

Relativizing the Patriarchy: The Sacred History of the Feminist Spirituality Movement

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Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Feb., 1991), pp. 279-295

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062958>

Accessed: 17-09-2018 12:54 UTC

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Cynthia Eller

RELATIVIZING THE  
PATRIARCHY: THE  
SACRED HISTORY  
OF THE FEMINIST  
SPIRITUALITY  
MOVEMENT

One of the most novel and fascinating new religious movements to develop in the United States in the past twenty years is the feminist spirituality movement. Originally growing out of radical political feminism and Jewish and Christian feminism, this movement has come to encompass a vast collection of religious artifacts, ranging from divination and magic to neopaganism and Goddess worship. Its most intense sociological manifestation is feminist witchcraft, which centers around Goddess worship and seasonal celebrations in small groups of practitioners that call themselves "covens." But the impact of the feminist spirituality movement is felt mainly in terms of its peripheral adherents, women who may light a candle for the Goddess, attend a lecture on Paleolithic religious artifacts, or read *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk without ever having face-to-face contact with someone who defines herself as a witch. It is these women who, more broadly speaking, compose the feminist spirituality movement.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, the loosest of definitions will suffice: feminist

<sup>1</sup> The size of the feminist witchcraft movement and its impact on feminism in general is difficult to calculate. But one suggestive bit of evidence is found in R. George Kirkpatrick's survey of a sample of San Francisco feminists, 30 percent of whom identified their religious preference as "pagan" (cited in John Dart, "Witches, Paganists Eschew

spirituality will be taken to include all religious or spiritual beliefs or activities that claim both a feminist worldview and a position outside normative religion.<sup>2</sup>

The feminist spirituality movement is interesting primarily in terms of its religious syncretism and its gender politics. Most new religions show an interest early on in consolidating their belief systems and establishing authority structures. Spiritual feminists, however, remain determinedly eclectic, borrowing deities, meditation techniques, and magical recipes from whatever cultures appeal to them. In this the feminist spirituality movement is like the New Age movement, which also shows no reluctance to take spiritual sustenance wherever it can be found. In fact, there is so much overlap between their interests (chakras, crystals, channeling, etc.), that it is sometimes tempting to view feminist spirituality as little more than the feminist wing of the New Age movement: the women's auxiliary, as it were. And yet this conception is true neither to the genesis of feminist spirituality in radical feminism nor to its continuing commitment to a feminist political agenda. Though feminist spirituality is syncretistic, it has a definite selection criterion in mind: namely, that all beliefs and practices,

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Satanism, Study Says," *Los Angeles Times* [November 5, 1983], sec. 2). This calls attention to a weak point in standard definitions of religious cults (under which category feminist witchcraft is typically included). Cults are traditionally portrayed as intense, intimate groups of believers who stand outside the mainstream of society, offering novel belief systems for those who have unusually pronounced problems adapting to their socially designated roles (see, e.g., Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone, eds., *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974], pp. 612–27; William S. Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, "Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models," *Sociological Analysis* 40 [1979]: 283–95; and J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Society, and the Individual* [New York: Macmillan, 1957], pp. 154–55). Yet other studies—and the example of feminist spirituality—indicate that the vast majority of participants in religious cults are "transitory affiliates," individuals who have some encounter with alternative religions, and are influenced by them, but do not continue as active participants (see Frederick Bird and Bill Reimer, "Participation Rates in New Religious Movements," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 [1982]: 1–14; and Robert Ellwood, *Alternative Altars* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 34). For every person who shaves his or her head, dons orange robes, and chants "Hare Krishna," there are probably a hundred who have read Swami Prabhupada's translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, attended a service at the local Krishna commune, or danced and chanted with the Krishnas as they proselytized at a beachfront festival. So it is with the feminist spirituality movement. For every woman initiated as a witch, there are many others who have read Z Budapest's *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries (Part One)* [Oakland, Calif.: Susan B. Anthony Coven Number 1, 1979]), participated in a feminist spirituality study group, or attended a makeshift equinox celebration. This diffusive effect has been largely ignored by sociologists of religion who describe cults in terms of their most intense manifestations (i.e., the commune or the meditation center).

<sup>2</sup> Though it is most convenient to restrict feminist spirituality to its expressions outside normative religions, its influence does not stop here; even feminists who continue to practice within Jewish and Christian traditions may appropriate the language and mythos of feminist spirituality.

whether individual or communal, must be conducive to the feminist struggle against a patriarchal social order.

This feminist commitment does much to explain the salient features of the feminist spirituality movement, including the worship of goddesses (or a Goddess), and the practice of ritual and magic directed toward the empowerment of women. But the most obviously "feminist" element in feminist spirituality is its sacred history, essentially a revisionist history of Western civilization. This reconstruction of standard Western history places female-ruled or equalitarian societies at the dawn of human civilization, traces their overthrow by patriarchal powers from 4500 to 2500 B.C.E., and looks forward to a coming millennial age in which society will be returned to "gynocentric," life-loving values. This sacred history, I will argue, is an effort to deal religiously with a challenge faced by all feminists: that of finding an adequate explanation for the existence and persistence of male dominance.

Understanding the nature of sexism is at the heart of any reflective feminism, political feminism no less so than feminist spirituality. It is an especially difficult challenge because male dominance seems to be the norm throughout recorded history and across all cultures.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the continuance of societies based on male dominance is unacceptable to feminists. But the fact that human society as we know it has almost universally been male dominant or patriarchal carries a tremendous weight against which feminists must struggle. In seeking to create an apparently unprecedented social order, feminists are vulnerable to arguments that male dominance has been the rule because it is in some sense morally right that men hold social power or, alternatively, that whatever the ethical status of male dominance, it is nevertheless instinctive to the human species and can only be altered at the expense of our collective sanity.

Thus feminists are faced with the task of developing explanations for the patriarchy that do not at the same time legitimate it. It is essentially a problem of theodicy: if the social order as we now know and have always known it is unjust to half the human race, how has it been able to survive? Why has it been tolerated for so long? Why is it still so resistant to change? Certain traditional answers are prohibited at the outset for feminist thinkers. For example, male dominance has long been explained as the natural and proper result of male biological superiority, a theory which must be anathema to any feminist hoping to claim her right to be fully human. Similarly, the argument that male dominance was ordained by God for pragmatic reasons, for the smooth

<sup>3</sup> For an elaboration of this theme, see Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1972): 5-32.

flowing of relations between fundamentally equal genders, cannot gain feminist acceptance. Anthropological theories which assert that male dominance developed early in human history at a time when superior male strength was key to survival do little to explain why male dominance should continue to the present day. What feminists require is a way of understanding the long history of patriarchal rule that does not make this rule normative but leaves the path clear to establish societies in which women share or control social power. For this the sacred history of the feminist spirituality movement is ideally suited; in fact, it is for this purpose that it was made.

By placing the patriarchy within clearly defined historical bounds, feminist spirituality's sacred history counters the psychological weight of thousands of years of cross-cultural male dominance with a virtually infinite number of years of female equality or superiority coming both at the beginning and end of historical time. Thus male dominance is relativized and gender equality or female dominance becomes the norm. An additional benefit for spiritual feminists is that the patriarchy is no longer the only known model for human society. Feminist spirituality's sacred history describes an alternative to male dominance such that feminists are freed from the onus of demanding a social order that is utterly unprecedented in human history and granted the much easier task of working for a return to a former, historically tested, and supposedly quite successful pattern of social organization.

This strategy of relativizing current power relations through a revisionist history is by no means peculiar to the feminist spirituality movement. As Mircea Eliade argues in *Cosmos and History*, religious understandings of time can function to help people cope with the existence of history and with all the evils it is capable of inflicting on one's group.<sup>4</sup> Spiritual feminists have developed one such way of seeing women's role in history, which I shall analyze after discussing the salient features of the movement's sacred history in greater depth.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY'S SACRED HISTORY

Prehistorical matriarchies are the keystone of feminist spirituality's sacred history. According to spiritual feminists, human society from our earliest archaeological records to the rise of the patriarchy in the second millennium B.C.E. was matriarchal, or at any rate, Goddess worshipping. This culture is alternatively called matristic, matrifocal, gynocentric, or matriarchal, all of which are meant to emphasize the central role given to women in society as representations of the God-

<sup>4</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), chaps. 3, 4.

dess herself. (I will use the term “matriarchy” as a matter of convenience.) Women in these societies are assumed to have access to social power, society is believed to reflect “feminine” values, and women are credited with the invention of such cultural products as agriculture, written language, mathematics, and medicine.<sup>5</sup> However, the exact status of women in prehistorical societies is clouded in mythological haze and is a matter of some dispute, even within the feminist spirituality movement, though particularly without. Some critics (notably Rosemary Radford Ruether) have argued that Goddess worship does not imply significant social power for women, that indeed a society can worship the divine as female and still oppress women. It must be stressed as well that feminist spirituality’s sacred history relies on a particularistic version of prehistory, one certainly not shared by archaeologists and anthropologists in general, or even those archaeologists and anthropologists who are self-described feminists.<sup>6</sup>

Among spiritual feminists, the debate about the status of women in prehistorical societies revolves more around questions of female supremacy versus equality of power relations between the sexes. Some spiritual feminists envision structural power as having been accorded only or primarily to women, who handled such power better and differently than have their male counterparts in the patriarchy. More common is to stress not matriarchal rule but the absence of sexism: relations between men and women are thought to have been equalitarian, and the prevailing ethic one of peaceful cooperation. In any case, the great majority of spiritual feminists assume a connection between Goddess worship and greater social status for women, often by reasoning from the coincidence in our own time of worship of a Father God and male social dominance. It is by means of this assumption—that images of the divine both reflect and legislate human social arrangements—that feminist spirituality’s sacred history gains its power to inspire its adherents.

<sup>5</sup> Some groups within the feminist spirituality movement have devised a new dating system to reflect the cultural accomplishments of women. They date history from 8000 B.C.E., the time when agriculture was first developed. Thus 1990 C.E. translates to 9990 A.D.A. (After the Development of Agriculture).

<sup>6</sup> In “Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism” (*Christian Century* 97 [1980]: 843), Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that the worship of Ishtar in Near Eastern cultures was practiced predominantly by men and that it served to legitimate patriarchal power relations rather than to call these into question. Ruether portrays Near Eastern Goddess worship as “a religion fundamentally interested in keeping Middle Eastern male kings on the thrones of their city-states.” An argument denying factual evidence for feminist spirituality’s understanding of prehistorical matriarchies is offered by anthropologist Sally R. Binford in “Myths and Matriarchies,” in *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1982), pp. 541–49.

Evidence offered by spiritual feminists for the existence of ancient matriarchies is primarily archaeological and mythological, though occasionally appeal is made to written sources dating from postmatriarchal times. It is generally implied that prehistorical matriarchies were a worldwide phenomenon, but in point of fact, discussions of ancient matriarchies are almost exclusively limited to the Middle East and Southern Eurasia.<sup>7</sup> Most convincing to spiritual feminists are the archaeological findings of an abundance of female figurines of apparently religious significance located in temples and at grave sites in the remains of Paleolithic and Neolithic settlements. Archaeological evidence also lends credence to the theory that these prehistoric societies were based on matrilineal kinship systems, which becomes in the hands of spiritual feminists a further proof of women's enhanced social power.<sup>8</sup>

A further support spiritual feminists cite for ancient matriarchies comes from mythology. There exists evidence that the pantheons of gods and goddesses found in Mediterranean and Near Eastern mythology were originally ruled by goddesses such as Gaia or Tiamat, Great Mothers who gave birth to all the other deities. Early versions of these myths allow the goddesses to retain their hegemony, while later versions give the goddesses' power to their sons or lovers. From this, spiritual feminists conclude that these myths reflect a similar change taking place in society itself between the prominence of women and their subsequent oppression by men.<sup>9</sup> Finally, written sources such as the Hebrew scriptures are seen by some feminist scholars as providing documentation of the patriarchal religious revolution that brought an end to matriarchal culture. By noting what the prophets were railing

<sup>7</sup> Emily Erwin Culpepper offers a critique of this ethnocentrism in her "Contemporary Goddess Theology: A Sympathetic Critique," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 53. There is rising interest among spiritual feminists in examining Goddess worship in other cultures, particularly in prehistoric Africa, though little scholarship has been done to date. In "Patriarchal Revolution in Ancient Japan: Episodes from the *Nihonshoki* Sujin Chronicle," Robert Ellwood discusses Goddess worship in prehistoric Japan (*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 [1986]: 23-27), but again, sources for feminist spirituality's sacred history are overwhelmingly Mediterranean.

<sup>8</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500-3500 B.C.: Myths and Cult Images*, 2d ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), p. 76.

against, spiritual feminists argue, the preexistence of a different, non-patriarchal religious and social order can be established.<sup>10</sup>

The new male ruling class that ushered in the patriarchy is generally understood to have been a group of invaders from the North Eurasian steppes who imposed a patrilineal kinship system and male deities on the Goddess-worshipping cultures.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the significance of this event—and of course there is great dispute here—there is widespread scholarly consensus that these invasions did occur. Spiritual feminists term these invasions “the patriarchal revolution” and argue that it was carried out with malice, forethought, and a considerable amount of violence. According to feminist spirituality’s sacred history, Goddess worship was forcibly perverted by the patriarchs of Judaism and Christianity into the mythology that comes down to us today and which sanctifies the oppression of women. Merlin Stone writes, “Archaeological, mythological, and historical evidence all reveal that the female religion, far from naturally fading away, was the victim of centuries of continual persecution and suppression by the advocates of the newer religions which held male deities as supreme.”<sup>12</sup> Or as Z Budapest explains in more polemic terms, “With characteristic lack of imagination, the patriarchs just reversed the Goddess-values and ‘invented’ sin, devil, guilt, confession, and pain-worship (martyrdom); used penance to justify suffering, glorified death through crucifixion; and created an all-male heaven to support the all-male cast in power on earth.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See especially Stone. There is sensitivity within the feminist spirituality movement to the danger that its view of history could open itself to anti-Semitism (i.e., it was the Jewish leaders who labored long and hard to crush Goddess worship and therefore matriarchy). A response to this charge can be found in Carol Christ, “On Not Blaming Jews for the Death of the Goddess,” in her *Laughter of Aphrodite* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 83–92.

<sup>11</sup> Some spiritual feminists link the patriarchal revolution to the discovery of men’s role in conception, suggesting that men indigenous to the ancient matriarchies took power in the interest of securing control over women’s childbearing functions. Other explanations of the patriarchal revolution I have heard proposed are that natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, etc.) ushered in a time of scarce resources during which male hunting and warring prowess became more important; or that UFOs landed, and aliens either trained peaceful men in the ways of patriarchy, or else themselves became human men and introduced patriarchal values to the human community. Explanations like these are quite rare. The dominant motif is one of “wave after wave of barbarian invaders from the barren fringes of the globe . . . who bring with them their angry gods of thunder and war, and who everywhere leave destruction and devastation in their wake” (Riane Eisler, “The Chalice and the Blade: Toward a Partnership with the Earth” [paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion meeting, Anaheim, Calif., November 1989]).

<sup>12</sup> Stone, p. xiii.

<sup>13</sup> Budapest, *The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries* (n. 1 above), p. 12.



Spiritual feminists argue, however, that Goddess worship was never entirely exterminated. Small bands of Goddess-worshipping pagans (or witches) continued to celebrate the seasons of nature and practice herbal medicine in an underground fashion, preserving the life-loving values of the matriarchy even as the patriarchs consolidated their death-dealing power. Witchcraft, and particularly the European witch burnings during the Middle Ages, symbolizes to spiritual feminists both the submerged power of matriarchy and the virulent misogyny of the patriarchs. Most feminist scholars assert that the Christian state executed nine million accused witches, the vast majority of whom were women or young girls.<sup>14</sup> Other medieval scholars' estimates are more conservative, some as low as 100,000, though there is general agreement that the majority of those persecuted were women.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, spiritual feminists contend that most of the women executed were not adherents of a Goddess-worshipping religion (though this religion was in existence at the time), but merely the victims of the patriarchs' paranoid obsessions with female power. Thus the European witch burnings vividly reveal to spiritual feminists the essential nature of the patriarchy: though the patriarchs prefer to carry out their mission of oppressing women in a more subtle fashion, they can and will use terrorism and violence on a massive scale in order to control the lives and labors of women. It is in the patriarchy—in fact, a

<sup>14</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 5; Daly, p. 183. The nine million figure is ubiquitous in feminist references to the European witch burnings but does not appear in the writings of other medieval scholars. Apparently this figure was first given by Matilda Joselyn Gage in *Woman, Church and State* (1893; reprint, Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1980), pp. 106–7.

<sup>15</sup> E. William Monter, ed., *European Witchcraft* (New York: Wiley, 1969), p. 73; H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), pp. 91–92; Jeffrey B. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 279–84, and *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), pp. 113–18; Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 96; Pennethorne Hughes, *Witchcraft* (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), pp. 71–74. The disproportionate number of women among those accused of witchcraft in medieval Europe is always acknowledged but rarely quantified. (An exception is Kieckhefer, who claims that about two-thirds of those accused were women.) However, it is worth noting that all these authors use feminine pronouns when speaking generically about witches. The same is true of medieval literature on witchcraft, including the famous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), the “Hammer of the Witches,” by Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Krämer, whose title itself is feminine. Thus, even if many men were persecuted as witches, the dominant stereotype was and is decidedly female. An excellent discussion of the limitations of both traditional male and recent feminist scholarship regarding the European witch craze can be found in Anne Llewellyn Barstow, “On Studying Witchcraft as Women’s History: A Historiography of the European Witch Persecutions,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 2 (1988): 7–19.

patriarchy in full flower—that spiritual feminists believe themselves to be living, and from which they seek escape for all humanity.

Clearly, more is at stake in the division of history into matriarchal and patriarchal eras than simple role reversal, and it is instructive to see where the distinctions between the two are drawn. To begin with, matriarchal society is mythically reconstructed as a world order entirely free of warfare. A stronger and more reciprocal relationship to nature is another salient element of this mythology.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as these are separable, though (and many feminists would argue that they are not), the central issue for spiritual feminists is the use of power under matriarchal rule. In *Dreaming the Dark*, Starhawk differentiates between two types of power, which can be roughly associated with patriarchy and matriarchy, respectively: power-over and power-from-within.<sup>17</sup> Power-over is domination, hierarchy, coercion—the favored methods of the patriarchy for ruling society. The alternative is matriarchy—in Margot Adler’s words, “a realm where female things are valued and where power is exerted in non-possessive, non-controlling, and organic ways that are harmonious with nature.”<sup>18</sup> The ancient matriarchies are also seen as a richer atmosphere for men’s development and freedom, making the ancient matriarchies a golden age not only for women, but for all of society.

This point is critical, for it is here that spiritual feminists find the justification for their efforts to bring the patriarchy down and return to the values and social structure of the ancient matriarchal cultures. Patriarchy is bad not only because it restricts women’s freedom but also because the patriarchal mindset is responsible for all forms of oppression, both social (sexism, racism, classism) and personal (mind against body, rationality against intuition and emotion). In “The Personal is Political,” Sheila Collins gives the classic feminist analysis of the patriarchy: “Racism, sexism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction are four interlocking pillars upon which the structure of the patriarchy rests. The structures of oppression are everywhere the same. . . . Feminists hold that the alienation of woman from man—because it was the first and still is the longest lasting form of human alienation—can be seen as a primordial paradigm from which all other unjust relationships derive.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, these are not mere social

<sup>16</sup> Charlene Spretnak, “The Spiritual Experience of the Female Psyche/Soma” (lecture, April 24, 1982); Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*.

<sup>17</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston: Beacon, 1982), chap. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon, 1979), p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> Sheila D. Collins, “The Personal Is Political,” in Spretnak, ed. (n. 6 above), p. 363.

arrangements that can be changed at will, because the patriarchy is rooted deeply in both the individual and corporate minds as a way of thinking and a method for ordering reality. Again, Collins explains:

Such metaphors [explaining the patriarchal worldview] are summed up in a series of dualisms, the two halves of which are related to each other as superior to inferior, superordinate to subordinate. Male/female, mind/body, subject/object, man/nature, inner/outer, white/black, rational/irrational, civilized/primitive—all serve to explain the way in which the patriarchy has ordered reality. As we have seen, the left-hand side of each equation has assumed a kind of right of ownership over the right. The relationship is one of owner to owned, oppressor to oppressed rather than one of mutuality.<sup>20</sup>

For spiritual feminists, then, the patriarchal rejection of women and nature, of the unconscious and the instinctual, is the seedbed of international violence and interpersonal domination. The threat of nuclear holocaust, the most pressing problem our world faces, is ultimately explained by spiritual feminists as the fully ripened fruit of patriarchal thought forms. Patriarchal values have reached their logical conclusion, and society has now arrived at an impasse such that its only options are extinction or social revolution.

It is from this history of oppression that feminist spirituality sees matriarchal culture emerging victorious once again. Some spiritual feminists see the coming millennial age as inevitable; most are more guarded in their assessments, viewing the patriarchy as dissipated but still incredibly powerful and to be overcome only through a combination of concerted effort and good fortune.<sup>21</sup> We are living in the darkest of times, say spiritual feminists, but the darkest times are also those most pregnant with possibility. We have reached a fork in the road where we as a species can choose life under the guidance of women and “feminine” values, or death at the hands of the patriarchal machine.

The hope for the future, according to feminist spirituality, lies with women: it is women who, so long prevented from exercising their wills and influencing history, will usher in the millennium if they are only granted the opportunity to do so. There is disagreement within the feminist spirituality movement as to why women are uniquely suited to bring down the patriarchy for the sake of all humankind. Some spiritual feminists emphasize women’s historic experience as the source of their ability to move society out of patriarchal values and into a new

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>21</sup> Contrasting views can be found in Z Budapest, “Christian Feminist vs. Goddess Movement,” *WomanSpirit* 6 (1980): 26–27; and Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (n. 8 above).

golden age. It is because women have been marginalized by the patriarchy that they can observe and isolate the patriarchy's crucial flaws. Having experienced the evils of oppression, women have some insight into alternatives, or at least a powerful incentive to create alternatives. Carol Christ reasons in this way: "Even when they cannot articulate them fully, women may sense connections between their own victimization and the relentless technological devastation of the environment, the exploitation of the poor, or the bombing of villages in foreign lands."<sup>22</sup> Other spiritual feminists place their hope for the future in women because they believe women to be biologically better suited to the creation of a peaceful, harmonious society. Women, believed to have a natural inclination toward holistic perceptions, must be the ones to guide society away from the dualisms of the patriarchy. In a massive narrative of feminist spirituality's sacred history entitled *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor describe this millennial hope and the pivotal role of women in bringing it to fruition: "Women, designed by evolution as the links between spirit and flesh, are perhaps also designed by the cosmos to lead the human world back, now, to the great celebration of the reconciliation of flesh and spirit. Thus, at the very edge of death, we will return to the beginning. That is, at the end of the world (where we must surely be!) we will return to the Goddess, the Great Mother of All Life, as her magic children. In a round world, the only way for human beings to survive the end is to *return* to the beginning."<sup>23</sup>

The exact nature of the coming golden age is not clear, which is unsurprising, given that the future utopia is at least in spirit a recreation of the ancient matriarchies, which are similarly misty and undefined. The same tension between egalitarian and female-dominant understandings of the ancient matriarchies is evident as spiritual feminists search for an adequate vision of the future. As one feminist witch explains, "Right now I am pushing for women's power in any way I can, but I don't know whether my ultimate aim is a society where all human beings are equal, regardless of the bodies they were born into, or whether I would rather see a society where women had institutional authority."<sup>24</sup> The fundamental dream seems to be one of equality (or

<sup>22</sup> Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 430. Further arguments for the biological advantage of women restructuring society can be found in Charlene Spretnak, "Introduction," in Spretnak, ed., pp. xi-xxx, and "The Spiritual Experience of the Female Psyche/Soma."

<sup>24</sup> Adler, p. 191.

stated negatively, lack of sexism), but this dream is colored by a deep distrust of men's ability to adhere to the new rules. Thus it may be necessary to retain at least some degree of female hegemony to insure against a return to patriarchal control.

Yet what is important to note is not so much the specific characteristics of feminist spirituality's future utopia but the fact that what is sought is a radical transformation of society as we have known it for several millennia. While more politically minded feminists have pursued wide-ranging social reforms, they have still maintained a stake in the present order and have been reluctant to trade it in for the hope of a future matriarchy. In contrast, feminist spirituality is apocalyptic in tone, envisioning the dramatic conclusion to society as we know it, and the birth of a society beautiful and new. This is consistent with the pattern of millenarian movements. As Norman Cohn explains in his work, *In Pursuit of the Millennium*: "It is characteristic of this kind of movement that its aims and premises are boundless. A social struggle is seen not as a struggle for specific, limited objectives, but as an event of unique importance, different in kind from all other struggles known to history, a cataclysm from which the world is to emerge totally transformed and redeemed."<sup>25</sup> What is at stake for spiritual feminists is nothing less than the survival of the human race, even of the world, and women take center stage as the salvific force that can bring us back from the precipice.

#### SACRED HISTORY AS THEODICY

Although spiritual feminists are unique in locating the primal social sin in male dominance, they are not alone in their efforts to give a mythicoreligious explanation of historical time. In *Cosmos and History*, Mircea Eliade maintains that dealing with the reality of time is a central religious problem for all people. According to Eliade, this problem has been approached in two basic ways, one "archaic" and the other "modern." The archaic mode favors a denial of historical novelty by forcing life to conform to mythological patterns that stand outside history. Constant repetition of these archetypes and the periodic "renewal of time" through ritual free the individual and the culture from the burden of directing history. For archaic peoples, living in "the paradise of archetypes," history holds no terrors because it is reversible.

In contrast, the modern mode embraces historical time with its potential for novelty. History is irreversible, but it is positively valued as a revelation of the divine will or as progress toward a destiny of

<sup>25</sup> Norman Cohn, *In Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 281.

cosmic proportions. But the modern mode too can be antihistorical, for history can be finite, "a fragment between two atemporal eternities."<sup>26</sup> For those who rely on this mode of dealing with time, history was originally born of timelessness and will eventually be absorbed back into timelessness. The terror of history is tolerated because history is of limited duration. History is working within itself to abolish itself and to usher in a second golden age, a return to the atemporal eternity of the first golden age.

The sacred history of the feminist spirituality movement conforms to this mode of dealing with time. The ancient matriarchies were timeless, stretching back into a distant, indeterminate past. The "paradise of archetypes" was disrupted by the takeover of the patriarchs and the consequent creation of historical time. All of history since the patriarchal revolution has been characterized by the oppression and misery of women. Nevertheless, meaning is conferred on this history because out of it will emerge another timeless society. History was produced through the radical disequilibrium of male dominance. When the balance is set straight, history will be destroyed, and once again, there will be no need for historical novelty or progress in a society that is in harmony with a continually renewed natural world.

This brings up an interesting parallel between feminist spirituality's sacred history and that of Marxism. Marxist analyses of history begin with tribal, communal society, a world not yet corrupted by class differentiation. History itself begins with the creation of economic classes, and the forward motion of history can be understood from the vantage point of a single factor: economic determinism. The present order is now collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, and a new order is arising through the dynamic of the present underclass—the proletariat—claiming societal power. The society to come is initially portrayed as a reversal of the current power structure (the dictatorship of the proletariat), but is expected to evolve into a utopia that is radically equalitarian—a return of the original classless golden age.<sup>27</sup> Feminist spirituality's sacred history is strikingly similar, with

<sup>26</sup> Eliade (n. 4 above), p. 112.

<sup>27</sup> Both Marxism and feminist spirituality are notably ambivalent about the future utopia. This is partially the result of their struggle between a desire for equality and a desire for reversal of present injustices. Furthermore, the analogy between Marxism and feminist spirituality is loosest at this point (the future utopia), because while the proletariat will cease to be the proletariat when the economic situation is radically altered, women will still be women after the patriarchy has fallen (and as we have seen, biological differences play a significant role in feminist spirituality's sacred history). Still, the general sentiment in feminist spirituality is that *if* men could be trusted to cooperate and not try to assert their former dominance, then the future society could be equalitarian—and this would be the most attractive option. It is the fear that men will never cooperate that leads feminists to demand female dominance, with the understanding that female

the substitution of “nonsexist” for “classless,” “male domination” for “economic determinism,” and “women” for “the proletariat.” In both cases the classless/nonsexist golden age extends into the infinite (and timeless) past and future, and though history is characterized by suffering, it is not without meaning, because it is driving toward salvation from all historical time in a future utopia. Even the worst abuses can be tolerated, because they are taken to be symptomatic of the imminent collapse of capitalist/sexist society and the advent of a new social order.<sup>28</sup>

Yet Marxism retains a more positive valuation of history than does feminist spirituality. In spite of the fact that feminist spirituality embraces historical novelty, at least for the restricted period of historical time needed to destroy the patriarchy, there is a persistent undercurrent of antihistorical intent in the feminist spirituality movement. For feminist spirituality draws on religious beliefs and practices that are archaic rather than modern, that seek to annihilate history periodically while still living embedded within it (a tactic to which Marxism apparently feels no need to resort). This is seen most clearly in feminist witchcraft, the most highly developed religious form of the feminist spirituality movement. Feminist witchcraft, with its concerns for sacred space, seasonal celebrations, polytheism, and repetition of mythological acts (e.g., the reenactment of the Demeter/Persephone myth), is essentially—and self-consciously—the religion of an archaic culture.

The most obvious reason why spiritual feminists choose elements from archaic religions is because these are the religions and their attendant cultures that spiritual feminists hope to replicate. By creating an island of matriarchal, timeless religious value within the historical time of the patriarchy, spiritual feminists see themselves both supporting and calling into being a nonsexist society. Just as the patriarchs enthroned a male God to justify the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, so feminists must invoke the Goddess to provide cosmic justification for the liberation of women and all those values denigrated as “feminine” under the rule of the patriarchy. Radically new cultures require new religions; spiritual feminists pro-

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dominance is better for society—and better for men—than the present world order. In this, feminist spirituality is really not so different from Marxism, which holds that until the capitalists learn to cooperate (and presumably come to understand the error of their capitalist ways), the proletariat will have to rule society with an iron hand for the benefit of all.

<sup>28</sup> For Eliade's treatment of Marxism's version of history, see *Cosmos and History*, p. 149.

pose to provide a new religion (or in this case, a very old one) that can undergird the society of the millennial age.

In interpreting the relative importance of archaic and modern elements in feminist spirituality, the most telling religious artifact is the Goddess herself. In striking contradistinction to the God of Judaism and Christianity, the Goddess of feminist spirituality stands completely apart from history. While the Goddess is occasionally asked to bless the work of feminists to bring an end to the patriarchy, there appears to be no notion of the Goddess actually intervening in human affairs to set things right. This is consistent with feminist spirituality's understanding of history. The Goddess belongs to nature, to timelessness, to the matriarchal eternities that stand at the beginning and end of history. It is not that she is distant from her worshipers, who must live within the history set in motion by the patriarchy—quite the contrary, she is a radically immanent deity.<sup>29</sup> But spiritual feminists' contact with the Goddess is limited to sacred time, and history is profane time.

One might wonder why feminist spirituality should be so thoroughly antihistorical, both in its treatment of history as restricted to the finite span of the patriarchy and in its adoption of archaic religious beliefs and practices. Why could not feminist spirituality adopt a deity capable of directing history, of acting in the historical moment, of giving the historical event meaning as such, without reference to its eventual demise? For the answer to this, we must return to Eliade's reflections on the terror of history. Eliade argues that our ability, as individuals and collectives, to take actions that are located in historical time, that is, that are both novel and irreversible, is an inherently terrifying thing. It is this terror of history that provides the primary reason why both the archaic and modern mode of dealing with time search out ways to ignore or soften the evidence that we live in historical time. The archaic mode denies history; the modern mode gives history transhistorical meaning, either by positing eternities on either side of history (as feminist spirituality does) or by seeing history as an epiphany of a metahistorical God (as Christianity does). The pressing need for relief from the terror of history, especially in the modern era, is captured by Eliade when he says: "In our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of

<sup>29</sup> See esp. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (n. 14 above).



economic, social, or political forces, or, even worse, only the result of 'liberties' that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history."<sup>30</sup>

But this implies an additional component to the terror of history: it is not only that the concept of historical novelty is frightening, it is also the fact that true historical creativity is the property of only a very few. As Eliade notes, "Modern man's boasted freedom to make history is illusory to nearly the whole of the human race."<sup>31</sup> He further points out that historicism as a philosophical theory was first promoted in nations where history has not been a "continuous terror," and he speculates that the peoples of nations who have had the misfortune to be neighbors to aggressive empires—such as Eliade's own Romania—would fail to understand historicism's appeal.<sup>32</sup> Basically, history is attractive to those who stand a reasonable chance of seeing their wills made manifest in history. Women have never had this reasonable chance extended to them, and hence it can be understood if they have no great love of the novel historical event.

It is also no surprise that the sacred history of the feminist spirituality movement should become especially appealing to women in the 1980s and 1990s. The powerful hopes and expectations nurtured in the early 1970s of a society free of sexual oppression are facing a political reality that admits of only incremental successes and the constant threat of failure. Once again, women have had to confront their relative powerlessness to move history in accord with their desires. Where does the feminist revolution go when society refuses to answer its demands, indeed, seems only too happy to absorb it back into the mainstream with a series of half-concessions? The revolutionary vision must be discarded, compromised, or retrenched within structures that promise to outlast the present political atmosphere. In this light, feminist spirituality can be seen as the retrenchment option, the strongly, even divinely fortified women's culture that can survive the ups and downs of political successes with integrity and without compromise. The political goals and practices of feminism remain, but the timescale for their accomplishment has been lengthened and invested with cosmic significance. The hoped-for political change of this generation becomes an eschatological hope to be passed down to future generations.

<sup>30</sup> Eliade, p. 151. It is interesting to note that in Carol Christ's autobiographical account of her pilgrimage away from Judeo-Christian religion, it is precisely this terror of history, the inability to see Western history as an epiphany of God, that was a major factor in her decision to leave the church (*Laughter of Aphrodite* [n. 10 above], p. 3).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151–52.

Though feminist spirituality anxiously awaits the end of historical time, the historical events that hasten this eventuality are no longer simply barbarities to be endured, but events rich with portents of better things to come. The sacred history of the feminist spirituality movement gives its adherents a context within which to endure their continuing oppression, without lessening the call to do everything in their power to fulfill their special role of putting an end to the patriarchy and reinstating matriarchal values. Using only a few powerful elements, the theodicy of feminist spirituality's sacred history explains away the patriarchy as an aberration, thereby freeing women to participate in the one grand foray into historical time that will bring its final end.

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