Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism

by Rosemary Ruether

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SUMMARY

The best way to create such a feminist spirituality is not by means of separatism and rejection, but by means of synthesis and transformation. We need to work through, with great breadth and depth, what our actual experience has been, both
Western social movements have a tendency to "trifurcate" into three trends: liberal reformist, socialist and countercultural romanticist. This division was evident in the movements of the 1960s and it is not surprising to find similar trends in feminism. Liberal reformers are basically concerned to achieve greater democratic participation and access of all persons to the existing system. Socialists doubt that this can be accomplished within the system and project a transformation of the economic-social structure within which persons exist. Countercultural romantics try to adopt an alternative culture and life style.

Within feminist religion and spirituality, there seem to be similar tendencies. The liberal reformer wants to gain greater access to education, ordination and employment for women in the church and to carry out some reform of language and exegesis, while maintaining a belief that the dominant religion itself is reformable in the direction of equality between the sexes. Feminists who espouse liberation theology believe that within biblical faith there is a critical tradition which can be the basis for the liberation of women, as well as of other oppressed people. But they see this tradition as being informed by conflict. Just as society is divided by class struggle, so the church and its theology are divided between an ideological use of religion to sanctify the ruling class and a prophetic tradition that denounces this misuse of religion.

Countercultural feminists reject the idea that any critical biblical tradition or any theological tradition has relevance for women. What liberation feminists would call the biblical tradition’s patriarchal ideology, countercultural feminists would declare to be its only ideology. In their view Judaism and Christianity exist for one purpose only -- to sanctify patriarchy. Consequently, any woman who is concerned to find a feminist spirituality must withdraw from these religious institutions, purge herself of any inherited attachment to their authoritative symbols, and seek an alternative female-centered religion.

Since there are no established female-centered religions around, countercultural feminists have been engaged in trying to rediscover or create them. Following
19th century anthropologists such as Jakob Backofen, countercultural feminist spirituality accepts the idea that human society was originally matriarchal. The original human religion, during the long millennia of Stone Age culture, was the cult of the Mother Goddess and her son, the hunter, which reflected matriarchal society. This religion was subdued by the patriarchal nomadic warriors who conquered the Indian subcontinent and the Mediterranean world in the second millennium BC. These nomadic warriors replaced the dominant symbol of the Mother Goddess with that of the sky god, and subsumed the goddess into the cult of Zeus Pater in the form of subordinate wives, mistresses or daughters. From the eighth century BC. to the seventh century AD., the patriarchal reform religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam suppressed the goddess altogether and substituted the exclusive reign of the sky father.

**The Maternal Ground of Being**

However, the cult of the Mother Goddess did not die out altogether. It survived underground as a persecuted religion, named witchcraft or devil worship by its patriarchal enemies. Medieval witchcraft is believed to constitute the continuation of the cult of the Mother Goddess and the horned god (cf. the writings of Dame Margaret Murray). Either in exclusively female or in mixed groups, her followers gathered in secret societies called covens, limited to the mystic number of 13. Reportedly, 9 million women were sacrificed to the fires of persecution. Nevertheless, a remnant of the true believers survives into the present. Today this "old-time religion" is being revived in the movement known as Wicca (supposedly the Anglo-Saxon word for witches). Followers of the Wicca movement believe that the dominant patriarchal history suppresses the truth about these matters.

Wicca, as delineated by its, theoreticians -- such as Starhawk (Miriam Simos) in her book *The Spiral Dance* (Harper & Row, 1979) -- is a feminist and ecological religion. It operates on the natural rhythms that connect our bodies with the cosmic body around us. It is not without its own ethical code, since to bring the human community truly into harmony with nature is not merely a personal but a social discipline as well. We must not only alter our personal life style but also struggle against the polluting systems of corporate capitalism that proliferate warfare and waste. Starhawk sees spells and incantations as ways of
transforming one’s own consciousness, purging oneself (individually or in groups) of depression, anger and hatred, and putting oneself in right relation to the self, others and the universe.

Starhawk would also reject female-dominant and separatist interpretations of Wicca, believing that such narrow forms lack the redemptive vision of the "craft" and could be destructive to men just as patriarchal religion has been to women. Her version of Wicca would include males and females as equals. Both men and women are able to integrate the intuitive capacities of the right hemisphere of the brain, which has been repressed into unconsciousness by the cerebrally one-sided patriarchal religions.

The Mother Goddess is fundamentally an immanent deity, the maternal ground of being of the coming-to-be and passing-away of all things, the womb of creation. In relating to her, we relate ourselves to the true divine foundations of reality that do not force us to deny our bodies and our material existence, as does patriarchal transcendence. Matriarchal religion allows us to accept the naturalness and goodness of things as they are. It teaches us to see not only all human beings but also the animals and plants, stars and rocks as our sisters and brothers.

Starhawk presents Wicca in an attractive manner. She is concerned to imbue it with an ethic of social responsibility. Another spokesperson for the movement of feminist witchcraft is Z. (Zsuzsanna) E. Budapest, who outlines the, female-dominant or "dianic" form of Wicca in her book The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries. Two women professors of religious studies influenced by Budapest are Carol Christ (Woman Spirit Rising) and Naomi Goldenburg (The Changing of the Gods). The magazine Woman Spirit, published in Wolf Creek, Oregon, is a popular organ of the movement of women’s spirituality and communualism.

If feminist spirituality claims to be making public statements about truth and liberation and not just idiosyncratic statements concerning personal preference, then those claims need to be tested for the sake of the best interests of such movements themselves, as well as for their possible impact on the rest of us. Several pertinent questions arise, which can be discussed under the following headings: (1) historical truth and self-knowledge; (2) anthropology, maleness and femaleness, good and evil; (3) nature and civilization; (4) the relation of
immanence, transcendence and fallenness; and (5) the methodology for a feminist critique of culture.

**Historical Truth**

Although feminist scholarship as a whole is developing an impressive record in new historical research, it is characteristic of countercultural spirituality to be quite arbitrary toward historical data, often relying on repeated quotation of outdated 19th century works on matriarchal origins. There is little effort to conduct new research or to consult primary documents. Most of all, there is little interest in dealing with such cultural artifacts in the complexity of their cultural and historical settings. A tendentious use of historical material reduces everything to one drama: the story of original female power and goodness, and the evil male conquest and suppression of the same.

For example, it is true that ancient Near Eastern cultures had female deities -- goddesses who were powerful, sexual, warlike, independent, and dominant over their male consorts. It is not true, however, that this picture of female deity can simply be read as an image of women in those societies and their relation to males. Nor is it clear that women created or defined these cults or predominated in their sacerdotal elite (even though women may have been included in them). E.g., in the neo-Babylonian psalms to Ishtar, the devotees who address the goddess are clearly of, the ruling class -- propertied persons who are concerned with restoration of economic prosperity and with victory over enemies in war and politics. If the devotee might occasionally be a queen rather than a king, the concerns are identical with those of the male ruling class.

The parallelism with Old Testament psalms is striking. In the cult of the goddess and the king, it is the latter who represents the human community. The goddess represents the encompassing divine-material cosmos on which the king and the human community that depends on him rely for their fortunes. The king is the son of the goddess, much as the Davidic king in the Hebrew psalms is the son of Yahweh. The Near Eastern goddess has no daughters! Although it is not insignificant that the female image can be used to portray this concept of god, the result is not a feminist religion or one concerned with liberating the oppressed; rather, it is a religion fundamentally interested in keeping Middle
Eastern male kings on the thrones of their city-states. One might argue that these historical texts of goddess religion represent the transformation of a still earlier truly female-centered pattern to a patriarchal system. But no one has yet discovered the sources for determining whether that is so.

Let us turn to another example. I have not seen the slightest evidence from medieval records that witchcraft was regarded by either its opponents or its alleged proponents as being centered in a female deity. The "devil," who is regarded by the inquisitors as the center of this cult, is always male. Nor have I seen satisfactory evidence indicating that witches, or those accused of being witches, were organized in any way into cubic groups such as covens. The former idea appears to have originated with Margaret Murray, drawing on 19th century romantic scholarship. The latter idea is a fantasy contrived by the medieval inquisitors in order to make the case that witches constituted a heretical sect.

Although women came to predominate among those accused of witchcraft, they were never the sole targets. Almost a quarter of those who were put to death were male. Responsible scholarship sets the number of those executed at several hundreds of thousands. Given the fact that for every person finally executed, dozens more were interrogated and tortured, the result -- in the period roughly from the 14th to the 18th centuries -- was no small atrocity. Nevertheless the figure of "9 million women burned," which is continually cited in feminist literature on the issue, appears to be completely unsubstantiated. So far as I can figure out, the motivation behind the repetition of this fallacy is a desire to "top" the Jewish Holocaust. I personally have trouble with competitions for top atrocity honors. Things have been bad enough without making them worse.

**Self-Knowledge**

The creation of a feminist goddess-centered religion need not be dependent on whether the worship of Ishtar or the practice of witchcraft was such a religion in the past. It is possible to start something new, using images from the past but transforming their meaning and imbuing them with contemporary experience. Every existing historical religion once did exactly this, and there is no reason why it cannot be done today by women concerned with a spirituality of women's liberation. But to make up a history out of misinterpreted evidence is a dubious
procedure. At the very least it means that one does not really understand either the meaning of appropriated symbols in their original context or their subliminal effects when unleashed into present-day experience.

To take over the goddess-king mythical pattern uncritically, and to misinterpret the goddess as a divine identity for women, may have an effect that is far from liberating or egalitarian. To do so may actually allow women to play the role of imperial dominance and vengefully and contemptuously to seek to reduce the status of males to that of dependent children, sexual toys or alien devils -- in short, to do unto males very much what feminists have accused males of doing to women in patriarchal religion. Dianic Wicca, as described by Z. Budapest, has a strong flavor of this tendency of "reversal of dominance." Revenge may be sweet, but can it be the mark of truly feminist spirituality or ethics?

Dubious historical pedigrees should be challenged not merely in the interest of academic fastidiousness, but because bad history never leads to good self-knowledge. Bad history is a tool of delusion, self-inflation and negation of others. One of the great contributions of reformed Christianity is that it has established the norm of self-critical knowledge of one’s own origins and history as the key to religious self-knowledge. It seems to me that a feminist religion that would be better cannot do less.

**Assigning Good and Evil**

Anthropologically, separatist spirituality embodies a broad general typology of maleness and femaleness. Females are seen as loving, egalitarian, mutual, holistic, ecological and spontaneous. Males are seen as oppressive, alienated, dualistic, rapacious and destructive. In short, women are the authentic human beings, while males are inauthentic and evil subhumans. The origin of these stereotypes lies in the 19th century Victorian cult of femininity. Victorian women, confined to the private, domestic sphere, were idealized as the incarnation of a higher and better humanity; males, split between the private personalized life and the public competitive life, were considered less moral, less spiritual, less altruistic and sensitive, and needing the "feminine touch" to humanize them. Separatist feminism "radicalizes" the Victorian doctrine of complementarity.
Most feminists use some version of this "critique of masculinity." But they view it as a matter of social systems that have socialized males to an extreme that favors power and control, while assigning women the more "humane" qualities but placing them in a powerless and dependent position. Separatist feminists move from identifying this split with socialization to seeing it as constituting inherent male and female "natures." This, of course, is what patriarchal ideologies have traditionally done to women. Mary Daly, in her most recent work, *Gyn/Ecology* (Beacon, 1979), comes close to such identification of goodness with women and evil with men.

One can well ask whether such stereotypes are not unfair and wounding to males. But more important here (since few males are going to expose themselves to being wounded by feminist separatists!) is the question of whether those stereotypes are conducive to valid female self-knowledge and development. If evil is male, then women don’t have to take any responsibility for it. They can be the great innocents or victims of history. Their only ethical task is to purge themselves of all traces of male influence; then their naturally good selves will be revealed and will re-create the world. There is no need for women ever to examine themselves to see whether they are capable of oppressiveness and injustice. In such an outlook, evil is always alien to true femaleness.

Oddly enough, such a position does not lead to female bonding or sisterhood, as is claimed, but to increasing paranoia and sectarianism on the part of women in their dealings with each other. Having relegated all males to the subhuman, women eye each other suspiciously. Few are believed to have true "feminist consciousness"; most are dupes of males. One shares sisterhood with fewer and fewer women. One cannot have sisterhood with any women who are married, who have male children, who engage in heterosexual relations, who remain within patriarchal religions. These limitations exclude most women. The circle of the elite becomes smaller and smaller, and less and less relevant to the day-to-day needs of most women.

This sectarianism is rooted in a false anthropology. Women need to acknowledge that they have the same drives and temptations to sin as males have -- not just sins of dependency but also the sins of dominance, of which they have been less guilty (not for want of capacity, but for want of opportunity). When women are
given more opportunity to play the power games, they do so and can learn to like it.

If we are really to effect change, we must take responsibility for the capacities for both good and evil in all people. We must stop projecting evil onto the "other." And in this way women will be liberated from the self-absolutization and paranoia that have so often created "revolutions," with the result that seven devils return to occupy the place, from which one has been driven. We will be able to cultivate a sense of humor, to be sensitive to the ambiguity in all of our efforts to do good, to be inclusive in our sympathies toward all persons. This is a better pattern not only for liberation but also for personal psychic health and equilibrium. To follow, it does not mean any lessening of judgment on the evils done in the name of male prerogatives, but rather not to allow the evil to overwhelm and destroy our souls.

**Nature and Civilization**

The male-female dualism of countercultural spirituality tends to be identified with the dualism of nature and civilization. Nature is seen as an unspoiled realm of spontaneous harmony that is to be found by getting in touch with the world outside of human intervention. In so doing we rediscover the deep rhythms that connect unspoiled nature and women's bodies. A woman’s body becomes a microcosm of the universe, rather than an object of exploitation and contempt. Much of separatist ritual has to do with celebrating those rhythms and connections. Although there is much in this perspective that is an important corrective to the negation of woman, of the body, and of nature in patriarchal religions, one must also be aware of certain dangers in it.

The source of this type of nature-civilization split (and its connection with femaleness and maleness) is again 19th century romanticism. In separatist spirituality the split is typically identified with ancient "paganism" or goddess religion. But in actuality the concept of goddess worship as nature religion is a fantasy of European Christianity. Ancient Near Eastern goddesses were not figures of "nature religion" in this sense; rather, they represented wisdom and order that restore the harmony not only of the natural environment but also the humanly managed urban and agricultural worlds, rescuing them as well from threatened disruption by the forces of death and chaos.
The romantic nature-civilization split seems to me to be an essentially escapist notion, rather than the basis for a genuine social ethic. One projects onto the world of human artifacts one’s sense of frustrated alienation, then imagines that an escape from this system is by means of a retreat into an unfallen paradise of "nature." This attitude relieves one from ever really having to take responsibility for trying to change the human world. Western males have been playing various versions of this "retreat into nature" for some time; they have stereotyped women, Indians and South Sea islanders as the "natives" in Eden. It is rather odd to find women identifying themselves with the same labels.

A much more sinister use of the nature-civilization dualism characterizes the type of German romanticism that was exploited by Nazi ideology. Here Germanic blood and soil were identified with the unspoiled realm of organic nature -- a realm to which the German Volk needed to return in order to be made whole. Urban civilization and technology were viewed as the realm of alienated rationality, which is the destructive virus of modern civilization. Nazi ideology took up this romantic dualism and related it to the racial split between German and Jew. The Jew was seen as the secular urban rationalist who alienated the German soul from its organic spiritual wholeness with nature and the cosmos. If the Jew could be purged from the German body politic, it was argued, this wholeness could be restored.

Some forms of feminist separatism seem close to making the same kind of identification of females with the organic true Volk and males with the rationalist, materialist alien. Not surprisingly, such circles seem "fascistic" in some ways. We find abrupt refusals to allow males to speak in assemblies, or to be present at all, and even efforts to purge women of all connections with males by refusing entry to those who engage in heterosexual relations or who have male offspring. One thinks of the Nuremberg laws which tried to ban all interpersonal relations between Germans and Jews. Although obviously such feminist groups lack the power to do to males what Nazis did to Jews, one shudders to think what might happen if they were in power -- or, more important, what these women are doing to their own humanity when they reduce the rest of the human race to nonpersons.

Immanence and Transcendence
It is widely assumed in feminist spirituality that the concept of transcendence represents an alien patriarchal ideology that separates God from nature, mind from body, heaven from earth. Feminist theology, therefore, must be a theology of immanent divinity. The goddess represents the immanent harmony of the existing natural ecology found in the turn of the seasons, the tides of the sea, the cycles of the planets. Once one has repudiated the alien world of male civilization, this natural mother is waiting for us, her arms outstretched. The concepts of sin and fallenness are lies which males have imposed on females in order to subject them to an inferior status.

In my opinion this kind of immanentism is an inadequate base for the feminist theological agenda. Although feminists obviously have to reject certain understandings of sin, fallenness, transcendence and future hope found in patriarchal theology, these concepts themselves need to be appropriated and reinterpreted in feminist terms. If human history has really been a history of genocide, rape and war, then that fact itself bespeaks a formidable reality of sin and fallenness. It means that human nature has the capacity to depart from and destroy its own harmony with the cosmos and, in the process, not only to distort its own nature but also to distort the cosmos itself -- in a way that today leaves very little of "nature" unspoiled by human intervention.

The original goodness of humanity and nature is not available simply for the price of a romp on the beach or a chant around the campfire. Original goodness exists as a lost potential that has to be reimagined and reclaimed, not simply by changed consciousness but through an ethical struggle to recreate the world and our own individual and social existence in it. The original harmony of humanity with nature and God exists not as a present reality but as a lost paradise and future hope, which we taste now and again in the midst of our broken existence. It is that future Shalom of God on earth for which we hope and struggle -- and which was announced by the prophets of Israel and by Jesus of Nazareth. Far from repudiating this biblical pattern of thought, a feminist denunciation of sexism as a primal expression of human fallenness can reinterpret that pattern with new power and meaning. In so doing we can also rediscover the union that the Hebrew tradition itself makes between God’s Shalom as social justice and as ecological harmony.
A Methodology for a Critique of Culture

Judeo-Christian religion and its stepchild, Western culture, have succeeded in monopolizing public reality, at least in our experience. This means that those who are a part of and yet are alienated from this culture have a difficult time arriving at a genuinely holistic alternative. If they try to negate the culture completely, they find themselves without a genuine tradition with which to work, and they neglect those basic guidelines which the culture itself has developed through long experience in order to avoid the pathological dead ends of human psychology.

This religious and cultural monopolizing of public reality has a formidable shadow side, a suppressed animus forming the underside of its own dominant identity. This animus is commonly identified with all those cultural "enemies" conquered in the past; it is called nature religion, goddess worship, paganism, witchcraft, demonism and the like. For a long time, Judaism also existed in Christian consciousness as a force in this suppressed animus.

The great mistake of any group seeking an alternative is to identify that alternative with the Christian animus. Jews, fortunately, were able to keep alive a genuine alternative religion and culture through centuries of Christian suppression, and so they were always able to differentiate between authentic Jewish identity and the Christian anti-Jewish animus.

But women are not so lucky in this regard. If there ever was an autonomous women's religion, it has not survived as an existing independent tradition. It is doubtful that the goddess worship of antiquity was such a religion. And even if it should hold clues to some alternatives, it has not come down as living tradition. To pretend that it has and to construct an imaginary line of descent for a feminist religion indicates a false understanding of origins. To a large extent this means that instead of creating a more holistic alternative, such feminist spiritualities succumb to the suppressed animus of patriarchal religious culture.

There is nothing objectionable in the effort to create a feminist spirituality is such. But actually to do so is both more difficult and more dangerous than one might realize, and demands both greater modesty and greater maturity than those still deeply wounded by patriarchal religion have generally been able to muster. The
best way to create such a spirituality is not by means of separatism and rejection, but by means of synthesis and transformation. We need to work through, with great breadth and depth, what our actual experience has been, both in the dominant culture shaped by males and in the suppressed experiences of women. Then we can begin to put together a new synthesis that utilizes many of the elements of earlier traditions, but within a new and liberated context.

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