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Source: *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1/2, Spirituality and Religions (Spring - Summer, 1993), pp. 106-120

Published by: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40003877>

Accessed: 17-09-2018 12:55 UTC

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# Why Women Need a Feminist Spirituality

*Judith G. Martin*

Spirituality pertains to the path we take to tap into and gain access to the transforming power of the Divine or Ultimate Reality. It can also be described as the way in which we come to experience and express the Divine in our relationships with our neighbor, with nature, and with our selves. This definition is deliberately broad to allow for the diverse ways in which the notions of “power,” the “Divine,” and “relationships” can be understood. Power may be conceived as *power over* or as *enabling power*, also known as empowerment. The Divine or Ultimate Reality may be thought of as being personal or transpersonal, as transcendent or as immanent. Relationships can be viewed as being hierarchical or egalitarian, as inclusive or as exclusive.

Over the centuries and across many cultures, individuals and groups have found distinctive ways of combining these elements, ways that have been systematized and institutionalized to the point where it becomes possible to speak, in general terms, of a spirituality that is Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and so on, and also to identify specific schools of spirituality within each of these traditions such as the Zen, Hasidic, Benedictine, and Sufi schools, respectively. In addition, there are the religious paths developed by Native Americans, wicca covens, and cults of the ancient goddess that are of special interest to feminists. The configurations are diverse but whatever the path—whether it be traditional or innovative, well-defined or eclectic—the network of beliefs, symbols, rituals, and practices enjoined by each conditions not only our vision of the Ultimate but how we view ourselves and our roles in life.

In the comments that follow, it is my intention (1) to discuss why many traditional, patriarchal, religious practices and the theology underlying them are not only found wanting by feminists, but are held to be inimical to women’s spiritual, psychological, and social development, and (2) to call attention to patterns in feminist spirituality that can be nurturing, liberating, and empowering for women and men.

### Foundations of Patriarchal Spirituality

Because the religious experience of Western women and men has been largely shaped by the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and, to some extent, Islam, it is important to note the extent to which rituals and practices found in these religions are conditioned by patriarchal ways of envisioning the Divine. For example, traditional Catholic spirituality tended to think of Ultimate Reality as being *pure spirit*, though always imagined as male, detached from or set over and against the material world. God was associated with that which was *above*, body and matter with things *below*. For God to become one with humanity, "he" had to empty himself and come *down*. This grand gesture of divine condescension, which meant "he" was taking on something foreign or alien to "himself," was seen as a necessary prelude to lifting humanity *up*.

Spirituality thus came to involve verticality. Movement upward toward the divine necessarily meant moving further away from any earthly attachments, and, it might be added, away from appreciation of or respect for creation. From this perspective it seemed only logical to regard celibacy as a "higher" calling than marriage, since sexual abstinence was obviously more spiritual than sexual expression. This dichotomy was also reflected in traditional Lenten observances that associated holiness with fasting and "giving up" material things in order to curb our senses and detach from bodily concerns.<sup>1</sup>

Dualistic thinking also influenced the way Catholics interpreted the sacraments of baptism and eucharist (communion). Baptism was viewed primarily as a ritual for cleansing the *soul* from original sin, and even the anointing of the senses was associated more with staving off their sinful use than celebrating their potential for good. It was a theology rooted in the notion of original sin rather than original blessing.<sup>2</sup>

The eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation likewise implies a dichotomy between spirit and matter. According to Catholic doctrine, the elements of bread and wine are *substantially* changed when they are consecrated and become the body and blood of Christ; after consecration they are to be regarded as bread and wine *in appearance only*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, for the presence of Christ to be made real, the material components of the ritual must become unreal or diminished in some way. This theology, and the religious sensitivity it nourished and expressed, simply was not able to acknowledge the real presence of Christ *in and through* the really present elements of

bread and wine. Succinctly stated, traditional Catholic theology and the spirituality it spawned, were rooted in and based on negative attitudes toward bodily existence and the natural world, both of which were seen as leading us astray and distracting us from the sacred.

These attitudes have had a particularly destructive impact on women precisely because religious traditions in the East and West have consistently identified women, due to their capacity to give birth, with nature, earth, and matter. Across centuries and across cultures, patriarchal societies along with their patriarchal religions have defined women almost exclusively in terms of their sexual and reproductive capacity and/or status. This, in turn, has been used to determine the degree of their participation and representation in religious institutions. Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring underscore this point in their work *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*:

In no religious system do women's dominant metaphors derive from characteristics other than their sexual and reproductive status, while for men sexual status has little to do with religious representation and participation . . . Women are strikingly one-dimensional characters in mythology and ritual actions. Images of women are reduced to their sexual function, women are excluded from leadership roles in most public rituals and images of the divine are mostly male. (1978, 2)

To confirm the accuracy of this assessment with regard to how women are being viewed by the U.S. Catholic hierarchy today, one need only consult the 1988 draft of the bishops' pastoral response to women's concerns, entitled "Partners in the Mystery of Redemption." The quotes gathered under the heading "partners in relationships" deal almost exclusively with statements about marriage, family, and moral decision making on sexual issues. In other words, for the bishops, women's relationships equal sexual and familial relationships. Nothing is said of nonsexual relationships with coworkers, colleagues, or with male and female friends. Similarly, single women are categorized in terms of their marital status as being "unmarried, widowed or divorced" (para. 92) and are defined, not by their talents or personhood, but in terms of being celibate and not sexually active.<sup>4</sup>

This limited and limiting view of women places them in a double bind. On the one hand, it insists that their proper, God-given role is inextricably linked to their biological nature. On the other hand, traditional theology is not capable of appreciating natural processes. Thus exactly those activities in which a woman expresses her God-

given nature and talents, such as in menses and childbirth, are the ones that all patriarchal religious traditions have come to regard as polluting, unclean, dangerous, debilitating, and, at times, sinful.

Here it might be noted that the same kind of negative attitudes toward bodily functions can be found in patriarchal traditions from East to West. Even in the Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu traditions, which stress orthopraxy over orthodoxy, more or less elaborate purification rituals are prescribed following natural acts of defecation, marital intercourse, menstruation, and childbirth because they involve the discharge of bodily fluids. The dualism evident in these practices can be linked not to a philosophical distinction between spirit and matter but to a belief in the existence of divine commands regarding what is clean and unclean, what is pure and what is polluted. Differences notwithstanding, the extent to which these dualistic traditions have had a negative impact on women, conditioning them to feel uncomfortable with their bodies and their natural biological cycles, becomes increasingly evident as one examines the anthropological literature and listens to women's stories from around the world.

### **Menstruation—A Case in Point**

The cross-cultural scope of patriarchal religious conditioning was brought home to me during a 1989 sabbatical journey to the East and Middle East that enabled me to interview Muslim women in Egypt, Hindu women in India, and a Buddhist nun in Nepal. In the course of discussing how these women became "feminists," and whether this had led them to work for change within their own religious traditions, I found that every one of them brought up the topic of menstruation without being asked.<sup>5</sup> Teachings, practices, and attitudes surrounding this experience exemplified the strong impact of religion on their lives. It is in the interest of making future experiences more positive for women that I focus on menstruation as a case in point.

In Egypt, a Muslim free-lance writer began to talk about religious restrictions placed on women during the days of menstruation.<sup>6</sup> Although she was unrepentant about challenging traditional Islamic attitudes pertaining to a woman's role in marriage, she admitted that she would "not feel right" if she violated the Islamic teaching that prohibits a menstruating woman from touching the Koran. When asked to explain this stricture, she turned to a male Islamic scholar whom she had invited to our discussion. As he proceeded gently but firmly to provide a patriarchal defense of the practice,

citing the ritual uncleanness of bodily excretions, she began to realize that if women writers like herself continued to rely on traditional interpreters and traditional interpretations, they would be little more than female conduits of patriarchal perspectives and, thus, would not be in a position to help liberate Egyptian women.

It should be noted that religious regulations regarding menstruation are not incidental in Islam. Elaborating on the Koran's description of menstruation as an illness requiring purification by ablution (II.222), the Islamic tradition teaches that this monthly occurrence interferes with a woman's capacity to participate in the central rituals of the religion. Being ritually unclean, a menstruating woman is prohibited from touching the Koran, entering a mosque, fasting during Ramadan, and participating in the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Should a woman begin to menstruate during the hajj, the journey would not count for her. Muslim women, interviewed by Carol Delaney in Turkey, recall being taught that menstruation and women's uncleanness were due to Hawa's (Eve's) disobedience to Allah (Delaney 1988, 79). Is it any wonder, then, that these same women not only accept the view that menstruation is a form of illness, rather than a normal biological function, but see it as a sign of moral weakness as well.

In her book on women in the Arab world, the outspoken Egyptian feminist Nawal el Saadawi discusses how the lack of instruction regarding normal physiological changes during childhood left young girls like herself "to understand that in me there was something degrading which appeared regularly in the form of this impure blood, and that it was something to be ashamed of, to hide from others" (1980, 45). When such scientific ignorance is coupled with a surfeit of religious instruction regarding women's uncleanness, there is little likelihood that this momentous change in their bodies will be perceived as something positive or that women will anticipate its monthly recurrence in any self-affirming way.

In India, the topic of menstruation unexpectedly came to the fore during an interview with a group of Hindu women who have established a unique religious community in the southern city of Tiruchirappali. I was interested in meeting them because they were among the first to be initiated into the formerly male-only Hindu priesthood. These women, who are called "*yoginis*," were trained by a yogi master who explained to me that when he came to the South to teach and found that female initiates were more faithful than male initiates, he requested permission from his teacher in the North to ordain them. I treasure a picture of one of these yoginis showing

her certificate of ordination to a Jesuit priest friend who was translating for me.

I watched as the yoginis performed an ancient *yajna* (fire ritual) that had been the exclusive preserve of Brahman males for three millennia and, later, was presented with a poster of the Absolute imaged as the Goddess, Ambika. The response of the surrounding community indicated that these women had not only gained entry to religious roles traditionally reserved for men, but had come to be recognized and accepted as spiritual leaders. Nevertheless, even they had not escaped all the vestiges of patriarchy. As I was about to leave and asked to take a photo of the whole community, I found the yoginis with whom I was speaking suddenly become reticent as they glanced sideways toward one member who remained outside the dwelling. Yes, she was having her period and, yes, the yogini who heads this progressive community of celibate women began to explain the polluting effect of a woman's flow of blood, and, hence, the need for a menstruating woman to remain apart from others. As we discussed this further, those present said that although they had asked why women couldn't be priests, they had not thought to question the teachings regarding the natural functioning of a female body.

Incongruities such as this are to be expected whenever innovative individuals make inroads into a patriarchal domain. The task of self-consciously examining the gender-biased assumptions of one's tradition requires time and opportunity for cognitive dissonance to occur. I was surprised, therefore, when an hour or so into our conversation, the "unclean" one was invited into the main house for a group picture. The theological implications had yet to be explored but the questioning had begun.<sup>7</sup>

In Hinduism, as in most other religious traditions, the "cure" for menstrual uncleanness is time—a period of segregation followed by some form of bathing. But in Nepal I learned of yet another practice from a Christian who is married to a Nepalese Hindu. She informed me about an elaborate purification ritual, prescribed for a Hindu woman who "touches" her husband during menses, which requires her to rub cow dung (used as a disinfectant in the East) on 365 parts of her body while bathing at the temple ghat.

Less dramatic but similarly detailed practices can be found in Orthodox Judaism. In this tradition a body of laws, known as *niddah*, teach that women are to be regarded ritually unclean and sexually unavailable for twelve days per menstrual cycle (five days of menses and seven days thereafter). They further stipulate that, before any

form of marital intimacy can be resumed, the wife must bathe and then enter a *mikveh* (ritual) bathing pool.

The prohibition of various forms of bodily contact with a woman during menses is based on the biblical injunction found in Leviticus 18.19: "And you shall not approach a woman as long as she is impure by her menses." The importance placed on this stricture is evident from the following quotation found in the *Zohar*, a well-known medieval Jewish text:

One who cohabits with a niddah [one in the state of impurity] drives the divine presence from the world. There is no stronger impurity in the world than that of niddah. (Greenberg 1981, 115)

In ancient Judaism, the laws of *niddah* also applied to men who had bodily discharges, requiring them to abstain from sex until they, too, underwent purification. It is germane to note, therefore, that when other laws of *niddah* were discontinued following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., those pertaining to women in menses were retained. In other words, "The only person still subject to purification is the menstruous woman" (Greenberg 1981, 113).

By contrast with the extensive regulations found in Judaism, relatively few were carried over into Christianity. Nevertheless, the few patristic formulations that were issued have left a legacy that is evident in the church's uneasiness with having women present in the sanctuary and serving at the altar. Typical of the church fathers who shaped Catholic attitudes toward menstruation was Dionysius of Alexandria, a third-century bishop, who taught that women should not be touched during "the time of separation [that is, menstruation]," nor should they "approach the holy table or touch the body or blood of the Lord [that is, communion]" (Tucker 1987, 111). The contrast is striking, if not blatant. Whereas the blood of Christ is regarded as purifying, sacrificial, and salvific, that of women is held to be unclean, contaminating, and without even symbolic redemptive significance, despite the fact that monthly bleeding is a *cleansing* process.

Around the year 600, Pope Gregory I responded to an inquiry from Augustine concerning this issue, by citing the gospel account (Mark 5.25–34) of the woman with an apparent menstrual problem who touched the hem of Jesus's garment and was blessed by him. The pope concluded that menstruating women should not be prohibited from receiving communion (Tucker 1987, 131). This did not end the matter, however, since influential texts known as *Penitentials*, written to guide priests hearing confessions, continued to teach that menstru-



ating women should not receive communion or even enter a church (McLaughlin 1974, 229).

Over the centuries these strictures have fallen into disuse among many Christians in the West so that, today, few Protestants or Catholics are aware that they ever existed. On the other hand, Greek Orthodox Christians living in the Middle East and many families who immigrated to North America have continued many of the traditional observances such as not entering a church or, at least, not taking communion during menstruation. A Palestinian woman who belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States described a recent family conflict related to this issue. She explained that a member of her family had been asked to be a godmother for a relative's child. The young woman gladly accepted the honor, but on the day scheduled for the baptism she woke to find her period had started. When the elders of the family insisted on observing the church's prohibition against having a menstruating woman serve as a godparent and had another relative take her place, tensions developed between members of the older and younger generations.

My conversations with those mentioned above and with other religious women from various parts of the world make it increasingly clear to me that there are no limits to the diverse ways in which patriarchal traditions have disempowered women, delegitimated our experiences, and conditioned us to accept a less than positive valuation of our normal bodily functions. Religion need not be an inhibitor of women's spiritual development, but for it to become a vehicle of our enhancement, women will need to take the initiative. For as long as women continue to observe negative practices that denigrate their experiences and absorb the mentality of the religious laws that subordinate them, it is unlikely they will be able to regard significant life-transitions like menstruation, menopause, and childbirth as occasions for profound spiritual reflection and spiritual growth.<sup>8</sup>

### **Designing Women: Contributions of Religious Feminists**

Some feminists suggest that religious menstrual customs should be viewed in a more positive light. For example, Denise Carmody describes seclusion times like menses and childbirth as an honor designed to protect women when they are most vulnerable (1989, 12). Frederique Apffel Marglin argues that insofar as Hindus apply the term *auspicious* to menstruation, the latter should be regarded as having a positive valuation in addition to the more publicized negative connotations (1985, 40). A thought-provoking article on premenstrual syndrome by Emily Martin even raises the possibility

that women themselves, in need of rest and "alone time," may have been the originators of isolation practices in many societies (1988, 172). Other feminists point to the beneficial practical side effects of menstrual customs, noting that traditional practices and taboos provide many overworked Third World women with a respite from cooking, cleaning, outside labor, and sexual obligations. Adding to this list are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Christian apologists who insist that ritual restrictions and exemptions were and still are signs of the traditions' attentiveness to differences in women's physical, psychological, and spiritual needs.<sup>9</sup>

Granting the validity of most, if not all, of the arguments mentioned above, *the question remains*—do such benefits really justify or balance out the accompanying attitudes that clearly demean women by regarding them as being unclean, polluting, and even dangerous (that is, likely to contaminate food, fields, water, and even air)?<sup>10</sup>

Many religious women, East and West, for whom this issue has become a concern and who find they can no longer relate to traditional practices, have responded by simply disregarding and discontinuing them, remaining content to accept menses and other physiological changes as something to be dealt with primarily on the practical biological level. While this approach may be satisfactory for some women, a growing number of feminists not only agree with psychological studies about the importance of "rites of passage" in helping individuals deal with major life changes, but are convinced that transitional periods, like coming of age and going through menopause, are ripe with spiritual opportunities that should not be missed. For as Penelope Washbourn points out, transitions often trigger crises that affect not only our bodies or our psyches, but our basic sense of identity. Describing this time of personal uncertainty, Washbourn underscores values that are central to feminist spirituality:

[Menstruation occasions] *a spiritual crisis* because the issue at stake is not just a personal question but involves redefining the self in context of the purpose of nature, understanding one's physicality in relation to the procreativity of nature, and deciding one's goal and purpose in life in human community. (1979, 253)

Women's rituals are needed to address this spiritual crisis because they can provide a "symbolic, interpretive framework" for negotiating such a crisis, help a girl realize that "our identity as women is not a solitary struggle but is to be worked out within the context of a community," and confront the "advent of a new power" that is capable of being a blessing or a curse (Washbourn 1979, 251). With

the help of ritual, "the onset of menstruation can symbolize the power of our bodies to give us joy, deepen and enrich our experience of life, and increase the totality of our self-expression" (Washbourn 1979, 256).

If religious communities are to provide a spiritually life-giving environment for women along the lines envisioned by Washbourn, then the teachings and practices they promote must enable women, as well as men, to gain access to the liberating power of the divine that dwells within them. On the one hand this will mean excluding traditions that foster a negative self-image, hinder the recognition and use of one's gifts, discourage personal development, undermine assertiveness, and otherwise inhibit full participation in life around them. On the other hand it will mean encouraging the creation of new forms of religious expression that acknowledge women's experiences as a primary source for "doing theology" and for developing the notion of spirituality.

One individual who not only recognized the need for new practices but was in a position to design and implement them was a Buddhist nun I met in Kathmandu.<sup>11</sup> Dhammawati is a 57-year-old Nepalese woman who, in the face of great social opposition and various political obstacles, made her way to Burma and completed fourteen years of intense Buddhist study. When I told her I wanted to interview women who were helping to make their religious traditions more supportive of women, she invited me to visit her at the *vihara* (monastery). That evening, shortly after my arrival, a 12-year-old girl presented herself in the meditation room where the Buddha shrine was kept. I was told that she was asking to perform the *Rishini Prabajna* ceremony created by Dhammawati for young girls coming of age. The initial ceremony included a welcome; the taking of refuge in the Buddha, his teachings, and in the Buddhist community; and the presentation of nun robes. Donning the robes, the young girl announced how many days she would like to remain at the monastery, living, working, and studying with the nuns.

To appreciate the significance of this ritual, it is necessary to know something about the one it was designed to replace. The traditional Nepalese Buddhist practice for girls coming of age called for them to be isolated for twelve days in a dark hut where they ate, slept, and lived alone. At the end of this experience, they were symbolically wed to the sun. The reasons for the specifics of this ancient rite have long been lost but the practice continued until Dhammawati introduced an alternate one in 1975. Initially, it was opposed by monks and laity but gradually couples began bringing their daugh-

ters, and after the prime minister's servant's daughter came, the practice gained acceptance. Today this ritual is performed in other *vi-haras* as well and the practice of isolating young girls is falling into disuse.

According to Dhammawati, the idea for this ritual came to her one day when she was thinking about finding a more positive and worthwhile way of marking a young girl's transition to womanhood. She said she recalled her own experience and found that it was hardly conducive to religious growth: "It only made me feel lonely and apprehensive." Dhammawati sees the *Rishini* (seer) ceremony offering the young girl an educational opportunity, a sense of accomplishment, and an opportunity for bonding with religious women who are respected by the community at large. Having stayed overnight at the monastery, I can attest to the enthusiasm with which this young girl greeted her new experience.

This kind of innovation is destined to become more common as women around the world not only come to realize that something is lacking in patriarchal religions but that the resources to supply what is wanting actually lies within *them*. In other words, there are no ready-made spiritual havens out there somewhere; they are in the process of being created by women themselves.

As more and more women from different religious traditions come to this realization, a variety of changes are being introduced. For example, Blu Greenberg, a feminist Orthodox Jew, takes a conservative approach that she describes as "grafting the new" onto the old laws of *niddah* (1981, 117–122). She recommends retaining the traditional practice of *mikveh* or postmenstrual bathing while purging it of its association with the notion of impurity. In place of the latter, she suggests thinking of the ritual bath as a return to the womb of nature and as an expression of care for a woman's body. She further proposes using this occasion as a time to advise women on health care precautions. As for the laws of *niddah*, which require approximately 150 days of sexual separation, Greenberg urges reducing the days of abstinence and not excluding *all* gestures of affection during those days.

Catholic feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether takes a more radical approach in her book *Women-Church*, where she supplies a collection of texts for a wide range of nontraditional, women-oriented liturgies involving rituals for the onset of menstruation, for victims of rape, for healing after an abortion, and for acknowledging one's lesbian orientation (1985). These rituals, like the women's movement itself, are ecumenical and lend themselves for use by Christians, Jews,

and followers of the Goddess. In fact, the suggestions collected in Ruether's work are models. This means they are meant to inspire new adaptations and new forms, not to be simply perpetuated and institutionalized as given.

Appropriately, these models inspired several mothers in my women's spirituality course to design rituals for celebrating the onset of their daughters' menses. They wanted to commemorate this event in a special way that would provide a reassuring context. They proposed the dining room table as the sacred space where the mother and daughter, alone or with other invited women, would come together to speak about the meaning of menstruation, the potential for life, and the responsibility for making choices and for respecting one's body. Their ritual called for passing on a symbolic gift such as a crescent pendant (symbol of the Goddess) or a handmade item. Then there was to be a shared meal to seal the new bonding.

Like Dhammawati, these mothers chose to take the initiative to create a liturgy that would meet the spiritual needs of their daughters. Assuming that this trend continues, there is hope that women will find more ways to ritually celebrate other aspects of their life cycle as well—from menses to menopause, from weaning to preparing for sons and daughters to leave home.

### **Foundations of Feminist Spirituality**

As these kinds of rituals for life transitions, life crises, and life cycles are experienced and shaped by women, it becomes clear why women are growing increasingly more alienated from traditional patriarchal practices. The latter have been so codified, standardized, and depersonalized, that they have lost touch with the spiritual sensitivities of modern religious women. From a religious feminist perspective, a healthy spirituality is one that serves to nourish and deepen one's faith experience. From this same perspective, many of the traditional patterns of spirituality found in the major world religions, along with the theological justifications for them, are unhealthy for women precisely because they ignore, oppose, negate, or fail to give expression to those aspects of women's faith experience that have become the mainstay of their spiritual nourishment.

Feminist spirituality thrives on ecological sensitivity (Diamond and Orenstein 1990; Plant 1989), creative reimagining of the divine (Gray 1988; Plaskow and Christ 1989; Starhawk 1979; Walker 1990), and egalitarian bonding and power sharing (Starhawk 1987; Spretnak 1982). It is rooted in a sense of connectedness with the divine energy in nature that also manifests itself in the cyclic rhythms of our bodies. It is rooted in a sense of connectedness with the past made

present in remembrance and with the future made present in hopeful struggle. Accordingly, ritual gatherings are called to coincide with life cycles, nature cycles, and historical events rather than fixed calendar dates. No particular space is regarded as being more holy than another; wherever the circle is cast, the liberating power becomes present. As for the unifying sacred stories, they, too, emerge from the participants who name their experiences as they share them with one another.

Clearly, the patterns of these rituals are drawn more from wicca and folk traditions than from mainline religions, but this does not preclude them from enriching and being enriched by symbols, practices, and insights found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. What distinguishes feminist spirituality from traditional spiritualities, however, is the fact that the primary source of feminist spirituality is *women's experiences*—their experiences of joy and anguish, of connectedness and alienation, of anger expressed and confidence restored; experiences that teach us to attune ourselves to the waxing and waning of opportunities; experiences that simultaneously help us appreciate how our lives are woven into the process of creation and the events of history, and how holistic participation in them liberates by bringing us into touch with our deepest selves.

Saint Augustine held that those who find their innermost self find God. Feminists insist that only when women find the Goddess within, will they find their true selves and, thereby, be empowered to contribute as equals to the construction of a more just, egalitarian and peaceful world order.

## NOTES

1. It could be argued that Christian theology sought to emphasize solidarity with the sufferings of Christ, but on the popular level, under the influence of puritanical Jansenism, Lenten sacrifices became viewed as ways to control the body and its sense desires.
2. Dominican theologian Matthew Fox found a strong following when he introduced a creation-centered spirituality in his work entitled *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, Inc., 1983).
3. It is interesting to note that despite the doctrine's teaching that, after consecration, the elements are no longer what they were, church authorities continue to insist that only bread and wine can be so transformed and not elements like tea and rice, which would be more meaningful for Christians in other cultures.
4. The bishops' preoccupation with sex is clearly evident in this chapter on relationships, which is three times longer than the chapter on personhood and noticeably longer than the two remaining chapters on women in church and society.

5. The women I met preferred to use the term *struggler* since the word *feminist* carried too many negative connotations of being super-aggressive and anti-male.
6. "A woman in her period may not hold Qur'an [Koran] in her hand but there is nothing wrong in her carrying it in her handbag." Religious advice given in the Saudi Arabian newspaper *Arab News* in January 1989.
7. Parenthetically, I might add that a male colleague was quite disturbed that I had engaged my "subjects" in this way. His methodology required him to listen in a detached manner so as not to disturb the "objects" of his study. To his dismay, my questioning and sharing had left them (and me) different than when we first met.
8. Myriel Crowley Eyekamp, in the article entitled "Born and Born Again: Childbirth Rituals from a Mother's Perspective," points out that as it now stands, neither the original bathing in the mother's womb nor the physical birthing of a child is acknowledged by the institutional church as a particularly blessed event in any salvific sense. The activity that women alone can perform, namely childbirth, simply doesn't count spiritually. Not until the child is handed over to a minister (usually male) who proceeds to imitate the birthing process as he pours the baptismal waters, does traditional theology consider the spiritual (re)birth to have taken place. Only when childbirth ceremonies are linked with the practice of parents baptizing their own children, will this sacrament be properly viewed as symbolically deepening the initiation into the faith that had already begun at birth. Elizabeth Dodson Gray, ed., *Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience*. (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1988), 58-64.
9. Jewish and Muslim feminists respond to such defenses by explaining how both Jewish and Muslim law teach that proper observance of a religious law requires that the person be commanded to perform it. By being exempted from the command (*mitzvah*), women's voluntary observance is held to count less. See Susan Weidman Schneider, *Jewish and Female* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 35-36.
10. Nahmanides, a medieval Talmudic commentator, wrote: "The glance of a menstruous woman poisons the air" (*Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Issure: Biah* 11.6). In like vein, the church father, Isidore of Seville, taught that the poison of menstrual flow withered flowers and aborted the fertility of the fields (Erickson 1987, 195).
11. Strictly speaking, the tradition of nuns or *bhikkhunis* has died out in the Theravada tradition, although Dhammawati is seeking to have it restored.

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