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THEALOGIES IN PROCESS:  
THE ROLE OF GODDESS-TALK  
IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Volume 1 of 2

by Ruth Mantin

Doctor of Philosophy

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This thesis has been completed as a requirement for a  
higher degree of the University of Southampton

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

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Employing a feminist methodology and epistemology, this study examines the possibilities presented by theology, as 'Goddess-talk', to articulate the generation of new expressions of post-dualistic, embodied spiritualities and of the immanent sacred. This inquiry is first contextualised within an overview of the Goddess movement as an emergent tradition within Western, contemporary culture, focusing on the extent to which relevant debates relate to this study's concern with feminist theology's potential to frame post-realist expressions of the sacred. A further focus is upon the distinctive contribution to understandings of Goddess-talk and spirituality presented by the theology of Carol P. Christ.

Drawing on the hermeneutical and epistemological issues raised by Christ's work, an exploration of post-realist theology and feminist spirituality is further pursued through dialogue with the narratives of nine women who locate themselves upon a feminist and/or theological spiritual journey. An approach is adopted to this heuristic aspect of the research which acknowledges the position of the researcher in the process of 'inter-viewing' and recognises the role of conversation in the construction of knowledge. The respondents' narratives are interpreted in relation to their presentation of central aspects of feminist spirituality. These are: the use of Goddess-talk; female empowerment; post-dualistic expressions of embodied spirituality; a biophilic sense of connection with 'nature'; relationality; political awareness; affirmation of female bodily sacrality; respect for difference; and the reclaiming and affirming of the 'Other'.

In conversation with these narratives, this study presents suggestions for the further development of theology, recognising the need to interrogate the role of 'women's experience' as a category and notions of the unified self in response to the challenges presented by postmodern and poststructural theories. Drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti to illustrate the relationship between a feminist appropriation of subjectivity as process and the 'power of renaming', expressed in her use of the image of the nomad, it is proposed that theology has a role to play in renegotiating the social imaginary. This argument explores connections between Braidotti's call for 'feminist figurations', Donna Haraway's presentation of the cyborg and Catherine Keller's use of Goddess-talk to express a mythology of the fluid, plural, relational self. A notable aspect of the links between these thinkers is their reference to the role of the female as monstrous in delineating difference.

This exploration results in an understanding of Goddess-talk as the creation of feminist figurations and as heteroglossia which disrupts patterns of oppression and offers possibilities for appropriate responses to difference. Such Goddess-talk could convey post-realist understandings of performative sacrality which are grounded in a sense of relation with all forms of life. It could also relate to post-metaphysical expressions of embodied spiritualities which reflect an acceptance of the plurality of subjectivity as process.

Concluding suggestions are made for future developments in theology. These include furthering conversation between feminist theologies and theologies, using the work of Grace Jantzen and Marcella Althaus-Reid as case studies, and pursuing the involvement of feminist theo/alogies in the wider context of postmodern feminist discourse. It is also proposed that theology could pursue further explorations of the implications of post-Cartesian interrogations of the notion of identity and understandings of subjectivity as process for enabling new expressions of embodied spiritualities. The study also calls for further theological reflection upon the socio-political implications of liberating narratives of the sacred from their metaphysical confines.

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## PREFACE: THIS STUDY

The Goddess movement is being recognised as a significant feature of contemporary religious expression. Similarly theology, reflection on the nature of divinity within a female perspective, is beginning to be recognised as a distinctive discipline. The focus of early expressions of Goddess feminism was on the regenerative power of reclaimed language and symbolism. As this emphasis has been investigated, the non-realist aspects of theology have been discussed and debated by participants in and commentators on the Goddess movement. I, however, am arguing for further discussion of the possibilities for non-realist theological discourse to transform the religious and cultural imaginary. I am proposing a radical, post-realist approach to 'Goddess-talk', which offers the potential of refiguring expressions of spirituality and of the sacred in a post-metaphysical, post-modern context.

In this approach I explore theological challenges to dualistic models of reality in order to present narratives of the sacred which are open to plurality, process and ambiguity. As a result I propose an understanding of ***spirituality as process***, which reflects the insights produced by post-structural challenges to Cartesian theories of the unified self. Alongside this I offer an understanding of the ***sacred as performative***, in which sacrality is recognised as a process of relation. I argue that such possibilities illustrate the potential for theological reflection to be further included in academic discourse and to be engaged in further conversation with feminist theologies.

# Chapter 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT

## This Study as My Journey

*"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?*

*The world would split open"*<sup>1</sup>

I can still remember the enormous impact that this line of poetry had on me when I first found it in the introduction to *Womanspirit Rising - A Feminist Reader in Religion* co-edited by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow.<sup>2</sup> At that time, it expressed, for me, the far-reaching implications of the transformation invoked by feminist challenges to androcentric world-views and by the reclaiming of 'women's experience' as a source of spirituality. I then reached the final article- Carol Christ's *Why Women Need the Goddess- Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections*. Here Christ drew on the work of Clifford Geertz to identify the 'powerful and long-lasting moods and motivations' generated by the symbols of patriarchal religions. She emphasized the psychological power and political implications of these symbolic orders, even for those who have no conscious religious affiliation. She argued that 'God the Father' provides sanction for patriarchal structures and the alienation of women, resulting in a process whereby women internalise their own oppression. 'Goddess', therefore, functions to counter this process as a symbol which affirms women's power, authority, bodiliness and relationships.

I found compelling Christ's argument that religious symbolic systems abhor a vacuum. I was convinced by her claim that only the affirmation of female desire and

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<sup>1</sup> From the poem 'Käthe Kollwitz' by Muriel Rukeyser (*Rising Tides* Chester, L. & Barba, S. (eds.) New York: Pocket Books 1973 p.73).

These lines are quoted frequently in feminist theo/alogy including Christ & Plaskow 1979 p.7.

In the light of issues I discuss in this thesis, I would now read this phrase differently and suggest that some aspects of it are problematic. It could read to confirm a notion of women's experience as essential and undifferentiated and also convey an assumption that there could be *the* truth about such experience.

<sup>2</sup> Christ & Plaskow 1979

embodiment in the conscious application of Goddess-talk would prevent the unconscious return to patterns of domination sanctioned by the pervasive power of the patriarchal symbol - God. These ideas provoked me to confront the 'world-splitting' and 'world-opening' implications of feminist critiques of androcentric language and symbols. It generated an interest in the power of symbol and story. This developed into a further consideration of the consequences of accepting that "the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world"<sup>3</sup> and "that the liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves".<sup>4</sup> This 'awakening' led to the 'insight' that I could no longer locate myself within a patriarchal/kyriarchal<sup>5</sup> symbolic order. It provoked my 'qualitative leap' beyond Christianity and set me on a journey towards a 'new naming' of my experience and spirituality. The role of Goddess in this new naming became an issue of central importance. My interest in the implications of Goddess symbolism for *theo/ology*, spirituality and for feminist strategies and alliances led me to focus on the work of Carol Christ.

As I read more of Carol Christ's work, I found that I empathised with much of her own story, which mirrored aspects of my own. There were also ideas expressed in her writing which, for me, raised further issues. Pursuing those issues led me down different paths from the ones she followed, but I remained in conversation with her. The content and approach of this thesis, therefore, is rooted in my own experience. The process of exploration documented here is very much a cartography of my own journey, mapping out the difficult terrain covered and the boundaries encountered in my attempt to find my own meaning in feminist spirituality and Goddess-talk. The journey has required that I venture into what was, for me, new and unsettling territory in order to consider the potential and possibilities of Goddess-talk in a postmodern

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, quoted in Mc Fague 1984 p.8

<sup>4</sup> Daly 1973 p.8

<sup>5</sup> A term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza using the Greek *Kyrios* to underline the fact that oppressive structures are determined by a male elite - 'lords'.

context. While attempting such forays, I have found Rosi Braidotti a challenging but inspiring travelling companion.

### **Thealogy, Goddess-talk and feminism**

'Thealogy', as opposed to theology refers to reflection upon the sacred as female<sup>6</sup>.

The term is usually attributed to Naomi Goldenberg who coined it when she considered the far-reaching implications of feminism's 'changing of the gods'<sup>7</sup>, although Emily Culpepper also claims to have, independently, imagined the word<sup>8</sup>. Thealogy has now emerged as a separate and distinctive discipline in its own right<sup>9</sup> although one of its central features is a resistance to static formulation or delineation. I echo Melissa Raphael's assessment that this characteristic does not deprive thealogy of its right to be acknowledged as legitimate area of scholarly reflection.

"The open texture of theological discussion is not a mark of intellectual laxity but belongs to a world view that recognises that knowledge does not stand over against the individual as dogma 'out there', but is embodied and lived and therefore shifts with mood and time".<sup>10</sup>

Raphael, nevertheless, suggests the following three 'distinguishing features' to enable meaningful reference to 'theological discourse' as opposed to any other. She suggests firstly that Goddess is nature, understood at least to be immanent in the cosmic energies of life, death and regeneration. Secondly, that Goddess is at least the symbol of individual and collective 'womanpower', though many Goddess followers have a more realist conception of her. Thirdly, that the Goddess is not just the object of faith but is present in experience and existence itself.<sup>11</sup> If these are basic aspects of thealogy, however, they are expressed and developed in a myriad of

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<sup>6</sup> In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by L. Russell & J. Clarkson London: Mowbray 1996, Charlotte Caron defines 'thealogy' as 'reflections on the divine in feminine or feminist terms'. Many feminist theologians would dispute the validity of 'feminine' perspectives on the female sacred, as is discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Goldenberg 1976 p. 96

<sup>8</sup> Culpepper 1987

<sup>9</sup> e.g. Christ 1997a, Raphael 1999a.

<sup>10</sup> Raphael 1999a p.13

ways. Furthermore, as Raphael's wording suggests, the 'base line' she provides, of Goddess as symbolic and immanent, is expressed in much more realist terms by many – perhaps the majority – of Goddess women. As will be discussed further in this study, an openness to plurality and ambiguity is a distinctive feature of Goddess discourse. The Goddess movement willingly embraces a wide range of approaches to and expressions of the Goddess. Charlene Spretnak's comments are representative when she says

There is no "party line" of Goddess worship; rather, each person's process of perceiving and living her truth is a movement in the larger dance – hence the phrase "The Goddess is All".<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, however, conflicts and disputes do exist within theology. I have witnessed several during my participant observation of Goddess events. The first of these was a conference in 1995, organised in London by the Pagan Federation to celebrate the Goddess and her priestesses. It was hailed as the first of its kind. I was looking forward to the prospect of participating in the ritual which was to conclude the event. This, however, proved to be very different from the unstructured, inclusive celebration I was expecting. Priestesses from the Fellowship of Isis stood on the stage and, after donning veils, claimed to be channels for specific Goddesses, speaking as their oracles. Conference participants were then invited to come on to the stage and receive the Goddesses' blessings individually.<sup>13</sup> As participants responded and then left the stage, several of them were visibly affected. In scenes reminiscent of Christian Pentecostal worship, one man had to be ministered to and revived after his encounter with the priestesses. After a while, a spontaneous ritual erupted at the back of the hall. Several women formed a circle and sang a Goddess chant very loudly, stamping their feet, in protest against the spectacle they were

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<sup>11</sup> Raphael 1999a p.62-63

<sup>12</sup> Spretnak 19982 p.xvii

<sup>13</sup> The audience was predominantly female but I noted that three of the first four to mount the stage were male. I also gained the impression that these supplicants spent longer receiving blessings from the young, attractive vessels of the Goddess than her older and larger manifestations.

witnessing. When I spoke to some of them afterwards I found that they were Pagans, witches and priestesses who objected to the hierarchical and disempowering nature of the staged ritual. One protester likened the event to a Billy Graham rally.

At the next major Goddess event I attended there was also a protest. During the first Glastonbury Goddess conference in 1996, the final evening's banquet was 'gatecrashed' by a vociferous group from the Spiral Camp, a radical feminist gathering for women and children only. The issues surrounding their demonstration are complex<sup>14</sup> but they represent a clash between radical Goddess feminists and a movement which they perceived as the depoliticisation and commodification of the Goddess. A theological 'culture clash' was also apparent when I took part in a BISFT<sup>15</sup> excursion to the Goddess Gate<sup>16</sup> programme in Mexico City in 1999. The organisers provided a programme which presupposed an understanding of the Goddess as Universal Mother and a willingness to undertake a pilgrimage in search of the female divine, based on such an understanding. Many of the participants, however, found the structured rituals disempowering and questioned the notion of a prescribed spiritual journey with a predetermined destination.

These illustrations indicate that, although theology is open to plurality, there remains room for debate within theology. There is still justification for the perception, held by most Goddess women, that different expressions of Goddess are colours in a kaleidoscope or movements within the cosmic dance. At the same time, however, the ways in which the Goddess is used to represent different, sometimes contrasting,

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<sup>14</sup> There was considerable evidence that Monica Sjöö, who was contributing to the conference but expressed her dissatisfaction with its approach, was involved in the protest. An example of some of the issues, from both sides of the dispute, can be found in *From the Flames: Quarterly Journal of Radical Feminism* 18 pp.29-34 1996. This is a small scale journal, privately published by a group of radical spiritual feminists in Nottingham who have connections with the women of the Spiral Camp. Raphael also provides an analysis in Raphael 1999a p.130-132. The protestors claimed that their concern was with a lack of access to those who were physically and financially disadvantaged. I discuss this protest further in chapter 7

<sup>15</sup> Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology

<sup>16</sup> This GATE Global Awareness Through Experience programmes is run by Cecilia Corcoran in Mexico City. It provides a pilgrimage to the Female Divine through an exploration of the sacred sites, artefacts and mythology of Central Mexico. Reflections on this event are recorded in *Feminist Theology* 24 2001.

worldviews is a matter of passionate concern to some theologians. It is therefore appropriate to consider ways in which different aspects of 'Goddess-talk' relate to one another.

When surveying the Goddess movement as a participant observer, the priestess Shan Jayran offers a method of plotting the different routes by which theology has emerged. She presents three distinct understandings of the Goddess which relate to different expressions of what Jayran terms Western Goddess Spirituality.<sup>17</sup> She refers to the Matriarchal Goddess, the Pagan Goddess, and Goddess feminism. Jayran presents these categories not as entirely distinct but as a means of classification to enable some navigation through the 'tangled group of otherwise confused identities'. She recognises that there can be combinations of these identities, such as Feminist Pagan.<sup>18</sup> Jayran's classifications are helpful but, inevitably, reflect her own perspective. She presents the theology of Goddess feminism as a recent development in contrast to the more ancient lineage of those who follow the Pagan Goddess.<sup>19</sup> I, however, would want to argue that all forms of contemporary Paganism, whatever their rightful claim to ancient origins, have been constructed within a modern context and in relation to the prevailing religious discourse of their cultural milieu. I would therefore question the implication that the Goddess-talk which has emerged out of a non-Pagan background is somehow less 'authentic'. I echo Christ's claim that images of God and their Christian and Jewish interpretations are an integral part of the western culture in which we stand and must therefore influence contemporary attempts to envision the sacred as Goddess.

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<sup>17</sup> Jayran makes her important point that, in discussing the Goddess movement, we are referring to a Western phenomenon, which she terms as a new interpretation, but not an innovation, distinct from 'the huge variety of world Goddess spiritualities'. At the same time she acknowledges the syncretism of Western 'Goddess people' whereby they draw on mythological, ritual and philosophical material from a wide range of world cultures (Jayran 1999 p.4). Jayran's emphasis on the view that Western Goddess Spirituality has an historical and cultural heritage reflects her own context, she identifies herself as a Pagan priestess.

<sup>18</sup> Jayran 1999 p.6

My own route to thealogy was through theology. I describe above the impact of reading Christ's *Why Women Need the Goddess* and Morton's chapter on the Goddess as metaphoric image in *The Journey is Home*. Recent overviews of the Goddess movement confirm that many women are introduced to the Goddess through literature.<sup>20</sup> I was already interested in the function of religious language. I was trained in theology in a traditional university in the early seventies. The approach that I worked with was informed by the then current interest in existential thought and in the role of symbolic language. Theology was examining its role as 'God-talk'.<sup>21</sup> The theology with which I then engaged reflected no inkling of the developments which were emerging out of the women's movement. I only encountered feminist theology much later and reacted with feelings of recognition, anger and excitement that Judith Plaskow has named the 'yeah, yeah experience'.<sup>22</sup> The movement which this experience began led me to question the symbolic value of 'God-talk' and to explore instead the possibilities of thealogy or 'Goddess-talk'. I undertake this exploration aware of the tensions which exists when I offer 'Goddess' as a signifier of the sacred which dismantles dualistic assumptions. I understand the view that the term 'Goddess' is, itself, one which functions in binary opposition, as a female counterpart or- even worse- a feminine diminutive, to the male 'God'. My response to this argument, following Morton and Christ, is that the iconoclastic potency of 'Goddess' lies in its ability to shatter androcentric preconceptions. Furthermore, the thealogical reflections generated by Goddess imagery open up new possibilities for refiguring the sacred. This view forms the basis of the argument presented by this thesis.

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<sup>19</sup> Jayran understands herself to be a priestess of the Craft, a tradition that she distinguishes from 'Wicca' claiming that many of the characteristics of Wicca are modern developments. (Lecture given at University College Chichester, April 2000)

<sup>20</sup> Eller 1993

<sup>21</sup> This phrase was coined in John Macquarrie's influential work, *God-talk*. Macquarrie's debt to Bultmann's programme of demythologising led to his own focus on the role of language. Macquarrie recognised that not all talk about God was theological and therefore defined his understanding of God-talk as a 'form of discourse professing to speak about God'. (Macquarrie 1967 p. 11).



The focus of this study is on thealogy in relation to feminist spirituality. Eller presents the Goddess movement in America as synonymous with feminist spirituality. This is more an accurate assessment of the situation in America than it is in Britain,<sup>23</sup> but even so, it is open to question. Even in the USA, not all Goddess women are feminists and not all spiritual feminists are Goddess women. When Melissa Raphael surveys discourse on the Goddess, she acknowledges this distinction but argues for the validity of focussing on thealogy as an expression of feminism, this is a focus I share.

When attempting a demarcation of the boundaries of thealogy, it is relevant to recognise the network of connections between terms such as the Goddess movement, Goddess spirituality, feminist spirituality and Goddess feminism. These distinctions indicate some of the different approaches to the relationship between feminism and Goddess-talk. In this study, my focus is on feminist thealogy and I do draw some distinctions between this and the Goddess movement as a whole. There are, however, other dimensions of Goddess-talk to be acknowledged. One is the emerging discipline of 'Goddess studies'.<sup>24</sup> This area of study encompasses thealogy but also draws on areas such as archaeology<sup>25</sup> and folklore studies.<sup>26</sup> It reflects the growing interest in images of the female sacred and is engaged in the debates surrounding the nature of ancient Goddess religions. A distinctive aspect of Goddess scholarship is its transdisciplinary nature. It is appropriate to note how many of the women responsible for generating a revival of interest in the Goddess come from a background in the creative arts. These include Merlin Stone,<sup>27</sup> a sculptor, Judy

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<sup>22</sup> Plaskow 1979 p.200

<sup>23</sup> See Long 1994

<sup>24</sup> There is some consensus that this discipline dates from the 'Ambivalent Goddesses' conference organised by Graham Harvey and Beverley Clack at King Alfred's College, Winchester, March 1997. (Jayran 2000 p.4, Raphael 1999a p.12.) Goddess- focussed studies in archaeology, anthropology, ethnography and folklore studies predate this conference, but it is viewed as the first occasion in Britain that these different areas of research were brought together under the heading of 'Goddess studies'.

<sup>25</sup> e.g. Goodison & Morris 1998

<sup>26</sup> e.g. Billington & Green 1996, Davidson 1998

<sup>27</sup> Stone 1976

Chicago<sup>28</sup> and Monica Sjöö<sup>29</sup>, both artists, and Elinor Gadon<sup>30</sup>, an art historian. Images of the female sacred have inspired countless expressions of contemporary art. At the same time, the Goddess is used as inspiration by a wide range of successful poets and novelists. This is illustrated by the anthology, *She Rises Like the Sun*, which presents 'invocations of the Goddess by contemporary women poets'.<sup>31</sup> Creative responses to the Goddess as image inform scholarly reflection on thealogy and vice versa. Mary Daly's work represents a groundbreaking model of the creative use of language, narrative and analysis.<sup>32</sup> Carol Christ opened up new and transformative approaches to the feminist study of religion when she explored women's fiction, poetry and narratives as sources of reflection upon spirituality. There are, however, many other examples. Susan Griffin incorporates poetry, creative prose and analysis to challenge dualistic approaches to nature and reason.<sup>33</sup> Starhawk merges ritual, chants, fictional narrative, poetic expression and the retelling of myths with her cultural, political and thealogical insights.<sup>34</sup> Raphael expresses critical thealogical reflection through a creative and poetic use of language.<sup>35</sup> It would, therefore be appropriate to refer to Goddess scholarship as the emergence of 'theapoetics'.<sup>36</sup> The primacy of poetry, the use of symbol<sup>37</sup> and emphasis on the experiential<sup>38</sup> have been recognised as distinguishing features of thealogical

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<sup>28</sup> Chicago 1979

<sup>29</sup> Sjöö & Mor 1991

<sup>30</sup> Gadon 1990

<sup>31</sup> Canan 1989 This collection includes contributions from several women of colour such as Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Marge Piercy and Ntozake Shange. This is noteworthy in view of the widely acknowledged perception of the Goddess movement as predominantly white, if not ethnocentric e.g. Eller 1993 p.18-21

<sup>32</sup> Daly, 1978, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1991, 1993

<sup>33</sup> Griffin 1978

<sup>34</sup> Starhawk 1978, 1982, 1987

<sup>35</sup> Raphael 1996a

<sup>36</sup> Holland 1997. The term 'theapoetics' is emerging to reflect the view that 'one of the happiest turns in postmodern thought for people of imagination and faith is the turn from metaphysics to poetry.' (Holland 1997p.318). Holland calls for theology to be understood as 'a kind of writing' which responds to the turn away from metaphysics and instead provides a poetic theology of transgression. In this study I am arguing that thealogy is better equipped to facilitate such a transformation.

<sup>37</sup> e.g. King p.131

<sup>38</sup> e.g. Eller 1993 p.132

expression. As 'a kind of writing', theology challenges an epistemology which presents poetry and scholarship in binary opposition.

### **Feminist Spirituality**

As has already been stated, the focus of this study is on the relationship between Goddess-talk and feminist spirituality. It is therefore necessary to consider what the term 'feminist spirituality' indicates. When surveying the relationship between feminism and spirituality, King noted that feminist critiques and reconstructions of spirituality coincided with a recognition of the widening context in which the term 'spirituality' could operate. King noted that some contemporary understandings of spirituality no longer placed it in an exclusive realm of religious practice or ascetic discipline. Instead, King argued, spirituality could be viewed as 'an integral, holistic and dynamic force in human life and affairs'.<sup>39</sup> King also noted that a vital factor in feminist transformations of spirituality was the critique of a dualistic framework which placed spirituality in binary opposition to aspects of experience deemed to be too corporeal and transitory to act as locations of the spiritual. A consequence of feminist critiques of dualistic disconnection was an emphasis on wholeness, connection and integration as the goal of spiritual direction. The metaphor of wholeness therefore occurs frequently in discussions and expressions of feminist spirituality. From an early stage, spiritual feminists wanted to make explicit that the wholeness they sought was not to be equated with the 'single vision' which has dominated Western culture and most theological thought. In this study, however, I argue that, despite such disclaimers, the emphasis on wholeness as the desired destination of feminist spiritual journeys can evoke nostalgia for the dream of unity envisioned by Western rationalism. I therefore propose the need for such imagery to be revisited in continued attempts to find figurations of spiritual feminism which celebrate diversity and change. I am arguing that Goddess-talk has a role to play in such a process. In

order to contextualise this argument, I will provide an introduction to the contemporary Goddess movement and the understandings of Goddess which have emerged from it.

## **The Goddess Movement**

It is important to clarify that, in this study, 'Goddess spirituality' refers to a contemporary Western movement and not to the goddess spiritualities of a wide range of established religious traditions. This contemporary movement does, however, appropriate aspects of such traditions. In 1994, (when I began research for this dissertation), Asphodel Long wrote that the geography of the Goddess movement had not been charted.<sup>40</sup> The situation since then has changed considerably and there have been a growing number of attempts to 'map' the many contours of this movement.<sup>41</sup> This is, however, no straightforward matter. The Goddess movement has appeared as the result of several different developments in contemporary religion and culture. It has many aspects and manifestations making it very difficult to chart. It is a complex, growing organism rather than a systemised organisation. Furthermore, as has already been stated and will be discussed further, inherent in the very nature of theological reflection is a resistance to fixed boundaries and a tendency to welcome plurality and ambiguity.

It is not the aim of this thesis to supply a sociological survey of the Goddess movement, as found in Cynthia Eller's *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*<sup>42</sup> nor to provide a comprehensive overview of the multiple discourses of the Goddess as achieved by Melissa Raphael's *Introduction to Thealogy*. I will, however, draw on these works, which have made important contributions to the charting of these areas,

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<sup>39</sup> King 1989 p.6

<sup>40</sup> Long 1994

<sup>41</sup> e.g. Eller 1993, Christ 1997a, Jayran 1999, Raphael 1999a

<sup>42</sup> Eller 1993

in order to contextualise my own focus on the role of Goddess-talk in feminist expressions of spirituality and of the sacred. Carol Christ's *Rebirth of the Goddess*<sup>43</sup> is also significant as the first attempt to supply a 'systematic theology' and I will return to these ideas in more detail in Chapter 3.

In *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, Eller acknowledges the complexity of the movement she is discussing. She suggests, nevertheless, that it is possible to present a 'taxonomy' of feminist spirituality, based on her analysis of the relevant literature, her observations and her interviews. This taxonomy comprises six categories. Eller identifies them as valuing women's empowerment; practising ritual and/or magic; revering nature; using the feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis and espousing the revisionist version of Western history favoured by the movement.<sup>44</sup> This overview provides a useful insight into feminist spirituality as it relates to the Goddess movement in America. It is, of course, also influenced by Eller's own interpretation.

Eller places particular emphasis on the role of ritual in the movement. She argues that feminist spirituality is more about doing than believing, more about experiencing than analysing. Eller reports that her respondents were unwilling to discuss their conceptions of the divine but became animated and specific when describing ritual practice. She attributed this to the fact that, because there is such flexibility in belief, the movement needs something else to give some sense of identity or coherence. Eller claims that 'If spiritual feminists are to come together...there must exist a stronger glue than theological doctrine. This glue is ritual.'<sup>45</sup> This focus on experience is one that most participants and commentators would endorse.<sup>46</sup> I would, however, question Eller's premise that ritual practice is a unifying force which endows

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<sup>43</sup> Christ 1997a

<sup>44</sup> Eller 1993 p.6

<sup>45</sup> Eller 1993 p.83

<sup>46</sup> e.g. Asphodel 1994, Christ 1985, 1995b 1997, Raphael 1999a, Harvey 1997

the feminist spirituality with the qualification of a 'socially recognisable movement'.<sup>47</sup> As Eller's own account shows, ritual is as individual and flexible an aspect of feminist spirituality as any other.<sup>48</sup> My own experience of the Goddess movement confirms that spiritual feminists can participate together in ritual, regardless of the diversity of their understandings of the Goddess. At the same time, however, the disputes and protests described above indicate that collective acts of celebration can also be fiercely debated and subjected to theological analysis. Inevitably, Eller's own perspective on the Goddess movement appears to influence her assessment of its determining characteristics. This is particularly apparent in her emphasis on the influence of beliefs about ancient, pre-patriarchal Goddess-centred cultures. Eller states that 'feminist spirituality's sacred history is a synecdoche of the entire movement'. This is a bold claim and one which is not confirmed by the wide and diverging range of views within the movement generated by debates surrounding the interpretation and significance of archaeological evidence, especially since the death of Marija Gimbutas.<sup>49</sup> It is very notable that, seven years after writing *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, Eller produced her own stringent critique of the view that an egalitarian, Goddess-centred civilisation predated patriarchy. In this work, she provides some autobiographical information to indicate that her disquiet about the function of what she calls 'the myth of matriarchal prehistory', dates back to her first encounters with feminist spirituality. This revelation casts some light on the prominence she gives to this subject in the structure of her research into the Goddess movement.<sup>50</sup> Eller's presentation of the Goddess movement is, like all interpretation, perspectival but it was nevertheless welcomed by those within the movement as a careful and sensitive account. It remains one of the most important

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<sup>47</sup> Eller 1993 p.83

<sup>48</sup> Other participant commentators refer to the diverse and individualistic nature of ritual in Goddess focussed contexts e.g. Christ 1997a p. 25 Jayran 2000 p.6

<sup>49</sup> These debates are discussed further in chapter 2.

sources for any attempt to provide a description of the contemporary Goddess movement.

### **The origins and development of the Goddess Movement**

Most commentators date the beginning of the contemporary Goddess movement in early 70s. Christ identifies the publication of the magazine *Womanspirit* in 1974 as the significant turning point. The term 'Womanspirit' has emerged as another expression of contemporary, women-defined spirituality. Raphael suggests that the pace of the movement's development increased significantly after 1976.<sup>51</sup> Between 1976 and 1979, something resembling a theology was emerging as distinct from feminist theology. Raphael notes that 1979 was a 'golden' year for the flourishing of women-defined expressions of spirituality and religious reflection.<sup>52</sup> This year saw the publication of Starhawk's *Spiral Dance*, Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, Naomi Goldenberg's *Changing of the Gods* (in which the term theology was first used) and *Womanspirit Rising*, the anthology of 'feminist religion', edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow. This collection included Christ's phenomenally influential article 'Why Women Need the Goddess'.<sup>53</sup>

I refer to the Goddess *movement* in order to convey the plurality and fluidity of its structures and beliefs. As Eller and Raphael point out, however, the movement is large, established and distinct enough to earn its right to the title 'religion'.<sup>54</sup> Whether

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<sup>50</sup> Eller provides the interview guide used in her research for *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*. In it there are specific references to 'ancient goddess-worshipping societies' with the direct question 'Why is their existence significant for you?' Eller 1993 p.233-234

<sup>51</sup> Raphael 1999a p.35

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*

<sup>53</sup> This is discussed in more detail in chapter 3

<sup>54</sup> Eller applies Wach's classical sociological definitions to argue that feminist spirituality qualifies as a religion by demonstrating relation to the numinous, expressed through theoretical, practical and sociological features.

(Eller 1993, p.39). Eller further aligns feminist spirituality with 'alternative religions', referring to Ellwood's argument that such new movements are part of 'the emergent tradition' which has new, contemporary manifestations but draws on religious symbols and patterns of identity which are perpetuated over time. (Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America* Chicago History of Religion Series, ed. Martin E. Marty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979), quoted in Eller 1993 p.40-41). Raphael argues that the Goddess movement

all Goddess feminists would welcome such a claim is another matter.<sup>55</sup> When Eller produced her survey of the Goddess movement in America she argued that it was a 'sociological entity in its own right' but had 'roots and branches' in other phenomena. Eller lists these as including neopaganism, political feminism, Jewish and Christian feminism, the New Age and Native American spiritualities. Eller, whilst recognising the fluid nature of the movement, nevertheless attempted to subject it to a sociological breakdown. In this, Eller identified the movement as 'separatist' in so far as it is centred on women, arguing that the place of men is a contested issue for some and a non-question for others.<sup>56</sup> Eller also described the movement as 'centred outside traditional religions and can be seen most accurately to be a part of an alternative religious milieu'.<sup>57</sup>

She identified the members as 'feminist in its broadest definition'. She does not define exactly what she means by this but claims that participants 'see themselves operating out of some sort of feminist consciousness'.<sup>58</sup> Eller locates the movement as centred on the English-speaking world, most prominent in the USA and Canada but also Britain.<sup>59</sup> When supplying a sociological profile of members of the of feminist spirituality movement Eller maintains that the majority are white,<sup>60</sup> middle class, well

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exhibits such characteristics as celebration of a divine principle; rites of purification, passage and initiation; festivals; social organisation; a cosmology; sacred history, sites and texts; and a growing number of adherents across three continents, all of which carry it beyond the realm of private spirituality. Raphael 1996b p.199

<sup>55</sup> Eller 1993 p. 39 Eller cites Culpepper, Stone and some of her respondents as examples of those who would prefer her term spirituality. (Eller 1993 p.239) Raphael also discusses this issue. (Raphael 1999a p.16)

<sup>56</sup> Eller 1993 p.7

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*

<sup>58</sup> Eller 1993 p.7

<sup>59</sup> Raphael's overview of theology, however, includes references to European expressions of the Goddess movement. (Raphael 1999a)

<sup>60</sup> Eller discusses the 'unwilling' and perhaps unacknowledged ethnocentrism of the movement. (Eller 1993 p.18 – 21) In her account of the Goddess movement, Asphodel Long also considers this issue (Long 1994 p.26-27)



educated, of Jewish or Christian background, in their thirties or forties, and are 'disproportionately lesbian.'<sup>61</sup>

Eller defines the Goddess movement as a religious movement in its own right, but understands it to have a complex web of relationships with other religious, spiritual and cultural traditions. These she categorises as 'affinities' and 'appropriations'. Eller presents the New Age Movement,<sup>62</sup> therapeutic movements such as the 12-steps programmes and Jungianism as groups which have affinities with feminist spirituality. Amongst the traditions 'appropriated' by the feminist spirituality movement, Eller lists 'ancient religions', and aspects of Eastern, Native American and African religions and, to a lesser extent, features of Judaism and Christianity.

One can gain some indication of the development of the 'Womanspirit movement' and the eclectic nature of feminist approaches to religion by surveying the contributions to the two influential anthologies, *Womanspirit Rising* and *Weaving the Visions*. In *Womanspirit Rising*, the contributions were mostly from Christian and Jewish feminists which challenged the patriarchal and androcentric nature of their own traditions. Alongside these there were also a few, albeit significant, articles which presented the Goddess as a focus for religious reflection. Ten years later, however, the landscape has changed and *Weaving the Visions* included contributions from Native American, Latina, Yoruba, Vodou, Asian American and womanist traditions. These contributions were all from members of those traditions but there has been a tendency to 'appropriate' these influences into women's

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<sup>61</sup> Eller 1993 p.18. Eller claims that '...it is fair to say that feminist spirituality (...in a lukewarm version) is now the civil religion of the lesbian feminist community' (Eller 1993p.20). At the same time, she acknowledges that the majority of women in the Goddess Movement 'consider themselves' heterosexual. (Eller 1993 p.21). Her comments relate much more to the situation in USA than in Great Britain. (cp. Long 1994).. I share Raphael's doubts about Eller's emphasis on the significance of lesbian identity for an understanding of the Goddess movement. (Raphael 1999a p.26) I would also suggest that the tone and content of Eller's critique of Goddess feminism in *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* reveals her concern that it is 'anti men' and that this may colour her presentation of the movement (Eller 2000)

<sup>62</sup> Eller's assessment may, again, reflect the USA context more than is the case in Europe. There are significant participant commentators who warn against too close a relationship between Goddess feminism and New Age spirituality e.g., Spretnak 1982 Sjö 1992 Christ 1997a

spirituality.<sup>63</sup> An insight into the resulting eclecticism of the Goddess Movement can be further provided by a survey of the magazines and publications it produces. A well respected example is *Goddessing Regenerated*.<sup>64</sup> Each edition signals and reviews the many new publications about aspects of Goddess study or spirituality. It also provides a 'cauldron of events' which lists the dozens of Goddess-focussed activities taking place internationally. Of particular interest are the many pilgrimages provided to the sacred sites of the prepatriarchal Goddess. Articles are provided on a wide range of related subjects including features on significant scholars, artists or events, reflections on particular Goddesses and comments on political and ecofeminist issues. Examples of art and poetry are also submitted. As several commentators have indicated, the remarkable proliferation in publications, art, music and events is evidence of the growing significance of the Goddess Movement.<sup>65</sup>

Out of this syncretic mix, I would argue, a distinctive theological discourse is emerging. It is important to acknowledge the genealogy of such discourse before considering further the possibilities it has to offer.

### **Who/What Is the Goddess?**

The remarkable increase of interest in the Goddess in the West is due to a concurrence of factors appearing in the second half of the twentieth century. Most significant, I would argue, has been the impact of second wave feminism on the study and practice of religion. Feminist analyses disclosed the extent to which religious language, scripture, liturgy and organisation reflected and sustained the

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<sup>63</sup> Eller acknowledges and provides a helpful summary of the ethical issues surrounding feminist spirituality's 'cross-cultural borrowing'. Eller 1993 p.74 - 82

<sup>64</sup> *Goddessing Regenerated* describes itself as an "international, multi-cultural Feminist newspaper of Goddess expression...". It is edited in Malta and published in Florida four times a year and has a network of readers in over 30 countries. It is notable for its comprehensive listings of international Goddess tours, events, etc and its high professional standards. Originator, owner and editor is Willow LaMonte (PO Box 269 Valrico FL 33595 USA or P.O.Box 73, Sliema, Malta).

subjugation and negation of women. Furthermore, they exposed the ways in which the use of exclusively male imagery of the divine reinforced religions' collusion with militaristic and colonial oppression. Those women who were convinced by these revelations but wanted to retain their identity as located within a faith tradition or to affirm the relevance of spirituality needed to re-vision religion in ways which did not collude with these patterns of domination. They also needed to find new ways to express the divine which affirmed their corporeality as women and asserted their right to identify with the sacred. At the same time as this need was being perceived, a range of other developments were progressing to provide a rich variety of resources from which such women could draw in order to represent female images of the divine.

The growth of contemporary Paganism, disclosing the heritage of the Romantics, led to a 're-enchantment' of the natural world and to poetic images of the sacred as Great Goddess. Also available was the increasing amount of information ensuing from the results of post-war archaeological projects which revealed hundreds of female figures from the beginnings of human civilisation. These provided the possibility of re-imagining an ancient Goddess-centred world which predated the patriarchy of today and made thinkable its disappearance in the future. Another powerful influence on emerging theories of the Goddess were Jungian approaches to therapy which recognised the need to reclaim 'feminine' aspects of the psyche. Such approaches also provided interpretations of Goddess mythology as expressions of feminine archetypes.

Other sociological and demographic features of the latter part of the twentieth century influenced the development of Goddess spirituality. The arrival in the west of a growing number of settlers from Asia and the Indian subcontinent bringing spiritual perspectives which challenged the predominant patterns of western theology. Such perspectives were assimilated by some of the emerging countercultural movements

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<sup>65</sup> e.g. Christ 1997a, Raphael 1999a, Jayran 2000

which grew out of the social upheaval of the 60s. The syncretic accumulation of spiritualities from contemporary and ancient sources resulted in the religious phenomenon now termed the New Age moment. A distinctive feature of many aspects of this movement is a rejection of exclusively male imagery to signify the divine. All of these factors – and more – contributed to the ‘rebirth of the Goddess’.

My interest, however, is in the extent to which the theological discourse that has emerged as a result of this rebirth signals a paradigm shift in understandings of the sacred. For many Goddess feminists, the significance of Goddess-talk is that it exposes the dualistic and life-negating assumptions of traditional worldviews. Charlene Spretnak expresses theapoetically the ways in which the symbol of the Goddess represents an affirmation of immanence, process and plurality.

“The revival of the Goddess has resonated with so many people because She symbolizes *the way things really are*. All forms of being are One, continually renewed in cyclic rhythms of birth, maturation and death. That is the meaning of her triple aspect - the waxing, full and waning moon; the maiden, mother and wise crone. The Goddess honors *union and process* the cosmic dance, the eternally vibrating flux of matter/energy: She expresses the dynamic, rather than static, model of the universe. She is immanent in our lives and our world. She contains both male and female, in Her womb, as a male deity cannot; all beings *are part of Her*, not distant creations.<sup>66</sup>

### **Central aspects of Goddess-talk**

The move from ‘God’ to ‘Goddess’ therefore signals much more than a mere sex change of the deity. In this study I wish to explore the possibilities offered by such a move to the expressions of the sacred and of spirituality. I will therefore provide my

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<sup>66</sup> Spretnak 19982 p.xvii also quoted in Canan 1989 p.xiv

summary of the central features of Goddess as an expression of the sacred before considering further some of the issues which arise out of such an understanding. Perhaps the primary aspect of the Goddess is that she represents **female empowerment**. Feminist analyses have exposed the damaging effects of exclusively male symbolism for God, which sanctions patriarchal and androcentric traditions. In contrast, the use of Goddess imagery presents the Sacred as female, allowing women to identify with the divine. The process of reclaiming Goddess herstory and of dis-covering the Goddess through textual analysis provides women with the conviction that they are not and never were inferior and incapable of reflecting sacrality.

A consequence of this empowerment is the process by which Goddess imagery represents the **resacralisation of the female body**. Expressions of the Sacred as female counteract the narratives which have presented women as unable to represent the divine, and female embodiment as a source of ritual pollution. As a result, those aspects of female embodiment which had been denigrated, such as menstruation, childbirth and ageing, could now be celebrated.

Linked to the resacralisation of female embodiment is an affirmation of the **sacred as immanent in the material world** and nature as locus of the divine. Theology therefore draws on imagery, mythology and ritual from past and contemporary traditions which express nature-centred spiritualities. It uses such symbolism to assert that, contrary to the paradigm of classical dualism, spirituality is present in the flux, finitude, change and decay of materiality and corporeality. A further implication of this challenge to traditional assumptions is that the sacred is no longer positioned only on one 'side' of the dualistic split. The 'underside' elements of this dualism - the dark, the transient, the sexual - are therefore reclaimed as expressions of divinity. The mythology of a wide range of Goddesses can provide the images to reinforce this.

These myths can also allow a re-imagination of *sacred narratives focusing on female experience*, the changing stages and cycles of a woman's life. Menstruation, giving birth and female ageing, previously demonised by patriarchal traditions and held as evidence of a woman's inability to occupy sacred space, therefore came to be the focus for sacrality, ritual and celebration.

Because ancient Goddess images have functioned to express these psycho/ spiritual transformations, the narrative of a *Goddess of prepatrarchal history* has acquired central importance for many Goddess women. An account of history in which a universal, egalitarian and pacific Goddess-centred culture was conquered and eradicated by a patriarchal take-over has become the 'sacred history' of most of the Goddess movement. The interpretation of pre-literate archaeological evidence is crucial to this narrative and has become the focus of intense debate about and within the Goddess movement. I will consider these debates further in chapter 3, although their main relevance for this study is the extent to which they challenge or confirm the view that 'the Goddess' must refer to a realist notion of divinity which equates with the one, universal 'Great Goddess' of prepatrarchal religion.

Most commentators refer to *the* Goddess but the issue of whether this relates to one deity or many is an area of debate for thealogy. Many Goddess feminists understand the paradigm shift generated by Goddess talk to challenge a monotheistic worldview in which one supreme deity replicates and sanctions hierarchical power structure. For such theologians therefore, monotheism is the antithesis of Goddess spirituality.

When theologians draw on a mythology provided by female images of the divine they have access to a multiplicity of Goddess names and images. For many this plurality is a vital feature of what Goddess talk offers and some Goddess scholars argue that thealogy should speak in terms of Goddesses rather than the Goddess.<sup>67</sup> The "one or many" debate in thealogy is related both to the issue of matriarchal prehistory and

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<sup>67</sup> e.g. Culpepper 1987, Downing 1990 Harvey 1997

to disputes about the realist nature of Goddess talk.<sup>68</sup> A narrative which presents the possibility of a universal Goddess centred world view which predates patriarchy is linked to an understanding of the Goddess as monotheistic but revealed in many aspects.<sup>69</sup>

The notion of plurality is central to the resacralisation envisioned by theology. Goddess, as the sacred immanent in the natural world, expresses the teeming biodiversity of all forms of life and death. Furthermore, in expressing the sacred as female, Goddess embodies the change, flux and lateral systems of women's experience as opposed to the singular, linear quest of the heroic male. Issues of naming are therefore not simply matters of ontological debate but relate to the socio-political implications of Goddess talk.

A further, crucial factor of these debates is that they appear to offer binary oppositions such as one/many. Many theological commentators have argued that such a dualistic model is itself challenged by the refiguration generated by Goddess talk. Asphodel Long, for instance, argues that the use of the phrase 'the Goddess' has never implied monotheistic assumptions.<sup>70</sup> The narratives of many Goddess feminists reinforce this opinion. A typical example is provided by one of Eller's respondents.

"I don't make those kind of distinctions that you hear about, they don't make any sense to me. You can say it's the Great Goddess, and that's one Goddess, but she's also all of the many goddesses, and that's true. And she's everywhere. She's immanent in everything, in the sparkle of the sun on the sea, and even in an animistic concept. I think certain objects can embody force and power. So I worship the Great Goddess, and I'm polytheist and pantheist and monotheist too."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> It could be argued that a realist/non-realist debate is more apparent in British theological circles (e.g. Raphael 1999 b and Clack 1999) whereas in America the focus is on issues of Matriarchal prehistory. I discuss the latter in more detail in chapter 2 but I am not attempting to provide comprehensive survey of all aspects of this controversy. My emphasis is on the extent to which it relates to the function of Goddess talk.

<sup>69</sup> I discuss this further in chapter 2

<sup>70</sup> Long 1997

<sup>71</sup> Eller 1993 p.132-133

A fluidity of thought, which speaks in terms of the singular and the plural as mutually inclusive, is also apparent in the narratives of the women with whom I inter-viewed.<sup>72</sup> Theology's ability to embrace diversity and ambiguity makes it difficult to define but at the same time provides it with the capacity to respond to challenges of a postmodern world. At the same time, it could be argued that theology's roots are placed firmly within feminism as an emancipatory movement and are therefore inherently related to modernist ideals of progress and liberation. The possible tensions between the postmodern and modernist aspects of Goddess feminism have been identified by Melissa Raphael.<sup>73</sup> In this study I encounter such tensions, but I approach their exploration from a different direction from the one taken by Raphael.<sup>74</sup> The Goddess movement, as I understand it, is a very new phenomenon. I would argue that it has already made important contributions to contemporary understandings of spirituality and sacrality. I echo Raphael's view when, after voicing some of her reservations about theology as an effective feminist project, she nevertheless suggests

"It must be a matter of celebration that, perhaps for the first time since the rise of Christendom in the West (and perhaps long before that), women are able to perceive and treat the material world as the locus of a self-generating divine value and power that can be experienced as something indivisible from themselves as women. It is still too early to assess to what extent and in what ways the reverberations of this shift will change the landscape of western religion and culture."<sup>75</sup>

The Goddess movement can, I would argue, offer enormous potential for the refiguration of narratives of the sacred. It is my contention that much of that potential has not been realised. Goddess-talk offers the opportunity to carry further the metaphoric process set in motion by theological reflections upon the language of the divine. In this study I wish to follow such possibilities. In this study I am therefore arguing that the 'small narratives' of radical theological reflection should be heard as

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<sup>72</sup> I discuss this in chapter 5

<sup>73</sup> Raphael 1996a, 1999a, 1999b

<sup>74</sup> I explore these issues in chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>75</sup> Raphael 1999a p.163



well as the views which are presented as a 'metanarrative' by a few spokespersons of the Goddess movement and most of its critics.<sup>76</sup><sub>34</sub>

## **SETTING THE CONTOURS OF THIS STUDY: COMMENTS ON SOURCES AND METHOD**

This study is set within an epistemological and methodological framework which is informed by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion. These approaches are explained, explored and interrogated during the course of this thesis. The impact of feminist analysis has generated a paradigm shift in academic discourse. It is therefore necessary to discuss the sources and methods used in this study.

### **Methods**

#### **Feminist epistemology and embodied knowing**

I adopt the use of the first person throughout this thesis and employ the imagery of a journey to convey the research process expressed by this thesis. In doing so, I reflect the epistemological bases of the content and method of this study. Within this study, I discuss the epistemological implications of feminist approaches to the study of religion which challenge a notion of 'objectivity' based upon Cartesian dualism and modernist claims for rationality.<sup>77</sup> Feminist critiques of androcentric traditions led to an awareness of the perspectival nature of all knowledge. It could therefore no longer be possible to retain the 'archimedean point' of Enlightenment rationalism where the universal knower can stand in order to view 'true' reality, free from the 'distortion' of individual 'bias'. Further challenges now face feminist discourse. Feminism made the

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<sup>76</sup> e.g. Davies 2000, Eller 2000.

<sup>77</sup> Lennon & Whitford indicated in the introduction to their anthology, *Knowing the Difference*, although challenges to traditional theories of knowledge are inherent to feminist thought there was not a great deal of material which dealt explicitly with feminist contributions to contemporary epistemological debates. (Lennon & Whitford 1994 p.i) Since then, more has been produced in this area, e.g. Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter *Feminist Epistemologies* New York, London: Routledge

understandable move to place the narratives of previously silenced and subjugated groups at the centre of theories of knowledge. This now raises the question, however, of how it can be argued that such perspectives, 'the subjectivity of the oppressed' can be taken as 'normative' and not be treated as a situated perspective alongside any other.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, there is a growing realisation that attempts to place groups such as 'women' at the centre of epistemological process, replicates modernist universalising tendencies and there is a call for the recognition of 'difference'. I attempt to take account of these challenges in the method and exploration of this study. Drawing on the insights which have informed feminist theo/alogies, I therefore work within a paradigm which acknowledges the perspectival and situated nature of all knowledges. Indeed, such a paradigm challenges the concept of 'knowledge' itself and posits instead a focus on the process of 'knowing'. In particular, I draw upon Carol Christ's theory of 'embodied knowing' which recognises the interaction between our own lived experience and our intellectual process. I therefore make no attempt to assume a position of neutrality and I acknowledge my own position within the text. I use travel analogy to signify the relationship between my own experience and the research that this thesis represents. This journey imagery is paralleled in feminist expressions of spirituality and is explored and interrogated in this study. A central feature of feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion is the move to place women's experience at the centre of religious and academic reflection. This move both informs my research and is problematised by it. This issue of reflexivity is of particular significance in relation to the heuristic element of my research and is discussed further in chapter 4. My use of interviews with a group of nine women is not offered as sociological or empirical research into them as 'representatives' of Goddess women. Following Kvale, I approach this aspect of the research as 'inter-viewing',

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1993 and more recently, Jan Duran *Worlds of Knowing: Global Feminist Epistemologies* New York, London: Routledge 2001

where conversation is a means of constructing knowledge.<sup>79</sup> Kvale employs a travel metaphor to articulate this epistemology and, similarly, feminist theo/alogies use journey imagery to express spirituality as embodied knowing. Such analogies reflect the epistemological insight that a recognition of the extent to which the subject is implicated in the production of 'knowledge' requires an awareness that the context of discovery is relevant to the context of justification.<sup>80</sup> Crucial to an epistemology constructed upon the notion of embodied knowing is the need to contextualise the process of knowing within the situation and perspective of the 'knower'. An important aspect of acknowledging my position in the text, therefore, is an expression of my own relationship with the ideas I am presenting.

Feminist analyses of the patriarchal and androcentric religious traditions precipitated my move out of Christianity and towards the use of 'Goddess' to signify the sacred. My position could, therefore be labelled as 'Post- Christian'. The use of 'post' as a prefix conveys both a move away from Christianity and a recognition that my reflections on religion are informed by my background in Christian theology.<sup>81</sup> I discuss in this study the extent to which I was convinced that a feminist critique of patriarchal symbols for the divine signals a challenge to all metaphysical expressions of divinity. Following the trajectory of this argument, an awareness of the power of language leads to a realisation that notions of the sacred can have no point of reference outside the narratives which express them. My move from 'God' to 'Goddess' therefore signalled a move away from 'realist' understandings of the divine. During this study, I define my position as 'post-realist' to signify the blurred boundary between 'realist' and 'non-realist' theo/alogies within the paradigm shift generated by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion. As a reflection

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<sup>78</sup> Lennon & Whitford p.3, also Jantzen 1998 p.:215

<sup>79</sup> Kvale 1996 I discuss this methodology further in chapter 4

<sup>80</sup> Lennon & Whitford 1994 p.3

<sup>81</sup> I find helpful Emily Culpepper's image of Christianity as 'compost'. When asked if the Christianity of her past remained as her 'roots', she searched for a metaphor which better expressed the complex

of my post-realist thealogy, I choose to refer to 'Goddess' rather than *the* Goddess. This study discusses current debates surrounding the meaning of 'Goddess'. For some Goddess scholars the term 'Goddess' may still convey vestiges of monotheism and they advocate instead reference to Goddesses.<sup>82</sup> In using the term 'Goddess', however, I am not denying the plurality inherent in thealogy but wish to convey that I am referring to the function of religious language rather than proposing belief statements. I therefore posit 'Goddess-talk' as a response to the impact of 'God-talk'. I retain a capital G to signify my respect for the biophilic connections which, for me, the term Goddess expresses and which I understand as sacred. My capitalisation of 'sacred' varies according to whether I am referring to a realist notion of deity or to post-realist expression of sacrality.

### **Language and narrative**

The primary and most compelling feature of feminist epistemologies is the recognition of the connection between knowledge, language and power. This is not just in the sense that further education enables fuller participation and empowerment but, more radically, that the legitimation of knowledge-claims is inherently linked to networks of domination and exclusion. In a move parallel to that taken by postmodern theories, this recognition has led to a deconstruction of the role of language in framing, sanctioning and reifying the power structures which determine patterns of oppression. The term 'narrative' encompasses the many means by which language and discourse produce perceptions of reality, constructions of 'how things are'. Feminist approaches to the study of religion revealed the extent to which the over-arching theories of religious worldviews excluded and denigrated female experience. Such analysis generated an interrogation of the far-reaching and disabling effects of religious symbolism and the reconstruction of new or reclaimed

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ecology of her spiritual life. She argued that her Christianity had become her compost, out of the decay of old symbols and traditions come the creative possibilities for new life. (Culpepper 1991)

forms of language. This process of analysis and transformation informs the direction and expression of this study. The language and terminology therefore reflects a deconstructive and creative approach to the function of words and phraseology.

Following Mary Daly, I make unconventional use of hyphens to signify the means by which words convey different layers of meaning, reclamation and exclusion<sup>83</sup>. This is illustrated by such words as 'dis-cover', 're-member' and 'de-monstrate'. Daly also created new terms such as 'biophilia' to express the life-affirming energy of women-centred processes. Feminist discourse makes use of plays on words to reveal androcentric assumptions of privilege disguised by ostensibly inclusive terms, hence, for instance, references to 'malestream' rather than mainstream schools of thought. Feminist innovation in linguistic analysis has influenced terminology recognised within feminist theology. I therefore make use of terms derived from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutical approach to textual analysis. Fiorenza has coined the term 'wo/men' to register that feminist hermeneutics have evolved by positioning 'women's experience' at the centre of interpretation whilst also recognising that privileged women are complicit in patterns of domination and that non-elite men are subjugated by them. In a similar move, Fiorenza has offered the term kyriarchy rather than patriarchy to indicate the awareness that hierarchical structures privilege a minority of elite males, whilst providing wider patterns of power relations. When discussing contributions made by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion I often draw on ideas which are common to some aspects of

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<sup>82</sup> e.g. Culpepper 1987, Downing 1990 Harvey 1997

<sup>83</sup> Mary Daly was one of the first feminist theorists of religion to identify the crucial role of the relationship between language and power in oppressing women and other subjugated groups. In *Beyond God the Father* she wrote 'To exist humanly is to name the self, the world and God. The "method" of the evolving spiritual consciousness of women is nothing less than this beginning to speak humanly- a reclaiming of the right to name.' (Daly 1973 p. 8) Since writing this, Daly has become far more radical in her approach and has advocated that other women discard the 'semantic baggage' of her earlier ideas. (Daly 1985b, p.xxiii) Daly no longer uses the term 'God', referring instead to Goddess as Verb. I discuss her ideas in more detail in chapter 2. Daly has continued to develop her process of renaming, producing a whole 'wickedary' of new or reclaimed words. (Daly with Caputi 1987)

feminist theologies and theologies. (My use of the plural indicates the diversity within these categories). On these occasions I shorthand this grouping into 'feminist theo/alogy', reflecting my concern to promote conversation between feminist theology and theology.

### **Method and experience**

In stating the focus of this study, I acknowledge that the particular emphases I place upon the function of Goddess-talk reflect my perception of the destructive effects of a dualistic religious worldview upon my own sense of self and ability to relate to others. Furthermore, I appreciate that the sources on which I draw are, in part, determined by my own academic background and interests. In recognising this, however, I would maintain that *all* religious reflection is contextualised within the experience of the person who is conceptualising it. Not all thinkers, however, have been willing or able to articulate this.

### **Feminist theologies**

The space given to a discussion of method indicates the 'slippery' but also, I hope, the creative nature of the material with which I am dealing. Before moving on, however, there is one more important consideration to which I must attend. I have already referred to the term 'feminist' and indicated that I wish to be in conversation with 'feminist theologies'. Before continuing in the use of such terminology it is important to acknowledge the problems inherent in so doing. In using the phrase 'feminist' theologies, I am aware of the problems surrounding the universalising tendencies inherent in such terminology. I acknowledge the claims of womanist, mujerista, latina, and women-defined movements from the Majority World to express their own distinctive and context-generated expressions of theology. I recognise the danger of producing a 'list' or an inevitably selective array of contextual, women-defined theologies and then pretending to subsume them all into the continued use of

the blanket term 'feminist'. In doing so, I am reinscribing the process by which women of colour and women of the Majority World are un-recognised, rendered invisible and silent. I retain the word 'feminist', not just as a shorthand indication of wider diversity but as an expression of hope in the potential of feminist critiques and reconstructions for socio/political transformations. At the same time, I recognise the powerful and painful reality that the term has also been instrumental in the marginalisation and negation of many women. In using the term, I also acknowledge that I speak from the position of a privileged, white, western woman. I can speak from nowhere else but my own location but this must not, however, serve to provide a comfortable excuse for my inherent collusion with the structures which demean and disadvantage the wo/men whose labour, poverty and suffering furnish my privilege. This advantage does, however, give me a voice and I am, at least, able to use that voice to challenge and critique my own privilege. Within these many qualifications, disclaimers and constraints, I intend to continue to use the term 'feminist'.

## **Sources**

### **Feminist philosophy and theo/alogy**

The primary sources for this study are taken from Anglo-American theo/alogy. My focus on Goddess-talk means that I refer, principally, to feminist theology rather than main/malestream theology. In addition, however, I draw on insights from feminist philosophy. My investigation of feminist expressions of the relationship between spirituality and the 'self' led me to consider the implications for feminist spirituality of recognising 'subjectivity as process'. In this connection, 'process' does not refer to the 'process thought', pioneered by Whitehead, which has influenced some feminist theological thought. Instead, I use the term in the sense developed by feminist philosophers to challenge masculinist theories of the fixed, unified self and to

recognise the changing, unstable nature of subjectivity.<sup>84</sup> The epistemological framework discussed above requires that the theo/alological reflection in which I engage is not directed towards the formulation of belief statements but is concerned with the transformation of the religious and cultural symbolic. The notion of a 'symbolic', that is the symbolic paradigm within which 'reality' is negotiated, is related to the concept of the 'imaginary'. These terms are so closely related that they can be used almost synonymously. I recognise that the latter term, in particular, has a specific reference within the context of psychoanalytical theories based on the work of Lacan. As Grace Jantzen has convincingly argued, however, Lacan's psychoanalytical account of the development of subjectivity needs to be subverted in order to make space for women as subjects.<sup>85</sup> My own academic background is not in Continental philosophy but Anglo-American theology. My access to poststructural theory and the influence of Continental philosophy has therefore been through Rosi Braidotti whose work is distinctive because of its connections with feminist theology at Utrecht.<sup>86</sup>

## Theology and experience

Raphael makes the important point that her references for theology do not just come from academia.<sup>87</sup> A significant feature of theology is its challenge to an imposed hierarchy of knowing. Experience is the most important source and validation of theological expression. Raphael therefore includes a wide variety of sources for her

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<sup>84</sup> I acknowledge the important influence of Julia Kristeva in developing a theory of subjectivity as process - *sujet en procès* (Moi 1986). I do not, however, intend to engage directly with Kristeva's work as this study centres on Anglo-American feminist theo/alogy and I discuss poststructural theory only in relation to this focus.

<sup>85</sup> Jantzen 1998 p.33

<sup>86</sup> Hence the first occasion I heard Braidotti speak was at the 'Corporeality, Religion and Gender' conference in Groningen, Netherlands, December 1997.

<sup>87</sup> Raphael 1999 p.9-10



introduction to discourse on the Goddess which moves outside academic circles. I am aware that I do not range as freely in my use of references to Goddess-talk. This is not to devalue the enormous contribution made to theology by voices outside the academy. It is because the particular concerns of this thesis centre on the possibility of employing Goddess-talk in relation to academic reflection on spirituality and the sacred. At the same time, however, I do draw on narratives from women outside the academy in the heuristic element of my research. I undertake this in recognition of the importance of relating my own claims for the potential of Goddess-talk to the ways in which women express their understandings of Goddess in the context of their own experience.<sup>88</sup> I use 'inter-views' which recognise conversation as a means of constructing knowledge.<sup>89</sup> I am in conversation with the women's narratives in the same way that I am in conversation with the ideas of Christ or Braidotti. I am theorising *with* the women as subjects of theologising rather than *about* them as the objects of research.

## MAPPING THE PROGRESS OF THIS STUDY

My purpose in this study is to explore further possibilities for the role of theology in transforming the religious symbolic. My focus is on the role of 'Goddess' as metaphor and on the function of Goddess-talk. A general overview of Goddess-talk is followed by a more detailed consideration of Christ's work for the following reasons. The influence of Christ's work relates to the personal journey in which this research is rooted. Furthermore, Christ's work, especially 'Why Women Need the Goddess', is recognised as a 'foundational' text for the development of Goddess-talk and relates

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<sup>88</sup> This, I would argue, indicates a significant difference between the theology in which I am engaged and the theology in which I was trained. The influential works I read (nearly all written by men) offered radical and innovative approaches to 'God-talk' but did not discuss these with people outside the academy to discover how far these ideas resonated with their understandings of 'God'.

<sup>89</sup> Kvale 1996. Kvale deliberately refers to 'inter-views' to indicate that his qualitative research is not based on empirical data gleaned from respondents but from the process of construction emerging from conversation with them. These epistemological and methodological issues are discussed further and in relation to the heuristic element of my research in Chapter 4

specifically to the questions of language, symbol, narrative and experience explored by this thesis. Christ occupies a distinctive position in the development of thealogy in that she bridges the world of academic feminist theo/alogy and the popular Goddess movement. Aspects of all the 'strands' of Goddess-talk considered in the following overview are related to her work, as are many of the debates between them. Christ is also distinctive in that she addresses explicitly the epistemological implications of the paradigm shift generated by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion. Her analysis of epistemological and methodological issues informs the approach of this thesis and its heuristic stage in particular. Furthermore, Christ's focus on language, experience and knowing has led her, in her later work, to address, specifically, issues of 'realist' or symbolic understandings of the Goddess. Christ's thealogy, rooted in her own experience, has developed to provide insights from process thought to present understandings of the Goddess as personal presence. In this thesis, my own line of thought has led me in a different direction to consider the possibilities of post-realist narratives of the sacred framed by Goddess-talk.

In order to pursue these possibilities, I inter-viewed with a group of nine women who located themselves on spiritual journey which focussed on or was related to feminism and/or the Goddess. My interpretation of these inter-views examines the extent to which the theological issues I wish to explore relate to the narratives provided by these women. I continue my conversation with their narratives by identifying the paradoxes which I perceive to exist between their emphases on embodiment, process and plurality and their tendency to retain aspects of more traditional, metaphysical expressions of the spiritual and the sacred. I develop this conversation further by exploring issues related to my attempt to develop feminist thealogy further into post-metaphysical expressions of spirituality and figurations of sacred. I identify these issues as the need to examine the role of 'women's experience' as a category, to respond to an acknowledgement of difference, to interrogate notions of the unified

self and to explore the implications of a recognition of plurality and fluidity in subjectivity. I then explore ways in which Goddess talk can provide narratives of the sacred which respond to these issues. I do this by relating the function of Goddess-talk to that of the 'figurations' and 'heteroglossia' called for by feminist theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway. Furthermore, I discover, in the work of Catherine Keller, an example of the means by which Goddess narratives can function to express subjectivity as process and to present images which reflect positive strategies for responding to difference. In the resulting conclusions and suggestions offered by this study, I offer possibilities for the ways in which Goddess-talk could convey a post-realist understanding of the sacred as performative and grounded in a sense of relation with all forms of life. I also argue that such Goddess-talk could relate to post-metaphysical expressions of embodied spiritualities which reflect an acceptance of the plurality of subjectivity as process. In making such suggestions, I call for further dialogue between theology and thealogy in feminist approaches to the study of religion.

## **Chapter 2: INTERWEAVING 'STRANDS' OF THE GODDESS MOVEMENT**

In order to assess the possibilities of 'Goddess- talk', it is necessary to survey some of the many, interweaving 'strands' of the Goddess movement. As already stated, this overview does not claim to be a comprehensive history or taxonomy but will attempt to present a framework within which to investigate current debates. The parameters of my own investigation into these debates are determined by the particular concerns of this thesis.

### **2:1 THE GODDESS OF A GOLDEN AGE**

#### **Gimbutas and Goddess History**

The attempt to recover and reclaim the history of ancient Goddess religions forms one of the central aspects of the Goddess movement. This recovery is based on the claim that growing archaeological evidence of Goddess-centred religions and a careful analysis of Goddess mythology reveal the existence of ancient pre-patriarchal and matrifocal societies. This, it is argued, reflects the existence of a peaceful, egalitarian culture which worshipped a universal Goddess, expressed through many names and aspects, and in which women were the holders of powers and the leaders of religion. It is claimed that this civilisation was eventually destroyed by a patriarchal worldview which sanctioned the construction of a male, transcendent, monotheistic deity and the resulting oppression of women.

Over the last twenty- five years, this 'herstory' has given rise to some of the most passionate disputes within archaeological and feminist scholarship and within the Goddess movement itself. There are several aspects of this debate. They include the

validity of the interpretation of archaeological evidence and the relationship between this evidence of Goddess religions and the status of women in the ancient societies in which they were practised. Also contested are the dangers of promoting essentialist images of women's roles; and the value of proclaiming the religion of one, universal Great Goddess. Recently, this debate has been intensified further. One important factor in this process was the death in 1994 of Marija Gimbutas, the most influential figure in the recovery of Goddess herstory. Gimbutas' death has strengthened the loyalty of those who champion her cause. It has also led to the ensuing suggestion that anyone who questions Gimbutas' theories is in collusion with a 'patriarchal backlash' following her death. Another factor is the appearance of a strident critique by Cynthia Eller of what she claims is 'an invented past' which 'cannot give women a future'.<sup>1</sup> The controversy surrounding *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* relates not just to its disparaging tone but also to the fact that Eller had previously produced a respected survey of the Goddess movement, based on privileged access to interviews with adherents.<sup>2</sup> A detailed analysis of all the archaeological evidence pertinent to this debate is outside the parameters of this study. It is, however, relevant to consider the implications of this debate for an understanding of Goddess-talk in relation to feminist and post-realist expressions of the sacred. The ideas encompassed in the recovery of Goddess herstory were introduced to this country largely through the work of the Matriarchy Study Group.<sup>3</sup> In America, Merlin Stone's book 'When God was a Woman' made these ideas available

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<sup>1</sup> Eller 2000

<sup>2</sup> Eller 1993

<sup>3</sup>The Matriarchy Study Group was formed in 1975 as an offshoot of the London Women's Liberation Movement. Asphodel long, a founder member, explains that its aim was to question the assumption that God had always been perceived and addressed as male no matter how often it was stressed that God is beyond gender'. (Long 1994 p.14) The group set about dismantling 'the great lie' that women had always been subordinate by providing scholarly research into ancient Goddess cultures. It produced several pamphlets including *Goddess Shrew* in 1977 and *The Politics of Matriarchy* and *Menstrual Taboos* both in 1978. The term 'matriarchy' has since been largely abandoned as it suggests a mirror image of patriarchy.

to a wider public<sup>4</sup>. The figure who has come to represent the embodiment of these ideas is Marija Gimbutas<sup>5</sup>. Gimbutas was a Lithuanian archaeologist whose research into artefacts from the Palaeolithic (c. 35,000 – 10,000 BCE) and Neolithic (c. 10,000 – 3,500 BCE) eras led her to develop theories which have had an enormous impact upon the Goddess movement.

As well as the many female statues which were discovered at the turn of the century, on twelve sites stretching from the Pyrenees to Siberia, Gimbutas also interpreted the patterns found on fragments of pottery. Gimbutas argued that the symbols found on these artefacts conveyed a 'language' which demonstrated a life-affirming spirituality and culture in which the Sacred was portrayed as female. She argued that the recurring use of symbolism such as chevrons, eyes and spirals represent the life-giving, renewing and regenerating powers of the Goddess. In her later works,<sup>6</sup> Gimbutas went on to maintain that the evidence of universal Goddess worship spans thousands of years and miles, witnessed by the testimony of her recurring symbols such as the serpent, bee, bull butterfly and double headed axe. Ancient stones and womb-like burial sites are also cited as clues for an understanding of the beliefs and rituals of this culture. Gimbutas coined the term 'archaeomythology' to describe her attempts to discover the hidden traditions of an ancient Goddess religion. She also provided the category 'Old Europe' (an area encompassing Turkey, Greece, the Balkans, westwards to Spain, Portugal and Britain and south-eastwards to Egypt, Israel and Mesopotamia), to designate a culture which existed before the Indo-European invasions. Gimbutas claimed that a Goddess oriented worldview generated a civilisation in which women were powerful and respected as representations of the sacred presence in all forms of life. Gimbutas claimed that this 'matrifocal, peaceful, art-loving, egalitarian' culture was destroyed by warlike, patrifocal

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<sup>4</sup> Stone 1976

<sup>5</sup> e.g. Gimbutas 1982, 1989, 1991

invaders who worshipped sky gods.<sup>7</sup> She named these 'Kurgans' after the form of burial they demonstrated. Gimbutas died in 1994 at the age of 73, leaving behind a powerful legacy. She occupies a unique place in the Goddess movement.

The vision of a prepatriarchal Goddess world, its conquest and revitalisation, a vision to which Gimbutas made so influential a contribution, has had a profound influence on the character and development of the Goddess movement. Eller has gone as far as claiming that this view of history is the synecdoche of the movement itself.<sup>8</sup> As I will discuss later, there are, in fact, a range of responses to this historiography. It is, nevertheless, true that most of the influential literature which has shaped the landscape of thealogy convey some acceptance of this view of history.<sup>9</sup>

Elinor Gadon, in her *Once and Future Goddess*,<sup>10</sup> offers an overview which is representative. As an art historian, Gadon's focus is on the impact of the Goddess as a symbol of female sacrality and she acknowledges her debt to Marija Gimbutas, Starhawk and Carol Christ.<sup>11</sup> She subtitles her book '*A Sweeping Visual Chronicle of the Sacred Female and Her Re-emergence in the Cultural Mythology of Our Time*'. Gadon's survey begins with a picture of ancient Goddess cultures. This begins with the Ice Age or upper Palaeolithic (c. 35,000 to 9,000 B.C.E.) and images of 'the Earth as Mother'. These include the famous examples of the small female figure found in Willendorf, Austria and the cave carving of a female holding a crescent, marked with thirteen notches, at Laussel, France, both dated c. 25,000 B.C.E. Gadon also presents more abstract drawings and artefacts which convey images of female sexuality. She uses these to confirm the view that the earliest humans experienced the sacred in the forces

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<sup>6</sup> Gimbutas, 1989, 1991

<sup>7</sup> Gimbutas 1989

<sup>8</sup> Eller 1993 p.154

<sup>9</sup> The list is extensive but significant works include Christ 1987, 1997a, Daly 1978, Olsen 1983, Orenstein 1990, Sjöö & Mor 1991, Spretnak 1982, Starhawk 1978, Stone 1976

<sup>10</sup> Gadon 1989

of life and death present in the human and animal life around them and conveyed these through female symbolism. Gadon then moves into the Neolithic era and the emergence of agriculture. She argues that the need for humans to intervene actively with nature led to a proliferation of more naturalistic images of the Goddess as birthing mother. She claims that

‘In time iconographic formulas were developed to express different aspects of the Great Goddess. These are the foremothers of the goddesses we know from ancient mythology and perhaps reflect an evolving sense of self.’<sup>12</sup>

This period also saw the development of an awareness of the landscape as sacred, expressed through monuments created within the earth or in harmony with the surroundings. Gadon works within the view that the many artefacts, megaliths, underground excavations and carvings found from this era (usually dated c. 9,000 to 3,500 B.C.E.) indicate a universal religion of ‘the Great Goddess’. She writes

“The role of the Goddess was understood as both life giver and life taker; burial in her great womb meant rebirth. Self-creating, autonomous, she was the all powerful mother. The vital connection between the magical power that provided food necessary to sustain life, woman as birth-giver and nurturer, and the female deity was expressed in art and ritual.”<sup>13</sup>

Gadon illustrates this worldview with a series of celebrated case studies. She begins with Çatal Hüyük, the Neolithic urban site, dated c. 6,500 – 5650 B.C.E., excavated in modern Turkey by James Mellaart in 1961-63. Gadon then moves to the ‘Old Europe’ distinguished by Marija Gimbutas as the oldest European civilisation c. 6,500 – 3,500 B.C.E.. Gadon draws on the many images discovered and interpreted by Gimbutas and places alongside them examples of contemporary art which they have inspired. Gadon’s visual chronicle then sweeps through Malta, with the claim that over thirty temples were built in honour of and in the shape of the Goddess from c. 3,500 to 2,500 B.C.E.. She then moves to Britain and the Goddess-centred rituals surrounding the Neolithic site of

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<sup>11</sup> Gadon 1989 p.ix

<sup>12</sup> Gadon 1989 p.23



Avebury. Gadon concludes her sweep over Goddess cultures with a survey of Crete. Minoan Crete, (c. 3,000 – 1,500 B.C.E.) is presented as the summit of Goddess culture and the last bastion of Goddess-focussed, peaceful, egalitarian civilisation before the Goddess was universally suppressed by the 'Patriarchal Takeover'. Gadon gives examples of the ways in which the Goddess was 'tamed' to reappear as the lesser consort of a male god, demonised, appropriated into patriarchal expressions of the feminine or rendered invisible altogether. She draws on the mythologies of Sumer's Innana and Greece's Demeter to illustrate the processes by which the power and autonomy of the Goddess is eroded with the onset of patriarchy, leaving only glimpses of and clues to her former role and authority. Gadon focuses on the rise of monotheism in ancient Hebrew culture and its devastating effect on Goddess worship,<sup>14</sup> thereby reclaiming 'the Hebrew Goddess', Asherah. She moves on to consider the extent to which the Christian iconography of the Virgin Mary reveals the sublimation of the Goddess. Gadon concludes her book with a celebration of the Re-emergence of the Goddess and presents the many artistic, intellectual, political media by which the Goddess has become a 'symbol for our time'. Whilst her approach is informed by her emphasis on artistic expression and by her own interest in Indian art, the historical landscape that Gadon presents provides the backdrop for many works on the Goddess. Baring and Cashford, drawing on Jungian assumptions about female archetypes, present their Goddess history as the evolution of an image.<sup>15</sup> Sjöö and Mor provide a sweep of history informed by radical feminist analyses of distinct female powers,

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<sup>13</sup> Gadon 1989 p.24

<sup>14</sup>This feature of Goddess history has raised the accusation that it colludes with and reinscribes anti-Judaism, presenting the Jews as perpetrators of 'deicide'. Some theologians, e.g. Long 1992, Christ 1987a, 1997a have addressed and refuted the view that the Hebrews were distinctively responsible for the overthrow of Goddess religion. An influential article in this debate was Annette Daum 'Blaming the Jews for the Death of the Goddess' *Lilith* 7 1980 p.12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Baring and Cashford 1993

suppressed by patriarchy.<sup>16</sup> In Britain, there is an element of the Goddess movement which draws on the 'Western' esoteric tradition. Representatives of which relate Goddess images and mythology to processes of transformation and enlightenment, sometimes within the context of formal training.<sup>17</sup> They all, however, reflect what Eller refers to 'the revisionist version of Western history favoured by the movement.'<sup>18</sup>

To return to Gadon, however, it is notable that although she draws on this 'revisionist' history, her emphasis is on the impact of Goddess as contemporary symbol. Like many Goddess scholars before her,<sup>19</sup> Gadon makes it clear that she is not advocating a return to a golden age<sup>20</sup> but argues that Goddess imagery provides a resource for the personal, political and spiritual transformation she desires. Within theology, there remains a tension between the use of ancient images to inspire biophilic expressions of spirituality today and the claims of those who wish to assert the historicity of a universal,

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<sup>16</sup> Sjöö and Mor 1991

<sup>17</sup> One of most prominent figures in this movement is Caitlín Matthews who, sometimes with her husband John, has published widely on Celtic tradition. She has also produced *Elements of the Goddess* Shaftesbury: Element 1989 which presents the Goddess as the goal of an inner journey. Kathy Jones, who, with Tyna Redpath, organises the annual Glastonbury Goddess Conference, has also produced several texts on the Goddess which she publishes privately e.g. *The Ancient British Goddesses: Their Myths, Legends and Sacred Sites* Glastonbury: Ariadne Publications 1991. She provides training for initiation into the Priestesses of Avalon. Another authority on the role of the priestess is Naomi Ozaniec, who was a prominent member of the Fellowship of Isis, though she has now left. She has written *Daughter of the Goddess: The Sacred Priestess* London: Aquarian 1993. Whilst all these writers understand the Goddess to be an empowering symbol for women, they consciously distance themselves from feminism. For this reason, I do not focus on their work in this study.

<sup>18</sup> Eller 1993 p.6 Eller also refers to this version of the past as the 'sacred history' of the movement.

<sup>19</sup> e.g. Merlin Stone, in one of the earliest Goddess herstories wrote "I am not suggesting a return or revival of the ancient female religion. As Sheila Collins writes, "As women our hope for fulfilment lies in the present and the future and not in some mythical golden past.. may be used to cut through the many oppressive and falsely founded patriarchal images, stereotypes, customs and laws that were developed as direct reactions to goddess worship by leaders of the late male – worshipping religions." (Stone 1976 p.xxv)

<sup>20</sup> Gadon 1990 p.377

prepatriarchal Goddess civilisation. This has been the source of debate within the Goddess movement since its beginning.<sup>21</sup>

The challenges to this vision of Goddess herstory come from several directions and cover a range of issues. Ronald Hutton occupies a distinctive space in this debate. He is a practising Pagan but has made his academic reputation by disputing the claims of contemporary Paganism to an historical legacy reaching back to Neolithic times.

Hutton's argument is that much of what is now expressed as Paganism stems from no earlier than the eighteenth century and the dawn of Romanticism. Hutton welcomes the 're-enchantment of the land' but denies its connection with any ancient expression of Pagan religion. He has, on several occasions, taken the opportunity to refute the claims for a Neolithic Great Goddess and the historicity of the worldview presented by Goddess feminism.<sup>22</sup>

Hutton maintains that these claims are not the product of accumulating evidence but a theoretical construction. He argues that contemporary theories of such a Goddess are 'backward projections'.<sup>23</sup> Hutton maintains that the image of a single, universal Goddess goes back only as far as the very unusual and late Graeco-Roman writings of Apuleius and the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>24</sup> Hutton then traces the emergence of the notion of a mother Goddess through the Romantic Movement's personification of the divine feminine in its exaltation of nature and the emotions. He continues the thread through

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<sup>21</sup> For example, in Charlene Spretnak's anthology of early writings from the feminist spirituality movement, she provides a debate between Sally Binford and Angela Carter on one side and Merlin Stone and herself on the other, arguing the scholarly or political validity of reclaiming Goddess history. (Spretnak 1982 p.541 – 561) The Matriarchy Study Group also addressed these issues in the 1970s, as is discussed further later in this section. In an early edition of *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, there was a special section on 'Neo-Paganism' in which issues of Goddess history were addressed. Articles were provided by Mary Jo Weaver, Jo Ann Hackett and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, with a response from Margot Adler (*The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* vol. 5 Spring 1989 p.47 – 100)

<sup>22</sup> e.g. Hutton 1991, 1997, 1998

<sup>23</sup> Hutton 1997

the work of influential scholars such as Sir Arthur Evans, who excavated Cretan Knossos, and through the theories of J.J. Bachofen, who posited the idea of matriarchy as an early form of human society. In this process of 'discovering' the 'modern' Goddess.<sup>25</sup> Hutton attributes special significance to the work of Jane Ellen Harrison<sup>26</sup> and, later, Jaquetta Hawkes.<sup>27</sup> Hutton maintains, therefore, that the worldview of 'the Great Goddess' was already in place before the discovery of the Palaeolithic 'Venuses', and thus provided a 'ready-made' explanation for them. He cites the scholars Peter Ucko<sup>28</sup> and Andrew Fleming<sup>29</sup> as providing an 'unanswerable' challenge to the 'scholarly orthodoxy' that archaeology provided proof of a universal religion of the Universal Mother.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hutton 1997 p.91

<sup>25</sup> Hutton 1998 p.99

<sup>26</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1903

<sup>27</sup> Hutton provides a detailed account of this process in Hutton 1997 p.92 – 95 and gives a summary in Hutton 1998 p.93 - 96

<sup>28</sup> In his article 'Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete' London: Royal Anthropological Institute Occasional Paper 24, Ucko warned against glib interpretations of Egyptian figurines and argued that they and the Palaeolithic 'Venuses' had no features to mark them off as divine or majestic. He suggests instead that, in the light of the function of similar statuettes among primitive agriculturalists of the present world, they might be children's dolls or figures used in sympathetic magic. The fact that many of them portray pregnant women would, therefore, reflect the dangers of childbirth. Mourning rituals are also suggested as another possible function. Even if they do apparently portray supernatural beings, he argues, there was 'absolutely no need' to interpret them everywhere as the same deity.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Fleming in 'The myth of the mother goddess' *World Archaeology* 1 p.247 – 261 argues that there is no proof that spirals, circles and dots were symbols for eyes, that eyes, faces and genderless figures were symbols of a female or that female figures were symbols of a goddess. He also used new methods in carbon dating to challenge previous theories about the spread of Goddess religion in Neolithic times.

<sup>30</sup> Hutton believes that Ucko and Fleming began a mood of scepticism about Goddess religion, which developed throughout the 70s and, within archaeological scholarship, undermined the claims for its existence completely. Hutton stresses that Ucko and Fleming were not intending to collude with patriarchy but to challenge the dominant orthodoxy of their day, which supported an essentialist view of 'the feminine'. He argues that it was only the irony of the fact that 'the same mood of iconoclasm in the late 1960s which inspired Peter Ucko and Andrew brought into being a women's movement bent upon challenging patriarchy in both society and religion' which prevented the disappearance of the claims of a Goddess religion. He believes that the work of Ucko and Fleming were too academic and inaccessible for the majority, but the old popular works were still lining the public library shelves. As a result, they went unchallenged or were able to provide 'some radicals with precisely the universal female deity they had been seeking'. (Hutton 1991 p.39) He also challenges the theory that Çatal Hüyük provides an example of Neolithic Goddess-centred matriarchy. Instead he is convinced by Hodder's argument that the sometimes

According to Hutton the appearance of Marija Gimbutas' book *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*<sup>31</sup> nevertheless encouraged this tendency to accept the concept of a Neolithic Great Mother. He expresses his respect for Prof. Gimbutas as an archaeologist but shares the scholarly concern he claims was caused by her interpretations of her finds. He has accused her of providing no other justification for her classification of statuettes as divine and of geometrical symbols than 'her own taste'.<sup>32</sup> Hutton's critique has provoked a spirited response from theologians. As well as disputing some of his evidence, Max Dashu accuses Hutton of presenting feminist scholarship as if it were homogeneous. After setting up 'the' feminist model as a straw doll, he then proceeds triumphantly to knock it down.<sup>33</sup>

The basic premise of Hutton's argument is, nevertheless, echoed by others critics of the prepatrarchal Goddess theory.<sup>34</sup> The situation is, however, more complex than this. Challenges to the idea also come from feminist archaeologists and from within the Goddess movement.

Asphodel Long, a theologian for whom the role of historical research is central,<sup>35</sup> has expressed her concern about Gimbutas' methodology. Whilst Long respects the contribution of *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, she regrets the lack of academic rigour in some of Gimbutas' later work. Long attributes the shift in Gimbutas' approach to

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Neolithic Goddess-centred matriarchy. Instead he is convinced by Hodder's argument that the sometimes disturbing images of female power alongside evidence of traditional role distinctions suggests "a considerable tension between the sexes". (Ian Hodder 'Contextual Archaeology : An Interpretation of Çatal Hüyük and a discussion of the Origins of Agriculture' *London University Institute of Archaeology Bulletin* 1987 p.43 –56 quoted in Hutton 1991 p.42)

<sup>31</sup> Marija Gimbutas *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 7000 - 3500 BC - Myths, Legends and Cult Images* Berkley: University of California Press 1982 (originally published in 1974)

<sup>32</sup> Hutton 1991 p.40

<sup>33</sup> Dashu 2001a p.2

<sup>34</sup> e.g. Davis 1998, Eller 2000

<sup>35</sup> Long 1992, 1998

an interpretation of evidence to events in her own life story<sup>36</sup>. Gimbutas was fighting a debilitating cancer which eventually claimed her life. Knowing this, Gimbutas exhibited a great urgency to express her convictions about a universal, egalitarian Goddess culture. In her life, Gimbutas had seen the devastating effects of war and totalitarianism. It was a matter of faith for her to provide evidence that a peace loving society had existed before the rise of patriarchy and that aggression was not the 'natural' condition for humanity.

Long welcomes an interrogation of Gimbutas' methods by feminist scholars. She is concerned about the tendency to attribute to Gimbutas 'iconic' status, rather than travelling further with the challenges to scholarship which she initiated.

At the same time there remains, however, a strong desire to reinforce the expression of affection and loyalty with which Gimbutas is remembered. This is illustrated by the series of articles in *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, collected by Carol Christ and Naomi Goldenberg,<sup>37</sup> to mark a special tribute to Gimbutas and in the responses which followed.<sup>38</sup> It is also evident in the reaction of the Goddess movement to Eller's critique of what she derogates as 'the myth of matriarchal prehistory'.<sup>39</sup> Max Dashu's response is representative.<sup>40</sup> Dashu accuses Eller, in her book, of exhibiting the very universalism, selective use of evidence, arbitrary interpretation and anachronistic analysis she condemns in Goddess history.

Eller insists on using the term 'feminist matriarchalists' to describe *all* those who posit the historicity of a prepatriarchal Goddess culture, despite the fact that she acknowledges that such terminology is not used by scholars themselves<sup>41</sup>. Eller also draws on illustration from the very margins of Goddess literature rather than focussing on

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<sup>36</sup> Long 1997 p.16-17 Hutton also makes this point. Hutton 1997 p.98

<sup>37</sup> Christ & Goldenberg 1996

<sup>38</sup> e.g. Abrahamsen 1997, Christ 1996, Goldenberg 1996, Keller 1996, Marler 1996, Spretnak 1996

<sup>39</sup> Eller 2000

<sup>40</sup> Dashu 2001

<sup>41</sup> Eller 2000 p.12

central texts<sup>42</sup>. Throughout her book, Eller adopts a very sarcastic, even sneering tone. It is interesting to note that, in her critique, she does not refer to previous, more carefully constructed criticism, emanating from within feminist scholarship, found in the collections of Goodison and Morris or Billington and Green.<sup>43</sup>

## Continuing Debates

The complexity generated by a survey of the issues surrounding the narratives of a Goddess from a pre-patriarchal past is further accentuated by the difficulty in extricating feminist critical reflection from the malestream backlash for which there is considerable evidence.<sup>44</sup> As has already been indicated, a vibrant debate has surrounded the hypothesis of an ancient, universal, 'matriarchal' Goddess culture since the beginning of the Goddess movement itself. This debate has circled around a series of issues. One issue is the question of academic rigour. Surveys of Goddess religion such as those provided by Stone, Mor and Sjöö and by Baring and Cashford present sweeping, 'enumerative'<sup>45</sup> overviews which, it could be argued, fail to acknowledge appropriate cultural and historical contexts.

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<sup>42</sup> For instance, Eller refers frequently to the role of extraterrestrial invasions in the demise of Goddess culture (e.g. Eller 2000 p.11, 51, 178, 201 n.65).

<sup>43</sup> Billington and Green 1996, Goodison and Morris 1998. This point is also made by Daniel Cohen in the journal *Wood and Water* Yule 2000

<sup>44</sup> Spretnak 1993. An example of such a backlash is found in Philip Davies' *Goddess Unmasked*. (Davies 1998) Here, Davies uses the deconstruction of Goddess history to validate his claim that the Goddess represents the 'deification of a lie' (Davies 1998 p.373). Davies cites other articles which have given 'critical attention' to aspects of the Goddess movement including: William Oddie 'The Goddess Squad' *National Review* Nov 18<sup>th</sup> 1991 p.44-46; Mary Lefkowitz 'The Twilight of the Goddess' *New Republic* Aug.3<sup>rd</sup> 1993 p.29-33 and 'The New Cults of the Goddess' *American Scholar* Spring 1993 p.261-268. (These are cited in Davies n.1 p. 375).

<sup>45</sup> This is a term coined by Aylward Shorter when, in his study of African Christianity, he was surveying the different methodologies adopted to convey a religious tradition. (Aylward Shorter *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* Gateshead: Geoffrey Chapman 1975) Shorter cites James Frazer – whose work had considerable influence on the emergence of Goddess history – as 'the classic enumerator of all time'. In describing Frazer's approach, Shorter claimed that he "enumerated endless litany of facts gathered from every age, country and social group. Vaulting lightly from one continent to another, across immense distances of space and time, he passed from one belief to another, linked only by a superficial similarity observed by himself." (Aylward 1976 p.44)

Sympathetic but critical feminist scholars such as Lucy Goodison have expressed concerns about such methods. Goodison has given an account of her attempt to speak to the Matriarchy Study Group about her research, which challenged their arguments for an ancient matriarchy in Crete. Goodison claimed that they refused to discuss the evidence and simply became 'upset and angry because I had questioned a cherished article of faith.'<sup>46</sup>

More recently, Goodison has pursued her sympathetic critique further by compiling, with Sandra Billington, a collection of feminist studies in archaeology which challenge the universalising assumptions of Gimbutas' approach<sup>47</sup>. Goodison, with Billington, expresses her disquiet about the personality cult she sees emerging around Marija Gimbutas. This, they argue, leads to an over reliance on authority rather than primary evidence<sup>48</sup>. They regret that Gimbutas' challenge to archaeological authority has only resulted in a search for a new orthodoxy which, they fear, leads to intolerance, a shutting down of imaginative powers and a sense of closure. Instead, they insist, the task of feminist study is to demystify the claims to certainty and authority, not set up a new metanarrative<sup>49</sup>. Another influential feminist critic of Gimbutas' approach is Lynne Meskell<sup>50</sup>. She critiques what she reads as a tendency to read back into the interpretation of evidence the hopes for a utopian future, resulting in 'an archaeology of desire'<sup>51</sup>. Similarly, Tringham and Conkey<sup>52</sup> problematise what they term 'archaeological essentialization' in the interpretation of figurines. Goodison and Billington conclude that we need to be open to diversity and ambiguity, paying careful attention to evidence

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<sup>46</sup> Lucy Goodison *Moving Heaven and Earth: Sexuality and Social Change* London: Women's Press 1990 quoted in Lunn 1993 p.24

<sup>47</sup> Goodison & Morris 1998

<sup>48</sup> Goodison & Morris 1998a p.13

<sup>49</sup> Goodison & Morris 1998a p.21

<sup>50</sup> e.g. Meskell 1995

<sup>51</sup> Meskell 1998



within its historical context. 'The monolithic 'Goddess' whose biology is her destiny, they suggest, may, to a large extent, be an illusion, a creation of modern need, but in acknowledging greater diversity in religious expression we allow for the possibility of finding new patterns in a rich and fascinating body of evidence<sup>53</sup>.

In her later works,<sup>54</sup> Gimbutas expanded her remit to include a survey of folklore and traditions to provide evidence of a suppressed Goddess culture. Gimbutas' employed her 'archaeomythology' in order to identify the existence of a universal religion of the Great Goddess. Such an approach has therefore come under the scrutiny of feminist scholars whose interests span the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, mythic literature and folklore. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green have compiled a collection of such articles in order to interrogate some assumptions about the 'concept of the Goddess'. In her introduction to this collection, Green wants to stress two important points from the conclusions drawn from the wide-ranging studies represented. Firstly, that goddesses represented considerable power and wide-ranging responsibilities but secondly, that it is unwise to draw generalised inferences from the status of female divinities about the position of women in those societies.<sup>55</sup> Billington and Green preface their collection with a tribute to the work of Hilda Ellis Davidson whose attention to detail, context and diversity provides a model of good practice which has been applied to a study of goddesses. In contrast, Juliette Wood expresses concern about the tendency of modern Goddess-paradigms to present ancient society as 'an organic whole whose cultural pattern is predictable, universal and predictable'.<sup>56</sup> Wood shares Hutton's view

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<sup>52</sup> Tringham and Conkey 1998 p.23

<sup>53</sup> Goodison & Morris 1998a p.21

<sup>54</sup> Gimbutas 1989, 1991

<sup>55</sup> Green 1996

<sup>56</sup> Wood 1996 p.13

that such a paradigm is inherited from the worldview of the Romantics, mediated through the imaginative embellishment of writers such as Frazer and Graves. Wood positions Gimbutas' theories within such a genealogy and identifies the problems surrounding their attempts to claim as historical fact the existence of a unified system of belief and practice. At the same time, as a folklorist, Juliette Wood understands and welcomes a Goddess-model, operating on the level of symbolic discourse, which provides a 'survivalist' discourse. Wood links the Goddess narrative of survival, followed by suppression and then transformation to the feminist project of socio/political change. As such, she argues, this 'exercise in creative history' has value, as long as its uncritical methodology and *a priori* assumptions about the nature of culture are recognised. Indeed, the importance of exercising creativity in reclaiming Goddess narratives is expressed by many Goddess feminists. Throughout her work, Mary Daly maintains that the power of Memory provided by the narratives of ancient Goddess images does not lie in their historical accuracy. Instead, women can rely on Crone-logy to detect the past underlying the foreground of reversals. Daly, like many other Spiritual feminists, often quotes Wittig's phrase

"Make an effort to remember. Or failing that, invent."<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, for some, like Barbara Mor and Monica Sjöö it is of central importance that the historicity of a Goddess-oriented past is affirmed. In *The Great Cosmic Mother* they maintain that knowledge of a history in which female biology was a

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<sup>57</sup> Monica Wittig *Les Guérillères* (trans. David Le Vay) New York: The Viking Press 1969. This often quoted phrase causes some controversy. Pamela Lunn has pointed out that the context of this phrase is within a vision of women as war-like Amazons, very different from the peaceful society envisaged by Gimbutas and others. Goddess feminists also debate the value of this expression for their understanding of history. This is reflected in the discussion of this issue in the journals *From the Flames: Quarterly Journal of Radical Feminism and Spirituality* 15, Spring 1995, p.19-21 and *Matriarchy and Reclaim Network* 105,

source of empowerment and advantage is vital to ensuring a radical feminist struggle now.<sup>58</sup>

One of the earliest and most persistent criticisms within feminist circles of an attempt to reclaim a 'golden age' of ancient matriarchies is that it deters women from addressing the political concerns of the present. This concern is expressed in the early and often quoted statement of Angela Carter where she argues that

"If women allow themselves to be consoled... by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used by men). If a revival of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place."<sup>59</sup>

Lunn also cites this quotation in her article "Do women Need the Goddess?"<sup>60</sup> where she provides further examples of feminist distrust of attempts to reclaim Goddess-centred matriarchies. Lunn quotes McCrickard's article,<sup>61</sup> which draws comparisons between the inflexible attitudes of Goddess spirituality groups and those of Christian fundamentalists, from the perspective of someone who has belonged to both.

On the other hand, feminists scholars engaged in Goddess research have been equally persistent in their insistence on the political implications of their work.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Sjöö & Mor 1991

<sup>59</sup> From Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* quoted in Binford 1982a p.539

<sup>60</sup> Lunn 1993

<sup>61</sup> J. Mc Crickard 'Born Again Moon: Fundamentalism in Christianity and the Feminist Spirituality Movement' in *Feminist Review* 37 p.59 –67 1991 quoted in Lunn 1993 p.25

<sup>62</sup> On the first page of the first publication by the Matriarchy Study group, they state their aims and claim, "We do not wish merely to contemplate the past. Our aim of understanding the past is to influence the present." (*Shrew* p.1)

The political implications of the research into ancient matriarchies is stressed throughout this publication. In 1977, however, the group published another pamphlet – *The Politics of Matriarchy* which addressed their critics even more specifically. The first article – '*Goddess Politics*' by Pat Whiting maintained that 'the study of the ancient matriarchal and matrilineal societies seems to answer questions about the rise of the present patriarchal social structures which do not seem to be answered by standard social theories.'

Another very important issue for feminists reclaiming Goddess history is the charge that the androcentric nature of mainstream scholarship determines its interpretation of evidence and provides its predetermined conclusions. Stone, in one of the earliest popular publications of Goddess history cited the need to challenge androcentric assumptions as one of the key motivations to undertaking a study of ancient and prehistoric herstory.<sup>63</sup> Thealogians like Christ and Long draw comparisons between the methods used by Fiorenza to reconstruct the history of early Christian women and those needed to reclaim Goddess history. They conclude that there is the same requirement to exercise a hermeneutics of suspicion when approaching the androcentric traditioning in the transmission and that this is the most vital aspect of its reinterpretation. Christ also stresses the need to interrogate the reasons lying behind mainstream scholarship's resistance to Goddess history.<sup>64</sup> The argument that women must not accept the patriarchal interpretation of their own past is one of the most powerful messages conveyed by this approach to an understanding of the Goddess.

Further issues arise for feminist theo/alogy around attempts to reclaim a matrifocal past. If there was a Patriarchal Take-over, how and why did it happen? As already indicated the work of scholars such as Merlin Stone drew the criticism that her identification of patriarchy with biblical traditions colluded with anti-Judaism<sup>65</sup>. Feminists have also registered that it is dangerous to collude with the work of scholars such as Bachofen, who, in the nineteenth century proposed the existence of ancient matriarchies but believed that their disappearance was part of the evolutionary development of civilisation to the superior stage of monogamy and patriarchy.

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<sup>63</sup> Stone 1976

<sup>64</sup> Christ 1997a p.70 -88

An expression of the feeling that women have 'lost' their true power, authority and spirituality is, nevertheless, an important theme in feminist religion and ritual. As a result, the image of a lost 'age' of Goddess-centred, women-centred civilisation sometimes functions as a myth comparable to the fall in Christianity. Rosemary Radford Ruether has made this observation and questions the benefit of such a lapsarian worldview. For her, vital questions are raised by the narrative of the defeat of Goddess religion and success of patriarchy. Ruether's work reflects an increasing recognition of the worth of Goddess research. Her response to early attempts to reclaim Goddess religion was very critical.<sup>66</sup> In *Gaia and God*, however, she acknowledges the mythic power of a prepatrarchal, Goddess-oriented past, but she questions the validity and value of equating myth with history. Drawing on the findings from Çatal Hüyük, Ruether also argues that, if there were Neolithic matricentric societies, they may have resulted in resentment against female power. She notes the ambivalent images of female as creator and a destroyer. Rather than attribute the downfall of these societies to marauding invaders, Ruether suggests that a matricentric culture could, itself, be a 'breeding ground for male resentment and violence'. She concludes, therefore, that although reclaiming the memory of these earlier cultures 'can be immensely valuable to the wholeness we seek' it is necessary to 'learn the lesson of the weaknesses of the matricentric core of human society that made it vulnerable to patriarchy.'<sup>67</sup>

In this section I have intended to provide an overview of the relevant issues surrounding the reclaiming of a Goddess-worshipping 'golden age'. It has not been my intention to attempt a survey of all the archaeological evidence but to focus on those aspects of the debate which relate to possible understandings of Goddess-talk. As Raphael has also

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<sup>65</sup> Long also addresses this issue in her article on anti-Judaism (Long 1991 p.125)

<sup>66</sup> Ruether 1979, 1980

indicated, there tends to be an alignment between those who argue for the historicity of a past civilisation, centred on one, universal and Great Goddess, albeit known through many aspects and by many names, and those who present a realist thealogy.<sup>68</sup>

In this study I am arguing that the most exciting socio/spiritual possibilities offered by thealogy emerge from its openness to ambiguity and resistance to closure. I therefore believe that thealogy should be wary of colluding with oppressive structures in the acceptance of a view of the past termed in an overarching theory which posits a monolithic Goddess. I contend that one of the most important contributions that Gimbutas gave to feminist scholarship was the exposure of the androcentric preconceptions underlying mainstream archaeology's metanarratives. It would therefore be inappropriate and unfortunate if Gimbutas' work was used to build another metanarrative. Another powerful legacy that Gimbutas has left feminist thealogy is a wealth of images and symbols, which can express re-visioned understandings of spirituality and the sacred. I would want to echo Raphael's suggestion that 'perhaps the conflation of these ancient symbols with new myths, irrespective of their historical context, could spark daring new religio-political projects that would be the more visionary for their lack of a knowable historical precedent'.<sup>69</sup> Naomi Goldenberg, who understands Goddess history to be 'fantasy', but at the same time, stresses the importance of Gimbutas' challenge to androcentric scholarship, demonstrates another notable example of this approach.<sup>70</sup> I intend to explore further the creative ways in which these images can resource a post-metaphysical thealogy which responds to the challenges of a

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<sup>67</sup> Ruether 1993 p.171

<sup>68</sup> Raphael 1999a p.65

<sup>69</sup> Raphael 1999a p.96

<sup>70</sup> Goldenberg 1990, 1996

postmodern world. Firstly, however, I need to consider some of the other elements of and influences on ways of constructing/manifesting the Goddess.

## 2:2 THE GODDESS AND FEMINIST WITCHCRAFT

The relationships between Paganism, witchcraft, 'Wicca' and feminism in the Goddess movement are complex ones. There has been a considerable 'revival' of Paganism and witchcraft in America and Britain<sup>1</sup> and the influence of feminist witchcraft on theology is very important. Many leading theologians were introduced to the Goddess through feminist witchcraft<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, Zsuzsanna ('Z') Budapest, who identifies herself as a hereditary, feminist witch and who founded the first all female coven, has claimed to be the founder of the women's spirituality movement though this claim is contested by Carol Christ.<sup>3</sup> Christ acknowledges her grateful debt to feminist Wicca, but makes clear that its approach, with its emphasis on magic, was never central to her understanding of the Goddess. She now distances herself from it and has developed a quite distinct theology<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, Naomi Goldenberg, whilst she continues to celebrate the iconoclastic opportunities that feminist witchcraft offers, certainly does not practice the craft herself<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, Asphodel Long makes the important point that, although feminist witchcraft and women's spirituality developed concurrently in America, the situation in Britain has been very different. As a result, British contemporary Paganism is by no means

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<sup>1</sup> The law against witchcraft in Britain was repealed in 1951 and by 1971 the Pagan Federation, an educational umbrella organisation for nature - and Goddess- oriented traditions was founded. One of its leaflets claims that 'Paganism is currently the fastest growing spiritual cosmology' in Britain. The remarkable expansion of contemporary Paganism in America was documented by the influential book, *Drawing Down the Moon*. (Adler 1979, 1981, 1986)

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Carol Christ and Naomi Goldenberg were introduced to the Goddess by Starhawk. Nelle Morton describes her debt to Z. Budapest.

<sup>3</sup> Christ 1997 p.185 quoting Eller 1993 p.58

<sup>4</sup> Christ 1997 p.42

<sup>5</sup> Goldenberg 1979 p.85-114, 1990 p.203 - 209



predominantly feminist<sup>6</sup> and the British feminist Goddess movement can be seen to have a very different genealogy and Long makes it clear that magic is not an important constituent of her theology.<sup>7</sup>

It could be argued that, because the women's spirituality movement and contemporary Paganism arrived more or less simultaneously in America, the latter could supply some of constituents needed to shape the former. Most importantly, of course, it offered the opportunity to affirm female sacrality and authority. There are, however, other significant contributions. These include the means of constructing ritual which can centre on female embodiment and rites of celebration which express biophilic respect for the cycles of change and decay. There is also a notion of magic which can express women's abilities to exert their will to bring about transformation in themselves and in the world. It is, nevertheless, still the case that not all witches or Pagans are feminist and not all Goddess feminists are Pagan or witches. It is not within the remit of this study to trace the many interweaving threads between witchcraft and feminism. Attempts have been made to negotiate them in Ursula King's careful overview of early developments in women's spirituality<sup>8</sup> and Shan Jayran has offered a plan of the interplay between Paganism, feminism and witchcraft<sup>9</sup>. Raphael also provides insight into the role of feminist witchcraft in theology<sup>10</sup> and, in her own work, contributes an example of the creative ways in which the theapoetics of feminist witchcraft can inform critical theological reflection.<sup>11</sup> The concern of this section is with understandings of Goddess-talk. The figure who has had by far the most

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of British contemporary Paganism see Harvey 1997

<sup>7</sup> Long 1994

<sup>8</sup> King 1989 p.129-138

<sup>9</sup> Jayran 2000

<sup>10</sup> Raphael p.1999 p.134 –156

influence in presenting witchcraft as feminist spirituality is Starhawk and she will therefore be the focus of this discussion.

Starhawk maintains that the feminist movement, rather than any other factor, has been the most significant in enabling the revival of interest in the Goddess. She describes feminism as the strongest mythogenic force at work today and contends that it is magico-spiritual as well as political.<sup>12</sup>

Starhawk, born Miriam Simos, has described her own journey from a dissatisfaction with the framework provided by her own Jewish tradition, through an instinctive sense of connection with the natural world, to her encounter with witchcraft<sup>13</sup>. She attributes to Zsuzsanna Budapest the credit for helping her to learn how to incorporate witchcraft into her feminism. As mentioned above, Z Budapest has played a significant role in the development of feminist spirituality in America. With Starhawk, she has provided a framework for nature-centred ritual and celebration, affirming female bodiliness and authority, which has been adopted and appropriated by thousands of women in their own spiritual journeys.<sup>14</sup> In *The Spiral Dance*, for instance, Starhawk explores the Pagan festivals, based on the Wheel of the Year. In all her books, she combines theoretical reflection with suggestions for ritual and spells. *Spiral Dance* also presents the ideas surrounding the notion of a three-fold Goddess, manifest as Maiden, Mother and Crone.

Also significant for the Goddess movement is the word 'witch' itself. For

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<sup>11</sup> e.g. Raphael 1996a, 1997

<sup>12</sup> e.g. Starhawk 1979 p.208

<sup>13</sup> . She was formally trained into the Faery tradition and soon became an active spokesperson for the craft. In 1979, with the help of Carol Christ, she published her first book *'The Spiral Dance - A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess'* which, ten years later, had sold over 100,000 copies. (Starhawk 1989 p.2-6)

<sup>14</sup> e.g. Budapest 1986, 1989. Z Budapest's account of a 'self blessing ritual' in *Womanspirit*

Starhawk, the very fact that many feel uncomfortable about the word indicates its power to challenge dominant discourse. She also discusses the need to reclaim the word 'witch' in order to reclaim the right for women to be powerful, to identify with the nine million victims of bigotry and hatred and to 'take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims'.<sup>15</sup> She challenges the demonisation of witchcraft by Christianity and refutes any connection with fascism<sup>16</sup>. Because of its powerful associations, the notion of the witch has been reclaimed by aspects of spiritual feminism which express no specific connections with Paganism or Wicca<sup>17</sup>.

At the end of *Spiral Dance*, Starhawk identifies the underlying concepts in Witchcraft, which she feels are valuable to other feminist traditions. She lists these as including first, and most importantly, the understanding of the Goddess 'as immanent in the world, manifest in nature, in human beings, in human continuity'. This awareness leads to an understanding of humanity that does not deny the physical but seeks 'to become *fully* human'. It also leads to a commitment to the world and a determination to change it for the better.

Starhawk also argues that witchcraft offers the model of a religion of poetry, not theology that presents metaphors not doctrines. Its worldview, she argues, is

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*Rising* has been particularly influential.(Budapest 1979)

<sup>15</sup> Starhawk 1979 p 22. The figure of nine million to indicate the victims of the Witch burnings is a controversial and contested one. As with other features of history within theology, however, Starhawk's approach is that the significance of accounts of the Burning Times lies in their function as powerful narratives. In *Dreaming the Dark*, she provides an explanation of the Burning Times which places it within this 'drama of estrangement' which is 'a long and complex story'. She argues that the persecution of the witches has to be seen within the context of interwoven processes including the expropriation of knowledge - especially medical knowledge, and the war against the consciousness of immanence, (which Starhawk identifies with the Goddess) which was embodied in women, sexuality and magic. (Starhawk 1982 p.183-219)

<sup>16</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.28

<sup>17</sup> In *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, Robin Morgan describes the Witch movement which began in New York in 1968. She maintains that there is no joining 'Witch' but claims 'You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous and immortal.' (Spretnak 1982 p.429)

cyclical and spiral so dissolving dualities and seeing opposites as complements, allowing diversity to be valued. Finally, she claims that witchcraft provides a structural model for community in the form of the coven, which is non-hierarchical but provides leadership and support<sup>18</sup>. Starhawk's exploration of all of these ideas, developed through her books, has made a significant contribution to an expression of feminist spirituality and to an emerging theology. Starhawk claims that Witchcraft or Wicca, coming from the word for 'to bend or shape' comes from the Old Religion, which is thirty five thousand years old.<sup>19</sup> In her presentation of the genealogy of witchcraft, Starhawk presents the view of an ancient, universal Goddess religion - which was conquered and suppressed by patriarchal Indo-European cultures. Even in her earlier work, however she acknowledged the debates surrounding such an understanding of the available evidence. Her approach then was to focus on the function of this interpretation to reinforce the worldview she was offering. She has maintained this approach, more recently describing the nature of this narrative as a 'sacred history'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, although she presents an oral tradition of the heritage of witchcraft as the Old Religion, she also acknowledges that in many ways modern witchcraft may have little to do with ancient traditions. She is happy to affirm that it is a kaleidoscope of traditions which has created its own rituals and is in many ways more a recreation than a revival. This approach includes an acceptance that

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<sup>18</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.209-210

<sup>19</sup> Drawing on 'oral tradition', she repeats the story that when the Goddess people were driven into the hills and high mountains they became Sidhe, the Picts or pixies, the Fair Folk or Faeries and here the Old Religion was preserved. In the British Isles its mysteries survived through the Colleges of the Druids and the Poetic Colleges of Ireland and Wales. She draws on Margaret Murray's version of history to describe the role of the Wicca religion after the two traditions existed side by side until the persecutions of the Middle Ages began. The Craft then met underground until the twentieth century when witches were able to 'come out of the broom closet'. (Starhawk 1979 p.17-22)

some of the 'traditions' of witchcraft go no further back than the imagination of figures such as Doreen Valiente<sup>21</sup> and Gerald Gardener.<sup>22</sup> Starhawk does, nevertheless, claim that despite the eclecticism of and diversity within witchcraft, there are certain ethics and values that are common to all traditions based on the concept of the Goddess as immanent in the world and in all forms of life. Starhawk's attitude to history reflects her frequent claim that witchcraft, and thereby feminist spirituality, offers a religion of poetry rather than theology or doctrine. She understands Goddess religion to be mythogenic. Her respect for the theological value of creativity and imagination is also reflected in the way in which she has produced fiction in order to explore theological issues<sup>23</sup>. In the *Spiral Dance*, Starhawk introduces the Goddess as the primary symbol for 'That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told' - the absolute reality that our limited minds can never completely know. As such she has infinite aspects and thousands of names,

She is the reality behind many metaphors. She *is* reality, the manifest deity omnipresent in all life, in each of us. The Goddess is not separate from the world. She is the world and all things in it; sun, earth, star, stone, seed, flowing river, wind wave, leaf and branch, bud and blossom, fang and claw, woman and man.<sup>24</sup>

Starhawk explores the implications of this understanding of the Goddess throughout her books. She contrasts the world-view it generates with that of the patriarchal, dualistic religion. She shares with Carol Christ the conviction that the Goddess functions as a symbol of the legitimacy and beneficence of female

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<sup>20</sup> Jayran 2000 p.11

<sup>21</sup> Starhawk 1988 p.229

<sup>22</sup> Starhawk 1978 p.25

<sup>23</sup> Starhawk 1993, 1997

<sup>24</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.22

power<sup>25</sup> and has therefore 'taken on an electrifying power for modern women'<sup>26</sup>.

When discussing the nature of the Goddess as symbol, however, Starhawk does not deny a realist understanding of Her. Starhawk exhibits the openness to plurality which has emerged as a central characteristic of theology. She can therefore make the claim.

I have spoken of the Goddess as psychological symbol and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists *and* we create her<sup>27</sup>.

Starhawk's theapoetics convey central aspects of Goddess-talk. She articulates an understanding of sacrality which completely embodied.

"She is the body and the body is sacred. Womb, breast, belly, mouth, vagina, penis, bone and blood –no part of the body is unclean, no aspect of the life process is stained by any concept of sin. Birth, death, and decay are equally sacred parts of the cycle. Whether we are eating, sleeping, making love or eliminating body wastes, we are manifesting the Goddess."<sup>28</sup>

Starhawk also gives vibrant and compelling expression to the notion of Goddess as nature, promoting a respect for and love of nature and life itself. 'Mother Goddess is reawakening and we can begin to recover our primal birth right, the sheer intoxicating joy of being alive.' The Goddess is

"the turning spiral that whirls us in and out of existence, whose winking eye is the pulse of all being - birth, death, rebirth - and whose laughter bubbles and courses through all things."<sup>29</sup>

This sense of connectedness with all forms of life requires a respect for nature which does not idealise or romanticise it. Starhawk presents the Goddess as destroyer as well as creatrix. Death is an integral part of life.

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<sup>25</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.23

<sup>26</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.91

<sup>27</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.95

<sup>28</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.92

"The core thealogy of Goddess religion centres around the cycle of birth, growth, death, decay and regeneration revealed in every aspect of a dynamic, conscious universe."<sup>30</sup>

Goddess spirituality therefore sees matter as saved and does not take us out of the world but brings us fully into it. The goal, therefore is 'to live in it, preserve it, fight against its destruction, enjoy it, transform it, get our hands dirty and dig our toes in the mud.'<sup>31</sup>

The affirmation of sexuality and the importance of sexual love are significant themes in Starhawk's work. Sexuality is not something to be denied or repressed, it is a sacrament<sup>32</sup> and of the very nature of the Goddess. Starhawk frequently describes eros or desire as the 'glue' which holds together the universe and<sup>33</sup> claims that to experience orgasm is to experience the energy of the universe.<sup>34</sup> She also often quotes the phrase 'all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals' from her favourite Craft liturgy, the Charge of the Goddess<sup>35</sup>.

Such respect means that the abuse of sexuality is regarded as 'heinous'<sup>36</sup>. The law of the Goddess is love and this, says Starhawk, has to be specific, involving real individuals not some vague concept of humanity<sup>37</sup>.

A distinctive feature of Starhawk's thealogy is the extent to which she explores the social, psychological and political implications of a religion based on the Goddess as manifest in all forms of life. She has summarised the thealogy of

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<sup>29</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.29

<sup>30</sup> Starhawk 1989 p.228

<sup>31</sup> Starhawk 1989 p.229

<sup>32</sup> e.g. Starhawk 1979 p.23

<sup>33</sup> e.g. Starhawk 1979 p.39, 99

<sup>34</sup> e.g. Starhawk 1979 p.40, 208

<sup>35</sup> e.g. Starhawk 1979 p.98, 208

<sup>36</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.27

<sup>37</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.97

Goddess religion in three concepts - immanence, interconnection and community<sup>38</sup>. Throughout her work, she relates these to every aspect of human relationship, society and culture, everything from views of sexuality to provision of childcare facilities, from political action against a nuclear power plant to attitudes towards children's toilet training. Also central to her analysis of socio/political issues is the concept of power. In *The Spiral Dance*, Starhawk introduces her analysis of fundamentally different forms of power, contrasting 'power-over' with 'power-from-within'.<sup>39</sup> She explores these ideas further in her next two books where she presents the former as the result of a culture of estrangement; and the latter as produced by a culture of immanence. In *Dreaming the Dark*<sup>40</sup> she adds the idea of a community-based 'power-with'. Starhawk also relates these ideas to psychosocial patterns. In *Truth or Dare*<sup>41</sup>, she elaborates upon five aspects of the 'self-hater.' She identifies these as the Conqueror, The Judge, The Orderer, the Censor, and the Master of servants. These psychological and emotional tendencies are the result of a dismembered world and she analyses their effects upon all forms of social interaction, especially in the area of sexual relationships. As a result she can claim that

'incest and sexual abuse are no more anomalies in the patriarchal family than rape is an anomaly of war.... Abuse is the logical outcome of a system in which power is sexualised and men have power over their families.'<sup>42</sup>

All Starhawk's theories about social and psychological patterns and the need for a radical change in culture and human relationships are based upon her

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<sup>38</sup> e.g. Starhawk 1989 p.10

<sup>39</sup> Starhawk 1979 p.51

<sup>40</sup> Starhawk 1989

<sup>41</sup> Starhawk 1987

<sup>42</sup> Starhawk 1987 p.205



understanding of the Goddess<sup>43</sup>. She employs the concepts of the Craft, as she understands them, to express the connection between spirituality, ecology and political action.

Feminist witchcraft has provided rich resources for the development of theology. At the same time, some of its aspects are problematic for an understanding feminist spirituality.<sup>44</sup> When questioning whether women really do 'need the Goddess', Pamela Lunn challenges the relevance and ethics of asserting the efficacy of magic as an exercise of power or will.<sup>45</sup> Some of the Goddess' more strident critics tend to equate feminist Goddess spirituality with paganism and witchcraft. In his attempt to 'unmask' the Goddess, Philip Davies, before rehearsing familiar warnings about the threat of radical feminism to family life and social stability, sets out to discredit the history of 'neo-paganism'.<sup>46</sup> The focus of this study does not allow for a full treatment of these issues<sup>47</sup>, but I would argue that they are not central to the theological questions I am exploring. With theologians such as Christ and Long, I intend to continue theologising outside the context of Wicca and magical practices. At the same time, I acknowledge the important contribution that feminist constructions of witchcraft have made to the Goddess narratives with which I am working. The conception

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<sup>43</sup> In *Dreaming the Dark*, Starhawk presents an ambitious overview of history. She links the roots of a culture of estrangement with the Bronze-Age shift from matri-focal earth centred, Goddess oriented culture to patriarchal, urban cultures of conquest, whose Gods inspired and supported war. (Starhawk 1982)

<sup>44</sup> When supplying extra notes for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary revised edition of *Spiral Dance*, Starhawk illustrates the ways in which she critiques some of her earlier assumptions and engages in ongoing re-interpretation. In particular, she revisits the heterosexist implications of the notion of polarity in the Craft. She also registers her move away from an acceptance of Pagan expressions of the God, emphasising instead the importance of Goddess-talk. The focus of this study has not allowed for a fuller discussion of these issues.

<sup>45</sup> Lunn 1993

<sup>46</sup> Davies 1998

<sup>47</sup> Raphael provides a fuller consideration of these issues in Raphael 1999a p.134-156

of Goddess as the immanent sacred, affirming the cycles of change and decay and expressed through a sense of relation to all forms of life are central to the Goddess-talk with which I engage. I recognise the role of feminist witchcraft in enabling such conception.

## 2:3 JUNG AND THE GODDESS

### Jung and the Return of the Goddess

These opening lines of Edward Whitmont's book, heralding the *Return of the Goddess*, indicate the apparent harmony between his perspective as a Jungian psychologist and the ideas expressed by a feminist reclaiming of the Goddess.

"At the low point of a cultural development that has led us into the deadlock of scientific materialism, technological destructiveness, religious nihilism and spiritual impoverishment, a most astounding phenomenon has occurred. A new mythologem is arising in our midst and asks to be integrated into our modern frame of reference. It is the myth of the ancient Goddess who once ruled the earth and heaven before the advent of patriarchy and of the patriarchal religions. The Goddess is now returning."<sup>1</sup>

In the early years of the Goddess movement, however, a lively debate emerged between the followers of Jung and feminist scholars of religion.<sup>2</sup> This section will provide a brief exploration of the relevance of this debate for an understanding of Goddess-talk. It will focus on Whitmont's work on the Goddess and on feminist critique of Jung's theories presented by Naomi Goldenberg and Demaris Wehr in order to highlight some of the issues raised by the interface between feminism and Jungian psychology.

It is first necessary to recognise the influence that Jung's work has had on the growth of the Goddess movement and to acknowledge that even his feminist critics often value some aspects of his contribution to depth psychology and to reclaiming of myth, symbol and ritual<sup>3</sup>. His emphasis on the importance of the 'feminine' has led Jung's followers to hail him as a champion of women's liberation. This emphasis led some of his closest disciples to explore the symbolism and mythology of the Goddess. These works of

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<sup>1</sup> Whitmont 1984 p.1

<sup>2</sup> The early stages of this debate were documented by early editions of the journals *Anima* and *Signs*

<sup>3</sup> In their critiques of archetypal theory, Christ and Goldenberg made a distinction between the pioneering influence of Jung himself and the tendency of 'Jungians' to treat his ideas as immutable. (Christ 1977, Goldenberg 1977). It is notable that Goldenberg herself records that it was the work of Jung that prompted her to study psychoanalysis (Goldenberg 1990 p.116-117)

second generation Jungians, for instance Esther Harding<sup>4</sup> and Erich Neumann<sup>5</sup> were very influential in the beginnings of a feminist Goddess movement. They were quoted by the Matriarchy Study Group, for instance<sup>6</sup>. Nelle Morton expresses her own debt to Esther Harding, with whom she had analysis<sup>7</sup>. Some writers continue to connect Jungian therapy to a feminist understanding of the Goddess, applying the archetypal energy of Goddess myths to the situations that women face when they encounter internalised patriarchal attitudes. The works of Jean Shinoda Bolen<sup>8</sup> and Clarissa Pinkola Estés<sup>9</sup> have been particularly influential here. The use of Goddess narratives in this way can, however, be problematic as will be discussed later. Baring and Cashford have combined the findings of archaeology with archetypal theory to map the 'evolution' of the images provided by the Goddess myth.<sup>10</sup> When tracing the development of feminist matristic arts, Gloria Fenan Orenstein notes that many of the first artists to use Goddess imagery claimed to be inspired by Jung, including herself.<sup>11</sup> She does, however, describe her own move away from a Jungian perspective as she encountered the results of feminist scholarship, revealing the historical reality of a Goddess-centred world religion. Orenstein registers her feeling that there is a danger that focussing on the notion of archetypes, emerging from the psyches of women, was reinscribing the familiar association between women artists and mad visionaries. More importantly for her, however, is the argument that the Jungian expression of the Goddess as an archetype, an internal image at work in the psyche everywhere, invalidated the historical research of writers such as Merlin Stone and Marija Gimbutas and the conscious creativity of

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<sup>4</sup> Harding 1971 (1955)

<sup>5</sup> Neumann 1963 (1955)

<sup>6</sup> In their publications *Goddess Shrew* in 1977 and *The Politics of Matriarchy* in 1978

<sup>7</sup> Morton 1985 p.150

<sup>8</sup> Bolen 1982

<sup>9</sup> Estés 1992

<sup>10</sup> Baring and Cashford 1993 As discussed in the previous section, the result of Baring and Cashford's approach could be accused of being ahistorical, acultural and 'enumerative' in its methods.

feminist artists such as Mary Beth Edelson. She dismisses the Jungian hypothesis of the collective unconscious, out of which the archetype of the Goddess is supposed to arise because it 'leads to ahistorical and transcultural conclusions that simply erase specific historic and cultural contexts.'<sup>12</sup>

### **Feminist critiques of archetypal theory**

A feminist critique of Jung's theories, especially his concept of the feminine archetype, goes much further than the charge that it denies the historicity of a Goddess religion, however. Naomi Goldenberg has argued for the necessity of feminist analysis to critique and revise Jungian 'philosophy'. She has claimed that the damage to women caused by philosophies which posit the assumption of absolute determinants at work in human life obligates feminist analysis to question any attempt to create absolute categories<sup>13</sup>.

Goldenberg, along with Carol Christ, first threw down the gauntlet in a series of articles written in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> The crux of their argument was that Jung's analysis was based on male experience alone, and did not reflect women's experience of patriarchy. They viewed 'femininity' as a social construct, not an aspect of the psyche. They argued that the characteristics attributed to a universal feminine archetype were actually the result of a process of stereotyping produced by patriarchy and androcentrism. Goldenberg carried the implications of these ideas further in her seminal book, *Changing of the Gods*.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Goldenberg has continued to develop her psychoanalytical

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<sup>11</sup> Orenstein 1990 p.15

<sup>12</sup> Orenstein 1990 p.20

<sup>13</sup> Goldenberg 1977

<sup>14</sup> e.g. Christ 1977, Goldenberg 1976, 1977

<sup>15</sup> Goldenberg 1979

approach to theology in *Resurrecting the Body*, emphasising the damaging effects of archetypal theory's separation of mind and body.<sup>16</sup>

Demaris Wehr has returned to the debate between Jung and Feminism in order to 'liberate' the notion of archetypes' from their essentialist origins.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, Wehr provides a careful survey of the Jungian theories and terms, which provide the context for his emphasis on archetypes. Jung believed that there is a common psychic base, uniting all humans, which he termed the collective unconscious. Out of this matrix emerge themes, images and motifs, which are described as archetypes. These can be seen within each individual's psyche and recurring throughout human history. Wehr points out that, late in his life, Jung did try to distinguish between the archetype, which is 'irrepresentable', and merely a disposition to form images and the archetypal image, which is visualisation, claiming universality only for the former. She acknowledges, however, that there remained considerable confusion between the terms, even for Jung, let alone his followers. According to Jung, the archetypes or archetypal images, operate on the tension of opposites, the most fundamental being the masculine and feminine, expressed as the animus and anima. The anima being the image of the female in man's unconsciousness and animus being the image of the male in the woman's unconscious. The animus is expressed through Logos, the ability to exercise rationality and the power of the will, the anima through Eros, the realm of emotions and relationality. The goal of Jungian psychoanalysis is to achieve individuation, to become truly oneself. The Self is the one archetypal image that specifically transcends opposites, uniting them all. Inherent in the process of individuation, therefore, is the resolution of the tension of opposites occurring in every psyche, contrasexual opposition being the most powerful

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<sup>16</sup> Goldenberg 1990 Drawing on her chosen perspective of post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Goldenberg argues instead for the need to acknowledge and affirm embodiment. In doing so, she identifies the points of contact between object relations theory and theology.

<sup>17</sup> Wehr 1986, 1988

example. Men must accept the 'feminine' in their psyche and women the 'masculine'. Failure to do so may result in possession by the archetypal image or the tendency to project it onto others. To be possessed by his anima would mean that a man acted like 'an inferior woman' (Jung's own term) i.e. not in control of his emotions and 'moody'. An animus-possessed woman would be 'an inferior man', i.e. shrill, dogmatic and 'bitchy'. If, on the other hand, a man rejects his anima he may project it onto other women. The images produced by this process, Jung believed, 'range from the threatening seductress and the toothed vagina to the angelic and pure innocent.'

It is possible to understand that when Jung first presented his theories, his emphasis on the need for men in particular and for society in general to acknowledge the importance of the feminine was seen as an affirmation of women. It might be appropriate to exercise some cultural relativity when analysing Jung's ideas, as some of his female defenders point out. The concern for feminists is, however, that the concept of a feminine archetype is still exercising enormous influence on Jungian theory today. This is especially true in any discussion of the meaning of the Goddess. Furthermore, Wehr, like Goldenberg before her, argues that Jungian ideas about archetypes exercise such power because Jung's theories are analogous, if not synonymous with a religion, despite Jung's insistence to the contrary. Jung claimed that his hypotheses are based on empiricism, but Wehr and Goldenberg provide powerful arguments to conclude that, by his own definitions, Jung was presenting a new religion. The importance of this aspect of Jung's ideas is stressed by Wehr.

"Noting the religiousness of Jung's psychology is essential in understanding the deeply entrenched nature of some of the Jungian concepts. The fact that androcentrism seems to be the "way things are" ... is not the only explanation for analytical psychology's resistance to change. If Jung's psychology is a religion, it stands as a symbol system itself, "revealed" to its founder – discovered, not invented. As a result, it rests on sacred and unassailable ground."<sup>18</sup>

Goldenberg presents a powerful argument to support the feminist contention that the concept of the eternal feminine is in fact the result of androcentric stereotyping when she gives examples of the crass racism expressed in Jung's 'analysis' of Africans and African-Americans and of Jews. In doing so she exposes the dangers of trusting his claims for universal archetypes.<sup>19</sup> The feminist archetype reinforces the misogynist and androcentric image of women as mentally and morally inferior to men and legitimises an understanding of women's role as always in relation to men. Goldenberg and Wehr illustrate the ways in which the connection between the animus and Logos has been used to justify women's exclusion from positions of authority to reinforce patriarchal assumptions about their inability to achieve intellectually. Both demonstrate the irony presented by female Jungians warning against the dangers of being 'animus-ridden' or moving too far into the realms of Logos when their own intellectual achievements belie their very argument.<sup>20</sup> Wehr attributes the willingness of so many women to accept the Jungian understanding of the 'feminine' to the fact that it corroborates the 'internalised oppression' induced by living in a patriarchal and androcentric world. Wehr quotes Goldenberg's argument that Jung's own words reveal the androcentric nature of his theories. Jung assumed that since the anima is an archetype that is found in men, it is 'reasonable' to suppose that an equivalent archetype must be present in women.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Goldenberg wanted to reject the concept of archetypes altogether although she felt that the adjective "archetypal" could be employed to describe the degree to which an image can affect us<sup>22</sup>. Wehr is less radical in her critique. She argues for a redefining of archetypes as liberating<sup>23</sup> but does not provide an explanation of how this

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<sup>18</sup> Wehr 1988 .

<sup>19</sup> Goldenberg 1990 p.99 - 102

<sup>20</sup> Goldenberg 1977

<sup>21</sup> Wehr 1988

<sup>22</sup> Goldenberg summarises her critique of archetypal theory in Goldenberg 1990 p.96-106

<sup>23</sup> Wehr 1988



could be achieved. In the meantime, she continues to use Jungian terms in the critique itself. For instance, she argues that Jung 'projects his own anima' into the discussion of women's psychology whereas many feminists would want to argue that what he is projecting is the patriarchal, androcentric image of women.

### **Jungian approaches and the challenge to dualism**

The concept of a feminine archetype continued to fascinate second-generation Jungians, however, and led to an increased interest in ancient Goddess religion as an expression of that archetype. The most influential being Erich Neumann's work, 'The Great Mother'. Neumann's emphasis on the Goddess as Mother developed Jung's own interest in the archetypal power of motherhood. Neumann provides an interpretation of Goddess mythology and art which reveals his patriarchal assumptions, for instance his understanding of the Goddess as a 'vessel'.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Neumann's explanation of the Great Mother emphasises the dualistic nature of his thought whereby the 'feminine' is either the 'good' mother – i.e. cares for and nurtures men or the 'terrible mother' onto whom is projected all the fearful images which have fed misogyny since the dawn of patriarchy.<sup>25</sup> Such narratives, which sanction both the idealisation and the demonisation of women, can be reinscribed in more contemporary attempts by women to apply Jungian theory to Goddess images. This is illustrated, for instance, when Barbara Koltuv explores the mythology of Lilith.<sup>26</sup> She presents Lilith as the feminine 'shadow', the archetypal image of female anger and will, whose suppression can have devastating effects for women and society. At the same time, however, Koltuv argues that this image

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<sup>24</sup> Neumann 1963 p.39 Mary Grey provides a critique of the notions of 'the feminine' which emerge from Neumann's archetypes in Grey 1989 p.18

<sup>25</sup> Neumann 1963 p.147 - 177

<sup>26</sup> Koltuv 1986 The story and image of Lilith, as the demonised first wife of Adam and reflection of an earlier Sumerian Goddess, is frequently invoked by Goddess feminists to reclaim female independence and authority e.g. Plaskow 1979

needs to be in harmony with the nurturing and selfless image of Eve. A healthy balance ensures that a woman is connected to 'her own feminine nature which contains both Lilith and Eve and prevents her from becoming possessed by Lilith's demonic power-seeking destructiveness'.<sup>27</sup>

Jungian approaches to the Goddess make wide use of mythology to illustrate their theories about the feminine archetype. Feminist theologians, such as Spretnak<sup>28</sup> and Christ,<sup>29</sup> have argued, however, that the myths on which they base their archetypal assumptions are, themselves, the product of a patriarchal worldview.<sup>30</sup>

Edward Whitmont claims to provide a response to the feminist arguments of Christ, Goldenberg and others in his contemporary Jungian interpretation of the Goddess, which claims to leave behind the patriarchal assumptions of Neumann's work and Jung's theories of the anima.<sup>31</sup>

Whitmont accuses such feminists of 'projecting their own unconscious patriarchal aggressive self rejection as women upon the 'male chauvinist pig', thereby actually perpetuating the worst features of the 'androlactic' patriarchal heritage. The Women's Liberation Movement is therefore deemed to be merely a 'peripheral phenomenon' compared to the profound change in beliefs brought about by the re-emergence of the feminine archetype – as described in his understanding of the 'Return of the Goddess'.

Whitmont provides some insights in his challenge to the patriarchal myths of Divine Kingship, Human Exile and The Scapegoat. These, he argues need to be replaced by a

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<sup>27</sup> Koltuv 1986 p.90

<sup>28</sup> Spretnak 1978

<sup>29</sup> Christ 1977

<sup>30</sup> In the introduction to her exploration of 'The Lost Goddesses of Early Greece', Charlene Spretnak argues that although Jung was aware that most mythology had been 'submitted to conscious elaboration', neither he nor most of his followers make a distinction between pre-patriarchal myths of Goddesses and later patriarchalized versions of them. She claims, therefore that 'In view of patriarchy's 'managing of information for the past 3,500 years, their traditions of mythology and religion do not allow us full views of our earliest archetypal images. Therefore, it would seem more accurate to speak of 'patriarchal archetypes,' rather than 'archetypes', when discussing psychological developments in patriarchal cultures such as our own.' Spretnak 1978.p.3

'myth for our times', the myth of the Grail. Whitmont remains, however, unable to challenge many of the androcentric assumptions which underlie his theories. The myth of the Grail is supposed to provide new archetypal roles for men and women, those of Seeker and Guardian respectively. As guardian, the new Feminine is asserting the value of the goal of the masculine search -the vessel – and of life's play and renewal.' Despite his brief reference to the fact that women also need to 'find the seeker in themselves', Whitmont's exploration of these new archetypes provides only new ways in which the female can be understood entirely in relation to the male. She enables the search for the vessel which will nurture and sustain him.<sup>32</sup>

In this work, Whitmont uses the terms Yin and Yang to express more accurately the archetypes, which, he claims, Jung's ideas about anima and animus could not fully express. He also relates them to right hemisphere and left hemisphere activities of the brain. He insists that the archetypes of which he speaks are not to be equated with individual, male and female persons. Indeed he sets himself the question that many feminists would want to ask: 'why speak of masculine and feminine at all if we merely mean traits shared to varying degrees by males and females?' His answer, however, reflects the attitude of standing upon 'sacred and unassailable ground' referred to by Wehr. He claims that the 'male-female differentiation is deeply ingrained a-priori; it is an archetypally predetermined perception.' Furthermore the opposition and complementariness of male and female are declared to be 'the most basic

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<sup>31</sup> Whitmont 1984

<sup>32</sup> . Whitmont claims that the social implications of this understanding of the Goddess' return include the self-affirmation of women. Again, however, his illustration of what this means is very revealing. He cites the example of the female patient who wanted her husband to really listen when she was expressing her feelings about the washing machine breaking down! Whitmont cautions against any over-simplistic attempts to provide utopian promises. He does, nevertheless, claim that the new theophany of the Goddess will bring about radical changes in human relationships. The emphasis he attaches to sexual expression as a means of expressing this 'vision for a new age', provokes considerable feminist suspicion, however.

representations' of the experience of dualism. They underlie 'the polarities of the solar and lunar' light and dark, active and passive, spirit and matter, energy and substance, initiative and receptiveness, heaven and earth.<sup>33</sup>

It is precisely this dualism, this world-view of cosmic polarities, which Whitmont is presenting as 'the way things are', that a feminist understanding of the Goddess sets out to challenge. Whitmont's claims for a re-emergence of the 'feminine' only reinscribe the dualistic assumptions which feminist critiques have challenged and revisioned. I therefore find convincing the arguments of Goldenberg and Christ which align Jungian theories with the damaging repercussions of dualistic perceptions of the female power of destruction and death, or 'feminine' aspects of need. Such images cannot be incorporated into a feminist thealogy which understands the Goddess to operate as a symbol which challenges the structures of oppression which distort human relationships and threaten our very existence.

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<sup>33</sup> Another central theme in Whitmont's dualism is the polarity between Apollo, who 'represents light, life immortality, harmonious balance and permanence' and Dionysus who represents darkness, disruption, death and transience.' The return of the Goddess also means the return of her consort, Dionysus. By accepting this dualistic framework, Whitmont links the re-emergence of the feminine with a new 'acceptance' of violence, aggression and need and new ways to 'contain' these necessary aspects of the psyche. The means by which this is achieved are linked with attitudes towards sexuality.

## 2:4 THE GODDESS AS SYMBOL OR METAPHOR

As the previous overviews have illustrated, there are several, albeit overlapping, 'strands' of Goddess-talk. The Goddess movement often voices its willingness to embrace diversity without attempting to prescribe conformity or dogma. I would argue that thealogy's openness to plurality and ambiguity is one of its strengths. At the same time, as I have attempted to demonstrate, there are nevertheless very real issues inherent in the competing claims of those who, for instance, present the Goddess as a universal Great Mother, as a feminine archetype or as a symbolic expression of female empowerment. At the root of all these strands of Goddess talk, however, is the claim that 'Goddess' functions to generate what Raphael has termed a 'conceptual and imaginal shift'<sup>1</sup>. When providing an early and insightful survey of women's spirituality, Ursula King noted the primacy that thealogy gives to symbols in contrast to the rational explanations prevalent in theological thought.<sup>2</sup> For some theologians, however, there remains the question of whether the Goddess should be perceived as purely a symbolic expression of sacrality or, in more realist terms, as a divine presence.

### Why Women Need the Goddess

Many commentators agree that Carol Christ's article "Why Women Need The Goddess"<sup>3</sup> can be regarded a foundational work in and classical example of the presentation of the Goddess as symbol<sup>4</sup>. In it Christ presents the Goddess as symbol, emphasising the importance of religious symbols for the creation of worldviews even for those who are not consciously religious. She argues, therefore, that 'symbol systems cannot simply be

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<sup>1</sup> Raphael 1996a p.246

<sup>2</sup> King 1989 p.131

<sup>3</sup> This essay was the keynote address at the 'The Great Goddess Re-emerging' conference at University of California, Santa Cruz Extension, in Spring, 1978. It appeared, in adapted form, in *Heresies* Spring 1978 and is reprinted in Christ & Plaskow 1978 p.273-287, Spretnak 1982 p.7'-89 and Christ 1987a p.117-134

rejected, they must be replaced'.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, she asserts the power of religious symbols to determine psychological dependence on male authority and which legitimises patriarchal structures. It thereby creates "the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent".<sup>6</sup> Christ's exploration of the symbolic power of the terms God and Goddess reflects one of the central concerns of the feminist analysis of religion – the need to recognise the power of language and imagery and the call to transform them in order to transform the world. In this article Christ lists four aspects of the significance of Goddess symbolism – the affirmation of female power, the female body, the female will and women's bonds and heritage. She points out, however that these are by no means the only examples of the much fuller range of meanings associated with the Goddess. The exploration of language, narrative and symbolism are central to Christ's work. Elsewhere, Christ quotes Tillich's phrase "God is a symbol for God" to introduce the claim of feminist religion that 'God' is a symbol that "may have outlived its usefulness as an exclusive mediator between humans and the ultimate reality that grounds and sustains our lives".<sup>7</sup> In *Why Women Need The Goddess* Christ attempts to address some of the issues raised by presenting the Goddess as a symbol. She cites three possible responses to the question of what, precisely, the Goddess represents – a divine female 'out there', a symbolisation of life, death and rebirth energy or a symbol of the affirmation of female power.<sup>8</sup> Christ maintains that these three different understandings need not be mutually exclusive, although she does acknowledge that some women would want to insist that the Goddess most definitely does not represent something 'out there'. She quotes Starhawk's response that the meaning of the Goddess symbol can be adapted to the

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. Lunn 1993 Long 1994 Raphael 1996a

<sup>5</sup> Christ & Plaskow 1979 p.275

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Christ 1987a p.135

way in which she 'feels' at the time. It can depend on whether she is feeling in need of help and protection from a female divinity or whether she wishes to affirm her own power or her connectedness with the energy of the world. Starhawk's ability to maintain a polyvalence about the ontological status of the Goddess is characteristic of theological reflection<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, Merlin Stone argued for 'three faces of Goddess spirituality'. She listed these as an identification with the female deity worshipped in ancient cultures, an expression of a feminist perspective on spiritual and theological questions and an expression of the feminist challenge to the misogyny of patriarchal religions. Stone then claimed that these approaches could be seen as 'simultaneously growing from one central trunk'.<sup>10</sup> As the Goddess movement has developed, however, more questions about the precise relationship between Goddess as 'deity' and Goddess as 'expression' have emerged.

Asphodel Long notes this when providing her account of the origins and development of the Goddess movement in Britain.<sup>11</sup> She claims that there was no attempt to *define* the Goddess in early publications produced by the Matriarchy study Group. Long likens that initial stage to the reaction of women whose exploration of the Goddess is still in the 'introductory stage' where precise definitions are of little importance in the joyful response to the Goddess as a synonym for their own self-worth<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, however, she recorded the fact that amongst some theologians, the question of who or what was meant by the Goddess was becoming more important. She also conveyed her own resistance to an attempt to equate the Goddess with the Cosmic Mother, an approach

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<sup>8</sup> Christ & Plaskow 1979 p.278

<sup>9</sup> Friends of Starhawk confirm that she has maintained this polyvalent attitude. (Personal conversation with Carol Christ March 2000.)

<sup>10</sup> Stone 1982 p.64

<sup>11</sup> Long 1994

<sup>12</sup> Long 1994 p.15

expressed by writers such as Monica Sjöö.<sup>13</sup> Long's prediction that the discussion of such issues would become more prevalent in theology has been justified. In 1997 Long herself returned to the question of whether the Goddess should be understood as the One or the Many.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Christ described her theological journey, through the publications which followed 'Why Women Need the Goddess', she continued to explore her own position in relation to the 'reality' of the Goddess. In more recent expressions of her theology, she has described how her experience of the death of her mother ended her vacillation between viewing Goddess only as symbol and Goddess as personal presence, confirming the latter.<sup>15</sup>

### **Nelle Morton's Journey**

Another very influential figure in the exploration of Goddess as symbol is Nelle Morton. She was the first theologian to teach a university course on women, theology and language and is regarded as a mentor by many leading figures in the current generation of feminists writing on theology and language<sup>16</sup>. Like Christ, Morton used journey imagery to describe her developing feminist consciousness in relation to religious language and imagery. Despite her influence on feminist religious thinking, however, Morton produced only one book, containing transcripts of key speeches she had given throughout her theological career and jottings from her journal. This book was not published until 1985, when Morton was eighty years old and only two years before she died. This can, perhaps, be explained by her own emphasis on the importance of hearing rather than speaking. She argued that the deification 'myth of matriarchal

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<sup>13</sup> Long 1994 p.17

<sup>14</sup> Long 1997 In this article, Long has expressed her concern about the emergence of a "Goddess fundamentalism" which presents Goddess as one supreme deity.

<sup>15</sup> Christ 1995a p. 18-23, 1997a p. 107-109. These issues are discussed further in chapter 3



history' of the word had led to a religion of one-way communication. In contrast, one of her most distinctive contributions to feminist theology was the phrase "hearing into speech".<sup>17</sup> It is possibly because Morton treated language so seriously that she was reluctant to commit it to the written word. Words, she claimed, do more than signify, they conjure images and images shape worldviews long before conceptualisation takes place. Images are therefore much more powerful than concepts.<sup>18</sup> Morton maintained that we live out of our images, not out of our concepts or ideas.<sup>19</sup> Concepts can be corrected or changed, not so images – they must be shattered or exorcised.<sup>20</sup> Morton's interest in the power of language led her to explore the importance of metaphor. Her journal jottings contain several quotations emphasising the power of metaphor and the centrality of the 'metaphoric process' to any attempt to make sense of experience. Morton made a significant distinction between the functions of symbol and metaphor. A symbol expresses the way things are but a metaphor stands over against present reality, involving a process, which is iconoclastic and revelatory. "Metaphoric movement ends by introducing a new logic – by ushering in a new reality and greater vision".<sup>21</sup> The term 'God', she argued, can now only function as a symbol because it has become so completely identified with the sexist, patriarchal world view which it sanctions and sustains. As a result it can be no more than a dead metaphor. Morton therefore argues for the term "Goddess" solely "for iconoclastic purposes".<sup>22</sup> She acknowledged that, in time, the Goddess could become a dead metaphor if she is set "out there" and literalised. She was convinced, however, that in the present sexist world the Goddess

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<sup>16</sup> This is claimed in the biographical note at the end of her book *The Journey Is Home* (Morton 1985) It is confirmed, for example, by the way in which Mary Daly, in her autobiography, acknowledges her debt to Morton. (Daly 1993)

<sup>17</sup> Morton 1985 p.54

<sup>18</sup> Morton 1985 p.20

<sup>19</sup> Morton 1985 p.31

<sup>20</sup> Morton 1985 p.143

<sup>21</sup> Morton 1985 p. 170

metaphor is necessary because it “produces a shock, a shattering and opens the way for exorcising the old image”.<sup>23</sup>

The Goddess, therefore, is a metaphoric image who must not be literalised. Morton warned

“Too many women in the Goddess movement see the Goddess as “out there” or “up there” – all powerful and all loving. In other words they perceive with a patriarchal mentality, which does nothing but make a matriarchy the opposite of a patriarchy structurally and functionally. The authoritarian ruler has only changed sex but the authoritarianism has yet to be exorcised from one’s consciousness”.<sup>24</sup>

Like Christ, Morton argued that images have the power to affect psychological and social structures. Morton contrasted the sense of dependence, surrender, obedience and gratitude provoked by the symbol of God the Father with independence, resourcefulness and celebration generated by the Goddess. For this very reason, Morton presents the metaphor of the Goddess as one which must be transient rather than fixed and eternal. She said that

“...the Goddess tends to be transparent, to make herself dispensable in such a way that in time we will be compelled to seek a totally different way of speaking of reality”.<sup>25</sup>

Morton spoke about the process of ‘imaging out of experience’.<sup>26</sup> She gives vivid accounts of her own experiences of the Goddess as metaphoric image.<sup>27</sup> She wondered, however, at the failure of others to understand what she meant by this. When asked to

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<sup>22</sup> Morton 1985 p. 145

<sup>23</sup> Morton 1985 p.151

<sup>24</sup> Morton 1985 p.217

<sup>25</sup> Morton 1985 p.144

<sup>26</sup> Morton 1985 p.125

<sup>27</sup> In her article *The Goddess as Metaphoric Image*, Morton describes five ‘experiences with the Goddess’. These include an occasion when Morton’s experience of the Goddess enables her to overcome her fear of flying. (Morton 1985 p.157-8) Morton describes another encounter when she saw her mother, floating on a river of blood. She heard her mother apologise for transmitting a patriarchal internalisation which made Morton fear menstruation and which generated the disease which was killing her. Morton then saw the Goddess as a spider. (Morton 1985 p.162 – 164)

confirm whether or not these experiences 'really happened' she regarded such questions as 'entirely beside the point' and therefore 'did not bother to add that the experience was more real than if it had been literal'.<sup>28</sup> Morton's great respect for the importance of metaphor and the consequent emphasis on the need to 'de-literalise' religious language is shared by Mary Daly.

### Mary Daly and the Goddess

Mary Daly has made a very distinctive contribution to Goddess-talk and is probably one of the most influential figures in feminist theo/alogy.<sup>29</sup> Daly is one of the few feminist scholars of religion whose influence extends beyond theology to the wider realm of secular feminism.<sup>30</sup> Another indication of Daly's exceptional status is the fact that her earlier books continue to be re-issued. Daly only consents to this, however, if she can write new introductions or afterwords indicating her disagreement with earlier positions

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<sup>28</sup> Morton 1985 p.147. When discussing the question of realist interpretations of Goddess, Raphael has cited these accounts of her encounters with the Goddess as evidence that Morton must have had some notion of Goddess as 'real' presence. (Raphael 1999a p.66-67) I would argue, however, that Morton's own response to those who asked her whether these events 'really' happened indicates that Morton's position is not a 'realist' one in the usual sense of the term. For Morton, the 'reality' of the encounters lay within her own experience and not some point of reference beyond. It could be argued that Morton's understanding of the Goddess opens up theological possibilities for renegotiating the boundaries between 'realist' and 'non-realist' expression of the sacred. Such possibilities are also suggested by Beverly Clack (Clack 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Scholars engaged in a feminist analysis of religion from a wide variety of backgrounds and approaches quote and refer extensively to her work e.g. Christ and Plaskow relate their theories to Daly's ideas. Susan Griffin cites Daly's *Beyond God the Father* as the work which made Griffin's *Woman and Nature* possible. (Griffin 1978 p.xii). Ruether also refers frequently to Daly's work, usually to challenge her position - e.g. Ruether 1993 p.171. This attention is not, however, reciprocated. Apart from an early reference in *The Church and the Second Sex* to 'Mrs. Ruether's' stand against Catholic teaching on birth control', (Daly 1968 p.133-4), Daly never mentions Ruether. The only feminist theologian to whom Daly acknowledges a debt is Nelle Morton. (e.g. Daly 1984 p.25). Daly does, however, include Carol Christ, Merlin Stone, Z. Budapest and Charlene Spretnak among those whom she regards as Muses who express 'Creative Female Clairvoyance'. (Daly 1984 p.333)

<sup>30</sup> Her best known book, *Gyn/Ecology* (Daly 1978, 1991) has been described as 'the single most important book to emerge from North American feminism since the early seventies.' (Segal 1987 p.18)

and charting her current movements.<sup>31</sup> These, along with her autobiography,<sup>32</sup> provide a full documentation of her interpretation of the ways in which her thought has developed. They map her journey from radical Catholic theologian<sup>33</sup> to elemental philosopher, realising the archaic future.<sup>34</sup> Whilst undertaking her 'Be-Dazzling voyage', Daly expresses in increasingly provocative and shocking language her consideration that women must live on the Boundaries of patriarchy, the Otherworld, in order to know their true Selves. Women are only at home in the Background, the Realm of Wild Reality, they must escape from the foreground, where male-centred objectification and alienation take place.

This consideration of Daly's travels focuses on her use of Goddess-talk, which is, nevertheless, a central aspect of Daly's vision of women's true Time/Space. For Daly, the Goddess is an expression of the 'Self-affirming be-ing of women', and Being itself, the Verb from whom, in whom and with whom all true movements move. Daly draws on her remarkable academic background in scholastic theology, philosophy and existentialist thought<sup>35</sup> to articulate her understanding of Goddess. Her earlier determination to de-reify God and to challenge what she deemed to be false language about transcendence equipped her with a methodology to use in approaching the function of Goddess-talk. Despite the originality and distinctiveness of Daly's theology<sup>36</sup> she, nevertheless, shares with thinkers such as Carol Christ or Starhawk some of the central 'characteristics' of theological discourse, including women's empowerment, the reclaiming of and connection with ancient matrifocal cultures religions and women's'

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<sup>31</sup> e.g. *Feminist Post christian introduction* (Daly 1975), *Original Reintroduction* (Daly 1985b), *New Archaic Afterwords* (Daly 1985a) and *New Intergalactic Introduction* (Daly 1991)

<sup>32</sup> Daly 1993

<sup>33</sup> Daly 1968

<sup>34</sup> Daly 1998

<sup>35</sup> Daly possesses seven degrees, three of which are doctorates.

relationship and identification with Nature.<sup>37</sup> Daly's explorations of the functions of Goddess-talk highlight some of the issues raised by the presentation of the Goddess as symbol for Be-ing. These include: the relationship between the Goddess as expression of women's Selves and the historical reconstruction of ancient matrifocal myths and cultures; the question of how Goddess as symbol or metaphor relates to the concept of the Goddess as a metaphysical reality, and the function and importance of creating of new Goddess-centred myths. For Daly, these issues are interrelated and she addresses them in the process of clarifying what the Goddess means to women. She has logged the spiralling in her understanding of this process as her own journey. A significant starting point for this journey to the Goddess was her development of Tillich's existential theology.<sup>38</sup> She travelled from an awareness of the revelatory power of women's 'courage to be'<sup>39</sup> to the conviction that this Ontological Movement<sup>40</sup> must involve a qualitative leap beyond patriarchy<sup>41</sup>, exorcising all aspects of the internal colonisation of women's Selves. For Daly this means recognising that 'males and males only are the

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<sup>36</sup> This is not a term which Daly herself uses. She would no doubt suspect its links with theology, which she views as an exercise in justifying patriarchy. Daly prefers to define her work as elemental feminist philosophy. (Daly 1984 p.7-10)

<sup>37</sup> One area in which I would argue she differs is her lack of emphasis on the Goddess as celebration of women's sexuality. For Daly, no expression of heterosexual sexuality can escape its link with phallic lust, a fusion of obsession and aggression which 'specialises in genital fixation and fetishism' (Daly 1984 p.1). Instead she celebrates women's Be-Friending (Daly 1984 p.362-386). At the same time, unlike several other lesbian feminist thinkers (e.g. Rich 1978, Lorde 1984, Heyward 1984) she does not link this woman-identified Be-longing (Daly 1984 p.336-361) to an emphasis on the importance of eros or erotic power.

<sup>38</sup> Despite her rejection of methodolatry, Daly maintained a respect for Tillich's contribution to scholarship, e.g. Daly 1984 p.155-159. Daly is, of course, critical of his inability to see the potential of his own arguments but still encourages her sister Hags to investigate his work. The full implications of Tillich's failings are demonstrated for Daly by the exposé of his sexual perversions provided by his wife, Hannah Tillich. (Hannah Tillich *From Time to Time* New York: Stein and Day 1973). Daly discusses Tillich's obsession with pornographic films and pictures of crucified women in *Gyn/Ecology*. (Daly 1978 p.94-95)

<sup>39</sup> Daly 1973 p.24

<sup>40</sup> Daly 1993 p.159-160

<sup>41</sup> Mary Daly "The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion" *Quest* No. 4 (Spring 1975) pp. 20-40

originators, planners controllers and legitimators of patriarchy.<sup>42</sup> Mary Daly was and is, in no way, afraid of the 'accusation' of separatism.<sup>43</sup>

When Daly was working within the parameters of Christian theology, a key issue for her was the liberation of language about God<sup>44</sup>. She challenged what she deemed to be false language of transcendence - and for Daly a sense of transcendence is central to the process of becoming - and then explored the limitations of traditional language about 'ultimate transcendence', that is 'God'. In her determination to de-reify God-talk, Daly called for the rejection of all nouns to signify ultimate transcendence. For Daly God must be an intransitive verb -

“..the Verb who is infinitely personal, non reifiable, present and future in the depths of our present-future I-Thou. This Verb is the eternal Thou”

When, however, Daly became convinced that the medium of God-talk could not be separated from the message of patriarchy, she transferred all the metaphoric power of the Cause of all Causes to the term 'Goddess'. Daly maintained, however, that she was not merely substituting a reified 'God' for objectified images of 'the Goddess'. It was important to affirm that the Goddess must not be reified<sup>45</sup> and to acknowledge that the Goddess, as Be-ing, 'is a Verb and that She has many verbs'<sup>46</sup>

Daly introduced the concept of the Goddess in *Beyond God The Father* in relation to her interrogation of the symbol of Mary.<sup>47</sup> Daly is sure that the Protestant critics of Maryology were accurate in perceiving in the power of Mary a reflection of its origins in Goddess

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<sup>42</sup> Daly 1978 p.28

<sup>43</sup> e.g. Daly 1984 p.363-373

<sup>44</sup> Daly 1973

<sup>45</sup> Daly 1978 p.xii

<sup>46</sup> Daly 1978 p.xlviii

<sup>47</sup> The images and insights which emerge from her first examination of the symbolisation of Mary and Christ as projections of the divided self are areas to which she spirals again and again in her later work. In *Beyond God The Father*, Daly explores the function of Mary as a 'compensatory image' of the 'reflected glory' of Christ's suffering and passivity in order to avoid the dysfunctional effects of the total identification of women with Evil, thereby deflecting female outrage and inhibiting insight and hope. What Daly finds so exciting is that although the doctrines associated with Mary were developed in order to reinforce sexual

religion and images of the Great Mother. She was writing when the only feminist scholarship on ancient Goddess religion was provided by Elizabeth Gould-Davis' *The First Sex* but she argues that the work of earlier scholars <sup>48</sup>witness to the operation of the Great Silence about ancient matriarchal and gynocentric cultures.<sup>49</sup> Daly explores the 'sub-intended dimensions' of the doctrines associated with Mary as a means of providing 'an analysis which reveals the dynamics of the co-option of female power'.<sup>50</sup> The Immaculate Conception can therefore be seen as revealing the autonomy and power of women and their freedom from original sin or the need of a male saviour. The Assumption can convey the exaltation of matter and a challenge to the dualistic association of women with evil as the 'other'. Daly makes clear that for her the most important aspect of this extreme dichotomy between quasi-prophetic symbolic exaltation and the actual social degradation of women was the 'harnessing of women's power by a quintessentially sexist institution'.<sup>51</sup>

In *Gyn/Ecology* this conviction becomes much more central to her thought and its implications are carried to much further lengths. She illustrates the reversals perpetuated by patriarchal myths so that the Christian trinity is a reversal of the Triple Goddess, its torture cross is a reversal of the Tree of Life, the chalice is a reversal of the Cauldron and Yahweh is a reversal of Iahu, the Sumerian Great Goddess.<sup>52</sup>

In exposing these reversals Daly confronts the tension between historical reconstruction and the right of women to discover and create their own myths. She responds to this

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caste, she believes that they can be 'selectively perceived' in order to reveal their true origins and thereby possess a 'prophetic dimension' of the future becoming of women. (Daly 1973 p.81 – 90)

<sup>48</sup> Daly refers to Bachofen, (*Das Mutterrecht* 1861), Louis Henry Morgan, (*Ancient Society* 1877), Robert Briffaut (*The Mothers* 1927) and Jane Harrison (*Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*). (Daly 1973 p.94)

<sup>49</sup> Daly 1973 p.92-95

<sup>50</sup> Daly 1973 p.85

<sup>51</sup> Daly 1973 p.89-90

<sup>52</sup> Daly 1978 p.79-81

tension by opting for one of her 'transcendent third options'<sup>53</sup>. She claims that Crone do not need to rely on historical study, useful though it is, to prove the reality of pre-existing gynocentric myths. They can rely on Crone-logical rather than chronological analysis to see through the distortions of phallic myth and discover the mythic power they have stolen.<sup>54</sup>

This phallic distortion and reversal of myths and symbols is a manifestation of the Goddess murder, rape and dismemberment which Daly sees re-enacted throughout patriarchal history and across all cultures, demonstrated by the Sado-Ritual Syndrome<sup>55</sup>. In order to reveal the 'existential meaning of Goddess murder in the concrete lives of women'<sup>56</sup>, she focuses on five manifestations of it. These are Indian suttee, Chinese footbinding, African female genital mutilation, European witchburning and American gynaecology. In keeping with her emphasis on Goddess murder, Daly's images of the distortion of Mary symbolism became increasingly provocative. She presents the image of the Virgin Birth as a reversal of the Goddess' parthenogenesis, and links it with the portrayal of Mary as Total Rape Victim, illustrated most effectively by the story of the annunciation.<sup>57</sup> In *Pure Lust* she goes further and argues that the Immaculate Conception is used to symbolise Mary's original rape, since it denies to her the

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<sup>53</sup> Daly 1993 p.186

<sup>54</sup> Daly 1978 p.47

<sup>55</sup> Daly provides a seven-stage pattern which she believes comprises the Sado Ritual Syndrome as the perpetual re-enactment of Goddess murder. She maintains that anyone who sees racism and/or imperialism in her transcultural approach are merely 'blinding themselves to the fact that the oppression of women knows no ethnic, national, or religious bounds.' (Daly 1978 p.111)

The seven stages are:

- I An obsession with purity
- II A Total erasure of responsibility for the atrocities performed
- III A tendency for Gynocidal ritual practices to "catch on" and spread
- IV The use of women as scapegoats and token torturers
- V Compulsive orderliness and a fixation upon detail develop in order to divert attention from the horror
- VI The acceptance as normative otherwise unacceptable behaviour as a result of ritual conditioning
- VII The legitimisation of the ritual by "objective" scholarship

<sup>56</sup> Daly 1978 p.111



possibility of self. At the Annunciation, therefore, "the already raped Mary 'consents' to further rape".<sup>58</sup> At the same time, Mary can still function as the Arch-Image of eternal power, though this can only be a broken and faded metaphor. She illustrates this by pointing to the way in which Christmas trees can still have 'magic' even though the annual killing of millions of them, as reversals of the Tree of Life, is another re-enactment of Goddess murder. Their 'magic' lies in the fact that they are not copies of real trees, but the remnant of what was once alive, evoking the memories of living trees. In the same way, Mary can evoke, for women, the memory of that which was once alive for them - memories of the Goddess as self-affirming being of woman.<sup>59</sup>

For Daly, then, Goddess is a metaphor of women's empowerment and the vital function of metaphors is to convey the movement away from the being/things which are mere simulations of being and transform a perception of reality. They are 'Messengers of Metabeing', that is 'participation in the power of being'. Goddess, therefore, is a metaphor of both immanence and transcendence, Self and Be-ing, but Daly is insistent that no word, 'Goddess' included, can reify Being, the Verb, into a noun, it can only point Metaphorically to 'the Active Verb in whose potency all biophilic reality participates'<sup>60</sup>. So, however 'truthful and encouraging' Goddess images are, they must not be used simply to objectify transcendence or they will become mere substitutes for 'God'.<sup>61</sup> For Daly, therefore, it is vital to realise that there must be a 'rich creation of other words to Name the Reality of self-transcending immanence'.<sup>62</sup> Unless the Metaphoric power of Goddess is correctly perceived, she can function to maintain patriarchal categories rather than transcend them. So, for example, 'fixation upon the "Great Mother" to the

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<sup>57</sup> Daly 1978 p.83

<sup>58</sup> Daly 1984 p.104

<sup>59</sup> Daly 1984 p.98

<sup>60</sup> Daly 1984 p.26

<sup>61</sup> Daly 1977/87 p.xviii

<sup>62</sup> Daly 1993 p.204

exclusion of the myriad other possibilities for Naming transcendence can fix women into foreground categories that block encounters with the inexhaustible Other, stopping the Metaphoric process."<sup>63</sup> In a similar move to that taken by Morton, Daly insists that the Goddess must not be reified yet affirms the ability to have communication with her as Be-ing<sup>64</sup>. When referring to the use of therapeutic establishments and 'New Age style Goddess spirituality', however, Daly is totally scathing of their 'massively passivizing effects' which, she claims, threaten, but do not succeed in, 'dampening the Radical Impulse'.<sup>65</sup>

As well as being one of the most influential thinkers in the feminist study of religion, Daly is also one of the most controversial. She can inspire both devoted loyalty and frustrated hostility.<sup>66</sup> Daly has faced several charges of elitism, ethnocentricity and essentialism which need to be taken seriously. One of the first and most famous public critiques of Daly was made by Audre Lorde in response to Daly's analysis of female genital mutilation in Africa. Lorde objected to the way in which Daly only used Lorde's poetry to introduce this chapter and then presented black women as victims or perpetrators without giving them a voice. As a result, Lorde felt 'un-recognised' and maintained that 'beyond sisterhood, there is still racism'.<sup>67</sup> Outside religious feminism, another influential condemnation of Daly as 'A-mazingly anti-women, as well as anti-political' is provided by

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<sup>63</sup> Daly 1984 p.403

<sup>64</sup> Daly provides insights into her own communication with Be-ing in *Outercourse*. She tells, for instance, of the occasion when a clover blossom 'announced its be-ing' to her. Some of the communications do sometimes seem to veer close to an almost 'interventionist' understanding of Be-ing, however. She tells of episodes in her life such as the occasion when she encountered nine clocks, all showing the time 11:12 - Daly's 'Be-witching Hour' (the precise time that her mother died) giving her the message "Hurry up. It's time! Do your work!" Daly understands such revelations as 'moments' which she defines as 'Moments/Movements of participation in Be-ing which carry Voyagers beyond foreground limitations.' (Daly 1993 p.4)

<sup>65</sup> Daly 1991 p.xviii, 1993 p.208

<sup>66</sup> For example, when expressing her own forceful critique of Daly, Lynne Segal declares her exasperation with the passionate loyalty of Daly's supporters. (Segal 1987)

<sup>67</sup> *An Open Letter to Mary Daly* written in 1979 and reprinted in Lorde 1984

Lynne Segal.<sup>68</sup> Segal accuses Daly of advocating a solution of psychic voyaging which only the affluent and highly educated could follow while the majority of women are left to remain marginalised by a dominant culture.<sup>69</sup> Segal affirms Meaghan Morris' view that Daly's exclusion of 'fembots', 'painted birds' and 'token feminists' from the Race of Women colludes with narratives which demonise Other women.<sup>70</sup>

Segal's claim that Daly's approach excludes many women from her vision of a New Time/Space and lacks any social praxis is echoed by several feminist theologians. Beverly Wildung Harrison makes similar points when she provides a response to Daly's call to Journey to the Otherworld. In contrast to Daly's 'otherworldliness', Harrison affirms a feminist ethic which is rooted in the embodied struggles of women *in* the world<sup>71</sup>. Meyer-Wilmes has linked Daly's inability to engage with social praxis with her exploration of the divided self.<sup>72</sup> Lisa Isherwood's reflections upon her encounter with Daly mirror the concerns of many spiritual feminists. Isherwood found Daly's perspective 'from the other side of the moon' exciting and challenging but also felt saddened by the implications of Daly's intransigent and separatist stance<sup>73</sup>. Despite these concerns,

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<sup>68</sup> Segal 1987 p.20

<sup>69</sup> Segal 1987 p.21

<sup>70</sup> Meaghan Morris 'A-Mazing Grace: Notes on Mary Daly's Poetics' *Intervention* 16 (Australia) 1982 p.20 quoted in Segal 1987 p.20. Segal also quotes the challenge made by Meaghan Morris to the radical nature of Daly's transformation of language. Morris argues that although Daly changes words she does not address the wider 'discourses' in which those words function. Instead, she claims, the discourses of Catholicism, with its polarities of Good and Evil, Purity and Sin and of nineteenth century romanticism which sees the individual as the agent of his or her own fate, are adapted uncritically in Daly's thought. These discourses, Morris and Segal argue are 'the discourses of the male-dominated individualistic culture of capitalism' and Daly's failure to reject them explain her ability to exclude so many women from her understanding of true humanity. ( Meaghan Morris 'A-Mazing Grace: Notes on Mary Daly's Poetics' *Intervention* 16 (Australia) 1982 p.20 quoted in Segal 1987 p.22)

<sup>71</sup> Harrison 1990

<sup>72</sup> Meyer-Wilmes focuses on Daly's concept of self, based on the theory and method of Ronald D. Laing. Her use of such theory and method, she argues, explains Daly's inability to reconcile the true Self - achieved through women's self-becoming- with the false self projected by patriarchy. This, Meyer-Wilmes claims, leaves women in a state of permanent schizophrenia. Meyer-Wilmes argues that Daly needs to develop Laing's idea that every 'spirit self' must be 'embodied' and therefore realise that 'the process of 'Being of women' is bound up with the changes of structures of societies and churches.' Meyer-Wilmes 1994

<sup>73</sup> Isherwood interviewed Daly when she was in Britain for the launch of *Outercourse* in 1993. When asked what she would say to a woman who is a feminist but also has men in her life whom she values, Daly

however, there is also the view that Daly's self-confessed extremism<sup>74</sup> has a role to play in feminist transformations of religion and culture. In an influential article in 1979, Carter Heyward even though she critiqued Daly's option for a philosophy which removed her from the world of political engagement, expressed her debt to Daly's radical stance.<sup>75</sup> More recently, similar responses have been elicited by Daly's call for support in the face of dismissal by Boston College.<sup>76</sup>

It is difficult to explore fully the implications of the criticism of Daly's work and her response - or lack of it - in this brief survey but they obviously raise important questions. Could it be argued that the Goddess as presented by Daly is a symbol which is not only unavailable to men but also disempowers many women? Daly's extremism elicits extreme responses and she provokes ecstatic acclaim as well as sweeping criticism. My own experience of exploring Daly's ideas with other women is that many of them value her 'heraic' stance on the Boundaries of patriarchy. They gain inspiration and courage from her extremism and revel in her outrageous humour. Even though they do not feel able or necessarily inclined to join her on the other side of the moon, they are glad that she has got there. Like Carter Heyward, they feel that, despite the problems it presents, Daly's radical critique of patriarchy is essential. Whether or not they can accompany her, they still want to join her in her cry of "Go, Mary, Go!"

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replied, "That is very difficult for her. They can trail behind if they like, but we can't help them. They have to make it on their own now, they have had our energies for too long." Isherwood 1994

<sup>74</sup> Daly introduces *Gyn/Ecology* by claiming: 'This is an extremist book, written in a situation of extremity, written on the edges of a culture that is killing itself and all sentient life.' (Daly 1978 p.17)

<sup>75</sup> Heyward 1979

<sup>76</sup> *Feminist Theology* published a series of articles following the special tribute made to Daly's work at the American Academy of Religion conference in Florida, Nov. 1998. (*Feminist Theology* 24 May 2000). These included an 'updated' assessment by Carter Heyward of Daly's work. As in her earlier article, Heyward is concerned about Daly's removal from the world. She stresses, however, Daly's gifts of creativity, biophilic courage, and clarity. Heyward concludes by saying 'As for the fact that you and I missed each other in the last century, it seems that when I was rolling my eyes that you were out to lunch, you were shaking your head that I was out to church!' (Carter Heyward 'Ruby Fruit Tangles: Responses to Mary Daly p.19 - 22)

## Metaphorical Theology

The relationship between metaphor and religious language has, of course, also been explored within the parameters of Christian feminist theology. Particularly influential has been the work of Sallie McFague. When McFague argued for a 'metaphorical theology'<sup>77</sup> she, like Morton, distinguished between the functions of symbol and metaphor. She provided as her definition of the latter

"an assertion or judgement of similarity and difference between two thoughts in permanent tension with one another which redescribes reality in an open-ended way but has structural as well as affective power."<sup>78</sup>

In challenging the idolatrous use of the 'father' model,<sup>79</sup> McFague drew on Ricoeur's claim that a metaphor conveys a sense of "is and is not".<sup>80</sup> McFague has built upon her metaphorical theology to develop an ecological theology which expresses the world as the body of God<sup>81</sup>. Her connections with theological perspectives therefore seem apparent. When, however, she considered the implications of Goddess language for a metaphorical theology, she confirmed her own position as Christian 'reformist', maintaining that the 'root metaphor' of Christianity is *not* patriarchy. Whilst acknowledging that Goddess symbolism has insights to offer Christianity,<sup>82</sup> and echoing Morton's claim that the "Goddess model" has the ability to 'shock' by juxtaposing the

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<sup>77</sup> McFague 1982

<sup>78</sup> McFague 1982 p.42

<sup>79</sup> McFague 1982 p.23

<sup>80</sup> McFague 1982 p.20

<sup>81</sup> McFague 1987, 1993

<sup>82</sup> McFague compares the insights of theology with the contributions to theology of fantasy writers such as Ursula LeGuin. McFague quotes Richard Scholes in order to emphasise that this is not meant to undermine their importance. She understands their function to be to 'offer us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know and yet return us to confront that world in some cognitive way'. (McFague 1982 p.160 )

The role of imagination in the construction of Goddess herstory has been a contested issue within theology, as was discussed in the section on the 'Goddess of a Golden Age'.

patriarchal model with something entirely different,<sup>83</sup> McFague finds Goddess-talk problematic. Recognising the challenge of theology, McFague is prepared to endorse the question of 'whether a feminine (sic) model for the divine-human relationship is not only needed but also desirable... for all people and for all Christianity'.<sup>84</sup> She nevertheless equates Goddess-talk with the embrace of stereotypical feminine (sic) virtues, resulting in a new form of 'biology is destiny' and an 'idolising' of women as saviours of a fallen world. In doing so, McFague rehearses familiar assumptions about the essentialist nature of theological discourse, assumptions which this study intends to challenge.

When exploring whether or not the Christian paradigm has the resources to generate a metaphorical theology which can counter the idolatry of patriarchal language, McFague considers different models of God. She is even prepared to acknowledge the need to hear 'the whispered' and 'is not' of the Christian paradigm itself if it has become absolute and irrelevant.<sup>85</sup> McFague does not, however, appear to consider whether or not the term 'God' itself is a model although she defines 'Goddess' as such. McFague avoids the issue of defining 'God' by maintaining that all Christian metaphors have been about the *relationship* between humans and the divine not about the nature of the divine itself.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, however, she seems to undercut her own argument by echoing Morton and Christ in emphasising the interdependence of models and the reality they attempt to express.<sup>87</sup> I find convincing Morton's fuller recognition of this

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<sup>83</sup> McFague does not acknowledge Morton's work in making this point.

<sup>84</sup> McFague 1982 p.164

<sup>85</sup> McFague 1982 p.153

<sup>86</sup> McFague 1982 p.1216

<sup>87</sup> McFague draws on the functions of scientific models to illustrate this and quotes the theologian Ian Barbour who does the same. The extract is worth quoting because of its use of so many images, which would later be used by feminist spirituality.

"It was stated that science is not primarily a search for facts, but a search for pattern: scientific theories order experience intelligibly. Religious concepts also result in an intelligible ordering of experience, though the relevant experience is more closely related to the personal lives of subjects.

interdependence, leading her to claim that 'in a sexist culture and sexist religion the option for Goddess may be the only, the only sane, redemptive move'.<sup>88</sup>

### **Goddess-talk, spirituality and experience**

The metaphoric process generated by Goddess-talk is recognised by all Goddess feminists, but not all of them heed Morton's warnings against the danger of 'literalising' the Goddess. It is, I believe, understandable that the reality of the female sacred, based on an historic Goddess-centred past has become so important to so many women. These Goddess narratives convey a sense of the 'loss' of female sacrality and to point towards possibilities for transformation and reconstruction. The images of Goddess religion, regardless of their 'original' function, can now provide a focus for new expressions of spirituality and sacrality.<sup>89</sup> I would, however, maintain that to anchor these narratives and images to a literalised version of the past and to a metaphysical, monotheistic and reified Goddess is to limit such possibilities. As I have already argued, one of the most important features of Gimbutas' work is the extent to which it exposed the assumptions and preconceptions of mainstream archaeology.<sup>90</sup> To use her work in order to create a new metanarrative undermines this insight. Morton's ideas present a theology in which the transformative power of Goddess requires no point of reference beyond the Goddess-talk itself. I am also arguing that Morton's understanding of Goddess as metaphoric process offers further possibilities for developing post-realist, post-metaphysical theologies within a postmodern context. In this study I wish to explore

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It will be recalled that scientific concepts and theories can be tested only in networks. *Webs of interdependent constructs are evaluated as total systems. The fabric of interlocking religious beliefs must also be contextually tested: ideas of God, self, society and nature are not independent. An interpretive scheme is evaluated indirectly by the emergence of many lines of inquiry*" (italics mine)(McFague 1982 p.23 quoting Ian Barbour *Issues in Science and Religion* London: Prentice Hall 1966)

<sup>88</sup> Morton 1985 p.145

<sup>89</sup> In Chapter 6, I provide an illustration of such a process in relation to the work of Catherine Keller.

such possibilities. I therefore intend to consider how such Goddess-talk relates to an expression of feminist spirituality founded in 'women's experience'. In order to do this, I will focus on the work of Carol Christ.

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<sup>90</sup>I also agree with Christ's emphasis on interrogating the issues underlying mainstream scholarship's resistance to Goddess history. (Christ 1997a)



## Chapter 3: THE THEALOGY OF CAROL P. CHRIST

### Thealogy and Story

Carol Christ invites us to understand her work 'within the context of her own life'.<sup>1</sup> Hers is a narrative thealogy which understands her own story as a spiritual quest. Because Christ's work is 'rooted in experience',<sup>2</sup> she supplies a great deal of autobiographical information. In the feminist study of religion, perhaps only the work of Mary Daly compares with this use of personal story.<sup>3</sup> In presenting her autobiography as a work of 'elemental philosophy' Daly, like Christ, uses travel imagery to describe her developing ideas. Daly's voyage over Subliminal Seas has taken her to the Boundaries of patriarchy. Whilst valuing and gaining inspiration from Daly's 'heraic' stance, I do not feel able or inclined to join her in this extreme outpost. Carol Christ's journey, on the other hand, is, as I have said, one with which I find considerable empathy.

The central role of women's experience in feminist spiritualities is one of the most distinctive features of Christ's contribution to the development of feminist theo/alogy and has influenced the method as well as the content of her writing. She has frequently identified this emphasis, claiming that

"Each of my academic interests - from my studies of the poetry of the prophets to my work on the narrative theology of Elie Wiesel, to my analysis of the women's spiritual quest in the poetry and prose of contemporary women, to my attempts to integrate thealogy and experience in my own work - has reflected my interest in forms of religious expression that are connected to experience." <sup>4</sup>

Earlier in her academic career, when Christ identified the sources of her theo/alogy she explained that her work was 'rooted in experience' and 'nourished by two intuitions'. These were, firstly that 'the earth is holy and our true home' and secondly

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<sup>1</sup> Sands 1994 p.134

<sup>2</sup> Christ 1985 p.120, Christ 1987 p.ix, Christ 1995 p.1

<sup>3</sup> Daly 1993

<sup>4</sup> Christ 1995 p.1

that 'women's experience, like all experience, is a source for insight about the divine'.<sup>5</sup> These themes run throughout Christ's work and are interrelated. Informed by her own instinctive sense of relation with the 'natural world', by her study of classical Greek philosophy and drawing on the analysis of Rosemary Radford Ruether,<sup>6</sup> Christ explores the challenge of feminist theo/alogy to the dualistic paradigm adopted by an emerging Christianity. Christ therefore rejects a Platonic longing for a flight from the material world which is inextricably linked with a gynophobic revulsion of the female body. Her affirmation of the immanence of the Sacred within nature is also an acceptance of the 'flux and finitude of life'. This, in turn, relates to a plea for an understanding of spirituality which is 'embodied' and which can be explored through the experiences and stories of the women who have been on the 'underside' of a dualistic worldview. The focus of this study, however, is on her second intuition - that women's experience is a source of and resource for theo/alological reflection. This central tenet of Christ's work has also led her to participate in debates about the issues raised by an uncritical use of 'women's experience' as a category.<sup>7</sup> An important aspect of Christ's emphasis on experience is her affirmation of the validity of mystical experience.<sup>8</sup> She includes 'messages from the Goddess' as sources of evidence for her theological reflections.<sup>9</sup> Christ is determined to retain mystical experience and the stories of her and others' lives as a legitimate source of reflection and to make her writing accessible to a wide audience. At the same time, however, she wants her work to be accepted by feminist scholarship. Christ cannot be content with the silence of mystics because of her commitment to the claim that the 'personal is political is spiritual'.<sup>10</sup> Her work is therefore characterised by an attempt to

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<sup>5</sup> Christ 1987(a) p.ix; Christ 1985p.120

<sup>6</sup> Ruether 1983

<sup>7</sup> These issues will be explored further in chapter 6

<sup>8</sup> Christ's developing understanding of the term 'mystical experience' will be explored in this chapter. When debating with Sheila Greeve Davaney the referential nature of feminist visions, Christ commented that it was obvious from Davaney's argument that she 'had never had a religious experience' Christ 1989

<sup>9</sup> e.g. Christ 1987a, Christ 1995, Christ 1997

<sup>10</sup> Spretnak 1982

address this paradox - at least that which is perceived as a paradox within the paradigm of malestream scholarship- of citing personal and 'mystical' experience as a source of reflection in scholarly debate. Christ also frequently defends the role of Goddess spirituality in feminist strategies and social praxis. In order to move into the public domain her voice - and that of the Goddess - needs to be heard. She is therefore still concerned with the attribution of academic respectability. This concern and her reflections upon the central role of experience in her thealogy has led to her to concentrate upon the shift of paradigm<sup>11</sup> within the academy necessitated by feminist challenges to androcentric assumptions and false dualisms.<sup>12</sup> Christ has, however, found it impossible to reconcile the tensions between the requirements of the malestream academy - still wedded to the myth of objectivity- and her own understanding of scholarship as eros - a passion to connect, employing a methodology of empathy which values story. The trajectory of her choice moved her out of the academy. Christ draws on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's critique of androcentric scholarship but declines to accept Fiorenza's call to feminist scholars to function within kyriarchal institutions as 'resident aliens'.<sup>13</sup> Christ's move can be compared with that of Mary Daly who has declared methodicide on all 'academentia' and migrated to reside on 'The Other Side of The Moon'.<sup>14</sup> Christ only travelled as far as Lesbos and Athens but she understood her move as a break away from the centres of malestream scholarship.

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<sup>11</sup> Christ notes that this term, coined by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962) is now widely used to refer to the frameworks for scholarship provided by fundamental and often unquestioned assumptions. (Christ 1987b p.53) Christ, like Daly, (e.g. 1985b p.1) also uses the arguments of Alfred North Whitehead that

"When you are criticizing the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the various systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them."

(*Science and the Modern World* New York: The Free Press 1925 p.48)

<sup>12</sup> Christ 1987b, Christ 1989, Christ 1991, Christ 1996

<sup>13</sup> Fiorenza 1992

<sup>14</sup> Daly 1993

Despite her move, Christ, nevertheless, maintains her links with the feminist theo/alological community. Her article 'Why Women Need the Goddess'<sup>15</sup> continues to be widely regarded as a 'seminal'<sup>16</sup>, 'classic'<sup>17</sup> and 'ground-breaking'<sup>18</sup> text in the development of the feminist study and practice of religion. The two collections co-authored with Judith Plaskow, i.e. *Womanspirit Rising*<sup>19</sup> and *Weaving the Visions*,<sup>20</sup> hold unrivalled positions as points of reference for an understanding the birth and growth of contemporary feminist theo/alologies. Christ's work with women's literature and story has, as Sands affirms,

"...in a unique way...made women's mystical experience and aesthetic sensibilities the stuff of religious reflection."<sup>21</sup>

*Diving Deep and Surfacing* provided patterns and methodologies followed by or reflected upon many feminist and womanist theo/alogians in their approach to women's literature as spiritual journey.<sup>22</sup> Indeed there appears to emerge, a new 'canon' for feminist spiritualities based on key texts from women's writing<sup>23</sup> which is itself becoming the focus of feminist interrogation.<sup>24</sup>

Christ's major contribution to the emergence of spiritual feminism has been acknowledged by recent attempts to analyse some of its implications. When Richard Grigg considered the repercussions *When God becomes Goddess*,<sup>25</sup> he surveyed the work of Christ alongside that of Ruether and Daly. Likewise, when Kathleen Sands considered the implications of spiritual feminism's *Escape from Paradise*,<sup>26</sup> the work of Carol Christ was central to her exploration.<sup>27</sup> Christ's analysis of the impact of feminist

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<sup>15</sup> Christ 1978 - also reprinted in Christ & Plaskow 1979 and Christ 1987a

<sup>16</sup> Long 1994

<sup>17</sup> Lunn 1993

<sup>18</sup> Raphael 1996 p.55

<sup>19</sup> Christ & Plaskow 1989 (1979)

<sup>20</sup> Plaskow & Christ 1989

<sup>21</sup> Sands 1994 p.115

<sup>22</sup> Cp. Grey 1989, Hurcombe (ed.) 1987, Sewell (ed.) 1991, Hurcombe (ed.) 1987, Sands 1994

<sup>23</sup> e.g. Bekkenkamp 1998

<sup>24</sup> e.g. White 1996, van Heijst 1995

<sup>25</sup> Grigg 1995

<sup>26</sup> Sands 1994

<sup>27</sup> Sands presents perceptive and insightful analyses of Christ's theology upon which I have drawn in this chapter. Sands was, however, writing before Christ's more recent work revealed the impetus for her

methodologies upon the study of religion has also become the starting point for further explorations of the relationship between religion and gender.<sup>28</sup> As a result of her validation of the role of experience in scholarly reflection, Christ wishes to make explicit the autobiographical sources of her theories and beliefs. She is concerned to stress that her theology comes from a particular perspective - in her case that of 'a white, middle class, well educated, Californian-born feminist who has Catholic - Christian Science-Presbyterian, Northern European-American roots.'<sup>29</sup> She maintains, however, that even this description is not sufficient, as it does not encompass all aspects of an affective dimension of her 'embodied knowing'. She wishes, therefore, to include such factors as 'a love for Judaism, that is part of her history, her passion for Greece, the ways in which she is moved by art, poetry and ritual, transformed by swimming in the Aegean Sea; whom she has loved and why and what drives her to despair.'<sup>30</sup> Christ considers it vital to provide the context of her own academic development that must, for her, include not only the thinkers who have influenced her own theories but also details of her life story. Christ's work has become increasingly autobiographical in her search to find what she calls an 'authentic voice'.<sup>31</sup> The methodological and epistemological implications of this quest inform all of Christ's work, as this chapter will attempt to explore. I intend to follow Christ's journey as she reveals it in her own autobiographical material. In doing so, I will also examine her contribution to the feminist study and practice of religion because Christ understands her work as 'a continuing effort to write theology out of the stories of our lives'.<sup>32</sup> Christ makes explicit connections between her own story and her methodology, epistemology, ontology and spirituality. I therefore focus on her own story. The

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ideas provided by a sense of despair as opposed to the laughter and eros on which Sands focuses. Sands' own concern is with the challenge presented to feminist religion by an appropriate response to the presence of evil and tragedy. Sands finds problematic Christ's tendency to attribute ontological status to a 'goodness' and 'wholeness' which lie beyond nature, thereby denying, Sands maintains, the necessary acceptance of ambiguity and a 'tragic sensibility'.

<sup>28</sup> e.g. King (ed.) 1995

<sup>29</sup> Christ 1987a p.xiii

<sup>30</sup> Christ 1987a p.xiv

<sup>31</sup> Christ 1995 p.12

<sup>32</sup> Christ 1987 p.11

privileging of experience and story cannot, however, remain unproblematised in current feminist discourse. A consideration of some of the issues involved in this process will inform the following chapters. At this point, however, it is relevant to emphasise that Christ's work reveals her life narrative only as *she* perceives, selects and interprets it at that particular time. Christ herself acknowledges this when she affirms the relative nature of any truth claims insofar as they are restricted to the inherently limited perspective of any one subject.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, however, she claims that

"...if we are explicit about, and allow our readers to know, the personal sources of our work then we will be less likely to make false and misleading generalizations...If we are more clear about why we each think the way we do, we might be less likely to label or dismiss or misunderstand the work of other feminists whose work comes from different histories."<sup>34</sup>

This seems to imply that statements about our personal sources are somehow immune from a perspectival stance. This is not Christ's actual position because in the course of her work she frequently re-interprets her own story. For instance, in *Odyssey*<sup>35</sup> she provides a complete re-assessment of the significance of events in her life recounted in *Laughter*.<sup>36</sup> Her role as priestess of Aphrodite and her relationship with her lover Nikos are viewed from a very different perspective. Christ is also, understandably, selective about which aspects of her story she wishes to reveal or offer as relevant to her narrative theology. It is, for instance, notable that she scarcely mentions the events of her failed marriage to Roger whilst she is willing to expose the details of her affair with Nikos to searching scrutiny. Only she can determine which parts of her autobiography have theological significance. We, the readers can only be aware of the perspectival nature of autobiography itself. Similarly, of course, I acknowledge the situatedness of my own summary of Christ's story.

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<sup>33</sup> Christ 1995p.2

<sup>34</sup> Plaskow & Christ 1989 p.5

<sup>35</sup> Christ 1995

<sup>36</sup> Christ 1987a

I am reading Christ's work through my own interest in the ways in which feminist strategies and alliances relate to and interface with theo/alogy. Like Christ and like many of the scholars whose work I am exploring, I was a theologian before I was a feminist. In following Christ's personal journey I wish to examine the process by which the epistemological challenges presented by feminist theories deconstruct the assumptions underlying malestream theology. This examination will focus on the relationship between language, narrative, imagery and power. At the same time, however, I am also concerned to reflect upon the questions posed by current feminist discourse to many of the assumptions underlying feminist theo/alogy's use of 'women's experience'. Such questions informed a roundtable discussion marking the tenth anniversary of the arrival of the groundbreaking *Journal of Feminist Studies in of Religion*.<sup>37</sup> Here it is argued that the eclipse of notions of female nature and women's experience'<sup>38</sup> call for a new consideration of what 'feminist study' might mean. Miriam Peskowitz argued the need for feminist study of religion to 'recognise and engage the complexities of our late - twentieth century lives' in order to 'move away from the unproblematized liberal paradigms that still underwrite much feminist studies of religion'.<sup>39</sup> María Pilar Aquino provides reflection on the function of liberation paradigms. She addresses the question of how to re-articulate 'universality' in the light of a recognition of the multiple and heterogeneous nature of feminist social practices.<sup>40</sup> Judith Plaskow summarises the implications of this discussion by presenting the challenge to feminist theo/alogical discourse as that of ensuring that, while responding to the challenge of recognising difference, it does not lose the basis for conversation or political action.<sup>41</sup>

In the light of these challenges I wish to ask 'how can 'women's experience' be understood as a source of and resource for feminist post-metaphysical spiritualities?' I

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<sup>37</sup> Peskowitz, Aquino, Davaney, Lewis, Townes & Plaskow 1995

<sup>38</sup> Davaney 1995 p.121

<sup>39</sup> Peskowitz 1995 p.115

<sup>40</sup> Aquino 1995

<sup>41</sup> Plaskow 1995

wish also to consider the question 'What potential does Goddess-talk have for constructing spiritualities which respond to the challenges of a postmodern context?' I will begin by examining Christ's journey as she tells it and I hear it.

### **Narrative and Spirituality**

In 'writing theology out of the story of her life', Christ reflects on the events of her childhood and on her family relationships. In *Laughter* she describes her early awareness that whatever her achievements, she felt unable to compete successfully with her brothers for the unconditional approval and affection of her father. Christ also expresses the sense of isolation and awkwardness she experienced as a child and teenager because she was so tall.

After four years at college, Christ's passion for learning led her, in 1969, to gain a scholarship for Graduate Studies at Yale University. Her emerging theology was strongly influenced by Paul Tillich's exploration of the power of symbol and language and by his expression of the sacred as 'the ground of our being'.<sup>42</sup> Christ was also deeply affected by the relational theology and mysticism of Martin Buber.<sup>43</sup> The contributions of these theologians have remained central to Christ's developing theories. She recounts, however, the difficulty she experienced in reconciling her growing feminist consciousness<sup>44</sup> with most of the androcentric traditions she encountered at Yale. In her second year of the graduate programme, Christ met Judith Plaskow and began a close but complex friendship. This friendship has also been well documented and illustrates the struggles that Christ has had in reconciling her move towards the Goddess with her sense of sisterhood with other feminist scholars who are sceptical of the validity of theology.<sup>45</sup> The sometimes problematic

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<sup>42</sup> e.g., Paul Tillich *The Courage to Be* New Haven: Yale University Press 1968

<sup>43</sup> Martin Buber *I and Thou* trans. Walter Kaufmann New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1970 (1937)

<sup>44</sup> While she was at Yale Christ was actively involved in the promotion of women's rights and campaigned for the inclusion of female undergraduate students. With Plaskow she helped to form The Women and Religion Section of the American Academy of Religion.

<sup>45</sup> Christ 1997 p.175-6



but enduring relationship between Plaskow and Christ embodies the potential in dialogue between feminist theology and theology.

Christ's Ph.D. thesis focused on the novels of Elie Wiesel. Her tutors at Yale would not accept her request to research the spirituality of women writers. In order to explore the power of narrative, she therefore turned to Wiesel's novels. She understood her focus on Wiesel's work as a natural progression from her sense of identity with the God of the Old Testament and from her love of the Hebrew prophetic literature. She states, however, that her first reading of his novel *The Gates of The Forest* - was a life-changing event.<sup>46</sup> For the first time, Wiesel's work brought Christ into encounter with the full horror of the Holocaust. This led Christ to a realisation of Christianity's inherent anti-Judaism, precipitating her final departure from Christianity.<sup>47</sup> Christ also found that many of Wiesel's images provided her with new understandings of her relationship with the Sacred.<sup>48</sup> Gavriel's laughter in *Gates of the Forest* revealed to Christ a means of responding to the systemic oppression of patriarchal religion. The resistance expressed through the transformative power of laughter was later to be identified as 'the laughter of Aphrodite'. Furthermore, Wiesel's reaction to his perception of God's betrayal of the Jews during the Holocaust opened up for Christ the possibility of expressing her anger at God. Throughout her narrative theology Christ draws parallels between her relationship with the Father God and with the men in her life.

"The day I read *The Gates of the Forest*, the laughter of Gavriel entered into my bones. I found myself laughing out loud and put the book down. I laughed for hours and hours. All my private, personal suffering during my first two years in graduate school flashed before my eyes and was dissolved in laughter. I saw myself in the office of the professor with whom I had come to study Hebrew poetry, saying, "Miss Christ, why did you come to this programme, why didn't you go to Comp. Lit.?" And then I began to laugh, saying to myself, "And

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<sup>46</sup> Christ 1987a p.5

<sup>47</sup> Christ 1987a p.10 Christ recounts how she attempted to support some of her female students by attending their ordination but could not tolerate the use of patriarchal, militaristic and triumphalist language and imagery. She marks this as her definitive move out of Christianity.

<sup>48</sup> e.g. The account of the Rebbe returning to perform a ritual in the *Gates of the Forest* ( Trans. Frances Frenaye New York: Schocken 1982) and of 'Man' changing places with God in *The Town Beyond the Wall*. (Trans. Stephen Becker New York Avon Books 1969)

you cared what he said? And you thought you were no good just because he did not appreciate what you were saying?" I was engulfed in laughter again. "How silly you were." I said to myself laughing again. I pictured myself in my room sobbing for the man I had loved, who had abruptly broken off our relationship. And I said to myself, "And you sobbed for months about that?" I couldn't stop laughing. I realised that I had created much of my own suffering because I had given men, many of whom I did not even like, power over my life. I knew that my suffering was not Wiesel's suffering, but I felt closely bonded to him, and I knew I would read the rest of his books and write about his stories. When I finally stopped laughing...I felt transformed."<sup>49</sup>

Despite this important transformative experience, Christ's later work reveals that a struggle with a conditioned reliance upon male approval continued to inform much of her theology. She returns to the struggle in *Odyssey* and *Rebirth*, recognising that her encounter with the power of male approval was, part of a spiralling or 'serpentine' journey".<sup>50</sup> Christ's emphasis on the need for a metaphoric shift in religious language and symbolism, nourished by the work of Mary Daly<sup>51</sup> and Nelle Morton<sup>52</sup>, grew from her conviction that

"as long as the Father continues to be invoked in churches and synagogues the stage is being set for the continuation of pathological relationships to God and to men in our lives."<sup>53</sup>

Christ's growing estrangement from the traditions, sources, language and symbolism of Christianity set her on an odyssey for alternative expressions of spirituality and the Sacred. Later in 1969 Christ read Doris Lessing's *The Four Gated City*.<sup>54</sup> Christ describes her excitement at discovering a woman's account of a spiritual quest which spoke to Christ's own experience. Christ began writing about Doris Lessing in 1973 and her reflections on the nature of spirituality revealed by Martha Quest, explored in several articles,<sup>55</sup> eventually culminated in her book *Diving Deep and Surfacing* -

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<sup>49</sup> Christ 1987a p.5

<sup>50</sup> Christ 1995 p.163

<sup>51</sup> Daly 1985b

<sup>52</sup> Morton 1985

<sup>53</sup> Christ 1987a p.18

<sup>54</sup> Lessing 1970 (1965)

<sup>55</sup> Christ 1973, Christ 1975, Christ 1976

*Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*<sup>56</sup> in 1980. In this book she analysed the texts by Kate Chopin,<sup>57</sup> Margaret Atwood,<sup>58</sup> Adrienne Rich<sup>59</sup> and Ntosake Shange<sup>60</sup>, as well as Doris Lessing. In doing so she made distinctive contribution to the study of religious experience.

The groundbreaking nature of Christ's attempt to express women's literature as 'sources' of spirituality is easy to overlook since the exercise is now so familiar in spiritual feminism.<sup>61</sup> Its significance, however, was reflected in the suggestion by her friend, Naomi Goldenberg, that fiction and poetry written by women might become the 'sacred text' of a new (feminist) consciousness.<sup>62</sup>

Throughout Christ's work she explores the implications of the relationship between experience and story. In the introduction to *Diving Deep*, drawing on the work of Novak<sup>63</sup> and Crites,<sup>64</sup> she claims

"In a very real sense, there is no experience without stories. There is a dialectic between stories and experience. Stories give shape to experience, experience give rise to stories. At least this is how it is for those who have had the freedom to tell their own stories, to shape their lives in accord with their experience. But this has not usually been the case for women. Indeed there is a very real sense in which the seemingly paradoxical statement "women have not experienced their own experience" is true."<sup>65</sup>

In her early explorations of the work of Lessing and Atwood Christ provided a quotation from the Chorus of Women in *Medea* by Euripides to express the transformative power of retelling and reclaiming stories

*"Flow backwards to your sources, sacred rivers,  
And let the world's great order be reversed.*

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<sup>56</sup> Christ 1995 (1980)

<sup>57</sup> Chopin 1972 (1899)

<sup>58</sup> Atwood 1972

<sup>59</sup> Rich 1973, 1976, 1978

<sup>60</sup> Shange 1976

<sup>61</sup> See Sands 1994 p. 124-5

<sup>62</sup> Goldenberg 1979

<sup>63</sup> Michael Novak *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper & Row 1971)

- *The Experience of Nothingness* (New York: Harper & Row 1970)

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Crites "The Narrative Quality of Experience" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (Sept. 1971) pp.291-311

<sup>65</sup> Christ 1995 p.4-5

.....  
*Story shall now turn my condition to a fair one,  
Women shall now be paid their due.  
No more shall evil-sounding fame be theirs."*<sup>66</sup>

In order to present the varied accounts of women's experiences as spiritual quest Christ developed an interpretive model - expressed in the terms of Nothingness, Awakening, Insight and New Naming. In revisioning what women's experience might contribute to an expression of mysticism, Christ drew on the definitive contributions of James<sup>67</sup> and Underhill.<sup>68</sup> In doing so, however, she was also constructing a critique of the dualistic assumptions underlying their definitions. (Christ later justified her use of classical terms as a deliberate 'deformation of language')<sup>69</sup> Christ challenged the view that 'nature mysticism' must be inferior to a sense of union with the transcendent. Instead she argued that the sense of relation with nature expressed in the women's literature she was exploring reflected a connection with and grounding in 'the great powers'. Christ linked this understanding of mysticism with a growing sense of 'authentic selfhood' experienced by women through their involvement in political movements which are 'quests for truth or justice or being' which are 'rooted in the power of being'<sup>70</sup>. Christ's distinctive contribution was to offer a particular revelation of the spiritual dimension of the feminist maxim that the personal is political. Influenced by Daly, Christ related the mystical state of Nothingness - 'the dark night of the soul'- to women's sense of non-being in an androcentric world. She provided an image of 'awakening' which countered the conversion paradigm of patriarchal religious systems. Christ understood as spirituality women's quest for authentic self-hood. She argued that in order to express their experience of 'social mysticism', women needed a 'New Naming', to create new possibilities of being and living. Christ shared Adrienne Rich's 'dream of a common language'<sup>71</sup> and Mary Daly's recognition of the

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<sup>66</sup> Christ 1975 Reprinted in Christ & Plaskow 1979 p228

<sup>67</sup> William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* New York: Collier 1961

<sup>68</sup> Evelyn Underhill *Mysticism* New York: Dutton 1961

<sup>69</sup> Christ 1986 p.xiii

<sup>70</sup> Christ 1980 p.23

<sup>71</sup> Rich 1978

liberating power of language.<sup>72</sup> Christ applied her model of Nothingness - Awakening - Insight - New Naming to an exploration of a wide variety of contemporary women's literature. Christ was aware of the problematic nature of some the claims she was trying to make, even as she made them. She had to defend herself against the charge of imposing upon the texts an expression of spirituality *and* argue for a relevance to socio/political transformation.

Christ faced particular challenges in her attempt to relate spiritual quest to social transformation when analysing Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. Christ answers Marge Piercy's criticism that *Surfacing* failed to address the issue of gender power relations by maintaining that

Atwood's protagonist has experienced a spiritual and psychological transformation that will give her the inner strength to change her social and political relationships. She no longer sees herself as inevitably powerless or victimized.<sup>73</sup>

Christ is drawn to Atwood's expressions of a sense of connectedness between the protagonist and nature in all its flux and finitude. Christ finds in this and the protagonist's 'awakening' to her 'refusal to be a victim' the possibility of a feminist spirituality which 'names anew the great powers and women's grounding in them'<sup>74</sup> and which she is so desperate to find. She has, however, to acknowledge that her motivations are not necessarily the same as those which occupy the novelist herself. *Diving Deep* included reference to Atwood's reply<sup>75</sup> to Christ's article in *Signs*.<sup>76</sup> Christ felt that her interpretation of *Surfacing* as spiritual quest was vindicated by Atwood's reference to the view that analogies could be drawn between the victimisation of a country, a group or an individual.<sup>77</sup> Christ also quoted in support of her own approach Atwood's comments in a letter to Dan Noel in 1974. In this Atwood stated that she did

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<sup>72</sup> Daly 1985b p.8

<sup>73</sup> Christ 1980 p.50

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*

<sup>75</sup> Atwood 1976

<sup>76</sup> Christ 1976b

<sup>77</sup> Margaret Atwood *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* Toronto: Anansi Press 1972 p.36 quoted in Christ 1980 p.150 n.2

not set out to create a female religious experience but 'found Ms. Christ very persuasive'.<sup>78</sup> It has, however, been argued that Christ's refusal to accept Atwood's own reading of the novel as a metaphor of America's exploitation and abuse of Canada demonstrates the questionable nature of spiritual feminism's appropriation of women's literature as 'sacred texts'.<sup>79</sup>

Doris Lessing's five-volume series about the significantly named '*Martha Quest*', was the catalyst for Christ's dive into women's literature as spiritual quest. Christ provides remarkable insight into the processes which Martha undergoes in search of herself as a 'person'. For Christ, the goal of Martha's quest is the realisation that "the core of herself is alone and independent of the relations and attachments she forms".<sup>80</sup>

With the hindsight provided by her narrative theology, we can see that Christ must have empathised with Martha's 'clear-lit space' of spiritual awareness which she called 'the watcher' and her encounter with 'the self-hater'. In *Rebirth*<sup>81</sup>, Christ reveals her own struggle with a lack of self worth. Again, however, Christ had to come to terms with Lessing's own lack of empathy with many of her own concerns. After the first flush of excitement and inspiration Christ became frustrated and disappointed by Lessing's conclusions to this quest - a social pessimism and reliance on breeding "new children".

Christ's exploration also included reflections upon *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, written in 1899. Christ summarizes Chopin's message as 'Spiritual Liberation, Social Defeat'. She presents this work as an early attempt to articulate women's spiritual quest for an authentic expression of their experience and in particular their sexuality. Christ acknowledges, however, the problematic nature of such an analysis in view of the fact that for Edna, the central character, her 'awakening' could lead only to escape from the restrictions of her world by suicide in the sea. It is ironic that the sea, so powerful a symbol of renewal and transformation for Christ, plays such an ambiguous

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<sup>78</sup> Christ 1980 p.146 n.21

<sup>79</sup> e.g. van Heijst 1995 p.257-267

<sup>80</sup> Christ 1980 p. 60

<sup>81</sup> Christ 1997

role in *The Awakening*. Whilst the sea functions as a medium of Edna's empowerment, it is also that which consumes her. A new dimension is added to Christ's discussion of her difficulty in accepting Chopin's presentation of Edna's death as the only liberation in the light of her later revelations that she, herself, had struggled with suicidal tendencies. In arguing for the legitimacy of citing Chopin's novel as an illustration of feminist spirituality, Christ justifies the exercising of cultural relativity in relating Edna's 'awakening' to the possibility of contemporary social and political transformation. She expresses some of her frustration, however, by concluding that "readers who recognize the importance of stories in shaping lives have the right to ask more of a novelist than realism."<sup>82</sup>

Christ provides perceptive and insightful interpretations of the experiences the protagonists of these three novels. Christ's autobiography reveals, however, how far her interpretation was informed by her sense of empathy with aspects of their spiritual quest to find an 'authentic' identity. An identification of a 'nature mysticism' conveyed by the literature was also of crucial importance to Christ's own spiritual journey. She identifies as transformative key moments in the novels when the protagonists experience a sense of connection or relationship with aspects of nature. These include Edna's relationship with the sea, Martha's mystical integration with the veld, re-experienced at important stages in her 'awakening' and the many occasions when the protagonist of *Surfacing* was aware of her connectedness with nature. In unfolding her analysis, Christ was 'doing thealogy out of the story of her life' and exercising a 'methodology of empathy'. Her application of the Nothingness- Awakening - Insight - New Naming model developed out of her attempt to articulate her own spiritual journey. She was, however, to find that the process from Nothingness to New Naming was not subject to so linear a transformation. We can also see the way in which Christ was using the intuitions which lay at the source of her thealogy - women's experience as spirituality and connectedness with nature -as an interpretive model for her analysis of these texts. Christ was, however very aware of the constraints upon this

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<sup>82</sup> Christ 1980 p39



process and anticipated the charge of imposing upon the text an interpretation not shared by the authors themselves.

When Christ turned to the work of Adrienne Rich and Ntozake Shange she found texts which could more explicitly function as sources for feminist/womanist spiritualities. In fact both, but Rich in particular, have become part of the unofficial 'canon' of feminist scripture.

The concluding words of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* had a profound effect upon Christ and have often been quoted since as paradigmatic of spiritual feminism.

*"i found god in myself  
and i loved her,  
i loved her fiercely."*<sup>83</sup>

When Carol Christ first used Rich's poetry to articulate the spiritual journey involved in 'diving deep', she noted that the spiritual dimension of that poetry had not been widely recognised.<sup>84</sup> Christ's insights have since been shared and enlarged by many spiritual feminists.<sup>85</sup> Christ later acknowledged a regret for her earlier awkwardness in relating Rich's *New Naming* to a lesbian vision. In her struggle to transcend the 'pathological' relationships with men in her own life, Christ was inspired by Rich's ability to learn how to "*love myself as only a woman can love me*"<sup>86</sup>

Christ has been criticised for failing to address the growing concerns voiced by feminist scholars about an uncritical use of women's narratives in succeeding editions of *Diving Deep*.<sup>87</sup> Despite this I would argue that *Diving Deep* has left an important legacy for spiritual feminists.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore I would suggest that Christ's exploration of women's literature as spiritual quest was an early, developmental stage in her 'search

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<sup>83</sup> Shange 1976 p 63 quoted in Christ 1980 p117

<sup>84</sup> Christ 1980 p.75

<sup>85</sup> e.g. Grey 1989

<sup>86</sup> Rich 1978 p.76, quoted in Christ 1980 p.94

<sup>87</sup> e.g. van Heijst 1995 White 1996,

<sup>88</sup> cp. Grey 1989 and Sands 1994 In *Escaping Paradise*, Sands also explores women's stories 'alongside her own' (p.168). Sands indicates that her concern with spiritual feminist strategies for responding to evil and tragedy is rooted in her own experience although she is not apparently willing to share her own story in the way that Christ does. Furthermore, she also turns to women's literature as spiritual insight in her conclusions.



for a voice'. It was also an attempt to search for the 'original sources of the sacred rivers'. She has tacitly admitted the attempt ultimately frustrating and has never since used women's literature in this way, although she continues to draw on novels and poetry. She has turned instead to Goddess herstory in order to reclaim the stories through which to articulate her own experience and spiritual quest, whilst maintaining that the Goddesses are not normative for her in the way that scripture is for the followers of patriarchal traditions. In addition to this Christ discovered that when she used *Diving Deep* with students in Amsterdam, this generated the release of the students own stories. She expresses in the second edition of *Diving Deep* the far-reaching impact that this had on her and the importance it represented for her understanding of both feminist spirituality and feminist methodology.<sup>89</sup> Christ began to use *Diving Deep* as a catalyst for encouraging women to 'hear one another into speech'.<sup>90</sup> This process prompted Christ to include autobiography in her thealogy. Reflection upon the implications of the process of storytelling and thealogy set her upon the path which led her out of malestream academy.

### **Difference and Embodied Knowing**

A critique that Christ clearly was willing to make of her earlier work was that her emphasis on women's experience had conveyed a false universalism. She acknowledged that she had treated women's experience as if it were a Platonic ideal.<sup>91</sup> In the Preface provided in the second edition of *Diving Deep And Surfacing* she writes

"Though our sources for the most part reflected white, North American or European, twentieth-century middle-class women's experiences, we wrote as if women's experiences were undifferentiated and universal...If I were writing *Diving Deep* now, I would be less global in generalising about women's experiences and I would not feel the need to justify the inclusion of lesbian and Black women's experiences to the white heterosexual reader."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Christ 1986 p.xv

<sup>90</sup> Morton 1985

<sup>91</sup> Plaskow & Christ 1989 p.3

<sup>92</sup> Christ 1986 p.xii

Christ's recognition of this flaw in her presentation of women's experience was prompted by the voices of women who were not being included in this apparently 'universal' category. Black women, women of colour, women from the majority world wanted to affirm that there are differences which make a difference.

One of the most famous challenges was that of Audre Lorde made to Mary Daly in an 'open letter' where she maintained that 'beyond sisterhood there was still racism.'<sup>93</sup> Alice Walker provided the term 'womanism' to express the bold purple challenge to the pale lavender assumptions of white feminism.<sup>94</sup>

Christ and Plaskow responded to this challenge in the introduction to their second collection, *Weaving the Visions*. Here, Christ wrote

"If we wish to speak of and act on the commonalties that link women together, to discover where our joint interests lie in vision and in struggle, we must do so on the basis of long and careful listening to the pains and satisfactions of many women's lives. The full reality of "women's experience" is contained not in one but in the rising chorus that speaks from many standpoints, pressing toward the creation of society in which all can be heard."<sup>95</sup>

Christ also linked the need to acknowledge difference and diversity within women's experience with the need to challenge the concept of 'objectivity' in scholarship. She emphasises the importance of using personal stories in academic reflection and spiritual quest. She maintains that being explicit about the personal sources about their work ensures that feminists will be less likely to make false generalisations.<sup>96</sup> Christ argues that if women express their theories, having identified the situated and perspectival, others are then able to find their own points of contact and commonality. This she calls a methodology of empathy. When employing this methodology, Christ is also in line with the view that it is not appropriate for any individual or group to claim solidarity with a more disadvantaged community. It is only up to such a community to

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<sup>93</sup> Lorde 1984 p.71

<sup>94</sup> Walker 1986

<sup>95</sup> Plaskow & Christ 1989 p.4

<sup>96</sup> Plaskow & Christ 1989 p.5

grant recognition to others that they are in solidarity with them. Christ makes the important point that a recognition of difference should not result in the damaging and patronising situation whereby white, western feminists feel that they may only speak when they do so 'on behalf of' a more disadvantaged group. On a few occasions, however, Christ appears to reverse the process of a methodology of empathy and suggesting that her own experiences make it possible for her to understand the suffering of others.<sup>97</sup> Employing the methodology in this way is, I would argue, more problematic but would, nevertheless, maintain that Christ's methodology of empathy makes an important contribution to the complex process of constructing a feminist theo/alogy which responds effectively to difference. Christ identifies the links between her methodology of empathy and a challenge to the 'myth ' and 'ethos' of objectivity in mainstream scholarship. She insists that her focus on experience does not 'reduce' theology to autobiography or solipsism. For her, the way out of solipsism is not objectivity but empathy. Christ maintains that when she found theory 'a dead end', the only way out was to bridge the gap between experience and theory by turning to story.<sup>98</sup> Using Daly's identification of feminism's use of 'non-questions' and 'non-data',<sup>99</sup> Christ calls for the need to 'lift the veil of androcentrism'<sup>100</sup> which disguise the fact that so-called 'neutral' approaches assume a justification of patriarchal attitudes. Christ illustrates her argument with a convincing and influential critique<sup>101</sup> of the androcentric assumptions underlying the celebrated and foundational work of Mircea Eliade.<sup>102</sup> Christ exposes the presuppositions informing Eliade's definition of a sense of the Sacred as a grasp of the difference between that which reveals itself as 'real and meaningful' as opposed to 'the chaotic and dangerous flux of things'. She then

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<sup>97</sup> For instance she has argued that her experience of being unusually tall allowed her to empathise with the suffering of women of colour (Christ 1997 p.35)

<sup>98</sup> Christ 1980 p2

<sup>99</sup> Daly 1985b pp.11 -12

<sup>100</sup> Christ 1987b

<sup>101</sup> King (ed.) 1995

<sup>102</sup> Christ 1991

illustrates the selective nature of Eliade's analysis of expressions of pre-literate religions in the light of such predispositions.

Alternatively, Christ provides an epistemological context for her experience-based approach which identifies the need for post-dualistic embodied thinking which makes explicit its perspectival situatedness. In this she expounds her understanding of feminist scholarship as eros. Drawing on Audre Lorde's expression of eros as 'deepest and nonrational knowledge',<sup>103</sup> Christ maintains that scholarship proceeds from a passion to connect.

Christ's call for embodied knowledge and her rejection of the notion of objectivity has drawn her into the debate about the nature of knowledge and truth claims in the light of postmodernist theory. In a collection<sup>104</sup> to which Christ also contributed<sup>105</sup>, Sheila Greeve Davaney offered a challenge to feminist theology.<sup>106</sup> She argued that, while feminist theology demonstrates an awareness of the conditioned and perspectival nature of knowledge, it nevertheless, insists on attributing to its vision of the full humanity of women some form of ontological status. Davaney aligns feminist theologians with the postmodernist move to present a critique of ideology and expose the relationship between 'regimes of truth' and the will to power. At the same time, however, she quotes, with approval, Foucault's criticism of those thinkers who acknowledge the relative nature of truth claims without accepting the full nihilistic implications of such a stance. For Davaney, therefore, feminist theology has not fully escaped the legacy of the Enlightenment and needs to confront the contradiction inherent in its methodology. In order to do so it must accept the full implications of the relative nature of all truth claims and abandon any appeal to ontological reality as grounds for the validation of its position. Davaney maintains that feminist theology has fully to recognise that the feminist vision is as much a human construct as any male

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<sup>103</sup> Lorde 1984 "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power". Reprinted in Plaskow & Christ 1989 p.208

<sup>104</sup> Cooley, Farmer & Ross (eds.) 1987

<sup>105</sup> Christ 1987d

<sup>106</sup> Davaney 1987

perspective. It therefore needs to be judged not by its relation to 'reality' but on the pragmatic grounds of what kinds of existence such a vision permits or inhibits.<sup>107</sup>

Davaney illustrates her case by drawing on the work of Ruether, Fiorenza and Daly.

Davaney argues that the 'reformist/revolutionary' distinction<sup>108</sup>, though useful in some ways, disguises the basic similarity shared by all these thinkers with regard to their 'often unexamined assumptions concerning the character of truth and the relation of reality and thought'.<sup>109</sup> It was, however, Christ who responded to the challenge.<sup>110</sup>

In order to do so Christ again emphasises the particularity of each thinker's position. She argues, for instance, that Fiorenza's statements are expressions of her experiences of being a member of a Christian community struggling against patriarchal oppression rather than an attempt to present universal truths. Having argued this, however, Christ acknowledges that such perspectivism is still not enough to satisfy Davaney's objections. While Christ finds some attraction in the process of Davaney's argument, she does not accept her conclusion. Indeed, Christ argues that Davaney herself is still indebted to the Enlightenment. Christ maintains that Davaney has been influenced by her teacher, Gordon Kaufman, to shift universality away from the relation between thought and reality only to place it in some 'neutral court' in which the competing claims for forms of communal existence can be judged. Christ is therefore claiming that Davaney and Kaufman's call for 'thoroughgoing relativity' is a bid for objectivity in a different guise. Christ is also more concerned about raising the 'specter (sic) of nihilism' which Davaney acknowledges but does nothing to dispel. Christ's recourse is, typically, to emphasise the role of experience which allows feminists to 'embrace the ambiguity of conditional but not absolute acceptance of the modern *and* postmodern frameworks'.<sup>111</sup> The main lesson, she argues, that the 'detached abstractionalism' of both the Enlightenment and postmodernism should

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<sup>107</sup> Davaney 1987 p.93

<sup>108</sup> This categorisation was introduced in Christ & Plaskow 1979. Plaskow & Christ 1989 re-examined this term, but from a different perspective from that offered by Davaney

<sup>109</sup> Davaney 1987 p.84

<sup>110</sup> Christ 1989b

<sup>111</sup> Christ 1989b p.14

present to feminists is the need for them to become '*more* embodied not *disembodied*' in their theologies.<sup>112</sup>

There remain, however, further aspects of the challenge to respond to difference which Christ's work continues to generate. In the concluding chapter of *Diving Deep* Christ analysed the spiritual and political trajectories of women's quests for New Naming. It demonstrates that she shared with most exponents of emerging theo/alogies a vision or hope of 'wholeness'.<sup>113</sup>

Some of the questions raised by this move 'towards wholeness', which recurs throughout Christ's work in the use of 'journey' metaphor, are posed by Kathleen Sands' reflections on the challenges and potential of feminist theo/alogies' 'escape from Paradise'. Sands does recognise that Christ is conscious of difference in the notion of female experience and is also prepared to excuse her from the accusation of 'romantic idealism'.<sup>114</sup> She, nevertheless, claims that Christ still clings to a notion of a single or ideal whole which lies beyond women's diverse experiences.<sup>115</sup> This illustrates, for Sands, the flaw in Christ's thealogy - the attribution of ontological status to the wholeness she seeks. Sands also applies this critique to Christ's presentation of Nature and to her eros-based ontology, epistemology and 'incipient ethic'.<sup>116</sup> Sands fears that Christ's thealogy 'still dreams of the oneness that has entranced Western rationalism' and is 'haunted by what it excludes - natural wholeness by the broken world of sociality, eros by violence, the true Goddess by the false but powerful God'.<sup>117</sup> Sands therefore calls for a fuller acceptance of plurality - with regard to her understanding of Nature and eros - in order to include what Sands calls 'the tragic sensibility'.<sup>118</sup> Sands also applies the need for plurality to Christ's view of the Goddess, calling instead for a recognition of polytheism. Sands argues that

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<sup>112</sup> Christ 1989b p.14 Christ's response to the challenge of relativity has been quoted several times e.g. Sands 1994, Hogan 1995, King (ed.) 1995

<sup>113</sup> e.g. Zappone 1991

<sup>114</sup> Sands 1994 p.214

<sup>115</sup> Sands 1994 p.124-5

<sup>116</sup> Sands 1994 p.1130

<sup>117</sup> Sands 1994 p.115

<sup>118</sup> Sands 1994 p.125

"A polytheistic theology might better address the multiplicity of worlds and their guiding spirits while dissolving the aura of essentialism that surrounds Christ's references to "the Goddess".... By combining her intuitions about the creativity of desire with a sharper sense of life's tensions, Christ's theology could avoid objectivist approaches to nature without abandoning physicality for the solipstic sociality of nihilistic postmodernism."<sup>119</sup>

Sands feels that, despite Christ's critique of Platonic Idealism, she makes an unacknowledged equation of goodness with Nature and with eros.<sup>120</sup> This, Sands believes, reduces theology's potential to make an important contribution to a new exploration of an understanding of evil in the void left by feminism's dismissal of the dualistic and androcentric accounts of traditional theology.

Further reflections on 'a vision of wholeness' are prompted by post-structural interrogations of traditional views of subjectivity. Speaking from a post-structuralist perspective, Rose White has argued that in *Diving Deep* Christ sustains a 'conversion scenario' because her interpretive model still presupposes a 'lapsarian' or fall/redemption paradigm.<sup>121</sup> Christ's analysis of the 'wholeness' towards which women's quest was directed suggests to White a nostalgia for the concept of 'authentic self'. White also questions the notion of an 'ultimate destination' for multiple and disparate feminist journeys. These concerns, prompted by speculation on the demise of the unified subject, call for a re-examination of many of the assumptions underlying early expressions of feminist spirituality. They raise the question of how far it is possible to envisage a post-modern/post-structural 'spirituality'. Like Sands,<sup>122</sup> White finds possibilities in womanist theologies' openness to difference, ambiguity and plurality. White suggests the need for a 'spirituality as process'<sup>123</sup> but is tentative

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<sup>119</sup> Sands 1994 p.133

<sup>120</sup> As discussed later in this chapter, Christ responds to some of Sands' arguments in *Rebirth*. Sands' reflections on the role of eros in Christ's 'theology of desire' were written before Christ revealed further the role of despair and suicidal tendencies in her narrative. Sands would not, however, be satisfied with Christ's focus on the 'matrix of love' as an adequate response to the tragic sensibility.

<sup>121</sup> White 1996

<sup>122</sup> Sands 1994 pp.137-169

<sup>123</sup> White cites this term from Janice Raymond *A Passion for Friends: Towards a Philosophy of Female Affection* London: The Women's Press 1986

about defining this phrase. In this study I attempt to provide some possible understandings of what such a spirituality might present.

For Christ, however, the significance of *Diving Deep* lies in its function as a turning point in her spiritual quest to find an 'authentic voice' with which to express the Sacred as female. Christ charted her journey away from Christianity towards Goddess in her next book, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, which represents the beginning of her narrative theology and makes use of the first person and autobiography for the first time. She describes her dialogues with the Father God, inspired by Elie Wiesel's ability to confront God with His acts of betrayal and to name Christianity's collusion with persecution and oppression. Christ's first encounter with Goddess is recounted as a mystical experience. In the midst of her rage and frustration at the androcentrism of the religious and academic traditions in which she found herself, she heard a voice telling her that

"In God is a woman like yourself. She shares your suffering".<sup>124</sup>

This initiated a pursuit of the female Sacred. Christ rejected Jungian approaches to the Goddess as essentialist expressions of the 'eternal feminine'.<sup>125</sup> Instead, Christ found a response to her quest through her association with the feminist witchcraft of Starhawk and Z. Budapest. This led her into a process of reclaiming Goddess herstory. Her emerging theology was influenced by her friendship with other feminist scholars such as Naomi Goldenberg, Charlene Spretnak and Hallie Iglehart and by the material presented by *Womanspirit* magazine. Christ developed her ideas in dialogue with the women in the 'Women and Religion Section' of the American academy of Religion. She also drew on the theories of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly. Christ now acknowledges her debt to Marija Gimbutas, although she did not fully appreciate this earlier in the earlier stages of her developing her theology.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Christ 1987a p.21, 1997 p.2

<sup>125</sup> Christ 1979

<sup>126</sup> Email communication with Carol Christ, November 1999



Christ maintains that the non- literate 'texts' of Goddess religion could never have, for her, the normative authority of the scriptures of patriarchal religious traditions. At the same time, however, it is of great importance to her that the Goddess is not just the creation of contemporary feminists. She understands Goddess history as 'the ground on which she stands'.<sup>127</sup> The narratives of a Goddess who, like other women, has suffered and had her history stolen from her help to fill the void left by the sacred stories, lost when Christ abandoned the biblical traditions and traced the path of heretics and outsiders. Christ's commitment to the recovery of prepatriarchal history, in the face of growing scholarly scepticism, has led her to focus on the methodological and epistemological implications of feminist scholarship. As discussed above, she has made an influential call for a shift in paradigm in the academy and in the study of religion.<sup>128</sup>

Out of her search for a spirituality rooted both in the experience of women's lives and in a celebration of the physical world grows her understanding of the Goddess charted in *The Laughter of Aphrodite - Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess*. Christ celebrates the importance of story and symbol. *Laughter of Aphrodite* includes the influential article 'Why Women Need The Goddess'.<sup>129</sup> Here Christ draws on Geertz's identification of the moods and motivations generated by religions' long-lasting symbols' to argue for the psychological and political necessity of Goddess imagery. Religious symbolic systems will not tolerate a vacuum and only the affirmation of female will, bodiliness and relationships in the conscious application of Goddess language will prevent the unconscious return to patterns of domination sanctioned by the pervasive power of God's patriarchal symbolism. These important contributions to the feminist study of religion eventually earned Christ a professorship at San Jose and the academic recognition she craved. She found, however, that such approval did not bring the fulfilment she was seeking. When, in response to a request in 1981 to work

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<sup>127</sup> Christ 1997a, p.44

<sup>128</sup> Recently, Christ has argued for a recognition of the paradigm shift in scholarship generated by the work of Marija Gimbutas. e.g. Christ 1996c

<sup>129</sup> Christ 1978 reprinted in Christ & Plaskow 1979 pp.273 - 287

during the Summer at the Aegean (now International) Women's Studies Institute, Christ went to Lesbos and a new and crucial stage in her spiritual odyssey began. Christ describes how she felt drawn - against her will -to the Greek Goddesses and found herself identifying with Aphrodite. Her Aphrodite was, however, one reclaimed from pre-patriarchal traditions who represents for Christ the independent female self she was searching for in *Diving Deep* but could not find. She gives an account of her 'initiation' as priestess of Aphrodite and describes her work with other women to revise Goddess rituals, in particular the enactment of the Eleusinian Mysteries which she believes centred on the myth of Demeter and Persephone. In Greece Christ felt that she was nurturing the intuitions which resourced her thealogy. She found it increasingly difficult to return to the USA. She was also struggling with the contradictions between her commitment to experience-based embodied thinking and the requirements of the patriarchal academic systems within which she worked. Furthermore, she felt increasingly alienated and betrayed by American feminist scholars of religion who disparaged studies based on the reclaiming of the Goddess. Christ resigned her professorship and moved permanently to Greece. She compared this decision with that of Edna's shedding of her clothes and stepping into the sea.<sup>130</sup> Christ cites as another reason for her move the break-up of her marriage. This comes as something of a shock because nowhere in *Laughter's* autobiography does she mention getting married. Her husband, Roger, is mentioned only once, in passing. So many intimate details of Christ's life are recounted as revelatory in her narrative thealogy but her marriage does not function as a significant experience in this way. The failure of this relationship does, however, contribute to her increasing sense that she is being engulfed by Nothingness. Neither the move to Greece nor the laughter of Aphrodite are able to generate an awakening out of this state. Christ then had to face the death of her mother and this set her upon a journey into what she later identified as her dark night of the soul recounted in *Odyssey with the Goddess*.

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<sup>130</sup> Christ 1995a p.137

## Odyssey and Rebirth

In the preface to *Odyssey* Christ finds it necessary to provide a justification of the book's 'boundary-breaking of genre'.<sup>131</sup> It represents a new stage in her narrative theology which Christ compares with the autobiographical theology of Augustine's *Confessions*. She is anxious to affirm that *her* story, like his must be 'incomplete' in that it comes from only one perspective.<sup>132</sup>

In *Odyssey* Christ's style is intensely personal and with remarkable frankness and honesty she exposes the intimate details of her life to analysis and reflection. I can understand the reaction, quoted by Christ with typical candour,<sup>133</sup> of one of her oldest friends. This friend said that, although she found Christ's story moving, she couldn't understand why she wrote it because it made no contribution to feminist theology. I, too, have experienced a sense of discomfort when first encountering Christ's openness in relating her own story to theological reflection. When I then analysed why this was the case I discovered that it was precisely the level of empathy which was problematic. In *Odyssey*, Christ is revealing on paper the thoughts and reflections which are the stuff of my own conversations with women friends. I found it very difficult to accept that something so intimate a part of my own life and relationships could be acknowledged as worthy of 'academic' scrutiny. I would argue, therefore, that this is exactly the challenge that Christ's *Odyssey* presents to theology - to take seriously the real stories of women's lives. As a result I understood better what Christ was saying when she described her response to her friend's criticism of *Odyssey*

. "For me the most the most meaningful mode of writing feminist theology is to tell stories in such a way that we confront the sources of our despair and name anew the great powers that give shape and meaning to our lives.... Many of us are telling stories because there is no other way for us to express the new

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<sup>131</sup> Christ 1995b p.1

<sup>132</sup> Sands in her survey of Christ's work before *Odyssey* had already made this comparison and noted that Augustine's autobiographical approach, unlike that of contemporary feminists, never counted much against his credibility!

<sup>133</sup> This mentioned in the afterword to the Third edition of *Diving Deep and Surfacing*. Christ 1995a

visions of the sacred that emerge as we heal the trauma of having been closed in silence for so long."<sup>134</sup>

In *Odyssey*, Christ's story is of pilgrimage. She gives an account of the first Goddess pilgrimage in Crete whilst also reflecting upon her own spiritual odyssey. Her mother's death and the failure of a disastrous love affair which she thought had been 'sent by Aphrodite' forced Christ to face her 'self-hater' in the form of suicidal tendencies which spoke to her of her inability to be loved. She was also prompted to express the anger she once directed towards the Father God against a Goddess whom she perceived as having abandoned and betrayed her. Christ's odyssey through these experiences towards a new transformation is described through the story of her pilgrimages in Crete. This story reveals the importance of ritual and sacred place in Christ's Goddess spirituality and of a community of women engaged in mutual empowerment. Against this background, Christ reveals the details of her own story with breath-taking openness. In doing so she lays herself open to the charge of self-indulgence and of a lack of awareness. With characteristic honesty, Christ describes the response of an editor to an earlier manuscript as 'leaving a bad taste in her mouth' because she could see better than the writer of the story what was going to happen i.e. the affair with her lover, Nikos, was going to end.<sup>135</sup> These are, however, risks that Christ is prepared to take in order to engage in embodied thinking. This is process narrative theology. At a later stage of her reflections Christ understands these experiences very differently. Through an account of the details of the events following her mother's death, she does, however, reach an analysis of the roots of her sense of despair and through this new naming find a spiritual transformation. The relationship with her father and the process of leading the pilgrimage made her recognise her conditioned need to be in control despite her theoretical acceptance of flux and finitude. She understands the experience of the death of her mother to have revealed to her the mystery of love. (Christ develops this awareness into an aspect of her emerging ethic in *Rebirth*).

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<sup>134</sup> Christ 1995a p.138-9

<sup>135</sup> Christ 1995b p.17

At the end of the literal pilgrimage, Christ had a physical and emotional breakdown from which she emerged into a Rebirth symbolised by her descent into the deepest level of the Skoteino cave where she 'heard' again the Goddess. She now felt able to re-assess her relationships and to resist the voice that spoke of despair and suicide. She had been initiated into an Eleusinian mystery of love and could emerge from the underworld to a Rebirth of the Goddess.

In her book *Rebirth of the Goddess - Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* Christ attempts to provide a systematic theology. Christ struggled with this project for several years before its eventual completion.<sup>136</sup> She believes that only after she had been through the "dark night of the soul" - narrated in *Odyssey* - could she emerge to complete the task. For Christ, '*Rebirth*' is an experiment in '*fully embodied thinking*', the next step in her quest to integrate scholarly reflection and experience. She acknowledges the difficulty in producing a 'systematic theology' - which is true to the centrality of experience. She tries to avoid the 'unnecessarily difficult and inaccessible' language of much scholarship - but wanted to produce the kind of teaching material that she had longed to read as a student. This experiment in '*fully embodied thinking*' does, however, highlight the difficulties presented to Christ's attempt to cite personal experiences as the grounds for scholarly reflection whilst also offering a systematic rationale for theology to the academic community. Until Christ's argument for the validity of a methodology of empathy as a strategy for countering the myth of objectivity is much more widely recognised, she is going to face scepticism about the 'academic respectability' of her work.

*Rebirth* could, nevertheless, be compared with Ruether's *Sexism and God Talk*<sup>137</sup> in that it addresses the traditional areas of classical theology - e.g. metaphysics, anthropology, eschatology - from a perspective which challenges the androcentric, Kyriocentric and anthropocentric assumptions of mainstream scholarship. *Rebirth* can

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<sup>136</sup> Christ 1995 p.16, Christ 1997 p.xvi

<sup>137</sup> Ruether 1983

also be seen as a defence of Goddess religion presented to its 'cultured despisers'. The Preface lists some of the questions generated by attempts to present 'Goddess' as a meaningful symbol for contemporary spirituality. Christ claims to answer them all but acknowledges that 'answering' might mean changing the question - once it is appreciated that we need to challenge some of the 'most deeply held and unrecognised assumptions of our culture'.<sup>138</sup>

Much of the first part of the book is familiar to those who have been reading Christ's earlier articles. It consists of a survey of Christ's arguments for the metaphoric power of Goddess religion and for the politically and spiritually empowering process of reclaiming Goddess imagery and herstory. Christ also provides her justification for rooting theology in experience, drawing on her previous explorations of the paradigm shift in scholarship generated by a feminist challenge to the myth of objectivity. In the acknowledgements at the end of *Rebirth*, Christ reveals that it was the process of writing an article on the relationship between scholarship and experience<sup>139</sup> that enabled her to return to the manuscript of her systematic theology.

The second part of *Rebirth* explores some more recent developments in Christ's theology as she addresses the themes of classical theology - metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology and ethics. In doing so she offers a 'vision' which is summarised in the book's preface as the claim that

'The Goddess is the power of intelligent, embodied love that is the ground of all being. The earth is the body of the Goddess. All beings are interdependent in the web of life. Nature is intelligent, alive and aware. As part of nature, human beings are relational, embodied, and interdependent. The basis of ethics is the feeling of deep connection to all people and all beings in the web of life. The symbols and rituals of Goddess religion bring these values to consciousness and help us build communities in which we can create a more just, peaceful, and harmonious world.'<sup>140</sup>

Christ is therefore venturing further than before into an attempt to *define* the 'meaning of the Goddess'. She still defends the virtue of theology's fluidity in its use of Goddess

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<sup>138</sup> Christ 1997 p.xiv

<sup>139</sup> Christ 1996a

<sup>140</sup> Christ 1997 p. xv

language but nevertheless is prepared to tackle the awkward question of precisely *what* is meant by 'the Goddess'. She develops her theology against the background of a survey of other major contributions made towards defining Goddess. Christ makes it clear that whilst she values Nelle Morton's warnings against the acceptance of the Goddess as a transcendent 'fairy godmother' she wants to go beyond Morton's 'Metaphoric Image'. She explicitly rejects Morton's claim that the function of the Goddess was to "work herself out of the picture". For Christ, drawing on her own experiences, the Goddess is very much a 'personal presence'. She therefore also wants to claim that her understanding of Goddess is more than Starhawk's Immanence. In exploring these claims, Christ challenges the dualistic assumptions of presenting as mutually exclusive such alternatives as Immanent/Transcendent, theism/pantheism. In order to find a way out of 'the impasse created by understandings rooted in classical dualism', Christ turns to insights provided by process theology. This is a new feature of Christ's theology. It allows her to speak in the traditional language of a personal deity whilst maintaining her affirmation of 'flux and finitude' and of the earth as the body of the Goddess. Christ uses process theologians' understandings of God as fully immanent in yet also transcending the world in the sense that an organism is 'more' than just the collection of cells or the mind is 'more' than a collection of chemical reactions.<sup>141</sup> Christ employs these ideas to frame an expression of 'the nature and power of the Goddess'.

"As fully immanent, the Goddess is embodied in the finite, changing world. She is known in rock and flower and in the human heart, just as in the theologies of immanence. As the organism uniting the cells of the earth body, the Goddess is the firm foundation of changing life. As the mind, soul or enlivening power of the world body, the Goddess is intelligent, aware, alive, a kind of "person" with whom we can enter into relation. Thus the Goddess can "speak" to us through the natural world, through human relationships, through communities, through dreams and visions, expressing her desire to manifest life ever more fully in the world. And we can "speak" to her in song, meditation, prayer and ritual, manifesting our desire to attune ourselves with her rhythms, to experience our union with the body of the earth and all beings who live upon it."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Christ 1997 p.105

<sup>142</sup> Christ 1997 p. 106.

Christ cites Paula Gunn Allen as a source for the phrase 'intelligent, aware and alive' and Martin Buber as a source for the claim that the Sacred can be understood as 'a kind of person' with whom we are in relation. Throughout *Rebirth* Christ employs Paul Tillich's metaphor of the ground of being to describe the 'power' of the Goddess. She claims that her interpretation of this metaphor differs from Tillich's because she is using a 'process ontology'.<sup>143</sup> Christ identifies the ground of being -or beings- with 'intelligent embodied love'. She anticipates resistance to the use of the category 'love'. Her justification for abandoning the term 'eros'- drawn from the work of Audre Lorde- in favour of using 'love' to define the power of the Goddess is based on personal experience, on the 'mystical insight' she was granted when her mother died. She does, however, express her belief that this revelatory experience is 'available to everyone'. Christ quotes the famous passage from *The Color Purple* to illustrate that the character Shug also experienced the mystical insight that the ground of all being is a matrix of love. She also demonstrated that such an insight begins with a sense of connection with all beings in the web of life.

For Christ this mystical sense of connection to the natural world is the foundation for all she claims about the validity of Goddess religion. She suggests that such mystical experiences are available to all of us but 'we may lack the language to express what we feel'<sup>144</sup> Christ expresses her sense of hurt in having her understanding of mysticism rejected as 'a pathetic fallacy'. She presents all those who have articulated a mystical sense of connection and thereby influenced the construction of her theology: Martin Buber,<sup>145</sup> Paula Gunn Allen,<sup>146</sup> Susan Griffin,<sup>147</sup> and Alice Walker.<sup>148</sup> Christ describes her attempts in *Diving Deep and Surfacing* to express her post-

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<sup>143</sup> Christ 1997n. p.202

<sup>144</sup> Christ 1997 p.113.

<sup>145</sup> Buber 1970

<sup>146</sup> Paula Gunn Allen *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Traditions* Boston: Beacon Press 1986

<sup>147</sup> Griffin 1978

<sup>148</sup> Walker 1984



dualistic understanding of mysticism.<sup>149</sup> She is prepared to move beyond the exploration of personal perspectives to make the claim that if her vision of Goddess as fully embodied intelligent love which is the ground of all being is 'true' then the mystical experiences she describes "reflect ontological insight or revelation of the nature of being".<sup>150</sup>

When Christ confronts the issue of the Goddess as 'the One or the Many' she again uses the strategy of challenging the monotheism/polytheism polarity as a construct of patriarchal thinking. She wishes to embrace diversity by celebrating, with Downing, a multiplicity of 'Goddesses' but is also anxious to affirm an 'intuition of unity underlying the multiplicity of life'. Christ relates this intuition of unity to her focus on the 'web of life' as the relational, interdependent connection between all living beings and is prepared to move into dangerous ontological territory in maintaining this central feature of her thealogy.

Christ's survey of what a systematic thealogy might entail includes an attempt to address attitudes to death, suffering and evil. She thereby confronts some of the most compelling current challenges to Goddess feminism.<sup>151</sup> Christ acknowledges Sands' concerns about feminist the/alogies' ability to embrace the ambiguities presented by a full acceptance of the presence of suffering in a postmodern world. Christ's response, however, is to reject the call for a 'tragic heuristic' by dismissing the 'tragic worldview' as a derivation of the heroic ideal and a product of the patriarchal warrior society.<sup>152</sup> Christ's reflections on the meaning of death, suffering and evil have developed from her focus on the need to accept finitude and to relinquish the desire to be in total control. Her arguments are conveyed through the narrative of her own story. She understands her own struggle with the desire to be in control to her claim that she was

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<sup>149</sup> Christ 1997 p.117

<sup>150</sup> Christ 1997 p.123

<sup>151</sup> When Christ discusses her relationship with Judith Plaskow, she records that Plaskow's critique of Goddess religion centred on its failure to provide principles of justice. This issue has also been explored by Melissa Raphael. (Raphael 1995b)

<sup>152</sup> Christ 1997 p.131 - 132

'born to a father with a limited capacity to love'.<sup>153</sup> Christ's narrative reveals that her experiences of the implications of her relationship with her father and, as a consequence, her relationship with all the 'men' in her life - including God - has been a major influence in the development of her thought. Christ relates her rejection of a control culture, manifested in the myth of 'the American Dream', to her critique of New Age Goddess spirituality. She understands the New Age ideal of 'creating your own reality' as another expression of a denial of the embodied and relational nature of reality.<sup>154</sup> She is also critical of New Age philosophies which employ theories of reincarnation to claim that individuals 'choose' the situation of their birth in order to provide an important 'lesson they need to learn. She argues

When such theories are used to provide an explanation for our own suffering, they seem to me to be an attempt to deny that we are finite, interdependent, and not fully in control of the conditions of our own lives. When they are used to provide justification for the suffering of others, I believe they become pernicious.<sup>155</sup>

In *Rebirth*, Christ develops her ideas about the ethical implications of a Goddess-centred world-view into an attempt to present a theological ethic. She develops the theory first presented in 'Why Women Need the Goddess' where she referred to Geertz's 'moods and motivations', and speaks of the crucial relationship between mythos and ethos. She provides a critique of the mythos of a dominator culture and its resulting ethos of violence and oppression, legitimized by the 'ritual enactment of patriarchy's myths'. For Christ, only the creation of a new mythos, centred on the Goddess, can generate the social transformation demanded by spiritual feminism. She maintains, however, that the ethos resulting from Goddess religion must recognise that 'moral action always takes place within the context of the 'ambiguity' of life' and will therefore not provide universal principles or absolute commandments. Instead, she suggests nine 'touchstones'<sup>156</sup> which might provide guidance for an

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<sup>153</sup> Christ 1997 p.125

<sup>154</sup> Christ 1997 p.125

<sup>155</sup> Christ 1997 p.134

<sup>156</sup> Christ 1997 p.167 The touchstones are:  
Nurture Life

ethical way of living in the web of life. She then relates this ethos to strategies for social and political change in order to challenge the structures of domination, drawing on the power of the erotic.

When surveying her work, Sands claimed that Christ was more open to plurality and ambiguity in her ethics than in her religious aesthetics or mystical theology.<sup>157</sup> Christ does appear to go beyond a methodology of empathy in an attempt to produce an over-arching rationale for her search to 'find meaning in feminist spirituality'. She argues that the insights provided by her personal experiences can be used to construct an interpretation of the universal nature of a mystical sense of union with the web of life. Christ's quest to 'reveal' this 'intuition of unity' which underlies the multiplicity of life would be regarded by Sands as a confirmation of her claim that Christ's theology 'still dreams of the oneness that has entranced Western rationalism'.<sup>158</sup> Christ would almost certainly reject the view that her approach could be aligned to the aspirations of rationalism, a worldview she explicitly counters in her theology. She does, however, recognise the need to navigate a route through the philosophical and ontological issues raised by the tension between theology's acceptance of plurality and her own conviction, based in experience, of the reality of a loving Goddess. In a recent interview,<sup>159</sup> Christ clarified her current thinking about the nature of the Goddess. She maintained that although she had always viewed the Goddess as symbol which affirms female power, the female body, the female will and women's bonds with each other, she had never seen the Goddess as only that. She

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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 respect  
Practice great generosity  
Repair the web

<sup>157</sup> Sands 1994 p.168

<sup>158</sup> Sands p.1994 p.115

<sup>159</sup> Christ 2001

describes how, when she first came to the Goddess she moved 'back and forth' between viewing the Goddess as an impersonal power, present in nature and in humans, and understanding her also to be a personal presence who could receive prayers. For Christ, the experience she encountered at the time of her mother's death, when she felt the room flooded with love, provided confirmation of the reality of the Goddess. Christ's understanding of the Goddess has been affected by her move to Greece. She expresses her conviction that her theology comes not 'from her head' but 'through her feet'. A sense of connection with a particular place is central to her spirituality.<sup>160</sup>

Christ is now convinced that, as well as being a power expressed through the processes of life, death and renewal, the Goddess can be known as a personal presence whose nature is loving.<sup>161</sup> Christ's concern to articulate this realist theology in terms which do not reinscribe monotheism and which do not fall back on classical or biblical expressions of deity has motivated her to explore the possibilities of applying process thought to theological reflection. She has been focussing on the work of Hartshorne whose philosophy and ontology she finds very compatible with her understanding of the Goddess.<sup>162</sup> Whilst Hartshorne used the term 'God', he did, late in his life, accept the feminist critique of exclusively male religious imagery. Christ therefore finds it acceptable to apply Hartshorne's ideas to Goddess, even though he

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<sup>160</sup> Christ's use of the folk piety and traditions of Greek women to illustrate her theological reflection has provoked some criticism as is evident in her debate with Miriam Peskowitz. Christ disputed Peskowitz's call for a re-assessment of feminist spirituality's use of weaving metaphors (Peskowitz 1995) and, characteristically, drew on the life-stories of Greek peasant women to illustrate her validation of weaving imagery. (Christ 1997b) Peskowitz remained unconvinced and claimed that Christ 'uses a notion of "the spiritual" that seems to negate the inconveniences of material conditions'. (Peskowitz 1997 p.137) In a further response, Christ refuted the charge of universalism and essentialism. She maintained that she was not providing a romanticised view of traditional Greek life, but drawing on the sense of connection with the individual, contextualised values and experiences of real women. (This article is due to be published, a copy was sent to me by Carol Christ, February 2000)

<sup>161</sup> Christ 2001a

<sup>162</sup> In her comparison of her own theology with Hartshorne's philosophy, Christ draws on the following works: (Christ 2001) Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1948; *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* Albany: State University of New York 1984; 'Do Birds Enjoy Singing? An ornitho-philosophical Discourse in *The Zero Fallacy and Other Essays in Neo-classical Philosophy* edited by Mohammad Valady, Chicago and LA Salle, Illinois: Open court 1997.

did not use such terminology explicitly. She cites Hartshorne's claim that Goddess/God is the supremely relative being and capable of a perfect relationship with every form of life. As such, Goddess/God is subject to change. Hartshorne, however, developed a theory of 'dual transcendence' to argue that although Goddess/God's experience does change, Goddess/God's character does not. As Goddess/God's nature is constituted by social relations it is characterised by love and the impulse towards beauty, creativity and harmony. Christ finds these ideas, along with Hartshorne's challenges to anthropocentrism and to classical theories of God's disembodiment and omnipotence, a rich resource for developing her own theology. At the time of completing this thesis, Christ was working on a new book entitled *She Changes Everything She Touches: A Feminist Process Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>163</sup> Christ, like Morton, has identified the need for a metaphoric shift in what many feminists are now calling 'the social imaginary'. For Morton, however, Goddess set in motion a metaphoric movement which ushered in a new reality and the role of Goddess in this movement was 'to make herself dispensable'.<sup>164</sup> Christ has explicitly declined to follow the trajectory of this metaphoric movement.<sup>165</sup> Christ's theological journey has made her more certain of the Goddess as personal presence. Morton, on the other hand, feared that unless a metaphoric movement away from a realist notion of the Sacred was recognised, Goddess religion would result only in the sex - change of the head of a hierarchical structure which determined the social imaginary. I find Morton's arguments convincing and wish to travel with her image of a transparent, post-realist Goddess.

In considering the implications of Goddess metaphors for theo/alogy and for feminist strategies, however, I am led to encounter the 'problem' of Goddess. I remember how, when undertaking my degree in theology, I felt the impact of Gordon Kaufman's, now classic, book, *God the Problem*.<sup>166</sup> Kaufman considered all the ways in which the

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<sup>163</sup> Personal communication with Carol Christ August 2001

<sup>164</sup> Morton 1985 p.144

<sup>165</sup> Christ 1997p.104

<sup>166</sup> Kaufman 1972

concept of God was problematic in a post-metaphysical world, anticipating his later engagement with the challenge of postmodernist thought. He then concluded with the ultimate problem that, despite all the difficulties involved, he was still reluctant to 'give God up'. I find myself in an analogous situation with regard to Goddess. I am not yet prepared to relinquish the possibilities of Goddess-talk although I find it increasingly difficult to align myself with any expression of Goddess religion. The challenge, therefore, is to explore the possibilities which Goddess symbolism and spiritualities can offer to feminist strategies, negotiations and alliances. In order to make such a contribution, theology cannot remain outside an 'interrogation of the ground rules, the boundaries and the barriers which define feminist theory and politics'.<sup>167</sup> If spiritual feminists are to travel with those who are exploring and defining new territories, they need to be party to important aspects of this interrogation, the questioning of relationship between 'woman', 'body' and 'nature'. Carol Christ has made a vital contribution to a feminist paradigm shift in the study of religion and has engaged in dialogue with some postmodern theories. Her experience, however, has led her to a realist understanding of Goddess and an intuition of unity. My embodied knowing has led me in a different direction. When mapping out her journeys, Christ has chosen not to venture into the territory of fragmentation and plurality. Perhaps, like ancient cartographers, she would leave such areas of the map blank with the words "Here be monsters". There are, however, feminist thinkers who want to include 'monsters' in feminist negotiations about the social imaginary. They are suggesting that the possibilities for feminists lie in the conversations *between* monsters, nomads, cyborgs and goddesses.<sup>168</sup> I wish to explore where such discourse might lead. If, however, I am to explore the possibilities of post-realist theologies which are in conversation with postmodern narratives I need to consider how such theologies might relate to the Goddess-talk of 'real life women' who locate themselves upon a spiritual feminist journey. The work of Carol Christ has made a unique contribution towards the

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<sup>167</sup> Mc Robbie 1994 p.128

<sup>168</sup> Lykke & Braidotti 1996

presentation of women's narratives as spirituality. I intend to draw on such insights in order to relate Goddess-talk to individual women's spiritual journeys. My intention is to theologise with such women in order to explore further the possibilities of post-realist Goddess-talk. When considering the methodological issues presented by this heuristic element of my research I will also draw on the epistemological insights provided by Christ's reflections on embodied knowing.

## Chapter 4: APPROACHING METHODOLOGY

### Approaching this study

When developing a proposal for this thesis I defined as its aim an exploration of the role of Goddess symbolism in feminist spirituality. In this study I have presented my attempts to pursue this exploration in terms of my own journey. In the process, I have come to focus on Goddess-talk in relation to postmodern and post-structural feminist calls for new language, images and figurations. My travels have also led me to encounter the problematic nature of some of the assumptions underlying current expressions of feminist Goddess spirituality. There is now a need to revisit some of the dominant themes of feminist spirituality e.g. of 'journey' and 'wholeness' in the light of challenges presented by postmodern and post-structural feminist theories. These theories are sceptical about the notion of a unified subject, expressed as 'female Self'. Instead, they welcome expressions of subjectivity which recognise its plurality and fragmentation, a 'subjectivity as process'. They question 'visions of wholeness' and resist the attempt to find 'destinations'.

These theories present a considerable challenge to feminist spiritualities but also open up new possibilities for post-metaphysical expressions of spirituality. The emphasis in feminist spiritualities on 'story', 'experience' and 'narrative' could be developed to explore the potential for expressions of spirituality in the notion of subjectivity as process.

From the beginning, my research project envisioned the inclusion of a heuristic phase which drew upon the ideas and beliefs of other women who located themselves upon a feminist spiritual journey. The direction and method that such a process might take has developed and emerged out of the results of my own journey of exploration. I turn now to a consideration of the methodological issues raised by the inclusion of women's own stories in my attempts to analyse the



potential of Goddess-talk to generate embodied spiritualities which can respond to the challenges of a postmodern age. In considering such a process, I need to explore methodologies which relate to the methods of feminist theo/alogies. My first step is to argue for a qualitative approach to this stage of the research on both theoretical and epistemological grounds.

## **Qualitative Research Methodology**

The epistemological assumptions<sup>1</sup> underlying the feminist methods examined and employed in this study require qualitative rather than quantitative approaches to the heuristic stage of its research.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the epistemological 'shifts' generated by feminist scholarship, demonstrated by the work and reflections of Carol Christ<sup>3</sup>, which reveals the perspectival, situated, relational and embodied nature of knowing runs parallel with the interpretive turn taken by the further development of qualitative research methods.

An overview of the development of qualitative research methods illustrates its relevance to theories explored in this study. The issues identified in such an overview relate to theories of knowledge and experience encountered and employed throughout this study.

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Christ 1989, 1996a, Davaney 1987a, 1987b, Lennon & Whitford 1994

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Warren 1988

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Christ 1987a, 1989a, 1991, 1996a In the development of qualitative research methodologies, feminist researchers also encountered issues of androcentrism masquerading as 'objectivity'. (Roberts 1981, 1989)

"Feminists, in stressing the need for a reflexive sociology in which the sociologist takes her own experiences seriously and incorporates them into her work, expose themselves to challenges of a lack of objectivity from those of their male colleagues whose sociological insight does not enable them to see that their own work is affected in a similar way by their experiences and their view of the world as men." (Helen Roberts 'Women and their doctors: power and powerlessness in the research process' Roberts 1981 p.7-29) p.16

They also addressed the question of the power relations inherent in the quest for 'neutrality'. Oakley 1981

In their influential 'handbook'<sup>4</sup>, Denzin and Lincoln identify five 'moments' in the history of twentieth century qualitative research<sup>5</sup>. The first moment is designated the 'traditional' period, spanning the early 1900s to the Second World War. It is characterised by the formative work of famous ethnographers such as Malinowski and Mead. Although these scholars are associated with the birth of qualitative research methods, they still produced 'objective', colonialising accounts of field experiences that were reflective of a positivist science paradigm.<sup>6</sup> These scholars were striving to provide 'objective' accounts of the alien 'other'. Alongside these scholars, however, emerged the 'Chicago School', often regarded as the founders of qualitative research 'proper'.<sup>7</sup> The researchers associated with the Chicago School, who produces their most significant work in the years between the world wars, championed participant observation. This approach emphasises the life stories of the subjects being observed. In seeking 'to develop an interpretive methodology that maintained the centrality of the narrated life history'<sup>8</sup>, it marks an important stage in the 'narrative turn' of research methods in the twentieth century. According to Denzin and Lincoln, the next 'moment', the modernist phase, extending through the post war years to the 1970s, builds on the canonical work of the traditional period. It encounters a range of new interpretive theories -e.g. ethnomethodology, phenomenology, critical theory, feminism - and attempts to incorporate these into a growing diversity of research practices. This was the stage at which rigorous analysis was applied to qualitative methods, often in response to or borrowing from the methods adopted by quantitative approaches. It was this

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<sup>4</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994

<sup>5</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994 p.6-15

<sup>6</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994 p.7

<sup>7</sup> Hammersley 1989

<sup>8</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994 p.8

'moment' which saw the publication of the influential book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.<sup>9</sup>

The next stage (1970 -1986) is defined as the 'moment of blurred genres'. The range of interpretive methods available diversified considerably. Some were inherited from the modernist phase but the diversity was further increased by the emergence of new approaches such as poststructuralism, deconstructionalism and ethnomethodology. Such developments led to the view that the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities had become blurred. Denzin and Lincoln argue that this moment was determined by the work of Clifford Geertz. He argued for a realisation that 'the human disciplines were giving way to a more pluralistic, open-ended perspective'. This new perspective took cultural representations and their meanings as its point of departure.<sup>10</sup> Geertz referred to such an approach as an attempt to provide a 'thick description'. His intention was to explore the concept of culture in society

"...as interworked systems of construable signs...culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly –that is, *thickly* described."<sup>11</sup>

For Denzin and Lincoln, the rupture which brought in a fourth moment occurred in the mid-1980s. It brought about a 'crisis of representation'. The impact of new critical and feminist epistemologies and epistemologies of colour produced new questions about 'truth'. They questioned one of the major assumptions of qualitative research, that it is possible to represent the lived experience of others or even of oneself. This fourth moment reflects the 'interpretive, linguistic, and rhetorical turns' in social theory. With it, however, comes the need to recognise the power issues involved in the act of writing and the awareness that 'experience' cannot simply be

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<sup>9</sup> Glaser & Strauss 1967

<sup>10</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994 p.9

<sup>11</sup> Geertz 1993, p.10

'captured', it is 'created in the social text written by the researcher'.<sup>12</sup> Issues of validity, reliability and objectivity, which had been assumed to be settled in the earlier phases, now re-emerge. According to Denzin and Lincoln these issues need to be considered not within a positivist paradigm but within a recognition of the problematic nature of any attempt to make a link between experience and written text. With the crisis of representation, therefore, comes a crisis of legitimation. At the time of writing, at the end of the twentieth century, Denzin and Lincoln believed themselves to be living in the present, fifth, moment of qualitative research which is characterised by a need to respond to the dual crisis mentioned above. Whilst concerned to ensure that too much self- reflection does not stifle the qualitative research project completely, they see the need to 'return the author openly to the... text'.<sup>13</sup> They suggest that researchers should explore more explicitly creative forms of representation, using fictional narratives of the self, engage in dialogue with those studied or produce poetic texts. Denzin explores these possibilities further in a more recent work.<sup>14</sup> Essentially, Denzin and Lincoln perceive the role of qualitative researchers to be that of storytellers. They claim that

"...our most powerful effects as storytellers come when we expose the cultural plots and practices which guide our writing hands. These practices and plots lead us to see coherence where there is none, or to create meaning without understanding of the broader structures that tell us to tell things in a particular way."<sup>15</sup>

The epistemological issues highlighted by Denzin and Lincoln in their overview relate to the concerns I encounter as I approach the heuristic phase of my research. Their emphasis on the role of narrative and interpretation in the process of meaning making and their understanding of the role of researcher as storyteller resonate with

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<sup>12</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994 p.11

<sup>13</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994 p.578

<sup>14</sup> Denzin 1997

<sup>15</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994 p.584

the explorations of the relationship between story, experience and spirituality feminist theo/alogy. In both contexts, the issue of 'representation' remains crucial. Denzin and Lincoln continue to assume a method based on the possibility of some form of representation emerging from 'being in the field'. I, however, would wish to explore further some of their insights into the epistemological challenges to any notion of representation. In particular, I wish to pursue their suggestion that an effective approach might be to understand the role of the researcher as one who is in the process of dialogue with others.

The question of legitimacy, however, continues to be a central issue for qualitative researchers and not all agree with Denzin and Lincoln's analysis of the way forward. When approaching *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*<sup>16</sup>, some qualitative researchers still feel obliged to answer the accusation that their methods amount to 'loose', 'soft' or 'sloppy' science.<sup>17</sup> They are keen to affirm that qualitative researchers deal with 'fact' and not 'fantasy'.<sup>18</sup> They wish to assert the need for 'promoting academic integrity'.<sup>19</sup>

It is not, therefore, surprising that the first paper to be produced in the Sage Qualitative Research Methods series was concerned with reliability and validity.<sup>20</sup> At this stage, the authors of the paper, Kirk and Miller, were still assuming the necessity of 'objectivity' in qualitative research. They maintained, however, that their understanding of objectivity was not reliant upon positivism or the hypothetico-deductive method. Their arguments, nevertheless, did rely on the possibility of demonstrative refutation by the world of empirical reality that was somehow still 'out there'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Morse 1994

<sup>17</sup> Morse 1994 p. 3

<sup>18</sup> Morse 1994 p.1 -7

<sup>19</sup> Knafl 1994

<sup>20</sup> Kirk & Miller 1986

<sup>21</sup> Kirk & Miller 1986 p.11

It is within the context of this crucial issue of reliability and validity that Glaser and Strauss', *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, can be seen to be a seminal work in the development of qualitative research methods. The importance of this work lay in its careful consideration of the implications of an inductive rather than deductive approach to research. It stressed the idea that a theory that was 'fit' for the specific situation being studied could only emerge from the data provided by that situation. Careful analysis of data items using the constant comparative method would lead to the emergence of conceptual categories which would describe and explain the phenomenon under study. Several explanatory or conceptual categories would be integrated around a core category and so the theory would emerge. The idea was to follow up conceptually fruitful avenues and allow emergent concepts to dictate the direction and nature of the data collection.<sup>22</sup>

This theory had an enormous impact on the development of methods of qualitative research. In some ways it pioneered an approach which recognised the perspectival and 'intertextual' nature of all evidence. On the other hand, some now question its modernist assumptions in failing to acknowledge the role of the researcher in constructing interpretation<sup>23</sup>. Many also claim, that it, in practice, it is very difficult to follow this process.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, there has been considerable disagreement between the original authors as to the 'correct' understanding of this theory. In 1990, Strauss produced a book with Juliet Corbin which claimed to define in some detail, the 'procedures and techniques' of grounded theory.<sup>25</sup> This book is prescriptive in its approach to the 'coding' and 'adjunctive' procedures required to undertake and evaluate grounded theory. It has become a popular text in defining

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<sup>22</sup> Melia 1986 p.31

<sup>23</sup> Denzin & Lincoln 1994

<sup>24</sup> e.g. Roseneil 1993

<sup>25</sup> Strauss & Corbin 1990

the practice of grounded theory.<sup>26</sup> Glaser, however, has criticised its approach. He argues that Strauss is intent upon 'forcing' conceptual theory upon the data rather than allowing 'theoretical sensitivity' whereby data collection and analysis went on side by side until a core category emerged and was 'saturated'.<sup>27</sup> It would appear that Glaser recognises more fully than Strauss the problematic nature of failing to acknowledge the presence of prior concepts when approaching any data. He has not, however, pursued as fully as Denzin, Lincoln and the contributors to their handbook the implications of feminist and postmodern theories of the situatedness of the researcher and the constructed nature of the 'data' they examine.

### **Qualitative Research, Process and Embodied Knowing**

The methods of qualitative research can, I would argue, hold more potential for a heuristic approach to the narratives of feminist spirituality than is expressed either by 'grounded theory' or the approaches advocated by Denzin and Lincoln. Some of the epistemological implications raised by the 'fifth moment' of qualitative research are carried further by Margot Ely and others in their collection, *Doing Qualitative Research; Circles within Circles*.<sup>28</sup> According to Ely et al, qualitative research means being 'engaged in in-process, recursive analysis, meaning-making and reporting'. In a move which reflects the imagery of feminist spiritualities, they employ metaphors of circles and spirals to emphasise the importance of *process* in qualitative research. They have a model of research in which the journey is home whereby there may be more questions at the end of the project than at the beginning. Ely et al follow a similar approach to grounded theory in that they maintain the importance of allowing the researcher's interaction with the situation being researched to generate the relevant questions to be asked. They pursue the implications of this

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<sup>26</sup> Melia 1997 p.31

<sup>27</sup> Melia 1997 p.31

<sup>28</sup> Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, McCormack & Steinmetz 1991

process model further, however, by recognising that an honest declaration of the affective dimension of the research process is vital to its validity. They make a connection between their challenge to positivist approaches to research which propose notions of validity based upon distance and objectivity and their insistence that the subjectivity of researcher and researched be fully acknowledged. They advocate that researchers keep a journal of their own feelings about the research process, including their apprehensions, anxieties and emotional involvement. They view this as an important aspect of the research project itself. They frequently emphasise the role of *experience* in the process of meaning-making which they view as the goal of qualitative research. This challenge to the myth of objectivity and recognition of the embodied nature of any knowledge means that Ely et al also challenge some of the assumptions about subject/object and power relations in research. In their understanding of qualitative research, the role of researcher is one of 'collaborator in research'.

The approach advocated by Ely et al, has many points of contact with Christ's theories of embodied knowing and her arguments for a methodology of empathy. Christ argues for the recognition and declaration of personal perspectives in scholarship as the means to counter the myth of objectivity employed to screen unacknowledged androcentrism. She maintains that this is also a safeguard against feminist scholars employing false absolutes and universalisms. Christ emphasises the affective dimension of knowledge. She relates scholarship to eros because it stems from

...a passion to connect, a desire to deepen our understanding of ourselves and others and to preserve or transform the world... Within the ethos of eros the scholar remains firmly rooted in her or his body, life experience, history, values, judgements and interests. Not presuming to speak universally or dispassionately, the scholar speaks from a standpoint that is acknowledged to be finite and limited. But rather than remaining "narrowly personal", "merely confessional", "self-referential or "self-indulgent", - discrediting terms taken from the ethos of objectivity - erotic scholarship moves from personal passion to empathy.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Christ 1996a p.30



The issue of 'empathy' is one to which a consideration of qualitative research must return. Elsewhere, however, Christ has spoken of a 'methodology of empathy' in a different sense. She argues that in order to acknowledge difference and avoid false universalism in an uncritical use of the category of experience, the feminist scholar needs to locate her position within her autobiography. Christ maintains that only when a writer's perspective is explicitly rooted within her life experience (as she interprets it), can the possibility of any sense of commonality be attained. If those who hear the story find that it does relate to their own experience, then a sense of connection exists for the hearer.

There is considerable discussion of the role of autobiography and life stories within qualitative research. Issues relating to the relationship between narrative, experience and knowledge are central to the content and method of this study.

Within the context of the theories examined in the first part of the study, I wish to explore the possibility of expressing 'narrative spirituality as process' using Goddess talk. Part of this exploration is to listen to the narratives of women who understand themselves to be on a feminist spiritual journey and/or use Goddess-talk to express their spirituality. In valuing women's own narratives, I am reflecting a central feature of the feminist theories and spiritualities I am examining. At the same time, however, I need to contextualise the women's narratives within the feminist theo/aological debates surrounding the problematic nature of using 'women's experience' as a category. My methods, nevertheless, acknowledge the implications of a theory of knowledge as 'embodied thinking' Such an acknowledgement challenges the privileging of written texts. It also opens up possibilities for interrogating and interpreting the spoken narratives in the same way that I have approached the theories of Christ, Braidotti and others.

When considering a rationale for the methods adopted in my approach to my interviews with the women who agreed to take part in my research, I need to employ a methodology which fully recognises the epistemological implications of the relationship between narrative, experience and knowing. Such a recognition has contributed to the growing impact of narrative analysis upon the methods of interviewing in qualitative research. Catherine Kohler Riessman explains the 'narrative turn' taken by all the social sciences in terms of the realisation that 'individuals become the autobiographical narratives they tell about their lives'.<sup>30</sup> Riessman demonstrates how such an understanding has emerged from the growing challenge to a view of language as a transparent medium, unambiguously reflecting stable, singular meanings. A critique of such realist, positivist assumptions about the relationship between language and knowing provides the philosophical underpinning for narrative studies. Scepticism about a correspondence theory of truth leads to an understanding of language as 'deeply constitutive of reality, not simply a technical device for establishing meaning'. Riessman's recognition that women's stories about their lives are constantly changing, being re-edited and re-interpreted reflects an understanding of identity as subjectivity in process. Riessman argues that 'informants' stories do not mirror a world "out there". They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with...assumptions and interpretive'.<sup>31</sup> An important implication of this for my research is an awareness that any attempt to analyse narratives is an attempt *to interpret interpretations*. The methods of narrative analysis explored by Riessman employ a structured approach which attempt to provide some form of representation, albeit based on notions of 'trustworthiness' rather than 'truth'.<sup>32</sup> My own approach has been informed by case studies of research which pursue further the role of dialogue in

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<sup>30</sup> Riessman 1993 p.20

<sup>31</sup> Riessman 1993 p.4-5

<sup>32</sup> Riessman 1993 p.64

qualitative interviewing. I therefore draw on the methods explored by Casey, Roseneil and Kvale in order to underpin my own approach to the women's narratives.

### **Narratives, Discourse and Heteroglossia**

Kathleen Casey was researching the ways in which women teachers worked for social change within their everyday lives in the U.S.A.<sup>33</sup> She worked with Catholic nuns and with African American and Jewish teachers. Casey used these women's own accounts of their life narratives in order to explore the relationship between teaching and political action in the lives of ordinary teachers. Drawing on the theories of the Popular Memory Group,<sup>34</sup> Casey argues for the role of relational analysis in understanding the significance of oral histories. She is convinced by the argument of the Popular Memory Group that the role of a historian-researcher is not to distinguish and separate the 'objective' from the 'subjective' but to recognise the relationship between them.

Casey understands the life history narratives of the women she interviewed as texts. When attempting to interpret these texts, however, she found the techniques provided by academic sociology wanting. Casey asked her interviewees to provide their own versions of their life narratives. As a result their narratives did not always address issues that a quantitative methods would stipulate. Casey wanted an analysis of the texts which allowed her to appreciate the pattern of the women's own priorities. In order to do this she turned instead to a framework based on Bakhtin's theory of discourses. Casey drew on Bakhtin's sensitivity to the plurality of experiences and their relation to the intersection of many different discourses. In developing his use of the dialogic imagination, Bakhtin was the first to use the term 'heteroglossia' - (later to be employed by Braidotti and Haraway). Casey drew the title of her book from this quotation from Bakhtin which reflects, for her, not only the

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<sup>33</sup> Casey 1993

<sup>34</sup> Casey 1993 p.13

plurality of subjectivity but also the ethical impulse in recognising the need for dialogue between discourses.

What is it that guarantees the internal connection among the elements of personality? Only the unity of responsibility. For what I have experienced and understood, I answer with my life.<sup>35</sup>

It was therefore a central feature of Casey's methodology that she began her analysis with an autobiographical account of her own identity as a woman teacher working for social change. She also included autobiographical references in her interpretation of the life narratives.

Sasha Roseneil's reflections upon the methodology adopted in her research focus further upon issues raised by women's narratives, autobiography and by the relationship between 'insider' and 'distant' approaches to qualitative research. Many of the distinctive features of Roseneil's research project relate closely to the questions I need to consider when approaching the heuristic phase of my research. This is reflected in the title of her chapter - *Greenham Revisited Researching Myself and My Sisters*<sup>36</sup>. Roseneil had been at Greenham and then later wrote a doctoral thesis exploring 'the social significance of Greenham on both a micro-level, to the tens of thousands whose lives were changed by the experience of involvement, and on a macro-level, to the social structures and institutions of a hetero-patriarchal society.'<sup>37</sup> In her reflections on the research process involved she considers feminist methodological principles, her autobiographical background, issues arising from her 'insider' status and from the retrospective nature of the research, the role of her own experience in her analysis and the ethico-political issues surrounding her endeavour.

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<sup>35</sup> (Morson GS (ed.) (1986) *Bakhtin - Essays and Dialogues on his Work* University of Chicago Press p.x quoted in Casey p.24)

<sup>36</sup> Roseneil 1993

<sup>37</sup> Roseneil 1993 p.177

Roseneil maintains that central to a feminist methodology of research is a focus on women's own interpretations of their experience, a rejection of value - neutrality and a commitment to reflexivity, locating the researcher on the same critical plane as the researched. Roseneil's own commitment to this last principle led her to explore the role of her own subjectivity in constructing her research product. She understands a vital aspect of this process to be the writing of her 'intellectual autobiography'.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, so strongly does she feel the methodological importance of this principle that Roseneil felt it necessary to reveal the impact on her research of her own lesbian identity.

Roseneil also provides theoretical bases for use of 'insider research'. She cites, for instance, previous recognition of the value of 'auto-ethnography'. She quotes the researcher C. Greed who defined her study of fellow members of her profession as 'retrospective ethnography' because she said 'I have already lived what I am researching'.<sup>39</sup> Roseneil also argues that the best qualitative research is done by those who are 'empirically literate', that is, already familiar with the phenomenon under study. When considering her process of analysing and theorizing upon the narratives provided by the Greenham women, Roseneil addresses the issue of identifying the key questions. She argues that, like most research, her approach does not conform to either of the traditional models of induction or deduction. She draws on the 'grounded theory' of Glaser and Strauss but recognises that she entered the research with a collection of ideas and theories which resulted from her own previous experience and reflections. Central to Roseneil's methodology was the significant principle that the interviewees must participate in the theorizing. She makes explicit her desire not to theorize *about* Greenham women but theorize *with* them.<sup>40</sup> Having established this theoretical approach, Roseneil is, however, honest about the remaining power issues to be considered. Despite the dialogic nature of the interviews, she acknowledged that in the end, it was *her* analysis that was used

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<sup>38</sup> Roseneil p.181

<sup>39</sup> Roseneil p.188

<sup>40</sup> Roseneil p.202

to interpret the views of other women and *she* retained the power of authorship. She therefore took steps not to abuse this power, including the establishment of 'informed consent'.<sup>41</sup>

## Inter Views

The methodologies explored by Casey and Roseneil make many points of contact with the theoretical issues presented by my own research. I am not proposing to engage in ethnographic research in a manner comparable to these researchers but I wish to employ a similar approach to the use of interviewing and the dialogue with women's narratives. When exploring the role of interviewer in qualitative research, however, I intend to draw on the insights provided by Steinar Kvale.<sup>42</sup> His approach highlights the epistemological issues raised by qualitative approaches to research. He presents two contrasting metaphors in order to illustrate the implications of different understandings of the research process.<sup>43</sup> The interviewer can be understood either as a miner or as a traveller. As a miner, the researcher seeks to extract objective facts or nuggets of meaning. Knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior, waiting to be uncovered, uncontaminated, by the miner. These precious facts are then 'purified' - by transcribing their meaning into written text. Finally, the value of the end product - its degree of purity - is determined by correlating it with an objective, external real world or to a realm of subjective, inner, authentic experiences. Kvale rejects this perception in favour of a traveller metaphor which connects well with an image of nomadic subjectivity and with feminist spiritualities use of journey imagery. This metaphor also resonates with my own approach to the process of knowing and to my interaction with other women's narratives. As a traveller, the interviewer sets out upon a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home. The interviewer/traveller 'wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people encountered.' Kvale draws attention to

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<sup>41</sup> Roseneil p.203 - 205

<sup>42</sup> Kvale 1996

<sup>43</sup> Kvale 1996 p.3-5

the fact that should the traveller choose to follow a *method*, it would be in the original Greek meaning of "a route that leads to a goal". He also points out that when the traveller asks questions of the local inhabitants which lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, then the traveller is conversing with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as "wandering together with". Kvale is therefore happy to acknowledge that this journey might not only lead to new knowledge, but also to a process of change in the traveller. He argues that the transformative effects of travelling are expressed in the German term *Bildungsreise* - a scholarly, formative journey. Kvale explores the functions of conversation as research. The contrast between the two metaphors of miner and traveller represents differing concepts of knowledge formation. In favouring the traveller, Kvale is opting for a postmodern constructive understanding of knowledge which involves a conversational approach to social research. He claims that the basic subject matter of social research 'is no longer objective data to be quantified but meaningful relations to be interpreted'.<sup>44</sup> Kvale suggests that the growing focus upon the role of the qualitative interview may in part be due to the correspondence of themes central to it and to current philosophy. Kvale lists these as including experience, meaning, life world, conversation, dialogue, narrative and language. He argues that the development of interview as research 'involves a challenge to renew, broaden and enrich conceptions of knowledge and research'.<sup>45</sup> Kvale adopts what he terms a postmodern approach, in line with the traveller metaphor, which emphasises the constructive nature of the knowledge(s) created through the interaction of the partners in the interview conversation.<sup>46</sup> In providing practical advice for the design and process of qualitative interviewing, Kvale wishes to steer a course between the Charybdis of 'no-method' and the Scylla of 'all-method'.<sup>47</sup> He attempts this by focussing upon expertise, skills and craftsmanship (sic) of the researcher. Kvale

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<sup>44</sup> Kvale 1996 p.11

<sup>45</sup> Kvale 1996 p.10

<sup>46</sup> Kvale 1996 p.11

<sup>47</sup> .Kvale p. 79-80

maintains that interview research is a craft that, if well carried out, can become an art. Many analyses of the methodological decisions have to be made on the spot, during the interview. This, he argues, requires a high level of skill in the interviewer, who needs to be knowledgeable about the topic being explored and familiar with the methodological options available as well as having a grasp of the conceptual issues of producing knowledge(s) through conversation.

Kvale stresses the interconnectedness of the practical issues of the interview method and the theoretical issues of the nature of interview knowledge(s). He maintains that

The qualitative research interview is a construction site for knowledge. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an exchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest.<sup>48</sup>

Kvale identifies as one of the main themes of his work the interdependence of human interaction and knowledge production. In order to illustrate this, he uses Rubin's well-known ambiguous drawing of two faces in profile with the shape of a vase between them. The viewer can either focus on the faces or on the shape between them, but not both at the same time. Kvale uses this figure to demonstrate his perspective of the interview as *inter view*. One can focus on the faces and conceive of the interview as interaction between two persons. Alternatively, one can focus on the vase between them as containing knowledge constructed *inter* the views of the interviewer and interviewee. There is, Kvale maintains, an alternation between the knowers and the known, between the constructors and the constructed.

Kvale suggests seven stages of investigation as a guide to developing the craft of the qualitative interview. These are thematizing-designing-interviewing-transcribing-analyzing-verifying-reporting. The issues of *verification* and *authenticity* in qualitative research are contentious ones. Critics of qualitative research methods often accuse them of failing to correspond to what Kvale terms 'the scientific holy trinity' of

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<sup>48</sup> Kvale 1996 p.1



generalizability, reliability and validity.<sup>49</sup> Kvale explores carefully the assumptions lying behind positivist approaches to verification. He demonstrates the ways in which they rely on a referential understanding of knowledge, which are now challenged by the insights of postmodern and post-structural theories. Once the apprehension of 'truth' as corresponding to an absolute and objective reality is questioned, notions of validity must radically change. As Kvale argues

The conception of knowledge as a mirror of reality is replaced by knowledge as a social construction of reality. Truth is constructed through dialogue; valid knowledge claims emerge as conflicting interpretations and action possibilities are discussed and negotiated among the members of a community.<sup>50</sup>

Kvale attempts to 'demystify' the concept of validity by relating it to the 'craftsmanship' of inter-viewing. He argues that validity is ascertained by examining the sources of invalidity at every stage of the research, understanding it as an embodied process.<sup>51</sup> Other researchers within qualitative research continue to examine its validity in 'making meaning'<sup>52</sup>, but they are not always grounded as firmly in epistemological concerns as Kvale's exploration. It is interesting to note that when Kvale is surveying the range of objections levelled against qualitative interviews as research, he cites an example from the feminist study of religion.<sup>53</sup> From a feminist perspective, it could, however, be argued that Kvale does not acknowledge sufficiently the power issues inherent in the interviewing process.

### **Developing a Methodology**

I am arguing that the epistemological implications of the theories of qualitative research, explored by the scholars above, inform a methodology appropriate to my own research. I approach the heuristic stage of my project understanding conversation as research and as a means of constructing knowledges. This allows

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<sup>49</sup> Kvale p.229

<sup>50</sup> Kvale p.239)

<sup>51</sup> Kvale p.241-252

<sup>52</sup> e.g.Hammersley1989

for a methodology which recognises the relational and embodied nature of knowledge. With Kvale, I understand my research to be a process 'inter views'. I adopt a traveller metaphor for the role of researcher which reflects the nomadic nature of the subject as process. The purpose of the 'inter - views' is not to provide a sociological profile of spiritual feminists.<sup>54</sup> I do not present my sample as 'representative' of the Goddess movement. Indeed, the post-Enlightenment theories of knowledge which inform the dissertation<sup>55</sup> preclude the possibility of claiming to 'represent' the other. Instead, I approach the heuristic stage of the research with an epistemology informed by the feminist theories I am exploring. With Casey, I understand women's narratives as texts with which I am in dialogue. I am attempting to ensure that my position as researcher, author, interpreter and fellow-traveller is clearly acknowledged in the text. I approach these narratives having already formed questions as a result of my own journey. I intend to adopt a hermeneutical approach to the analysis of the inter-views.<sup>56</sup> This method involves a process by which I share my reflections during inter-views and allow further questions and interpretations to emerge. Kvale's provides a seven stage model of 'thematizing-designing-interviewing-transcribing-analyzing-verifying-reporting' for this hermeneutical process. The methods I have employed, however, adopt a less linear model. Instead, I acknowledge a spiralling process of interpretation emerging from an on-going conversation between the themes identified in my survey of the contemporary Goddess movement, the theories developed in dialogue with written texts and the inter - views with women's spoken narratives. Such a process of dialogue and interpretation will first need to identify the features of a feminist process spirituality

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<sup>53</sup> (Kvale p.282-3)

<sup>54</sup> cp. Eller 1993

<sup>55</sup> e.g. Christ 1989, 1996a, Davaney, 1987a, 1987b, Lennon & Whitford 1994, Riessman 1993, Newman & Holzman 1997

<sup>56</sup> Kvale p.46-50

and relate these to the women's own expressions of their spirituality. It will also need to analyse the role of Goddess talk in such expressions.

Within the context of the theoretical issues explored in the dissertation, I wish to explore the possibilities presented by Goddess-talk for new understandings of spirituality. My research methods involve a developmental process but they challenge some of the linear assumptions of Kvale's framework. My exploration involves three stages. Firstly, to examine the women's narratives in order to identify distinctive aspects of feminist/Goddess spirituality, albeit expressed in diverse ways. Secondly, to analyse these themes further in the light of relevant, contemporary debate within feminist theo/alogy and in response to the challenges of postmodern and poststructural theories. Thirdly, to develop the implications of these challenges in relation to further possibilities for expressions of spirituality and sacrality.

When considering the process of 'verifying' and 'reporting', therefore, I have pursued the implications of Kvale's 'traveller' epistemology further than his linear model. I am acknowledging my process of interpreting the women's interpretations. I am questioning whether it is possible to push the women's expressions of spirituality further along the trajectory of their own arguments. If the challenges to metaphysical dualism, inherent in feminist Goddess-talk, are pursued, what possibilities for new expressions of spirituality emerge? In other words, I am approaching the narratives with the question "What would happen if....?" In employing such a method, I am using a paradigm in which 'knowledge' is 'in process'. This form of inter - viewing acknowledges the role of conversation in constructing knowledges. My conversation with the women's narratives continues in my further engagement with their ideas in relation to my own theorizing.

I wish to interrogate the implications of post -dualistic spiritualities which take seriously the fluidity and plurality and relationality of subjectivity as process. I intend also to explore the role of Goddess-talk in the women's narratives. This exploration

will be informed by Morton's presentation of Goddess language as metaphoric process and by an understanding of Goddess-talk as 'figurations' within 'political fictions' which generate possibilities for positive and effective responses to devalued difference.

In wishing to theorize *with* and not *about* the women with whom I converse, I am recognising, with Roseneil, that 'in researching my sisters I am researching myself'. I acknowledge that this does not exempt me from declaring the ethico-political issues involved in the power relations of research. Indeed, an acknowledgement of my role as interpreter brings with it serious ethical implications. It is therefore essential that my research demonstrates that the women with whom I am theorising operate within a context of informed consent.

## **Chapter 5: INTER-VIEWING WITH WOMEN'S NARRATIVES**

The heuristic aspect of my research is significant not because it claims to provide an ethnographic study of feminist spirituality but because it reflects some of the epistemological implications of feminists perspectives on the study of religion. Such perspectives validate the embodied knowing expressed in women's own accounts of their narratives. My intention is to investigate the possible trajectory of developments in the perceptions of spirituality and the Sacred generated by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion. My sources for such an exploration are, primarily, the literature produced by feminist theorists and theo/alogians. My reflections upon this material are, however, informed by the conversations I have had with other women and with other scholars<sup>1</sup>. The unstructured inter-views that I arranged with a specific group of spiritual feminists provided a further aspect of the 'construction of knowledge'.

I inter-viewed with nine women. My own location and connections determined the choice of respondents. The nature of the group and my interaction with them was also affected by my own relationship with Goddess feminism. Two of the respondents were very well known to me, two I knew slightly and have since come to know well, five were not known to me personally but were referred to me by others. I contacted these women through connections I had made with other Goddess feminists, some of whom were within the interview group.

Three of the women were or had been attached to the same women's spirituality group of which I was not a member. Two of these and one other had taken the same course in feminist theology led by a prominent figure in the British Goddess movement. One of the women had attended a course which I had led and taken part in a 'Womanspirit' group of which I was part.

This intentionally small scale research is, therefore, not intended to be 'representational' of the Goddess movement nor does it claim to be a statistically accurate sampling of Goddess feminists. Eller makes the same point about her interview group of 32 women. She provides a disclaimer about the numerical and geographical limits of the range of her interviewing group and maintains that the primary source for her research is the literature of the movement, alongside participant observation. She is, nevertheless, intending to provide a sociological study of feminist spirituality as a religious movement in a way that I am not.<sup>2</sup>

My intention was to interact with women's spoken narratives, as well as with written texts, in order to explore the possibilities of Goddess talk for generating new understandings of the concept of spirituality and of notions of the Sacred. I therefore spoke to women who, in some way, identified themselves as being on a feminist spiritual journey and/or used Goddess imagery to express the Divine. I chose to be in conversation with women who were willing to explore their ideas with me. Even within such a small group, there is a wide range of perceptions and understandings of the term 'Goddess' and of the role of feminist spirituality. As with other 'sample groups' of Goddess feminists, however, this diversity of opinions is not mirrored by a wide range of ethnic or social backgrounds<sup>3</sup>. The inter-views took place between March 1999 and July 2000. The inter-views were unstructured, following Kvale's conversation model.<sup>4</sup> I interacted with the women's ideas during the interview. They provided informed consent for their views to be used in my own interpretations of Goddess talk, they also had access to the transcripts of the inter-views. These are included as appendices. Quotations from and references to the narratives are referenced in the text under the names of the women and correspond to the page numbers of the

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Daly has acknowledges this epistemological process by quoting and referencing conversations, often by telephone, as sources of her reflection and this method has been adopted by other feminist theo/alogians.

<sup>2</sup> Eller 1993

<sup>3</sup> Eller 1993 p, 18 - 21; Raphael 2000 p.25

transcripts. When referring to the participants, I have used pseudonyms unless they specifically asked to be represented by their own name.

I will provide a brief introduction to each participant in the order in which they were interviewed.

**Michelle** is single and in her forties. I met her through contact with another Goddess feminist who ran a course on feminist theo/alogy. Michelle is French by birth, though now living in Britain. During the inter-view, she sometimes needed to consider how to express complex concepts in a second language.

**Gina** is in her late forties, married and has three children and two grandchildren. I met Gina when she joined a Religious Studies degree as a mature student at the college at which I work. Gina also attended a 'Womanspirit' group there which has since disbanded. After gaining her degree, Gina did some part time teaching at the college.

**Amy** is single and in her early thirties. I was put in contact with Amy by other members of the women's spirituality group she was then attending.

**Pamela** is in her fifties, married with two grown up children. She is an active member of the Unitarian Church. I was put in contact with Pamela through Helen.

**Annie** is in her thirties and lives with her partner. She has a part time job but also works as a community priestess in the Pagan tradition. Helen also acted as gatekeeper in arranging contact with Annie, although I had heard her speak at a Goddess conference.

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<sup>4</sup> Kvale 1996

**Cessy** is in her fifties and is a Catholic nun in the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. This is a modern order, founded in the USA in the late nineteenth century with the precise intention of addressing issues of social justice and the rights of women in particular. The sisters do not wear habits. Cessy was based in Mexico City, although she also spent time in the USA and elsewhere in Latin America, especially El Salvador and Guatemala. Cessy ran a series of GATE (Global Awareness through Experience) programmes. These were aimed at participants from North America, involving them in an 'immersion' experience in order to increase awareness of the social and economic situations facing the people of Latin America. The sisters worked closely with members of the Christian base communities, especially the women. For the last few years, Cessy has organised a 'Goddess Gate'. This is intended for women and involves them in an exploration of feminine aspects of the Divine and female sacrality through the symbols, artefacts and sacred sites of Central Mexico. I participated in this Goddess Gate in August 1999 and interviewed Cessy in her base at Mexico City.

**Jaki** is in her fifties and is now single with one adult son. I met Jaki through three means of contact. She was a member of a women's ritual group I also attended, she had taken the feminist theology course organised by a mutual friend and then attended the college at which I worked in order to complete a degree qualification by taking the third year level of the Study of Religions course. I inter-viewed Jaki when she first joined the course. I have since come to know her well.

**Emily** is single and in her forties. She had taken the same course in feminist theology as Jaki and had attended the same women's ritual group. After giving the inter-view, Emily also joined the third year of the Study of Religions course.



**Helen** is in her forties, single and has one daughter. She has been a close friend for many years. Helen works from home as a healer and therapist. She identifies herself as a Pagan and belongs to the local Unitarian community.

### **Focus of the inter-views**

Cynthia Eller has provided the most comprehensive survey, to date, of feminist spirituality as a new religious movement<sup>5</sup>. In doing so, she has identified as the five most characteristic elements of the movement: valuing women's empowerment; practising ritual and/or magic; revering nature; using the feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis and espousing the revisionist version of Western history favoured by the movement<sup>6</sup>. An overview of the inter-views in which I participated reveals many points of agreement with Eller's classification. There are, however, differences of emphasis. My own focus on the potential of Goddess-talk for the generation of post-metaphysical expressions of spirituality and post-realist notions of the Sacred affected the nature of my interaction with the women's narratives. I made this aspect of my own narrative clear to the women during the interview. As discussed in the previous chapter on methodology, such a failure to maintain objectivity would, according to some epistemological models, render my research unreliable and invalid. In the light, however, of challenges to this epistemological paradigm provided by feminist theory and qualitative methods of research, I would maintain that open acknowledgement of my perspectival and contextual nature of my position as researcher contributes to the validity of my findings.

It is interesting to apply the same issues to Eller's research in the light of her subsequent work. Seven years after writing the influential *Living In the Lap of the*

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<sup>5</sup> Eller 1993

<sup>6</sup> Eller 1993 p.6

Goddess, Eller has produced the controversial work, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*<sup>7</sup>. Here, Eller makes a brief reference to the influence of her own story on her apparent fixation upon the dangerous implications of the matriarchy myth for feminist spirituality<sup>8</sup>. The critiques from within the Goddess movement of Eller's representation of the views of 'feminist matriarchalists' have been discussed in a previous chapter. One could, however, now ask how far Eller's own focus on the importance of feminist spirituality's 'sacred history' influenced the design of her interview outline and the analysis of its results. The issue of pre-patriarchal Goddess herstory did not arise in any of my inter-views. Michelle drew on the images of ancient Cretan societies, but was more concerned with their transformative power than with their historicity. Many of the women referred to the notion of a 'lost' spirituality but did not relate this specifically to an historic event.

Similarly, Eller places considerable emphasis on the role of ritual in feminist spirituality, whereas I did not focus on it in my analysis of the women's narratives. The narratives reveal that, for these women also, ritual *is* a central aspect of their spirituality. My particular and expressed intention, however, was to explore the relationships *between* ritual, spirituality and understandings of the sacred.

The focus of my conversations with the women was on the relationship between Goddess-talk and feminist spiritualities. Unlike Eller, I did not ask the inter-viewees to provide information about their personal life or sexuality. I did, however, ask the women to provide their reflections upon the nature of the Goddess, despite the usual theological resistance to definitions. I acknowledge my own position as inter-viewer in generating this theological conversation.

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<sup>7</sup> Eller 2000

<sup>8</sup> Eller 2000 p p.3 - 6

## **Feminist Spiritualities**

As illustrated in the previous chapters, I understand the emergence of contemporary 'Goddess-talk' to have resulted from the paradigm shift generated by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion. This process of revisioning has also facilitated new and transformative expressions of the notion of spirituality. Inherent in these is a reclaiming of those aspects which had been relegated to the 'underside' of a classical dualistic paradigm. In particular, feminist spiritualities offered a challenge to perceptions of spirituality which denigrated, demonized or negated female bodiliness. Feminist spirituality has therefore been expressed through affirmations of the material, physical world, of female corporeality and sexuality, through change, flux and immanence. Feminist spiritualities are embodied and biophilic. Inherent in a feminist critique of a dualistic paradigm is an awareness of the relationship between spirituality and holism, connectedness and relationality.

Also central to such revisioning is an awareness of the socio/political implications of religious imagery which presented femaleness as ontologically opposed to spiritual development and which excluded women's experience from any notion of the Sacred. As a result, a maxim of the emerging women's spirituality movement is "The personal is political, is spiritual."<sup>9</sup> Feminist perceptions of spirituality place it firmly within the realm of political action. Feminist approaches to spirituality address the ways in which patriarchal expressions of the spiritual life had negated female subjectivity. In response, women's attempts to dis-cover and re-affirm their own sense of self have been understood as spiritual quests. Images of journey and of wholeness are therefore frequently used to express these aspects of feminist spiritualities.

Furthermore, spiritual feminists have argued that the hierarchical principles which determine the dualistic paradigm provide the prototype for all oppressive

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. Spretnak 1982

structures<sup>10</sup>. Once the notion of the 'Absolute' and the 'Other' has been established, humanity and reality are determined by that which is normative and that which is not. There have, of course, always been counter-cultural movements, especially mystical traditions, which have challenged dualistic assumptions and have found the Sacred within the Other. The dominant discourse of western culture, however, has been determined by a set of binary oppositions, expressed in gendered language, which devalues 'otherness'. A worldview which so denigrates difference provides the justification for demonising or even destroying the Other. In contrast, feminist spiritualities provide post-dualistic expressions of the sacred which affirm diversity, otherness and relation.

In the light of this understanding of feminist spirituality, supported by my reading of the relevant literature, I approached the narratives of the women with whom I was in conversation. I wished to analyse the women's responses in relation to central characteristics of feminist spirituality and to theology.

For the purposes of this study, I have therefore identified the characteristics as

- use of Goddess-talk
- female empowerment
- post-dualistic expressions of embodied spirituality
- biophilic sense of connection with 'nature'
- relationality
- political awareness
- affirmation of female bodily sacrality
- respect for difference
- reclaiming and affirming the 'Other'

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<sup>10</sup> e.g. Ruether 1983

When conducting and analysing my inter-views, I intended to examine the diverse ways and the extent to which these central characteristics of feminist spiritualities were expressed in the women's narratives.

## USE OF GODDESS-TALK

In view of my own focus, the emphasis of the inter-views was on the ways in which the women used and interpreted 'Goddess-talk'. It is interesting to note that the women's responses spanned all the 'strands' discussed in chapter 2. Within their narratives, however, none of the women identified themselves, exclusively, in terms of one aspect of Goddess spirituality. Instead, narratives of past cultures, references to magic and witchcraft (the influence of Starhawk is very apparent), some allusion to Jungian concepts and a great deal of reflection on the Goddess as symbol interweave in their accounts.

At my request, the women all provided stories of how they came to understand/ perceive the Sacred as Goddess. Most of the respondents were located within some form of religious tradition, with different degrees of commitment.

Only **Michelle** expressed her hostility to any form of religion or spirituality before becoming a Goddess feminist. She had been brought up in the Roman Catholic tradition and rejected it entirely in her teens. Like many Goddess feminists, significant books influenced Michelle's emerging understanding of spirituality.<sup>11</sup> For Michelle, these were Graves' *The White Goddess*<sup>12</sup> and *The Wanderground*<sup>13</sup>. She was also affected by a sense of connection with 'the land' when visiting Greece which was intensified by the symbolic power of the Goddess artefacts encountered in Crete. (p. 1) For Michelle, however, the most important factor in her transition to Goddess

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<sup>11</sup> Eller claims that 'the most common entrée into feminist spirituality was through books Eller 1993 p.33

<sup>12</sup> Robert Graves *The White Goddess* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1966 (1948)

<sup>13</sup> Sally Gearhart *The Wanderground* Watertown MA: Persephone Press 1977

spirituality was its relation to feminist politics, as experienced at Greenham Common.  
. (p.6-7)

**Annie** narrates the process by which she became a Pagan in order to explain her relationship with the Goddess. She identifies herself as Pagan but 'not a particular kind of Pagan, not Wicca or Druid' ( p.1) she has moved away from thinking of the Sacred in terms of 'deities' anymore but the enduring image of the Goddess, which she tends to refer to as 'the Great Mother', has remained. p.1

Jaki was born Jewish. She refers back to the poetry she wrote as a child and a young person which she describes as 'railing against God'. She cites the powerful influence of books such as Merlin Stone's *The Paradise Papers* and later Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology*. Following attendance at a lecture given by Michael Ralph Harvey, Jaki began to identify herself as a witch and joined a coven. At the time of the interview, Jaki felt that she was 'moving out of that phase' but retained her enthusiasm for the empowering process involved in reclaiming terms such as 'witch' and in drawing on Goddess images of strong female authority.

**Emily** draws on many illustrations from her life to provide a narrative account of the emergence of her Goddess oriented spirituality. This narrative includes several accounts of Emily's experiences of the spiritual and paranormal. Emily describes how, despite a continuing interest in ethics and spirituality, she encountered an increasing sense of frustration at the exclusive and misogynistic nature of the Christianity in which she grew up. This was exacerbated by the arrival of a new vicar who consciously set out to demolish the 'pagan' elements of village celebration that Emily valued. Her growing dissatisfaction and resentment led her to a 'crisis' in which she voiced her anger at God and her intention to leave the church. This resulted in her first encounter with what she now identifies as 'spirit guides'. She 'heard' a simple reply "Alright". She interpreted this as an endorsement of her right to 'go and explore' many spiritual possibilities. These explorations were informed by Emily's developing

involvement with feminism and socialism. She did, however, continue to experience disillusionment with the exclusive nature of the political theories she encountered and with the secular assumptions of her course. Her spiritual journey reached another important landmark when, as part of her History of Art course, she visited Florence and went to see the 'Masaccio's Trinity'. This proved to be a powerful and emotional episode in which she experienced her first 'vision'. When contemplating the painting, Emily 'heard' the Virgin Mother figure, who was pointing to the figure of Jesus on the cross, say "Look at my son". For Emily, the impact of this experience lay in the power of the female image. This led her to embark upon a study of female religious symbolism which eventually, after what she defines as a 'spiritual crisis', led her to research Goddess imagery. Emily's struggle to resolve this crisis resulted in a growing involvement with mystical experiences such as contact with spirit guides, communication through dreams and spiritual healing. She felt guided to sign up for a course in 'Biblical Studies from a Feminist Perspective' and that opened up the possibility of Goddess spirituality. Emily describes the process as the different aspects of her life 'coming together – the spirituality and the politics and the study' (p.9).

**Pamela** and **Cessy** narrated the ways in which feminist theories influenced their perception of spirituality and in their expression of the Sacred. In their cases, however, they still situated themselves within their established religious community but understood a process of transformation to have taken place from within that location.

Cessy is an American Franciscan Catholic sister based in Mexico City. Her community was already concerned with women's empowerment and social justice. In addition to this, however, Cessy's perceptions were widened when she encountered some works of feminist theo/alogy. She then read an article about the 'Goddess of Teotihuacan'. She was intrigued and excited to imagine that female images of the Sacred might be found in the apparently male dominated and war-like cultures of

early Central Mexico. She therefore went to a local exhibit and discovered work of Esther Pastori who was challenging the androcentric assumptions of the mainstream archaeological interpretations of the area. Cessy's fascination led to her undertaking a doctoral study which explored the implications of re-discovering the Female Sacred in these Mexican goddesses. She also began to organise a 'Goddess GATE (Global Awareness Through Experience)'. This programme was designed to help women undertake a spiritual journey to find the divine female in the sacred sites and artefacts of Central Mexico.

Cessy continues to interpret her spirituality within a Catholic Christian paradigm, but brings to it and her understanding of the Divine the insights of feminist theology. Pamela continues to locate herself within the Unitarian Church which is a liberal and radical strand of Christianity. Pamela's understanding of an embodied, inclusive spirituality developed as a result of her contact with feminist movements, for example conscious raising groups (Pamela p.5). She also cites the influence of scientific ideas such as the Gaia hypothesis. This led her to develop 'women's rituals', largely based on ideas from the work of Starhawk, but still within the context of a Unitarian congregation (Pamela p.23). Pamela maintains, however, that she recognised problems with her experience of religion from a young age although she did have a framework within which to express a critique until feminism provided it. She looked back to her Christian confirmation and claimed to remember it as a 'very male experience' (Pamela p.6).

**Gina and Amy** are similar in that, unlike the other women, they made a clear distinction between Goddess feminism and their understanding of spirituality. Indeed, Amy was reluctant to identify herself as feminist at all. She had encountered the use of Goddess symbolism through her move towards a nature-based spirituality. This move was prompted by the arrival in her shared house of someone who identified herself as a witch. Amy was intrigued and made contact with her and, as a result,



other women interested in Goddess spirituality. This introduced Amy to a new concept of 'celebrating life' rather than 'the other sort of dogmatic ways which seemed to be on offer' (Amy p.1). Through her new contact with Goddess women, Amy also encountered a new aspect of feminism. She became aware of the ways in which women had been denied their own spirituality. She therefore recognised the need to affirm female expressions of the divine. Amy's own focus, however, was on a nature-centred spirituality. She contacted the Pagan Federation and took part in rituals organised by them, where she felt comfortable with the practice of 'balancing' male and female aspects of divinity (Amy p.3). She decided, however, that she preferred the freedom and spontaneity of rituals in Goddess feminism. At the same time, she found herself moving away from the need to articulate the Sacred as female or, indeed, male. Instead, she wanted to base her spirituality in 'nature itself' (Amy p.5).

Gina recounts her introduction to the concept of the Goddess and to feminist approaches to religion. She relates this to a session in one of her courses for her Religious Studies degree. She describes the ways in which this radically changed her perception of her own relationship with religion. At the time, Gina was a practising Buddhist and regularly visited the nearby Theravada monastery. Her newly found feminist analyses of religion led her to challenge her own assumptions. She had previously maintained, even against the suggestions of her own husband, that her tradition 'transcended' such issues as sexism. She now saw that tradition as patriarchal and oppressive. As a result, after a process of painful realisation, Gina stopped going to the monastery. With other women at the college, she took part in 'Goddess groups'. She looks back on this period of community and affirmation with great affection. During this time, the symbol of the Goddess became very important to her and it generated a difficult but empowering process of reassessing her life. Eventually, however, the women's group broke up in an atmosphere of considerable

bitterness and acrimony. As a result, Gina experienced a sense of disillusionment with feminist spirituality and with the concept of the Goddess. She felt that, although she continued with Buddhist practice, she could not return to the Buddhist community. Instead she searched for other sources of spirituality such as the Christian cathedral worship. These were also ultimately unsatisfying and Gina described her situation as a 'spiritual wilderness' (Gina p.7). Then, about a year before giving the interview, Gina was asked to give a talk about Goddess feminism. Once she started to read about Goddess studies again, she rediscovered the excitement and empowerment of Goddess symbolism. She found that what she described as 'doing Goddess work' was 'marvellous' but realised that, for her, the Goddess functioned as 'not a divinity but as an empowering image' (Gina p.7). She also made a distinction between the 'spiritual experience' of meeting with other women and the 'spiritual path' she desired (Gina p.8). Feminism was, therefore, an important source of empowerment but could not provide the direction she desired for her spirituality. This empowerment, however, was achieved only through a difficult process of 'psychological exploration' (Gina p.9). Although Gina feels that the Goddess cannot function to assist her spiritual needs, the Goddess remains a powerful symbolic force (Gina p.11).

Like Gina, **Helen** acknowledges the influence of this researcher in her move towards 'Goddess talk' (Helen p.2). She had, however, developed her own, very distinctive understanding of Goddess. Like most of the respondents, Helen described her spiritual journey towards the Goddess within the context of her own life narrative. According to this narrative, Helen began in her twenties within Christian Methodism, which she associated with her mother. She then moved into the Church of England, which she associated with her father. She felt attracted by the ritual, 'drama', 'dressing up' and 'intellectualism'. Helen now interprets this move as an attempt to please her father, whose approval she then perceived as more significant (Helen p.2). Helen actually worked within the church but became increasingly uncomfortable

about the language she encountered and even more so about the constant 'put downs'. She questioned the narrative which identified her as a 'sinner' in need of 'big daddy's' guidance and forgiveness (Helen p.3-4). Helen's emerging critique was informed by feminism (Helen p.23). Helen's actual move out of the church and out of Christianity was precipitated by the fact that she was dismissed from her job for becoming pregnant when unmarried. For Helen, the hypocrisy inherent in her total rejection by those who claimed to be 'loving, caring Christian people', prompted her own complete rejection of God (Helen p.24-25). After two years of 'wallowing around in nothing', feeling a sense of spiritual emptiness, Helen began to develop techniques in alternative healing and found herself attracted to Paganism. She drew on aspects of Wicca, but found that Wicca was too patriarchal for her (Helen p.7). She was, however, very attracted to the concept of the Goddess, which, for her, was informed by feminism (Helen p.7). Helen has, therefore, developed her own understanding of Paganism. When Helen was introduced to Unitarianism and discovered that it was possible to be Pagan and Unitarian, she joined the local Unitarian church. Helen defines Paganism as a 'way of life' but maintains that it does not contribute to her spirituality in the way that feminism does (Helen 15). Similarly, she feels that Pagan Unitarianism provides 'community', which is very important to her, but not spirituality (Helen p.25). Helen identifies herself as a 'Goddess feminist' (Helen p.3) and describes the centrality of the Goddess image for her understanding of a process of relational, embodied spirituality. Helen conveys this in her use of the term 'Goddessing'.

## **WHAT IS MEANT BY 'GODDESS'?**

I ensured that the women being interviewed were aware of the concerns of my research. Within this context, I asked them to define what they meant by the term 'Goddess'. I sometimes asked them to elaborate upon their responses and

occasionally inter-viewed with them about my perceptions of some of the implications of their ideas. The result was a wide variety of expressions and definitions, mirroring the pluralities and ambiguities of 'Goddess-talk'. Some of the women referred directly to this theological diversity and fluidity. "If we talk about Goddess religion it can mean almost as many things as there are women talking about it" (Michelle p.8).

In answer to my request for her understanding of the meaning of 'Goddess', Emily affirmed that 'there are many different layers to this' (Emily p.1) She then moved into her life narrative in order to explain. In the process, she illustrated how the many 'layers' were interconnected. When responding to my direct question about whether 'God' and 'Goddess' referred to different ways of expressing an idea, separate metaphysical beings or forms of language, Emily replied, "All of these and more, probably" (Emily p.14).

Jaki also expressed an acceptance of the plurality inherent in Goddess-talk.

I think when I need the mother figure then Goddess is the mother, when the Goddess comes to me she could be the Amazon, the Lover, the Crone. I mean whatever, it's all change. I think the very nature of Goddess is that at different stages in your life it changes, or She changes. And it's not just one mother, it's also daughter, warrior, whatever, it's a vitality (Jaki p.12).

As this study has attempted to illustrate, such an openness to diversity, grounded in personal experience, is characteristic of theological statements. Some of the respondents maintained that an unwillingness to dwell on theory or dogma stemmed from a focus on practical/political action, rather than disembodied rationality (Helen p.11-12, Jaki p.5). At the same time, however, the ways in which the women's 'Goddess-talk' challenged some of the traditional dualisms of western theology signalled its capacity to offer a range of possibilities for communicating notions of the Sacred.

## ONE OR MANY?

As has already been indicated, debates exist within theology which revolve around the nature of 'Goddess'. Most women in the Goddess movement refer to **the** Goddess. For some, this is related to a conviction that contemporary Goddess spirituality is a re-awakening of an ancient worldview which revered a universal Mother Goddess. For others, this apparently monotheistic paradigm is a travesty of the feminist challenges to patriarchal traditions, though they may still use the term 'the Goddess' as a short hand term for the plurality they embrace. For others still, however, it is important to challenge monotheism explicitly by referring to 'Goddesses'. All the women in my interview group referred primarily to the Goddess in the singular. Their discussions with me did, however, demonstrate that some of them were very willing to include notions of plurality in that term.

The women sometimes made references to specific, named goddesses, but this did not constitute a significant feature of their Goddess-talk. Gina draws on Bolen's<sup>14</sup> use of goddess archetypes as different aspects of one's psychological construction. Gina maintains, however, that the specific 'labelling' of such goddesses is unimportant, although she later refers to Hecate and Lilith as symbols of empowerment (Gina p.11-12). Amy makes clear that she is not interested in calling upon particular, named goddesses (Amy p.4) and Annie cites a move away from polytheism as a feature of her growing interest in the Goddess (Annie p.1). She suggests, however that her reluctance to draw on the mythology and iconography of goddesses such as Brigid is part of her reluctance to reify the Goddess whom she prefers to express in pantheistic terms (Annie p.1). Helen cites the mythic power of a pantheon of goddesses in her role as storyteller, referring to Pandora, Isis and Rhiannon. At the same time, however, she was happy to admit that, for her, all these images merged into one, 'big momma' figure if she so wished. (Helen p.11-12) Michelle (p.10) and

Emily (p.21) were explicit in maintaining that although they used the term 'the Goddess', this term was inclusive of the notion of 'goddesses'. Only Jaki wanted to stress that her understanding of the Sacred was expressed by reference to 'Goddess' and *not* 'the' Goddess. Michelle (p.10), Emily (p.17) and Jaki (p.3) all referred explicitly to monotheism as the antithesis of Goddess of religion. It is, however, notable that all three attended courses led by the same Goddess scholar who offers a critique of monotheistic traditions.

Helen introduced a significant element into her Goddess-talk by emphasising her claim that 'Goddess doing' and 'Goddess thinking' were at the centre of her spirituality (Helen p.1). As a result, she used the term 'Goddessing' throughout her narrative, conveying an awareness of Goddess as Verb.

## **GODDESS AS SYMBOL**

The most prominent means of expressing the significance of Goddess was to refer to Her symbolic power to counter the damaging influence of patriarchal language. With only one exception, (Pamela), the women's narratives referred first to the Goddess as image, although most of them later explored Her nature further in later discussion. Gina, however, maintained throughout her account that the Goddess was solely a symbol which functioned for her as an 'empowering image' and not a divinity (Gina p.6). For Gina, there could be 'no Goddess in the sky that was helping me.' Michelle came to an interest in the Goddess through her recognition of the power of Goddess symbolism and only later countenanced any notion of spirituality. Like Jaki, (p.4), Michelle identified as the most important aspect of Goddess imagery the ability to empower women (Michelle p.10). Emily was introduced to Goddess spirituality through her interest in female images in religious art, (Emily p.6). Helen cited the importance of the Goddess as an image in her role as storyteller, recognising the power of narratives to determine worldviews (Helen p.9-12). Amy understood the

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<sup>14</sup> Bolen 1982

Goddess or Goddesses as symbols on which to focus, for instance in healing rituals (Amy p.4-6). For Amy, however, these symbols should not be equated with divinity itself which, she experienced, was expressed through nature. Annie had moved away from her earlier polytheistic Paganism, but the enduring 'image' that had remained was that of the Goddess, (Annie, p.1). Cessy drew on many thea/ological expressions to convey the meaning of the Sacred but at the same time recognised that the 'metaphors' of the myths of Mexican goddesses were 'just a tool' to allow women to communicate across barriers of language and class (Cessy p.17).

### **IMMANENT OR TRANSCENDENT?**

Alongside the central theme of Goddess as symbol of female empowerment is the notion of Goddess as the expression of divinity present in all forms of life.

Annie's introduction to her understanding of the Goddess is typical of this idea.

..she is around and within us all the time', every tree, every blade of grass, every animal, every human. It is all part of the Goddess... (Annie p.1).

Annie's statement is also typical in its recognition of the sacrality of 'nature'. The most frequently used metaphor for the medium of divinity is 'energy' (Pamela,p.2,12; Cessy, p.5,11; Amy, p.4-6; Emily,p.1;Annie p.1). This could reflect the influence of New Age terminology. As has already been noted, Goddess spirituality is very eclectic and often incorporates aspects of the wider New Age movement. This was apparent in some of the women's narratives here. This influence was most obvious in Emily's narrative, where her understanding of the Goddess was related to a whole series of spiritual experiences including spirit guides (Emily p.3, 7 ,9.), visions (p.4-5), spiritual healing (p.7-8) and revelatory dreams (p.8, 12). Emily also referred to the influence of the chakras (p.7) and of 'male and female energies' (p.13). In addition to her personal experience of the reality of 'Goddess energies' (p.14), Emily relates a significant encounter with the Green Man (p.14-15). For Emily, her encounter with these entities confirmed her claim that there are many different levels of reality

(p.17). Similarly, Helen's narrative placed goddesses alongside angels and other spirits which contributed to her role as a healer (p.10-11, 12) and conveyed a worldview in which a range of spiritual 'energies' were a reality for her. Helen also included in her account a belief in reincarnation (p.19- 20) and this was the most frequently cited aspect of New Age spirituality in the narratives as a whole. (Although Gina's understanding of reincarnation was rooted in her Buddhist practice.) It is interesting to note that both Annie and Helen identified themselves as Pagans and yet incorporated a belief in reincarnation into that identity (Annie p.10). After my discussion with her, Annie did distance herself from aspects of New Age interpretations of reincarnation which suggest a process of choice whereby some spirits choose to enter abusive situations in order to learn from them (Annie p.12.) Annie was aware of the ambiguity involved in her position and argued her case on the basis of Nature's tendency to 'recycle'. There are, however, many Pagans who maintain that their worldview is incompatible with that of New Age spiritualities.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, there has been some debate about the extent to which Goddess spirituality should align itself with New Age aspirations. Monica Sjöö has argued passionately that the Goddess and the New Age movement are incompatible<sup>16</sup>. Carol Christ has also distanced theology from the ideas of the New Age movement, especially in relation to reincarnation<sup>17</sup>. It would appear that some of the women in the interview group had absorbed at least New Age terminology in their expressions of spirituality. At the same time, however, using 'energy' as an analogy for the nature of divinity could also convey the sense of process, relation and embodiment intimated by the women's attempts to articulate their understandings of the Sacred. Whilst metaphors of immanence predominate in the respondents' Goddess-talk, (e.g. Cessy p.11; Amy, p.13) most wanted to maintain that the Goddess could also be

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<sup>15</sup> Harvey 1997

<sup>16</sup> Sjöö 1992

<sup>17</sup> Christ 1997a p 133 - 134



expressed as transcendent. Emily began her account of the Goddess by claiming that She is “..an energy that is in me and outside” (Emily p.1).

When I later questioned Emily whether this ‘energy’ came from a transcendent being, she explained that the energy did not come from ‘above’, but was ‘all around us and on different dimensions’ (Emily p.17). In order to elaborate upon this, Emily drew on the analogy of the universe which was, at the same time, vast beyond imagining *and* the very stuff of which each individual was made. This metaphor was also used by other women to convey their expressions of Goddess as both fully immanent yet existing in some form beyond human perception (e.g. Michelle p.12). Cessy, for example, uses the same image. She speaks of the ‘force’, ‘energy’, or ‘formless diversity’ of the universe which is, at the same time, ‘inter-related to dependency and for the community’ (p.11). This notion of immanent/transcendence as an expression of relationality was also articulated elsewhere. Amy, for instance, defines the term ‘Goddess’ as a

“...handy way of saying ‘I believe in something out there, something that’s a part of us’...We’re all a part of it, really.” (Amy, p.13)

For Amy, issues of pantheism or pan-en-theism seem unimportant. What she wants to stress is a sense of connectedness.

Jaki admitted that the status of the Goddess could be affected by her own feelings or by an act of will. She speaks of

“...the Goddess who sometimes I see as external and sometimes I see as internal. Sometimes She is the planet I’m standing on and sometimes She’s a, well, a what ever, alien thing in the sky, my great mother that bore us all, and it changes.” (Jaki p.2)

## **GODDESS AS MOTHER**

The quotation above lists some of the most common presentations of the Goddess, including the controversial image of Goddess as mother. For some feminist critics of the Goddess movement, the presentation of Goddess as mother smacks of dangerous essentialism and colludes with assumptions about the ‘feminine’ attributes of the Sacred as female.

Gina could not relate to the Goddess as a 'wonderful, benign Earth Mother, weaving and sewing' Instead, for Gina, the images she used were of 'very strong women,' even 'warrior women' (Gina p.12). Helen, on the other hand, found the image of Goddess as mother very empowering. Helen was dismissed from her job in the Anglican Church for becoming an unmarried mother. She describes the affirmation of being able to use expressions of the Sacred in which her femaleness was not only 'OK' but the very basis of religious experience, '..where the Goddess image was the mother, the woman the child bearer, the creatrix' (Helen p.3). Annie, expressing herself as a Pagan, understood the term 'Great Mother' as the primary image for the Sacred. For her this image was inextricably linked with the sacrality of 'nature' (Annie p.1).

Cessy used mother imagery extensively in her narrative and was prepared to answer the 'charge' of essentialism. She argued that the traditional language of her church, drawing on notions of male dominance, was insufficient to express an experience of the divine as 'life giver'. Cessy was prepared to link this notion of the Sacred with traditionally 'feminine' attributes such as generosity and caring (Cessy p.9), feeding, nurturing and sustaining. (Cessy p.19) Cessy connected these life-giving qualities with a respect for nature (Cessy p.9, 19) and with her work with the women of Mexico's barrios.

So when I talk about spirituality, I'm talking about a life-giving force that transcends, if you will, the small parameters of my life and is integrated with ...solidarity with women – that we're in this struggle together. The feminist part of my spirituality is that I, as a woman, would define my relationship with the powers that be, whether they're hierarchical, patriarchal, institutional, or those powers that oppress, with life-giving powers of the Female, which are more nurturing, more egalitarian, more participative, more communicative, more sensate. I celebrate those elements, essentialist or not." (Cessy p.18)

Cessy is working very much within the symbology of Christianity and acknowledged that mother imagery was used deliberately as a balance to the image of God the Father.

"We use language that is contemporary, that is feminist, that speaks of the suppressed Female Divine. And for every time that we call on Our Father, I

have the duty and the right to call on Our Mother. And if we have overplayed the gender qualities-this is all metaphor, of course, - we're just trying to create, with our poor language, this immanent divine who is working within us." (Cessy p.9-10)

Cessy maintained that such Mother imagery was not just about actual reproduction of children (Cessy p.19) and that it could convey power, but such power was unlike the oppressive dominance of exclusively male imagery. She was reluctant to adopt 'warrior' imagery for the Goddess as she felt was colluding with a 'male aggressive stance'. (Cessy p.19) Instead, the power came from 'an internal strength that comes from our passion and our desire for life' (Cessy p.19).

Cessy maintained that the world 'needs a mother' (Cessy p.9). Jaki makes a similar suggestion, although she is working within a very different worldview (Jaki p.11).

Jaki's analysis of religious beliefs is informed by psychological methods. She maintains that the emphasis in androcentric religious traditions on life after death is an attempt to 'escape from the mother' (Jaki p. 6,7). Jaki also cites the need to counter the permeating image of God the father (Jaki p.12). More significantly, however, she acknowledges her own psychological need for a mother image.

"It's the Mother that birthed the universe. A mother doesn't desert her children, a mother may die, who knows? Her children may die. That's a very interesting mention because usually a mother will die before the children will die, that's a more natural thing, but then perhaps it's my need. This is my psychological need to have a good mother image and because that doesn't exist for me on the human, the real plain then maybe I create this for myself. So this is purely, you know, I'm not going to try to prove Her existence or anything but I think it's very much something that I need and it's very subjective and very personal." (Jaki p.8-9)

When challenged about the possible essentialism of mother imagery, Jaki emphasises the fact that a mother image is only one of the great diversity from which she and others can choose. She stresses that other, more assertive, images are also very important to her.

"... I think when I need the mother figure then Goddess is the mother, when the Goddess comes to me she could be the Amazon, the Lover, the Crone. I mean whatever, it's all change. I think the very nature of Goddess is that at

different stages in your life it changes, or She changes. And it's not just one mother, it's also daughter, warrior, whatever, it's a vitality. "(Jaki p.12)

## **GODDESS AS SELF**

Jaki's open acceptance of her own ability to determine her relationship with Goddess is closely linked to her sense of identification with Goddess. She describes herself as 'Goddess in training' (Jaki p.5) and states that 'Goddess is within me' (Jaki p.9). Eller cited women's self-identification with the Goddess as a distinctive element of feminist spirituality.<sup>18</sup> This is another important dimension of theology's emphasis on the Sacred as immanent and is related to the role of Goddess symbolism in female empowerment. The latter is paramount in Gina's narrative. For her, the goddesses are 'internal images' which can 'rise' within her (Gina p.11). Gina refers to the influence of Bolen's work<sup>19</sup> for her personal journey. Drawing on different sources, Cessy also relates the power of Goddess imagery to facilitate healing and 'inner transformation' (Cessy.p.14).

Expressions of Goddess as 'within' were often related to a sense of connectedness with all forms of life and with the divine. Helen can therefore speak of the Goddess 'as the world, as me, as...everything' (Helen p.3). Annie makes similar claims and goes on to say that eventually there will be no distinction between the Sacred and humans (Annie p.8).

## **REALIST OR NON-REALIST?**

The recognition of the Goddess' symbolic function, of the embodied immanence of divinity, of the women's own sense of identification with the Goddess and of the women's own ability to determine the Goddess' role raises the question of whether or not the term 'Goddess' relates to a separate, personal existence. Only Gina was explicit in maintaining that the Goddess represented an empowering image but not a

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<sup>18</sup> Eller 1993 p.141-142 In this passage, Eller relates this self-identification to belief in reincarnation. This connection was not evident in the accounts of the women with whom I inter-viewed.

<sup>19</sup> Bolen. 1982

separate existence. (Gina p. 4, 7) Gina did, however, have a belief in some form of transcendence but the Goddess was not part of it. (Gina p.6) Jaki understands religion in terms of psychological development and seems to discuss notions of divinity as human constructs. (Jaki p.6-7, 9, 10). She is the most adamant in her rejection of a metaphysical paradigm. At the same time, however, Jaki acknowledges that she has had religious experiences which seemed to bring her into encounter with the Goddess as 'other' (Jaki p.2). She also admits that, in times of crisis, she finds herself turning to a 'mommy' Goddess or even God for help. Jaki, nevertheless, wants to maintain that there are significant differences between Goddess and God, based on notions of 'otherness'.

“But Goddess stuff, it is how it manifests for each of us. It's different from how God effects, God is so definitely the other that you'll spend your whole time working out your relationship with God whereas Goddess is just there, through us, enabling us to explore on Her behalf.” (Jaki p. 17)

Throughout Michelle's account, the role of Goddess as image is paramount. At the very end of her narrative, however, she seems to feel compelled to try and relate this symbolic principle to some sort of metaphysical entity. As in other cases discussed above, Michelle drew on the analogy of the universe and of a sense of connection to express this (Michelle p.12-13).

## **GODDESS, GOD AND GENDER**

The ambiguities in the women's narratives with regard to the symbolic or realist nature of Goddess raises the question of how the notion of Goddess is related to the notion of 'God'. My attempts to discover whether the terms God and Goddess were solely linguistic or referential of different existent beings were usually met with the characteristic fluidity and openness of theology (e.g. Emily p.14)

In their autobiographical accounts of their journeys to the Goddess, Helen (p.24), Emily (p.3) and Jaki (p.1) described their anger towards God and rejection of him.

Only Emily was prepared to return to the possibility of God as an expression of the Divine (Emily p.9-10).

Pamela and Cessy, who both remained located within Christian communities, were more ready to convey the belief that language about the Goddess was a metaphorical expression of the Divine which existed beyond gender (Cessy p.10, Pamela p.7-8). Similarly, Annie and Amy, who both placed 'nature' at the centre of their religious worldview, expressed the view that the Sacred was genderless and that, although the image of the Goddess played an important role, it could, eventually disappear (Annie p.8, Amy p.3).

Such a view then raises the question of how far the Goddess movement was solely a religion for women. Amy was clear that she was not comfortable with an all-female community and this was one of the reasons she was moving away from the Goddess (Amy p.17). She expressed her doubts about the notion of 'sisterhood' and welcomed male opinions as well as female ones (Amy p.19). Gina had also suffered disillusionment about the sisterhood of women, which had led her away from the Goddess movement but she had since renewed her interest (Gina p.8). Michelle's journey into Goddess spirituality was influenced by the images of Minoan Crete and she believed that this and other evidence showed that Goddess religion was originally for men and women (Michelle p.10). Helen was anxious to ensure that the Goddess was not used to disempower men (Helen p.10) but admitted that although she liked men, she couldn't respect them. Emily was also keen to ensure that Goddess images were not used to exercise 'power over' others (Emily p.14) and expressed her concern about and compassion for men. She believed that they needed new role models for positive notions of masculinity (Emily p.16). Only Jaki was explicit in her belief that Goddess spirituality needed to be separatist. She maintained that Goddess religion was incompatible with monotheism which she characterised as a male dogma (Jaki p.3).

## FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Eller identified 'valuing women's empowerment' as the first category in her taxonomy of feminist spirituality<sup>20</sup>. It is clear from the analysis above that an expression of female empowerment was a central feature of inter-viewees' use of Goddess talk. The role of the Goddess as image which affirmed and sacralised women was paramount for nearly all the respondents. For Gina, especially, the process of empowerment was coterminous with her configuration of the Goddess. She makes clear, however, that this process was often very difficult and painful (Gina p.9). Gina has a non realist understanding of the Goddess and the value of feminist rituals lay not in their spiritual efficacy but in the very experience of the community of women.

"That was just wonderful, the ritual, the place to experience women's talk, women's lives, acknowledging rites of passage, just being able to articulate those things in a safe place where whatever feelings you had about other women stayed outside the room. We all came together and did our thing and then stuffed our faces and it was generally social ...I thought that was empowering, very empowering." (Gina p. 3)

Gina did, however, discover that female solidarity was fallible. The group eventually disintegrated amongst some animosity. For some time, this led to Gina's disillusionment with Goddess feminism and the notion of 'sisterhood'. (Gina p.5) She has, however, since returned to an appreciation of the empowerment generated by Goddess imagery and female community whilst abandoning a dream of perfect sisterhood. (Gina p.7) Amy was also very sceptical about the myth of female sisterhood (Amy p.19)

All the inter-viewees referred, in some way or another, to the realisation that women were oppressed and negated by androcentric religious traditions and that women's spirituality had been suppressed. Some narrated an awareness of this from an early age (Emily, p.1, Jaki, p.15, Michelle p.11, Pamela, p.6), whilst others described the process by which the discovery of feminist analyses generated a new consciousness

raising. (Cessy, p.1, Gina p.1-4). Several expressed their sense of anger at such a realisation. Jaki conveys typical outrage when, after reading Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*<sup>21</sup>, she cries "How *dare* these people have lied to me for all these years?!" (Jaki p.1-2). Even those who were uncomfortable with the idea of exclusively female imagery for the divine or with feminist spirituality as separatist voiced the need for Goddess-talk to 'balance' or counteract the harmful effects of exclusively male expressions of religion (e.g. Annie, p.7, Pamela, p.22). The process of empowerment was often linked with the role of Goddess as self. Cessy expresses a common theme when she defines the goal of her 'Goddess Gate' programme as enabling others to 'find the female divine within themselves' (Cessy p.1). She describes the impact of the programme on women who are located within the Christian church.

"It releases ... the power within them, I think, to let go of those hurts of patriarchy. We don't continually have to reflect back on patriarchy and the terrors of the church or the way that we have interpreted reality. But what we find is a joyous empowerment of women who can say, "Well, the church can be let go of now, or be pitied or we need now to choose – to choose what part of it we want to take with us and what part desperately needs our renewal."" (Cessy p.5)

Cessy describes how, when she first arrived in Mexico, she was wary of the popular image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, regarding it as a collusion with assumptions about women as passive and Mary as submissive. Later, however, after the influence of the Esther Pasztory's work<sup>22</sup> on prepatriarchal Mexican goddesses, Cessy reread the story of the Guadalupe's appearance as a theophany, a 'manifestation of the Divine Mother' (Cessy p.6). Cessy relates the ways in which such an image, and the recovery of other Mexican goddesses, can function as a means of empowerment for the women of the barrios of Mexico (Cessy.p.16-17).

Jaki defines Goddess spirituality in terms of the affirmation of women.

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<sup>20</sup> Eller 1993 p.6

<sup>21</sup> Daly 1978

<sup>22</sup> Esther Pasztory *The Murals of Tepantitla, Teotihuacan* New York: Garland 1976; *Teotihuacan: An Experiment in Living* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press 1997 quoted in Corcoran 1999



"I feel that, for me, Goddess spirituality is about empowering women and Goddess gives me a role model, a spiritual role model that I can identify with..." (Jaki p.2)

Jaki is the only respondent who articulates the notion of separatism and female supremacy for the good of the planet's future (Jaki p.3). She does, however, make an important distinction between female assertion and female aggression (Jaki p.12). Many of the respondents are anxious to distinguish between the 'power within' that they are advocating and the 'power over' that they reject (e.g. Emily p.13-14, Helen p.12).

## **POST-DUALISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY**

One of the most notable aspects of the women's responses is the way in which they use narrative. In answer to a question about an apparently abstract concept such as spirituality, most of the inter-viewees responded with stories about their own life. In doing so, they demonstrate a central feature of feminist spirituality, the recognition that spirituality is embedded and embodied in lived experience. They illustrate feminist theo/alogy's emphasis on the power of story and the role of life-narrative as spiritual quest. One of the women, Jaki, articulated this in her inter-view, arguing that 'religion' must 'be embedded in a person's total story'. (p.10)

Such a recognition has generated new understandings of what the term 'spirituality' might mean. This is conveyed by the inter-viewees' reflections on their understandings of spirituality. There is, however, diversity in their expressions of these understandings, for instance in the extent to which they relate their spirituality to feminism, political action or Goddess talk. There is also considerable diversity in the extent to which the women recognise, acknowledge or assent to the post-dualistic implications of expressions of embodied spirituality.

Most of the inter-viewees come from a background of traditional Christianity. Their narrative and spiritual journeys involve a move away from the patriarchy and androcentrism of the traditions of their childhood, including a changing understanding of the nature of spirituality. Most of these journeys led the women out of their original faith community. Some, however, apply a transformed perception of spirituality but still identify themselves as remaining within Christianity.

**Pamela** illustrates this process and articulates her understanding of embodied spirituality. She locates herself within a Unitarian community but understands her spirituality to be informed by other factors. In response to the opening question about how she understood the term 'Goddess spirituality', Pamela began by commenting on the problematic nature of trying to define 'spirituality'. Her first suggestion for a possible definition was 'some sort of connection with another dimension of reality' (p.1). Pamela then continued to illustrate here meaning with examples from her own experience. In doing so, she conveyed aspects of a post-dualistic expression of embodied spirituality. She gave, as her first example-, a walk in the countryside. She went on, however, to include 'music...poetry, prose, and relationships, friendships, loving, sex...' as 'things spiritual' (p.3). When asked to give an explanation of the ways in which her concept of spirituality differed from a notion of aesthetic experience, Pamela recognises the difficulty in doing so. She relates it to her conviction that there is 'some power beyond us' (p.5). Her attempts to express what she means by this 'power' do not, however, communicate conventional notions of the metaphysical. Her awareness of this 'power' is most apparent to her when she considers the mystery and magnitude of the universe. She uses the word 'energy' to articulate what she means by this 'power', despite her concerns that this might be a 'cliché' (p.5). For Pamela, it is the sense of connection with this energy or 'power' which allows her to understand her embodied experiences as 'spirituality'. As the discussion progresses, Pamela conveys the extent to which relationality is central to

her concept of spirituality. She includes the sense of communication attained in group worship (p.4) and the experience of friendship with other women (p.9) in her description of spirituality. Pamela also relates as spiritual the experience she remembers from working with children with special needs. She says

"I used to have to do a lot of work one to one with kids and because the empathy level required was very, very high there was a different dimension that I was aware I was in as well as communicating with that particular pupil. ...usually when that feeling was there the session had been a good one and I think it's about the sharing, it's something about the combined energies that are created between two or more people that is spiritual." (p.9)

Pamela goes on to relate this experience of 'dialogue' to 'that divine part of a person that everybody has' (p.12). She does, however, have some reservations about using the term 'spirit' to describe this 'aspect of the divine'. She feels that the language of 'spirit' is too wedded to Judaeo/Christian assumptions about the spirit as a 'form'. She describes her need to move on from these 'childlike images' of the spirit although she finds it hard to find new images to express what she means (P.14 - 15). The narratives that Pamela uses in her explorations of spirituality, however, indicate an understanding of spirituality which perceives it as integral to embodied experience. I therefore asked Pamela directly about her response to a notion of post-dualistic spirituality (p.15 - 16). It is interesting to note that Pamela's response was to reflect on the nature of 'consciousness'. She confessed that she was 'in confusion' about whether her 'spirit or energy or soul or whatever' had the possibility of existence beyond the body. She maintains, however, that her spirituality is very much centred on 'what she does with this life' (p.20).

Pamela does not preclude the possibility or dismiss the importance of life beyond death. She expresses the wish that she could believe in life after death because she would 'desperately' love to be able to 'see' again her brother who died when he was nineteen. The focus of her spirituality remains, however, in the 'here and now' (p.21).

A good deal of Pamela's interview consisted of her explorations into the nature of spirituality. A notable aspect of this process is the way in which Pamela linked her discussion of spirituality to reflections upon the nature of consciousness and identity. When she is responding to a direct question about dualistic assumptions about spirituality, Pamela expresses her sense of uncertainty about whether the 'spirit' existed after death. She described this feeling as

"a tremendous confusion, almost a rage sometimes between my gut feeling and my thinking process." (p.17.)

I therefore asked her if, by this, Pamela meant that there was a dualistic separation between feelings and rationality. She replied

" I think my spiritual life, if we come down to 'spirit' as my spiritual life, influences my thinking. I'm not sure whether my thinking influences my spiritual life. It is easier to talk about them as separate but I think there is interaction. ... I'm quite good at brainwashing myself, quite good at controlling my inner life" (p.18)

When I asked to explain what she meant, Pamela gave the example of waking up and feeling a strong sense of loss because of her Mother's recent death. She describes a dialogue taking place between 'her' and her 'inner life'. One voice says it would be nice just to stay in bed and be sad. The other voice tells her to get up and start moving around the house and that will help feel better. Pamela concludes that she would like to think that her 'rational processes of thinking and moving into positive mode' influences her 'spiritual life' (p.18). Pamela goes on to describe these experiences of inner argument and dialogue as 'a very busy inner life'. Her discussion of her 'inner life' seems to suggest an awareness of the plurality of identity which she sometimes finds quite disturbing (p.19). Pamela's explorations of the significance of her 'spiritual' or 'inner' life raise interesting questions about the relationship between spirituality, process and identity. The inter-view with Pamela illustrates the extent to which conversation can be 'a construction site for

knowledge'.<sup>23</sup> At the conclusion of our discussion, Pamela commented on 'the clarifying process' of putting ideas into the spoken word. (p.25)

Like Pamela, **Cessy** locates herself within an established faith community. As a Franciscan nun, however, Cessy is much more familiar with the conventional language of spirituality. When asked to reflect upon the notion of 'feminist spirituality', Cessy provided a coherent expression of what she understood 'spirit' to be.

"The spirit is the integrated person. To touch that part of us that is fed by the intellect but also is nurtured by the heart and is empowered by the passion for life." (p.18)

Cessy's words convey feminist approaches to an embodied, biophilic notion of spirituality. They emerge from a post-Vatican II Catholicism and a close involvement with feminist and liberation theologies. Cessy has an 'embodied' ecclesiology. She understands 'the church' to be 'here and now' and 'within' (p.10.) Her narrative illustrates the extent to which she sees no distinction between her activities to promote social justice, her positive affirmation of life and her concept of spirituality. Cessy's discussion of 'spirit' was placed within the context of questions about the possible essentialism of her emphasis on the Sacred as Mother. Her response suggests that her understanding of embodied spirituality challenges some of the metaphysical assumptions of her spiritual tradition.

"I think that, in being empowered and being assertive and being unafraid, that all of this gives us that gives us life, may move us in to death. ... that we move also in the path of death and regeneration. So that feminist spirituality is one that accepts that whole integrating life cycle." (p.19)

As a Pagan, **Annie** also speaks as an 'adept'. Like Cessy, Annie was able to provide carefully structured expressions of her ideas and beliefs. Because of the nature of Annie's account, I found that I dialogued with her the most with regard to the nature of spirituality. My own contributions to the conversation were more significant than in other inter-views. This was partly because of the extent to which Annie's narrative

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<sup>23</sup> Kvale 1996

seemed to involve a juxtapositioning of the affirmation of embodiment with metaphysical notions of the 'spirit' and I wished to pursue this.

Annie began her narrative by providing an eloquent expression of the ways in which Goddess expressed, for her, the immanent Sacred. Annie explained that, whereas some Pagans have personal images of the Goddess as Brigid, for example, she understood Goddess as life itself.

"So saying 'Do you believe in the Goddess?' is like saying 'Do you believe you are alive right now?' It just doesn't work for me." (p.1)

When describing her understanding of Goddess, Annie seemed to point towards post-metaphysical expressions of the Sacred. (p. 2). Similarly, when first presenting the concept of 'spirituality', she made it clear that hers was a post-dualistic view of the spirit. She used the analogy of water in a sponge to describe the relationship between spirit and body. (p.3). Annie clearly understood the celebration of bodiliness and affirmation of sexuality to be central aspects of the Paganism that she embraced (p.3). Later in the discussion, however, she demonstrated that, although her spirituality was embodied, she made a clear distinction between the transient nature of the physical body and the 'eternal' nature of the spirit. In response to a question about the possibility of Goddess 'putting herself out of business', Annie confirmed her belief in the importance of process. She expressed a belief that everything is going through a process of evolution and that, after physical evolution, must come 'emotional, mental and spiritual evolution' (p.8). Annie linked this, however, to an apparently metaphysical notion of spirit.

...my feeling has often been that part of the destiny of the human race is not to be on this planet any more because our bodies are a temporary part of who we are but our spirits are eternal. And my feeling is that we are going to move into a place where there is no longer any distinction between human and deity. (p.8)

Later, when I questioned her about the apparent dualism between a finite body and an infinite spirit, Annie explored her ideas further. She made it clear that she did not

connect the eternal nature of the spirit with a notion of immutability. Indeed, although she found it interesting, one of the main reasons she found it hard to accept Ruether's image of returning to 'cosmic compost' was that it denied a sense of movement in all forms of life.

...I suppose I see all of life, in whatever form it is, as a kind of progression towards or maturation towards something. And that involves everything that is and it's all moving and changing and developing. So, as a human being, I am having certain experiences and learning certain things while I am here in the body and when I die, that knowledge needs to carry on and learn and grow a lot more.  
(p.15)

As a result, Annie finds reincarnation the most useful metaphor for her understanding of the relationship between life and death, although she acknowledges that not all Pagans would agree with her (p.10 –11). In a manner typical of the eclectic nature of Goddess feminism,<sup>24</sup> however Annie includes some elements of Eastern religious traditions and of New Age spiritualities in her references to concepts of Karmic influence. (p.11-13 She is, nevertheless, willing to distance herself from suggestions presented by some New Age movements that spirits 'choose' to enter an oppressive or abusive situation as part of a learning process (p.12-13).<sup>25</sup> Annie maintains that she does not see a contradiction between affirming an embodied spirituality and having a belief in reincarnation (p.10-11). She compares the notion of reincarnation to an ecological awareness of change and recycling. She concludes with the analogy of iron oxide which comes from the earth and may be changed into many different forms. As iron, it can be made into a sword or a ploughshare, but 'it is still what it is in the beginning'.

And I think of our spirit as being like that, but whatever it was in the beginning, molecularly, if you like, it still is, but because it's alive and conscious, it's growing and changing and learning and all of that. I would never say that it was unchanging because that goes against the rules of the universe. (p.16)

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<sup>24</sup> Eller 1993, Raphael 1999a

<sup>25</sup> Cp. Christ 1997 p.133 - 134

When I asked **Michelle** how she became involved in 'Goddess spirituality' she wanted to emphasise her initial antagonism to the whole notion of spirituality.

Michelle was a political feminist from the age of 19. Later, she came into contact with the work of the Matriarchy Study Group. At first, Michelle viewed their research into ancient Goddesses as an unnecessary 'luxury'. For her, feminism had to be about 'political change' (p.1) She traced her journey into spirituality through an interest in mythology, an awareness of the power of Goddess images generated by visit to Crete and the inspiration of the book, *The Wanderground*. She moved to Holland and help to found a 'Witches group', inspired by a workshop on the work of Starhawk. Michelle emphasised that her 'spirituality has always been involved with feminist women'. (p.2) This led her, on her return to England, to join the women at Greenham. Here, her understanding of feminist spirituality developed. Michelle's understanding of spirituality relates well to the maxim of feminist spirituality - 'the personal is political, is spiritual'. Michelle's narrative accounts of her journey illustrate the extent to which she understands spirituality to be embodied. She explained why the witchcraft group in Amsterdam became important to her and why she eventually became disenchanted with it. The criterion by which Michelle judged the validity of expressions of spirituality seems to be the extent to which it is embodied. She found the early rituals meaningful because 'every women present there felt the connection to it' (p.4). She describes the power re-telling the Demeter and Persephone story because it related to

...the idea of going into the darkness and from the darkness you re-emerge strengthened, facing fears with something that ultimately empowers. And this was embodied in this ritual and corresponded to 'out of winter we emerge into the spring', new life comes forth. And it was powerful because I really could have said that all the women there felt connection. We get a physical shape to what we perceive, the change in the earth and how it corresponded to the change in human beings, the patterns we go through, the mood we go through, the way we learn, the way we come to life, the way we grow, the way we die, the way we blossom... (p.4)

Michelle, however, became disillusioned with and saddened by the way in which these rituals developed. She regarded them as 'obscure' (p.4) because she saw no



connection with embodiment. Instead, they became determined by doctrine, 'we face this direction, we say this, we say that...' (p.5). Michelle illustrated further her emphasis on the connection between ritual and embodied spirituality with a story from her time at Greenham. She described the visit of Starhawk and the now famous 'bogroll ritual'<sup>26</sup>. Many of the women at Greenham at the time were resistant to the idea of ritual. They parodied Starhawk's ideas by using a toilet roll to wind around them as a 'web'. Ironically, this action, nevertheless, developed into a meaningful ritual for many of them. Michelle described the humour involved in the process but maintained that it had power because

"...there was a way in which women felt a connection to a kind of story. We passed this 'thread' and things were explained ... Starhawk was indeed extremely good - explaining, simply, why we were planning to do this political ritual, what it was about, what was perceived, what women wanted to put in an outward shape in the form of a ritual." (p.7)

Michelle refers to the fact that one woman was offended by the 'bogroll ritual', perceiving it as a 'desecration'. Michelle, however, argued that 'there is no point in having a sense of reverence that is akin to what we felt if we had a traditional religious upbringing. That is not what it's about' (p.7). This observation leads her to reflect upon the ways in which she understands the function of Goddess imagery to express a different understanding of religion. She argues that the arrival of monotheistic religion signalled a sense of separation between the Sacred and our everyday lives. She articulates her understanding of embodied spirituality by claiming that with a monotheistic perception of the Sacred as 'one man'

...we lost the understanding of religion being the underlying current in our life, being completely part of our life, instead of which, religion became - well you have your natural life ...and then you have religion, It's separate, the soul becomes separated from day to day existence.

Michelle's account of her understanding of religion is clearly post-dualistic and there are powerful implications for a post-metaphysical expression of spirituality in her

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<sup>26</sup> Starhawk gives her account of this in Starhawk 1987 p.250-251 but Michelle was unaware of this.

reflections. Her attempts at the end of the inter-view to articulate her understanding of the nature of the Sacred do not, however, make these explicit (p.12 -13).

**Emily** operates firmly within a metaphysical paradigm. 'Metaphysical exercise' (p.7) is an important aspect of her spirituality. She has experienced the presence of 'spirit guides' since an early age (p.3, 7 has received several visions (p4-5,14, 24) and 'soul communication' dreams (p.8, 9, 14-15) and knows herself to be a healer (p.7). She belongs to a healing foundation which includes a woman who undertakes 'trance channelling' (p.7-8). Emily confirmed her belief in the actual existence of 'beings' such as the Green Man and 'goddess energies'. (p.14-15) Emily's worldview could be interpreted as reflecting aspects of New Age spirituality. For instance, she draws from a diversity of mystical traditions including spiritualism, (p.1, 2, 18, 26), the use of chakras (p.7, 12-13) and yoga (p.18). Like several of the other inter-viewees, reincarnation is a central concept in Emily's spirituality. She maintained that it was important to perceive a sense of connectedness with the physical world which she considered an 'antidote to Christian asceticism' (p.17).

For **Gina**, although notions of embodiment are important to her understanding of the power of Goddess imagery (p3, 4, 11-12) there is a distinction between this and her understanding of 'spirituality'.

"I never felt within the Goddess group or the Female Spirituality group that it was a spiritual path for me, it didn't provide that so I could never say that it was a religion for me, it was a spiritual experience but it wasn't a path. It's never been able to be a path for me because it couldn't take me to where I'm trying to go." (p.6)

Instead, she had searched established religious traditions in order to give her a sense of direction. She had turned to her adopted tradition, Buddhism, and had even returned, briefly, to the identity she had rejected, Anglo-Catholic Christianity (p.6-7). At the time of the inter-view, she was exploring Kabbalistic traditions. (p.14 –15) She recognised that her spirituality was not rooted in any one tradition and in some ways, she found this a lonely path (p.14). For Gina, the notion of a spiritual path was a very

important. She was willing to reflect critically upon the teleological assumptions of this linear paradigm and view the process as cyclical, but the metaphor of a destination was still central (p.9 -10). She accepted, however, that she had no idea where this journey was leading her and was therefore open to the process of travelling rather than assuming a predetermined place of arrival (p.10, 19). Gina related her understanding of the goal of spiritual journeys to a belief in reincarnation, drawing on her background in Buddhism and informed by an interest in Hinduism (p.10). She was able to discuss the idea of 'no-self' from a Buddhist perspective and relate it to theories of subjectivity in process. Her attitude was, however, that these ideas did not have any real relevance to her spiritual journey because they were not rooted in her own experience and that, for Gina, must be the true source of spirituality (p.19). Interestingly, however, she concluded her account by stating that she understood as an 'a sort of faith' her conviction that it was possible to have 'out-of-body' experiences (p.19-20).

For **Amy**, although she was reluctant to define herself as feminist (p.10), the discovery of 'women's spirituality' opened up new possibilities for a spirituality of connection.

"The women's spirituality gave me a concrete expression of something which I was also aware of - like the seasons changing, cycles in myself and things like that. It linked body and spirit together, if you know what I mean." (p.3)

Amy's narrative emphasised, however, that her spirituality was very much in process or 'evolving' (p.1) and she was moving away from the use of Goddess-talk to express her spirituality (p.3, 5-6). Nature or the 'physical' world was a very important source of and resource for her spirituality (p.4, 13,14). Her approach was informed by contemporary Paganism (p.2) but she liked to create and enact her own private rituals (p.2, 6). She made a distinction between this physical world and the 'material' world which was human-made and, in many ways, detrimental to spiritual growth

(p13-14). Like most of the other inter-viewees, Amy expressed her belief in reincarnation (p.7, 9) and that the physical 'plane' was a place to learn how to 'evolve spiritually' (p.9). Again, however, she was clear that this did not mean that the 'spirit' was unchanging. On the contrary, the notion of change and process were central to her spirituality (p.1, 3, 9,10,12, 18). Amy uses the metaphor of 'energy' (p.4, 5,7, 8) to express her understanding of what 'spirit' might mean. Again, like Annie and Emily, Amy believed that a physical sense of connection, expressed through some forms of science, reflected her understanding of spirituality (p.8). Like Pamela, Amy expressed an embodied spirituality insofar as she also linked her notion of spiritual process to ideas about identity and self (p.7, 9-10, 12).

The interviewee who makes the most explicit mention of post-dualistic perceptions of spirituality is **Jaki**. The challenge to dualistic world views is a central aspect of her own feminist theology. Her criticism of patriarchal theologians is that

...they try to abstract from Goddess or from Wisdom or from Sophia whatever it is that makes it magical, and they try to disembodify it which doesn't work. And the very nature of Goddess, it has to be embodied. (p.4)

Jaki demonstrates early in her inter-view that a perception of spirituality as embodied is interrelated with many aspects of her understanding of Goddess: as an expression of female power; of political action and of relationships which affirm difference. (p.4) When Jaki attempts to define her understanding of spirituality she expresses her dislike of "the idea of spirituality as this detached something, pie in the sky thing" (p.4).

She suggests, instead, the idea that 'spirit' means 'spirited' (p.4) She expresses spirituality as

"...a way of living and a way of treating that which is around you and that which comes into contact with you in a particular way - with a respect, with a concern for the other." (p.5)

Jaki acknowledges that in a time of crisis she easily reverts to transcendent images of the Sacred as a 'Mummy' or even 'Daddy' to whom she can turn for help or approval. Jaki interprets this as her 'externalising' spirituality. She conveys the idea, however, that the concept of spirituality is most meaningful for her when it embodies her own sense of empowerment. This she defines as a 'confidence of spirit' (p.5). When Jaki explores further what she means by 'embodied spirituality' she is emphatic in her belief that soul, spirit and mind are 'all body' (p.6). She rejects the idea that the body is 'this corrupt thing' the merely carries the eternal (p.6). Jaki applies her interest in the psychology of religion to relate her critique of a transcendent spiritual otherness to the 'genocidal behaviour' of patriarchal culture (p.6). She links the denial of the body to a male desire 'to escape from the mother' which, in turn, is expressed through a hatred of the female (p.7). For Jaki, an awareness of the immanent Sacred and of embodied spirituality must lead to acceptance of finitude and of the reality of death (pp. 7-8).

It is possible that Jaki's Jewish background (p. 15) contributes to her willingness to abandon dualistic notions of spirituality. Jaki is ambivalent about her Jewish identity but she expresses her delight in the distinctive conversation she finds with fellow Jews. She relates this to embodied spirituality and to Goddess-talk and describes it as a love of "...that level of intensity, and depth of soul, if you like, manifest in the body..."(p.16)

## RELATIONALITY

As has already been illustrated, the women's narratives demonstrate feminist spiritualities' emphasis on relation and connection. This emphasis is, itself, related to other aspects of spirituality and of post-patriarchal notions of the Sacred. A focus on the Sacred as immanent rather than transcendent was frequently linked to a sense of relation between all forms of life. Amy expressed this when trying to articulate the

ways in which the influence of women's spirituality had affected her understanding of the Divine.

"We all are part of it. We're not separate as we'd like to think we are which is quite nice in a way to think that we're all connected. We're sort of,... we are individuals, but we're still connected. Do you know what I mean?" (p 13)

For her, the term 'Goddess' conveyed a more 'encompassing' notion of the Sacred than the 'God' who, despite Christians' claims to the contrary, seemed to be 'separate' from the cycles of nature and humanity (Amy p.13). Cessy expressed similar ideas although she wanted to maintain that the Divine was both immanent and transcendent at the same time. This divine energy is, however, 'inter-related to dependency and for community' whilst also present in the 'mystery of creation' (Cessy p.11).

Helen cites 'connectedness' as the key factor in her determining what is expressive of spirituality or revelatory of the divine (Helen p.9). Similarly, this is a central concept for Michelle (Michelle, p.3, 13). For Michelle, this perception of 'belonging' and connectedness is linked with political action as an aspect of spirituality (Michelle p.3). This was a view shared by other women. When expressing her understanding of the dimensions of feminist spirituality, Cessy included the notion of 'solidarity with women – that we're in this struggle together'. For Pamela, a sense of community with others was an aspect of embodied spirituality (Pamela p. 3, 4, 8).

Throughout the narratives, there is a theme of the interconnectedness of the different aspects of embodied spirituality. A sense of connection with other forms of life is often expressed as the basis for other ethical issues. Emily claims that the attraction of Goddess spirituality was its ability to connect different 'layers' of her experience.

"That was when it all came together – the spirituality and the politics and the study. it had all been separate aspects of my life. Now it all started coming together" (Emily p.9).

This sense of relation is also often linked to a biophilic sense of connectedness to 'nature', (e.g. Michelle p.12, Pamela p. 9 -10).

## BIOPHILIC SENSE OF CONNECTION WITH 'NATURE'

Mary Daly claims to have been the first to coin the term 'biophilia'<sup>27</sup> to express ways in which feminist philosophy challenges the dualistic assumptions of patriarchal traditions in order to produce a life affirming worldview. Feminist post-dualistic spirituality expresses an understanding of the Sacred as immanent in the physical world and therefore resacralises 'nature'. A reverence for nature is identified by Eller as a central element of feminist spirituality. This is confirmed by the narratives provided by the women in my inter-view group. They all conveyed some sense of connection with nature or 'the earth'. For Amy and Annie, nature is the very manifestation of the sacred. Jaki uses image of the Goddess as 'the body of the planet' (Jaki p.5). When Pamela attempts to define the slippery term "spirituality", she begins by expressing her sense of connection with the countryside and with nature (Pamela, p.1-2). She believes that it was this sense of relation and awareness of the importance of patterns of connection which led her to study Geography (Pamela p.3, 6). Similarly, Michelle, who was initially very hostile to any form of religion, was led to a notion of 'spirituality' by an 'experience with the land' in Crete (Michelle, p.1-2). Emily found the 'pagan' elements of village Christianity to be the ones which attracted her. When these were denied, it prompted her move out of patriarchal Christianity (Emily p.1-2). More recently, Emily's sense of relation with nature was expressed in a vision of the Green Man (Emily p.15). Cessy used the story of the vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe to demonstrate that 'we need to care for the earth as the earth cared for us' (Cessy p.7-9).

As was discussed above, the narratives illustrate the ways in which spiritual feminists often understand a relationship between a sense of connection with nature and other socio/political concerns. Helen (p.9) and Gina (p.11) both express the sense of their

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<sup>27</sup> Daly p.1993

own affirmation as 'earth-centred' experience. Helen also links the use of the image of the Goddess as 'Earth Mother' in her storytelling to her commitment to an ethic based on that which is 'life enhancing' (Helen p.13). She expresses the ways in which the concept of enhancing life determines her religious and political attitudes (Helen p.14).

## **POLITICAL AWARENESS**

Another distinctive element of women's spirituality is its recognition that 'the personal is political, is spiritual'. The identification of spirituality as 'feminist' is, itself, a political act and most of the interviewees made this identification. Helen used the term 'Goddess feminist' to denote her current understanding of her spirituality (Helen p.3). Emily (p.4) and Michelle (p. 1-2) were political feminists before they related their feminism to spirituality. Emily articulated how important it was to her that she could make a connection between her politics and spirituality (Emily p.9). Cessy, as a Roman Catholic nun, had followed a different route to the development of her spirituality. She explains, however, that her community had a history of demonstrating a 'social-economic-political consciousness' (Cessy p.2). Cessy related her own involvement with the political struggle in Central and South America and especially with the women of the base communities, drawing on the 'motifs' of Liberation theology (Cessy p.1-2). She now identifies her spirituality as feminist and acknowledges the influence of feminist theologians, leading her to an interest in Goddess spirituality. Interestingly, Cessy expressed her current sense of disillusionment with political action. Although she maintained a continuing sense of solidarity with the political struggle of the women in Mexico (Cessy p.15), she now puts more trust in the results of personal inner transformation, generated by a quest for the Goddess (Cessy p.11-12). When reflecting on her relationship with the structures of the church, Cessy acknowledges that it is sometimes necessary to use



the authority of the church to provide a voice for the poor or to negotiate peace in war-torn areas (Cessy p.10).

Gina identified herself as a feminist but did not relate her feminism to her spirituality, which, for her, was a quite separate journey from the one undertaken to self empowerment (Gina p.14, 16). Annie (p.) and Amy (p.1) did not identify themselves as feminists although they did express some agreement with the principles of feminism. They were both perceived an element of extremism in the term 'feminist'. Amy was introduced to a group of women practising feminist spirituality. She admitted that this did reveal to her an awareness of a different element of feminism, one which was celebratory rather than condemnatory (Amy p.1). Amy maintains that she is 'not a very political person' (Amy p.10), although she does tend to define political in quite a narrow sense (Amy p.11). Jaki, however, maintains that spirituality needs to be political, citing Starhawk as a good example of what she means (Jaki p.4). Jaki expresses her concern about the future of the planet and the ecological damage which she attributes to the direct result of masculinist dogma about disembodied spirituality (Jaki p.3, 6). Emily understands her ethical system as the foundation of her spirituality but attributes this to the result of Goddess studies and not to theology. For Michelle, politics must be at the very heart of and is an essential ingredient of her spirituality. She describes her time at Greenham where she encountered an ethic which was 'presenting alternatives which were imbued with life' (Michelle p.3). In articulating her understanding of politics as 'a sense of connection with other human beings' (Michelle, p.8), Michelle conveys the most significant and frequent aspect of the inter-viewees' many expressions of socio-political awareness. As has been demonstrated above, it is a consciousness that all forms of life are interconnected that forms the basis of the women's ethics. Relationality is the basis of political awareness.

..we belong with each other, we belong with the land, we need to respect her, we need to respect each other so there is a connection with the need for liberation, for changes of justice... (Michelle p.9).

## **AFFIRMATION OF FEMALE BODILY SACRALITY**

The emphasis in the inter-viewees' accounts on relationality reflects the extent to which feminist theo/alogy has challenged a dualistic paradigm which divorces the transcendent sacred from the bodily profane. In feminist Goddess-talk, spirituality is not removed from the corporeal and physical. On the contrary, it is located firmly within the everyday connections which constitute relationships and intercourse. Most importantly, feminist religion counteracts the narratives which present female bodiliness and sexuality as a site of profanity and pollution. Hence, Raphael defines feminist thealogy as the post-patriarchal reconstruction of female sacrality<sup>28</sup>. This was a concept implicit in some of the interviewees' ideas but rarely made explicit. The respondents did not use the terms 'sacred' or 'dualism' in their accounts but their expressions of spirituality as embodied and their celebration of women's empowerment conveyed the notion of female sacrality. Amy discovered in a new-found Goddess spirituality the possibility of 'celebrating being a woman' (Amy p.1). Likewise, Annie was attracted to Paganism and to Goddess spirituality because they 'celebrate the body and its sexuality' (Annie p.3). Cessy understands the goal of Goddess feminists as 'to seek ways of finding the female divine within themselves' (Cessy p.1). Michelle could only find the rituals of the Goddess movement meaningful if they were connected with women's experience and centred in their own bodies (Michelle p.4). For Jaki, female empowerment means knowing that "...it's a blessing to be a woman, not a curse" (Jaki p.13).

## **RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCE**

Another common theme in feminist theo/alogy found in the respondents' narratives is a willingness to embrace plurality and diversity. This was particularly obvious in the

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<sup>28</sup> Raphael 1996

women's Goddess-talk. Thealogy's readiness to accept multiplicity and ambiguity is also an element of its rejection of dualism. Feminist spirituality is not predicated upon an 'either/or' basis. It does not accept the absolutes of patriarchal or monotheistic dogmas. Feminist Goddess-talk therefore has the capacity to welcome difference. The notion of 'difference' has become a compelling subject for debate within feminist discourse, as will be explored further in the following chapter. This was not really reflected in the inter-viewees' accounts. The respondents tended to refer to the category of 'woman' in a largely undifferentiated and universalist manner. Many, however, conveyed a sense of respect for diversity, often based on an awareness of relationality, which was the basis of their ethical framework. This was stated most explicitly by Annie, although she was referring specifically to Pagans.

"...because they feel that, in order to live in harmony with the universe, you treat everything with respect" (Annie p.4).

Emily also expressed a passionate concern for a respect for difference. Ironically, however, her notion of difference was based upon the right to encounter a variety of metaphysical experiences. She, nevertheless, extrapolated from this belief an ethic of social justice.

"I do feel that if our consciousnesses are different,... we're all part of the human community and all valuable" (Amy p.26)

The ability of feminist thealogy to construct a viable ethic if it embraces postmodern attitudes is a matter of debate to be discussed further in the following chapter. The socio/political implications of a respect for difference may be latent within the inter-viewees' responses but this was not fully articulated.

## **RECLAIMING AND AFFIRMING THE 'OTHER'**

As I intend to explore further in the following chapters, thealogy's challenge to dualism enables a revisioning of the boundaries between the 'absolute' and the 'other'. This enabling, I would argue, provides the potential for socio/political

transformation in offering positive strategies for approaching difference. Within the women's narratives, there were demonstrations of a post-dualistic world view and of a valuing of difference. I wish to travel further with these ideas in order to approach the reclaiming and affirming of the 'other'.

## **POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR GODDESS TALK**

The ways in which the women expressed their understanding of the term 'Goddess' reflect the fluidity of thought which is characteristic of spiritual feminism. As Christ and several other commentators have been eager to maintain, this is not just the result of 'sloppy thinking'. The willingness to affirm several propositions simultaneously, some of which appear mutually exclusive, is part of theology's conscious challenge to the dualistic thinking which has determined theological orthodoxy for two millennia. Christ makes this explicit in her attempt to produce a 'systematic' theology. Here she argues that the requirement to clarify issues such as whether the Goddess is transcendent or wholly immanent or whether theology is monotheist or polytheist is predicated upon the acceptance of a dualistic paradigm which presents the 'one' and the 'many' as irreconcilable. Christ demonstrates that a Goddess oriented world-view challenges such assumptions as false. As was discussed in chapter 3, Christ draws on process theology to illustrate that it is not invalid to attempt a philosophical argument which presents immanence and transcendence, one and many as compatible.

Another important aspect of theology's conscious affirmation of ambiguity and plurality is its tendency to accept personal experience as a valid source of reflection about the nature of the divine. In doing so, theology is challenging another premise of dualistic thinking, the value of reason above embodied experience. Goddess-talk therefore abandons logocentric assumptions when expressing 'reality' as it is encountered in the lived experience of individuals. This approach reflects the

epistemological implications inherent in a feminist paradigm shift. When describing her experiences of the Goddess, Nelle Morton refused to accept a dichotomy between 'experience' and 'reality'. Morton was working within a paradigm in which the Goddess represented a 'non-realist' expression of the Sacred. For Morton, this was an essential ingredient of the iconoclastic element of Goddess as metaphor. Morton rejected the notion of a transcendent Sacred as the projection of a patriarchal worldview. She, nevertheless, maintained that her 'experiences' of the Goddess were meaningful and revelatory. Morton found it pointless to respond to those who asked 'did it really happen?' Morton has not provided further exploration of the implications of her apparent premise that the Sacred can only be encountered in human experience and that to search for a 'reality' beyond this is nonsensical. I, however, wish to follow the trajectory of Morton's thinking and explore the potential of Goddess-talk for post-metaphysical expressions of the sacred.

The emphasis on the embodied and experiential nature of reflections upon the meaning of the Goddess was apparent in the inter-viewees' responses. The women also demonstrated an acceptance of plurality and fluidity in their attempts to express their understanding of the Goddess. I am not suggesting that all the women consciously incorporated an epistemological critique of dualistic and logocentric paradigms into their narratives. I would, however, maintain that such a critique is implicit in many of the points that were made. All of the women, in diverse ways, expressed the need to abandon traditional, patriarchal images of the divine. The narratives' emphases on the sacred as immanent, spirituality as embodied and experience as relational follow on from the women's rejection of conventional perceptions of the divine.

When discussing the distinctive aspects of feminist spirituality's expressions of the divine, Eller focuses on the relationship between the Goddess and 'the self'.<sup>29</sup> Other commentators have recognised the close association between the notion of the

Goddess and female identity as a significant feature of theology. For Asphodel Long, this is the primary focus of the Goddess movement which she expresses in the phrase 'in raising her. We raise ourselves and in raising ourselves, we raise her'.<sup>30</sup> Long maintains that this experience of the Goddess as self empowerment preceded all theological reflection. As a result, the apparent ambiguity of expression, for instance between Goddess as the 'one' or 'the many' can be understood in this context. Raphael maintains that a distinctive aspect of feminist spirituality is the sense of an 'ontological continuum' between women and the Goddess.<sup>31</sup> As was demonstrated above, notions of 'Goddess- as -self' were very apparent in the women's narratives. Alongside these affirmations of the Goddess as coterminous with the women's own sense of identity, is a recognition of movement and process in that sense of identity. The expressions of spirituality found in most the women's accounts are related to narrative and identity. The women frequently referred to their understanding of the Goddess and of themselves in terms of a journey (Cessy p.12, Gina p.4), pathway (Pamela, p.11, Helen p.3-4) or process of evolution (Amy p.1, 9-10, 12, Annie p.8). In these accounts of their 'travels', the women freely acknowledged that their configurations of the Goddess have changed as their knowledge and experience developed and that such a process is often linked to their own psychological as well as spiritual development. Jaki voiced her belief that all religious expression was the product of psychological development or change and was 'embedded in each person's personal story' (Jaki p.10). She recognised that the more she studied the more her views about Goddess changed.

In their accounts, inter-viewees were often open to the idea that their personal journeys were without a destination. When discussing her spiritual journey, Pamela is anxious to stress that she does not understand 'progress' in terms of a 'a straight line'. Helen also wants to emphasise that her 'pathway' is not a process of

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<sup>29</sup> Eller 1993 p.141 -143

<sup>30</sup> Long 1994 p.17

'discovering who I am' but an on-going journey recognising that she has different needs at different times in her life (Helen p.3-4). (Helen cited the influence of Germaine Greer's ideas in *The Whole Woman*<sup>32</sup> in developing this view.) Helen, therefore, is happy to understand herself on a journey where she is 'not going to get there' (Helen p.8). She is 'uncovering layers' of herself, but does not expect to 'get to the core' of her self (Helen p.5). When discussing her 'journey', Emily also states that she 'doesn't think she will ever arrive any where', although she conveys more desire for firmer foundations (Emily 11-12).

At the same time, however, there seemed to be very little willingness to relinquish a notion of the unified self. Only Helen touched upon this possibility when she expressed her sense of identity as having many layers (Helen p. 5). On the whole, however, despite the close relationship between the Goddess and the women's own sense of identity, there was sparse evidence that the women were prepared to associate the readily accepted plurality inherent in Goddess with a recognition of plurality in their own subjectivity.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, many of them retained an allegiance to the notion of reincarnation, whereby some aspect of a presumably 'eternal' self transmigrated into another life.

I would, therefore, argue for the identification of tensions between this and the affirmation of embodied spirituality. Similarly, many of the women 'reverted' to a metaphysical conceptual framework in order to articulate their notion of the sacred, despite an apparent affirmation of the Goddess as wholly immanent in the physical. This is not to recognise the validity of theological challenges to notions of immanence and transcendence as mutually exclusive. Such challenges, however, still seem to operate within a metaphysical framework which posits a 'realist' notion of Goddess.

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<sup>31</sup> Raphael 1996 p.131.

<sup>32</sup> Greer 2000

Post-metaphysical expressions of the religious symbolic must, I would argue, engage with questions of 'realism'<sup>34</sup> I share with Morton a profound scepticism of the extent to which such an understanding of the sacred can function to disrupt images of hierarchical dualisms. The starting point for nearly all the respondents was the symbolic function of Goddess-talk. Only Gina, however, was prepared to present an unequivocally non-realist understanding of Goddess.

I, therefore, wish to argue that if feminist approaches to the study of religion is to move beyond Augustinian and Cartesian dualisms, it needs to question symbols of the fixed, unified, self-authenticating 'self' as well as those of the immutable, immortal and disembodied 'spirit'. Such an interrogation can be seen as a necessary aspect of the 'shift in paradigm' required in order to provide alternatives to a God- talk which is embedded in representations of the fixed, transcendent Absolute.

## **WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE**

The theme of spirituality as rooted in 'women's experience' runs throughout the narratives, as it does throughout feminist theo/alogy. The range of critical questions surrounding the category of 'women's experience', which is emerging in feminist theo/alogy and will be discussed in the following chapters , were not reflected in the women's accounts. Furthermore, as Grace Jantzen has effectively demonstrated, the problematizing of women's experience as an 'anchor' for the religious symbolic is related to theorising about the subject. Jantzen hopes that 'women's experience' can become, a source of 'transformative suggestion in a feminist symbolic of religion.'<sup>35</sup> She maintains, however, that before this can take place, the notion of 'experience' needs to be problematised. She therefore calls for an interrogation of the often

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<sup>33</sup> One notable and distinctive exception here is Pamela's account, although Pamela did find the 'internal dialogue' she experienced quite problematic. On the other hand, she also related this multiple 'inner life' to her notion of spirituality (Pamela p.18-20).

<sup>34</sup> In feminist theology, Ruether's foundational work, *Sexism and God-talk* (Ruether 1983) represents a serious consideration of the implications of a post-metaphysical framework for new expressions of theological concepts. As a result, Hampson 'accuses' Ruether of abandoning theism. (Hampson 1990 p.29)

<sup>35</sup> Jantzen 1998 p.113



oversimplified connection between notions of experience as a category and resource and masculinist assumptions about 'self' as a unified substance, a subject of attributes.

Goddess-talk has the potential to generate images of plurality, process and connectedness in the religious symbolic. Thealogy can therefore also offer possibilities for expressions of spirituality which reflect the diversity, fluidity, and relationality of subjectivity. I intend, therefore, to explore such possibilities in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: DEVELOPING FEMINIST THEALOGIES IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

In this study I am arguing that feminist Goddess-talk has the potential to express notions of the sacred and understandings of spirituality which can operate within a post-metaphysical and post-realist context. Feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion, exemplified by the work of Carol Christ, have generated expressions of embodied spirituality which challenge traditional dualistic assumptions. In the process, feminist theo/alogy demands a reconsideration of the religious symbolic, recognising the power of language in constructing a sense of relationship with the sacred. Feminist theo/alogy's challenge to the dominant patterns of religious expression emerged from the claim that such expressions omitted, negated or demonised women's experience. The resulting emphasis on women's experience as a source and resource for reflection about the divine led to an awareness of the relationship between narrative, identity and spirituality. *It also placed spirituality and notions of the Sacred firmly within the socio/political sphere.*

In the previous chapter I attempted to demonstrate how the paradigm shift generated by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion was reflected in the narratives of the women with whom I inter-viewed. Their responses conveyed an awareness of embodied spirituality which challenged dualistic assumptions about sacrality. In the inter-views it was apparent that the concept of 'women's experience' was central to their expressions of spirituality which were related to narratives of lived experience and to notions of identity. At the same time, however, the women's explorations of their narrative spirituality conveyed an acceptance of plurality and process. In this chapter I intend to revisit some of the central themes of spiritual feminism, as illustrated in the inter-viewees responses, in the light of challenges presented by postmodern and poststructural feminist theories. I wish to argue that post-dualistic notions of embodied spirituality have the potential to generate expressions of spirituality which respond to a postmodern context.

Furthermore, I intend to explore the role of Goddess-talk in facilitating such expressions of spirituality.

The use of 'women's experience' as a category of analysis has been pivotal to the development of feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion but is now open to serious interrogation. As was discussed in earlier chapters, early articulations of second wave feminism presented the notion of 'women's experience' as if it were a universal, undifferentiated absolute. Feminist theory has more recently recognised that such an assumption mirrors the oppressive patterns of an androcentric worldview. As a result, the need to respond to 'difference' has become a compelling concern in feminist discourse. In previous chapters, I have referred to the challenge to feminist theo/alogy presented by the voices of women of colour. In this chapter I wish to focus on the related dialogue between feminism and postmodern/poststructural thought, with special reference to feminist spirituality.

### **Feminism and Postmodernism**

The debate surrounding the relationship between feminism and postmodernism is contentious, complex and ongoing. Linda Nicholson's influential anthology of landmark articles does, however help to map out many of the central issues.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in her introduction to this collection, Nicholson provides an overview of the relevant tenets of postmodernist thought which is notoriously and inherently difficult to define. Nicholson focuses on the epistemological implications of postmodernism. She understands the 'post' of postmodernism to indicate a complete reaction against 'modernism' i.e. the cultural legacy of the Enlightenment. Such a legacy Nicholson characterises as

"the attempt to reveal general all- encompassing principles which lay bare the basic features of natural and social reality."<sup>2</sup>

This presupposes that it is possible to achieve, in Nicholson's adaptation of a previous term, a 'God's eye view' of reality which transcends the perspective of any one human

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholson 1990

<sup>2</sup> Nicholson 1990 p.2

being or group. Coupled with this is the assumption that all human progress is ultimately leading to the attainment of this transcendent and absolute knowledge and that this march of progress was determined by the supremacy of Reason. For Nicholson, the value of a postmodern critique of this world-view lies not only in its acknowledgement of the perspectival nature and 'situatedness' of all human thought but, more radically, in its need to question "the very criteria by which claims to knowledge are legitimised."<sup>3</sup> The implications of this are far reaching since, once the God's eye view of the world is challenged, then so are all the criteria for demarcating 'true' and 'false'; 'fact and 'fiction', which must be recognised as having no legitimacy outside such a world-view. This challenge inevitably leads to the embracing of pluralism and relativity and a refusal to recognise any transcendent referent beyond human discourse. Furthermore, the post modernist thinkers have demonstrated that modernist claims to absolute or universal knowledge or criteria by which to judge such absolutes represent the emergence and development of specific 'regimes of power'. Hence the well known summary of the post-modern condition, supplied by Jean-Francois Lyotard, as 'a loss of credibility with regard to the grand narrative'<sup>4</sup> or, as many writers prefer, the metanarrative.

Nicholson's survey illustrates how feminism and Postmodernism, though developing independently, share common concerns in their recognition of the relationship between metanarratives, knowledge and power. As a result, there are a growing number of feminist thinkers who perceive postmodernism as an ally and define themselves as post modernist feminists. Linda Nicholson, with Nancy Fraser, argues for such an alliance.<sup>5</sup> Nicholson and Fraser do, however, take issue with Lyotard's analysis. They maintain that postmodernism's critique of foundational philosophy has much to offer feminist theory, enabling careful examination of the charges of essentialism, absolutism and universalism. At the same time, however, Fraser and Nicholson challenge Lyotard's claim that a commitment to antifoundationalism must lead to the total rejection of all genres of

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholson 1990 p.39

<sup>4</sup> Lyotard 1984 p.37

<sup>5</sup> Fraser & Nicholson 1990

social criticism.<sup>6</sup> Fraser and Nicholson welcome the insights of postmodernism which lead to an appropriate response to difference. They call for feminist political practice which is 'a matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest or identity'. Drawing on an images which are popular in feminist spiritualities, they envisage feminist practices as a 'patchwork' of alliances and as a 'tapestry' of many different coloured threads.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, Fraser and Nicholson want to retain the necessary analysis of societal macro structures in order to combat patriarchy in all its 'endless variety and monotonous similarity'.<sup>8</sup> Fraser and Nicholson's approach represents a negotiation between feminism and postmodernism which is continued in the articles gathered in Nicholson's anthology. They map out the convoluted routes taken by feminist theorists in the 1980s to explore the boundaries between feminism and postmodernism. Some of the contributors to Nicholson's collection are, however, less enthusiastic than she is to align feminism with postmodernism and wish, in particular, to challenge its perceived 'gender scepticism'. For them the maintenance of a feminist analysis of social structures remains problematical within the postmodern condition when such a condition seems to preclude the use of 'women's experience' or even 'woman' as a category at all. They see a danger that too full an acceptance of the postmodern condition will result in a situation where the voices only recently found by women in the public domain, and in academic discourse in particular, will again be silenced. For instance, Susan Bordo insists that

Too relentless a focus on heterogeneity can obscure the transhistorical, hierarchical patterns of white male privilege that inform the Western intellectual tradition.<sup>9</sup>

For many feminists, Lyotard's call for scepticism towards all grand narratives, including 'narratives of emancipation', entails a thoroughgoing relativity which can only lead to a

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<sup>6</sup> Fraser & Nicholson 1990 p 21-26 Fraser & Nicholson support their argument by identifying the inconsistencies of Lyotard's argument. They demonstrate that, although Lyotard calls only for narratives of legitimation which are plural, local and immanent, his own analysis implies normative judgements which move beyond the 'ad hoc' and nontheoretical.

<sup>7</sup> Fraser & Nicholson 1990 p.35

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Bordo 1990 p.149

politics of apathy and disavowal which they cannot endorse. It is, therefore, tempting to echo Sandra Harding's suspicion, quoted from Irigaray, that postmodernism might just be the 'last ruse of patriarchy'.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Christine Di Stefano suspected that, in its emphasis on plurality and relativity, postmodernism might succeed in producing an updated version of the modernist case of 'the incredible shrinking woman'.<sup>11</sup> Di Stefano lists the feminist charges against postmodernism as four related concerns. Firstly, that, despite its call for heterogeneity, postmodernism actually relates to the claims of a particular constituency, that of white privileged males of the industrialised West. Furthermore, Di Stefano points out that this group has gained the benefits of the Enlightenment for itself but are now eager to submit its legacy to critical scrutiny. Secondly, that the objects of this scrutiny are, themselves, the creations of a similarly specific and partial constituency, i.e. the founders of Western philosophy. Thirdly, that mainstream postmodern theory has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender. Finally, that if the postmodern project was seriously adopted it would make any semblance of feminist politics impossible because of postmodernism's claim to preclude any subject-centred enquiry or theory.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, Mary Daly has gone so far as to apply her categories of a Sado-Ritual Syndrome to the gynocidal effects of postmodern theory.<sup>13</sup> Less dramatically, Susan Bordo argued that, in shifting the focus of feminist concerns about the representation of cultural diversity away from practical contexts, it results in a de-politicising of the feminist agenda. Bordo also argued that the postmodern 'dream of being everywhere' provides just as absolute and transcendent a perspective as the Cartesian view of disembodiment.<sup>14</sup> Such an insight presents the encounter between feminism and postmodernism as an almost Pythonesque interchange of claim and counter-claim that each has not escaped the legacy of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>10</sup> Harding 1990 p.85 citing Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which I Not One* Cornell University Press 1985

<sup>11</sup> Di Stefano 1990 p.77

<sup>12</sup> Di Stefano 1990 p.75-76

<sup>13</sup> Daly 1999 pp.134-144

<sup>14</sup> Bordo 1990 p.143

Carol Christ made very similar arguments when she made her entry into the debate with postmodernist thought within spiritual feminism by refuting the arguments of Sheila Greene Davaney.<sup>15</sup> The main lessons, Christ argues, that the 'detached abstractionism' of both the Enlightenment and postmodernism should present to feminists is the need for them to "become more embodied not more disembodied" in their theologies and spiritualities.<sup>16</sup> Whilst accepting the need to retain a strategic ambivalence when approaching the claims of postmodernism I would, nevertheless, argue for the value of exploring postmodern theories which prompt us to question further what feminist narratives *mean* by 'embodiment' and 'women's experience'.

### Journeys and process

The narratives of the inter-viewees expressed the link between experience, story and spirituality and frequently used metaphors of travel to articulate this. In doing so, they echo central themes in the work of Carol Christ. Christ has, however, been open to criticism for being too 'teleological' in her imagery, especially in her use of this in *Diving Deep and Surfacing*.<sup>17</sup> Rose White has questioned the 'conversion scenario' presented by Christ's use of an interpretive model which, White argues, presented a 'lapsarian' or fall/redemption paradigm, suggesting a nostalgia for the concept of 'authentic self'. White also expressed concern about the notion of an 'ultimate destination' for all these disparate feminist journeys.<sup>18</sup> In her more recent work, Christ has recognised some of these issues herself. In *Odyssey with the Goddess*, for instance, Christ realises that she is on a serpentine path rather than a straight road.<sup>19</sup> Her reflections in *Rebirth* do not, however, suggest that she fully accepts Morton's belief that 'the journey is home'. I interpret Morton's phrase to mean that it is better for spiritual feminists to travel hopefully, imaginatively, passionately and biophilically than to arrive. A recurring theme in early

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<sup>15</sup> Davaney 1987

<sup>16</sup> Christ 1989 p.14 Christ's response to the challenge of relativity has been quoted several times in feminist theo/alogy, e.g. Sands 1994, Hogan 1995, King (ed.) 1995

<sup>17</sup> e.g. Van Heijst 1995, White 1996,

<sup>18</sup> White 1996

<sup>19</sup> Christ 1995

expressions of feminist spirituality, however, is a 'vision of wholeness' which is the goal of spiritual journeys.<sup>20</sup> The questions surrounding notions of destination relate to issues raised by postmodern and poststructural reflections upon the unity of the subject.

As Lennon and Whitford have pointed out there is a link between the awareness of the lack of unity within the category of the female subject and a realisation of a lack of unity *within* each female subject<sup>21</sup>. Lennon and Whitford are concerned with the epistemological implications of this move. As a result of poststructural theory, informed by psychoanalytical research, the notion of the subject, as defined by Cartesian philosophy, is under serious scrutiny. Lennon and Whitford describe this development in terms of changing metaphors. The subject is, they maintain, more like a railway junction where signifiers, discourses and messages meet or flash past, than it is a source, origin or mirror."<sup>22</sup>

The scepticism with regard to the unity of the self raises further issues for feminist strategies. In the early stages of second-wave feminism, feminists presented a challenge to the patriarchal representation of 'woman' as the 'other'. Integral to this critique was an insistence upon women's subjectivity and their capacity for self-transcendence. It therefore seems to some that no sooner do women gain the right to claim their sense of 'self' than they have to relinquish the concept of a unified self altogether!<sup>23</sup> A growing number of feminist theorists, however, maintain that the concept of the 'female self' now demands reinvestigation. Angela McRobbie, for instance, suggests that perhaps a feminist notion of a 'real me' was a necessary fiction in the early '70s but argues that "the fragmentation of the feminist self is now confirmed through the global and postmodern critique of the European Enlightenment".<sup>24</sup> Despite the difficulty for some in relinquishing the female Self, therefore, the changing understanding of the subject which underpins

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<sup>20</sup> e.g. Christ 1980, Zappone 1991

<sup>21</sup> Lennon & Whitford 1994

<sup>22</sup> Lennon & Whitford 1994 p.4

<sup>23</sup> e.g. Caputi 2000

<sup>24</sup> McRobbie 1994 p.128



postmodernist and poststructural theory is attractive to many feminist thinkers. They articulate the connection between the presentation of a Cartesian, unified, self-authenticating subject and the patterns of domination inherent in the Enlightenment project. For them, the association between presenting Reason as Absolute and male as normative is expressed in the term phallogocentrism. One such feminist thinker is Rosi Braidotti who gives passionate expression to her concern over this connection when she claims

I am struck by the violence of the gesture that binds a fractured self to the performative illusion of unity, mastery, self-transparency. I am amazed by the terrifying stupidity of that illusion of unity, and by its incomprehensible force.<sup>25</sup>

Braidotti articulates her conviction that philosophical questions about the nature of subjectivity have far reaching political implications. She resists the view of the 'death' of the subject as an intellectual crisis, but approaches it more as an opportunity, especially for feminists. Braidotti is not prepared to accept postmodernism as an inevitably nihilistic and cynical response to societal analysis. Such an approach she characterises, with typical humour, in the words of some Paris graffiti-

"God is dead, Marx is dead, and I'm not feeling too well myself."<sup>26</sup>

In response to the ambiguities discussed above, Braidotti understands the task facing those she terms 'postmodern female feminists' to be that of respecting difference and diversity without falling into relativism or political despair. In order to address this task, she employs the image of the nomadic subject.<sup>27</sup>

Braidotti understands this image to be a 'myth', defining myth as 'a political fiction'. She suggests that her own experience of living in a variety of cultures and speaking many languages has informed her understanding of the need for feminists to be 'polyglots' and

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<sup>25</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.12

<sup>26</sup> Braidotti 1991 p.2

<sup>27</sup> Braidotti's use of this image is obviously influenced by her teacher, Deleuze. (e.g. Goodchild 1996 p.2, 172-174). She does, however, develop her understanding of nomadic subjectivity in a distinctive way and, whilst acknowledging her debt to Deleuze, is critical of his work, especially its androcentric assumptions. (e.g. Braidotti 1994 p 111-123)

nomads. She links these images together and wishes to 'emphasize the extent to which the nomadic state has the potential for positive renaming'.<sup>28</sup> Like Morton, Daly and Christ, Braidotti recognizes the power of language and images. She values a 'visionary epistemology' which recognizes that a new image has the "capacity to offer us ordinary access to extraordinary thinking".<sup>29</sup> Throughout her work, Braidotti encourages female feminists to present new 'figurations' or 'politically informed images' in order to 'free the activity of thinking from the hold of phallogentric dogmatism'.<sup>30</sup> She echoes Donna Haraway's call for 'ecstatic speakers' and 'heteroglossia'.<sup>31</sup>

Here, I would argue, there are strong links between Braidotti's approach and that of the feminist theology generated by Morton and Christ. Similarly, the inter-viewees' narratives demonstrated that the primary function of Goddess-talk lay in its power of renaming. They also illustrated the extent to which theology's symbolic potency related to the women's exploration of their own identity. Furthermore, this exploration was experienced as an engagement with process. The women's responses also revealed, however, a desire to translate the Goddess as symbol into some form of metaphysical reality even though such a translation was difficult to articulate. As has been discussed in previous chapters, within the Goddess movement as a whole, the boundary between Goddess as symbol and Goddess as metaphysical reality is one which is much contested. At the same time, however, the conscious fluidity of theological reflection allows the boundary to be very blurred. This was also reflected in the inter-viewees' responses. In contrast to the on-going polyvalence of Starhawk or the realist position of Christ, I am arguing for a post-realist understanding of Goddess as metaphorical process. Following Morton, I am in no way denying the reality of women's experience of Goddess. I am suggesting, however, that, like the figurations presented by Braidotti and Haraway, the transformative power of Goddess-talk needs no point of reference beyond the language itself. In this regard, I echo Braidotti's belief in the political potency of imagination and myth making. She

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<sup>28</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.8

<sup>29</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.8

<sup>30</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.4

<sup>31</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.8

maintains that political fictions have the potential to be more effective than theoretical systems in these 'postmodern times'.<sup>32</sup>

The mythic figure of the nomadic subject allows Braidotti to move through the challenges of postmodernism on her own terms, 'blurring boundaries without burning bridges'.<sup>33</sup> A nomadic subject wanders happily between different categories and many disciplines. The image of nomadic subjectivity is many layered. It allows affirmation of movement and process whilst retaining the possibilities of community and commonality. She further defines a nomadic consciousness as that which

... combines coherence with mobility. It aims to rethink the unity of the subject, without reference to humanistic beliefs, without dualistic oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new set of intensive and often intransitive transitions.<sup>34</sup>

Central to Braidotti's work is an exploration of the socio/political implications of a rejection of modernist assumptions about the unity of the subject. The nomad, therefore, is an image of post-Cartesian subjectivity, challenging the boundaries of absolute and other. Braidotti maintains that the anti-foundational origins of feminism and postmodernism do not automatically rob them of their political agency. Indeed, she argues that exposing the illusion of ontological foundations is, itself, a political act.<sup>35</sup>

Braidotti's nomadic feminism is therefore still about empowerment. As a nomad, the female feminist moves through many different kinds and levels of identity. This does not, however, prevent her from acknowledging her situatedness. The notions of female embodiment and 'experience' continue to have importance for Braidotti. She relates these notion to a politics of location and maintains, in a similar sense to that of Christ, that

...one's intellectual vision is not disembodied mental activity; rather it is closely connected to one's place of enunciation, that is, where one is actually speaking from."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.4

<sup>33</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.4

<sup>34</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.31

<sup>35</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.35

<sup>36</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.237

The nomadic feminist, therefore, speaks 'as-a- woman'. Subjectivity is sexed. The mobile and fragmentary nature of subjectivity does not preclude a sense of identity because

Identity is retrospective; representing it entails that we can draw accurate maps, indeed, but only of where we have been and consequently no longer are. Nomadic cartographies need to be redrafted constantly; as such they are structurally opposed to fixity and therefore to rapacious appropriation.<sup>37</sup>

The image of the nomad is, therefore, able not only to reflect the plurality and fluidity of subjectivity but also to convey a political commitment to oppose all forms of Kyriarchal oppression.

When advocating the power of figurations to generate the epistemological and social transformations she desires, Braidotti cites Donna Haraway's celebrated image of the cyborg. A cyborg is a hybrid of organism and machine which, Haraway argued, not only features in science fiction but has also become a social reality. Haraway presents a 'manifesto for cyborgs' as an 'ironic political myth'.<sup>38</sup> She consciously provokes her readers into considering incompatible positions as being simultaneously necessary or true.

Donna Haraway approaches her feminist theory from her background as a sociobiologist. She developed her ideas through her original focus on primatology and her attempts to investigate the so-called 'objective' scientific knowledge which determined the ways in which the behaviour of monkeys and apes was interpreted and related to gendered human relationships. She therefore became acutely aware of the issues at stake in exploring the complex but immensely influential association between 'woman' and 'nature'. Her work now calls for an examination of the invention and reinvention of nature which Haraway identifies as the most significant arena of debate for contemporary issues of oppression.<sup>39</sup> Haraway's favourite slogan is 'cyborgs for earthly survival'.<sup>40</sup> She acknowledges the influence of the work of Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde and Adrienne

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<sup>37</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.51

<sup>38</sup> Haraway 1990

<sup>39</sup> Haraway 1991

Rich- the radical feminists who have influenced the work of many theologians, including Carol Christ. Haraway argues, however, these thinkers, in presenting an opposition between the organic and technological, related to the symbolic systems of ecofeminism and neopaganism, fail to respond to the changing situation of the world as it leaves the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> This situation, Haraway argues, is characterized by a breakdown of clear distinctions between organism and machine. She calls for feminists to embrace the possibilities presented by this and other challenges to the opposing distinctions structuring the Western self. Haraway rejects what she views as 'naturalistic' and technophobic nostalgia' She claims that in facing the threat of the 'informatics of domination' feminists need to acknowledge that not only is 'god' dead, the goddess is dead too.<sup>42</sup> Braidotti sees the value of Haraway's figuration in its clarification of the new political struggles facing female feminists when, she maintains, white capitalist patriarchy has been replaced by the domination of information technology. Braidotti also believes that Haraway's manifesto for cyborgs is raising the question - what counts as human in this posthuman world? Braidotti summarizes the role of cyborg as figuration for feminist subjectivity when she claims that

As a hybrid, or body/machine, the cyborg is a connection-making entity, it is a figure of interrelationality, receptivity, and global communication that deliberately blurs categorical distinctions....the cyborg is Haraway's...answer to the question of how feminists reconcile the radical historical specificity of women with the insistence on constructing new values which benefit humanity as a whole.<sup>43</sup>

Haraway's manifesto for cyborgs is included in Nicholson's overview of the dialogue between feminism and postmodernism. Nicholson sees the value of cyborgs in their challenge to dominant distinctions between humans and machines, minds and bodies, materialism and idealism. In this rejection of binary oppositions, Nicholson accepts Haraway's assumption that the image of 'female as goddess' represents 'prior hopes of

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<sup>40</sup> e.g. Haraway 1990 p.225, 1991 p.4

<sup>41</sup> Haraway 1990 p.216

<sup>42</sup> Haraway 1990 p.204

<sup>43</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.105

unity and wholeness' which need to be discarded.<sup>44</sup> Haraway famously concludes her manifesto for cyborgs by claiming that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.<sup>45</sup> I wish, however, to challenge the assumptions that tie goddesses to a nostalgia for essential unity.

No figuration is self-defined, its potency lies in the possibilities it generates. The narratives of the inter-viewees did reveal a naïve assumption of the innocence of 'nature'. On the other hand, however, the women's Goddess-talk was also related to an openness to plurality and ambiguity when articulating notions of subjectivity and of the Sacred. It is notable that, in presenting their heteroglossia, Braidotti and Haraway reflect the influence of religious language. They perceive the need for new 'myths' and Haraway refers to manifesto for cyborgs as a blasphemy because blasphemy is more faithful to the importance of the issues it questions than is apostasy.<sup>46</sup> In presenting their figurations of the nomad and cyborg, respectively, Braidotti and Haraway are attempting to provide new and empowering images to generate the feminist transformations they seek. In her exploration of the nomadic subject, Braidotti is anxious to differentiate the nomadic state from a position of exile.<sup>47</sup> It might still be argued, however, that nomads present a place of marginalisation which many feminists would question. Haraway's appropriation of the cyborg, with its macho connections to militarism and narratives of domination, is consciously ironic. If cyborgs are capable of being 'unfaithful to their origins' and, as illegitimate offspring, rejecting their fathers,<sup>48</sup> then I would argue that goddesses can certainly break free from the Great Universal Mother. The cyborg's potential to question boundaries, categories and dichotomies may have something relevant to offer ecofeminism.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, the cyborg is a contentious figure and many feminists would still question where its true loyalties lie. Jane Capputi represents a radical

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<sup>44</sup> Nicholson 1990 p.11

<sup>45</sup> Haraway 1990 p.223

<sup>46</sup> Haraway 1990 p.190

<sup>47</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.21-28

<sup>48</sup> Haraway 1990 p.151

<sup>49</sup> See Lester 1998

feminist position in her suspicion of the cyborg.<sup>50</sup> She expresses her opposition to the poststructural fragmentation of the self. Whilst welcoming the rejection of 'the grandiose conceit of the Western, liberal, masculinist self, Caputi echoes Daly in her belief that an emphasis on the plural, constructed and performative nature of the subjectivity is to collude with narratives which objectify women and render them the non-human other. Caputi also provides the insight that Haraway's manifesto, whilst attempting to subvert traditional binary oppositions, still reflects some aspect of damaging dualism. Caputi suspects Haraway's affirmation of the cyborg's lack of nostalgia for 'Eden'. Haraway points out that the cyborg 'is not made of dust and cannot dream of returning to dust'.<sup>51</sup> This she interprets as the conventional polarisation which equates mud with evil matter and light with the non-material good.<sup>52</sup> Drawing on Daly's analysis, Caputi therefore concludes that Haraway's image of the cyborg does not subvert but rather reinforces fragmentation, while simultaneously reinscribing misogynistic contempt for dark, the Earth, the material, the female.<sup>53</sup>

Lester is much more positive about the potential of 'cyborgology' but also raises some words of warning. For Lester, an over-romanticising of the cyborg might lead feminist theory away from its necessary political analysis and reducing it to the discursive efforts of privileged intellectuals. Lester is also suspicious of the depoliticising effects of the cyborg's concern with identity. Haraway's figuration of the cyborg, nevertheless, has highlighted the need for feminist discourse to continue its exploration of the ways in which images and myths can present new ways of exploring female subjectivity and relate to the socio/political struggle to dismantle patterns of oppression.

I want to argue that Goddess-talk can contribute to such an exploration. Catherine Keller, whose work was influenced by Nelle Morton, provides an illustration of such a

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<sup>50</sup> Caputi 2000

<sup>51</sup> Haraway 1990 p.192

<sup>52</sup> Caputi 2000 p.16

<sup>53</sup> Caputi 2000 p.16-17

possibility.<sup>54</sup> Keller has produced a feminist theo/alogical critique of the concept of the unified, self-authenticating subject. The context of this critique is not, however, post-structural theory but process thought. Keller's emphasis on the fluctuating, fragmentary nature of self, drawing on insights from process thought, serves to demonstrate the relational, connective nature of self. In *From a Broken Web - Separation, Sexism and Self*, Keller's concern is with investigating the patriarchal world view in which the male possesses a separate self while the female has a soluble self which exists only in relation to others. Keller maintains that "separation and sexism have functioned together as the most fundamental self-shaping assumptions of our culture."<sup>55</sup>

She argues, however, that 'self' and 'relation' have been presented as false alternatives. On these grounds, Keller therefore challenges the albeit understandable feminist quest for a separate self. Drawing on psychoanalytical and mythic representations of male and female selves, she demonstrates the ways in which the 'heroic' male quest for a unified, independent self has denied connectedness and therefore sustained patterns of alienation and domination. "For", she claims, "it is a self conceived as separate that has ... projected its grid of fragmentation upon the world".<sup>56</sup> Instead, Keller calls for a reformulation of the concept of self in relation, a connective self which recognizes the plurality of identity. In order to provide an interpretive framework and metaphysical basis for this she turns to the process thought of Alfred Whitehead. By a very different route from that taken by Braidotti, Keller also reaches the conclusion that 'self is an event, a

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<sup>54</sup> In the following discussion of Keller's work, I appreciate that I am drawing on material from 1986 and which could, therefore, be regarded as rather dated. In *From a Broken Web*, Keller presented an approach, based on process thought, which has been adopted and developed by a 'school' of relational feminist theo/alogians e.g. Grey 1989, Zappone 1991. I, however, am returning to her work from a different perspective. I am claiming that what is distinctive about some aspects of Keller's approach is the manner in which she relates Goddess narratives to a critique of theories of the fixed, unified self. This is an area of theological reflection which, I would argue, has not been explored in detail elsewhere. In exploring it here, I uncover points of contact between Keller, Braidotti and Haraway. In particular, I pursue their investigation of the role of monsters in delineating difference, focussing on Keller's account of Medusa as Goddess/monster. In her more recent work, Keller draws on 'trickster' imagery to challenge the dualistic Whore/ Wise woman symbolism of Wisdom literature (Claudia V. Camp 'Wise and Strange: An Interpretation of the female Imagery in Proverbs in the Light of Trickster Mythology', *Semeia* 42 1988 p.18f. quoted in Keller 1996 p.305-306. It is interesting to note that Haraway also employs the trickster as a feminist figuration to transcend binary oppositions. (Haraway 1997)

<sup>55</sup> Keller 1986 p.2

<sup>56</sup> Keller 1986 p.161



process...' <sup>57</sup> and that identity is about re-visiting, re-remembering a plurality of experiences and connections which must always be in the past. I do not wish to minimize the significant differences in the methodologies and visions of these thinkers. Central to Keller's ontology of the self is the power of relation. Braidotti may be suspicious of such an emphasis. I would argue, nevertheless, that Keller's exploration of a multiple self-in-process within the context of theo/alogy opens up opportunities for a consideration of what the spirituality of the nomadic subject might entail. Braidotti, Haraway and Keller have a further interest in common.

When exploring 'the systems of myth and meaning structuring our imaginations' <sup>58</sup> both Braidotti and Haraway are interested in the role of 'monsters' in determining 'the limits of community'<sup>59</sup> and 'the status of difference within rational thought'<sup>60</sup>. Braidotti shares with feminist theo/alogy a recognition that woman's association with monsters goes back to Aristotle's teaching, sanctified by the endorsement of Aquinas, that women are defective and misbegotten. As such, femaleness is an anomaly, a deviation from the human norm - and therefore monstrous. Women are the Other. The significance of this powerful image exceeds mere outdated biology and has determined the androcentric worldview of Western culture. It is also linked to the masculine bias in Aristotle's theory of subjectivity which has determined Western phallogocentrism. Braidotti argues that female bodily subjects are, therefore, like monsters, figures of devalued difference. The results of this are apparent in the misogyny and gynophobia exhibited towards female sexuality in the writings of the early church fathers. Braidotti argues that the place of women as a sign of abnormality and therefore of difference as inferiority has remained a constant in Western scientific discourse and has produced a literary genre which celebrates a horror of the female body.<sup>61</sup> Whilst pursuing the implications of the association between the female body and monsters, Braidotti explores the blend of fascination and horror that this can

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<sup>57</sup> Keller 1986 p.194

<sup>58</sup> Haraway 1990 p.205

<sup>59</sup> Haraway 1990 p.222

<sup>60</sup> Braidotti 1994 p. 78

<sup>61</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.78

evoke and notes Freud's essay about the head of Medusa . In this, Freud relates the myth of Medusa to the male castration anxiety evoked by the sight of female genitalia. When exploring the mythic dimension of the triumph of the unified separate self over the soluble fluid self, Keller also considers the role of women as monsters, as initiated by Aristotle's meditations upon the nature of the soul. Like Braidotti and Haraway, she too notes the etymology of the word monster, *-monstrum* a portent- from the verb *monstrare* 'to show'. Monsters 'de-monstrate' that which is and is not the norm. These considerations also lead Keller to an exploration of the myth of Medusa but from a theo/alological perspective. We learn that Medusa's monstrous appearance as a hideously ugly creature with a head of writhing snakes was given to her as a punishment. Originally she and her two sisters were famed for their beauty and glorious hair. Medusa's deformity was inflicted upon her by the goddess Athena for the 'crime 'of being raped by Poseidon . The sight of Medusa's monstrosity would turn the viewer into stone. Her role in Ovid's narrative is to be conquered by the hero Perseus whose name means destroyer. Perseus is aided by the goddess Athena who provides the weapons to destroy Medusa and guides Perseus' arm in decapitating her. In return, Perseus gives the petrifying head to Athena, who wears the serpents on her armour.

Keller peels away the many layers of this myth in order to provide a deconstruction or demythologizing which reveals its presupposition of the transcendent independence of the ego and the normative self as masculine. To achieve this she employs psychoanalytical methods and the results of scholarship into Goddess herstory. She notes the significance of the relationship between the characters in this narrative. In classical Greek mythology, Athena was born out of the head of Zeus, declaring her disdain for the female and her loyalty to the male. Keller shows how this defines Athena as being safely cleansed of any female sexuality or 'embarrassing aroma of maternity'.<sup>62</sup> Keller then considers the reasons why Medusa's serpents should pose such a threat to a 'divine Daddy's girl'. Keller turns to Goddess herstory contributions of which presents a feminist genealogy of the snake. Keller draws upon the work of Marija Gimbutas.

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<sup>62</sup> Keller 1986 p.52

Gimbutas argued that the snake epitomised the worship of life in the earliest forms of religion present on earth. The snake's seasonal renewal in sloughing of its old skin and hibernating made it a symbol of the continuity of life and of the underworld. Gimbutas claimed that the snake therefore represented an energy which could transcend its boundaries and influence the surrounding world.<sup>63</sup> Gimbutas linked the importance of the snake to the symbols of spirals, circles and coils which appear on artefacts from Paleolithic and Neolithic times. She maintained that these symbols are not mere decoration but the 'language' of archeomythology. They conveyed, she argued, a reverence for the energy inherent in 'the process of becoming' <sup>64</sup>. Serpents therefore developed into symbols associated with many goddesses of healing and wisdom. Because of its centrality to Goddess religions, the serpent became a target for demonisation in the patriarchal traditions which conquered, suppressed or assimilated them. The best-known example of this being role of the serpent, along with Eve, in the downfall of humanity in the biblical creation narrative. Keller is therefore not surprised to find that lying behind the androcentric image of Athena as symbol of a patriarchal city-state is a different story. 'She belongs' Keller reveals, 'to the earlier culture of the pre-Hellenic peoples, of which only distorted vestiges, lame or monstrous, seep through the symbolic overlay of the triumphant, Zeus-worshipping, Achaean and Dorian invaders.'<sup>65</sup> A more common fate for the female representatives of a pre-patriarchal understanding of the sacred was that of rape or demonisation -or both in the case of Medusa. Medusa's serpents are potent remnants of a different wisdom, a female way of knowing that the appropriated daughter must be seen to destroy.

A further level of complexity is revealed when Keller re-members further aspects of Athena's story. The images of Athena as snake goddess in a matrifocal religion are pre-literary. In an earlier version of the classical account of her paternal beginnings, however, there is a clue to her more dangerous origins. Keller tells us that in the earliest written

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<sup>63</sup> Gimbutas 1989 p. 121

<sup>64</sup> Gimbutas 1989 p. 277

<sup>65</sup> Keller 1986 p.54

account of Athena's birth from Zeus' head, Hesiod tells us that she *did* have a mother—Metis the Titan goddess of wisdom. After his battle to conquer the Titans, children of the goddess Earth, Zeus seduces/rapes Metis, resulting in her pregnancy. When she is about to give birth, Zeus swallows Metis and places her within his own belly in order to prevent the birth of her wise children. Athena, however, bursts out of Zeus' head but she has no memory of her mother.

An examination of the roots of the names Medusa and Metis reveals for Keller their common origin.

The repressed Mother and the shadowy Other merge at the roots. Metis and Medusa are one. It follows that the reborn Athena has accomplished through her heroic accomplice Perseus a secret matricide...If Athena is to function as the ultimate personification of *patriarchal* wisdom, an epiphenomenon of Zeus in whose culture wisdom remains a male prerogative, she must deny any femaleness not defined and sanctioned by the male.<sup>66</sup>

This revelation calls for an examination of the significance of Athena's accomplice, Perseus. Keller traces the starring role that Perseus has played in a series of psychoanalytical dramas depicting the construction of self-identity. A succession of Jungian or post-Jungian scholars have meditated upon the implications of Perseus' quest as hero of the ego. After all, as Keller points out, Jung defined matricide as 'the first creative act of liberation'.<sup>67</sup> Underlying these debates is an assumption of subjectivity as masculine and an androcentric, phallogocentric expression of the self.

Keller follows Perseus' story and finds another significant encounter with mother/monsters. On his way home, Perseus rescues Andromeda, who, despite the fact that her name means 'ruler of men', is helplessly awaiting her sacrifice to a terrorizing sea serpent. An investigation into the genealogy of the dragon/sea monster brings us to the primordial struggle recounted in the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*. This conflict, which brought the created world and humanity into being, was between Marduk, heroic representation of the patriarchal city-state and Tiamat, the First Mother, whose name means primeval waters, the ocean, chaos. After a fearsome battle, Marduk slaughters

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<sup>66</sup> Keller 1986 p.57

<sup>67</sup> Keller 1986 p. 62

Tiamat and creates the cosmos out of her dismembered corpse. This triumph was ritually re-enacted at every Babylonian New Year festival and underlies the biblical account of the Hebrew monotheistic God's creation of the world over against *Tehom*, the chaotic waters of the deep.

Such dis-coveries are the mainstay of theology's reclaiming of female sacrality and re-telling of myths. What is distinctive about Keller's exploration is her connection between Goddess herstory and a critique of Western rationalism's claims for the unified, separate and self-authenticating self. The myths which have determined our symbolic order inform us that true selfhood, the prize of all heroic quests, can only be attained by conquering and exterminating the Other, thereby denying any sense of plurality or relation *in ourselves*. Keller connects this to pre-literary and hermeneutical evidence of ancient, pre-patriarchal traditions which expressed a very different way of knowing and relating, conveyed through symbols of biophilic energy and female sacrality. I would argue that Keller's symbology needs to be considered within the context of the current debate surrounding Gimbutas' theories, discussed in chapter 2. At the same time, however, I would maintain that the value of such symbols - regardless of their 'historical authenticity'- lies in their power to function as images which express process, becoming, plurality and which celebrate biophilic connection, relation and interdependence. As images or figurations, therefore, the symbols of Goddess-talk are replete with socio/political significance.

Braidotti expresses her doubts about the use of Goddess-talk when referring to the work of Mary Daly. In doing so, she voices familiar concerns about a mere reversing of patriarchy. Braidotti is sure that there is no need for a nostalgic return to a female deity and that feminist discourse can fill the metaphysical void left by the 'death' of God.<sup>68</sup> In advocating the use of Goddess-talk in feminist discourse, I am not calling for a return to an alternative set of 'sure historical foundations', nor do I wish to enter a 'matriarchy of history versus Goddess of faith' debate. I am not attempting to provide an alternative metanarrative, although I recognise the reluctance give up all together on metanarratives

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<sup>68</sup> Braidotti 1991 p.206

when you have only just gained access to them and have not had the luxury of taking the starring role in them for several millenia! I am, however, arguing that Keller's use of Goddess herstory is effective because not only does it allow for the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, it de-monstrates the *process* by which such knowledges become and remain subjugated. This relates to Carol Christ's work in calling for a shift in paradigm within the scholarly community. She analyses the process by which malestream scholars present as 'neutral' 'objective', 'rational', analytical', dispassionate', 'disinterested' and 'true' their own unexamined assumptions.<sup>69</sup> Christ has illustrated this with a skilful critique of the androcentric presuppositions underlying Mircea Eliade's revered history of ancient religions.<sup>70</sup> The more malestream scholars decry a feminist 'standpoint' perspective, the more they reveal their own unacknowledged perspectives.

Keller's use of mythology illustrates the extent to which goddesses can provide 'political figurations' which challenge androcentric and kyriarchal assumptions about what is normative and what is 'monstrous'. This is because when you scratch a mythic monster you find a Goddess. As contemporary figurations, goddesses can transgress the boundaries set by phallogocentric dogma.

Employing a visionary epistemology and recognising that fantasy is a key to creating feminist theapoetics,<sup>71</sup> I maintain, therefore, that goddesses can travel with nomads and cyborgs. The Goddesses with whom I wish to travel share with nomads the movement and spiralling energy of subject as process. For them, the journey is home. They also share with nomads a connection with and respect for the material environment in which they move and with which they are interdependent. Goddesses like Medusa, Lilith and Tiamat would be happy to converse with cyborgs about the subversive power of monstrous hybrids. These are no passive Earth Mothers. They move with the creative chaos of matter's energy. They are wisdom Goddesses who present embodied ways of knowing and epistemologies which reflect the multiple, fluctuating nature of subjectivity.

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<sup>69</sup> Christ 1996a p.28

<sup>70</sup> Christ 1991

<sup>71</sup> Goldenberg 1990 p.203, Isherwood & McEwan 1993 p.147

Furthermore I would venture that Goddesses can provide what nomads and cyborgs cannot, an expression of the sacred and of sacrality. I am contending that Goddess-talk enables spiritualities which are grounded in personal trans-formation and political action. Goddesses also possess an historical specificity, they inherit a history of suppression, marginalization and demonization which equips them with possibilities for new ways of understanding and responding to difference.

When Braidotti considers the question facing contemporary feminist theory she understands the challenge to be

...how to redefine female subjectivity after the decline of gender dualism, privileging notions of the self as process, complexity, interrelatedness, postcolonial simultaneities of oppression, and the multilayered technology of the self ? <sup>72</sup>

I am arguing that the same issues must face feminist spiritualities. For Braidotti, an appropriate response involves 'inventing new images of thought that can help us think about change and changing constructions of the 'self'.<sup>73</sup> Feminist the/alogy shares Braidotti's commitment to the political potency of mythogenic creativity. I am arguing for thealogy's further recognition of 'the need to work on transforming the very image of thought and of subjectivity as an intensive, multiple, and discontinuous process of becoming' in order to subvert 'the staticness of formulated truths'.<sup>74</sup> In the next chapter I wish to explore if such a recognition could generate an expression of 'spirituality as process'. Braidotti expresses no interest in spirituality but does frequently speak of the ethical, ontological and transcendental values of feminism.<sup>75</sup> I wish to name as spirituality the many changes and relations that constitute that which we trans-form and re-member as identity. For Braidotti and Haraway, feminist figurations function to pose the question

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<sup>72</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.157

<sup>73</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.204

<sup>74</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.111

<sup>75</sup> e.g. Braidotti 1994 p144

‘what counts as human in a post-human world?’ I wish to pose the further and, I believe, related question, ‘what counts as sacred in a post-metaphysical world?’



## **Chapter 7: CONCLUDING ANALYSES AND FUTURE JOURNEYS**

### **The Journey So Far**

In this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate that feminist theologies can make a valuable contribution to discussions surrounding the nature of spirituality and the sacred. I began by locating my own journey in relation to the ideas I present. I expressed my growing awareness of the extent to which feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion have re-visioned the religious imaginary and of how far-reaching are the socio/political consequences of this power of renaming. In the last thirty years, the application of Goddess-talk has emerged as an aspect of the transformation generated by feminist reconstructions of religious expression. I have provided an analysis of some of the many strands of the Goddess movement in order to present my claim that Goddess-talk has a much greater potential to contribute to feminist spiritual discourse than has yet been fulfilled. I have attempted to pursue this potential by identifying Goddess-talk as an example of the heteroglossia called for by feminist theorists such as Braidotti and Haraway and by presenting goddesses as feminist figurations which enable epistemological and socio/political transformation. Alongside my exploration of feminist theo/aological renaming of the Sacred, I examined the implications of this for new understandings of spirituality. Drawing on the work of Carol Christ, I pursued the possibilities of post-dualistic spiritualities which emerge from attention to women's own narratives. I became convinced, however, of the need to revisit some of the assumptions of feminist expressions of spirituality in the light of poststructural challenges to the concept of the unified self. As I followed the direction of these implications, I interviewed with other women who located themselves upon a feminist and/or Goddess – oriented journey. Out of these conversations emerged new ideas about figurations of the sacred and expressions of spiritualities.

The development of feminist theo/alogies and spiritualities is grounded in a notion of women's experience.<sup>1</sup> I have attempted to show how the category of 'women's experience' has become an increasingly problematic issue. This is not least because the very emancipatory impulses which generated a reclaiming of 'women's experience' now seem to be in danger of being halted by the ways in which the term can exclude and negate real women's lived experience. A rigorous consideration of what we mean by female identity and subjectivity is, therefore, central to the socio/political concerns of feminism and not just the esoteric occupation of a privileged academic elite. At the same time, however, there is a real threat that too much concentration on theoretical discourse will remove feminist projects away from actual engagement with the political struggle to improve the lives of oppressed and disadvantaged wo/men. Negotiating routes through these complex and competing demands is the challenge facing feminist theo/alogies in the twenty-first century. I wish to argue that Goddess-talk has something distinctive to offer this process

Feminist theology has, from its outset, been involved with and embedded in wider issues of social justice. It has understood and demonstrated that the construction of religious worldviews is a crucial aspect of the creation, sustenance and perpetuation of oppressive patterns which determine the subjugation and suffering of the majority of the world's population. Analysing, critiquing and re-envisioning God-talk is, therefore, vital to socio/political transformation. Feminist, womanist and woman-defined theologies, in all their diversity<sup>2</sup>, have made world-opening break-throughs in providing new understandings of what can be meant by spirituality and by the Sacred. They are, however, constrained by the context in which they operate. They speak from a religious tradition, which carries a heavy weight. It carries centuries of

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<sup>1</sup> As is discussed in Chapter 3 and later in this chapter, early examples of feminist thought and theo/alogy tended to speak in undifferentiated terms of 'women's experience'. Feminists now recognise the need to acknowledge the diverse contexts in which women have 'experience'.

interpretation and inscription which have enshrined a theology of domination. There are, of course, minority and counter-cultural movements within Christian his/herstory which can provide empowering sources and resources. The paradox at the centre of Christianity, which presents a God incarnate in an individual who identified with the marginalised and despised and was tortured to death as a political subversive, ensures that diversity and critical reconstruction are integral aspects of the Christian tradition. At the same time, however, the voices of possibility provided by these minority sources are almost drowned in the imperious roar of a dominant metanarrative. Christian feminists/womanists inherit a God-talk which was crystallised in the bedrock of classical dualism and metaphysical biophobia. The very fact that Christian feminist theologians are consciously subverting the philosophical assumptions of the dominant theologies is, of itself, valuable. They are, however, in other ways hampered by the need to use the very language, the God-talk, which has framed the worldview which they wish to deconstruct. Audre Lorde famously identified the difficulty presented by trying to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house<sup>3</sup>. It was this realisation which led Nelle Morton to abandon 'God' as a dead and redundant symbol and embrace the exorcising and regenerative possibilities of Goddess-talk as metaphoric process. I therefore wish to argue for further conversation between feminist theologies and theologies in the undertaking to re-imagine the Sacred and re-articulate expressions of spirituality. I intend to summarise the challenges facing feminist theo/alogies in this process and then identify the distinctive potential offered by my own understanding of Goddess-talk. I will first address the notion of spirituality and then consider what can be meant by the Sacred.

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<sup>2</sup> I recognise the dangerous limitations of trying to subsume the many, diverse contexts in which women theologise into the dominant term 'feminist'. See chapter 1.

## Refiguring Spirituality

'Spirituality' is a contentious term. Its origins lie in a specifically Christian concept, but it has come to be used in a widening sphere of contexts.<sup>4</sup> The narratives provided by the women with whom I inter-viewed reflected the extent to which feminist theo/alogy has renegotiated the boundaries of spirituality. These narratives presented a notion of embodied spirituality which was sexual and political. They also intimate the possibility that spirituality is engaged in process rather than fixed destinations. At the same time, however, the women's responses indicated that, although their expressions of spirituality challenged traditional dualistic presuppositions, they were still wedded to familiar metaphysical concepts and to assumptions about the fixed and unified self.

I am arguing that feminist theo/alogy needs to consider further the implications of challenges to the unified subject and move further beyond Cartesian as well as Neoplatonic and Augustinian dualism. This involves not only challenging the symbols of the immutable, immortal and disembodied 'spirit' but also those of the fixed, unified 'self'. I am maintaining that if we continue to predicate an expression of spirituality upon the notion of a unified subject with essential 'attributes' this supposes a 'real' or 'true' identity, a pure and unsullied self which is the destination of all spiritual quests. This 'absolute' self can then be in binary opposition to the 'other' – the unreal, the material, the disposable. The patterns of oppression are then left intact. Such a paradigm also diminishes the potential for understanding the

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<sup>3</sup> Lorde 1984 p.110-113

<sup>4</sup> The concept of 'spirituality' has its roots in a specifically Christian notion of religious practice, related to Trinitarian doctrines of the Holy Spirit. The actual word has a more recent history, however, tracing back to the beginning of the twentieth century where it first appears in the context of French Catholic theology. The term has since been transplanted into the context of other faith traditions, as is evidenced by *World Spirituality: An Encyclopaedic History of Religious Quest*. published by SCM which includes twenty- five examples of 'spirituality' spanning a range of eras and faith traditions. This translation can be regarded as an example of Christian imperialism, as it is by some Jewish scholars (email correspondence with Clive Lawton, August 2001) or as an indication of the concept's multiple possibilities. Sheldrake 1998 provides an assessment of the genealogy of Christian spirituality, its relationship with theology and its contemporary relevance. Rose 2001 provides a discussion of the ubiquitous appearance but indeterminate meaning of 'spirituality' across a variety of faith traditions.

plurality and fluidity of subjectivity *in relation to and in connection* with other subjectivities.

I am, therefore, asking feminist theo/alogies to push further the boundaries of spirituality in order to challenge the notion of a metaphysical 'spirit' altogether. This raises the question of whether it is appropriate to retain the term 'spirituality' at all. Perhaps we should follow the example of a contemporary prince of popular culture and refer to a 'process formerly known as spirituality'.<sup>5</sup> I am, however, reluctant to relinquish the concept to its dualistic origins because of the powerful possibilities that the notion of truly embodied spirituality conveys. As I have tried to argue, however, the fulfilment of such possibilities requires a reassessment of the relationship between identity and spirituality and a re-visioning of the role of spirituality in a post-metaphysical world. I have attempted to illustrate that feminist theology has a distinctive role to play in such a refiguration. I would argue, however, that these negotiations between conventional notions of spirituality and issues of identity are already taking place within a range of different contexts. To illustrate this, I will use as a case study the contemporary debate surrounding the notion of 'spirituality' in relation to the place of Religious Education in the school curriculum. It is not my intention to attempt a comprehensive survey of all the issues relevant to this subject, let alone offer practical solutions to ways in which 'spiritual development' might be fostered in the classroom. I wish only to indicate the extent to which the concept of spirituality is being renegotiated in contexts outside its conventional parameters. Such explorations allow, for instance, for the possibility of a notion of 'secular spirituality'. Of particular interest to my own theological reflections on the meaning of spirituality is the way in which this current debate within the theory of Religious

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<sup>5</sup> 'Prince' is the stage name used by a successful rock musician. For a while, as the result of contractual problems, he stopped using the name and replaced it with an unpronounceable hieroglyph. All references to himself then had to be termed as 'The Artist Formerly Known As Prince'. The suggestion

Education relates the delineation of spirituality to understandings of identity. It is also significant to note that the disputation over the 'ownership' of spirituality is related to the authority of faith communities and thereby to the determining of boundaries which separate the sacred and the profane. By providing a survey of aspects of the 'spirituality in education' debate, therefore, I intend to highlight the parallels between the issues raised there and those I am trying to address within feminist theology. I will then consider the place of Goddess-talk in this refiguration of post-metaphysical spiritualities.

### **Spirituality, narrative and identity in a secular context**

Notions of post-conventional spirituality are being discussed in relation to the education of children. The contours of this discussion are located within a much wider and fiercely disputed terrain. This is the debate surrounding the legitimate aims of Religious Education, its place in the curriculum of state schools, its relation to the inculcation of morals, values and to 'spiritual development, and the ideological and epistemological bases of education itself. This is too large and contested a territory to map in the confines of this aspect of my thesis.<sup>6</sup> I do, however, wish to highlight some features of the debate surrounding the notion of 'spiritual development' in schools. I do so to demonstrate how slippery and flexible a term 'spirituality' is and how far it has moved out of its original context within a faith community and into 'secular' discourse. I also wish to use the 'spirituality in education' issue to illustrate the relevance on my own focus on narrative and identity, as explored in feminist theology, to the exercise of signifying 'spirituality'. A notion of 'secular spirituality' has entered the vocabulary of education debates because the 1988 Education Reform Act reiterated the claims of legislation framed

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that this practice should be applied to the contested term 'spirituality' developed out of a postgraduate research seminar at University College Chichester, October 1999.

in 1944 that a central aim of education should be to 'promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and society'<sup>7</sup>. Although this responsibility was claimed to lie with the curriculum as a whole, Religious Education was deemed to have a distinctive role to play. In a circular providing guidance on Religious Education, the Government expressed its concern that insufficient attention had been paid explicitly to spiritual, moral and cultural aspects of pupils' development<sup>8</sup>. Thus begun a debate about the nature of 'spirituality' and its relation to Religious Education. This debate was fuelled by further 'guidance' provided by government bodies. Such guidance needed to address a paradox. In referring to 'spiritual development', the legislation used the terminology of a faith community but, at the same time, the Government wanted to argue that the curriculum was open to and inclusive of all religious and non-religious perspectives. This paradox was approached by further 'guidance', presenting spirituality as 'a dimension of human experience' which is 'not confined to the development of religious beliefs'<sup>9</sup>. Instead, the NCC Discussion Paper represented 'spiritual development' as including such aspects as 'a growing understanding and acceptance of individual identity' and 'developing a sense of community; the ability to build up relationships with others.'<sup>10</sup> In 1996, SCAA (Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority), now QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) set up a national conference on Spiritual and Moral Development, out of which further documentation ensued<sup>11</sup>. The stage was now set for heated debate and for further explorations by theorists of Religious Education as to the meaning of spirituality. The suggestion that spirituality can be

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<sup>6</sup> Attempts to map aspects of this debate can be found, for example, in Copley, 2000; Erricker 1998, Slee, 1993; Thatcher 1999, 1999a; Wright 1998. The surveys provided by these authors also reveal their own perspectives on the debate.

<sup>7</sup> DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) Circular 1/94 Religious Education and Collective Worship 1994 p.9

<sup>8</sup> DfEE Circular 1/94 *Religious Education and Collective Worship* 1994 p.9

<sup>9</sup> NCC (National Curriculum Council) Discussion Paper 3 *Spiritual and Moral Development* 1993 p.2

<sup>10</sup> NCC Discussion Paper 3 *Spiritual and Moral Development* 1993 p.3

<sup>11</sup> e.g. SCAA Discussion Paper 6 *Education for Adult Life: the spiritual and moral development of young people* 1996; SCAA *Findings of the Consultation on Values in Education and the Community* 1996

represented as a concept outside a religious context has been contested by many<sup>12</sup>. Copley, for instance, expresses his regret at the extent to which spirituality has been hijacked by 'secular and atheist notions' and calls for a renewed awareness of the 'umbilical' connection between spirituality and religious language. He believes that the result could be that

Perhaps ...those with a secular outlook will discover that religious spiritualities are neither as dependent on doctrinal affirmation as they presumed.... and that religions have more to teach ...society ...than they thought.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, a widening context for the expression of spirituality has allowed some interesting formulations of the relationship between identity, narrative and spirituality. This is this aspect of the 'spirituality in education' debate on which I will focus, drawing on the work of David Hay and of Clive and Jane Erricker.

Hay responds to the need to express spirituality in secular context and supports his theorising of the spiritual with the results of research with school children undertaken with Rebecca Nye.<sup>14</sup> Hay claims that this research reinforces his view that spirituality or, as he prefers, 'spiritual awareness', is a universal feature of human experience.

Drawing on the theories of Alister Hardy,<sup>15</sup> Hay goes as far as saying that spiritual awareness is a natural predisposition, which, though often overlaid by cultural construction, is, nevertheless, a *biological reality*. Hay supports this with a study of children's responses to research interviews. He maintains that children express their spirituality through their use of narratives whether fictional or autobiographical. In the process of analysing these narratives, Hay identifies the central aspect of spiritual awareness as *relational consciousness*.

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<sup>12</sup> E.g. Copley 2000 Wright 1998 Thatcher 1999

<sup>13</sup> Copley 2000 p.142

<sup>14</sup> Hay with Nye 1998

<sup>15</sup> Alister Hardy *The Divine Flame: An essay Towards a Natural History of Religion* (London: Collins 1966), *The Spiritual Nature of Man* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979 quoted in Hay with Nye 1998



He argues for the need to nurture this inherent relational consciousness in children in order to counteract pervasive aspects of popular culture which promote extreme forms of competitive individualism. Hay links the dominant influence of this competitive individualism to a worldview derived from Cartesian dualism.<sup>16</sup> In a similar move to that made by Keller,<sup>17</sup> Hay develops his critique of Cartesian narratives to call for more relational understanding of identity and spirituality.<sup>18</sup> There are, therefore, points of connection between Hay's figuration of identity and spirituality and the issues with which I am in conversation. Hay does not, however, seem to carry his critique of a Cartesian paradigm far enough to encounter the multiple and fluid nature of subjectivity. With his theory of spiritual awareness as 'natural', biological and universal, Hay still seems to retain a modernist model of the fixed self, to which one can attach attributes. Hay also conveys an understanding of spirituality as a fixed, pre-determined quality, to be pursued and 'developed'.

Clive and Jane Erricker, however, follow much further the trajectory of an argument which questions the epistemological certainties of modernist and Cartesian models. Drawing on the ideas of Lyotard,<sup>19</sup> the Errickers maintain that the only 'reality' available to human experience is one which is constructed through metaphorical language. Using postmodern analyses, they present as untenable the attempt to propose a notion of objective reality, 'truth' or knowledge beyond the interaction of narratives. The Errickers support their position with the results of their research in the Children's Worldviews Project.<sup>20</sup> Here, they argue, are found the means by which children construct meaning by working within narratives which relate the metaphors presented to them – by for instance, parents or religious communities – to the, often painful, experiences of their own lives. In this way, children weave their own expressions of identity, relationship and purpose. Jane and Clive Erricker name

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<sup>16</sup> Hay with Nye 1998 p.156

<sup>17</sup> Keller 1986

<sup>18</sup> Hay 2001

<sup>19</sup> Lyotard 1984

this process as spirituality. As a result, they reject a view of spiritual development (or, indeed, moral development) which operates to impose an understanding of spirituality on children. Instead, they argue, those concerned with education must begin with what is meaningful to the children and to their own narratives. This can only take place in an understanding of education which differs radically from the one offered by the official guidance mentioned above.

“What is being proposed here is a new conception of the classroom: a place of conversational activity within the disorderliness of every day school life; a place of unfolding thought and performance that will have political effect. This can be understood as attending to a spiritual process.”<sup>21</sup>

This is a radical understanding of spirituality which is critiqued from some theological perspectives. Andrew Wright and Adrian Thatcher are scornful of the legitimacy of attempts to present understandings of spirituality which are not rooted in the tradition and continuum of the Christian worshipping community. As a result, Wright calls for ‘embodied spirituality’ in a very different sense from the one I am using.<sup>22</sup> His phrase refers to the need to embody spirituality in the communal context of a faith community. Wright and Thatcher critique what they claim is presented as the ‘consensus’ approach to a secular, individualistic presentation of spirituality.<sup>23</sup> Wright challenges the assumption, as he perceives it, that spirituality understood as a narrative expression of identity and relationship is a ‘universal’ and inclusive expression of the term. Instead, Wright maintains that such an understanding can be traced to a very particular philosophical route through Romanticism into postmodernism<sup>24</sup>. As such, he argues, this view of spirituality should be perceived as a move to deconstruct and then appropriate the spirituality of Christian Trinitarian orthodoxy. Wright rejects the Errickers’ view, as he presents it, that reality is the creation of inter-subjective communication. In contrast, he maintains that ‘authentic’

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<sup>20</sup>Erricker, & Erricker 1996; Erricker, Erricker, Ota, Sullivan, & Fletcher 1997

<sup>21</sup> Erricker & Erricker 2000

<sup>22</sup> Wright 1997

<sup>23</sup> Thatcher, 1999, 1999a; Wright 1996b, 1998

freedom lies not in emancipation from the constraints of reality but in the 'authentic relationship with God and his (sic) creation.'<sup>25</sup>

Wright's analysis of the philosophical inheritance of the expression of spirituality as narrative and identity may well be accurate. I am not, however, convinced that this genealogy automatically deprives it of validity. Linked to this analysis is the criticism that a 'secular' model of spirituality is too individualistic and lacks the social and political dimension of Christian spirituality.<sup>26</sup> This may be more true of Hay's understanding of spirituality, although this has relationality at its very centre, but, as the quotation above illustrates, it is not true of the Errickers, for whom political praxis is vital to a theory of education.

Wright concludes his assessment of 'spiritual pedagogy' with this claim.

Genuine spiritual education thus transcends the limitations of a pedagogy concerned with stimulating the child's experiential sensitivity as an end in itself. It demands the embodiment of questions of ultimate truth within developing traditions, an awareness of the spiritual ambiguity of a society that functions with a diversity of spiritual traditions, and the ability to develop one's own spiritual life with wisdom and insight.<sup>27</sup>

Wright's critique of the spirituality presented by Hay and Erricker is that it is related to a 'contemporary consensus' model of religious education which attempts to obscure the complexity and ambiguity of competing religious truth claims. To question such a model, which is suggested by much of the government-sanctioned guidance, is a valid argument. I would, however, challenge Wright's assumption that this model is the context in which the Errickers operate. It is valid to call for an awareness of 'spiritual ambiguity' and competing perspectives but I am not convinced by Wright's apparent conclusion that it is therefore necessary to fix oneself in a faith community in order to survey these contesting truth claims. Nor am I persuaded that the outcome of such an overview need be that the perspective which has meaning for him, that of orthodox Trinitarian Christianity, is the only one

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<sup>24</sup> Wright 1996a, 1998

<sup>25</sup> Wright 1998 p.71-72

<sup>26</sup> Also Thatcher 1991

valuable to those who claim to experience spirituality. Furthermore, I would suggest that the inter-views with women, recorded in this thesis, demonstrate that expressions of spirituality as narrative and process are not as Thatcher and Wright suggest, the result of some conspiratorial attempt to produce a contemporary, secular consensus on spirituality but responses to embodied experience and knowing. The Errickers operate within an epistemological framework which, I would argue, is also indicated by feminist approaches to a critique of Cartesian dualism and a recognition of the role of narrative in the construction of reality.<sup>28</sup> Within this framework, they effectively consider what can be meant by 'spirituality'. They do not, however, address the issue of what might be meant by the 'sacred' in a post-realist world. It is to this question that I now turn.

### **Feminist images of the Sacred.**

In chapter 1 I presented the ways in which feminist theo/alogy challenged traditional expressions of the divine, focussing on the awareness of the power of symbol and language. The process generated by a critique of the exclusive use of dominant male language to image 'God' led to a much wider re-visioning of notions of the Sacred. Mary Grey has recently provided an overview of the implications of feminist re-imagining of God.<sup>29</sup> Her survey, consciously informed by her own perspective, presents images of God which move beyond the dualistic assumptions of classical theology. This is an embodied God, immanent in the material world, in the physical struggles of oppressed communities and in the individual's passion for justice. This God defies the restrictions of classical transcendence and is present *in* the suffering the disadvantaged and subjugated. In order to counter images of a distant,

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<sup>27</sup> Wright 1998 p.102

<sup>28</sup> With the notable exceptions of Mary Grey (e.g. Grey 1999) and Nicola Slee (e.g. Slee 1993, 2000), feminist theorists have made very little impact on the spirituality in education debate. I have attempted to argue for the relevance to religious education of feminist approaches to spirituality and of spirituality as process. (Mantin 1996, 2000)

<sup>29</sup> Grey 2001

impassive divinity, Grey is prepared to envision a God who responds to the ambiguity and tragedy of unexplained suffering. For Grey, the image of Sophia facilitates the revisioning of God generated by feminist challenges to dualistic patterns of oppression. Grey's overview of the passionate creativity involved in feminist theologies' imaging of God illustrates the challenges facing those who operate within the framework of God-talk.<sup>30</sup> One of the most debilitating images with which they struggle is the transcendent God of classical theology. As discussed in chapter 2, Goddess-talk has responded to this by an overwhelming emphasis on the Sacred as immanent. Within theology, however, feminists are obliged to retain some understanding of divine transcendence. This has its advantages in that, as a result, feminist theologies have produced very creative and enabling interpretations of this concept. When claiming that the world could be understood as the body of God, Jantzen retained an acknowledgement of transcendence only in the sense that it prevented a 'reduction' of an embodied God into mere physiology.<sup>31</sup> When constructing an urban ecofeminism which resonated with the political struggles of the wo/men of Latin America and with the Catholic Christianity within which they are situated, Ivone Gebara presents a reconsideration of traditional understandings of transcendence. It becomes an affirmation that experience of the divine cannot be confined within the words we use to express it. In this sense, transcendence becomes a quality which is not just 'out there' but within every human's reality.<sup>32</sup> Carter Heyward has brought the notion down from the metaphysical distance and

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<sup>30</sup> In her survey, Grey acknowledges the valuable contribution offered by theology to refigurations of embodied divinity. She does, however, voice reservations about the Goddess movement's ability or motivation to address issues of globalised social injustice.

<sup>31</sup> Jantzen 1984 p.127. Jantzen develops this idea further in Jantzen 1998 p.270-275, recognising that her earlier work was done in ignorance of the relevance of process thought and of gender issues. In challenging the dualism of immanence and transcendence, Jantzen offers a 'pantheist symbolic' as one which promotes 'a feminist recognition of the divine as a horizon of becoming, exploring the embodied, earthed, female divine as 'the perfection of our subjectivity'' (Jantzen 1998 p.275).

<sup>32</sup> Gebara 1999 p.153, 167

into relationality by arguing that the 'trans' of transcendence can refer to the movement 'across' and 'between' rather than 'out of'.<sup>33</sup>

These examples indicate the ability of feminist theology to question the binary opposition of immanence and transcendence. The rejection of such a dualism is even more apparent in theology<sup>34</sup> and was articulated in the responses of the women with whom I inter-viewed. I do not deny the value of dismantling such dualism. I respect feminist theological strategies to appropriate the concept on their own terms and appreciate the possible dangers of reinscribing the essentialist connection between 'woman' and 'immanence'.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, I still question, in view of its far-reaching devastation, how helpful it is to retain the image of divine transcendence.

Another, related, dichotomy which is challenged by feminist theo/alogy is one which posits 'realism' over against 'non-realism'. Jantzen and Clack address the possibility of overcoming such a position in the light of a feminist refiguring of the sacred. Jantzen finds the realist/anti-realist debate unhelpful and maintains the value of recognising that

...there is every reason to suspend questions of truth in the interests of allowing more scope to the creative imagination, and seeing to what extent a feminist projection of a female divine might help shift the ground of what has too often been a highly oppressive concept of God. This is not least because such a shifting of ground will involve a re-visioning of truth itself and how it should be pursued.<sup>36</sup>

The emphasis in theology on Goddess as symbol and as self lends it to non-realist expressions of the sacred. As discussed in chapter 1, Melissa Raphael and Beverley

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<sup>33</sup> Heyward 1984

<sup>34</sup> e.g. Starhawk 1978 Stone 1982 Eller 1993, Long 1997, Christ 1997

<sup>35</sup> Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972 (1948)) defined the feminist project as the need for women to escape their association with immanence. Whilst respecting her position as a pioneer of feminism, feminist theorists are now questioning her attitudes to immanence and transcendence and the notions of subjectivity on which they are based e.g. Butler 1990, Spelman 1990, Braidotti 1994. Several feminist theo/alogians have responded to and re-interpreted de Beauvoir's claims e.g. Daly 1973, Keller 1986. More recently, Jantzen has addressed this issue in relation to Irigaray's concept of a 'sensible transcendence'. "...a transcendence which is wholly immanent, not in opposition to the flesh but as the projected horizon for our (embodied) becoming." Jantzen 1998 p.271

Clack have debated the extent to which non-realism is vital to the imaginal shift envisioned by theology<sup>37</sup>. In the light of this debate, Clack suggests

Theology challenges the very way in which we consider the universe and our place in it, and that challenge may also have the effect of breaking down the barriers between people who might have thought themselves as realist or non-realist. Perhaps the Goddess is telling us that such distinctions do not do justice to the complex ways in which religious language works.<sup>38</sup>

In a move similar to that of Clack, I wish to question the validity of a realist/non-realist split within a theological paradigm whilst maintaining the worth of challenging metaphysical dualisms. I therefore prefer to signify my position as 'post-realist'<sup>39</sup>. Feminist theo/alogies have shifted the world out of a dualistic paradigm. They have envisioned images of the divine which are embodied and present in the flux and fluidity of lived experience. I am calling for another movement in that shift, further away from realist and metaphysical definitions, allowing a notion of the sacred which leaves behind a reliance on self-referential stability<sup>40</sup>. This movement has been anticipated in the concept of 'enacting the divine', recognised by Grigg as a sympathetic and enthusiastic observer<sup>41</sup>. I wish to carry this metaphor further. In following Morton's trajectory, I recognise the need to discard images of metaphysical reality. When the metaphysical trappings of immutability have been removed, we are

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<sup>36</sup> Jantzen 1998 p.192

<sup>37</sup> Clack 1999, Raphael 1999a

<sup>38</sup> Clack 1999 p.153-154

<sup>39</sup> My use of this term resulted from a conversation with Carol Christ in March 2001. Christ challenged my view that my position was 'non-realist' and in opposition to hers when I still spoke in terms of relation and communication with forms of life such as the sea. I found her argument compelling and considered that the prefix 'post' better conveyed both a distinction from and a continuum with her own view of Goddess as 'personal presence'.

<sup>40</sup> Such a movement is suggested by feminist theo/alogy's appropriation of process thought, e.g.. Daly, 1973; Grey 1989a; Keller 1986; Suchocki 1989. Jantzen has, however, illustrated that there are problems with Whitehead's theories in relation to the development of a feminist symbolic of the divine. Whitehead's paradigm retains aspects of a realist concept of deity, fulfilled in the ultimate perfection of creation. In Whitehead's theory there still a distinction between the 'primordial nature' and 'consequent nature' of God. The former relates to God's involvement in the processes of the universe and all that is in it. The latter, however, is 'the realisation of the actual world in the unity of his (sic) nature'. (Alfred North Whitehead *Process and Reality* New York: Free Press 1978 (1929) p.345 quoted in Jantzen 1998 p.257). Jantzen also provides an overview of the potential and problems related to feminist theology's use of process thought. Jantzen 1998 p.256-258

More recently, Christ has used the work of Hartshorne to develop her theology, where Whitehead's presentation of a dipolar God does not apply. Christ 2001

<sup>41</sup> Grigg 1995

left with a sacred as process. Such an awareness was intimated in my inter-view with 'Helen' when she referred to 'Goddessing' as a more useful expression to her than 'Goddess'. I wish to carry this metaphor further and argue that this indicates a performative sacred which can only have reality in the experience of those who enact it. A vital aspect of this process, however, is that it is *relational*. This was made very obvious in the narratives of the women with whom I inter-viewed. A sense of connection was central to their concept of the sacred.<sup>42</sup> It is in the awareness of relationality that the sacred is experienced. Grey, following Grigg, associates the enactment of the divine with a solidarity with suffering and the struggle for justice<sup>43</sup>. Elsewhere, she widens this sense of relation to an ecological web of connectedness, which was also apparent in the inter-viewees' responses.

Grey demonstrates the link between feminist relational theologies and an awareness of the movement of God. She therefore calls for the need to 'let God be who God will be'.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, she echoes the suggestion in the Hebrew Bible that the divine is signified by a term translated as 'I am who I am and will be who I will be'.<sup>45</sup>

Possibilities for an understanding the sacred as process are present in such an expression. A notion of sacred as process is also suggested by Daly's configuration of Goddess as Verb.<sup>46</sup> Notably, the verb is an intransitive one. It therefore has no object, it does not attempt to define the other. It does have a subject. That subject, however, is not fixed. It is constantly in relation to the verb. This movement in relation conveys something of what I understand the sacred to be - a process which releases movement, defies boundaries and enables relationality.

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<sup>42</sup> See chapter 5 of the present study

<sup>43</sup> Grey 2001 p.46

<sup>44</sup> Grey 2001 p.116

<sup>45</sup> Exodus Chapter 3 v. 14

<sup>46</sup> Daly 1978



## Refiguring the Sacred

These deliberations lead to the inevitable question 'if the sacred is wholly immanent and is to be understood in an inclusive, post-realist manner then what is meant by the term 'sacred' at all?'<sup>47</sup> The reclaiming and restructuring of language used to divide and alienate is a vital exercise in feminist theo/alogy. Traditional notions of the sacred are usually predicated upon the binary opposition of 'sacred' and 'profane'. This is one more dualism that needs to be exorcised. Narratives of the sacred have been used to oppress others. Locating the sacred in situations and people which have elsewhere been demarcated as 'profane' is, itself, a political act. The sacred/profane distinction has operated to oppress 'others' on the basis of a range of 'attributes' such as gender, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality, mental/physical ability and class. The revisioning generated by feminist theo/alogy enables us to question the concept that the notion of the sacred can only have meaning if we can prescribe locations of the profane. The fluidity of theological reflection allows us to move beyond the duality of the sacred and profane. I wish, however, to retain the biophilic potential of using narratives of the sacred. Braidotti has claimed that new images have the "capacity to offer us ordinary access to extraordinary thinking"<sup>48</sup> I would argue that established symbols, expressed in new ways, can also provide such access. 'Narratives of the sacred' have been used to disempower others – all the more reason to reclaim them in ways which respond positively to difference. They are too influential to leave to the narratives of dominance. Perhaps, in a move parallel to that which prefers to speak in terms of 'subjectivity as process' rather than *the* 'self', it would be beneficial to discuss 'sacrality as process' rather than *the* Sacred. In such a move, sacrality is perceived as a process, generated when individuals embody their sense of connection with all other forms of life and sustain patterns of relationship and mutuality with them. As such, this

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<sup>47</sup> Cp. Jantzen 1998 p.275

<sup>48</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.8

biophilic awareness of connection cannot exist in isolation. It is enacted in community. In 'enacting the sacred', we construct the conditions necessary for life-affirming community – the 'kin-dom' of abundance envisaged by feminist liberation theologies. This understanding of the divine as performative sacralises the material conditions which enable, promote and sustain 'abundant life'. In the interest of continuity, I intend to retain the use of 'the sacred' to indicate the process of sacrality, in much the same way that poststructural theories continue in the use of the term the 'subject'. This is not to deny that the use of singular phraseology belies the plurality and movement inherent in the notion being signified.

Although I am calling for an understanding of divinity as performative, I still, like Daly, argue for the relevance of Goddess-talk in expressing this process. Because I am claiming that relationality is inherent in a figuration of the sacred as process, I maintain that metaphors of personal language are appropriate to use when constructing an imaginary around it.<sup>49</sup> In particular, female imagery can help to exorcise from narratives of the sacred the imperialist, colonising associations of metaphysical, realist expressions of deity. Feminist theologies can generate such imagery in the construction of a religious symbolic. This was apparent in the responses of the women with whom I inter/viewed. They affirmed the ways in which Goddess myths functioned to counter the debilitating effects of patriarchy and to generate alternative patterns of relation and socio/political structure. The responses also conveyed an understanding that these myths were not fixed but could travel with them on their own journeys. Goddess-talk infuses the narratives of the sacred with an openness to plurality and ambiguity. The imagery and mythologies of Goddesses can contribute further to this process by re-membering the connections between the demonisation of female authority and the construction of 'monsters'. A

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<sup>49</sup> This is not to deny the value of *impersonal* symbolism in figuring the divine. My emphasis on immanence echoes theological and ecofeminist calls for the resacralisation of the earth and the possibility of any object or element conveying the presence of the sacred. I wish here to justify the validity of Goddess-talk in expressing the sacred as process, not to endorse anthropocentrism.

theology which affirms the sacrality of monsters might have something to offer attempts to challenge the attitudes which dis-able the different.<sup>50</sup> When developing their body theo/alogy, Lisa Isherwood and Elisabeth Stuart consider the important challenges presented to notions of embodiment by the experience of people with disabilities.<sup>51</sup> They relate this to the dangers they perceive in theology of presenting a romanticised and 'pure' understanding of embodiment, linked to a distrust of technology. Drawing on Haraway's dichotomy of goddess and cyborg, they argue that a cyborg figuration provides more potential for people with disabilities for whom the blurred boundary between human body and technology is often a lived reality. They also refer to Nancy Eiesland's liberatory theology of disability. Out of an analysis of the lived experience of people with disabilities, Eiesland explores new possibilities for expressing the central Christian concept of incarnation. She presents her epiphany of a disabled God, revealed by the survivor Christ whose 'impaired' body is the incarnation of the full contingency of human life.<sup>52</sup> I would want to argue that Goddess-talk which questions notions of 'wholeness' and which affirms the sacred in the ambiguities of embodiment and in the monstrous other might also contribute to a theology of disability.<sup>53</sup> Isherwood and Stuart question whether theology or Christian theology has yet developed the necessary processes to attempt the crucial task of responding to the life and death challenges posed by attitudes to physical and mental disabilities. Such challenges, they suggest require

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<sup>50</sup> Jackie Leach Scully 'When Embodiment isn't Good' *Theology and Sexuality* 8 1998 quoted in Isherwood and Stuart 1998 p.94

<sup>51</sup> Isherwood and Stuart note that, for people with disabilities, the power of renaming is a vital factor in the struggle for social justice and against social stereotyping. There are therefore a range of terms presented by the differently abled to describe themselves over against the dominant discourse which renders them less capable and less human than the 'norm'. Isherwood and Stuart explain that they use the phrase 'people with disabilities' because this is the term used by Nancy Eiesland in her groundbreaking book *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994

<sup>52</sup> Nancy Eiesland *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994 p.99-100 quoted in Isherwood and Stuart 1998 p.91 - 93

<sup>53</sup> I appreciate that there is a danger in using Goddess narratives such as those of Lilith and Medusa to affirm the sacrality of monsters and the demonised other if the monstrous nature of these Goddesses is perceived as the distortion of patriarchy, disguising their 'true' beauty. I would, nevertheless, maintain

us to 'face up to the terror of otherness'.<sup>54</sup> What theology can, perhaps, do is to demonstrate the extent to which the performative sacred refigures the boundaries between the Absolute and the Other. In so doing, Goddess-talk sacralises those deemed monstrous by the purveyors of dominant discourse. This transgressive sacrality also exposes the oppressive structures which determine the confines within which the 'others' exist. It enables the alliances and strategies which can work in solidarity with the political struggles of communities crushed by globalised injustice.

The search to find enabling imagery with which to figure sacrality and spirituality as process moves me to return to Braidotti's figuration of the nomad.<sup>55</sup> Some Goddess scholars have indicated that they have reservations about the use of nomadic imagery.<sup>56</sup> Some suggest that it denies the sense of connection to place required by a respect for the immanent sacred. Christ emphasises the need to be connected to the land and have 'a ground on which to stand'.<sup>57</sup> Gimbutas' narrative of the subjugation of the Goddess pivoted on a contrast between the biophilic civilisation of a matrifocal, 'sedentary' community and the destructive oppression of the nomadic Kurgans.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps more importantly, myths of the nomad could serve to romanticise the harsh, often horrific, material conditions faced by millions displaced as refugees or asylum seekers.<sup>59</sup> There is, of course, a range of positive and negative connotations for any linguistic figuration, as this thesis attempts to illustrate.

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that the association between monsters and Goddesses presents the potential for challenging narratives which dis-able the different and for providing an effective response to the terror of otherness.

<sup>54</sup> Isherwood and Stuart 1998 p.94

<sup>55</sup> Whilst justifying the validity of employing the nomad as a figuration, I would want to underline Braidotti's reminder of the metaphorical nature of the language being used here. "Though the image of 'nomadic consciousness' is inspired by the experience of peoples or cultures which are literally nomadic, the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. Not all nomads are world travelers (sic); some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one's habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling." Braidotti 1994 p.5

<sup>56</sup> E.g. participants of the Goddess Studies Colloquium at Bristol University, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2001

<sup>57</sup> Christ 1997a p.41-42

<sup>58</sup> Gimbutas 1989a.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Grey also makes this point in Grey 2001 p.94 - 95

Indeed, when exploring the notion of the nomad, Braidotti is drawing on the work of Deleuze, where nomadic images were sometimes far from biophilic.<sup>60</sup> I would, however, want to maintain that the image of the nomad could suggest positive possibilities. When presenting her myth of the nomadic subject, Braidotti insisted on a distinction between a nomadic existence and the situation of the exile or migrant.<sup>61</sup> She drew on her own experience as a polyglot, moving from one territory to another, to argue for the value of resisting the dangerous allure of fixed maps and static formulations. Indeed, the native and indigenous peoples whose expressions of the sacred as immanent in the world have been so inspirational to feminist theo/alogies usually, if free to do so, live nomadically. They experience a strong sense of connection to the land, but did not envision the need to demarcate or 'own' it. Their boundary-defying mobility does not result in isolation or individualism. I would therefore argue that an imaginary created around the figuration of the nomad is very different in its movement from that of the solitary vagabond of post-modern myth.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it is in these nomadic peoples that we find a highly developed sense of community, one which can move beyond the confines of space, time<sup>63</sup> and anthropocentrism. Similarly, nomadic tribes have a strong sense of oral tradition, allowing a connection with 'dangerous memories'. This is not to romanticise or idealise the situations of actual nomadic tribes where patriarchy and misogyny were

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<sup>60</sup>, Goodchild 1996 Braidotti 1994 p.25. Braidotti acknowledges but interrogates the association of nomadic tribes with violence. She makes the point that the violence attributed to nomadic people is often in opposition to state control. Her analysis would seem to be supported by the tribal activities of 'eco-warriors' and by the nomadic community of those labelled 'anarchists' who are engaged in resisting global capitalism. Braidotti also asks whether it was the countercultural mobility of the Gypsies which made them targets for Nazi extermination. Braidotti 1994 p.27 The fact that Gypsies were victims of the Nazi death camps and yet there is so little memorial of their Holocaust, presents other possible links between the image of the nomad and that of the subjugated, monstrous Other.

<sup>61</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.21-27

<sup>62</sup> Erricker provides a genealogy of this postmodern metaphor. (Erricker 2001 p.80-81) Erricker cites Benjamin's exploration of Baudelaire's image of a *flâneur*, stroller, as the postmodern type who observes with detachment. (Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism* London: Verso 1983). Bauman then develops this theme into a discussion of the tourist and the vagrant/vagabond as types within postmodernity. (Zigmunt Bauman *Postmodern Ethics* Oxford: Blackwell 1993) Erricker identifies with the vagrant who has no home and no value within a capitalist, modernist, free-market society. (Erricker 2001 p.81)

<sup>63</sup> E.g. Teish Luish 'Ancestor Reverence' in Plaskow & Christ 1989 pp.87-92

as prevalent as any other community and where tribal narratives could still function as controlling metanarratives. I am, however, suggesting that a nomadic relationship with the past could permit a continuum, but ensure that narratives of the past did not hold back the exploration but instead accompanied the journey. Nomadic figurations draw on energy from the lateral movement of rhizomes rather than fixed, immobile, linear roots.<sup>64</sup> Drawing on Braidotti's imagery but travelling with it,<sup>65</sup> I would want to argue for nomadic spiritualities and approaches to narratives of the sacred which respect the process of sacrality but do not attempt to reify, circumscribe or 'lay claim to' the divine.

### **Identifying Paths and Placing Signposts**

The journey experienced as my own research over the last seven years has led me into some unexpected and challenging territories. It has brought me into encounter with some fascinating, infuriating and inspiring travelling companions. It has also allowed me the privilege of walking alongside women's conversations as they engage in the process of constructing embodied knowing. It has given me the opportunity to take part in many late night discussions around the metaphorical campfire, negotiating the benefits or otherwise of the path I have followed and where the route should lead me next.

I feel that I have travelled far but do not claim to have arrived at a final destination. I do not propose to present a definitive cartography of feminist theology. I would, however, assert that my route has led to a place where I can suggest signposts for future journeys. I wish to argue that my research has indicted the potential of pursuing the following areas of discussion:

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<sup>64</sup> Braidotti develops this image, provided by Deleuze, to envisage a 'nonphallogocentric way of thinking' Braidotti p.23, 76. I am suggesting a much broader concept to address the concerns of feminist theologians who wish to retain connection with a sense of communal identity or with their forefathers.

- Furthering conversation between feminist theologies and theologies;
- Furthering involvement of feminist theo/alogies in the wider context of postmodern feminist discourse;
- Exploring further the implications of post-Cartesian interrogations of the notion of identity and understandings of subjectivity as process for enabling new expressions of embodied spiritualities;
- Developing further an awareness of the socio-political possibilities of liberating narratives of the sacred from their metaphysical confines.

I do not offer these signposts as the directions for roads which I claim to have travelled extensively. They are more suggestions for exciting possibilities, in light of my journey so far, lines plotted on a map in hopeful anticipation of future exploration.

### **Furthering conversation between feminist theologies and theologies**

My interrogation of the disabling effects of dualistic paradigms has led me to suspect boundaries, including those set between feminist theology and thealogy.<sup>66</sup> In whose interests does such a barrier exist? I am becoming more convinced that it is not in the interests of the wo/men who strive to liberate religious discourse from the strategies of domination and colonisation. The explorations, discussed above, into feminist theological re-visioning of the nature of the sacred demonstrate how rich a source feminist theology is for the process of renaming and its socio/political implications. On the other hand, thealogy has sometimes been too easily dismissed as the rantings of women who are 'away with the Faeries', if not also round the crop circles and off with the UFOs. I have tried to show that Goddess talk has a great deal to offer feminist interrogations of and disruptions of the religious and cultural

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<sup>65</sup> I appreciate that my use of Braidotti's image 'goes against the grain' of her intentions. I would, however, argue that I am 'in conversation with Braidotti's ideas, using Kvale's metaphor of conversation as the construction site for knowledge. (Kvale 1996)

<sup>66</sup> Beverley Clack has discussed this boundary and illustrated the 'accusations' on both sides. Clack has argued for the possibilities of 'creative interdependence' between feminist theology and thealogy. She focussed on the ways in which both approaches had reconstructed the concept of 'redemption' to challenge its anthropocentric assumptions and re-vision it as part of a process which recognised the

symbolic. Not all members of the Goddess movement are engaged in the Goddess-talk I am advocating, but then feminist theologians only represent a tiny percentage of the 'God movement'. In neither case should this invalidate their scholarship. There is wide diversity within as well as between the categories of women-defined theology and thealogy. I maintain that theological reflection should have its place in academic discourse. In calling for a recognition of the power and potential of Goddess-talk, I am not attempting to deny feminist theologians the right to use the God-language which grounds them in their faith communities. At the same time, however, I am arguing that some of feminist theologies' projects could be further enabled by theological narratives of the sacred which are open to plurality, flux and ambiguity.

In order to illustrate my point, I will focus on two works, Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine*<sup>67</sup> and Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology*<sup>68</sup> and use them as case studies. I select these examples because, I would contest, they represent some of the most exciting and innovative developments in contemporary feminist theology. Specifically, I would argue, they contribute to a development which moves feminist theology beyond dogmatic and credal issues towards the re-visioning of a religious symbolic. They allow interrogations of the narratives of the sacred which challenge the boundaries of difference and dominance. As such, they provide possibilities for conversations with post-realist theological reflections.

Jantzen and Althaus-Reid speak out of the specific contexts which then determine the imagery and symbolism with which they engage. Althaus-Reid locates her theology within the context of the religious and political situation pertaining to Latin America and Argentina in particular. Jantzen acknowledges that her own approach

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connection between all forms of life (Clack 1999a). Raphael also discusses the boundaries between theology and thealogy. (Raphael 1999a).

<sup>67</sup> Jantzen 1998

<sup>68</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000



is determined by her philosophical training in an Anglo-American context. In *Becoming Divine*, however, she is in conversation with the theories of Continental philosophers, especially Irigaray and Derrida. Jantzen is careful to be explicit about the situatedness of her theorising. In the introduction to her book, she gratefully acknowledges her debt to theology and to the contribution of Christ, Starhawk, Raphael and Long. She gives as her reason for not discussing their reinterpretations of the divine the fact that her attention was directed to the philosophical contours of a feminist symbolic rather than to a survey of feminist religious thinkers.<sup>69</sup> I do, of course, respect her position but would suggest that perhaps the line between articulating reinterpretations of the divine and constructing a religious symbolic is a very fine one. I certainly desire to see more conversation in the future between the post-realist theology I am advocating and the Jantzen's project which she defines as the search

...to change the ground, to try and think otherwise in a way that disrupts the cultural symbolic and enables divine becoming.<sup>70</sup>

Jantzen's 'thinking otherwise' leads her to reveal the unacknowledged framework of masculinist philosophies of religion, whereby mortality is taken as the starting point for reflection, resulting in an imaginary constructed around death or as Jantzen claims, echoing Daly, 'necrophilia'. Instead Jantzen offers the possibilities of a symbolic of natality in which 'flourishing' rather than 'redemption' expresses the ground of religious desire. In challenging the life-denying duality of malestream philosophy and advocating a religious imaginary constructed around images of biophilia, Jantzen is in sympathy with the expressions of theological reflection. It is interesting to note that, in her acknowledgements,<sup>71</sup> Jantzen states that *Becoming Divine* began as a collaborative project with Dr. Beverley Clack, who has since

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<sup>69</sup> Jantzen 1998 p.4

<sup>70</sup> Jantzen 1998 p. 59

<sup>71</sup> Jantzen 1998 p.vii

developed her philosophical interrogation of dualistic expressions of mortality and spirituality within a theological framework.<sup>72</sup>

I also find points of contact between a theology which follows the trajectory of Morton's metaphoric process and Jantzen's challenge to feminist theology to abandon attempts to provide foundational belief systems and realist expressions of the divine<sup>73</sup>. Jantzen is particularly insightful in her analysis of the role of 'women's experience' in the transformation of religious expression. She writes

I wish to suggest that much would be gained for the strong claims for women's experience made by feminist theologians if, instead of thinking in terms of the trajectory of beliefs, we were to consider women's experience as a resource and grounding for desire and imagination in the development of a feminist religious symbolic. In this way, rather than serving as an empirical foundation of religious truths, women's experience offers transformative suggestions for the religious imaginary and the development of the woman subject.<sup>74</sup>

I share Jantzen's desire to destabilise any suggestions of dogmatic fixity in feminist theo/alogy and to emphasise that, when engaging with narratives of the sacred, we are addressing the religious imaginary. I do, however, believe that Jantzen could perhaps 'change the ground' even more effectively if she was prepared to move further beyond God-talk in constructing a new religious symbolic. She does, for instance, draw on Daly's work without acknowledging that Daly has rejected God language. Jantzen therefore refers to comments Daly made about 'God the Verb' from 1968<sup>75</sup> without mentioning, even in a footnote, that Daly now speaks of Goddess the Verb.<sup>76</sup> Goddess-talk, with its openness to plurality and ambiguity opens up a wide range of possibilities for transformative suggestions for the religious imaginary and for the process of 'divine becoming'.

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<sup>72</sup> e.g. Clack 1999, 1999a 1999b, 2000

<sup>73</sup> Strictly speaking, Jantzen is dealing with a feminist philosophy of religion rather than theology, but, as her analysis of the role of 'women's experience' in feminist theological reflection illustrates, her approach has powerful implications for a feminist theological project. Jantzen's position that a feminist philosophy of religion does not have to be centred on belief systems or rationality but can focus on the role of desire in the construction of a female imaginary has not gone unchallenged. See Jantzen 2001

<sup>74</sup> Jantzen 1998 p.101-102

<sup>75</sup> Jantzen 1998 p. 257

<sup>76</sup> e.g. Daly 1978, 1984, 1993

Althaus-Reid is also engaged in 'changing the ground' when recommending her *Indecent Theology*. Her point of departure is from 'the crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer Thinking',<sup>77</sup> a location which will be discussed further below. Althaus-Reid explains indecent theology as an analysis of sexual constructions which 'destabilises the sexual foundations of economic and political theories and unveil the sexual ideology of systematic (even liberationist) theology'. Althaus-Reid questions how effective such theologies can be in enabling liberation when they are revealed to 'comply with sexually hegemonic epistemologies'.<sup>78</sup> She links the task of indecent theology to that of post-colonial feminist hermeneutics, that is

“...subverting, or making indecent that ideological sacralization of a sexual economic oppressive construct which kills women and turns them into the fetish of a disconnected ontology and an exploitative form of production.”<sup>79</sup>

Althaus-Reid is, therefore, concerned with the role of exclusion and 'otherness' in the construction of 'discourse of the divine' which regulate the borders of ecclesiological, theological, political and amatory structures in Latin America.<sup>80</sup>

Althaus-Reid challenges these boundaries of 'decency' which she argues, are reinscribed in Liberation Theology. Her intention is to express a theology which is rooted in the sexual and economic realities of the 'poor' and draws from the imagery of the Latin American carnivals, in which the 'poor' appropriate religious mythology as drag queens and transvestites. In contrast to a discourse of 'decency', Althaus-Reid calls for hermeneutical 'perversions' in theology, arguing that to per/vert is to follow a different path, to offer another interpretation, allowing a disruption of the ideological order which determines the normative.

Althaus-Reid interrogates the assumptions underlying the strategies which use images of Christ and the Virgin Mary to reinforce the regulation of 'closeted' compulsory heterosexuality. Althaus-Reid offers alternative images. One such

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<sup>77</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000 p.2

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*

<sup>79</sup> Althaus-Reid 1998 p.44

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*.

per/version is the Bi/Christ, who 'helps to problematise the 'either/or of monopolistic economic and affective relationships' For Althaus-Reid, the imprecision of the Bi/Christ may give way to new perceptions of coherence, outside the coherence of binarism. Althaus-Reid proceeds to reflect on the ways in which such an image challenges boundaries and welcomes ambiguity. Using metaphors which resonates with Braidotti's myth of nomadic consciousness she claims that

"Bi/Christology walks *like a nomad* in lands of opposition and exclusive identities, and does not pitch its tent for ever in the same place."<sup>81</sup>

Althaus-Reid continues her exploration of the imagery of process by referring the picture presented by John's gospel of the Divine as Verb 'dwelling among us as a tabernacle'.<sup>82</sup> For Althaus-Reid this image 'conveys Christ's high mobility and lack of fixed spaces or definitive frontiers'. She claims that

The beauty of this God/tent symbolic is that it can help us discover Christ in our process of growth, the eventual transformations through unstable categories to be, more than anything else, a Christ of surprises.<sup>83</sup>

Althaus-Reid's Bi/Christ would, I believe, feel in congenial company 'between monsters, cyborgs and goddesses'.<sup>84</sup> Goddess images can provide a range of transgressive hybrids to symbolise the process of transformation through unstable categories.

Althaus-Reid does have some conversation with Goddesses. She notes that the poor Latin American women, whom she places at the centre of her theologising, do have *La Pachamama*, the Goddess Earth of the Incas, in their indigenous narratives. The issue is, however, that these narratives have been erased by the metanarrative of the Conquista. The women whose loves and lives are regulated by the discourse of decency use a Medieval European image of Mary to focus their worship.<sup>85</sup> This,

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<sup>81</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000 p.119 italics mine

<sup>82</sup> John chapter 1 v.14

<sup>83</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000p.120

<sup>84</sup> Lykke & Braidotti 1996

<sup>85</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000 p.3

therefore, is the image which, for Althaus-Reid, calls for 'indecenting'. Althaus-Reid does refer to the Mexican Goddess, Cihuacoatl (She with the skirt of serpents), and her transvestite priests as suggesting possible challenges to sexual patterns of oppression. She notes, however, that transgendered expressions of the sacred did not coincide with social justice for women and therefore did not function as transgressive in economic or social relations.<sup>86</sup> Althaus-Reid is careful to assert that the indigenous metanarratives which precede the metanarrative of the Conquista were no less patriarchal or oppressive. She does not see any value in 'reclaiming' an idealised past. Althaus-Reid comes closest to drawing on a goddess figuration in her queer theorising and christological reflections upon the contemporary figure of Xena the Warrior Princess.<sup>87</sup> It could, however, be argued that there are other resources for developing an indecent theology. Goddess feminists from the nearby Spiral camp disrupted the first Glastonbury Goddess conference banquet. I now look back on the spectacle that these women presented in the light of Althaus-Reid's use of carnival imagery.<sup>88</sup> Their protest was about access. Ostensibly, the issue was about access denied on the basis of mobility and financial resources. As the protest continued, however, further issues emerged. They sang about the Goddess to the tune of 'She'll be coming round the Mountain'. The verses declared that when the Goddess comes, she'll be coming in a wheelchair, from the ghettos and with her female lover. When explaining her right to gatecrash the party, one of the protesters claimed 'I have a right to be here, I *am* the Goddess'. The women presented themselves as a carnival of dykes. One memorable figure stood on a table to blow her ram's horn, she was shaven-headed, had her face painted green and was wearing nothing but a bra, tutu and Dr. Marten boots. I can now interpret the actions of these Goddess

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<sup>86</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000 p.18

<sup>87</sup> Althaus-Reid 2001

<sup>88</sup> I was actually present at this event but this analogy was suggested to me by Raphael's description of the occurrence as a 'carnival procession' (Raphael 1999a p131). Raphael's presents a critique of the value of the image of 'Wild Women' in theology. (Raphael 1997)

women as a queer celebration, challenging notions of otherness in an act of indecent theology.<sup>89</sup>

In calling for more conversation between feminist theologies and theologies, I am not asking the wo/men involved to speak out of anything other than their own location. I am not expecting Jantzen or Althaus-Reid to use Goddess-talk which is not within their frame of reference. What I am suggesting is that there are so many more opportunities for conversation between their ideas and the figurations generated by Goddess-talk than either feminist theologians or theologians seem to be taking. With Clack,<sup>90</sup> I am arguing that a great deal of creativity could flow from a recognition of what each has to offer. I am not only asking for more recognition of theological reflection for feminist theology and the academic world in general, though I think this is a valid request. I am also asking feminist theology to recognise its own potential and contribute further to the creative processes exemplified in the work of Jantzen and Althaus-Reid.

*Jantzen and Althaus-Reid do not deal explicitly with the concepts I desire to see emerging from theological reflection, that is embodied spirituality as process and sacrality as performative. What I am arguing is that the groundbreaking explorations undertaken by these feminist thinkers are covering territory also open to theological expressions of the sacred as biophilic, fluent, flamboyant and willing to transgress boundaries. The possibilities offered by Jantzen and Althaus-Reid to rethink the sacred provide access to the prefiguring of spirituality and sacrality that I am exploring. Jantzen is calling for an engagement with narratives of the sacred which is not based on phallogocentric assumptions about credal statements of the 'reality' of the divine. Instead she presents a consideration of the effects of the religious symbolic on our perception of subjectivity and on our relationships at a personal and*

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<sup>89</sup> I also appreciate and witnessed that this event caused considerable distress for many of the women there, including Goddess feminists and women with limited finances and mobility themselves. Perspectives from both sides of this dispute are recorded in the magazine *From the Flames* 18 pp.29-34 1996.

global level. Jantzen is asking us to perceive the ground of desire in a religious imaginary as a yearning to enable 'flourishing' rather than to conquer mortality. She wants a feminist symbolic of natality to provide transformative suggestions for such an imaginary. In doing so, she is covering areas already touched upon by theological reflection. The wealth of reflection upon the power of renaming, the profusion of mythogenic resources and the abundance of life-affirming images which theology can provide should equip it to engage further in the process of assembling a new cultural imaginary as advocated by Jantzen. Goddess narratives can provide images which challenge the boundaries of 'otherness', and which position the queer and monstrous at the centre of religious reflection in the hermeneutical perversions called for by Althaus-Reid.

### **Furthering involvement of feminist theo/alogies in the wider context of postmodern feminist discourse**

My research journey moved into new and challenging but also exciting and promising areas when I encountered the issues raised by 'secular' postmodern and poststructural feminist theorists. I will shorthand such theories into 'postmodern feminist theories', using the term 'postmodern' to embrace a range of approaches which have emerged as a result of challenges to the epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment. In using this phrase I am also conscious that it needs to be attended by valid caveats, some of which were discussed in chapter 6. Like Braidotti, I am calling for a blurring of boundaries, not a burning of bridges.<sup>91</sup> I, nevertheless, believe that further interface between feminist theo/alogies and wider feminist theory would be enriching for feminist discourse as a whole. A growing number of feminist theo/alogians are, of course, furthering such conversation.<sup>92</sup> I will,

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<sup>90</sup> Clack 1999a

<sup>91</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.4

<sup>92</sup> Some of the most influential examples include Althaus-Reid 2000, Fulkerson 1997, Jantzen 1998. The journal *Feminist Theology* encourages creative conversations between theo/alogy and secular feminist theories e.g. Daggers 1997, Parsons 2000

however, continue to use as case studies the distinctive contributions made by Jantzen and Althaus-Reid in the works mentioned above since it is my contention that where feminists undertake radical renegotiations of the nature and function of the religious symbolic, Goddess-talk has something to offer. Jantzen begins her exploration of the possibilities of a feminist philosophy of religion by calling for the deconstruction of the religious/secular divide as 'a binary constitutive of modernity which calls out for deconstruction'.<sup>93</sup> I would echo Jantzen's proposal that such deconstruction need not mean demolition but can provide a 'destabilization which permits the achievement of new possibilities'.<sup>94</sup> Jantzen also begins with the irony that influential thinkers in Continental Philosophy use religious imagery constantly, and yet there is perceived to be a chasm between the sphere in which these philosophers work and the boundaries of feminist theology. Jantzen wishes to diminish, if not cross, this apparent fissure. In particular, she focuses on Luce Irigaray and her model of 'becoming divine'. Jantzen employs an expert strategy of Derridean 'double reading' in order to read the implications of 'secular' philosophical explorations by Irigaray and others back into the construction of a feminist religious symbolic.

Althaus-Reid cites her sources as including, alongside systematic theology, Postcolonial criticism, Marxist studies, and the Continental Philosophy of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and of Baudrillard. In addition, she makes creative use of Sexual Theory, including that of Judith Butler, as well as incorporating Queer studies and theologies.<sup>95</sup>

Althaus-Reid calls for the need to problematise the concept of 'decency' as it has operated to classify and subjugate 'otherness' in theological and political discourses. She presents a convincing argument for the inextricable connections between sexual, religious and economic oppression in her specific context of Latin America.

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<sup>93</sup> Jantzen 1998 p. 7

<sup>94</sup> *ibid*



Althaus-Reid's contention is that the Liberation Theology in which she was trained and from which she speaks, also needs to be 'undressed'. This is in order to reveal the extent to which it reinscribes the dominant discourse of 'decency', that is a discourse of 'compulsive, closeted heterosexuality' which reinforces the privilege of those who determine the boundaries of ideology, theology and sexuality.<sup>96</sup> Drawing on the theories of Adrienne Rich, Althaus-Reid defines 'heterosexuality' as 'a political compulsory institution that affects modes of production and identity both for men and women alike.'<sup>97</sup> Althaus-Reid maintains that, although Liberation Theology claims to be for those on the margins, as long as it works within a hegemonic narrative which defines 'the poor' as conforming to prescribed sexual identities, it is actually working from centre-based definitions which marginalise and exclude. Instead, Althaus-Reid confirms the relevance of Queer theory for political and feminist theologies. She employs the term 'queer' as a category of indecency which operates as a 'zone of possibilities, always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet articulate'.<sup>98</sup> Althaus-Reid's per/versions, speaking from the crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer theory, provide exciting and provocative possibilities for feminist theo/alogies' engagement with sexual politics and its implications for issues of social and economic justice.

These examples illustrate the creative potential of meetings between feminist theo/alogy and feminist theory but the conversation is too often one-way. Feminist theo/alogians draw on the ideas of their 'secular sisters', but the compliment is rarely returned<sup>99</sup>. I appreciate Braidotti's claim that feminist discourse does not need to

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<sup>95</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000 p.7

<sup>96</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000 p. 64, quoting Adrienne Rich 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence' *Signs* 5/4 pp.31-60 1980

<sup>97</sup> Althaus-Reid 1998 p.40

<sup>98</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000 p. 64 quoting Jagose, A *Queer Theory: An Introduction* New York: New York University Press 1996 p.1

<sup>99</sup> Tina Beattie has discussed the relationship between theology and feminist theory from a different perspective, informed by her location within Catholic Christianity. She concludes that theology should acknowledge the significant differences between religious and secular discourse and avoid becoming 'a ghostly and anachronistic echo of feminist theory'. (Beattie 1999 p. 125). I have more confidence in the possibilities of conversation.

engage with metaphysical symbols.<sup>100</sup> She *does*, nevertheless, draw on the images of the sacred when generating her new 'myths', as does Haraway when she presents a new 'blasphemy'. Braidotti recognises the power of religious language. She expresses this, in a characteristically provocative manner, when she claims

"God may be dead but the stench of his rotting corpse pervades all of Western culture".<sup>101</sup>

Braidotti celebrates the power of renaming and welcomes growing range of feminist figurations. Feminist theory would, I believe, benefit from paying more attention to those who are struggling to re-vision God –talk – and Goddess-talk. At the same time, feminist theo/alogy could perhaps benefit from listening more to those who are applying postmodern and poststructural thought to a further interrogation of the ground rules of feminist theory. This is not to deny that feminist theory need only accept aspects of the postmodern condition on its own terms, as reiterated above. It does, however, need to be involved in the conversation in order to ensure that feminist projects are not depoliticised and comfortably removed to ivory towers. In calling for a blurring of boundaries, I do not wish to burn the bridges which connect feminist theory to political struggles for justice. Feminist discourse must not exclude the voices and lived experience of wo/men whose daily suffering de-monstrates the death-dealing consequences of globalised oppression.

### **Exploring further the implications of post-Cartesian interrogations of the notion of identity and understandings of subjectivity as process for enabling new expressions of embodied spiritualities**

When I first encountered the work of Rosi Braidotti, I found it difficult to appreciate her argument that the 'gesture that binds a fractured self to the performative illusion

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<sup>100</sup> Braidotti 1991 p.206

<sup>101</sup> Braidotti 1995

of unity', was an act of violent force.<sup>102</sup> I have since been convinced by feminist arguments that Descartes' narrative of the unified, separate self was constructed upon a correlation between the 'self' and the situation of elite maleness. Furthermore, this model determined the Enlightenment projects of emancipation, positing the male, elite subject as the norm, against which notions of equality were measured. The 'unity' of the self was inscribed by positing a unified 'essential' self, commensurate with androcentric and colonial presuppositions, which was capable of affixing 'attributes' such as 'gender' or 'race'. This construct of the self was linked to the project of Western rationalism, which was perceived as a relentless march of progress towards an ideal 'wholeness' which lay beyond the fragmentation of imperfect and perspectival perceptions. A recognition of the damaging effects of such models has provoked a move within feminism away from a notion of 'equality', which presupposes an absolute with which to equate, and the consideration of appropriate strategies with which to respond to 'difference'. It has also prompted many feminists to argue the socio/political implications of challenging the fictive unity of the self.

One feminist thinker who has perhaps had the most impact on the exploration of this challenge is Judith Butler. Her groundbreaking book, *Gender Trouble*,<sup>103</sup> confronts and disputes one of the founding themes of feminism, the notion of 'woman'. She sets herself the question

"What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics? ...to what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics preclude a radical enquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?"<sup>104</sup>

Butler maintains that there is a 'connection between political assumptions that there must be a universal basis for feminism and efforts to colonize and appropriate non-

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<sup>102</sup> Braidotti 1994 p.12

<sup>103</sup> Butler 1990

Western cultures' this allows an explanation of gender oppression 'as symptomatic of an essential, non- Western barbarism'.<sup>105</sup> She argues that this model of subjectivity also supports colonial assumptions by complying with a construct of the subject which operates through 'the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject'.<sup>106</sup> Butler's focus, however, is upon the social construction of identity in relation to gender and sexuality. Butler disputes the widely accepted distinction between 'gender' and 'sex' and maintains that 'gender is not to culture as sex is to nature'.<sup>107</sup> Butler argues that all humans have the potential to be polysexual and that sexual identity and 'gender' are both socially constructed. She suggests that the category of woman as a coherent and stable subject is itself an 'unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations'. Such regulation, she argues, can only operate within 'the context of the heterosexual matrix'.<sup>108</sup> Butler contrasts the humanist conception of the subject as a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and non-essential 'attributes' (of which, gender would be one) with a social theory of gender. Here, gender would be understood as a *relation* among socially constituted subjects in historically specific set of relations. She develops this argument further, however, to maintain that gender is 'an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*'.<sup>109</sup> Butler concludes, therefore, that 'gender', as a constructed identity, is enacted as 'a performative accomplishment'.<sup>110</sup> Butler's theory of identity, and gender as a feature of that identity, as 'performative' presents challenging but stimulating possibilities for feminist theo/alogies.<sup>111</sup> Such possibilities reach beyond the

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<sup>104</sup> Butler 1990 p.ix

<sup>105</sup> Butler 1990 p.3

<sup>106</sup> Butler 1990 p.5

<sup>107</sup> Butler 1990 p.6

<sup>108</sup> *ibid*

<sup>109</sup> Butler 1990 p.140

<sup>110</sup> Butler 1990 p.141

<sup>111</sup> Butler's ideas are being most explicitly appropriated by feminist theologies which relate to Queer theory e.g. Stuart 1997, Althaus-Reid 2000

parameters of this thesis, but are indicated by them. They informed my move towards an expression of the sacred as performative.

Butler's own aim is 'to make gender trouble', that is

"subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power."<sup>112</sup>

She intends to achieve this through the proliferation of 'gender parodies'.<sup>113</sup> The political efficacy of such performance and its relevance to the lives of women within, for instance, the context of poverty in the majority world, has been questioned,<sup>114</sup> although Althaus-Reid's 'indecent theology' links such acts of sexual parody with resistance to social and economic oppression in Latin America.<sup>115</sup>

Alongside Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Elizabeth Spelman produced another influential analysis of the problems surrounding notions of fixed identity in relation to the category 'woman'. Spelman's investigation of the *Inessential Woman*<sup>116</sup> works with a word play. It recognises that Western philosophy has presented 'woman' as not essential to what it means to be human but at the same time critiques Western feminist thought for presenting a notion of essential 'womanness' which is somehow distinct from the racial, class, religious, ethnic and cultural differences between women. Spelman argues the assumption of a possible 'generic woman' mirrors the oppressive patterns of Western philosophy's presentation of a 'generic man': it obscures heterogeneity and thereby effectively excludes the experience of real women's lives.<sup>117</sup> Spelman provides a convincing demonstration of the ways in which feminist thought has theorised the category of 'woman' to equate it with white, privileged women. She traces such a tendency back to the works of Plato and

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<sup>112</sup> Butler 1990 p.34

<sup>113</sup> Butler 1990 p.138

<sup>114</sup> For example, when discussing Butler's approach with regard to theories of education, Cole and Hill refute the idea that 'gender parody' can make a difference to the class nature of economic and political power relationships which determine women's oppressions. (Cole and Hill 1995 p.173)

<sup>115</sup> Althaus-Reid 2000, 2001

<sup>116</sup> Spelman 1990

<sup>117</sup> Spelman 1990 p.ix

Aristotle where a conscious distinction is made between freeborn women and female slaves. Spelman interrogates the process by which feminist thinkers have chosen to base their critique of these philosophers only on their discussions of freeborn women. She argues that it reflects a desire to concentrate on women just 'as women', separating the fact of being a 'woman' from further issues such as class and race. The result is that only those women for whom class and race are not an issue, i.e. white privileged women, 'count' as the subject of feminist theorising. Spelman suggests that the phrase 'as a woman' is 'the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism'.<sup>118</sup> I remember the sense of shock I experienced when I read *Inessential Woman* and realised how often I had argued that 'sexism is the prototype for racism' and had compiled lists that differentiated 'women', 'blacks', 'the poor', 'the disabled' and so on. As Spelman identified, I had been implicitly denying the possibility of being a 'woman' *and* black *and* poor *and* disabled. Spelman relates this tendency of feminism to simulate the very processes of exclusion that they critique in patriarchy to theories about identity. She does not include a specific critique of Descartes in this, indeed she suggests that his process of interrogating what is meant by 'I' might have something to offer feminism!<sup>119</sup> Instead she analyses what she calls a 'pop-bead metaphysics' of identity. In this view identity is made of different parts but 'being a woman' can somehow be separated from 'being white or Black', 'rich or poor', 'French or Jamaican', Jewish or Muslim'.<sup>120</sup> I would argue that Spelman is therefore calling for more recognition of the fluidity and interconnectedness of these multiple aspects of subjectivity. The legacy of western philosophy is the desire to identify the 'self' with fixed categories that are separate and self-authenticating. In order to be faithful to their desire to subvert the patterns of domination which oppress women in all their diverse contexts, feminists need to re-examine their 'dreams of a common language' between all women. This entails a

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<sup>118</sup> Spelman 1990 p.13, 185

<sup>119</sup> Spelman 1990 p.pp.143-144

willingness to face the challenges of rethinking subjectivity in order to relinquish the residues of western rationality's dreams of unity.

I would argue that theology's openness to plurality and process equips it to assist in narrating such challenges. Despite her reservations about the postmodern tendencies of theology, Raphael quotes Naomi Goldenberg with approval when she relates the notion of a single, fixed religious identity to patterns of violence and oppression based on the centrality of tribal loyalties. Raphael claims that 'for Goldenberg, and other spiritual feminists, feminism is about the need to feel the empathy, involvement and identity beyond our particular tribe that is vital to the renunciation of control and dominance and to the cause of global peace. Tribalism is threatened by those who enjoy multiple, connected identities, by the female sense of diversity within self-hood'.<sup>121</sup> Goldenberg therefore argues that

"...the world needs more people who can feel several loyalties, several affinities, *several identities*"<sup>122</sup>

Raphael argues that Goddess feminists can respond to such a need and I agree. When I argue for a dismantling of the Cartesian unified self, I do, however, appreciate that this is not without its problems. I have sympathy with those who claim that fragmentation has been all too apparent a feature of women's experiences within patriarchy and that to reinscribe disintegration is disastrous. Tatman, for instance, provides some moving and insightful reflections on wholeness and at-onement in relation to the practice of self-mutilation.<sup>123</sup> Her encounter with women who experience this provoked her to re-examine her denial of a body/mind separation. She argued that sometimes women need to disassociate their 'self' from the body which had suffered abuse. Tatman suggested that when they produced pain in their own bodies, it was an expression that these women needed to demonstrate to

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<sup>120</sup> Spelman 1990 p.136

<sup>121</sup> Raphael 1999 p.27

<sup>122</sup> Goldenberg, N *Resurrecting the Body: Feminism, Religion and Psychoanalysis* New York: Crossroad 1990 pp.64-67 cited in Raphael 1999 p. 27 italics mine.

themselves that they were able to 'feel something rather than nothing'. Tatman termed as 'whole enough' the state that these women need to experience. She maintains that a theological concept of atonement must speak to this human yearning for wholeness. At the same time, she is anxious to distance this notion of wholeness from a 'longing for a merged unity with a transcendent deity' and from a notion of the individual centred on a construct of the self as wholly separate and autonomous. Indeed, Tatman relates her concept of 'whole-enough' to change and process.

Wholeness has to do with individual human integrity, the integration within oneself of all of one's life experiences, even (perhaps particularly) her most painful. A yearning for wholeness is an on-going longing; it's about reaching into one's past, feeling that past into the present, transforming that past in different ways at different times, and then taking the past and present into the future with oneself. *At no time is the process fully completed*; we muddle along as best we can, striving to be and become more or less whole-enough to keep muddling sometimes giving, sometimes being given a helpful nudge along the way.<sup>124</sup>

I appreciate Tatman's attempt, one she acknowledges as difficult, to express a notion of 'wholeness as process'. I also recognise that spiritual feminists' 'hopes for wholeness' are not synonymous with the dreams of unity of Western rationalism. When Zappone expressed the desire of feminist spirituality as 'wholeness', she was anxious to clarify that she did not equate such wholeness with perfection nor with linear aspirations. Instead she refers to a 'tidal movement of ebb and flow'. Like other relational theo/alogians, for Zappone the key to feminist spirituality is an awareness of relatedness and mutuality.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, I am aware that theology presents the possibility of rethinking 'wholeness' further with its narratives of Goddess as 'The One *and* the Many'. It also provides images of the Virgin aspects of Goddess which express a sense of 'being whole to oneself' in contrast to the need for female identities to be defined by male constructs. This is in stark contrast to the

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<sup>123</sup> Tatman 1998

<sup>124</sup> Tatman 1998 p.35 italics mine

<sup>125</sup> Zappone 1991



construction of Christian doctrines about the virginity of Mary, built around the necessity to distance her from any aroma of female sexuality and to ensure her unbroken hymen. Instead, goddesses such as Athene/Diana were free to express their sexuality in multiple ways whilst maintaining the integrity of their virginity. Whilst I recognise the potential of such images for rethinking wholeness, and appreciate the debilitating effects of fragmentation, I would still want to reconsider images which suggest unity with regard to the nature of subjectivity and, thereby, of spirituality because of their tendency, discussed above, to exclude and negate.

Subjectivity as process, I would argue, does not have to convey the disintegration of a fractured self. It recognises the fluidity and multiplicity of subjectivity but retains a sense of continuum. Central to feminist expressions of spirituality is recognition of connectedness and relation. In the inter-views I had with my respondents, this spirituality of connection was linked with an awareness of process. As Keller and Braidotti suggest, identity can be mapped from this process, but only retrospectively, the process is ongoing. If we accept the damage caused by humanist concepts of a substantive, essential 'self' to which additional 'attributes' can be attached, there is no 'core' to which one can return in order to affirm identity and no ultimate destination to which the process must travel. This need not mean, however, that identity cannot exist. The devastating effects of alienation and disintegration are experienced when there is no sense of relation with the process of one's own subjectivity and/or no sense of connection with the relational subjectivity of others. I would therefore underline the importance of the 'trans' in transformation to indicate relation 'across' subjectivities. I would also suggest that 're-membering' our subjectivity as process involves the very opposite of disintegration.

Feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion have made vital contributions to understandings of the connection between narrative, identity and spirituality, as well as between spirituality, sexuality and politics. In her groundbreaking work on women's narratives as spiritual quest, Carol Christ provided

an interpretive model for exploring feminist spirituality - Nothingness - Awakening - Insight - New Naming.<sup>126</sup> The way in which Christ then expressed such a quest – as moving ‘towards wholeness’- could now be open to criticism for its linear and teleological assumptions. If, however, it is refigured as an ongoing, spiralling movement which expects no destination in unity<sup>127</sup>, it can still articulate a spirituality which is challenging the boundaries of identity and of difference. I would argue that poststructural expressions of subjectivity as multiple and fluctuating present real possibilities for re-visioning post-dualistic spiritualities. I would argue for the value of exploring further the potential of images which express as spirituality the many changes and relations which constitute that which we trans-form and re-member as subjectivity and identity.

### **Developing further an awareness of the socio-political possibilities of liberating narratives of the sacred from their metaphysical confines**

Feminist theologies have made vital contributions to a refiguration of the divine which moves it from the impassive, immutable distance of classical theology into the joy and suffering of the material world. Ruether, when she produced her groundbreaking analysis of the relationship between sexism and God-talk,<sup>128</sup> recognised the breadth of the range of socio/political implications ensuing from the metaphysical paradigm of classical theology. Ruether demonstrated how the ‘hierarchy of being’ on which this paradigm was constructed provided the model for domination and subjugation for all other hierarchies. For Ruether, therefore, the process of removing the Sacred from its position ‘beyond’ the physical and into primal matter is central to the social and economic transformation she desires. A consequence of this move is the need to relinquish a concept of immortality. Ruether

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<sup>126</sup> Christ 1980

<sup>127</sup> Christ recognised this and expressed her *Odyssey with the Goddess* as a ‘serpentine path’ which ‘does not ever come to a point’. She speaks of ‘not the goal, but the journey’. (Christ 1995 p.163)

has since said that, when discussing her theories in talks and lectures, the aspect which provokes the most reaction and hostility from her listeners is the suggestion that they are 'deprived' of their right to eternal life after death.<sup>129</sup> My own conversations with the inter-viewees suggested that, although they expressed sacrality as immanent and spirituality as embodied, they had difficulty in abandoning notions of an immortal life and of the sacred as 'out there'. I would, however, echo Ruether's analysis that the social transformation envisaged by a renaming of the sacred requires a willingness to relinquish attachment to a metaphysical worldview. Not all feminist theologians go as far as Ruether in framing a materialist theology, but many are challenging the dominant image of a transcendent God. As was illustrated above, feminist theologians are renegotiating the boundaries between concepts of immanence and transcendence. These negotiations are undertaken not to indulge in esoteric mind-games but to sacralise the world in a political act of disruption and restoration. I would, however, argue that feminist theologians are sometimes hampered in the pursuit of their arguments by the realist, metaphysical trappings of the 'God' language they use. The familial ties which bind God-talk to metaphysics, dualism and the philosophical assumptions of modernity are very strong. Goddesses have far more freedom to wander outside the family circle. They can more easily facilitate a nomadic consciousness. Their connections with shape-shifters make it much more difficult to fix them within a system. Their relationships with monsters allow them to include rather than marginalise the other.

I appreciate that I am tending to group together realism, transcendence and metaphysics in a coalescent lump. At the same time I would justify categorising these three concepts into an alliance, I do perceive an inevitable connection between them. Following Braidotti, I would argue that metaphysics is a "political ontology"<sup>130</sup> which,

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<sup>128</sup> Ruether 1983

<sup>129</sup> This comment was made by Ruether during a conversation at the American Academy of Religion conference, Nashville, Tennessee, November 2000.

<sup>130</sup> e.g. Braidotti 1994 p. 108

whilst devaluing the material, also conceals the cultural construction of discourses of the divine and locates a distant, literalised deity beyond the transience and ambiguity of lived experience.

I have argued that Goddess- talk is more open to post-realist notions of immanence, flux and corporeality. This conviction was largely inspired by the reflections of Nelle Morton on the role the metaphoric process generated by the Goddess. For Morton, one of the vital functions of the Goddess as metaphoric image was to shatter the mindset which accepted hierarchical patterns of domination as 'the way things are'. She understood the patriarchal model, realised in the symbol or 'dead metaphor' of a male God, to be responsible for the 'militarized cultures and pervasive hedonistic mentalities' of contemporary political systems.<sup>131</sup>

The role of Goddess as metaphoric image is to 'usher in a new reality'. The iconoclasm of metaphoric movement is followed by 'epiphanous action'.<sup>132</sup> Morton warned against a Goddess movement which merely brought about the sex change of God without shattering the image of the divine as 'out there', even if she was 'all-loving'. For Morton, to retain such a worldview was failing to exorcise the hold of authoritarianism on one's consciousness.<sup>133</sup>

Beverley Clack followed Morton's trajectory to argue that inherent in thealogy is a post-dualistic understanding of spirituality and a non-realist perception of the sacred<sup>134</sup>. She later acknowledged that this perception was not an accurate picture of the views of the Goddess movement as a whole.<sup>135</sup> I wish to argue, however, that the possibilities presented by Morton and Clack for the post-metaphysical expressions of Goddess- talk are ones which thealogy needs to pursue.

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<sup>131</sup> Morton 1985 p.218

<sup>132</sup> *ibid*

<sup>133</sup> Morton 1985 p.217

<sup>134</sup> Clack 1995

<sup>135</sup> Clack 1999 p.153

Theology can be free of the hold of static dogma and can move with mythogenic agility. This is illustrated in Starhawk's celebrated polyvalence when expressing the meaning of 'Goddess'.

It all depends on how I feel. When I feel weak, she is someone who can help and protect me. When I feel strong, she is the symbol of my own power. At other times I feel her as the natural energy in my body and the world.<sup>136</sup>

The results of Eller's research into the Goddess movement and my own conversations with inter-viewees, endorse this approach as characteristic of theological reflection. Melissa Raphael has, however, provided compelling arguments for a recognition that many Goddess feminists do retain a realist understanding of the Goddess. For Raphael, this need not rob theology of its political potency. On the contrary, she argues that theological realism might be necessary for the spiritual feminist project of social transformation. Raphael recognises that theology's openness to flux and ambiguity could be classified as the characteristics of a postmodern movement. At the same time, she maintains, these tendencies are held in tension with the liberal, modernist aspirations of feminist intentions to overthrow patriarchy. Raphael views the postmodern features of theology as potentially problematic. She fears that they may hinder Goddess feminism's ability to provide effective or persuasive strategies for countering 'the evil of patriarchal disconnection'.<sup>137</sup> Whilst I respect Raphael's analysis and the context out of which she, as a Jewish feminist, speaks, I disagree with her conclusion. I would like to see more evidence of Goddess feminism's postmodern and post-realist potential expressed in its refiguration of the Sacred. I would argue that it is precisely in its anti-foundational manifestation that theology can disrupt the boundaries which are set to separate and suppress.

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<sup>136</sup> Personal communication between Starhawk and Carol Christ quoted in Christ & Plaskow 1979 p.278-279

<sup>137</sup> Raphael 1996b p.211

To determine the location of the sacred is a political act. I am, therefore, calling for feminist theo/alogies to travel further in recognising the socio/political implications of constructing our own post-metaphysical narratives of the sacred and in enacting performative sacrality.

### **The Journey Continues**

My suggestions for the possibilities of exploring the notions of spirituality as process and the sacred as performative have emerged from the issues presented by my travels into the potential of Goddess-talk. I began the journey with a qualitative leap out of patriarchal religion. This was prompted by Carol Christ's disclosure of the deep-seated affects of male symbology and of the need to re-vision the sacred as female. I travelled with Christ to discover the transformative power of claiming women's experience as a source of spirituality and religious reflection. On the way, I became convinced that theology's potential to generate socio/political change lay in its ability to dismantle dualisms. With Morton, I was certain that Goddess-talk needed to function as metaphoric process and became concerned that this was not always apparent in public expressions of the Goddess movement. I wished to explore the post-metaphysical possibilities of Goddess as an expression of the sacred and consider the role of spirituality in such a framework. I inter-viewed with other women's narratives and found exciting potential in their embodied spiritualities and Goddess-talk. In the process of such discovery, however, I encountered the problems presented by spiritualities which were framed within notions of a fixed, unified identity and by spiritual journeys to 'wholeness' which suggested a desire for the ideal unity which was the aspiration of western rationalism. I therefore turned towards expressions of spirituality which reflected an awareness of subjectivity as process. I discovered ways in which the move from 'God' to 'Goddess' provided access to understandings of divinity which embraced transience, plurality and

ambiguity. I explored the potential for Goddesses to function as figurations, challenging phallocentric modes of thought and presenting positive strategies for responding to difference. My travels in this direction prompted me to suggest possibilities for refiguring sacrality as enactive and performative.

To raise such possibilities is to recognise that they demand further interrogation in relation to meaningful and enabling expressions of the sacred. Not least, they require further exploration into their relationship with women-defined theo/alogies of the Majority World, with searching questions about the currency of concepts such as 'evil' and 'justice' and with political strategies to address the human and ecological devastation wreaked by capitalist globalisation. I desire the opportunity to participate in conversations with wo/men who struggle with such concerns.

The journey continues but the issue is not the precise location of our destination. Rather, the issues are how, in which direction and with whom we travel, what we leave behind and all that we cannot leave behind.

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