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Source: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 49-64

Published by: [FSR, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002097>

Accessed: 03/05/2013 17:26

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WHO IS THE GODDESS AND WHERE DOES SHE GET US?

Mary Jo Weaver

You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.

—Monique Wittig

As I gathered material for this paper I tried to conjure up a vision of some of the nineteenth-century leaders of the women's movement "casting a circle" or "drawing down the moon." Negative associations were easy enough to imagine: I could hear hostile male critics calling Susan B. Anthony a "witch," for example, and referring to the radical Matilda Joslyn Gage as "demonic" because such words have often been used to discredit and threaten strong women who operate in defiance of patriarchal norms. Positive connections were harder to imagine: I cannot envision Elizabeth Cady Stanton dancing at a moonlit solstice celebration. Although this failure of imagination says more about me than it does about witchcraft, I must still insist that nineteenth-century feminist leaders do not guide me to the *practices* of neopaganism. Nevertheless, I am convinced that their iconoclastic religious writings helped to make the current revival of Goddess religion possible. Stanton and Gage particularly, in urging women to reject the authority of the Bible and the institutional church, raise a challenge that, although ignored or condemned in their own time, has been taken up by neopagan feminists.¹

Neopaganism is a generic term for a loosely connected group of practitioners who believe that their religious tradition is older than any of the major world religions. As such, neopaganism includes contemporary revivals of witchcraft and Goddess religion as well as Druids, believers in old Celtic religion, and others. Marked by eclecticism, neopaganism has emotional or

I would like to acknowledge two particularly helpful critics. An anonymous *JFSR* reader saved me from some unconscious biases and a couple of crucial errors of fact. Karen McCarthy Brown found my work frustrating and suggested a way in which it might be less so. I appreciate their careful readings and their incisive suggestions.

¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (1898; reprint, Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974), and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church & State* (1893; reprint, Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1980) both attempt to break the link between male authority and God's will whether that divine mandate is located in a written word (the Bible) or in an institution (the church).

psychic bonds with parts of many other religious and quasireligious groups. I am mostly interested in the revival of Goddess religion by a significant number of American feminists, and mention witchcraft because it has been defined by some as a Goddess religion.

Although my title asks where the Goddess “gets us,” I might just as well have asked where we “get her,” especially since the arguments over historical evidence have been particularly acrimonious and belabored. At the same time, I think it can be shown that questions surrounding the revival of Goddess religion can provide a different perspective on some important feminist concerns. As a religious studies scholar, I am particularly interested in the ways in which Goddess claims raise questions about history, authority and language. Furthermore, when I interpret broad-based feminist spirituality as a quest, I can see some of the ways in which neopaganism functions as a utopian poetics, drawing believers into a better future.

What does it mean to talk about or believe in “the Goddess” when the evidence for her existence is entirely preliterate? Is Natalie Davis right to encourage the kind of history that is “extracted from dramatic texts, inscriptions, pictures and myths”?² What connection is there between the absence of written texts and the disdain for dogma in neopaganism? Is it easier, in other words, to imagine an egalitarian religion when one can surmise its tenets rather than having to extract them from ancient texts? What kind of authority can a misogynist tradition claim over women? Does the rejection of biblical and ecclesiastical authority, as recommended by Stanton and Gage, lead, necessarily, to a rejection of religion, or can it lead to the creation of a new one? Finally, when neopagan practitioners appear satisfied with the Goddess as a psychic reality, must we conclude that they cannot find objective verification for her existence, or that they do not need it? And, if they do not need it, then how does Goddess religion function mythically within the human community?

My purpose here is to raise some of these questions in a broad context so that the intellectual issues embedded in the rise of neopaganism will not be obscured by the emotional field surrounding them. In order to produce the *status questionae*, however, I need to set this highly complex phenomenon of neopaganism into a manageable historical context. Although there were earlier contributions to the debate—for example, Z. Budapest’s *The Feminist Book of Light and Shadows*—let me choose Halloween 1979 as my starting point. This date is memorable for the publication of two major works on witchcraft and Goddess religion: on that pagan feast Margot Adler covered the East Coast with her comprehensive study of neopaganism, *Drawing Down the Moon*, while Starhawk represented the West Coast with *The*

² “Discovery and Renewal in the History of Women” (Paper delivered at the Centennial Session of the American Historical Association, 30 December 1984; published in Italian in *Profili de Donne*, Gelatina, 1986), 305–22. Quotation from p. 9 of the English transcript version.

Spiral Dance, her handbook of witchcraft as Goddess religion.³ Under the light of a not quite full October moon, therefore, from coast to coast, American feminists were invited to consider a viable religious alternative, a new religion claiming to be a revival of “the Old Religion” dating back to the beginning of time.

By 1979, the feminist search for religious alternatives was not news. Discouraged by a textual tradition that appeared to deny women’s experience, some scholars attempted to discover and integrate “the feminine dimension of the divine”⁴ into the main streams of the tradition while others saw “the Goddess” as a guide to a new religious world. With the publication of *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly, one of the most original thinkers among former Catholic feminist theologians, moved away from patriarchal religion entirely by repudiating her first book, eclipsing her second, and using this latest book to argue that men were naturally necrophilic, their religions inexorably patriarchal, and their world on the verge of collapse.⁵ In the process, she made a case for Goddess religion as a separatist search for creative transcendence and urged women to reclaim their creative, biophilic natures. If Rosemary Ruether, a prolific, but more moderate critic of conventional Christianity, was, in 1979, still involved in the bracing project of recovery, finding “Women of Spirit”⁶ within the tradition, she had also published a set of radical essays that set the stage for her continued attempts to link theological revolution with ecology and with “a spiritual quest within nonbiblical religion that focuses on the Goddess.”⁷

By 1979, old icons like Mary, the mother of Jesus, had no place in the women’s movement. Indeed, Marina Warner had shown that there could be no solace in a figure that had been so thoroughly coopted by the patriarchs

³ Published in the mid-1970s, *The Feminist Book of Light and Shadows* was incorporated into Budapest’s two-volume *The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries* (Los Angeles: The Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1, 1979–80); Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

⁴ Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979) argues that feminine words and metaphors for God were systematically repressed in the early Christian church. One of the strong points of her argument concerns the role of Sophia. For more on this image see Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

⁵ *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Daly’s first book was *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). See the revised edition (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975) with its “new, Feminist, Post-Christian introduction by the author.” Her second book was *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

⁶ *Women of Spirit*, ed. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), is an anthology of early and contemporary religious heroines.

⁷ “Female symbols, values, and context,” *Christianity and Crisis* 47 (12 January 1987): 460–64. Ruether says that she has never questioned the authenticity of the quest, though she has clearly had major problems with some of the historical conclusions and theological

and had been used so effectively for so long to relegate women to subservient positions.⁸ Later attempts to reclaim Mary, including my own, tried to emphasize her independence and majesty, attributes of mythical goddesses in poetry and world religions.⁹

If adumbrations of Goddess religion can be found in some of these feminist theologians in 1979, it may be because a wholehearted journey to “the Goddess” had been inspired earlier by the work of an art historian and sculptor, Merlin Stone. Her provocative book, *When God Was a Woman*,¹⁰ published in 1976, became a mainstay for those who were unable to abandon religion altogether, but equally unable to participate in what they considered to be religious traditions that were ineluctably harmful to women. Taking a popular biblical metaphor, we might say that whereas Mary Daly had engineered the exodus event (when she led women out of the Harvard Divinity School chapel in 1972, consciously using the exodus story as her theme), Merlin Stone led them to the promised land, encouraging them to experience God as a woman and, later, to connect the experience with what she called the “ancient mirrors of womanhood,” Goddess and heroine lore from around the world.¹¹

In the closing days of the 1970s, encouraged by Stone, and thoroughly discontented with their own traditions, a group of feminist theologians and historians began their pursuit of Goddess religion as a realistic alternative to Judaism and Christianity. Stone’s work, although not above serious criticism from scholars of the ancient Near East, and from Jewish feminists who urged all feminists to resist “blaming patriarchy on the Jews,”¹² was nevertheless an enormously influential book. In many ways, it supported a revolution among feminist theologians.

Carol P. Christ, building on a provocative distinction originally suggested by Sheila D. Collins,¹³ published a review of feminist theological

assumptions of Goddess feminists. The book of radical essays I refer to is *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

⁸ *Alone of All Her Sex* (New York: Random House, 1976).

⁹ See, for example, my *New Catholic Women* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), and E. Ann Matter, “The Virgin Mary: A Goddess?” *The Book of the Goddess*, ed. Carl Olsen (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 80–97.

¹⁰ (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

¹¹ Preaching on the exodus texts at the Harvard Divinity School chapel in 1972, Mary Daly called on women to follow the exodus motif and leave the church of the fathers behind. See Mary Daly, “The Women’s Movement: An Exodus Community” in *Religious Education* 67 (Sept/Oct 1972): 327–33; *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood* (New York: New Sibylline Books, 1979).

¹² Judith Plaskow, “Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism,” in *Cross Currents* 28 (1978): 306–9; republished as “Blaming Jews for Inventing Patriarchy” and printed with Annette Daum, “Blaming Jews for the Death of the Goddess” in *Lilith* 7 (1980): 12–17.

¹³ *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1974), 41. The distinction between reformers and revolutionaries was also adapted by Christ and Plaskow in *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

literature in the fall of 1977 that categorized feminist theologians either as “reformist” or “revolutionary” on the basis of their response to Mary Daly’s work. “A serious Christian response to Daly’s criticism of the core symbolism of Christianity,” argued Christ, “either will have to show that the core symbolism of Father and Son does not have the effect of reinforcing and legitimating male power and female submission, or it will have to transform Christian imagery at its very core.”¹⁴ To Christ’s way of thinking, Ruether and others were merely reformers, swimming against the current in a patriarchal tradition that is, finally, intractable. On the other hand, revolutionaries like Collins urged women to search through history and prehistory to find new myths of female empowerment.¹⁵ Penelope Washbourn supported revolution because she created new rituals that “used women’s experiences as a starting point for theology.”¹⁶ Stories of goddesses and matriarchies were considered crucial to a revolutionary consciousness, and Christ’s own work with Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, won wide popular support partly because its argument culminated in the claim that “women need the Goddess.”¹⁷

At the heart of the revolutionary project, Christ argued, both in her review article and in *Womanspirit Rising*, is the rejection of the authority of scripture and organized religion, an echo of Stanton and Gage that would often be heard by feminist theologians in the coming years. The rejection of traditional religious authority had a growing community of support by 1979. Naomi Goldenberg’s *Changing of the Gods* offered a “phenomenology of modern witchcraft” and set the revival of Goddess worship in the context of a female quest for power, noting that all legitimate power for women is based on the great pagan goddesses of the ancient world. Elaine Pagels, who won the National Book Award with the *The Gnostic Gospels*, suggested that controversies in the early Christian movement might be read today for their insight into the pluriform possibilities of ancient Christianity. It was possible, within the parameters of Christianity, to imagine a mother God and to focus on immediate experience, ecstasy, and divinization.¹⁸

As we moved into the 1980s, excitement about “the Goddess” and expansion of “the Craft” seemed to reach everywhere. Since one of the tenets of the women’s movement demands as full a representation of women’s ideas and practices as possible, meetings related to what many began to call “womanspirit” were enormously varied. Conferences attracted scholars, practicing witches, pantheists, healers, tarot readers, repertory groups de-

¹⁴ “The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature,” *Religious Studies Review* 3 (October 1977): 203–12; quote from p. 205.

¹⁵ The sentiments are Christ’s, but see *A Different Heaven and Earth*.

¹⁶ Quotation is from Christ, but see *Becoming Women: The Quest for Wholeness in Female Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

¹⁷ *Womanspirit Rising*, last chapter.

¹⁸ Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).

voted to staging Goddess events, and a host of other women's groups that were drawn to what Charlene Spretnak called "the rise of spiritual power within the feminist movement."¹⁹ By the mid-1980s, "feminist spirituality" had come to mean that set of religious experiences clustered around Goddess religion and witchcraft. Stories about housewives in Ohio offering the fruits of the harvest to Isis in a civic festival were as much a part of this new movement as bibliographies on Goddess religion published by women's studies programs and seminary consortiums.²⁰ Even *Women's Sports and Fitness*, a sports magazine, ran a brief story on South Pacific island women who juggle, claiming that men cannot do it with the same skill because their efforts are not blessed by "an ancient Goddess of the underworld."²¹

If the energy of Goddess religion and the rise of modern witchcraft gave a thrill of excitement to the field of feminist theology, they also presented it with enormous problems. Christ's division of feminist theologians into (mere) reformers and (marvelous) revolutionaries caused some stir of its own as various writers attempted refinements of the distinction or denied its validity altogether. At the same time, the claims of Goddess feminists and witches raised vexing questions of definition, historical verifiability, the nature of religious evidence, and the authority of biblical religion. Most importantly, Christ's challenge sparked a debate which appeared to call for feminists to choose sides: it presented the issue of whether one works within a tradition or outside of it as an argument to be settled by reason and implied that abandonment of particular traditions was the most logical conclusion. In order to bring a cluster of debatable issues into focus, and to interrogate the challenge itself, I will use the work of Christ, a revolutionary, and that of Ruether, a radical reformer. Their work is pertinent not only because they represent two different perspectives, but because they have been involved in a public debate about Goddess religion since 1979.

Although Ruether had written about witchcraft in a 1975 essay,²² she did not begin to raise serious questions about Goddess religion until 1979, the year of *The Spiral Dance*, the *Changing of the Gods*, and *Gyn/Ecology*. Since Ruether's own agenda is based on a radical reading of the prophetic tradition, she criticized "that branch of the feminist spirituality movement that has rejected biblical religion and turned to the alternative religion of the God-

¹⁹ *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, ed. Spretnak (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1982).

²⁰ Ben L. Kaufman, "Women 'exiles' seek new ways to express female image of God" *National Catholic Reporter* 20 (21 October 1983): 11; one such bibliography is "The Goddess Walks Among Us: Feminist Spirituality in Thought and Action," a select bibliography compiled and distributed by the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Calif., 1981.

²¹ Maria B. Nelson, "News from the Field" in *Women's Sports and Fitness* 9 (March 1987): 17.

²² See "Witches and Jews: The Demonic Alien in Christian Culture" in *New Woman, New Earth*, 89–114.

dess.”²³ Her questions appear to be straightforward—on what basis do Goddess feminists totally reject the Bible?, for example, and how helpful is the specific alternative they offer?—but these questions are rooted in her belief that real feminists are radical revisionists working within a tradition. “Discovery of the liberating potential [of an authoritative tradition] is what [she] would see as the key to authentic feminist critique of culture.”²⁴ Goddess feminists are, according to Ruether, narrow-minded in their reading of the Bible, bigoted in their separatism, and simply wrong about the historical background of “the great Goddess.” Drawing on her background in classics Ruether argued that ancient Goddess religion existed to glorify male power over women.

Christ’s response to Ruether was published in two parts in *Woman-Spirit*. Much like her 1977 review essay, it focused on the absolutely crucial nature of the male God symbol in Judaism and Christianity. The contemporary oppression of women, she believes, is a logical outcome of the core symbolism of God/He. That being the case, the “patriarchal attitudes of the majority of those whose religious faith is based on the Bible will not be changed until the image of God is changed.” In response to Ruether’s use of biblical prophets as a critical norm, Christ, insisting that the prophetic tradition is at the roots of religious intolerance, said simply, “I do not believe the prophetic-messianic tradition can function as a basis for feminist theology.”²⁵ Again, the arguments appear to be straightforward, but they are imbedded in her belief that real feminists are revolutionaries who reject the biblical tradition in favor of a journey to the Goddess.

Judging from a hastily re-formed session at the National Women’s Studies Association meeting in June 1980, Ruether’s article shocked and wounded Christ and Goldenberg, who took the opportunity to “answer” Ruether publicly and without much warning. That session, and the proliferation of Goddess events, meetings, and publications, led to Ruether’s second article, “Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism,” published in September 1980. Basing her arguments on her belief that the creation of a feminist spirituality “needs synthesis and transformation, not

²³ “A Religion for Women: Sources and Strategies,” *Christianity and Crisis* 39 (10 December 1979): 307–11; quote from p. 307. Ruether’s belief that one must renew from within the tradition does *not* mean that one must renew from within the *Christian* tradition, or that the Christian tradition is the only valid one. All of her articles on witchcraft and Goddess religion have stated her belief that she has no problem with people exploring paganism as a religious alternative. Her concern is that Goddess feminists apply the same critical yardsticks to paganism as they do to other religions. She has been clear in insisting that feminist interpreters treat *all* religious traditions with integrity, noting the good and bad aspects of each.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 308.

²⁵ Christ’s response to Ruether was reprinted as “A Spirituality for Women” in her book *The Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 57–72; quotes from p. 61.

separation and rejection,”²⁶ she criticized Goddess feminists for absence or misuse of historical evidence; for articulating a simple-minded anthropology in which males are necrophilic whereas females are biophilic; for writing what amounted to escapist fiction; and for reducing complex theological questions like immanence and transcendence to a male/female dichotomy.

Although the direct responses to Ruether were confined to a few letters to the editor,²⁷ the debate raged on at national meetings, at conferences—as, for example, the Women’s Spirit Bonding conference at Grailville in July 1982—and at the separate celebratory events of neopagans and Womenchurch feminists.²⁸ Furthermore, it continues to provide a significant dialectical moment not only for the women’s movement, but also, as Goddess feminists have claimed all along, for the planet.²⁹

It is worth pausing a moment to consider the substance of the Ruether/Christ debate since it turns on issues that vex feminist critics in other disciplines, namely those of historical evidence and reconstruction; canonical authority and written texts; androcentric symbols and language.

One of the main arguments against Goddess religion and witchcraft centers on the lack of clear historical evidence for their claims. Scholars have been quick to point to the flimsy if not altogether nonexistent state of the historical evidence for primary matriarchies or for a religion devoted to “the Great Goddess.” Two different issues are at stake here: the existence of matriarchies in the ancient world, and the existence of a single “Great Goddess” worshipped in such a world. The matriarchal issue is the one that has received the most negative response from scholars, and may be something of a red herring. Margot Adler notes that it is “fashionable for scholars to dismiss the idea,”³⁰ and Charlene Spretnak claims that the rejection of

²⁶ *The Christian Century* 94 (10–17 September 1980): 842–47; quote from p. 847.

²⁷ See letters in *The Christian Century* 26 November 1980 and 7–14 January 1981. Z. Budapest responds to Ruether as a “powerful and misinformed enemy” (94: 1162). A long letter from Shirley Ann Rank, a Unitarian-Universalist minister, is evidence of the impact of Goddess religion on established churches. Among other things, Rank says, “It is an important first step toward a more complete truth for women to dig into history and hold up to light the symbols of female divinity and power” (95: 19).

²⁸ Grailville is the headquarters of an ecumenical women’s collective. For more about their history and points of emphasis, see my *New Catholic Women*, 119–27, and the article by Janet Kalven in this issue. The conference was organized to gather as many voices as possible into dialogue about the future of feminist spirituality. For more on the Womenchurch movement, see *New Catholic Women* and also the new book by Rosemary Ruether, *Womenchurch* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), a history and collection of new rituals. Both Goddess feminism and Womenchurch create new rituals and attempt to celebrate women’s religious experience, but Goddess feminists have abandoned traditional institutional religion whereas Womenchurch members consider themselves to be in exile from patriarchy, but not out of the church.

²⁹ Note, for example, the conclusions of Marilyn Massey, *Feminine Soul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), or, more powerfully, the arguments and conclusions of Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

³⁰ *Drawing Down the Moon*, 190.

matriarchy by feminist scholars on historical grounds obscures deeper issues of meaning. Whether one can locate a real matriarchal society is not so important to her as whether or not the *concept* of woman was different in ancient Goddess-centered societies than it was in patriarchal ones.³¹ The first level of response from practitioners, often using the poignant words of poet Adrienne Rich, was sadness: “My heart is moved by all I cannot save/so much has been destroyed.”³² That sadness soon changed to anger and blame: it was the patriarchs who destroyed the records, burned the women, and set humanity on a collision course with self-destruction, said Mary Daly (in *Gyn/Ecology*), and other Goddess feminists repeated it. When critics complained that the explanation itself was mythic, predicated on a nonexistent primal matriarchy, the response was more clearly designed to prove neopagan claims using scholarly sources. Excavations by British archeologist James Mellaart, and University of California archeologist Marija Gimbutas, were used to supplement the claims of Merlin Stone, and the argument moved from the absence of sources to the nature of the evidence.³³

The problems are rooted in the fact that there is no *written* evidence for the existence of primal matriarchies or the “Great Goddess”: all the “proof” as adduced by scholars and their interpreters is based on Neolithic cave paintings and prehistorical pottery remains. Textual evidence about goddesses comes from male poets and historians like Homer and Hesiod and, while useful for describing attributes of Greek goddesses, it cannot be used to draw conclusions either about the lives of women in ancient cultures or about prehistoric precursors of those goddesses. The contemporary penchant for understanding witchcraft as an ancient, universal matriarchal tradition practiced in secret underground societies throughout human history—as presented by British folklorist, Margaret Murray—has been dismissed by scholars.³⁴ Finally, some of the feminist scholars who write passionately about prehistoric Goddess religion and ancient powers of women are, themselves, not trained in the scholarly tools of ancient history or archeology. Judith Ochshorn’s *Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine*, for example, has been repeatedly criticized both by male and female scholars of the ancient Near East and by other feminists.³⁵

³¹ *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, 129.

³² “Natural Resources” in *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 67.

³³ Two works by Mellaart often cited are *The Neolithic of the Near East* (New York: Scribners, 1975); *Çatal Hüyük* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 7000–3500 B.C.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

³⁴ *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) is where Murray interprets witchcraft as a pre-Christian matriarchal religion. One critic of her work is the medieval scholar, Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

³⁵ See for example Carol P. Christ’s review in the *Journal of the American Academy of*

In the face of this kind of questioning Goddess feminists and witches have adopted several different responses. Merlin Stone, to whom the pre-historic evidence is clear, refuses to argue about it any more. Naomi Goldenberg chooses to ignore historical problems in favor of the psychic reality Goddess religion has for its adherents.³⁶ Others, in repeating the refrain about lost sources, implicitly raise questions about what kinds of evidence one *can* use.

Feminist *historians* have learned to extract a good deal of information from inscriptions, myths, drawings, and other obscure sources; they have found ways to get behind a given text in order to discover what has been omitted from it. Feminist *theologians* who attempt to reconstruct religious history must first choose a norm, that is to say, an evaluating device with which to make judgments and sift evidence. Those called “reformers” by Christ find their critical norm within the text or the tradition. Ruether, for example, uses the prophetic cry for justice against oppressive biblical texts. Clearly, however, a textually devised norm will not help “revolutionaries”: Goddess feminists have rejected the texts in an attempt to create a new religion from prehistorical sources.

At the same time, Goddess theologians like Christ and Christine Downing appear to long for historical verification: they clearly want to link contemporary Goddess religion to ancient textual evidence to show that this “new religion” is, in some respects, a revival of an old one.³⁷ If the ancient, written sources are androcentric, however, how can they be used by feminists? Is there an interpretive principle imbedded within the texts themselves, or do Goddess scholars need an extrinsic evaluative norm?

At this juncture, it is useful to turn to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a New Testament critic who works from within the Christian tradition, but who, nevertheless, uses a norm not derived from the text as her critical principle. She argues that women’s experience—past and present—is the only standard a radical feminist hermeneutics can use.³⁸ Christ has recently turned to Schüssler Fiorenza as a methodological guide in her attempt to reconstruct the past faithfully. For Schüssler Fiorenza, and now for Christ, “feminist critical method [can] be likened to the work of a detective in that it does not rely solely on historical ‘facts’ nor invent its evidence but is engaged in an imaginative reconstruction of reality.”³⁹

Religion 52 (December 1984): 787; or Sarah Pomeroy’s review in the *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 1367–68.

³⁶ See the “debate” between Stone and anthropologist Sally Binford in Spretnak, ed., *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, 541–63. It is fair to say that in *Changing of the Gods* Goldenberg was not particularly interested in historical questions.

³⁷ For a representative work of Downing’s see *The Goddess: Mythological Representations of the Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

³⁸ *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

³⁹ See “Reclaiming Goddess History” in *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 161–80, quote from p. 162.

Schüssler Fiorenza's method is political and therefore reminiscent of nineteenth-century feminists, especially on the issue of canonical authority. In *The Woman's Bible*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that the Bible was a political weapon used by men against women, and that it was written by men not by God. The authority of the Bible, therefore, ought to be questioned, and the texts ought to be weighed and interpreted in the light of some critical principle. Stanton's critical principle appears to have been a combination of common sense and new translations of troublesome passages. Schüssler Fiorenza, using Stanton as a starting point for her own feminist critical hermeneutics, makes the experience of women her measuring rod.

Whatever the merits of Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics in New Testament circles,⁴⁰ her willingness to "read the silences" and to be continually suspicious of "androcentric texts" makes her an attractive guide for Goddess feminists. If Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutical principle of normative women's experience is adapted by Goddess feminists, it might enable them to read androcentric texts about ancient goddesses, measure them against women's experiences—ancient and modern—and then attempt a reconstruction of the origins of Goddess religion. Whether such a project is feasible I do not know; but it appears to me that the very attempt is worth considering since it allows neopagan scholars to use and evaluate the written evidence that has heretofore been used against them.

A reconstructive or reimaginative method, based on the theological work of Schüssler Fiorenza, allows interpreters to choose certain aspects of ancient goddesses and reject others. Christ, for example, rejects the goddess Athena because of her association with war.⁴¹ "I judge everything I learn from the past on the basis of my own experience as shaped, named and confirmed by the voices of my sisters," she says.⁴² She can do that partly because Goddess traditions are not normative for her in the way that Scripture is normative for Christians, but also because the principle of women's experience as named and confirmed in community is her winnowing fan.

Once the possibility of choosing one's own religious symbols is introduced into the argument, I find myself back at the opening challenge in this debate: feminist theologians have to show either that the core symbolism of Christianity is not hopelessly sexist, or they have to abandon it in search of a new religion. Ruether and others have said repeatedly that the male God-language of Judaism and Christianity is harmful for women, and that the

⁴⁰ See for example Schubert Ogden, "Women and the Canon: Some Thoughts on the Significance of Rudolf Bultmann for Theology Today," a contribution to the Rudolf Bultmann Symposium at Syracuse University, 27 February 1986. Ogden compares Schüssler Fiorenza to Bultmann to show that Schüssler Fiorenza, in deriving her critical principle from outside the text, has effectively taken herself out of the Christian tradition of New Testament interpretation.

⁴¹ *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 80.

⁴² "Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (Spring 1985): 123.

practices of the Christian church have been odious where women are concerned. Ruether admits that the whole witch-craze is a harvest of the Christian traditions of misogyny and sexual repression, and clearly recognizes that contemporary policy in the churches is bad for women. Nevertheless, she says, the tradition can be and must be subverted from the inside. The critical principles must be derived from the tradition itself.

Ruether's position has strong support from like-minded feminist theologians. Anne Carr at the University of Chicago, for example, works on theological method and the reinterpretation of Christian symbols. She bases her conclusions on the nature of symbols themselves, arguing that they possess a drive toward a transcendence of their own culture-bound formulations. Religious symbols may be oppressive, in other words, but they are also something more than oppressive: they can move beyond the social and political patterns they have legitimated.⁴³ Sallie McFague, at Vanderbilt, in *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, assumes that all theology is metaphorical construction and that each age must experiment with those metaphors most able to interpret beliefs persuasively for its own time.⁴⁴ Her revisionary reading of the Christian doctrine of the trinity abandons "Father, Son and Holy Ghost," for "God the Mother, God the Lover, and God the Friend."

Christ, on the other hand, and those who share her views, find the core symbolism of Christianity hopeless. For Goddess feminists, rejections of the authority of Scripture and tradition are presuppositions and the task of feminist theology is to create new symbols rather than to reinterpret traditional ones. "Out of our intuition, experience, and research," Christ says, "some of us are creating Goddess traditions anew."⁴⁵ Like many feminists who have rejected religion altogether, Christ believes that efforts to reinterpret the misogynist statements of the Bible, the Qur'an or the Talmud bog down in their own casuistry. The only alternative for her is a search for female symbolism outside the tradition that can be introduced alongside male symbols so that the deity can be fully represented in dual imagery.⁴⁶

The arguments between Christ and Ruether appear to lead to an impasse, because they are rooted in a strategic choice: Does a feminist with

⁴³ *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁴⁴ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁴⁵ "Roundtable Discussion," 123.

⁴⁶ "Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology" in *The Book of the Goddess*, 231–51. Christ distinguishes four responses to the problem of male God imagery: one suggests that male symbols can be interpreted in nonoppressive ways; a second neutralizes the language; a third discovers female symbolism outside the tradition and introduces it alongside the male symbolism; and the fourth abandons male symbolism altogether and returns the Goddess to ascendancy. She explicitly characterizes herself as type three, but it is not clear to me that she is not, in fact, espousing the views of type four.

religious predilections work best within a given tradition, or apart from it? I suspect, however, that such a choice is an odious one. If Goddess feminists and traditional religious feminists share a general respect for religion in human life, if they both understand the need for community, and if they both long for some ritual reenactments of a central religious vision, then perhaps the “choice” between these two paths is rooted more in religious autobiography than it is in argument. I do not want to suggest that questions of truth are not important in religion; but I believe that a traditional religious approach to truth as historically verifiable may be more appealing to some than to others. Neopaganism offers a religious alternative that rests on a utopian vision rather than a historical one.

Goddess feminists do not reject religion, nor do they despise symbols. On the contrary, Christ argues that people need to be open to the mysterious dimensions of life and concludes that life is truncated without symbols. Her theological point is simple: God is a symbol that may have outlived its usefulness, whereas Goddess has within it liberating principles both for women and for humanity.⁴⁷ What I find radical about Goddess feminists is not the rejection of God, but the determination to live a life rich with religious experience, ritual and community. As such, Goddess feminists are engaged in a triangulated dialogue within religious studies: one group—including revisionist feminist theologians—hopes to reinterpret Christian symbols; another, not necessarily involved in feminist questions at all and represented by Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman, advises getting rid of symbols altogether;⁴⁸ and Goddess feminists insist on their right to create new symbolic expressions of feminist religious consciousness. As such, Goddess feminists have become dialogue partners in a lively and radically ecumenical discussion which, at its best, can reflect an existential pluralism. Having said that, I turn from the language of theological disputation to ask how Goddess feminism functions mythically. I want to conclude my examination of this branch of neopaganism by reflecting on it as a kind of utopian poetics.

If Goddess feminism is perceived as a quest motivated by religious experience, then it has a right to be valued as authentic, at least *as a religious experience*. I am reminded of William James’s musings about mysticism, an experience he neither had nor believed in. After he gathered evidence about mystical states in a variety of the world’s religions, he concluded: “They tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest. They offer us *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See for example Kaufman’s “Nuclear Eschatology and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (1983): 3–14. Kaufman, taking an apocalyptic view of the contemporary situation, says, “we must be prepared to enter into the most radical kind of deconstruction and reconstruction of the traditions we have inherited, including especially the most central and precious symbols” (p. 13).

which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset. The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life."⁴⁹ Whether we can follow James totally or not, it is useful to imagine Goddess feminism offering hypotheses and to ask what they might be. For example, do Goddess feminists have a political agenda?

One of the criticisms leveled against Goddess religion—both by theologians and by feminists whose work demands certain political commitments—has been that it is romantic, solipsistic and politically lethargic.⁵⁰ Yet Goddess feminists repeatedly extol the value of political action and are involved in a variety of grass roots movements. The political goals of Goddess feminists, represented by Starhawk's *Truth or Dare*,⁵¹ appear to be mainline utopian ones: that is, they are rooted in the hope for a better humanity. As such, neopaganism, as I have described it here, is connected to the main lines of the humanist agenda: the hope for peace, for a rebonding with nature, and for networks of social interaction modeled on partnership. Goddess-centered feminist spirituality can be distinguished from other utopian or humanitarian groups on the basis of its challenge to androcentrism. "Abolitionism, pacifism, anarchism, anticolonialism, environmentalism . . . each describes different manifestations of the androcentric monster," says Riane Eisler, "the only ideology that frontally challenges [a male-dominator, female-dominated model] of human relations, as well as the principle of human ranking based on violence, is, of course, feminism."⁵²

Because Goddess feminists have interpreted the advent of patriarchy as a defeat of a woman-centered world, they have drawn attention to ancient history and have argued that patriarchy, from its beginnings in human history, is a culturally constructed system rather than a God-given reality. Because of their questions and assertions, one may imagine alternatives. Empowered by a myth of prehistoric societies modeled on partnership rather than on domination, Goddess feminism embodies a hope for something beyond the present moment. In this way, the strands of neopaganism I

⁴⁹ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958; originally published in 1902), 328.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

⁵¹ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁵² Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, 164. If male dominance is a key to understanding political problems radically, that may explain why lesbian theorists are sometimes especially useful as social critics. I have in mind Barbara Love and Elizabeth Shanklin, "The Answer is Matriarchy" in Ginny Vida, ed., *Our Right to Love: A Lesbian Resource Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 183–187. Love and Shanklin define matriarchy as a "nonalienated society" where women define motherhood and determine the environment of child rearing. Insofar as matriarchal societies tend to be dominant, they do not offer a real alternative to patriarchal *dominance*; but as a critique of capitalism, this essay is insightful and useful because it begins with a premise that male dominance and ranking systems based on violence are at the root of human problems.

have been discussing function as a utopian poetics, a way to imagine a “really, possible, and better” alternative in the future.⁵³

These mythic functions are not small ones. All feminists aim to defeat patriarchy, and a disparate group of scholars, political activists, futurists, scientists and others have joined in a chorus of crisis, warning about the end of the world and urging humanity to choose peace and cooperation rather than war and strategic defense initiatives. Whether one reads modern science or political speeches, religion or law, cultural anthropology or poetry, it appears that we are at a new moment in human history. Mary Wakeman says, “our present situation calls for new ways of thinking, feeling and acting in response to conditions that have arisen in, and as a result of, a context of values that is no longer sufficient to deal with its own consequences: the power to destroy ourselves.” As a scholar of the ancient Near East, Wakeman looks at the “end inherent in the beginning” of civilization and pleads for “diversity, interdependence, and the reevaluation of nature” in the future.⁵⁴ Riane Eisler, examining the same evidence from a wider perspective, says flatly that we are at a point of evolutionary choice where we can follow a dominator model toward our own destruction or can choose a partnership paradigm for the future of the planet. Eisler’s work, which Ashley Montagu calls “the most important book since Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*,” shows how feminism provides a means to think differently about the present, and how Goddess feminism opens the mind to imagine a new future.

Whether we talk about pornography or women’s ordination, women on the American frontier or the “language of blood and milk,” there seems to be a universal feminist assertion that modes of dominance, especially male dominance, are maladaptive. If we need a new myth of origins, one that will empower women and support the claim that in the earliest moments of social interaction humanity inhabited peaceful worlds where the gifts of men and women were equally valued, then I believe we must credit Goddess feminists for having retrieved an ancient image that could serve as a powerful engine for change.

Who is the Goddess and where does she get us? I am not sure who she is, or even if she can be named at this point. If we take the formula, “first the appearance, then the dance, then the story,”⁵⁵ to specify the proper relationship among theophany, ritual and theology, then we can say that the

⁵³ I am indebted to my colleague James G. Hart for stating these principles of utopian poetics: they must point to the future (to draw us toward it), and what they posit must be really possible, not just conceptually possible, and it must be better than the present reality. All of these phrases, in the hands of superb philosopher of religion, like Hart, are enormously complicated. I have reduced them to terms that he would undoubtedly find too simple.

⁵⁴ “Ancient Sumer and the Women’s Movement: The Process of Reaching Behind, Encompassing and Going Beyond,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985): 7–27; quotes from pp. 25, 9.

⁵⁵ Rosemary Ruether credits a former teacher with the formula, see “For whom, with whom, do we speak our new stories?” in *Christianity and Crisis* 45 (13 May 1985): 185.

theophany is prehistoric and not textually recoverable; that rituals are now being created and “rediscovered” by believers in a celebration of diversity; and that the theology has just begun to be written. Christ often quotes Monique Wittig—“Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent”—to sanction the re-creation of Goddess rituals and beliefs.⁵⁶ Perhaps the answer to *Who is the Goddess?* needs to wait until neopagan theologians are able to be more specific. Perhaps her identity thrives on continual creativity and newness.

Where does she get us? As a scholar I think she gets us into a series of very interesting arguments about the nature of religious authority and the limits of historical research. As a sympathetic observer of religious communities, it appears to me that Goddess feminism presents a utopian moment in which to consider the future. Unlike traditional Western religions, which are grounded in historical events, utopias need not have connections to a real past in order to provide hope for a real future. Goddess feminism, by “reaching behind the biblical monotheistic world view to affirm bodily and social processes [and to promote] natural and cultural diversity,”⁵⁷ creates a hope for new possibilities. Goddess feminists use their rituals as moments of celebration, as a means of connection with the natural world, and as energy centers whence they emerge to seek the transformation of the world. Whoever she is, therefore, the Goddess appears to emerge out of a lost past with an invitation to criticize the present and to create a new future.

⁵⁶ *Les Guérillères*, trans. David LeVay (New York: Avon Books, 1971), 89. See *The Laughter of Aphrodite*, 121.

⁵⁷ Wakeman, 26.