliefs) and verifiable history.<sup>32</sup> How can this criticism be so readily repeated by Ruether and Eller without some degree of self-consciousness regarding their own tradition(s)? In *Gaia and God*, Ruether notes that the creation myths of Mesopotamia, Christianity, and Greece contain stories of lost paradises, such as in the biblical Eden and Greek Golden Age stories. While she notes the women-blaming element of both Eve and Pandora, she does not call upon Christians, Jews, or Hellenists to acknowledge the implausible historicity of these stories.

The tacit presupposition of this criticism is that Christians have a clear understanding of the difference between what is historically verifiable and what is (the mythic) part of the tradition. Yet anyone having taught an introductory course in religion knows that most Christians inaccurately regard as historical some very elementary aspects of their tradition. For instance, many Christians understand the gospels to have been written by actual disciples of Christ. There is no evidence for enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt, nor of an Exodus of a sizeable number of foreigners.<sup>33</sup> We have known for quite some time that archaeological investigations have negated the possibility of a worldwide flood. Thus, making accusations of the 'vacuousness' of a tradition that confuses its history with mythology constructs a myopic

31. Patton and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells*, p. 168.

32. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 8.

33. See Hershel Shanks (ed.), *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999).

spotlight that would wilt any tradition's adherents.<sup>34</sup> And yet, as Ruether and Eller (in some sentences) note, the 'Goddess hypothesis' does remain a plausible hypothesis for prehistory. What, then, is the intention of the constant reiteration of such a criticism?

In *Myth*, Eller acknowledges that other religions' myths are equally susceptible to criticism under historical scrutiny, yet she seems hagridden with a need to 'debunk' what she claims is foundational to the Goddess movement: a vision of a Golden Age prehistory. Why the irritation with this particular tradition? She offers the argument that the myth lessens the credibility of the feminist movement, but it seems that—if one really wanted to bolster the feminist enterprise—efforts might be better spent, for instance, in critically analyzing the rhetoric of certain AM radio talk shows.

Perhaps the issue is not so much one of historical veracity or feminism's credibility,<sup>35</sup> of vacuity or power reversals,<sup>36</sup> of women being kept in their place or 'reversed forms of scapegoating',<sup>37</sup> of 'ecofeminists' confusing myth with history,<sup>38</sup> or neopagans failing to 'take responsibility for their own complicity in the evils they excoriate'.<sup>39</sup> Maybe the real crux of the issue lies in that reaction to aberrance I keep encountering at the mention of the divine as feminine. The intense digging at details in archaeology and myth, and anthropology and history, makes for fabulous analytical exercise, but the reductionistic and disparaging depictions of the practitioners, and their choice to imagine the divine as female, goes beyond mere intellectual honesty.<sup>40</sup> There appears to be a real level of discomfort ignited by the mere idea of the feminine divine. Because neopagan rituals and theology's ethics and philosophy are readily appropriated, the *gender* of the divine begins to appear the more salient candidate for the source of the repulsion.

### *Theology and Appropriation*

Ruether acknowledges, in print, that 'the wisdom and goodness' that is recognized as Jesus for Christians 'underlies all other religious quests',

34. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, p. 8.

35. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, p. 7.

36. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, pp. 7-8.

37. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, 143.

38. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 8.

39. Ruether, *Gaia and God*.

40. See Eller's admission of such, Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, p. 6.

and she includes the Goddess in her list of noted religions. Elsewhere, and more often, her depictions fail to present the sophistication or complexity of theology. For instance, Ruether writes, 'I believe that merely replacing a male transcendent deity with an immanent female one is an insufficient answer to the "god-problem"'.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, in the reformed Christian theology that Ruether proposes in *Gaia and God*, I recognize an enunciation on relationality that is familiar to theology. For instance, she proposes that '[t]o believe in divine being means to believe that those qualities in ourselves are rooted in and respond to the life power from which the universe itself arises'.<sup>42</sup> What Ruether wishes to promote in combining the metaphors of Gaia<sup>43</sup> and God (minus the sovereign, reigning, patriarchal, notions of God) are the characteristics of a spirituality that are quite common to the Goddess movement. She acknowledges that she wants to incorporate the Gaia voice that has long been silenced because without it 'our laws have no heart, no roots in compassion and fellow feeling. They fail to foster a motivating desire for biophilic living'.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, her advocacy to 'see the workings of eco-justice and spirituality as interrelated' would find an exemplary model in Starhawk.<sup>45</sup> An acknowledgement of some appropriation is nuanced in Ruether's admission that Christian and Jewish feminists transfer 'elements from the neo-pagan movements into their own liturgical work' and in her use of the name Gaia.<sup>46</sup>

### *Breaking Free of a Hegemonic Symbolic Order*

While there is a tendency to focus on the differences between Goddess

41. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 4.

42. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 5.

43. Ruether's use of Gaia should not be misunderstood as her acknowledging a sense of the divine as feminine or a Goddess. She has merely drawn on a goddess's name from classical Greece who is the Earth. For Ruether, Gaia means 'the living system' that is the earth; there is not a sense that she makes feminine the concept of deity or the Creatrix'. In fact, at her September 1996 lecture 'Some Issues in Ecofeminist Theology', sponsored by the Center For Process Studies, at the Claremont School of Theology, Ruether argues that we do not need to make nature sacred or divine, but merely need to respect it.

44. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, 255.

45. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 5. Ruether denies or fails to recognize such a link already in existence. In fact, she accused 'New Agers' of 'recreational frolicking in nature without responsibility', at her lecture at the Claremont School of Theology, in September 1996. She did not clarify whom she meant in referring to 'New Agers'.

46. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Feminism and Religious Faith: Renewal or New Creation?', *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3.2 (1986), p. 18.

and Christian feminist spiritualities, commonalities exist; consider Carol P. Christ and Ruether. We have two well-educated, intelligent women, both of whom recognize the dominant traditional-lineage of patriarchal religion in the West to be highly problematic, and both seek to foster a more woman-valuing, ecological, and ethically-based religion. I view the situation somewhat like the way my father makes soup from scratch. He opens the refrigerator door and considers what he has got to work with. Both Christ and Ruether are working within the milieu, or soup, of a predominantly patriarchal Christian culture. Both recognize the symbolic nature of culture and religion as key.<sup>47</sup> Christ has long been described as the revolutionary and Ruether the reformer. Yet, Ruether's reform does not seem repulsed by, but attracted to, the theology (philosophy, rituals, and ethics) of the Goddess movement or Wicca; indeed, she appropriates parts of it. Despite all the ink spilt, the issue of 'matriarchies' and paradisiacal prehistory really do not seem to be the issue. The point of repulsion seems to lie in the symbol of the Goddess itself – reformer and revolutionary, in this context, basically connote one who is unable to break free from a hegemonic symbolic order, and one who has.

In *Becoming Divine*, Grace Jantzen proposes that, 'the traditions of western Christendom...are more constitutive of us than we might like to think'.<sup>48</sup> In particular, Jantzen sees Ruether as ambivalent in her call to ground religious tradition in women's experience in lieu of her contradictory practice of putting scripture and Christian tradition in a place of privilege.<sup>49</sup> Jantzen proposes that to truly allow women's experience to rewrite and re-vision a lost and distorted past for the purpose of developing 'a just future', will likely result in the emergence of something that 'will go far beyond anything resembling traditional Christianity'.<sup>50</sup> I suggest it already has.

My investigation of the significance of the feminine divine has been kept astir by people's reactions to the concept, within and beyond academe. Ruth Barrett, who for twenty-five years led and developed the largest and longest-lasting organization of the Dianic<sup>51</sup> Wiccan tradition

47. Ruether writes, 'A healed relation to each other and to the earth then calls for a new consciousness, a new symbolic culture and spirituality', in Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 4.

48. Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 107, 111.

49. This criticism was not only of Ruether but also of Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza.

50. Patton and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells*, p. 164.

51. 'Dianic' in this context refers to the Zsuzsanna Budapest lineage of Wicca. In this tradition the divine is conceptualized and named in exclusively female form and

in the United States, noted similar experiences of this phenomenon in people's reactions during an interview. She summarized the repulsion/reaction as, 'people will call God anything [He or It] but *She*'.<sup>52</sup> I have come to think that this concept does lie somewhat beyond the realm of reality as it exceeds what western philosophers have long described as the totalizing signifying system of western metaphysics, the systemic method for representing and understanding reality.

### *Symbol Systems*

Ecofeminist theology and spirituality has tended to assume that the 'Goddess' we need for ecological well-being is the reverse of the God we have had in the Semitic monotheistic traditions; immanent rather than transcendent, female rather than male identified, relational and interactive rather than dominating, pluriform and multicentered rather than uniform and mono-centered.<sup>53</sup>

At the risk of sounding vacuous, I suggest the answer to questions about either attraction or repulsion to this tradition lies in the Goddess. Ruether – alongside Carol Christ, Naomi Goldenberg, Grace Jantzen, Luce Irigaray and others – has noted the importance of constructing an alternative symbolic system to transform patriarchal culture and its religious systems effectively. This image or signifier and the importance of semiotics overall has both been acknowledged and in some sense avoided or dismissed. For instance, early in *Gaia and God*, Ruether acknowledges that, 'A healed relation to each other and to the earth then calls for a new consciousness, a new symbolic culture and spirituality'.<sup>54</sup> Yet in closing the chapter in which she outlines the development of patriarchy, her proposed solution is that mutual parenting, rather than a focus on maternal parenting, be implemented to overcome the current hegemonic disaster and to best avoid further male resentments.<sup>55</sup> This idea, popularized by Nancy Chodorow, is commendable, but fails to create a new symbolic culture.

Symbolic gestures not only perpetuate cultural patterns but have the potential to transform them. Some, such as Roland Barthes, argue that we could never expect to transform any ideology of culture without

terms, respectively. In addition, only women attend the practices of public rituals (which occur six times a year).

52. Interview with Ruth Barrett, 27 April 2000.

53. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 247.

54. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 4.

55. Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 171.

altering its symbols. The Goddess movement, I propose, breaks out of a *doxic*, unquestioned, worldview. It lays bare the orthodoxy of patriarchy, including its masculine conceptualization of God, and they criticize 'God's' characterizations that reiterate and validate a model of oppressive power. Ruether similarly couples with her arguments and evidence of society's fall into patriarchy, a critique of the cultures that shaped western society – Mesopotamia, Greek, Christian and Jewish – particularly noting the continued erasure and appropriation of women's procreative abilities, and the cultures' oppressive and militant character. Ruether's critical awareness of such issues makes her somewhat rare in Christianity as well as in western culture at large. She shares this awareness with the women in the Goddess movement generally, who have similar critical awareness around these issues.

Once a *doxic* structure is recognized and questioned, understood to be hegemonic rather than natural, it falls open to critical consideration. Pierre Bourdieu calls the questioning of the generally *doxic* paradigms of culture and religion a 'crisis', but it is a crisis pregnant with potential. It threatens the dominant order, which will do everything in its power to silence the heterodoxy and return to a state of *doxa*. Fear of the dominant discourse 'rejects heretical remarks as blasphemies'.<sup>56</sup> Bourdieu's descriptions of hegemonic practices explains the impulse behind the discrediting descriptions of Goddess worship as 'beyond the limits of serious discussion' and its stories as historically unverifiable. These criticisms are suitably understood as intended to discredit and disempower an alternative and threatening symbolic order.

The Wiccan/Goddess religion is not a mere affront to patriarchy, but arguably, theoretically, can be viewed as de-stabilizing or even rupturing western metaphysics through its radical transformation of the hegemonic signifying system. This profound potential is, in my view, the impetus behind the voracious attacks on both scholarship and practices that seriously consider a historical or contemporary conceptualization of the divine as female.

My semiotic hypothesis draws on Jacques Derrida's notions of deconstruction. He contends that the most we can do to go beyond the hegemonic structures of meaning is to engage in the act of deconstruction. The contemporary notion of the Goddess, in some sense *is*, in fact, a deconstruction of 'God'.

56. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. Richard Nice; Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, 16; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 169.

*The Transcendental Signified*

To develop this hypothesis, let us draw on a variety of theorists to peel away the layers of meaning-making for western metaphysics. Semiotic and psychoanalytic theory exposes the phallogentrism of western culture and its signifying structures. Ultimately, Derrida's theory of the transcendental signified – as the anchor by which one's symbolic culture may be reinforced or transformed – can be used to articulate a semiotic approach by which we can view the concept of the Goddess and understand why it indeed threatens the established hegemony. Each theory provides a piece of the critical lens that recognizes some of the characteristics inherent in western metaphysics. Piecemeal these theories ultimately demonstrate how Goddess spirituality effects a deconstruction of this limited signifying structure. Semiotic theory offers the view that the Goddess tradition alters the hegemonic system of signification by altering the transcendental signified.

In contrast, Eller invokes 'relative deprivation theory' in *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, to argue that the cause and effect of the feminist spirituality movement are centered on issues of power.<sup>57</sup> She proposes that women in the 1970s were disappointed that they had not gained their expected socio-political status as equals to their brothers. Yet, this period, during which the Goddess movement emerged, was one of the most hopeful periods of the women's liberation movement in American history. During this period feminist practice and theory was at a height; women *were* experiencing social changes and new freedoms, including that of creating or transforming religious traditions. Thus I find it questionable whether American women in the mid-seventies were riddled with angst over not having achieved the goals of the feminist movement. Nor does it explain why contemporary women turn to the practice while others, feeling similarly disappointed, do not. Eller's perspective seems more applicable to the present day than to the seventies, and thus 'relative deprivation theory' fails to convincingly explain women's attraction to or the emergence of Goddess spirituality. Lastly, a critique of deprivation theory by Virginia Hine evokes a growing feeling of powerlessness for all types of individuals.<sup>58</sup>

I suggested that the Goddess tradition's production of an alternative signifying system is the key to its emergence, attraction, and its repul-

57. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, pp. 209-12.

58. See Virginia H. Hine, 'The Deprivation and Disorganization Theories of Social Movements', in Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone (eds.), *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).



sion. Western culture is highly influenced, if not wholly determined, by a limited symbolic system.<sup>59</sup> One of the primary characteristics of that structure, according to (post)modern feminists, is that it is patriarchal or, more specifically and semiotically understood, phallogentric. Throughout its short history, different members of the Goddess movement have described their tradition as characterized by its production of an alternative symbolic structure. For instance, in her landmark article 'Why Women Need the Goddess', Carol Christ (1979) describes symbols as having both

psychological and political effects, because they create the inner conditions...that lead people to feel comfortable with or to accept social and political arrangements that correspond to the symbol system.<sup>60</sup>

She notes the power of recurrent symbols, stating that, '[e]ven people who no longer 'believe in God' ...may not be free of the power of the symbolism of God the Father'.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in *Enchanted Feminism*, Jone Salomonsen (2002) says of the Reclaiming group founded by Starhawk, 'they invent new symbolic universes'.<sup>62</sup> These examples indicate that Goddess spirituality adherents have long realized the power of symbol and recognized that this tradition was creating a new symbolic order. My hypothesis identifies the semiotic ingredients and process of that transformation as conveying an understanding of why and how Goddess spirituality and its rituals are empowering within a much grander scheme than suggested by 'relative deprivation theory'.

We begin with the general context or milieu of the Goddess revival—western culture. According to Jacques Lacan, its system of signification is Phallogentric. In his combination of linguistics and psychoanalytic theory, Lacan substantiates that the binary gender hierarchy in Western culture is based on the male/female opposition with the superior positioning of the male or, more specifically, the designation of the

59. This notion of a totalizing and limited metaphysical system is part of the lineage of criticism present in the western philosophical works of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Lévinas, as well as the works by poststructuralists Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida.

60. Carol P. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections', in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 274.

61. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess'.

62. Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco*, Religion and Gender (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 214.

Phallus as the privileged signifier.<sup>63</sup> Many are familiar with Freud's claim that women suffer from penis envy. Lacan provided a more acceptable interpretation of this observation, explaining that women do not envy the male organ *per se*, but rather the access to the privilege this signifier affords. The Phallus is not simply the penis but a signifier given culturally constructed value. It is not, however, unrelated to the penis, as privilege is afforded to those who have *it*. Lacan describes not only our culture but also our very language as phallogentric.

The field of semiotics has helped to disclose the *doxic* values that are perpetuated through seemingly innocuous everyday words. What we discover in the relationship between the signifier and the signified – which Ferdinand de Saussure established to be arbitrary – is a value system that replicates a culture's status quo. Representation, whether through stained-glass church windows, TV commercials, or ordinary language, is a practice.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, through an alternative practice of meaning-making – in ritual and language – cultural values can be written, or re-written. In fact, (w)riting an alternative symbolic within a ritual milieu is uniquely advantageous as the expressed meaning can exceed the totalizing limits of a phallogentric language. Ritual provides ways to express sensibilities 'that cannot be expressed in any other way'.<sup>65</sup>

At many, if not all, Goddess rituals, what can be observed is a re-(w)riting of the signifier 'woman'. Through ritual performance, an alternative idea of women as powerful and self-determined is articulated. Women are ascribed as The Sacred and Goddess. Yet, understood from a semiotic context, the rituals do more than re-(w)rite a single signifier – 'woman' – though the impact of transforming this one concept carries vast significance.

The symbolically represented hierophanies of the Sacred that are carefully selected and arranged for the ritual altars signify the Goddess. Flowers, seashells, and strings of pearls at seasonal Spring rituals all represent the Goddess – identifying her with nature, and conversely representing nature as She. The plurality of Her images, the richness and multiplicity of Her form, signifies to the ritual participants that She is all things, one and many, immanent and transcendent. The celebration and

63. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 36.

64. Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), p. 34.

65. Stanley Tambiah quoted in Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 111.

recognition of the Goddess in these different symbols places Her in the position of the transcendental signified – the most influential and central signified of the symbolic structure; a position generally held by 'God'.

To understand the transcendental signified we must consider the center of meaning-making by drawing on Derrida, who combines linguistics, psychoanalysis and philosophy in his deconstructive work. The transcendental signified is described as the presumed anchor for 'reality', some transcendent certainty – be it Truth, or the logos, Being, or God – without which signifiers could only meaninglessly point to other signifiers. Its centrality results in its affecting the value and meaning of all other signifiers. In theory, everything within a system of signification would be altered by the replacement of this central signified. The transcendental signified functions as a pebble tossed into a still pond that causes a ripple effect. This pebble creates and defines the initial wave as well as the meaning and value of all the waves that follow.

While descriptions of the transcendental signified in some writing depict it as the mystery of unnameable origin, in other works it is explicitly described as the Phallus for western culture.<sup>66</sup> Irigaray clarifies the issue in her pronouncement that the transcendental signified is the omnipresent Phallus or 'God'.<sup>67</sup> Irigaray writes, 'God functions as the keystone of language, of sign and symbol systems'.<sup>68</sup> For Irigaray the interrelations of gender, God, and language have not only a long history but also a well-protected one. They have, she claims, 'for centuries been scrupulously protected by the word of men'.<sup>69</sup> To question the 'sex of language' is to take issue with the 'God of men in his most traditional form'.<sup>70</sup>

A phallogocentric system of language results in a production of meaning that is heavily constrained by a patriarchally hegemonic binary opposition. This has a deep effect on the limitations, values, and perspectives of, for instance, what is male and what is female. The current metaphysical process replicates *ad nauseam* a repression of the feminine and a privileging of the Phallus. This signifying process results in a multitude of related symptoms that are succinctly summarized in

66. Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 37. For an acknowledged phallogocentric signifying structure, this is not at all a surprise.

67. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum: Of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 52.

68. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 112.

69. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

70. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

the description of western metaphysics as a production of 'the Same'.<sup>71</sup> In addition, as Irigaray notes, 'the *Other* ['God'] often stands in our tradition for *the production of a hatred for the other*'.<sup>72</sup> This statement invokes a paradigm that manifests in hostilities, repulsion and a compulsion to 'debunk' and annihilate a religion that offers a living alternative to that ultimate and central bastion of patriarchal order.

### *Deconstructing 'God'*

God is being used by men to oppress women...therefore, God must be questioned and not simply neutered...

Luce Irigaray<sup>73</sup>

Jantzen articulates that the concept of the divine feminine or Goddess is one that generally encompasses character traits different from the traditional and familiar idea of God the Father, who is sovereign, transcendent, disembodied, and rational. God the Father, she explains, has been used to deny the sacredness or religious leadership of women. In contrast, the Goddess as She is the source of life experienced in life. She encompasses all, female and male, just as all things come from a mother. A key association with the imagined gender of the divine is that the exclusive concept of a male deity emerges from a culture in which the system of representation is based on a hierarchical binary with the male in dominance. This system of representation cannot be divorced from its religious machinations.<sup>74</sup>

God simplified or neutralized as an It, on the other hand, does not affect the present power structure. Derrida's description of deconstruction helps in understanding what is at issue in disrupting and dismantling this pillar of patriarchal theology:

...a kind of general strategy of deconstruction ... is to avoid both simply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing

71. Irigaray explains that because the formulaic structure of the western economy of representation presupposes the male model as the norm, women can only be defined in opposition, in contrast, as different than men, as the not-man. Women are always found lacking, defective as a result of this unquestioned algorithm. Irigaray defines the underlying binary logic as 'he is/she is "not"'.  
72. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 112.

73. Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (trans. Gillian C. Gill; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. v.

74. Ruether notes that 'Societies with gender parity virtually always have creation myths that attribute the creation either to a female or a male and female together. By contrast male-dominant societies typically have male-only creation stories', Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 166.

within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it.<sup>75</sup>

Ruth Barrett, the High Priestess of the Dianic tradition I studied, seemed to intuit a similar view. She explained that if you want to create balance in the power structure, that is, to do away with patriarchy, you do not raise the male while at the same time elevating the female, or you will have only raised the hierarchical structure in *toto*; you will not have changed it.

A more in-depth description of deconstruction by Derrida makes clear that we are dealing with a systematic structure of oppressive violence. Neutralization does not allow for the recognition of such a structure. Derrida describes deconstruction is a double-gesture:

...on the one hand, we must ... recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of *neutralization* that *in practice* would leave the previous field untouched, leaving one no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of *intervening* in the field effectively. We know what always have been the practical (particularly *political*) effects of *immediately* jumping *beyond* oppositions, and of protests in the simple form of *neither this nor that*.<sup>76</sup>

Let me reiterate with some simplification – neutralization leaves the previous field untouched: God as It would still be God [veiled He]. A move toward neutralization overlooks the subordinating effects of this structure. On the other hand, overturning this hierarchical binary, according to Derrida, allows for a recognition of the effects of the domination.

Within the political context of the gender of the divine, denial of the importance of a male image of the divine, by claiming that God is not gendered but is spirit, is a denial of and refusal to acknowledge the effects of patriarchy. Jantzen theorizes, '[t]he western cultural/philosophical imaginary is sick, and a symptom of its sickness is its refusal to acknowledge its condition'.<sup>77</sup> She clarifies that the 'western symbolic can be thought of as the patient, in the grip of a disorder called masculin-

75. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (trans. Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41.

76. Derrida, *Positions*.

77. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 97-98.

ism'.<sup>78</sup> Jantzen, like Irigaray, and many other feminist scholars of religion, understand that, 'religious discourse serves as the linchpin of the western symbolic, it is religion above all which requires to be disrupted'.<sup>79</sup> Irigaray contends,

What matters is that this *concept* of the divine...is preserved – a concept that valorizes power, mastery, eternity, utter independence, spirit rather than body, another world rather than this world, maleness rather than femaleness.<sup>80</sup>

According to Jantzen, one consequence of the failure to question the God of classical theism, is that the concept has been 'given a prominence which has not been argued for'.<sup>81</sup> Jantzen explains that, "'God" itself as it is used is simultaneously made to stand for everything divine, beyond race or gender, and yet is also the 'Father' God of (white, western) christendom'.<sup>82</sup> She proclaims that '[t]his concept of God has been used to legitimate the most appalling sexism, racism, colonialism, and technological exploitation of the earth'.<sup>83</sup> She notes the humorous example of what a Church of England bishop wrote to the *Church Times* a few year ago, 'In the Christian tradition God is "a relatively genderless male deity"'.<sup>84</sup> Ruether agrees that 'God' has symbolically reinforced systems of domination of men over women, masters over slaves, and so on.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, merely altering models or metaphors will not solve the problems with traditional concepts of God. A wholly different ethos and symbology is needed. It seems that from every corner of feminist spirituality, whatever its form, the need for an alternative symbolic order has been acknowledged, reflecting Irigaray's proposal that to be fully emancipated women must have a concept of the divine in their own image.<sup>86</sup>

### *An Alternative Symbolic*

Some philosophers and theologians view the Goddess tradition as a mere

78. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 97.

79. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 12.

80. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 67.

81. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*.

82. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 74.

83. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 66.

84. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 65.

85. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, p. 3.

86. See Luce Irigaray, 'Divine Women', in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

inversion of the binary positioning of the current symbolic hierarchy: replacing man on top with woman on top, or replacing God with Goddess. Such interpretations, I suggest, have failed to understand the signifier of the Goddess within the tradition's cultural context. The substitution of Goddess in place of God is not a mere sex change or 'God-in-a-skirt'. The contemporary notion of the Goddess, in some sense *is*, in fact, a deconstruction of God. This at times leads to a reductionistic claim that the concept is a mere reaction to the patriarchy. The Goddess is never *simply* an inversion.

Rather than the characterizations associated traditionally with God — such as transcendent, disembodied, rational, sovereign, and, of course, male — in comparison, adherents of the Goddess movement describe the Goddess as transcendent and immanent, embodied, passionate, sexual, relational, and female. Quite often, adherents explain that their idea of the divine is not actually gendered, but that, given the context of patriarchy, they prefer to name this sacred, creative power 'She'.

In the rites of the Wiccan/Goddess group I studied, the transcendental signified ('God' or the Phallus), is re-(w)ritten as the Womb (the chosen symbol of the Goddess). This is not a mere inversion or replacement because, whereas the Phallus denotes power over, the Womb in this context signifies the life-giving force common to all things. Thus the alteration of the worldview and central signified through the ritual, creates, performs and embodies an entirely different metaphysical system of signification. This is what Diane Bell describes as the potential of ritual to create a 'redemptive hegemony'.

Because the Goddess' characteristics and values are vastly different from those of 'God', replacing Him with Her would, theoretically, result in more than a mere inversion; it would instead issue an alternative system of signification. The transformation of this strategic, central signified, would, at least theoretically, cause a chain reaction modifying the value and meaning of all other signifiers. Theoretically, substituting the transcendental signified with a completely different value-laden signifier alters the entire signifying structure. Many western philosophers, from Hegel to Derrida, have agreed that this substitution would change everything.

Eller's proposal that 'relative deprivation theory' explains why women turn to Goddess spirituality provides no predictive value to explain the development of any religious movement in general, nor for the Goddess movement in particular. Nor does the issue of power adequately explain the historical or current attraction for some but not for others.

By contrast, through approaching the concept of the Goddess at the semiotic level, my hypothesis explicates why Goddess spirituality

effectively practices a 'redemptive hegemony', in particular through its rituals, rather than diminishes the transformative efficacy claimed by the practitioners. It also assists in understanding the threat of the practice to the hegemonic worldview. Theoretically, the substitution of the Goddess for God results in the rupture of the western symbolic order, that is, it threatens the system of signification which defines reality. I submit this is a plausible explanation for the admitted hostile responses to the idea of the feminine divine; it may also provide insight into the harsh and myopic/self-unaware portrayals of the Goddess movement by feminist antagonists such as Ruether and Eller.

By understanding the profound effect caused by an alteration of the transcendental signified in concept and its simultaneous ritual enactment, we can better comprehend why the Goddess movement often results in high levels of provocation. For some, the Goddess promises to solve western culture's problems by creating a new, more female-valuing symbolic structure. For others, She threatens the very core of the current system of signification and everything within it. My hypothesis creates a space that affirms both views.

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**Is Reverie to be Trusted?  
The Imaginal and the Work of Marija Gimbutas**

Norvene Vest

This paper explores the possibility that the insights of 'the Imaginal', a key method of the depth psychological approach at Pacifica, can provide a useful means of assessing the value of the work of Marija Gimbutas, whose library and papers reside in Pacifica's special collections. Gimbutas invented the term archaeomythology to describe her process in developing the theory of pre-history called 'the civilization of the goddess' in the title of her last major book. That theory is currently the subject of lively debate in the scholarly world, and this paper is a brief foray into that conversation, by looking at Gimbutas' work through the lens of imaginal. The imaginal is a mode of knowledge based not primarily in the sensory and the empirical, nor primarily in the conceptual and ideational; rather it rests between senses and ideas, in a true realm largely forgotten today.

First, the imaginal itself will be explored and then Gimbutas' work. Finally, I will endeavor to integrate the two and form some conclusions.

*A. The Imaginal*

Western civilization has developed as a strongly positivist, rationalist civilization, with corresponding consequences for how we see things and what we consider to be real. Hillman observes that 'basic to this modern view of persons is the psychology of Descartes; it imagines a universe divided into living subjects and dead objects. There is no space for anything intermediate, ambiguous, and metaphorical' (Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* 1). Durand warns of the danger of this hyper-developed Western cultural way of thinking: 'The basic disease from which our culture may be dying is man's minimization of images and myths, as well as his faith in a positivist, rationalist, aseptized civilization' (Durand, 53). In other words, we have been imprisoned by a relatively narrow mode of experience. Our culture tends to see things largely as ego or other, causing or caused, subjects or objects. We

consider myth and metaphor to be pretty illusions, but quite useless and sometimes downright false. This epistemology, or way of knowing the world, excludes information which in other times and places has been considered central to human life. We have limited our knowledge by modes of perception with no place for mystery or soul; thus something inside us, and maybe inside our culture itself, is dying for lack of attention.

Depth psychology challenges that positivist, rationalist epistemology, insisting – as the quote above from Hillman suggests – that such a view is itself an imagined state of affairs, rather than a true understanding. Depth psychology celebrates a more nuanced, ambiguous, and perhaps even chaotic approach to consciousness and experience, urging that this is essential to human health, especially to the health of the soul. Ellenberger's comprehensive assessment of the history of depth psychology roots dynamic psychiatry in the idea that disease can be seen as the loss of the soul, and the treatment of disease is intended to restore soul (Ellenberger, 6-7). He traces the unfolding of depth psychology through various means toward this goal, beginning with ancient ritual, exorcism, magic and suggestion, and temple healing. And Ellenberger shows that imagination is an important source of modern dynamic psychiatry, as for example in the Renaissance term '*imaginatio*, a term that held a much broader meaning than it does today and included what we call suggestion and autosuggestion' (Ellenberger, 11-12). Depth psychology is about soul, working with methods related to the imagination.

Archetypal psychology might be called a 'daughter' of depth psychology with a focus on the imaginal. Modern archetypal psychology begins with Carl Jung and continues in the work of Henry Corbin. Jung's insight was that 'the basic and universal structures of the psyche, the formal pattern of its relational modes, are archetypal patterns' (Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account*, 10). Corbin, a French philosopher who translated many works of Sufi mystics, found he needed terms not available in French or English. Corbin developed the concept of the *mundus imaginalis*, 'a distinct field of imaginal realities requiring methods and perceptual faculties different from' the sensory or intellectual worlds (Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account*, 11). Corbin's distinction between the imaginary and the imaginal includes two parallel points: (1) that the imaginal world is a place, a locus of universes enfolding our natural space, 'an intermediate and intermediary world' between the empirical world and that of the intellect (Corbin, 76-77); and (2) that 'this world requires its own faculty of perception, namely, imaginative power, a faculty with cognitive function, a noetic value which is as real as that of sense perception or intellectual intuition' (Corbin, 77). Corbin

sometimes calls that faculty of perception by the name used by Jung to evoke the transcendent function, that is, the active imagination.

Our concern in this paper is with the imaginal faculty of perception as a methodology, or interpretive lens, a way of knowing 'reality'. Archetypal psychology posits that the imaginal offers a means of recovery of soul through a reworked epistemology. Adriana Berger explicitly claims the imagination as 'a faculty of knowledge and as the function that assimilates knowledge' (Berger, 146). She notes that in speaking of the imagination, Corbin is talking about a basic function of perceiving and understanding, and she argues that this invites a radically new hermeneutics, or method of interpretation, useful for all the humanities. She advocates its wide usage:

I suggest that such a method – this broad cultural hermeneutics – should be used in all types of humanistic inquiry, aiming to a total comprehension of culture and civilization, of creativity and its meaning. In that respect, the irreducible place of interpretation is always linked to the construction of the imagination and imaginative process (Berger, 151).

The hermeneutics advocated by Berger, rooted in the work of Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin, is a mode of perception that calls for 'sympathetic participation in distant experiences and events' (Berger, 142). It begins with concrete experience, using imagination and intuition to explore any historical moment, thus 'reveal[ing] certain values not evident on the level of immediate experience', releasing hidden meanings through imaginative reconstruction of the sacred (Berger, 154).

Berger's assertion that a creative hermeneutics founded in the imaginal is appropriate and necessary for all humanistic inquiry is a strong claim, although not unwarranted by the momentum of archetypal psychology. To the extent that humanistic research is oriented toward the primary issues of the human psyche, that is to say of the human soul, then all the humanities require a method of interpretative understanding capable of dealing with soul matters. The methods of empiricism and intellectualism, taken alone, have demonstrated their inadequacy for this task, and the imaginal offers a new faculty of knowledge to supplement their capabilities. Gaston Bachelard has already 'provided the epistemological basis for drawing up a statute of the poetic as opposed to the positivistic mind [...] reestablish[ing] the importance of both reverie and the dreamer, placing them on a level equal to that of the scientific approach' (Durand 61). And in particular, Dawn George notes that it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the imaginal to Pacifica's work of tending the soul of the world, 'for it (1) guides the fundamental mode of perception for [Pacifica's] research, due to the recognition that

(2) the *Mundus Imaginalis* is the order of reality that is the central aspect of our tending' (George, *Mundus Imaginalis*).

My interest here in the imaginal as a credible methodology is the possibility that new insights might emerge when we look at Gimbutas' work from this hermeneutical lens. But before moving to her theories, let us consider briefly what sort of information an imaginal hermeneutics can produce. While the imaginal can mediate both sensory and ideational experience, it is not identical with either one, and will not be expressed in their modalities. The images which emerge are not literal and cannot be reduced to something other than themselves (Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account*, 15). Figures and symbols are to be 'imagined seriously, though *not literally*.[...] Their 'between' reality is neither physical nor metaphysical, although just 'as real as you – as a psychic entity – are real' (quoting Jung CW 14 section 753)' (Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account*, 56). The imaginal does not provide the same kind of validity that the empirical or scientific method provides. On the other hand, because it has access to the arena of soul, imaginal hermeneutics often has greater depth and capacity to supply meaning than other interpretive methods. The imaginal and its images 'claim reality; that is, authority, objectivity, and certainty' (Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account*, 15).

### B. Marija Gimbutas' Civilization of the Goddess

Marija Gimbutas was born in 1921 in Lithuania, three years after Lithuania had declared its independence from Russia. Daughter of two medical doctors who were part of the Lithuanian intelligentsia, though often living in the countryside because her father was leader of the Lithuanian resistance movement (to Polish and subsequent foreign occupations), she absorbed the folklore, songs, daily rituals, and mythical imagery of an ancient and largely pre-Christian culture, and became fluent in the Lithuanian language, which is one of the most conservative Indo-European languages, bearing similarities to Sanskrit (Marler, 'The Life and Work of Marija Gimbutas', 37-39). Before she was 20, Marija had begun a scholarly collection of songs and tales and stories of ancient burial rites. In her profession of archaeology, Gimbutas spent the years from the 1940s to the 1970s in extensive studies of the Indo-European Bronze Age, herself directing five major excavations in southeast Europe, while also reading scholarly reports in their original languages (she was fluent in 20 European languages) on Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe (Keller, 383). It was not until her appointment at UCLA in 1963 that Gimbutas began to wrestle with 'the Indo-European question': were there layers of

civilization, some prior to the Indo-European and vastly different than it? And what combination of fields of study would better illumine this problem? (Marler, *From the Realm of the Ancestors: An Anthology in Honor of Marija Gimbutas*, 12-13).

Gimbutas' published books are filled with sketches of the objects she unearthed and studied over many decades. I imagine her sitting with these figurines in a state of reverie, perhaps by lamplight at night in her field tent, pouring over the repetitive patterns adorning the small figures, wondering about connections, seeking understanding of the culture which produced these artifacts. Her theory of the civilization of the goddess did not spring full-blown from Gimbutas' mind, but developed slowly as she reflected and imagined. Her first book in this series focuses on identifying the territory and extent of the ancient culture she called Old Europe, whose location extends from the Aegean and the Adriatic as far north as Czechoslovakia, southern Poland and the western Ukraine, including 'five major regional variants which display well-developed traditions in ceramic art, architecture and cult organization' (Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: 6500–3500 BCE: Myths and Cult Images*, 19). The book begins with a note on radio-carbon and dendrochronologically calibrated dating, which 'revolutionized earlier conceptions of European Neolithic-Chalcolithic chronology, extending its span by almost two millennia' (Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: 6500 – 3500 BCE: Myths and Cult Images*, 13). Thus, Gimbutas is studying refined civilizations for which we have no written records (at least none so far deciphered) which flourished between 7000 and 3500 BCE, while the Egypto-Mesopotamian civilization reached its peak after 3000 BCE, and of course Homeric Greece dates from the first millennium BCE. Gimbutas demonstrates that the artifacts of this Old European civilization are markedly different than those of the Indo-European culture which later arrived in the area from the Russian steppe in three waves of infiltration between 4500 and 2500 BCE.

In her second book Gimbutas struggles with the question of how we can understand a civilization for which we have no written records (Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*). She hypothesizes that the images of that culture must serve as its language, and that through them we can create a sense of its mythic structure. Through detailed analysis of signs and design patterns that appear repeatedly on cult objects and painted pottery of Neolithic Europe, she uncovers 'the grammar and syntax of a kind of meta-language by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted' (Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, xv). Now Gimbutas develops the concept

of 'archaeomythology', as an amalgamated field including archaeology, linguistics, cultural anthropology, comparative mythology and folklore.

Gimbutas draws two conclusions that are even more radical than that of the heritage of a civilization much older than previously thought; here she is explicit that in Old Europe (1) the sacred is inseparable from all the actions and relationships of daily life, and (2) the goddess is not merely a sex symbol, but is symbolic of 'the mystery of birth and death and the renewal of life, not only human but all life on earth and indeed in the whole cosmos' (Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, xix). This book is a careful study of many artifacts, in a range of shapes and symbols, organized according to the major functions of the goddess in life-giving, renewing and eternal earth, death and regeneration, and energy and unfolding. Gods are not absent in this worldview, but they play a supportive and rather minor role. Gimbutas does not insist upon only one goddess, but offers a composite interpretation:

[A]ll of these Goddess images [are] aspects of the one Great Goddess with her core functions.[...] The obvious analogy would be to Nature itself; through the multiplicity of phenomena and continuing cycles of which it is made, one recognizes the fundamental and underlying unity of Nature (Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, 316).

This is not the substitution of one monotheism for another, but rather an effort to express a pre-historic human consciousness which experienced the world as a wondrous whole, multiple in its many facets, altogether gift.

Gimbutas' final book synthesizes her previous works, and is also filled with detailed assessments of archeological sites and findings, enabling readers to draw their own conclusions (Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*). The book first defines, describes, and gives information on time, place and cultural practices in what she now calls 'the civilization of the goddess', while later chapters look at religion, script, and social structure. Gimbutas demonstrates that this is not a pre-civilization period, but that this culture 'had towns with considerable concentration of population, temples several stories high, a sacred script, spacious houses of four or five rooms, professional ceramicists, weavers, copper and gold metallurgists, and other artisans producing a range of sophisticated goods' (Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, viii). She shows that differing patterns of life and worship existed among the various regions of Old Europe but that common mythic themes appear throughout. Gimbutas eschews the term matriarchy, preferring to speak of a matrifocal or matristic woman-centered culture, egalitarian and non-

hierarchical, where war is unknown – all conditions nearly impossible to conceive in light of our own culture. Finally Gimbutas opines: 'A serious and continuous obstacle in the study of ancient societies is the indolent assumption that they must have resembled our own' (Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, 324).

Although Gimbutas' work has received repeated challenge, one wonders to what extent the challengers are actually familiar with her work. Some critics object to her methods, insisting on an empirical approach 'proceed[ing] from the material evidence to their conclusions with the minimum of personal interference' (Goodison 9). But this is a peculiar insistence at a time when science itself is moving 'away from the notion of an impartial observer towards that of participant observer who inevitably interacts with what is being seen' (Goodison, 14). This argument also contains the implicit critique that Gimbutas herself did not work carefully with the material evidence, a viewpoint which seems most unlikely to anyone who actually reads her published work.

Perhaps Gimbutas' work has been rendered suspect largely because she was warmly adopted by a women's spirituality movement in the popular culture that is not as concerned for scholarly evidence as was Gimbutas herself. Critics like Cynthia Eller lump all 'feminist matriarchalists' together, (Marler, *The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, citing Eller's page 11), although differing authors have vastly different objectives. And even within feminism there is disagreement about whether there is such a thing as a uniquely feminine point of view (e.g., the nature/culture debate) (Marler, *The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, 6). Yet it is unquestionably the case that Gimbutas' theories embody a radical challenge to a deeply ingrained androcentric, patriarchal point of view. She rejects the idea that generously endowed female figurines, with clearly defined vulva symbols, are intended primarily as sexual symbols ('venus' figures). 'In Gimbutas' view, Paleolithic as well as Neolithic female sculptures were not produced for the erotic stimulation of males, but expressed concepts of the sacred source and cyclic mystery of life rendered in female forms, which she called "Goddess"' (Marler, *The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, 8). Gimbutas' archaeomythology not only suggests a worldview centered in the feminine, but a *divine* or sacred feminine at that.

Thus another critique is leveled at Gimbutas because she insists that it is not possible to understand this ancient civilization without considering its religious dimension as central to all sociological functions. While Goodison acknowledges that 'the contribution of the Goddess move-



ment needs to be recognized as both spiritual and archaeological' (Goodison, 12), she also observes that archaeologists are reluctant if not negative about 'the possibility of effectively studying religion through archaeological materials' (Goodison, 8).

The particular nature of these criticisms of Gimbutas seem to cry out for an interaction with the methodology of archetypal psychology, the means of imaginative yet authoritative study of the human soul. The imaginal is a method ideally suited to assess, critique sympathetically and extend the contribution of Gimbutas to our ongoing understanding of the prehistorical period.

### *C. A Proposed Integration*

In a very thoughtful paper assessing 'the Gimbutas paradigm', philosopher Mara Keller explores Plato's *Republic* for its approach to 'the complex, interconnected epistemologies of both science and mythology' (Keller, 384). Keller describes Plato as acknowledging four levels of truth-seeking, each with its own hermeneutics. First, *eikasia* is taking sense perceptions at face value, a kind of conjecture based on common thinking; second, *pistis* is direct sensory perception of empirical facts; third, *dianoia* is discursive reasoning, deducing conclusions from accepted principles; and finally *noesis* is a reconsideration of first principles based on direct apprehension or intuition (Keller, 384-86). Noting that much contemporary archaeology is empiricist, Keller observes that such a perspective 'cannot logically believe it possible to have any probable knowledge of the mind-states or spiritual experiences of ancient peoples' (Keller, 386). To such empiricists, she raises the question, 'how does one construct a highly probable interpretation of symbolic meaning from material objects, images and signs?' (Keller, 388). I do not know whether Keller is acquainted with the methodology of the imaginal, but for those acquainted with its potential, imaginal hermeneutics would seem an obvious answer to this question.

I have been trying to follow Gimbutas' thinking back to the source of the understandings which led to the development of her theory, just as Corbin suggests the imaginal practice of *ta'wil* can follow an expressed revelation back to its source, or carry the sensible forms back to the imaginative forms where meaning emerges (George, *Mundus Imaginalis*). I suggest that Gimbutas herself—formed in a pre-Christian culture, informed by the perspectives of over 20 languages, empowered by many years of direct exposure to field artifacts from this period—employed a method like the imaginal or what Keller would call the noetic, in order to construct a probable interpretation of Old European civilization.

We need not assume that Gimbutas intended her theory to supplant prior theories; indeed perhaps as one who was challenging the entrenched patriarchal theory of prehistory, she may intentionally have chosen to exaggerate the perspective of the margin in order to dislodge the privileged position and open the conversation (compare George lecture for MS 510 on March 4, 2003). The strong resonance her theory has evoked among many women of spirit suggests she tapped into an essential aspect of truth long denied. Gimbutas not only challenges the reigning patriarchal paradigm of history, she restores the sacred to its central place in human history and questions the exclusive reign of scientific method in archaeology. She activates the subversive reversal of which Derrida speaks (Powell), evoking the birth of a 'third thing' from the chaotic and ambivalent middle to expand our understanding of human origins. Her theory of the civilization of the goddess may not be 'right', but it contains enough of truth to help those who take her seriously to understand the 'and' of prehistory – that 'and' of the Sufi quotation which guided our class:

You think because you understand one you must understand two, because one and one makes two. But you must also understand 'and' (Sufi saying, quoted in Wheatley, page 9 per class notes).

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## Shaping Feminist Theology: A Pragmatic Approach?

Beverley Clack

### *Introduction*

A utilitarian philosophy of religion must treat being religious as a habit of action. So its principal concern must be the extent to which the actions of religious believers frustrate the needs of other human beings, rather than the extent to which religion gets something right. (Rorty 1999: 148).

Nancy Frankenberry, Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College, USA, in a recent addendum to a previously published article, suggests that the ideas of American pragmatism might provide a useful framework for a feminist philosophy of religion (in Anderson and Clack, forthcoming 2003[still?]). Pragmatist philosophy is defined by the shift that its practitioners make in determining the nature of philosophical practice. Philosophy should not be understood as providing a method for assessing the factual 'truth' of propositions or beliefs, but should be used to explore the *uses* of such propositions or beliefs. Frankenberry details the considerable similarities between pragmatist philosophy and the concerns of feminists. She notes, for example, that both groups view scientific positivism with a critical eye; that they share a resistance to philosophies that create a dichotomy between fact and value; that they reject the idea that theory and practice are different modes of activity, insisting, to the contrary, that both activities are parts of a whole; that they resist as inappropriate and impossible the 'spectator stance' of philosophical indifference. At the same time, Frankenberry alludes to the 'untapped resources' of pragmatist thinking on religion, where transcendence is relocated *within* immanence, spirit *within* nature, salvation *within* community. These are the features, she suggests, that might profitably be explored through the pragmatist paradigm by feminist philosophers of religion.

Frankenberry is not alone in suggesting that pragmatism might provide an appropriate framework for feminist approaches to the study of religion. Sheila Greeve Davaney has similarly argued that a 'pragmatic historicism' provides the best framework for a twenty-first century

theology (1997, 2000). While not necessarily wishing to endorse in its entirety such an approach, I want to suggest that adopting some aspects of the kind of pragmatism advanced by the philosopher Richard Rorty might indeed prove useful for shaping a contemporary feminist theology. Others in this edition will have suggested some of the tensions that exist between Christian feminists and 'non-Christian' feminists (specifically, in this instance, feminist theologians). I want to suggest that these tensions might be eased if a more pragmatic attitude to the purpose of religious belief were adopted.

Two key features determine Rorty's understanding of a pragmatic philosophy. Firstly, he emphasizes the importance of deciding the *usefulness* of any position for furthering human happiness. In this sense, 'Truth' is determined by use, not by the extent to which any particular statement corresponds to an external, 'objective' reality. For the pragmatist, 'truth' is not associated with any external metaphysical claim which establishes 'the way things really are', but rather becomes associated with appropriate modes of behaviour in any particular community. Secondly, Rorty argues that the pragmatist's focus for developing any philosophy should be on hope rather than knowledge. In such a context, what matters is the way in which beliefs contribute to the future good, rather than how such beliefs reflect 'things as they really are'. My concern is to consider the impact that adopting such principles might have upon feminist theology, and, in particular, the way in which such ideas might prove helpful for furthering discussions between Christian feminists and Goddess women.

#### *Feminist Theological/Theological Disputes*

The relationship between English-speaking Christian feminists and 'non-Christian' feminists takes on rather different guises, depending upon which side of the Atlantic one inhabits. In the United States, the dominance of academic institutions by Christian concerns has led, understandably, to considerable criticism of the privileged role given to Christian theology – and by implication to Christian feminists – in the academy. So in a recent 'Roundtable' discussion in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (16.2 [Fall 2000]) Rita M. Gross complains that the trumpeting of 'diversity' by feminist theologians is in practice 'limited to diversity within Christianity' (Gross 2000: 73). Furthermore, she argues that there is a tendency for feminist theologians to act 'as if all theology were Christian theology' (Gross 2000: 73). This leads her to conclude that Christian feminists 'do not recognize what it is like to be a religious minority and do not construct feminist theology that is mindful of

religious diversity' (Gross 2000: 74).

The same discussion sees Carol Christ launching a further attack on Christian feminists, though on rather different grounds. Christ focuses on what she sees as the ignorance of Christian feminists about the Goddess, and the possible reasons for this: 'the Goddess is threatening to Christian feminist theologians because the images of the Goddess and the embodied earth-based spirituality they reflect are powerful and attractive' (Christ 2000: 81). She suggests that the corresponding fear of the Goddess stems from a failure on the part of Christian feminists to engage with theological ideas. But just as Gross' comments only really make sense against the cultural backdrop of the American academy, one wonders at the extent to which Christ's comments could be accurately applied to the British context. Indeed, Christ locates her comments firmly in an American context: 'I wonder how different our work and our dialogue might be if all of us were not constrained and seduced by the economic powers of the church and the academy' (Christ 2000: 82). In secular Britain, it is difficult to see the Church as that powerful a force: although colleagues working in institutions with a religious foundation would probably disagree. I wonder, though, whether the British scene is more accurately defined by the inability of many educational institutions to take seriously the study of religion *at all*.

In a later interview, Christ acknowledges significant differences between the American and British contexts (Mantin 2002). She is impressed that British feminist theologians and theologians are talking to each other. And indeed the kind of tribalism that Christ identifies with the American academy does not seem to be such a feature of the British scene; or at least as far as the relationships between feminists go. So, for example, Christian feminists like Lisa Isherwood have been particularly supportive of the work of feminists in theology, while the engagement with Sophia seems to have furthered the conversation between feminists with different religious commitments.

The remainder of this paper will explore further ways of developing such constructive discussion, and will do so by considering the ramifications of adopting a more pragmatic framework. My contention is that an overly representational view of truth underpins and sustains apparent differences between feminists, and that adopting a pragmatic framework might enable us to avoid the diversions of division by focusing on the practical importance of furthering feminism's liberating agenda.

### *Truth in Community: The Art of Compromise*

Discussions of the nature of 'truth' have invariably revolved around

distinctions between correspondence and coherence theories of language. According to correspondence theories of truth, a statement is true if it corresponds to a state of affairs external to itself. In this sense, language and beliefs are 'representations' of a truth that transcends these human forms. In a theo/allogical context, religious language is thus 'true' *if* it corresponds to a divine that similarly transcends human life and community. Coherence theories of truth are different: a statement is true if it coheres or 'fits in' with other ideas held by a particular community. Invariably, philosophers who emphasize the way in which 'truths' attain their power through their connection with other communal beliefs have been labelled relativist, for to adopt such a framework is to accept that truth is not absolute but only ever relative to an individual or group.

Pragmatists are often accused of being relativist as they seem to adopt the coherence theory of truth. Rorty's response to this (invariably critical) comment is to resist such a description. His reasoning on this point is interesting. He argues that distinctions between correspondence and coherence theories of truth simply reflect the dualistic division of reality that the pragmatist wishes to reject. For the pragmatist to accept that they are relativist is to implicitly accept the Platonic division of reality into oppositional binaries. Famously, Plato divided reality along the following lines: reality is contrasted with appearance, the rational with the irrational, theory with practice, reason with desire (see, for example, *Republic V*). In practice, one side of the equation is valued at the expense of the other: and as feminists have noted, the history of western philosophy is marked by the identification of the male with what is valuable, the female with what is not valuable (Lloyd 1984; Grimshaw 1986; Anderson 1998: Part I). Rorty, in common with feminist philosophers, wishes to reject this way of thinking in its entirety. As such, he is not prepared to accept the legitimacy of the 'realist'/'anti-realist' debate which divides philosophers into two opposing camps: those who accept the existence of a 'reality' in contradistinction to human desires and preferences, and those who argue that there is no 'reality' apart from that created by human language (cf. Rorty 1996). Instead, he argues that the pragmatist makes a distinction between *the more useful* and *the less useful* (Rorty 1996: xxii). Such an approach explicitly resists dualistic construction, for all attempts to give meaning to human life are seen as on a continuum, an image that emphasizes commonality, instead of being structured by a 'line' that divides like from unlike.<sup>1</sup> The pragmatist goal is linked directly to the idea of 'use', for their overriding commitment is

1. The word 'line' is used here deliberately: see Plato's *Republic VI* where it is 'the line' that divides reality in two.

to the creation of a better future (cf. Rorty 1994: 27). It is the explicit connection between philosophy and social hope that I find particularly exciting as a feminist philosopher of religion. Debate becomes less a matter of abstract objectification, and more a way of seeking the good for our world and our communities.

The emphasis on practical engagement is further underscored when we consider the effect that adopting such a framework has upon the theory of language. Language ceases to be seen as that which *represents* reality. Instead, words are viewed 'as nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment' (Rorty 1996: xxiii). We are not quasi-transcendent observers but participants in the world, irrevocably entwined in the web of life. Responsibility to 'Truth' or 'Reason' is thus 'replaced by talk about our responsibility to our fellow human beings' (Rorty 1999: 148).

How might these ideas impact upon the way in which we approach debates between Christian feminists and feminist theologians? It seems to me that our discussions are still determined by the kind of Platonic dualisms that Rorty and feminist philosophers have been at pains to reject. Consider, for example, the way in which the realist/anti-realist structure has been applied to discussions of the Goddess. Much of my own writing on this theme has been dominated by this idea. So I have argued that the Goddess is not conceived by theologians as an existent reality in contradistinction to the way in which the divine has tended to be understood in western Christianity (cf. Clack 1995). Now, while such an approach probably says much about the way in which I approach the nature of religion (that it is about *creating* meaning, as much as *finding* meaning), fitting the Goddess into such a framework probably forces a misrepresentation of beliefs about the Goddess, as well as Christianity. For a start, while 'anti-realist' might be a term accurately applied to women like Nelle Morton, and perhaps Starhawk, it ignores the sensibilities of other Goddess women. For example, Carol Christ describes the Goddess as both 'the power of life, death and renewal and ... a personal presence whose nature is loving' (Mantin 2002: 120). Similarly, while the Christian tradition could be described as presenting a 'realist' God, there are also Christians who refuse to see God in this way, a notable example being Don Cupitt.

Such reflections may say much about my own weaknesses as a scholar, but I think that more importantly they reveal the continuing power that Platonic dualism has to structure western thinking.<sup>2</sup> Under

2. This is, as Fergus Kerr has argued, one reason for the power of Wittgenstein's critique of the Cartesian self, for what Wittgenstein exposes is the way in which Des-



this structure the divine must be *either* real *or* a human creation. While this limits our understanding of the divine and how religious language is in practice used, it also leads to the conclusion that only one of our respective world-views can possibly be correct: one of our world-views must more accurately correspond to reality than the other. By necessity you must be *either* a Christian *or* a follower of the Goddess, *either* a realist *or* an anti-realist. Despite the apparent rejection of the correspondence theory of truth by the anti-realist, in practice defining oneself in opposition to 'realism' means accepting, albeit implicitly, that one position more adequately corresponds to the nature of reality than the other.

My question is whether the implicit acceptance of such dualistic thinking means that we fail to use all the tools available to us to shape our hopes for the future. If we give up the dependence on dualisms of all kinds, perhaps we might be able to judge the usefulness – or otherwise – of our respective beliefs for building new and liberating communities.

Consider the question Rorty asks when addressing the issue of a belief's meaningfulness: 'For what *purposes* would it be useful to hold that belief?' (Rorty 1996: xxiv; my emphasis). Taking this principle seriously would mean that beliefs are treated 'not as representations but as habits of action' (Rorty 1996: xxv), as ways of helping us to shape our behaviour. This does not mean that we will no longer be in a position to make decisions about the efficacy or otherwise of religious systems. Rather it means that our judgments will be based not upon the extent to which such systems correspond to some reality external to human language and society, but upon the extent to which such systems contribute to the happiness of human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Taking such an idea seriously might mean adopting a more eclectic, less sectarian approach to the religious ideas that we allow to shape our theo/ologies. So we might consider the way in which key Christian stories have promoted social justice.<sup>4</sup> We might consider the effective way in which the story of Christ's Passion helps us to engage with the inevitability of loss and suffering in human life; or the way in which the cross shows that wickedness must be resisted and can, indeed, be overcome. Similarly, stories of the Goddess in her many forms may help us to engage with the world around us, seeing ourselves as part of the web

cartes' mind/body dualism continues to shape our understanding of ourselves (see Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986]).

3. By 'happiness' I have in mind the Greek notion of '*eudaimonia*', often translated as 'happiness' but more adequately defined as 'fulfillment' or 'contentment'.

4. Although I am aware that Carol Christ would argue that the monopoly on social justice is a claim much overplayed by Christians.

of life, rather than beings who transcend it. Reflecting on the Goddess enables the de-centering of the human in order to value all things. Now, clearly, our personal preferences are likely to make us gravitate to one set of stories rather than another. But I am suggesting that rather than encounter each other as holding mutually exclusive positions we might enter our discussions with an eye towards our common goal: in this case, the desire for women's liberation and the transformation of human society.

Evidently this suggests a central role for compromise. And it is undoubtedly at this point that the greatest challenge might be made to the position I have so far advocated. Rorty expresses the centrality of compromise for pragmatism in terms that may make us feel deeply uncomfortable. Our choices, he argues, are not between 'good' and 'evil', but between different goods. And of course this is the logical conclusion for a philosophy that is radically anti-dualist, for according to the pragmatist 'good' and 'evil' are simply terms that reflect the platonic desire to divide reality into opposing binaries.

How should feminists respond to this idea? After all, we have been much concerned with the struggle to name and reject the 'evil' of patriarchy. Similarly, given our commitment to justice, any attempt to downgrade evil into a 'lesser' good should be treated with suspicion. What is 'good', say, about the murder of a child, or the torture of suspected witches during the Burning Times? Rorty's response to such criticisms is interesting: 'moral struggle is continuous with the struggle for existence, and no sharp break divides the unjust from the imprudent, the evil from the expedient' (Rorty 1996: xxix). In other words, his concern is that when particular groups or individuals are identified as 'evil', there is a tendency to avoid recognizing the common humanity that unites us. In such a context, we avoid grappling with such horrors, instead oversimplifying the sources of wickedness.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he questions what the language of 'good' and 'evil' actually achieves: 'What matters...is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness' (Rorty 1996: xxix). Compromise is seen less as a theoretical ideal and more as a practical virtue that enables us to work together to achieve the goods we desire.

But could such a shift in emphasis achieve the just society for which feminists strive? Let us consider its implications in more detail. In a powerful essay, Harriet Harris challenges the attempt to split ethical and

5. A similar position is held by both Mary Midgley (1984) and Erich Fromm (1997 [1973]).

epistemological concerns in the way Rorty seems to suggest (Harris 2001). The focus for her argument is specific and, while dealing less with the issue of human wickedness, raises questions that are nevertheless pertinent when analyzing the implications of accepting the pragmatist dismissal of 'good' and 'evil'. Harris considers the compromises made by the Church of England in the wake of the historic decision in 1992 to allow the ordination of women. An Act of Synod was passed which allowed for the co-existence of 'two integrities' in the Anglican Church: those who supported the ordination of women and those who did not. Harris argues that the ramifications of this compromise suggest something of the problems of living with dishonesty. In practice, the position of women priests is undermined by the institutional support for those who reject women's ministry. As Harris points out, the church is refusing to name as 'wrong' discrimination against women, and this compromise has practical consequences.

While ostensibly Rorty and Harris seem to be concerned with different issues, their positions are ultimately determined by different claims as to the relationship between human language and reality. Rorty argues that ethical action does not require a realist epistemology, while Harris argues that, to be effective, it does. Rorty's response to such claims is worth exploring, for it suggests a shifting of the ground on which such debates take place. Rorty argues that the goal of achieving human happiness is worth dying for, 'but it does not require back up from supernatural sources' (Rorty 1996: xxix). Does the use of language like 'good' or 'evil' actually facilitate the change that radicals wish to see? Or does it perhaps suggest a desire to distance and detach ourselves from our opponents? We are back to the principle claim of the pragmatist: of what *use* is such language?

Now, it may be the case that Harris is correct, and that precisely why we need such language is to facilitate and support our ability to name what is wrong as 'wrong'. And I am sympathetic to this argument. But it is not self-evident that to adopt a pragmatist position would, necessarily, weaken our ability to respond appropriately to the unjust actions of others. At the end of his biography of Stalin, the historian Robert Conquest makes the following comment while trying to ascertain why his subject acted in the frequently appalling ways that he did. I think his comments throw some light on this issue:

Stalin was the incarnation of an intensely active force, in conflict with human and reality, like an only vaguely humanoid troll or demon from some sphere or dimension in which alien physical and moral laws apply, who tries to force the differently ordered Middle Earth to fit his rules. *But that is hyperbole*. Even if Stalin was one of those in whom the conception of

such mythological monstrosities may in earlier terms have had their original basis, *he was, after all, a human being*. He was mortal and he died. After a time his system and his ideas died too (*Conquest* 2000 [1991]: 327; my emphasis).

'He was, after all, a human being'. And perhaps that comment reveals something of the problems that arise from employing the dualistic language of 'good' and 'evil', for such language may encourage us to ignore the common ground between us and the perpetrator of terrible (or unjust) deeds. Does the naming of a 'monster' mean that we ignore the common ground between 'us and them'?<sup>6</sup> Such language may enable us to express our outrage at such acts, but does precious little to facilitate the transformation of human society, for the monster is as much a product of that society as we ourselves.<sup>7</sup> And at this point it is important to note that the pragmatist is not arguing that once we see our connection with those who perpetrate terrible (or unjust) acts we will cease to struggle against such behaviour. Rorty may write that 'we decent, liberal, humanitarian types (representatives of the moral community to which both my reviewers and I belong) are just luckier, not more insightful, than the bullies with whom we struggle' (p. 15); but the end of that sentence is important, for the bullies are those *with whom we struggle*. And he goes on: 'It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out our differences' (p. 15). In recognizing the interconnection between human beings, we are forced to recognize our similarities, but that does not mean that, to use Rorty's example, the horrors of Nazism become acceptable.

These comments are not meant to downplay the significance of Harris's criticisms: far from it, for she shows how any dualistic split between knowledge and practice may have ethical ramifications. But at the same time I am not convinced that the criticisms she makes are necessarily insurmountable for the pragmatist. If anything, her comments highlight the importance of struggle. We need to engage with the ideas of others but we must also have clear ideas about what, precisely, we want our beliefs to achieve.

### *Feminist Hope: Shaping the Future*

The importance of struggle for achieving justice is intimately connected

6. A similar argument is advanced in Midgley 1984, ch. 6.

7. See Fromm 1973, ch. 10.

to the second area of pragmatist thinking that I wish to consider. The pragmatist, Rorty argues, considers the validity of beliefs in so far as they contribute to a better future for human beings. This orientation towards the future arguably moves the pragmatist even further away from philosophies based upon largely Platonic concerns with acquiring 'true' knowledge. Pragmatism, Rorty argues, 'substitutes the notion of a better human future for the [platonic] notions of 'reality', 'reason' and "nature"' (Rorty 1994: 27). It is the hope for and commitment to social justice that forms 'the only basis for a worthwhile human life' (Rorty 1998: 204). Thus, the commitment to epistemological certainty is rejected in favour of commitment to the kind of praxis that would bring about such a future.

Liberation theologies have famously identified hope as an integral part of the Christian gospel (cf. Moltmann 1967, 1975 [1965]), and this theme also informs aspects of feminist theologies which share the central concern with liberation. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to consider what such an orientation towards the future might mean for discussions between religious feminists. If our focus is on the future, does this mean that concern with the past becomes less significant and our responses to each other less hind-bound by historical issues than by the future we might shape together? This is not to say that we forget the historical situatedness of our beliefs. As Davaney points out, any discussion between religious traditions takes place 'not in spite of our historical particularity, but because of it' (Davaney 2000: 171). We must always remember that belief systems and the ways of life that they support develop in particular historical settings, over long periods of time. But recognizing the importance of historical development need not go along with ideas that that history must be normative: if anything, considering the different historical forms of a faith will reveal the extent to which no tradition is monolithic. To adopt the pragmatist paradigm is to accept that these positions are not revelations of some external truth, but rather reveal the extent to which human beings constantly shape and create values and attitudes, drawing upon the sources that are available at the time, but often developing these sources in new and creative ways. So consider the way in which Augustine's theology develops from his attempt to bring together Christian themes with elements of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Even apparently 'timeless truths' must be interpreted in new ways for new times, and this may mean using ideas drawn from very different systems of belief.

So what might this orientation towards the future mean for discussions between religious feminists? Consider two examples: firstly, the feminist critique of Christianity, of which my own work has been a part.

To what extent is the concern with the injustices of the past inclined to obscure the value and potential of some Christian stories for shaping a just and happy future? Clearly this is a contentious point. Daphne Hampson, for example, would argue that the past is significant precisely because the patriarchal world that shaped Christianity continues to influence Christian norms and practices. And this means that Christianity is ultimately a reactionary force that hinders our construction of a just future for all human beings (Hampson 1996a).

But perhaps such an interpretation can only come about if we accept conservative claims that Christian scriptures are the final word in the development of 'man's' relationship with 'his' God: that they are not, if you like, open to the kind of re-visioning that seems to categorise the history of theological thinking. The kind of literary approach that feminists like Jane Shaw and Nicola Slee bring to the reading of the Christian gospel suggests significantly more flexibility to the reading and use of these texts than Hampson would allow (see Shaw and Slee in Hampson 1996b).

Rorty's reading of such narratives is interesting, and focuses on the way in which such stories shape political action. He uses a powerful and rather beautiful phrase when he critiques and considers Christian and Marxist accounts of the future. Such writings, he says, express 'glorious hopes' (Rorty 1998: 201). While they may not always have provided the means to attaining the kind of just future to which they aspire, and, while he feels that neither is really suited to bringing about the future we desire now (cf. Rorty 1998: 202), he again focuses on the *use* of such ideas for shaping the future, rather than simply upon the way in which such ideas have been interpreted historically. As he puts it, he is grateful for such texts as their ideals have 'helped make us better' (Rorty 1998: 209). This claim suggests the possibility of adopting a different set of criteria for assessing belief systems. Of course, we may still reject their appropriateness for structuring the kind of just society we would like to see. But such a future-orientated critique may be a more constructive way of proceeding than simply assessing the use to which such stories have been put in the past. There are many different ways of reading such stories, and, after all, not all have been negative.

Or consider a second example: consistently the proponents of Goddess spirituality have been criticized for suggesting that there is a historical basis for the contemporary revival of interest in the Goddess. Rosemary Ruether, in particular, has been forthright in her rejection of the claims that there was a 'golden age' prior to patriarchy which was matrifocal and peaceful (Ruether 1990: 843). Similarly, it might be argued that any attempt to view the Goddesses of the past as 'proto-feminist' ignores the

extent to which such images were shaped less by women, and more by patriarchal norms. An apt example of this process is provided by Athene, patron Goddess of Athens, who springs from Zeus' thigh ready-armed, and who rejects the mother in favour of the father. She could hardly be embraced as a feminist icon, and in fact supports patriarchal power by diminishing anything that might be associated with the female.

But if we follow Rorty, rather than focus upon perceptions of the past, we might be better advised to consider such stories in the light of our future hopes. For example, many stories about the Goddess can be viewed as supporting a particular attitude to the planet that undercuts any simplistic anthropocentrism and focuses on the connections we have with all things. In the words of a popular Pagan chant, 'The Earth is our Mother, we will take care of her. The Earth is our Mother, she will take care of us'. Indeed, one aspect of Rorty's pragmatism that I am less comfortable with is its explicit anthropocentrism. What is 'good' is what is good *for human beings*. So responsibility is invariably defined as our responsibility *to human beings* (Rorty 1999: 148), while technology is lauded as the chief means of eradicating poverty, with little discussion of the implications of industrial technologies for the ecosystem as a whole (Rorty 1992: 228).

Davaney recognizes this weakness and, drawing upon the insights of Sallie McFague, William Dean and Gordon Kaufman, argues that: 'there is no human history that can be attended to outside the constraints and possibilities of the non-human world' (Davaney 2000: 176). Here, the stories of the Goddess are particularly helpful, as they provide ways of de-centering ourselves, looking at things not just from the human perspective, but also from the perspective of nature 'herself'. Just as the pragmatist challenges us to think again about the language of good and evil, it is important to challenge any straightforward notion of what is 'good' for human beings. Excessive consumption, material possessions and instant gratification may not be the best way of cultivating a meaningful human life. Our notion of what constitutes the 'good life' needs to reflect upon what is good for the planet and its different life-systems as a whole. The language of the Goddess may be peculiarly suited to facilitating this end.

Reflection on what constitutes the meaningful life leads to some further reservations regarding the pragmatist reorientation towards the future. While the focus on the future is undoubtedly necessary for shaping social policy and public praxis in order to attain the transformation of society, I am not altogether convinced of the value of such an orientation for living happy lives as individuals. Past theologies that over-emphasised the eschatological dimension promoted terror at the cost of

human happiness in the here-and-now (cf. Camporesi 1991). And even if 'the future' need not be understood in such otherworldly terms, I wonder if any happiness we might find as individuals lies in living fully in the present moment. The kind of spiritual exercises employed by Hellenistic philosophers such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius seem specifically designed to focus the mind upon the present moment. For these Stoic philosophers, we should not base our happiness in the uncertain future, but should accept the gift of each moment of life that is bestowed upon us. Seneca suggests that before we sleep we should say: 'I have lived. I have completed now the course that fortune long ago allotted me. If God adds the morrow we should accept it joyfully. The man who looks for the morrow without worrying over it knows a peaceful independence and a happiness beyond all others. Whoever has said "I have lived" receives a windfall every day he gets up in the morning' (Seneca 1969: 59). If we are to be truly happy, a balance must be attained between our hopes for the future and the significance of the present. Approaching theo/alogy as a means of developing narratives to help us live more appropriately in this world enables us to go some way to achieving this balance.

### *Conclusion*

The intention of this paper has been to explore what it might mean to adopt a pragmatic framework for shaping feminist theo/alogies. As such, I have focused on the place given to usefulness and the future in Richard Rorty's pragmatism. Underpinning all these discussions is the utilitarian aim that Rorty states in the passage that introduced this paper: to what extent do our religious beliefs and systems support and facilitate human happiness? In many ways, this has been an exploratory paper, for while I think that there may be clear benefits from adopting such an approach, I am not altogether sure how far such notions should or indeed *could* shape our theo/alogies. My interest in pragmatism stems from the concern to find a framework that enables us to work creatively together to achieve the transformation of society that we desire. Thus shifting our concerns away from epistemology towards efficacy seems to me to suggest one possible way of moving together towards this liberating end. 'What works' becomes more important than 'what is'.

An obvious criticism of such an approach revolves around the consequences of ditching the notion of 'Truth' with a capital 'T'. To what extent does such a move make it more difficult to resist falsity and lies? And this, it seems to me, is the single most important challenge for the pragmatist to face, for it may be that the language of correspondence to



truth is of real *use* for bringing about a just society. At the same time, I have suggested that accepting the pragmatist argument does not lead to acceptance of the unacceptable. Struggle is at the heart of the pragmatist concern to establish a just society. Rejecting dualistic distinctions simply means that we recognize the connection between ourselves and others, and in so-doing perhaps we will be able to be more self-critical too.

It is this self-critical eye that we need to bring to our discussions of the divine. Adopting a pragmatist framework means that we need to think about what, exactly, our concepts of God or Goddess are designed to do. Are they descriptions of a state of affairs or ways of creatively responding to the world in which we find ourselves? But to frame that question in that oppositional way is perhaps too constraining. The most important feature of Rorty's pragmatism is the way it challenges us to identify residual Platonism. Making this identification in a theo/alological context is equally important, for it may be that our thinking is hampered by the sense that 'God' must be either personal or impersonal; either 'real' or 'idea'; either one thing or the other. Recognizing the way in which dualism continues to structure our thinking may enable us to develop new and creative theo/alogies.

All of which suggests the importance of openness and honesty in our theo/alological discussions. Pragmatism is a useful way of facilitating such methodological virtues, for it is, as Davaney puts it, 'a modest doctrine' (Davaney 2000: 191). It resists the idea that there is a final position to be achieved, being 'always open to revision, criticism, and replacement' (Davaney 2000: 187). Feminist theology has continually subjected itself to self-criticism: and in some of the ideas of pragmatism, there is clearly the potential for furthering this willingness to challenge our own norms, working together for the transformation of society, the academy, and ourselves.

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## **From the Goddess to Queer Theology: The State we are in now**

Marcella María Althaus-Reid

*Where do all the Women Gather if all the Angels are Men?*

There is a story about Hetty, one of Charles Darwin's daughters, when she was an eight year old girl troubled by the death of a slighter older sister. According to family records, Hetty was worried with thoughts of the afterlife and especially concerned about her sister going to Heaven. One day Hetty asked her mother: 'But Mamma, where do the women go to, for all the angels are men?'<sup>1</sup> According to Emma Darwin's diary, she then burst into tears. It was 1851 and her mother had been reading her Bunyan's *The Pilgrim Progress* in an edition illustrated with engravings of male angelic figures. One cannot but admire the theo-logic of Hetty's question while at the same time acknowledging the depth of a child's pain. It is as if at a very elemental level an eight year old girl of the nineteenth century intuitively knew that the Christian God was capable of exclusion on grounds of gender through an inflexible theo-logic which could not have compassion on little girls. Or to put it in a different way, the intuition was related to God's own limitation: gender was God's own limit.

The theological dilemma of salvation, that is, the either/or of a dualist Christian theology obsessed with separating instead of thinking togetherness in difference, is rooted in a sexual encoding of spirituality. In 1851, at a time when decent women could not mix freely with men on earth and could not even go for a walk 'unchaperoned', it was obvious that if they could not fit into the humble societal (and ecclesial) spaces they certainly could not fit in heavenly spaces. Tragically, Hetty was unsure about her sister's situation in the afterlife. Where do little girls go when they die? The theological question posited here is one of impropriety in the placement of love in the sexual theology of Christianity. According to Emma Darwin, Hetty was distressed because she wanted

1. Quoted in Randal Keynes, *Annie's Box: Charles Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution* (London: Fourth State, 2001), p. 214.

to be so good that God would accept her amongst the male angels. Although today the sex of angels does not occupy much space in theological discussions, anyone who has read Carol Christ's *The Rebirth of the Goddess*, might recognise and identify with her in the anguish of a child who as a girl wanted to please a God identified with hard gender and sexual options. Carol herself in her spiritual journey towards the Goddess, had experienced the desire to be good as a child, in order to fit and be loved in a patriarchal spiritual pattern, to belong and cease to be the permanent stranger amongst God and lesser divinities, such as men in the church and angels.<sup>2</sup>

That strangeness, that feeling of being born as a permanent Other to God, was a decisive experience at the beginning of Feminist thinking and theology. The first feminist theological wave wanted inclusivity. They were not far from Hetty Darwin's concern about a place in Heaven. They struggled for a God who could be called 'Mother' at times and for hymns in which the word sister appeared alongside the word brother. They wanted sermons using words such as 'humankind' instead of mankind, fought pitched battles with the Scriptures to produce scholarly work which discovered women leaders amongst the Hebrew people and the Jesus movement. Like Hetty before them, but through historical re-reading and modern exegesis, feminist theologians have been trying to find a place for women amongst male angels. However, the decisive point in theology was not the secular gender inclusive movement but the liberationist movement growing in Latin America during the seventies. Since that time Latin American theologians have been busy queering male angels too on the basis of an analysis of theology and ideology into class consciousness and cultural and racial hegemonical assumptions. Gender was but a new suspicion to add to the circle.

At the risk of over-simplification we can say that the work of Third World women and the hermeneutical circle of Liberation theology were crucial in providing Feminist Theology with a questioning perspective which anticipates non-essentialism, the need for theological agency and postcolonial suspicion. In all this Rosemary Radford Ruether was an illuminating pioneer. Not only did she articulate the complexity of Feminist theology in a political way but she became the voice of many Third World women in the church who were at the time excluded from theological studies and formal church activities. Rosemary also confronted liberationists with the limits of their hermeneutical suspicion and political activism. Thanks to Rosemary's work honest liberationists started to

2. Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of The Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997), p. 2.

rethink their gender assumptions together with class and race. There were many women pioneers doing feminist theology and politics at that time, such as Mary Hunt (who worked in Argentina in the politically militant Methodist Church). Nor should we forget theologians such as Beatriz Couch and the late Maria Teresa Porcile Santiso, who confronted the military regimes of Argentina and Uruguay through their posts as university professors, through their books but also through their political activities. They organised public demonstrations related to The Mothers of the Disappeared and signed open letters in newspapers at a time when such actions could cost not just your own life but the lives of your whole family and friends.

Later, as the hermeneutical circle became increasingly suspicious at the structural levels of church organisation and theological reflection, a metaphysical reversal occurred in terms of the equality paradigm. It was not we, women, strangers to God and minor male divinities, who wanted to be admitted into the heavenly and ecclesiastical courts or into inclusive biblical readings or worship anymore. No. It was the discovery that it was not after all us but God himself who was a stranger for women, black people, the poor and the sexual marginalised. That realisation of what I have called elsewhere 'the right of not being straight'<sup>3</sup> (that is not fitting into a Patriarchal heterosexual order) makes us realise that other divinities are not only more friendly, but that there is a 'god' who is one of us: for women she was the Goddess.

The Goddess movement (a term that I prefer to 'Theology' which seems to lack the dynamism of the former) had something intrinsically Christological in its process. After all, the question concerning Jesus, was the discovery of a God who was one of us, the leader of a peasant movement in Palestine many centuries ago. For Feminist theologians there was an obvious connection. As a Latin American, I was part of a people in search of a god with brown eyes, a mulato Jesus sweating in the plantations as he repeated the words of the prophet Isaiah condemning of the abuse by landowners and the accumulation of capital. For some women it was the search for the Virgin Mary as a single mother in the slums. As Third World theologians, we wanted to claim the presence of the Other God and even to denounce the conflicts of God in Christianity. There is a false assumption that there has been a hegemonic patriarchal divine order in Christianity through the ages: historically this has not been the case. Different gods and different Jesuses have claimed and ruled over many contradictory situations.

3. For this point see M. Althaus-Reid, 'A Woman's Right of not Being Straight: On Theology, Church and Pornography', in *Concilium* 2002/5, pp. 88-97.

Patriarchal gods partake of class and racial ideologies.

The Goddess movement was meant to be a liberative spiritual movement, denouncing and announcing what difference gender and sexuality make to doing theology. Goddesses are not liberative *per se*, that is, outside a theological narrative concerning liberation as we understand it today. The divine is mediated by language, culture and levels of human consciousness. I have neighbours in Buenos Aires worshipping the Pomba Gira by offering cider and roses at the crossroads, just as I know whole families who carry under their shirts blue beads for the Iemanja. The images of the celebration of the year 2000 included the beach at Copacabana illuminated at night by thousands of candles carried by an armada of small paper boats, launched out on the waters to greet Iemanja, the beloved goddess of the sea. And yet while my neighbours worship the goddess domestic violence still exists. Brazil, a nation in which goddesses have been worshipped for many centuries, is in relation to the consciousness of patriarchy no further forward than ancient Greece. Carol Christ has also recognised this in her work: people's theophanies do not mean instant *karma*.<sup>4</sup> We need not only the goddess but the Other goddess, the Goddess who reads *Capital* and understands the need for agrarian reform. We need female angels illuminating the path against the politics of globalisation. We need divinities for our times.

The Goddess movement has produced a generation of women involved with women's issues at grassroots levels, from domestic violence to stop-the-war campaigns. This is true also of feminist theologians. We have all learned from each other and together we may have succeeded in unmasking much ideology underlying theology, including the sexual and gender foundations of the church. In addition to Third World women theologians, whose work has always been grounded in social action, theologians in Great Britain, where I live and teach, are notorious for their political involvement. When I first came to Scotland I lived and worked for many years in poor council estates in Dundee and Perth, developing Freirean conscientization programmes. Mary Grey is an example of a theologian who has for many years consistently given her time, energy, money and theological reflection to serve women in poor communities. Her project 'Wells for India', is exemplary, as is the continuous networking and fundraising she does to encourage the theological work of less economically privileged women. ??????????, Lisa

4. See Carol P. Christ, *op cit.*, p. 57. Although Christ's tries to redeem at times Greek Patriarchalism by affirming that although men were to be seen in public women had the real power at home (which is part of the patriarchal myth of the distribution of 'power'), I cannot see that line of argument can be still sustained.

Isherwood, Dorothea McEwan, ??????????, ?????????? and ?????????? founded the BISFT, with the vision to network and serve women in a grounded theological reflection at a time when it seemed impossible to do so. Through yearly conferences and gatherings, they have nurtured and encouraged many women to think for themselves and to work in solidarity. Elizabeth Stuart is not only an important theologian, but one who has been writing books through a process of engagement in her community. Stuart's thought comes from her continuous involvement in gatherings where she, in the best liberationist tradition, enters into theological dialogue on the themes important to the community. Her style of work is a reminder of Isasi-Diaz's *Mujerista* project in the USA, for it carries some ethnography in it. The list of political involvement amongst feminist theologians in Britain is long and there are many names to add.

At the meeting of the American Academy of Religion last year in Toronto Grace Jantzen and I presented papers for the 'Derrida and Religion' panels: both of us focused on politics. Grace reflected on a postcolonial feminist critique while I presented a sexual political theology highlighting the current situation of Argentina under the Globalisation process. By contrast and to my surprise the Goddess panel I attended did not present any political theological reflection. It is true that there were important reflections on women in the Holocaust, but not about women in Palestine or Afghanistan. Nor was there any discussion of agency and spirituality in political struggle. There was enthusiasm about Goddesses coffee shops and the marketing success of books printed with covers in 'Chanel colours' (an unfortunate joke, we hope) but no interest in slave labour in Asia under globalisation. However, this does not mean that the goddess movement has become apolitical. Carol Christ's reflection was rich enough to have inspired the audience, but when I tried to open a theological political discussion, I detected little interest.

The fact is that the Goddess movement, as the Feminist Theological one, is not unique. It is composed of women of many different political positions – and none. To worship the Goddess does not bring instant consciousness. But we must observe the whole picture. It includes one or two generations of women in theology focussing on sexual justice and spirituality as well as political and racial issues. We have all been changed along the way. The context of the Goddess movement is very different from when it started. Also, feminist theologians are far more complex today than in the seventies and it is this complexity that I should now like to explore.



*Queer Goddess*

If we wished to claim that women from the Goddess movement and feminist theologians have something in common, we could point to their common search for an alternative system of justice, peace and solidarity, based on a radical understanding of how sexual ideologies function in Christianity and especially in systematic theology. As this quest has become more subtle and complex, something else has emerged after Feminist Theology and the Goddess movement. I am not even sure if the term Feminist Theology is still relevant. If it can still be retained it is only if we are aware of the extent to which its context (and content) have changed. Feminist theology must now be brought into relationship with the complexities of a radical questioning of sexual constructions: this goes beyond the scope of the feminist theology in the past decade. At this point we need to consider the new players in theology today, especially the work of recent Queer Theology.

Together with other women, I myself can identify with neither the 'Mother/Father' god of the early feminist theologians nor with the Jesus who was kind to women, nor with the overt heterosexual epistemology of many goddesses. The goddess movement has been important in confronting feminist theologians with their textual (and sexual) limitations. Mary Daly expressed it well many years ago when she referred to the links between worshipping a God-man and men in general. The goddess movement challenged feminist theologians to inquire if there was anything good left in Christianity at all. Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson considered that Patriarchalism was foundational for Christianity: remove this single pillar and the whole edifice crumbles. However, these were the times of a gender speech paradigm in theology. Lesbian and gay theologies have been establishing other daring paradigms, by pointing out the heterosexual condition of theology. That is to say, even Hampson's appraisal of theology was made from a heterosexually constructed Patriarchal view. This happened because even radical feminist theologies could speak against Patriarchalism without challenging the main pillar of patriarchal structures, that is, heterosexuality as an ideology. When theology fails to engage with sexual ideology as a method, it remains at a gender level which sooner or later takes us back to equality (liberal) feminism. The challenge is to query more than simply the gender of god/goddess, but rather the way we think theology sexually. When we raise questions such as whether Jesus could have been biologically a male without his sexuality necessarily matching it, we are then in the position also to question the sexuality of God altogether: a new divine epistemology may then unfold.

What feminist theology intuited and the Goddess movement searched for was a God who can still be a stranger at the gate, a more *troublant* God than the one feminist theologians and goddess worshippers have presented. The point in Queer theology is a resistance to normativity and a subversion of the politics of representation which are essentialist and reductionist. The theological underpinnings are formed on the ground from where theology have been thought, the grounds of ideological legitimacy. Therefore the gender of God becomes irrelevant not because it gets subsumed into something 'higher' (as some feminist theologians considered in the past) but because legitimacy and illegitimacy in theology are no longer kept within the boundaries of boys and girls in theology (neither for that matter of gay versus straight). What Queer theology questions is the frightening assimilation of theology into heterosexuality and the potential of dissident, marginalised epistemologies in thinking God. Not only in thinking God, though, but in thinking race, globalization and social exclusion. In a way, theology in general has reached a stage when the fracture of identity (and systematic theological identities) can no longer be ignored. This is not to say that the goddess movement is irrelevant, but that theologically and politically we are no longer in the seventies. Queer theology presents a unique challenge to theology, that is, to do theology from a different sexual epistemology. I have said elsewhere that all theology is sexual and every theology is a sexual act.<sup>5</sup> There is a story of desire in theology and in Christianity. To unveil it means to unveil a methodology and a way to understand church culture and politics. Instead of a crude YHWH God or a straight Greek or Umbanda goddess, a more oblique divine understanding is needed. For YHWH is not the bull flying in the skies of the Psalmist. Neither is the Goddess Aphrodite or the Iemanjá. Divine anthropologies are part of a narrative of former times which perhaps we do not need anymore because they have been superseded by other forms of narratives. These are the theological narratives we find in films, in literature and in acts of political defiance. These are theological narratives crossing boundaries of postcolonial analysis, theology and globalisation and sexual dissidence. The goddess may be also re-inscribed in similarity instead of alternatives, unless she becomes Queer and learns to deconstruct herself, to be multitudes and to destabilise her sexuality and political stances.

Paulo Freire used to oppose the term 'education for liberation'. He thought that if education did not liberate it was not education. Why should we conceive a different name for 'the real thing'? In a similar

5. M. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

way, if theology is not for liberation, that is, to take us away from the ideological sexual and political constraints of its constructions and if it is not rooted in our experience and does not become transformative, it is not theology. We should not need so many labels if our objectives were clear.

The goddess movement and Feminist Theology have a particular path to travel, and a valid one, but it is a path made of boundary work and experiences. In that sense, it is a Queer path. For if the angels in Heaven are all men, who knows, after all, what kind of men are they? And who knows how illuminating a transvestite angelology might be. In Queer Theology God is still a complete stranger: a Queer God. And Queer theology challenges us today to find the divine in the love/knowledge of the sexually marginalized epistemologies, away from the more naïve gender paradigms from a past when theology had not yet learnt to dismantle the heterosexuality of its foundation.