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WOMOON RISING:
FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MODERN WOMEN'S
MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Cynthia L. Wilkey, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1997

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Leila Rupp, Adviser
Professor Susan Hartmann
Professor Steven Conn

Approved by

Adviser

Department of History
ABSTRACT

Feminist spirituality, an outgrowth of the modern American women's movement, addressed the spiritual needs of many women. When the women's movement first expanded its critique of modern society to include those institutions that justified and perpetuated patriarchy, religious institutions became a target of feminist attack. Nineteenth-century feminists had raised similar criticisms, but in the twentieth-century, by the late 1960s, many women moved beyond critiquing traditional religion to creating institutions that empowered and validated women's experiences. Drawing upon the ancient past and looking to any tradition that included Goddesses or female religious leaders, the feminist spirituality movement borrowed heavily from many cultures and found an ally in the modern NeoPagan movement.

Not all feminists, especially radical feminists with left-wing roots, saw this development as an acceptable use
of feminist energy, so the emergence of feminist spirituality immediately created a wave of controversy within the women's movement which was related to the larger debate over the emergence of cultural feminism. Despite generating some valid criticisms from within the women's movement and elsewhere, feminist spirituality overall has had a positive effect on the women's movement. It has provided a spiritual outlet that many women find empowering, and rather than draining the women's movement of energy, it actually led many women into political activism. This was particularly true of younger women entering the women's movement in the 1990s.

Feminist spirituality, furthermore, played an important role in helping the women's movement expand its definition of a feminist issue. Although opponents accused feminist spirituality of being "apolitical," it had a political dimension that found expression in the ecofeminist movement where women drew a parallel between the treatment of women and the treatment of the earth. Similar arguments emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life led spiritual feminists to embrace such topics as anti-militarism and animal rights.
Despite fears that these activities threatened the central concern of feminism—improving women’s status—by the 1990s feminist spirituality was present at most feminist gatherings. Feminist spirituality weathered assaults from external foes and also survived many internal disagreements to emerge as a dynamic new element in modern feminism.
Dedicated to Mary Lou Wilkey, my mother
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has greatly benefited from the invaluable assistance of many others. Topping the list, however, was my dissertation director Leila Rupp. Throughout my career as a graduate student she has been never failing in her support and encouragement of my efforts. She has provided insightful and encouraging comments throughout this project, and her faith in me never wavered, even when my faith in myself did. She is a true mentor and I am indebted to her for all she has done. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, Susan Hartmann and Steven Conn, for their helpful comments and suggestions. My dear friends Greta Bucher and Virginia Boynton provided invaluable advice and encouragement, and without their support, and outstanding examples, I doubt that this project would have ever been completed.
Equally crucial was the assistance of the Columbus Pagan community and the many women who so generously shared a part of themselves with me and my research. They made this work possible, and for their openness and trust I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank the staff of the Ohio Historical Society and of the microfilm reading room at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The assistance I received at both locations was always friendly and ever helpful.

I owe an enormous debt to my husband, Matt Oyos. In the final phases of this project he has read countless drafts, prepared many meals, solved numerous computer crises, and always offered loving encouragement and excellent suggestions. His faith in me remained steadfast, and for his love and support I give thanks daily. Finally, for teaching me never to doubt my abilities, for providing unconditional love and support, for being wise and strong, and for encouraging me to be myself, I thank my mother, Mary Lou Wilkey. To my mother, and to She who is mother of us all, I dedicate this dissertation.
VITA

July 22, 1962 .................. Born - Dayton, Ohio

1987 ......................... B.A., Oakland University

1990 .......................... M.A., The Ohio State University

1988 - 1993 .................. Graduate Teaching Associate,
                          The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field:  History

Studies in:  American and European Women's History
             Modern American History
             Modern European History
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INTRODUCTION

"A woman's asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan."¹ This statement, penned in 1975 by Mary Daly, one of the luminaries of the feminist spirituality movement, encapsulates the feelings of thousands of American feminists who have come together since the 1970s to found a new religion based upon the spiritual needs, experiences, and power of women.

Rejecting traditional Judeo-Christian doctrines, liturgies, and theologies as being inherently sexist—with a male god, male clergy, male saviors, and male church and synagogue leaders—the proponents of feminist spirituality sought to find, or create, female connection to the Divine. 

¹ Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 6; other works by Daly include: Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).
Most became Goddess worshipers, revering a Goddess whose very essence was indefinable since she was different for each woman. Some saw her as a transcendent deity, or multitude of deities—"the Goddess of the Ten Thousand Names"—but to other women the Goddess was immanent, or alive, in every living being and thing; to most, she was a little of both.

No matter how they approached the Divine, all of these women rejected the male god of the Christians and Jews, the two dominant religions in the United States, and struck out on their own. Many feminists did choose to remain in traditional religions and continue to work diligently to

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2 Since every woman I interviewed engaged in some form of Goddess worship, and for the sake of some variety in terminology, I use "Goddess worshipers" as a term synonymous with the proponents of feminist spirituality, also called "spiritual feminists." Not everyone in the movement, however, would agree with this usage. Charlene Spretnak, one of feminist spirituality’s earliest leaders, for example, claims that not all spiritual feminists are Goddess worshipers, and another major figure, Starhawk, draws a distinction between “believing in” the Goddess and “knowing her.” The Politics of Women’s Spirituality, ed. Charlene Spretnak, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1982), xvii; Starhawk, The Spiral Dance (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 91-92.

redefine these traditions in ways less alienating to women, but they are not the focus of this study. Instead, this dissertation explores the origins, development and impact of the feminist spirituality movement as a daughter, although

one sometimes treated as an unwelcome stepchild, of the second wave of American feminism. The first wave usually refers to the suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the second wave denotes the modern women's movement which resurfaced in the 1960s. Recently, feminists have begun discussing a third wave, which usually connotes women who were politicized into feminism in the 1990s.

Spiritual feminism has played an important role in the history of the women's movement, and an exploration of its impact allows us to understand better the dynamics of an influential American social movement.

When feminists in the early 1970s began their search for a spirituality that would empower women and value women's experiences, many found refuge in the burgeoning NeoPagan movement, itself a fast-growing body that dated its modern incarnation to a British folklorist and occultist named Gerald Gardner. In 1954 Gardner published his first book on "the Craft," Witchcraft Today, and after Britain repealed the last of its witchcraft laws in 1951 he produced another entitled The Meaning of Witchcraft, published in 1959. Gardner, who claimed to have been initiated into the

Craft in 1939 by an elderly "hereditary witch" (someone who claims to have had occult training passed down within their family for generations), sparked the current wave of interest in NeoPaganism in the United States and Britain with these two books. NeoPaganism, therefore, despite its roots in an ancient religion, is really rather young.  

The Coalition for Pagan Religious Rights (CoPPR), one of several organizations dedicated to protecting and enhancing the legal rights of Pagans, defines a Pagan as "A member of an eclectic modern religious movement encompassing a broad array of religions which revere the Divine in nature and/or draw upon the myths and symbols of ancient faiths." Pagans tend to be polytheistic, worshiping a range of Gods and Goddesses, but especially divinities of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Celts. Modern Pagans, however, are not hesitant to borrow from any tradition that appeals to them.


Pagan author Margot Adler described this tendency as a "hallowed Gardnerian tradition--stealing from any source that didn't run away too fast."  The actual number of American Pagans is difficult to measure since many, for fear of public censure (some Pagans have lost their jobs or custody of their children because of their religion), remain in what they refer to as the "broom closet."  Estimates range from as low as 50,000 to as high as 200,000.

For feminists searching for some expression of the feminine in the Divine, Paganism was a good fit since it already involved the worship of a Goddess or Goddesses and held the feminine sacred.  Wicca, or Witchcraft, the most popular form of Paganism in the United States, also appealed to feminists who would create "Feminist Wicce" (the unique

9 Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 93.

10 One Pagan advocate attempted to gauge the size of the NeoPagan movement based upon such factors as festival attendance, book sales and mailing lists, and he guessed anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000, as cited in, Eller, Lap of the Goddess, 50.  The Covenant of the Goddess, one of several Pagan umbrella organizations, however, recently claimed that the Pagan movement boasted 200,000 adherents, and had been called the fastest growing religion in the United States, according to the Institute for the Study of American Religion.  See: "Commonly Asked Questions," Covenant of the Goddess Homepage, http://www.cog.org/wicca/faq.html#many, 1 July 1997.
spelling was to emphasize the feminine) or "Feminist Witchcraft." The beliefs of spiritual feminists would overlap with those of the broader NeoPagan movement, but there were, in the first few years, some disagreements between mainstream Pagans and the spiritual feminists swelling their ranks. The new spiritual feminists often founded "Dianic" or woman-only separatist circles or covens, and this, along with their tendency to worship the Goddess exclusively, bothered many traditional Pagans, both male and female. By the 1990s, however, most of these disagreements had passed, and most spiritual feminists placidly called themselves Pagans.

Spiritual feminists were not only associated with the NeoPagan movement, but they were also a part of the women's movement, and their relationship to all parts of that movement is my concern here. Reborn in the 1960s, the modern women's movement has commonly been described as

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11 Wiccans, especially women, have attempted to reclaim the term "witch" and to infuse it with positive rather than negative meaning. They claim that the origins of the terms Wicca or witch is from the Anglo-Saxon root word of "wic," meaning to shape or bend. Others call Wicca the "Craft of the Wise" and claim its meaning is equivalent to wisdom or wise woman.
having two distinct wings. One group, generally referred to as liberal feminists, tended to be older, working women who coalesced under the leadership of Betty Friedan and the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW took on a traditional, hierarchical structure and was basically reformist in its approach. Its leaders worked within existing political frameworks and concentrated on obtaining legislative solutions to women's inequality. The second, radical branch of the women's movement developed out of the civil rights movement and the New Left. Composed of younger women, radical feminism opposed leadership and structure, and it was more revolutionary than reformist in its approach. Radical feminism was often referred to as the "women's liberation branch" of the movement. The two wings, although they emerged from different origins, interacted with one another and have grown together in the decades since the 1960s.  

activists after its appearance, feminist spirituality represented one thread that helped to span the gap between the different branches of the women's movement. Its original history within each branch was different, however, and I explore both histories here.

This study also explains the impact of the feminist spirituality movement on the larger women's movement by analyzing its role in the debate between radical and what have been called "cultural feminists." Scholars have identified feminist spirituality with what is called "cultural feminism"--acceptance of an essentialist explanation of the differences between men and women and advocacy of at least limited separatism and female institution-building. Feminists concerned with a strictly defined political agenda found feminist spirituality and other cultural forms of female empowerment "apolitical," and they often labeled such efforts a "cop-out" that strayed

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from the true struggle. Brooke Williams, a member of the early radical feminist collective Redstockings, claimed that cultural feminism and its fascination with female culture, matriarchies, and spiritualism would "transform feminism from a political movement to a lifestyle movement." Proponents of feminist culture and spirituality countered such criticisms by arguing that feminist spirituality emphasized connectedness and empowered women and was therefore inherently political. Despite the importance of feminist spirituality in this debate, this study is the

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14 Brooke [Williams], "The Retreat to Cultural Feminism," 68.
first to analyze systematically its role in this ongoing controversy, and, thus, to transcend the artificial dichotomy raised between the study of religion and politics in the history of the modern women's movement.

My analysis of the origins, development, and impact of feminist spirituality within the women's movement has both a national and local focus. Discussion of feminist spirituality and its relationship to the larger women's movement took place at the national level through newspapers, magazines, books, conferences, and other forums. To track this debate, I utilized the Herstory Microfilm Collection which gathered feminist literature from across the United States from 1956 until the late 1970s. In the pages of many different journals, newsletters, and magazines, I traced the discussion of religion and spirituality as it was played out in the women's movement's ephemeral literature. But most feminist organizing was local, especially in the radical branch of the movement, and few studies have explored developments at this level, especially away from major centers such as New York.  

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15 All of the following, for example, are national studies: Steven M. Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United*
Therefore, to explore the impact of feminist spirituality at the local level, I have also conducted a case study of that community in the city of Columbus, Ohio, where I interviewed 35 spiritual feminists.

Columbus was an excellent site for such a study because of its size and location. It is the state capital and the home of the nation’s largest university, Ohio State University, and it has sheltered a large and active feminist community. From 1972 to 1984 Columbus was host to the Women’s Action Collective (WAC), a radical feminist umbrella organization. At its peak WAC oversaw a variety of feminist groups, including the Women’s Co-op Garage, Women Against Rape, Fan the Flames Feminist Book Collective, Lesbian Peer Support, a Single Mother’s Support Group, and the Womansong newspaper.16 The Women’s Music Union also produced feminist


16 For an excellent history of WAC and the radical feminist movement in Columbus, see: Whittier, Feminist
concerts in Columbus from 1973 to 1990. In addition, liberal feminist organizations, such as NOW, flourished in Columbus, which hosted the state chapter, a city chapter, and, since 1996, a campus chapter at Ohio State. Most importantly, however, Columbus is typical of smaller cities across the nation where the women's and feminist spirituality movement emerged at a later date, and often at a slower pace, than in larger cities where most studies of the women's movement have taken place. Movement dynamics are often different in such communities where the pool of feminists, and Pagans in this case, is smaller, and disagreements that might divide a larger community are, by necessity, worked out if the movement is to survive. Sometimes, obviously, discord is not settled and movements die in smaller locations, but, overall, smaller communities must work harder at getting along than larger ones.

Columbus has a thriving feminist spirituality community, with strong ties to the Columbus Pagan Community Council. A feminist witch, in fact, headed the Council while I was conducting my interviews in the spring and

**Generations.**
summer of 1996. The city also supports at least five "New Age" bookstores, is home to a variety of Pagan sects and circles, and every October hosts a Halloween Ball that has become one of the largest Pagan gatherings in the Midwest.

Of the 35 women whom I interviewed, all but two matched the common profile of most spiritual feminists--white and middle-class. Most were also well-educated, like other members of the Pagan community in general. Twelve women had undergraduate degrees, two were students, and ten held advanced degrees. Only two of the 35 had never attended college, although they did possess high school diplomas, and all of the remainder had spent at least a few years in college. The ages of the women interviewed ranged from 22 to 72, most being in their thirties, forties, or fifties. All of the women were either students or engaged in some type of employment. The occupations of the women varied from such diverse fields as artists and dancers to therapists, educators, and even a telephone psychic. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, although a few occurred over the telephone, and I found most of my subjects through snowball sampling, with each interview leading to a number of new contacts. Each woman answered the same set of
questions based upon an open-ended interview guide, and each session was tape-recorded and partially transcribed. I was also fortunate enough to speak with many women involved in local (Ohio or Columbus) NOW and some women active in national NOW. Altogether I interviewed 45 women, and another two I corresponded with through either electronic or regular mail.

For the most part, academics have ignored, or more accurately barely mentioned, the feminist spirituality movement, especially as part of the history and development of the larger women's movement. Pagan author Margot Adler explained some of this neglect in her influential study of the NeoPagan movement, *Drawing Down the Moon*:

> I have noticed that many intellectuals turn themselves off the instant they are confronted with the words witchcraft, magic, occultism, and religion, as if the ideas exert a dangerous power

17 To ensure the anonymity of my interview subjects, I numbered each interview and will refer to each interview by that particular number throughout this dissertation.


15
that might weaken their rational faculties....If NeoPaganism was presented as an intellectual and artistic movement whose adherents have new perceptions of the nature of reality, the place of sexuality, and the meaning of community, academics would flock to study it....But words like witch and pagan do not rest easily in the mind or on the tongue.19

The feminist spirituality movement has generated only one book-length study, and although the book is excellent, the author, Cynthia Eller, was trained as a sociologist of religion rather than as a historian and thus does not utilize historical methodology or sources.20 The latest studies of the American women’s movement make brief reference to feminist spirituality, and while the conflict between cultural and radical feminists has been a common topic, the spiritual aspect of cultural feminism has never been thoroughly analyzed.

19 Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 5.

20 Cynthia Eller, Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1993). Eller’s book does supply a history of the movement, but that background is based largely upon anecdotal evidence and interviews rather than printed sources. The book does explore the identity of the women involved in the movement, but it is a national study and it does not explore the movement’s history within a historical framework or its impact on the larger women’s movement.
Similarly, although religious scholars and theologians have not ignored the topic, their attention has been more focused on discussing the movement's theological implications and not its history or impact on the women's movement. And, even though the feminist spirituality movement itself has been quite prolific in spawning books, articles, and every other media, participants have produced almost all of this literature, and thus it not only lacks a certain objectivity, but it was also seldom written for an academic audience.

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This study, therefore, is the first historical investigation of the development of the feminist spirituality movement and its impact upon, and relationship with, the larger American women's movement. It also considers the rather rocky history of feminism and religion in both waves of the women's movement, pointing out that feminists in both the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries were uncomfortable with wedding feminist radicalism to religious critique. Still, there were women in both waves who attempted to do so. I also suggest that a third wave of feminism is visible on the horizon and that younger women in this developing component of the women's movement tend to view feminist spirituality more positively.

The final section of the dissertation explores controversies within the feminist spirituality movement itself. Overall, the feminist spirituality movement has not suffered the same nearly fatal divisions that wracked the larger women's movement. Perhaps spiritual feminists escaped deep divisions because of the racial and class homogeneity of their groups, being largely white and middle class. Spiritual feminism has, however, like all social and political movements, suffered from some internal discord, and those debates are analyzed as a necessary component for understanding feminist spirituality and its contributions to the changing nature of the women's movement.

In general, this work is sympathetic to the feminist spirituality movement and argues that it has played a dynamic role in feminist dialogue. Spiritual feminists have
not drained the women’s movement of “precious woman-energy,” nor have they dulled the movement’s political edge. They have, in fact, acted as a mobilizing agent for many of the younger feminists who compose the fledgling third wave of the women’s movement. Perhaps more of a swell than a wave at this point, this third generation of feminists have nevertheless entered a movement where prayers to the Goddess are commonly offered before feminist marches and rallies, and thus they see no contradiction between feminist politics and feminist spirituality. Feminist spirituality, I argue, has played an important role in redefining feminism and feminist issues in ways that will allow the women’s movement to continue to grow, remain relevant, and expand its core of support. I believe that feminist spirituality, which has a long history within the women’s movement, will play an important role in the next generation’s feminist agenda.
CHAPTER 1

RELIGION AND FEMINISM:
A RELATIONSHIP GONE BAD

"We don't agree that a woman's religion is any kind of answer to the patriarchy. Religions, even woman-identified ones, have misled the oppress[ed] rather than encouraging them to struggle against their situation."¹ This statement, published in 1977 in the premier radical feminist journal, off our backs, captures the attitude that many modern feminists share regarding the value of religion and spirituality. The second wave of American feminism, in both its radical and more liberal manifestations, has had a rocky relationship with religion.

The dominant Judeo-Christian heritage of the United States, is, most feminists agree, overtly sexist, if not misogynist, in its beliefs, symbolism, ideology, and

¹ Editorial note, off our backs, November 1977, 17.
ministry. Traditional religious practices that excluded women from ordination bothered feminists, as did the almost exclusive use of male terminology to describe the Divine and centuries-old concepts such as the “Curse of Eve” that have been used to justify female subordination. For many second wave feminists, then, a rejection of religion was easier than reconciling two seemingly irreconcilable ideologies. Such a severing was eased by feminism’s ties to the American intellectual Left, which is, according to historian Leo P. Ribuffo, “one of the most secular communities in the United States.” The ideal feminist, therefore, became a completely secular woman who rejected religion and spirituality as anti-woman and anti-intellectual. Those women who chose to remain in a traditional religion in an

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2 For works that explore this topic see: Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, Womanspirit Rising; Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, Weaving the Visions; Carol Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); Sheila Collins, A Different Heaven and Earth: a Feminist Perspective on Religion (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974); Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex; Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father; Naomi Goldenberg, Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Ursula King, Women and Spirituality (London: Macmillan Education LTD, 1989).

effort to reform it, or even those who sought to find or create a new form of spirituality that would be woman-centered, found themselves marginalized and criticized within the larger women's movement. This attitude, as leading feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues, directly contradicts all other aspects of feminism, where women who challenge sexist institutions such as the state, or even the military, are applauded for their efforts and not belittled as are activists who maintain religious ties.4

Feminist discomfort notwithstanding, religion, as either a formal set of beliefs or a less-structured emphasis on personal spirituality, is not an issue that will just go away. Furthermore, as the backlash against feminism fueled by the Religious Right continues to erode feminist accomplishments, it can only behoove the women's movement to reach a truce with religion. Also, for a movement that

4 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Keynote Address," Speech given at The Woman's Bible Centennial Conference in Seneca Falls, New York on 4 November 1995; although some feminists questioned whether the military was an appropriate career for women, it never provoked the same level of antipathy that women's involvement in religious movements has.
seeks inclusiveness, secularism is clearly an inadequate substitute for the millions of women who continue to swell the memberships of all religious institutions, both liberal and conservative.

In the preface to Gerda Lerner's controversial work, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness--the companion piece to the equally controversial The Creation of Patriarchy--Lerner states,

The most important thing I learned was the significance to women of their relationship to the Divine and the profound impact the severing of that relationship had on the history of women. Only after exploring the process of the "dethroning of the goddesses" in the various cultures of the Ancient Near East could I fully appreciate the depth and urgency for Jewish and Christian women for connection to the Divine...The insight that religion was the primary arena on which women fought for hundreds of years for feminist consciousness was not one I had previously had.¹

For students of the modern women's movement, such conclusions force us to reconsider the relationship between feminism and religion. Where have the two intersected with one another? How have each affected the other, and why has religion been such a difficult issue for feminists?

FEMINISM AND RELIGION IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY

Not surprisingly, the first wave of American feminists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were less likely to ignore religion than their successors in the second wave. Religion was, however, just as controversial for them as it proved to be for later activists. As early as 1893, suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage questioned the status of women in the established churches in her book, *Woman, Church and State*, as had the utopian radical Fanny Wright decades before, and in 1895 Elizabeth Cady Stanton completed her most controversial work, *The Woman’s Bible*, a feminist reinterpretation of the Christian tradition. For this book, Stanton, already used to public condemnation, was accused of working directly with the devil.  

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6 Although “feminism” and “feminist” are twentieth century terms, their meaning applies equally well in a nineteenth-century context, and for the sake of ease of language, it is not uncommon for feminist scholarship to apply the term to the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement and its activists.

The Woman's Bible was not the first time that Stanton had attacked the Church for its treatment of women. Two of the eighteen grievances she penned 47 years earlier in the Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments" addressed women and religion:

He [man] allows her in Church, as well as state, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and with some exceptions from any public participation in the affairs of the Church...

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.

Stanton's anticlericalism seemed to intensify with age, but as early as 1890 Gage claimed that Stanton had been asserting for years that "the church was the greatest enemy." According to Stanton biographers Lois W. Banner and Elisabeth Griffith, in the final decades of her life Stanton became increasingly convinced that the ultimate

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8 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments," Seneca Falls, New York, July 1848.

source of women's subordinate and dependent status was rooted in male-dominated religious authority. In 1896 Stanton wrote, "There is no persecution so bitter as that in the name of religion." Similarly, in 1890, Gage resigned from the National Woman Suffrage Association and founded the Woman's National Liberal Union from which she launched her own anticlerical crusade.

Nineteenth-century women objected not only to their denial of ordination and to masculinized liturgies. They also had to fight against deeply held gender prescriptions that forbade women even to speak in public. When, for example, Sarah and Angelina Grimke dared to speak publicly as abolitionists in 1836, their actions sparked a "Pastoral Letter" that condemned their activities as "unnatural," and argued that "The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given

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11 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Draft of Criticism," 1896, as printed in The Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Reader, ed. Ellen Carol Dubois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 244.

12 Banner, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 157-161.
Many of the established churches also opposed the early women's rights movement for similar reasons. Female subordination was, argued opposing clergymen, God-given, and as proof they offered the masculinity of Jesus and all of his apostles. Incidentally, the Vatican used this argument as recently as January 1997 to deny Catholic women once again the right to become ordained priests.

THE SPIRITUALISTS

Renowned suffragists were not the only nineteenth-century feminists to oppose church doctrine. In fact, historian Ann Braude asserts that "the annals of Spiritualism contain the history of another women's rights movement in addition to the one that became the women suffrage movement." Spiritualism, a movement that sought

14 Ibid., 101-102.
16 Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, (Boston:
to prove the soul's immortality through communication with the dead, was, according to The History of Woman Suffrage, "the only religious sect in the world...that has recognized the equality of woman." Because Spiritualists believed that all individuals could seek divine truth through communication with spirits, they rejected all forms of domination because each individual was equally capable. Second wave feminists would not embrace a similar opposition to all forms of domination until the 1980s.

Individualistic in their approach, Spiritualists advocated a host of radical reforms including women's rights and abolitionism. In many ways, Spiritualists were far more radical than suffragists in their demands for female equality. Spiritualists not only wanted political and economic equality for women, but they also strongly critiqued the institution of marriage and were among the first to see women's health issues as crucial to women's emancipation. Unlike most suffragists after the Civil War,
Spiritualists did not sacrifice their radicalism to political expediency. Spiritualists continued to crusade for a broad range of women's equality issues, and like spiritual feminists of the late twentieth century, championed a definition of feminism that included opposition to any form of domination. According to Braude, "Although they spoke and wrote in favor of woman suffrage, many became identified with movements espousing a broader reorganization of society." Spiritualists could be found in the labor, socialist, and early civil rights movements. Furthermore, the leadership opportunities afforded women Spiritualists, and the public speaking skills that they gained from talking in trances and in seances, so empowered Spiritualist women that even Susan B. Anthony envied their aplomb.

Other scholars are more critical of the Spiritualists' feminist accomplishments. Mary Farrell Bednarowski claims that while the Spiritualists were sincere in their support of feminist issues, they failed to develop any coherent theoretical basis for their feminism. Moreover, Bednarowski adds, the Spiritualists fell short of truly understanding

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18 Braude, Radical Spirits, 198.
the complex nature of women's oppression by embracing the stereotypes typical of nineteenth-century definitions of womanhood: passivity, sensitivity, and spirituality.\(^{19}\) Similar criticisms became common in the debate that twentieth-century feminist spirituality sparked in the second wave of the women's movement, and it is this seeming acceptance of assigned gender roles that lies at the heart of religion's problematic relationship with feminism. Some scholars have argued, however, that it was the first wave's failure to address properly the ramifications of religious oppression that ultimately cost the movement its radical edge.\(^{20}\) This assessment is striking given that members of the second wave would argue just the opposite, that it was the feminist spirituality movement and other types of cultural feminism that deradicalized the later women's movement. For the first wave, however, it is highly questionable whether a less conservative suffrage movement would have ever met with success.


\(^{20}\) Braude, *Radical Spirits.*
Among the Spiritualists' most famous mediums and women's rights activists were the Fox Sisters (Leah, Kate, and Margaret) and free-love advocate Victoria Woodhull. Woodhull, while president of the American Association of Spiritualists, attempted to rally support from both suffragists and Spiritualists for her unsuccessful bid for the United States presidency in 1871. She is also commonly credited with having been the first woman to speak before Congress on the topic of woman suffrage.21

THEOSOPHY AND FEMINISM

Theosophy represents another religious movement with nineteenth-century roots that supported women's equality. It attracted the most adherents in the United States and Great Britain and benefited from women leaders in both countries. The literal Greek translation of "Theosophy" means "knowledge of God" or "divine wisdom." "Theosophy," claimed author and early Theosophist L.W. Rogers, "is a universal thing like mathematics--a body of natural truths applicable to all phases of life." Proponents saw Theosophy

21 Ibid.
as a science, a philosophy, and a religion, although one with no official dogma or organizational structure. Borrowing liberally from Eastern traditions, Theosophists were reincarnationists who believed in the need for a balance between male and female energies and who venerated the Mother Goddess. They held that women's rights were not just desirable but in fact a "cosmic necessity," for they believed that the imbalance between male and female power caused many of the world's ills.22

Theosophists were convinced that a definite link existed between the newly emerging woman's movement and the Theosophist movement. In a 1913 book entitled Theosophy and the Woman's Movement, famous British and international feminist Charlotte Despard offered what, in today's terms, would be a radical feminist critique of modern society, liberally interfused with present-day feminist spirituality concepts. Despard posits women's oppression as the source of all other forms of oppression, and argues that until that

injustice is corrected “we shall not have a strong, wise and noble race, capable of self-government, on the one hand, and of reverence for beauty and greatness on the other,...until we have a true, strong, well-developed and finely educated generation of women.” Unsparing in her analysis, Despard saw female oppression in state institutions, legal organizations, traditional religions, economic and labor systems, limited educational opportunities, and the family. She held that all must change in order for human evolution to progress and to allow humanity to embrace the knowledge of the Divine.23

Like the Spiritualists, Theosophists also believed that women possessed certain gender-specific traits. Women, because of their reproductive capabilities, were regarded as more spiritual, servile, and self-sacrificing than men. In spiritual terms, therefore, this belief made the demand for women’s equality that much more profound for these movements. In modern terms these “cultural feminists” believed in inherent differences between men and women and demanded that female qualities be re-valued (if not, in

23 Despard, Theosophy and the Woman’s Movement, 5.
fact, more highly valued) and that women be given equal status and opportunities in all modern institutions. Putting theory into practice, the most famous leaders of the Theosophists were women: Madame Helena Blavatsky, Katherine Tingley, and Annie Besant. All three advocated equal suffrage along with other women's rights. Besant, for example, was arrested and tried for her support of birth-control, and she gave her first public address on "Political Rights for Women."  

Mary Kingsford, another nineteenth-century mystic, supporter of women's rights, and devotee of Theosophy for a time, was also well known for championing animal rights and vegetarianism with language that sounded amazingly modern, and was clearly a foremother of what would become a common ecofeminist stand in the 1980s. When invited to attend a Women's Peace Convention during the 1870s, she responded, "these poor deluded creatures cannot see that universal peace is absolutely impossible to a carnivorous race."  


The Theosophists, much like the Spiritualists, also viewed the goals of the women's movement as inclusive of the aims of other movements. Despard cited the labor movement, child protection, and racial equality as important movements related to women's quest for equality:

The coming together of nations and races in a new recognition of common interests and aims is another significant sign of the times, prophetic of that long-desired world-peace, through which alone the social reconstruction that means so much to woman, will become possible.24

Thus many nineteenth-century feminists were clearly comfortable with a definition of feminism that was broader than simply "women's issues" such as voting or property rights. Perhaps the much maligned cultural feminists of the late twentieth century were, in fact, truer heirs to their feminist foremothers than their strictly political sisters believed.

Despite the existence of Spiritualists, Theosophists, and other such women,27 feminist religious scholar Rita M. 1976, 54-55.

24 Despard, Theosophy and the Woman's Movement, 44.

27 Another form of alternative spirituality that thrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which attracted a mostly female following,
Gross has argued, "For the most part, overtly religious issues were not central to the nineteenth-century women's movement. Most nineteenth-century feminists wished neither to blame religion for women's position nor to advocate a changed position for women in the church." This assessment, however, failed to recognize the activities of religious radicals and saw nineteenth-century feminism only in the narrow confines of the suffrage movement. Her exclusion of these religious radicals was not surprising, since the histories of nineteenth-century feminism have largely exorcized their memory. Even at the time, many suffragists sought to distance themselves from these more radical movements and individuals, and feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that Susan B. Anthony and her biographer Ida Husted Harper "intentionally" excluded the contributions of Matilda Joslyn Gage because

was the "New Thought" movement. New Thought was a system of religious healing that, like the two movements already discussed, had strong appeal to white, middle-class women, and that also had definite ties to the first women's movement. For a thorough discussion of the New Thought movement see: Beryl Satcer, "New Thought and the Era of Woman, 1875-1895" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1992).

28 Gross, Feminism and Religion, 36.
her anticlericalism "did not fit into the dominant framework for telling the history of the nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement." 29

Gage was not alone in her banishment from feminist memory. The Spiritualists were also omitted. Ann Braude is less accusatory than Schüssler Fiorenza in stating, "It is unclear whether the editors [of The History of Woman Suffrage] intentionally excluded Spiritualists from their account or whether they were simply unfamiliar with them." 30 Given Anthony's close familiarity with the Spiritualists, Braude's assessment was overly generous.

Even Elizabeth Cady Stanton, although hardly a figure who could be dismissed, faced censure from an increasingly conservative suffrage movement for her radical critique of religion. In the final decades of her life Stanton suffered estrangement from the movement, and biographer Lois W. Banner blamed this alienation solely on her attacks on religion and her anticlericalism. Stanton herself became dissatisfied with the direction the movement was going, and

29 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 4-5.

30 Braude, Radical Spirits, 81.
in 1888 wrote, "Lucy and Susan alike see suffrage only. They do not see woman's religious and social bondage, [and] neither do the young women in either [suffrage] organization."\(^\text{31}\) Stanton failed repeatedly to convince the National Woman Suffrage Association, which she had helped found, to pass a resolution that would condemn the Bible and Christianity itself for its anti-woman attitudes. Furthermore, in 1896, one year after the publication of The Woman's Bible, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) officially disavowed any connection to the work, stating, "this association is non-sectarian, being composed of persons of all shades of religious opinion, and that it has no official connection with the so-called 'Woman's Bible,' or any other theological publication."\(^\text{32}\) Even a personal explanation from the newly emerging NAWSA leader Carrie Chapman Catt could not assuage Stanton's hurt

\(^{\text{31}}\) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as quoted in Banner, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 154.

feelings for this rebuff. Stanton should not have been that surprised by their actions since she clearly knew that her views were considered dangerous by most suffragists. In the introduction to *The Woman's Bible*, she had anticipated their criticism. "Others say it is not politic to rouse religious opposition. This much-lauded policy is but another word for cowardice. How can woman's position be changed... without the broadest discussion of all the questions involved in her present degradation?"

Nineteenth-century feminism was not without its own religious dissenters, and then, as today, the movement was uncertain what to do with these rebels. However, nineteenth-century feminists were more likely to ignore a religious critique because it was, in fact, extremely radical, and because one of the suffrage movement's closest allies, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, would not allow such a dialogue. The mainstream suffrage movement, most scholars agree, was by and large a rather conservative movement with a rather limited critique of American society.

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33 Banner, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, 154-165.

The demand for suffrage itself was highly controversial and had almost paralyzed the participants who gathered at Seneca Falls in 1848. Most nineteenth-century suffragists were not willing to alienate themselves further from the dictates of Victorian society by appearing irreligious during a time that prescribed one of women's roles as the caretakers of piety and morality. In fact, suffragists often exploited such an image in their arguments for why women should possess the franchise.35

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SECOND WAVE FEMINISTS AND RELIGION

Pushed to the fringe in the first women's movement, religion in any form seemed to stand less of a chance in getting a hearing at the outset of the second wave. In the period between the ebbing of the first movement after the passage of woman's suffrage and the rise of the second movement in the 1960s, the interest of women in reforming religion, or adopting a more equitable spirituality, also subsided.\(^3^6\) Theosophy remained, as did other spiritually inclined beliefs, but without the energizing presence of a parallel political drive faded even further into the fringe during the conservative 1920s, the trials of the 1930s and 1940s, and especially during the Cold War of the 1950s. The enforced nature of Cold War cultural conformity, along with what historian Elaine Tyler May dubbed the "domestic containment" of American women, made for an especially inhospitable environment for any non-traditional religions and for women's involvement in any type of religious

\(^3^6\) For a discussion of the women's movement between the first and second waves, see: Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990. 42
leadership, whether as ordained leader or layperson. In fact, during the 1950s women's religious leadership dived to its lowest point since before the nineteenth century. The political and cultural ferment of the 1960s, therefore, offered a supreme opportunity for the return and linking of feminist energies at the political and cultural levels.

"How NOW Got Religion"

Despite the return of a mass feminist movement in the 1960s, many feminists repudiated any relationship between political feminism and religious reform. Radical feminists, reflecting their left-wing and Marxist roots, in particular embraced secularism as the appropriate feminist model. Their position was understandable given that radical feminists were more revolutionary and believed "the system" was beyond reform. They out of hand rejected all religion as an impulse that connoted a traditional, hierarchical

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38 Gross, Feminism and Religion, 39.
institution. If religion were going to have any role in the new movement, liberal feminists were more likely to pay it some attention.

Liberal feminists were always more reformist than radical feminists and had a longer history of working to change traditional religions. NOW, for example, had sub-committees, task forces, and various committees dedicated to women and religion for at least its first decade of existence. In a 1973 pamphlet highlighting NOW's accomplishments, one section read: "In Religion--More women are assuming leadership in religious organizations and succeeding in abolishing traditional practices which have kept women in a secondary position in all aspects of life."39

Despite such words of encouragement, NOW did not eagerly push religious reform. The organization was at first resistant to putting religion on its agenda, according to a 1972 article in Genesis III, "How NOW Got Religion," published by the Philadelphia Task Force on Women and Religion. The article credited a meeting between Betty

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39 Ohio Historical Society, [OHS], Columbus, Ohio, Ohio NOW Papers, Box 12, Folder 56, "NOW Accomplishments 1973."
Friedan and Elizabeth Farians, a professor of theology and founder of the Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion, as having hatched a scheme to add religion to the NOW program. At the second annual NOW conference held in Chicago in 1967, Farians joined NOW's Board of Directors, and "Women and Religion" became its seventh task force. The article explained:

The secularists of NOW had discounted religion and had not included it in their planning. For feminists in general religion was irrelevant and for the women in religion feminism was irrelevant. It became the job of the NOW Task Force to point out that one of the root problems of the oppression of women was religion.40

Thereafter NOW became active in this arena. A 1970 task force concerned with the status of women in traditional churches, particularly the Catholic Church, met in Detroit and sent the National Conference of Catholic Bishops an eight-point platform that demanded equal treatment, and participation, for women in the Catholic Church. An article in WomanKind, a Detroit area feminist publication to which

NOW had granted exclusive coverage of this meeting, observed:

the National Organization for Women contends that Catholic women are the most likely to feel oppressed within the church. Past and current controversy over 'the pill' and the 'fetish for the fetus' has made the Catholic church and its stand on such issues appear to be the arch-oppressor of women.\footnote{Zorina Damman, "Women in the Church," \textit{WomanKind}, Detroit, May/June 1971, 18, Herstory I, Reel 4.}

At the same time, the leader of the task force, Elizabeth Farians, was quoted as demanding that women "examine their role in the church," and as saying that "women who regard themselves as active within the religious body are often nothing more than churchmice--physically present, but with no real voice in official church business." Her tone suggested a growing exasperation with women who continued to remain in churches and failed to push for meaningful feminist change, and despite her role as head of the religious task force, she seemed to reflect here something of the anti-religious attitude that many other feminists embraced. Farians later stated, "If women are not willing to seize their rights, they don't deserve them."\footnote{Ibid.}
For some women in NOW, religion had always been an important topic. One early member of NOW explained that for her religion was infused throughout the entire women's movement and had been always been an important part of her commitment to NOW. "The whole [women's] movement is spiritual," she explained, "it's about women believing in themselves and finding new self-esteem, and that is spiritual." She also claimed that religion was the base of patriarchy and that it was religion that had "taught men how to treat women." This woman also served on the "Culture and Society" committee, which she explained had religious issues "tucked into it" at the national level, and in 1976 she founded a "Women and Religion" task force for New Jersey NOW. Its goals were rather traditional--gaining women access to ordination and challenging male language--and it was the early 1980s, she explained, before "women's spirituality" became a separate issue from religious reform.43

Indeed, records reflect that NOW remained active in religious reform throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. One

43 Interview # 36, 21 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
1978 memorandum from the National Committee on Women and Religion read, "Calling all Closet Christians!" and "Calling all Closet Jews!" It implied that religion was an aspect of women's lives that many kept separate from their feminist identity. NOW also had a group called the "Religious Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment," and NOW sold "Women and Religion" information packets as well as an "ERA Religious Action Packet."

By the 1990s, however, NOW's organizational structure no longer reflected the importance of women and religion as an issue. Although religion still maintained a presence at NOW conferences in the form of various workshops on women's spirituality and an abundance of Goddess merchandise for sale, NOW no longer maintained any standing committees specifically focused on women and religion. NOW's Senior Development Planner, although herself a practicing Pagan, defended this change by stating, "Religion is not a place where NOW can be effective," and further added, "Feminists

should not get in the business of telling people how to worship." She explained that she does not advertise her Paganism at work, nor does she hide it, and she also stated that she had never had any "bad experiences regarding being a Pagan." She did state, however, that she was "not as embarrassed being a Pagan as she was being a Christian." These statements once again demonstrate the problematic relationship between feminism and religion, for it suggests a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude. It does imply, though, that alternative religions such as Paganism were more easily reconciled to feminism than traditional faiths.

In a much less positive portrayal, another long-time national NOW member and former Wiccan who had "wandered back into the church" described NOW as having an "a-religious culture" at best. Although she emphasized that the organization was not "openly anti-religious," she did complain that there was "Not a particularly strong desire to accommodate that [religion]," in contrast to NOW's "tremendous efforts to be sensitive to such issues as race or sexual orientation." "People who are religious are

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45 Interview # 37, 10 July 1996.

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regarded as eccentric, they are tolerated, but that is about it." Nonetheless, her only memory of overt religious tension in NOW occurred about fifteen years ago and involved a defeated internal Affirmative Action measure that would have regarded Jewish women as a minority had it passed. In NOW, as in other parts of the women's movement, Jewish women often felt that the movement required them to relinquish their Jewishness, and the problem of anti-Semitism, indeed, would rock all parts of the women's movement."

On the local level of NOW, however, tension over religion was infrequent. The NOW women I interviewed in Columbus, many of whom were involved in both the state level and city chapter of NOW, all insisted that religion had never been a disruptive issue for them. The founder of the NOW chapter at Ohio State University, also located in Columbus, was herself a very active witch, and she too insisted that she had never met with any opposition or protest within NOW over her spiritual practices. Ohio NOW began sponsoring workshops on women and religion in the 1970s, and one of the local leaders of Columbus NOW was an

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"Interview #38, 27 June 1996. The issue of anti-Semitism is discussed in-depth in chapter five."
ordained Methodist minister who made religion an important part of that chapter's focus.

Radical Feminism And Religion

If some women thought national NOW was rather secular and anti-religious, the more radical branch of the women's movement was even more inhospitable to religion. Some of this hostility, of course, had to do with the radicals' rejection of reform politics and hierarchical institutions. However, because radical feminists, more than their liberal counterparts, made each other--or the concept of sisterhood--the very essence of their movement, they tolerated dissent and deviation even less well, especially in matters of religion.

Radical feminists in Columbus, for example, were decidedly anti-religious. In a 1981 WAC "Struggle Session" on racism in the Collective, the mostly white women of WAC complained that minority women were often still too tied to their religions, and many in WAC felt that a good radical feminist should not subscribe to such notions. "Lots of feminists," argued one participant, "have rejected that part of their culture that is religious. It's too hard to share
parts of yourself that aren't feminist." Others emphasized that for some women their religion and culture are "intertwined," and that this is difficult for many women, especially Christian women, to comprehend. "Religion," argued another member, "rams things down women's throats." 47

Columbus radical feminists were not unique in their condemnation of religion. The radical feminist journal off our backs regularly ran articles critical of religion of any sort, and despite the growing significance of the feminist spirituality movement in the 1980s, never changed this perspective. A 1989 article called "Atheist Feminist Notes" provoked some opposition from spiritual feminists, but also met with much approval. Furthermore, except for letters to the editor, off our backs never printed anything positive on any form of religion or spirituality, reflecting a continued bias against religion. 48 The debate this anti-religious attitude triggered within the radical feminist community

47 OHS, B7, Minutes of Struggle Session #3, Racism-Minority Women, November 22, 1981.

will be explored in later chapters of this study, but it is effectively captured in this passage from Luisah Teish, a priestess of the Afro-Caribbean Goddess Oshun:

Feminist spirituality had a real problem because most revolutionary circles have considered spirituality a no-no area. Because the male god and the institutionalized church has been so counter-revolutionary, there has been the temptation to say that there is nothing but the material world, and this is all we should deal with.49

RACE TENSIONS AND SECULARISM

The intense secularism of the modern women’s movement also exacerbated already tense race relations. The women’s movement has been deservedly criticized by women of color for its white, middle-class framework, but little discussion has occurred on how religion played a factor in worsening the relationship between mostly white secular feminists and more religious minority women.50 The 1981 Columbus WAC


50 See, for example: Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought (Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1990); Gloria T. Hall, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, But Some of
struggle session illustrated this tension, but the National Woman’s Studies Association conference held in Indiana in 1980 indicated how large this problem remained at the national level through the 1980s. One of the attendees recalled a controversy over the religious character of African American performer Elizabeth Cotten’s songs. Black attendees expressed frustration with white women’s criticism, pointing out that such music is an integral part of African American culture and that too often “feminist culture” was derived purely from white culture. Similar incidents fueled charges of anti-Semitism within the women’s movement and also likely contributed to the movement’s limited appeal to highly spiritual Native American women and Hispanic women, who are often devoutly Catholic. By the


51 Interview # 39, 23 June 1997.

52 I am not suggesting that feminist secularism is the full explanation of the women’s movement’s limited appeal to minority women. Obviously race and class issues remain
1990s, the pressure to reject religion, however, seemed to be most strongly felt by white women of Christian heritage, as the women’s movement did make progress in recognizing the role of religion in identity politics for non-white women.

A 1990 article in off our backs demonstrated that even ten years later secularism still reigned within the National Woman’s Studies Association and the radical feminist community, but that participants were at least discussing spirituality. “At this year’s NWSA, I was struck by the number of women saying that we have to take more account of spiritual issues (even as they said that they themselves weren’t at all spiritual).” The author went on to explain, “But I don’t happen, personally, to believe people actually need spirituality. I don’t think it is necessary for feminism to incorporate it, only for us to understand it as far as we can.”

paramount, but, nonetheless, I do believe that the relentless secularism pursued by many white feminists lessened the appeal of feminism to many women of color, for whom religion is an important aspect of their lives.

CONCLUSION

Feminism, in both its first and second waves, has had difficulty reconciling its critique of society and its institutions with many women's continued desire for spiritual expression. In a fascinating turn-about, religion went from being considered too radical a topic for nineteenth-century women to something that was too "counter-revolutionary" for twentieth-century feminists to discuss. Nonetheless, religious radicals who attempted to alter the patriarchal practices of traditional religions existed in both centuries, and both groups were seen as extremely threatening, although for different reasons.

The religious radicals in both time periods also shared some basic principles. They believed that women were more connected to the earth than men, and each group argued for a definition of feminism that encompassed more than a strictly political agenda for the movement. Both would also be similarly criticized for accepting, rather than challenging, prescribed gender roles that emphasized women's "natural" nurturing and compassionate tendencies. However, while nineteenth-century religious radicals were omitted from the histories of that century's movement and thus long denied
their place in the history of feminism, twentieth-century spiritual feminists continue to reshape our understanding of what feminism is and should be.

Secularism, nevertheless, remains at the heart of the modern movement's definition of a "good" feminist, and this anti-religious attitude and the controversies it has generated have been harmful to the growth and success of the second wave of American feminism. In a movement that seeks to be as inclusive as possible, religion is understandably a complex and difficult issue. The women's movement, however, has marginalized, or in some cases rejected, women's hunger for connection to the Divine, at some risk to itself, for the denial of this important feature of so many women's lives all but guarantees an elitist, white, middle-class movement that fails to meet the needs of many women.
CHAPTER 2

THE GODDESS AWAKENED:
THE BIRTH OF A NEW MOVEMENT

When feminist spirituality emerged in the early 1970s, it did not spring up out of thin air any more than feminism had come from nowhere within the New Left and civil rights movement. An actual moment of birth is difficult to locate, however, as spiritual feminists followed many different paths in "finding the Goddess." Nationally, feminist spirituality first appeared in larger coastal communities in the early 1970s, later finding its way to smaller feminist communities such as Columbus, Ohio. Nor would feminist spirituality appear in a vacuum; its form was shaped not only by the women's movement from which it emerged, but also by the other movements of that decade. The dawning "New Age" movement, the American Indian movement, the counterculture movement, NeoPaganism, and the environmental
movement would all contribute to the emergence and shape of feminist spirituality, as did the general atmosphere of experimentation and openness associated with this era.

PATHS TO FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

A review of the abundant participants' histories and 'how to' reference manuals--giving advice on spell casting or starting your own circle--that constitute most of the movement's literature suggests a rather simplistic history for feminist spirituality. Almost all of these works do provide a brief overview of the movement's past, but these histories are based mostly upon anecdotal evidence and personal memories. As an example, in her book, *To Know: A Guide to Women's Magic and Spirituality*, longtime spiritual feminist Jade traced three common routes to feminist spirituality. The first, she argued, was the women's movement itself, especially the conscious-raising or "cr" sessions that were first popularized by the New York Radical Feminists. For many second wave feminists, cr groups were often the first place where a woman openly shared her feelings and experiences only to discover that what she had thought was a personal problem, was, in fact, commonly
shared by other women. Sitting in circles, sharing fears and emotions, and being validated by other women, cr was, for many, a spiritual experience that evoked something bigger and more powerful than oneself. Not surprisingly, many began to share memories of hurt and alienation from the traditional religions within which they had been raised.

They talked of how it felt to be offered a spiritual system that had no concept of the female as divine. They explored their feelings about the notion of original sin and the role of women in traditional religion. They puzzled over the idea of male superiority offered by these religions and looked for the source of "divine proof" for this theory. They studied religious texts and looked into alternative religions. A frightening realization emerged from this process. Women found that they were oppressed by traditional religion.¹

Many women did begin to search for alternative spirituality after such an awakening; for others, however, such an awareness had long been a part of their feminism, and for those not spiritually inclined, cr never led to religious questioning. Only one of the women I interviewed traced her path to feminist spirituality from some of the cr sessions in which she participated while in college during the late 1960s. For her, however, having been raised as a

¹ Jade, To Know, 6.
Mennonite, religion had always been an important component of her life and her understanding of feminism, and she still struggles "to blend the two in a way that meets both her needs."^2

Jade also cited two other common paths to feminist spirituality: the environmental movement and science fiction and fantasy literature. The environmental movement, with its emphasis on the sacredness of the earth and "her" natural rhythms, is a close fit for the essentialist ideas so prevalent in feminist spirituality. Many spiritual feminists also see themselves as ecofeminists, or, perhaps more correctly, see the two as one and the same. Science fiction and fantasy, especially that which is penned by female authors, allows women to experience worlds dominated by powerful female warriors, priestesses, and highly revered Goddesses, encouraging many women to seek out similar belief systems. Two of the women I interviewed specifically mentioned science fiction as an important form leading to their interest in feminist spirituality, and two others.

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^2 Interview # 3, Columbus, Ohio, 13 March 1995.
cited an interest in environmental politics as a predecessor to their involvement in Goddess spirituality.

CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL FAITHS

The paths taken by individual women were highly varied, but the emergence of the feminist spirituality movement itself followed a more discernible trail. As second wave feminists looked around themselves and began analyzing the various forms of female oppression and the institutions that justified and perpetuated their continuation, organized religion came under feminist attack. The earliest discussion of spirituality came mostly from feminist religious scholars and challenged the inherent sexism of Judeo-Christian beliefs, symbolism, ideology, and ministry. With time, many also came to believe that the portrayal and role of women in traditional religions was overtly misogynist. One of the first to articulate such themes was Mary Daly. In her 1968 book, The Church and the Second Sex, Daly explored sexism in the Catholic Church, critiquing the Church until she rejected Christianity completely. She remains among the most eloquent of feminist critics of traditional religion:
The image of God as exclusively a father and not a mother, for example, was spawned by the human imagination under the conditions of patriarchal society and sustained as plausible by patriarchy. Then, in turn, the image has served to perpetuate this kind of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in “his” heaven is a father ruling “his” people, then it is the “nature” of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated. Within this context a mystification of roles takes place: the husband dominating his wife can feel that he represents God himself....intelligent people do not really think of God as an old man with a beard, but it is quite possible for the mind to function on two different and even contradictory levels at the same time....The widespread concept of the Supreme Being has been a not very subtle mask of the divine father-figure, and it is not too surprising that it has been used to justify oppression, especially that of women, which is said to be “God’s plan.”

Although one of the first and most influential, Daly was not the only feminist critiquing traditional religion in the early 1970s. The feminist press was rife with articles critical of traditional religions and their attitude toward women. No mainstream faith was spared from criticism, although Judeo-Christian practices--and especially

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Christian, as the most prevalent of American religions—received special attention. As early as 1970, feminist journals and newspapers ran articles such as "Women in the Church," "Women and Judeo-Christian Ethics," and even the highly irreligious radical feminist journal, off our backs, devoted several pages of a 1971 issue to the topic of women and religion.

These articles, and others like them, portray religion as having failed women. The message given to women, argued Sue O’Brien in the Indianapolis Women’s Newsletter, was to "accept subjection. It is your true and glorious religion. Christianity often calls itself 'the priesthood of believers.' Yet religion is no leveler for women. The contributions we have made and our possibilities for divine inspiration are confined largely to our biological status." In off our backs, the Church is described as a "bastion of male chauvinism and its various attendant evils," and the authors also explained that "Jewish men give thanks each day that they were not born women" and that "Christian men who dominate their wives have learned to fashion themselves on

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4 "Women in the Church," Indianapolis Women’s Newsletter, November 1970, 6, Herstory I, Reel 16.
the model of the Lord Himself," while women have "been offered little chance of emancipation or self-fulfillment this side of the grave." While women in Springfield, Massachusetts, claimed, "Our Judeo-Christian religions are all patriarchal—with their male God, male Savior, and male prophets and disciples. The Bible is full of images of strong men and weak women."  

Although highly critical of traditional religion and its attitudes towards women, many of these early articles still demonstrate a desire to incorporate traditional religion into a feminist framework. The overtly anti-religious and strictly secular model of feminism that dominated the women's movement, especially in the radical wing, by the late 1970s was not as apparent as earlier in that decade. Perhaps this reflected the fact that during the late 1960s and early 1970s, women were still merely critiquing religion, and had not yet moved to putting their time and energy into creating religion. It is obvious,
however, that many had not yet completely rejected all traces of their religious upbringing. Even those articles highly critical of church doctrine stressed that such attitudes were a departure from those of Christ, who was frequently described as a "feminist." "Christians, and those affected by Christians, need to know what Jesus' attitude toward women was. The answer is clear: Jesus was a feminist." Even in the pages of *off our backs*, a journal that would become notorious among spiritual feminists for its condemnation of religion and spirituality, writers argued in 1971 that "Much of the treatment afforded women in the name of the Father and the Son has been blasphemous. For Jesus Himself was remarkable in his lack of sexism."®

Despite such faith in Jesus, many Christian-raised feminists still found it difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the realities of the Church with their feminism. *Off our backs* explained this dilemma: "the women's movement is faced with deciding whether to attack the church or

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® "Women and the Church," 2.

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Another woman asked, "Will it be necessary for us to withdraw from church life to reconcile our beliefs with our religion?" Ultimately, many women answered that question with a resounding yes, and numerous feminists left the church and rejected religion altogether. Many of these women shared Boston feminist Barbara Monty's belief that "Religion and Woman's Liberation in true forms are mutually exclusive." Other feminists used even stronger language and pictures to denounce religion. In a 1971 article in the New York City feminist newspaper Woman's World, Patricia Lawrence demanded that "some legal action be taken against this powerful male chauvinist structure [the Catholic Church] that kills women in the name of Jesus Christ." The article was accompanied by a drawing depicting a pregnant woman being crucified against a giant pair of testicles and attached penis. Other women, such as noted

9 Ibid.


religious scholars Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, would stay within the Church, working diligently to redefine the very meaning of Christianity in a way that was inclusive and empowering to women. A third category of women, however, rejected both solutions and pursued a third alternative, the advancement of feminist spirituality.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{FINDING THE GODDESS}

For many women feminism itself inspired a spiritual awakening. Indeed, the search for sisterhood can be viewed as a spiritual quest, a search for something bigger and more meaningful than oneself.\textsuperscript{14} Some women, however, sought a more specific form of spiritual expression for the feelings feminism evoked in them. "I want to learn to express my feminism theologically or religiously. What feminism activates in me has a religious meaning to me--of course, I

\textsuperscript{13} "Women and the Church," 2; "Women and Judeo-Christian Ethics," 11.

\textsuperscript{14} This analysis of sisterhood was first suggested to me by Nancy Hewitt, and I am grateful for her insight.
would not expect it to for everyone else," explained Emily Hough in Boston's Female Liberation Newsletter.\textsuperscript{15}

Apparently Hough was not alone, because in 1974, Dayton, Ohio, feminist Mary Anne Balch expressed similar sentiments in an article entitled "Spiritualism and the Women's Movement." Balch concluded by asking, "Are any of you interested in finding the way with me?"\textsuperscript{16} Both of these women, however, made it clear that traditional religion was not filling this need; thus, they, and many others, began looking for other sources of spiritual inspiration.

One such example was found in the figure of the witch. Second wave feminists felt a strong identification with the image of the persecuted witch. They envisioned a strong, powerful and defiant woman who disdained male-dominated society, and the Church, often living alone and beyond male control. At first this identification focused mostly on witches as symbols of resistance and female power and as victims of patriarchy but were free of any spiritual

\textsuperscript{15} Emily Hough, "Letters," Female Liberation Newsletter, Boston, 30 August 1971, 1, Herstory I, Reel 14.

\textsuperscript{16} Mary Anne Balch, "Spiritualism and the Women's Movement," Dayton Women's Liberation Newsletter, January 1974, 6, Herstory I Continuing Update, Reel 2.
overtones or discussions of witchcraft as an ancient women's religion. Still, articles about the witch burnings and abuse of midwives became commonplace in the feminist press in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and although not yet a spiritual figure, the witch, for feminists, has become a symbol of female power and resistance. When New York feminists hexed Wall Street in 1968, they dressed as witches. They were members of the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH), an action-oriented feminist group that specialized in guerilla theater and "zap-actions." WITCH founding member Robin Morgan recalled:

We were on to a valid theme--identifying with the witches--although it is only now, eight years later, that women are taking up that theme with the serious study it warrants, recognizing it as part of our entombed history, a remnant of the Old Religion which pre-dated all patriarchal faiths and which was a Goddess-worshiping, matriarchal faith...We in WITCH always meant to do the real research...but we never got around to it. We were too busy doing actions.¹⁷

The WITCH manifesto also demonstrated how feminists viewed witches as the:

original guerillas and freedom fighters against oppression—particularly the oppression of women...Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, nonconformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary. (This possibly explains why nine million of them have been burned.) Witches were the first Friendly Heads and Dealers, the first birth-control practitioners and abortionists, the first alchemists...They bowed to no man...If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. You make your own rules. You are free and beautiful....You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal.¹⁸

Only gradually, as Morgan indicated, did women begin viewing witches as practitioners of the "old religion." By 1970, for example, Boston feminists, while lambasting traditional religions, claimed, "As witches we have defied both Church and state, rebelling against the patriarchal Christian status quo."¹⁹ Boston women were clearly ahead of much of the rest of the movement, because Mary Daly recalls "some local self-declared witches" who came out to hex Boston College in 1969 when it attempted to fire Daly for her controversial book The Church and the Second Sex.²⁰


¹⁹ "Cultural History of Feminine Oppression," 3.

²⁰ Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, 11.
The birth of the Susan B. Anthony Coven Number One, founded in Los Angeles in December 1971, further intensified feminist interest in witches as not just defiant women, but also as spiritual figures. Instigated by "hereditary witch" Z. Budapest, seven women gathered in Hollywood to celebrate the winter solstice and to blend feminism with witchcraft:

Nobody thought about that day as 'herstorical.' It was a mild winter day, no rain for a long time. I was expecting a couple of friends to join me in my first efforts at holding a public gathering of women to celebrate the birth of light and to blend witchcraft and feminism together. What a heady brew! Nobody then suspected it would become a mass movement that would propagate itself like dandelions. No. It was only our first.²¹

This first coven quickly grew, and by March 1974, Budapest counted its membership at over 60 initiates.²² Considered by many to be the "mother" of feminist spirituality, Budapest's importance cannot be overlooked. This first feminist coven spawned similar circles, such as the Amelia Earhart Coven in New York and the Elizabeth Gould Davis Coven in Florida. The term "feminist spirituality" is one


Budapest claims to have coined, and many of the most noted figures in the movement acknowledge Budapest as their mentor. Many, like popular author and environmental activist Starhawk, were initiated as a high priestess by Budapest. She would also be among the movement's most fervent and articulate defenders. For Budapest the marriage of witchcraft and feminism was as natural as breathing, and in her mind there was no contradiction between feminist spirituality and feminist politics. As part of their ritual that first Winter Solstice, each woman jumped over their caldron and asked the Goddess for a boon (favor), and even here, their wishes were shaped by their political consciousness. "Since we were steeped in public service, most of our spells concerned political freedoms for all oppressed peoples: free Chile, grant women control over their own bodies." 23

One year later a New York group, The Feminists, chose to hold "an autumn, harvest ceremony dedicated to Demeter rather than celebrate the patriarchal holiday of

23 Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 121; Budapest, Grandmother of Time, 16.
Thanksgiving." The Feminists, best known for feminist philosophy, argued that:

as feminists we need to redefine the boundaries of woman’s possibilities on both the rational and the supernatural planes....Alternative celebrations as part of the irrevocable commitment to a feminist culture and a negation of our brainwashing heritage may help to sustain our movement when it is no longer fashionable and ceases to be “newsworthy.”

Their insight into the future was remarkable, as their suggestions quite accurately portrayed the backlash that soon developed and the fact that women’s spirituality, and other forms of women’s culture, would help sustain the movement in the face of increasing hostility.

Witches were not the only fabled women to fuel feminist interest. As women began looking for past role models and symbols of female power and resistance, they would also rediscover Amazons, ancient goddesses, and matriarchal legends. “As matriarchs we have been the dominating sex, and we have done the work while the men took care of our


25 Taylor and Rupp, “Women’s Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism.”
homes and children," explained Massachusetts feminists in 1970. "As Amazons we have built empires, ruled and fought for by women alone...We have helped build beautiful societies where the sexes lived in more equalized, communal, and free relationships with each other. We have done everything we have been told was impossible."

Articles in the feminist press began not just to critique traditional religions, but to argue that at one time there had been matriarchal societies that revered women and worshiped a female deity or deities. Feminist groups and journals began naming themselves after Amazons or ancient Matriarchies. Such titles would be most popular with lesbian feminists who felt especially alienated from mainstream society and who saw themselves as the ultimate threat to patriarchy.

Lending a certain credibility to their claims was the controversial scholarship of Marija Gimbutas, Riane Eisler, and Elizabeth Gould Davis. Using historical,

26 "Cultural History of Feminine Oppression," 3.

archaeological, and anthropological evidence, these scholars attempted to prove that prior to the advent of patriarchy, there were matriarchal and Goddess-worshiping societies in which women were revered and men were less destructive and more in-tune with nature. For many spiritual feminists, then, the matriarchal past became an unquestioned part of their understanding of history. Not only was such a theory compelling to spiritual feminists, but even for their more secular sisters this belief was popular as it seemed to give the lie to essentialist claims of the “naturalness” of male superiority and female subjection. Some feminists, bothered by the lack of empirical evidence on matriarchies, still saw it as a powerful symbol for women, if not an indisputable fact. Many felt that the lack of evidence was easily

Europe: Myths and Cult Images (Berkeley: the University of California Press, 1982); Marija Gimbutas: The Language of the Goddess, Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization (New York: Alfred van der Marck Editions, 1988). Davis’s work in the early twentieth-century was among the first studies to argue the prepatriarchal hypothesis, which claims that patriarchy is a rather recent invention, only about 6,000 years old, and that prior to its emergence there existed a “golden age” where women and the Goddess were worshiped and revered. Davis also propagated the “men as mutants” theory, which holds that men were actually an accident of evolution and are therefore less evolved than women.
explained by male violence. As men and male-dominated religions began destroying the more peaceful matriarchies, they deliberately obliterated all evidence of these past societies as part of their absolute conquest.23

SPREADING THE WORD

By 1973 feminist spirituality was a firmly entrenched part of the modern women's movement. In January 1973, New York's Majority Report asserted:

Matriarchal religions are getting very popular in Feminist circles. Sisters are crunching apples in the name of Eve and Lilith, W.I.T.C.H. did its thing in the name of the Great Goddess Madison Avenue, The Feminists recite a prayer which goes against the most basic of True Religions--love and respect for all humankind--and women in lesbian counseling group casually refer to each other as witch, claiming their very lifestyle is a form of

karma/yoga, a religion that 'not much is known about'.”

In April, 1973, Majority Report described a Goddess-oriented Druid circle, and Seattle’s Pandora reported on a workshop devoted to feminism and spiritual living. Interest at this workshop was so keen that the attendees decided to hold another longer gathering “to explore together spiritual paths for women.” This gathering ultimately led to the "Spirituality" issue of Country Women, a primarily lesbian journal devoted to country living. This issue was very significant in the growth of the feminist spirituality movement. For one, it was the first of many journals that would dedicate an issue to the increasingly important and popular subject of feminist spirituality, but it was also the impetus for WomanSpirit, the first journal completely dedicated to women’s spirituality.


This first issue included songs to the Goddesses, poems, photographs, and a variety of articles on topics ranging from witchcraft to yoga to a "Letter from a Quaker Woman" to "Catholic Girlhood." The editorial on page one, written by Jean Mountaingrove--one of the original editors of WomanSpirit and one of the movement's most beloved foremothers--explained the origins of feminist spirituality:

The spiritual is a dimension of a person that is just as real as the physical dimension, but it shows itself to us in different ways....Some women are categorizing their new experiences as spiritual and religious--they are noticing their dreams, their daydreams, their impulses, their intuitions, and reading books about women's societies long ago to find similar experiences described...We are sharing the hidden, private, unconfirmed experiences of our spiritual search in the belief that they too are shared by many women, and are significant.

In the original version of this statement, Mountaingrove had concluded the editorial with the word "political," but the other women working on that issue changed it to "significant." Even as early as 1974, opponents of feminist spirituality had already labeled it as "politically
irrelevant," and the collective did not wish to antagonize further their more secular sisters.\textsuperscript{31}

In the process of putting together this issue, Jean and her partner Ruth began exploring the possibilities of publishing a quarterly magazine devoted solely to women's spirituality. "Because of the great response to the topic of this issue," they wrote in the classified section of the "Spirituality" issue of Country Women, "we are seeking women's writings and artwork, suggestions and energy to support a new quarterly magazine. We see it as a continuing channel for sharing the diversity of religious, intuitional, philosophical, spiritual and psychic experiences of women today."\textsuperscript{32} WomanSpirit lasted from 1974 to 1984 and remains required reading for all women interested in feminist spirituality. In its premier issue, the authors explained its timing and purpose in a first page editorial entitled "Why WomanSpirit":

\textsuperscript{31} Country Women, Albion, CA, April 1974; Jean Mountaingrove was gracious enough to send me her personal copy of this issue, and it was she who informed me about the change from the word "political" to the seemingly less threatening "significant."

\textsuperscript{32} "Contact," Country Women, 64.
This is a crucial time for women. We have begun to understand and work through much of our oppression. We have made radical changes in our lives—and we are becoming aware of the immensity of these changes. We are also seeing the directions our new ways of living are taking us. When we realize the political implications of all our struggles, we know that patriarchy cannot withstand our changes; something is going to happen. We are feeling stirrings inside us that tell us that what we are making is nothing less than a new culture.

What women are doing by exploring the spiritual sides of their lives is essential for the building of a new women's culture....As we continue to tear down the institutions and relationships that oppress us, we are also building, making, creating. Because this process...is so deep, profound, and all-inclusive we are calling it spiritual. The sharing and comparing in that process is the reason for this magazine.13

Following in the path of Country Women, in the next few years many other feminist publications devoted an issue to the topic of feminist spirituality. In spring of 1975 Quest, a quarterly feminist journal, published an issue on spirituality, and in 1978, two other feminist journals, Chrysalis and Heresies, followed suit. This phenomenon also spread across the Atlantic to Great Britain, which is not surprising since modern Paganism was supposedly reborn there.

in the 1950s, and in 1977 the British feminist journal, Shrew, published its "Goddess" issue. By 1993, the academic journal Women's Studies Quarterly also tackled the controversial, but by now inescapable, topic of women's spirituality.  

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s feminist spirituality continued to gain ground. In 1976 the first national conference on women's spirituality was held in Boston. This three-day conference, entitled, "Through the Looking Glass: A Gynergetic Experience," drew over 1300 women and included workshops on "Women's Past History," "Feminism and Vegetarianism," "Theology and Politics," and "Feminism and Witchcraft." Unfortunately this first national conference was marred by a split between what off our backs reviewers called "spiritualists" and "politicalists," and what a more sympathetic WomanSpirit reviewer saw as a division between "leaders and attenders." The more hostile reviewers from off our backs described the conference as little more than "a frenzied confrontation

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between two groups of self-righteous, pompous myopics masquerading as serious philosophical, political, and spiritual discourse." They concluded by arguing that the term "feminist" had become too loosely defined, and that it was time to apply a more rigorous definition to the "much-abused label 'feminist,'" one which, based upon an analysis of the derisive language used throughout their review of the conference, would not include "several hundred women chanting 'The Goddess is alive, magic is afoot,' constant screaming and animal hoots, [and] the incessant roar of bongos, congas and tambourines to which many crewcutted women gyrated."\(^3^5\)

In the next few years national and regional conferences became common, and even the annual conference of the National Organization for Women began including workshops on the topic by the late 1970s, as did regional and state-level NOW conferences.\(^3^6\) In the print media, the topic became

\(^3^5\) Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 223; Landria and Regensburger, "Through the Looking Glass," off our backs, June 1976, 12; Jeriann Hilderly, "This Meeting a Stepping Stone to the Next," WomanSpirit, Summer 1976, 92-96.

\(^3^6\) In a review of NOW National Conference proceedings, the first reference I found to a workshop on women and spirituality was in 1977, and the first appearance of the
pervasive as books and journals dedicated to feminist spirituality proliferated. Many, in fact most, of the journals and magazines that sprang up were local, and like many local feminist publications, rather short-lived. In her 1992 bibliography, *Goddesses and Wise Women: The Literature of Feminist Spirituality, 1980-1992*, Anne Cameron listed 112 publications that were either dedicated specifically to feminist spirituality, or related publications that regularly devoted a significant portion of space to the topic.  

The feminist spirituality movement, although mostly a loose confederation of individuals who come and go and who tend to be very geographically mobile, did begin to generate some organizations and some state-sanctioned “churches.” High Priestess Z. Budapest would again be at the forefront of the term “feminist spirituality” was 1980. However, one woman I interviewed, a member of NOW since its inception, recalled them from the very start.  

of gaining official recognition of Wicce as a religion, and she served as a founding member of the Covenant of the Goddess, one of the movement's first organizations. In February 1976, Budapest was arrested in Los Angeles on charges of fortune-telling. Although Budapest lost her case and was fined, she appealed the decision, which ultimately led to the state of California recognizing "The Sisterhood of the Wicca" as a genuine church. Nine years later, California also struck down its law against psychics, and on October 31, 1975, the Covenant of the Goddess (COG) was recognized as an official church. This "Craft-wide organization" was a "confederation of covens of many traditions" whose goals included first amendment protection for all practitioners of Wicce and other Pagan sects and building "closer links of love and trust among Craft people everywhere." 38

In the 1980s, noted Wiccan priestess Selena Fox waged a similar battle with authorities in Wisconsin. In 1986, local authorities attempted to bar Fox and her husband from running their Wiccan organization, Circle Sanctuary, on

their 200-acre farm. It was, claimed local authorities, a violation of zoning regulations. Local citizens also accused the group of practicing Satanism (a common misunderstanding), and this, more than zoning regulations, seemed to be at the heart of the organization's problems with local officials. Two years later, with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), local authorities unanimously voted Circle Sanctuary recognition as a valid church. By 1997 a number of different organizations existed to aid Pagans in their legal struggles. These include, to name only a few, the Alliance for Magical and Earth Religions, the Earth Religions Assistance League, and the Coalition for Pagan Religious Rights.

Feminist spirituality has not only generated a plethora of traditional print sources, but it has also embraced modern technology and communications. The movement has spawned at least two cable shows, "Goddess Television," started in 1989 and hosted by Z. Budapest, and a monthly program hosted by Starre Goode. California has a "Goddess hotline," and dozens of pagan web sites dot the horizon of the World Wide Web. Pagans, despite their claims to being practitioners of an ancient religion, are seldom
"technophobes," and in fact one of the women I interviewed claimed to have discovered feminist spirituality via the Internet.\textsuperscript{39}

Not all spiritual feminists were of European descent, and feminist spirituality also found expression in the Afro-Caribbean religion of Santería and in its better-known cousin, Voudou. Both are a blend of ancient African traditions and Christianity and have their roots in African slavery in the western hemisphere. Santería is more prevalent among those who were enslaved in Spanish or Portuguese colonies, whereas Voudou developed in French colonies. They do, however, worship similar Gods and Goddesses and have other commonalities, so that to the casual observer they seem the same.\textsuperscript{40}

The best example of spiritual feminism among this type of alternative spirituality is the high priestess of the

\textsuperscript{39} "Goddess," off our backs, July 1991, 6; Sonia L. Nazario, "Is Goddess Worship Finally Going to Put Men in Their Place," Wall Street Journal, 7 June 1990, A9; Interview # 4, Columbus, Ohio, 19 July 1995.

Goddess Oshun, Luisah Teish. Claiming that Voudou was "a science of the oppressed, a repository of womankind," Teish has been very outspoken in her support of feminist spirituality and her opposition to both racism and sexism. She also claimed that she saw "the reemergence of the women's movement as the manifestations of the desires of the goddess energy." In her book, Jambalaya, she urged all women to work together to end oppression of all types.¹¹

Many Jewish women also found the emphasis on ancient Celtic or Norse Goddesses incompatible with their own spiritual needs. For many of these women an effort to reclaim or create a "Womon Identified Judaism" or "matriarchal Judaism" thrived alongside and sometimes in conjunction with the more pagan-oriented feminist spirituality movement. WomanSpirit, for example, published a number of articles and letters on topics such as "Hebrew

In a variety of different forms, feminist spirituality by the 1990s had infiltrated nearly every aspect of the women’s movement. At NOW conferences, Take Back the Night marches, pro-choice rallies, and the annual Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, the Goddesses’ presence was obvious. From bumper stickers proclaiming, “My other car is a Broom,” to “Magic Happens,” and Goddess tee-shirts, calendars, jewelry, and figurines, the women’s spirituality movement is ubiquitous, and prayers and chants before feminist rallies and protests have become common.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the movement’s size and consequence is its appearance in the mainstream press. In 1986, the New York Times printed an article by African American novelist Gloria Naylor that discussed the increasing popularity of women psychics and claimed that “this female monopoly predates the Judeo-Christian ethos.” Naylor explained that “it is rooted in the legacy of

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prehistoric matriarchal societies, where women were worshiped and feared for their mysterious ability to reproduce life." In 1990 the Wall Street Journal asked, "Is Goddess Worship Finally Going to Put Men in their Place?" in a two-page article on the growing movement, and in 1991, Time ran an article entitled, "When God Was a Woman: Worshipers of Mother Earth are part of a Goddess Resurgence." In this piece Time quoted adherents who claimed that as many as 100,000 American women were involved in the movement. All of these articles acknowledged Goddess spirituality as an aspect of feminism, and two of the articles were informative without being judgmental. This not only speaks to the growing influence of the feminist spirituality movement, but also to the relative acceptance of feminist ideas as a whole. The article in The Wall Street Journal, however, was rather patronizing in its tone and language and provoked at least five letters to the editor protesting the treatment of the subject.43

THE LOCAL SCENE

Although firmly entrenched on both coasts by the late 1970s, feminist spirituality was slower to reach smaller, inland feminist communities such as Columbus. Second wave feminism first arrived in Columbus on the campus of Ohio State University. Columbus-OSU Women's Liberation (WL) held its first meeting in the spring of 1970. Soon after its birth, WL survived a baptism of fire as its members opted to join the coalition of student organizations that led a ten-day strike that shut down the university. From campus, feminism quickly spread to the community, and by the end of 1971 Columbus was home to a local NOW chapter as well as a radical feminist group, the Women's Action Collective (WAC). Feminism peaked in Ohio's capital during the mid 1970s, but like the larger movement in general, was in decline by the late 1970s and early 1980s. WAC stayed afloat until internal disagreements and financial problems caused it to disband in 1983. The Columbus chapter of NOW remains


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active, and Ohio State also has a university affiliate of NOW as well as an outstanding Women's Studies program."

Columbus NOW, largely due to the presence of founding member Ruth Browning, had a Committee on Religion, chaired by Browning, and a regular column on women and religion in the chapter's monthly newsletter. Browning, as well as being an ordained Methodist minister, also held a Ph.D. in Biblical Literature. Her approach to the subject of women and religion, however, reflected that of NOW during the 1970s and early 1980s which emphasized changing sexist language and working towards the ordination of women, not on building a new religion that centered around Goddess worship. Nevertheless, owing to the mingling of feminism and religion from its earliest days, Columbus NOW never saw the two as mutually exclusive, and current members include many women involved in some form of feminist spirituality. The founding member of OSU NOW is a very active witch deeply

"For a more thorough history of feminism, especially radical feminism, in Columbus, Ohio, see: Whittier, Feminist Generations."
involved in feminist politics, the Democratic party, and Goddess spirituality.\(^4^5\)

In more radical circles, the development of feminist spirituality was more sporadic and slower to develop. As early as 1975, *Womansong*, a feminist newspaper affiliated with WAC, ran an article on "The Feminist Wicca." The author of this article, Judith Sturnick, had also sent WAC a letter with an article about Z. Budapest and an inquiry as to whether there was enough interest on the topic of women’s spirituality in Columbus to invite Budapest to the area. To my knowledge Budapest never came, and I can only assume that at that time Columbus’s radical feminist community was not yet interested in feminist spirituality. The WAC newsletter included notices by individuals attempting to start a "religious study group" in 1978 and a "discussion/ritual group" in 1981. There was never any further reference to either in the following weeks, so again it seems that interest was not yet there.\(^4^6\)

\(^{45}\) Interview # 13, 27 August 1995, Columbus, Ohio.

By the 1990s feminist spirituality was a vital component of the women's movement in Columbus and also had strong ties to the city's larger Pagan community. In the

47 Interview # 25, 5 June 1995, Columbus, Ohio.

48 Interview # 15, 29 September 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
early 1980s some mainstream Pagans in Columbus were uncomfortable with the emergence of separatist "Dianic" covens and the relationship between spiritual feminists and the larger Pagan movement had been less comfortable, but by the mid-1990s such tensions were not apparent. Columbus did support at least one lesbian-separatist coven focused on recovery from 1983 to 1985, but it is now defunct. The city does support some "Dianic" covens, but despite rumors to the contrary, I could not locate any lesbian-separatist circles. However, one leader of the Columbus Pagan Community Council did note that during some special events such as large festivals, they often see women that they believe belong to local lesbian-separatist groups, and who choose to remain outside the larger Columbus Pagan community."9

The transformation of the formerly lesbian-only political action group the "Lesbian Avengers" into a "Dark Moon" Wiccan circle open to all interested women represents, perhaps, the most persuasive, and fascinating, piece of evidence attesting to the growing strength of the feminist spirituality movement, especially among younger women. This

"9 Interview # 22, 12 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
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group was an assembly of militant young lesbians who engaged in radical forms of political protest to advocate lesbian rights (such as being arrested for going topless to protest laws that forbade women from being bare-breasted in public). Although now organized as a Wiccan circle, the group did not lose its political edge, as it demonstrated when many of its members continued past practices by marching topless in a 1995 NOW rally.\textsuperscript{50}

The transformation of the "Lesbian Avengers" into a Wiccan circle also speaks to the changing nature of the feminist spirituality movement itself. In its early days, like other forms of cultural feminism, the movement had a decidedly lesbian focus. Many of the movement’s earliest leaders such as Z. Budapest were lesbians, and WomanSpirit, published by Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove, also had a strong lesbian influence. In the minds of many, feminist spirituality and other types of cultural feminism were equated with lesbian feminism.\textsuperscript{51} However, by the 1990s,

\textsuperscript{50} Interview # 1, 17 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio; Interview # 2, 25 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.

\textsuperscript{51} Taylor and Rupp, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism, 33.
even though there remains a strong and vital lesbian presence in feminist spirituality, it was no longer a primarily lesbian movement, and the change in focus of the "Lesbian Avengers" to a circle open to all women demonstrated this shift.

CONCLUSION

Feminist spirituality, in both Columbus and the nation, was a natural outgrowth of the ideas of the second wave of American feminism. If patriarchy was ever really to fall, argued its proponents, then the religious ideas and institutions that supported it must also be challenged and changed. The next step in this progression involved going beyond the critique of existing religions to the creation of new ones more empowering to women. This process, however, took different forms for different women. For women who had never completely rejected religion, feminist spirituality was a logical next step in their desire to blend their spiritual needs with their feminism.

"Finding the Goddess" clearly filled a void that many second wave feminists felt, despite their involvement in the larger women's movement. Furthermore, as the "headiness"
and "rapture" of early feminism began to fade and as the limitations of "sisterhood" became more apparent, feminist spirituality rekindled those emotions for some women, especially those who were searching for something "bigger than themselves". Similarly, as younger women began entering a movement no longer fueled by the "rapture" that second wave feminists often describe, they, too, often found that missing energy in feminist spirituality. But unlike their older counterparts, many of these younger women first found the Goddess and then became feminists. For example, eight of the twelve younger women (those born after 1960) that I interviewed described themselves as having first discovered the Goddess and then become a feminist.

If, as Jade claimed, the cr session gave way to the ritual circle for many second wave feminists, then it seems that the ritual circle paved the path to feminism for many younger women. In other words, the ritual circle was their equivalent to cr sessions. In her recent study of young feminists, Paula Kamen bemoaned the fact that younger women never got to experience the benefits of consciousness.
raising. However, she failed to note that ritual circles across the nations filled that need for many women (young and old). Goddess worship offered women a blending of spiritual, political and personal empowerment that some women found to be extremely potent. Perhaps this was because, as one Columbus witch stated, "the Goddess allows, indeed she encourages, difference. There is, after all, 'no one true path'."

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53 Interview # 15, 29 September 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
Even as feminist spirituality became a firmly entrenched aspect of the women's movement, a number of different kinds of critics assaulted it. From Christian feminists to environmentalists, and from NeoPagan men and even to the Vatican, the emergence of feminist spirituality triggered a hostile backlash. Nowhere, however, was the tension more palpable, and destructive, than in the women's movement itself, where the newly emerged feminist spirituality movement stood front and center in a larger debate between "radical" and "cultural" feminists.

Boiled down, feminist spirituality sparked two basic types of reaction. To politically minded, secular feminists, feminist spirituality seemed to distract and detract from the larger, and more important, political
agenda of the women's movement. At the same time, the spiritual and philosophical thrust of feminist spirituality excited foes outside the women's movement who saw a cultural and religious threat. Owing to its unique positioning as a feminist religious expression, feminist spirituality was exposed to a battering barrage from all sides.

Similar to so many of the other political and social movements that emerged in the 1960s, modern-day feminism has suffered serious fractures, and the divide between radical and cultural feminists was one gulf that split the movement in the 1970s. Most radical feminists traced their activist roots to the New Left and civil rights movement of the 1960s, and they were political in their orientation. They believed that patriarchal oppression was woven so deeply into political and capitalist institutions as to place current society beyond repair. All in all, then, radical feminists favored a "revolution" that would rebuild society along more egalitarian lines. In contrast, those labeled "cultural feminists" accepted an essentialist, or innate, explanation of the differences between men and women and not only advocated building a new society, but also a new culture that would value women and their contributions. As
part of this new culture, many, especially lesbians, also supported at least limited separation from men, non-feminists, and non-lesbian women. Supporters of this form of feminism helped to construct an autonomous women’s culture that included women’s art, crafts, music and literature. For other radical feminists, however, this separate women’s culture was an anti-revolutionary political cop-out--a pretty diversion from the real work of revolution. In many ways, then, this debate came down to semantics, and was often about ownership of the term “radical feminist,” for cultural feminism was an identity that few claimed, but instead was a term imposed upon feminists interested in women’s culture.

Brooke Williams of the radical feminist collective Redstockings was one of the first to use the term “cultural feminism” and also was one of the first to critique this tendency. In 1975, Williams defined cultural feminism as “the belief that women will be freed via an alternate women’s culture.” She added further: “It leads to a concentration on lifestyle and ‘personal liberation’, and has developed at the expense of feminism, even though it
calls itself 'radical feminist.'”¹ In a more scholarly, although highly influential critique, historian Alice Echols summed up the differences in her study of the radical women’s movement by describing radical feminism as essentially a “political movement” and cultural feminism as a “countercultural movement.”² Such definitions implied that while radical feminism was political, cultural feminism was not.

Radical feminists such as Williams and Echols, concerned with a strictly political agenda for feminism, bemoaned the wedding of women’s culture to feminism, and they objected particularly to the emergence of feminist spirituality. To many radical feminists, such beliefs and activities wasted women’s energies at best, and at worst betrayed the very principles of radical feminism because of the emphasis on personal transformation, essentialism, and other such “apolitical” concepts. By the late 1970s, the


² Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad, 6.
furor over culture led to heated debates, shattered friendships, and a reassessment of the women's movement.

Factionalism, however, was hardly a new problem for the modern American women's movement. It had, after all, begun in the 1960s in two distinct branches, liberal and radical, and even within those categories divisions were common. Radical feminists, for example, divided in the early days between "politicos," women who maintained some ties to the male-dominated New Left, and "feminists," women who completely rejected the Left. As radical passions and dreams of revolution faded and backlash strengthened, a move to find common purpose with liberal feminists commenced in the late 1970s, but then issues of race, class, and sexuality would convulse the women's movement. The "gay/straight split" became particularly bitter as many heterosexual women, unconcerned with lesbian rights, claimed that such issues were a "lavender herring" that would only distract from, and harm, the larger goals of the women's movement.

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1 Buechler, Women's Movements in the United States; Davis, Moving the Mountain; Echols, Daring to Be Bad; Evans, Personal Politics; Freeman, The Politics of Women's Liberation; and Ryan, Feminism and the Women's Movement.
movement. These debates shaped the controversy over the emergence of cultural feminism and feminist spirituality, and many of the criticisms leveled against feminist spirituality actually mirrored other tensions within the women's movement.

The origins of many radical feminists' antipathy toward feminist spirituality is readily discerned. Politicized by their involvement in left-wing movements in the 1960s, most radical feminists rejected religion as "the opiate of the masses." Furthermore, their suspicion of male-dominated hierarchical institutions made nearly all organized religions unacceptable by definition. Finally, the role that traditional religions have played in justifying the subordinate status of women made religion even more unpalatable to many radical feminists. Thus most radical feminists were atheists or agnostic; they had rejected religion and spirituality and had filled their lives with sisterhood and the movement. For many women that would be enough, but for others, a void remained, and when they began to fill that void with discussions of ancient matriarchies

\[\text{' Davis, Moving the Mountain, 257-277.}\]
and goddesses, their less-spiritually inclined sisters were appalled. Such efforts would be criticized not only for being a "waste of time," but also for the direction in which they carried the movement itself.

One such critique was offered in the frequently reprinted article "Will the Women's Movement Survive?", where Naomi Weisstein and Heather Booth described feminist spirituality as a "collapse into mysticism," and also questioned its political merit. Similar objections were made in a series of letters and editorials in *off our backs*, beginning in 1976 and culminating in the spring and summer of 1977. As one critic explained in an article entitled "Off the Mountains and Into the Streets," "In considering the politics of spirituality, I cannot escape my sense that the grittiest, most urgent problems facing us are material." In another article that reviewed a New York spirituality conference, the authors concluded that spirituality could become too distracting even if it was not by definition dangerous to the movement. The language was, however, derisive: "Escapist fantasy can...become a

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5 Marcy Rein, "Off the Mountains and Into the Streets," *off our backs*, July/August 1977, 15.
substitute for real power. Identification with a mythic heritage can lead to losing sight of current realities."

Such arguments occurred not only at the national level, but state and local feminist groups also found themselves at odds with one another over this topic. In Columbus similar disagreements erupted in the early 1980s. When the newsletter of the Women’s Action Collective changed its name to *Womoon Rising*, members of the collective objected. The editors explained the change:

> As radical feminists we have all made the commitment to ending the patriarchy and re-establishing the Matriarchy. One of the ways we do this is by claiming as our own the strong ties between ourselves and the Mother Spirit. In Pre-historical societies (prior to patriarchy in both importance and chronology), the moon represented this Mother Spirit. We take the name WOMOON RISING because we are Womoon. And, although we may not yet be full, we are definitely rising."

Opponents objected to both the name change and the explanation. In the following issue of the newsletter,

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which was renamed *Womyn Rising* as a compromise, members took issue with both the manner in which the title was changed—not having gone through the collective process—and also the philosophy behind that decision. They maintained that the "ideas and politics were the authors' own, not the collective's." They further asked, "What is a Womoon? No one knows, but it certainly doesn't sound like a political activist." Once again, the relationship between political activism and feminist spirituality came into question, and this dispute ended bitterly as the woman mainly responsible for the new name ultimately resigned from the newsletter and left the collective.

Radical women's distaste for feminist spirituality also reflected the race and class tensions within the women's movement. Opponents of spirituality often pointed to the fact that practitioners of feminist spirituality were mostly white and middle-class and numerically represented only a privileged minority. Critics labeled them "privileged" because they supposedly had the time and means to concern themselves with matters that their more strictly political

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sisters saw as trivial. Most spiritual feminists were, indeed, white and middle class, but the same could be said of nearly all other parts of the women's movement, including radical feminism. Nevertheless, critics regarded feminist spirituality as a white, middle-class fad. In Columbus, the women of WAC delivered blunt criticism.

We feel it is easy for white feminists to dismiss racism, capitalism, and imperialism as secondary to sexism when cataloging the ills of the world. Matriarchy in and of itself could be no more than exchanging white women for white men as the rulers.

Making a similar argument in *off our backs*, Marcy Rein concluded her critique by lambasting feminist spirituality for being "inward-turning," apolitical, elitist, and a waste of "woman-energy."

Our time and energy are limited. Rituals practiced by a small group of initiates are inherently inward-turning. The choice to focus inward is one made possible by the class privilege of the participants. They are comfortable enough so that they have no need to forcibly wrest a decent living from

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9 Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 291.

the power structure. To come full circle, they represent a movement for those of us who aren’t starving, which will not act on the concerns of those of us who are. It is acutely painful to me to see woman-energy spent this way, away from the direct confrontation and organizing which will make the revolution.\(^1\)

Interestingly, the language and accusations leveled against feminist spirituality articulated in many ways various tensions within radical feminist theory. Radical feminists believed that gender was the oldest form of oppression and that all other forms were based on that model; consequently, radical feminist theory tended to elevate gender over issues of race and class.\(^2\) Perhaps such ideology was a reaction against past experiences with New Left men who viewed gender oppression as a secondary concern, but whatever its origins, this theory caused radical feminists themselves to face charges of racism and a lack of class-consciousness.\(^3\) Perhaps as a way to

\(^1\) Rein, “Off the Mountains,” 15.


\(^3\) Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Women*. 110
compensate, they turned the same charge on their spiritual sisters.

More understandable was radical feminism's discomfort with the essentialist arguments of spiritual feminists. In an effort to overturn the long-held belief that "biology is destiny," radical feminists, being mostly social constructionists who believed that gender roles were taught through the process of socialization, sought to degender society. Spiritual feminists, in contrast, believed that innate differences existed between men and women, and that women should celebrate and re-value those differences. In particular, spiritual feminists glorified women's capacity to give birth, celebrated menstruation, emphasized compassion and nurturing, and saw themselves as the earth's caretakers. This was a stark contradiction to radical feminist theory which radical feminists could not help but see as dangerous to their cause. "After decades of resisting the axiom that 'biology is destiny,'" complained writers in *off our backs*, "it is sad to encounter it in a new form. The emphasis on the woman-as-mother, female

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principle also seemed to be tied to contempt for that other female organ, the brain and the capacity for rational thought, recalling the old sexist dichotomy, 'men think, women feel.' From the radical feminist perspective, spiritual feminists were not confronting or challenging what they saw as restrictive patriarchal sex roles but instead embracing and lending credence to them. Many radical feminists began to view the entire feminist spirituality movement as an elaborate form of escapism that allowed some women to retreat from the horrors of battling patriarchy directly by emerging themselves in safe havens of Goddess worship, while political feminists remained to do all of the "real work."

Opponents also claimed that feminist spirituality suffered from a lack of critical thinking. For many radical feminists, any belief in a higher being, male or female, was anti-intellectual, childish, and anti-revolutionary. One Wiccan High Priestess in Columbus felt this antagonism first-hand when she contacted the Center for Women's Studies at Ohio State University in 1978 and offered to conduct some

workshops in feminist spirituality. She was summarily
turned down and remained angry about the rejection over
fifteen years later. "There was no interest and the gist
was, 'we don't do that.' Religion was not seen as a
worthwhile topic to pursue." She concluded that the
attitude at Ohio State was the result of "all that anti-
religion Marxist Bullshit." Radical feminist opponents
also perceived in feminist spirituality a dangerous tendency
to feel and believe--the very tenets of spirituality--at the
expense of critical thought. One critic described her
concerns about the "tendency to substitute superstition for
thinking," and added, "This is just substituting one set of
unquestioned assumptions for another, and is much easier
than doing the hard work of thinking." Actually, many
supporters and practitioners of feminist spirituality echoed
charges about a lack of thoughtfulness. One letter in off
our backs by a self-proclaimed witch pointed to this

16 Interview # 17, 5 May 1995, Columbus, Ohio.

17 Janis Kelly, "Lunation," off our backs July/August
1977, 20. It should be noted, however, that overall this
review of a feminist spirituality conference was far less
critical than most, and the author did point out that
despite her concerns, she did not feel that most of the
women at this conference were "off on escapist trips."
weakness in the feminist spirituality movement. She denied that feminist spirituality was apolitical or lacked class-consciousness but did state her belief that the true problem was an absence of "criticism and self-analysis" within spiritual circles. Furthermore, in my own interviews, this same criticism surfaced several times. "There is a problem with the scholarship and a decided lack of left-brain critical analysis in most of the feminist spirituality literature," one Columbus woman explained. However, unlike radical feminist critics, spiritual feminists did not condemn the willingness to believe in a higher force, just some of the scholarship regarding ancient matriarchies and religions.

In a no-win proposition for feminist spirituality, it also faced charges of being either too radical or too "traditional" and "anti-revolutionary." Brooke Williams took spiritual feminists to task for reactionary tendencies early in the debate, stating that "Mysticism and religion are based on fatalism. Fatalism sees change made by


19 Interview # 7, 12 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
ourselves in concrete conditions as impossible. As such, fatalism is absolutely opposed to revolutionary change."\(^{20}\)

According to this definition, spiritual feminists chose between their faith and revolution, for Williams saw the two as mutually exclusive. The women of WAC in Columbus held similar views. In their debate they informed the spiritual feminists: "Equally disturbing is your reference to a 'Mother Spirit.' If you feel some strong ties to this entity, fine--but don't speak for the collective. The whole concept, down to the name being capitalized is traditional in many ways."\(^{21}\) At the same time that these accusations appeared, others worried that advocacy of woman-only Dianic covens would lead to a "sexual caste system" that would replace patriarchy with a "Gynocracy," where men would be dehumanized and only women would have power. "It seems like another case of the oppressed adopting the characteristics of the oppressor," stated off our backs reviewers.\(^{22}\)

\(^{20}\) Brooke, "Cultural Feminism," 67.

\(^{21}\) "Letters," Womyn Rising, 10.

Off our backs was not the only feminist publication to disapprove of feminist spirituality. MS, the movement’s best known liberal feminist journal, mentioned spiritual feminism on only three occasions in the 1970s and then not in the most positive of lights. Aside from one article by Robin Morgan in 1975 and one mention of the Z. Budapest fortune-telling case in 1976, MS acknowledged feminist spirituality only one other time, and that was in a highly critical review of WomanSpirit magazine. In an overview of movement publications by Lindsy Van Gelder, WomanSpirit was described as the “leader of the feminist spirituality movement.” Claiming that “If you like menstruation, you’ll love WomanSpirit,” Van Gelder concluded:

I tried hard to relate fairly to this publication for months, but I gave up after the Spring Equinox issue which, in its letters column, carried a report from a woman currently involved in a meaningful relationship with two fir trees who speak to her in a special tree-language that she thinks may be related to Sanskrit or the language from Lord of the Rings.23

This review provoked a response from WomanSpirit contributor Christina Pacosz. The portrayal of “WomanSpirit magazine as

some sort of voice for the lunatic feminist fringe" perturbed Pacosz. She defended the woman Van Gelder had derided for talking to trees, and concluded, "Once we open ourselves to the knowledge of the life forms with which we share this planet, the old mind think of patriarchal culture no longer holds as much power over us." An unrepentant Van Gelder replied, "Sorry, but on the scale of blows against the patriarchy, I fail to be deeply troubled by my inability to form meaningful relationships with mighty oaks and spreading chestnuts." According to WomanSpirit founder Ruth Mountaingrove, this exchange did inspire MS to send a reporter to do an in-depth story on WomanSpirit and the movement it represented. That reporter, however, was given such a "hard-time" by the women at WomanSpirit that she never completed the article. Not until 1993, in fact, would a newly formatted MS, with the nationally known

26 Interview # 40, 15 October 1996; MS, March-April 1993.
"cultural feminist" Robin Morgan as its editor, cover feminist spirituality.\textsuperscript{27}

The early 1980s brought little change in attitude in the feminist press towards feminist spirituality. MS continued to ignore it, and \textit{off our backs} persisted in debating it, but not with the same frequency or intensity. Still, a 1981 letter from a Wicca practitioner stated, "There is a strong anti-wicca sentiment among segments of the Feminist Community--which surfaces in publications periodically." Still arguing that feminist spirituality was political, she resented having to "engage in a "Who has the better feminist credentials' battle," and emphasized how Wicca had aided her in her political efforts to enact change for women.\textsuperscript{28} Alice, an \textit{off Our Back} writer, responded with arguments similar to those presented in the previous debate, and contended that religion was a "waste of time" that

\textsuperscript{27} Morgan, although considered by many such as Alice Echols to be a "cultural feminist," calls herself a radical feminist.

\textsuperscript{28} Murf, "Feeding the Spirit," \textit{off our backs}, March 1981, 27.
"inhibits problem solving because a bad thought process is encouraged."²⁹

Nearly a decade later, in 1989 and 1990, *off our backs* still printed negative articles on feminist spirituality, although in most of the intervening years it had ignored the movement. In 1989 the continued prevalence of feminist spirituality again inspired criticism. In "Pre-Packaged Spiritualism," Angela Johnson discussed how she and several other feminists shared their anger at a Take Back the Night March over the pervasiveness of "new age" (she used this term, as many do, as a catch-all for a variety of different types of alternative religions) spirituality at feminist gatherings. She called the spiritualist movement "racist and classist," "self-indulgent," and criticized it for "exalting the masculine." Mostly, however, she confessed to feeling "embarrassment," stating, "I think that new age spirituality, the left's panacea for all the world's ills, is embarrassing."³⁰


Johnson's critique, although not particularly new, was telling. For one, it demonstrated how ubiquitous spirituality, "the left's panacea," had become at nearly every type of feminist gathering, while also demonstrating that it was still not universally accepted. Like those critics before her, she complained that spirituality not only drained the women's movement, but also that it undid many of the gains women had made by "eschewing their autonomy."\(^{31}\)

Predictably, Johnson's article provoked a flurry of angry letters from spiritual feminists (many of whom obviously read *off our backs*) who found her comments offensive and misinformed. Among the more thoughtful respondents, Susanna J. Sturgis drew parallels between many of the spiritual rituals that Johnson had ridiculed and similar acts considered political. She noted that while Johnson made fun of the political effectiveness of women coming together to perform spiritual rituals, she herself had been at a Take Back the Night March. "Sure, just like her own walk at night through Philadelphia, possibly wearing

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
a feminist t-shirt or button, made the streets safe for women, but she found good reasons to do it anyway."

In another letter of opposition a woman who described herself as having both African and Native American ancestors wrote, "The commentary on New Age movements in the last issue reminded me why I no longer consider myself part of the formal Lesbian-feminist movement." She had left the "formal" movement, but not because of her involvement in feminist spirituality, but because of the larger movement's attitude towards it.

Not all the letters vented anger at Johnson's article (three rather lengthy letters opposed Johnson's article and two supported her stance). Jan Hardy exalted that other feminists shared her disdain for spirituality. "In my community, skeptics are a definite minority, and crystal-gazing is seen as legitimate political activity." She did differ with Johnson on one point: she did not feel "embarrassment" towards the "new agers" in the movement, but

"embarrassment" towards the "new agers" in the movement, but


rather anger. Her letter, like the article that prompted it, demonstrated both how quickly and thoroughly feminist spirituality had stormed the women's movement, and how many feminists still found it unacceptable and apolitical.34

Both sides of this debate considered themselves to be part of the same movement, and as such, this confrontation was played out in a variety of settings. Feminist publications represented one of the most important means of exchange between radical and spiritual feminists, but they were not the only forum for discussion and confrontation. Feminist gatherings were another important venue, and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was one of the most significant. This annual festival began in 1975 and represented a totally male-free environment to enjoy women's music, crafts, and workshops.

In the 1990s the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival so teemed with the presence of the Goddess and her followers that one would never guess that Z. Budapest boycotted the event for years for its "lack of spirituality." It was not until the tenth festival in 1985 that feminist spirituality

34 Jan Hardy, "Zucchini of My Being," off our backs, February 1989, 19.
and its leaders were officially welcomed, and it was not until the thirteenth festival that Z. Budapest felt comfortable attending after a nine-year boycott of the event. By that time the feminist spirituality movement was already in evidence at the festival. Goddess images were present in the form of jewelry and ceramics and other crafts, but the organizers refused to permit any official prayers from the main stage. After seeking permission to lead prayers in the late 1970s, Budapest was told, "No. There are too many atheists out there," and "We cannot let the representative of any one religion on stage, because then all kinds of religious representatives would want to do the same."

Budapest thought such a broad spectrum of involvement was a great idea, but, according to her, the festival planners did not.\(^5\)

Although prayers to the Goddess were forbidden on the main stage before 1985, as early as 1980 writers at off our backs were "distressed at the predominant support for change through spirituality and revolution through alternatives."

"I don't like any religions," wrote Tacie Dejanikus, "and


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what bothers me the most about matriarchal religion is that it is being presented at the largest gathering of lesbians as an important (or worse THE) alternative to men’s domination of women.”

By 1985, the gathering had workshops such as: “Weaving Magic and Politics: Writing From a Goddess Perspective,” or “Differently Abled Women’s Spirituality: What Is It For Us?” Healing Circles and Aura Work were also popular.

All in all, many radical feminists opposed cultural feminism, and especially feminist spirituality, at nearly every juncture. Philosophically, strategically, and conceptually non-spiritual feminists found fault with the theories and practices of feminist spirituality. Spiritual feminists were not intellectual enough, they were not class-conscious, they lacked a firm grasp of political “reality,” they drummed instead of marched, dreamed when they should have been raging, and worshiped a Goddess that most opponents doubted had ever existed, or even if she once did,

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had long ago deserted women to the agony of patriarchy. They stood by mystified, and even a little betrayed, as feminist spirituality continued to grow at a pace that political radical feminism could not match.

ECOFEMINISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

Although radical feminists were among the loudest and most outspoken critics of feminist spirituality, they were not the movement's only antagonists. Many in the environmental movement also grew uncomfortable with the increasing numbers of ecofeminists in their ranks. Environmental critics were especially uncomfortable with the Goddess language and symbolism ecofeminists invoked. Ecofeminists, like all environmentalists, wanted to protect the earth and its resources. They, however, drew a connection between the treatment of women whose physiology has long been associated more with natural processes and the Western world's cavalier disregard of ecological systems. As such, ecofeminists believed that women, and feminists in particular, needed to protect "Mother Earth," whom many
believed was at least symbolically, if not actually, the body of the Goddess.\textsuperscript{38}

Many of those critical of ecofeminism, such as feminist and environmental activist (but not ecofeminist) Janet Biehl, objected, as did radical feminists, to the essentialist conceptual framework of ecofeminists. Biehl labeled this framework as "reactionary" for the women's movement. For example, in her book, \textit{Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics}, Biehl censures ecofeminists for embracing, rather than rejecting, the male socially constructed notion of women as "other," especially the "myth" that women were inherently closer to nature. "The male-created joint 'otherness' of women, in which 'woman equals nature,' in fact becomes a positive political starting point for ecofeminists."\textsuperscript{39} Biehl also criticized separatism, arguing that women must work with like-minded men to enact effective


ecological change, and she critiqued much of the scholarship upon which feminist spirituality rested. She was especially skeptical of the scholarship of Riane Eisler and Marija Gimbutas, who used archaeological and anthropological evidence to argue the existence of matriarchal or gender-equal societies in the pre-historic past that revered the feminine and were therefore more peaceful.⁴⁰

Biehl demonstrated that such scholarship lacked broad scientific acceptance, and that even those aspects that were archaeologically sound still could be misinterpreted. For example, she argued that reverence for a Goddess did not automatically translate into a higher status for women. She noted that in countries such as Burma (Myanmar) or among Chinese Buddhists, which have female Goddesses, the treatment of women remained abysmal.⁴¹

The Goddess-imagery of most ecofeminists really outraged environmentalists such as Biehl. "[Charlene] Spretnak, for example, seems to feel that changing the sex of a culture’s deity yields profound political and social

⁴¹ Ibid., 93-99.
differences for that culture. A veritable religious determinist, in her version of history, culture is shaped primarily by religion." Although meant to be harsh, Biehl’s term “religious determinist” did accurately describe the conceptual framework of most spiritual feminists. The majority did believe that the roots of patriarchy lay in religious beliefs and that by challenging those religious concepts, they were, therefore, on the cutting edge of feminism.

Biehl did not stand alone in her critique of blending Goddess imagery with either feminist or environmental politics. In a 1991 article scholar and activist Betty Roszak leveled similar charges, but did admit that “the Goddess movement gives women a sense of spiritual strength.” Nonetheless, she, like Biehl, along with radical feminists and even many Christian feminists, speculated that identification with the archetypal mother might actually impair feminist gains. “Are we not being used again subtly in the service of male power? By acknowledging a special relationship between women and nature, do we not reinforce

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42 Ibid., 98.
the projection of male responsibility onto women as saviors of the world?" Feminist theologian (the unique spelling indicates a theologian with a feminist perspective) Emily Culpepper was more direct in her assessment, "It is not liberating for the women's movement to become simply the goddess movement, as some have suggested it should....[It] will fail to be true to its liberating motivation if the Goddess eclipses actual women."

Clearly the image of the Goddess, a symbol so many spiritual feminists found empowering, did not affect all women, or even all feminists, similarly. For every woman who saw women's connection to the Divine in the Goddess, another saw the reinforcement of the claims of patriarchy about women: men have transcended their animalistic past and were the keepers of intellect, while women were tied to nature and therefore less evolved.

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In a similar vein, spiritual feminism's glorification of motherhood, perhaps a corrective for the days when the women's movement seemed to denigrate everything about traditional womanhood, was equally troubling for some women. Once again, it seemed that rather than challenging patriarchal assumptions about women's roles and duties, spiritual feminists were merely reappropriating them, and thus undoing progress that had been made. "For all its claims of radicalism," wrote sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters, "feminist spirituality ends up creating a mirror image of male theology, or a self-indulgent glorification that serves to bolster traditional assumptions about women's identity."45

CHRISTIANS AND PAGANS

Feminist spirituality also sustained attacks from those it seems should have been on its side. Both feminist theologians and the broader NeoPagan movement found fault with spiritual feminism. Feminist theologians such as

Rosemary Radford Reuther and Elisabeth Schüssler Firoenza might have seen the feminist spirituality movement as an ally in their efforts to convince the women's movement of the true importance of religion, but instead treated it as a threat to their legitimacy. Already marginalized both in the theologian community and the feminist community, feminist theologians, or "reformists" who sought to redefine traditional religions in a woman-friendly way, found that the emergence of feminist spirituality jeopardized further their status in both communities. In the women's movement, feminist spirituality was not always approved of, but, having completely rejected traditional, patriarchal religions, spiritual feminists often met with more approval than feminist theologians from other feminists. Among theologians, the intellectual "fuzziness" of feminist spirituality further weakened what little credibility feminist theologians had gained.46

46 Much of this information was shared with me by other participants at the Centennial Conference on The Woman's Bible, Seneca Falls, New York, 4 November 1995. Many of the women at this conference were Christian feminists who had worked hard to reconcile two world views that meant a great deal to them. I left this conference with a newly found respect for such women. At the session where I presented my paper, however, one member of the audience made it clear
Feminist theologians also frequently argued that by redefining what was good in traditional religions, they were more truly radical than those who labeled such efforts "reformist." Spiritual feminists, who dubbed themselves "revolutionaries," often just changed the gender of God, charged theological critics, but did not fundamentally challenge society's dualistic understanding of the Divine. 

"I believe that merely replacing a male transcendent deity with an immanent female one is an insufficient answer to the 'god-problem'," Rosemary Radford Reuther wrote.

that she did not approve of "Pagan women" claiming the term "feminist spirituality." She had thought the term would describe Christian or Jewish women working to transform traditional religions, but not women who had mostly been raised in traditional religions, and then chosen to reject them. Interestingly, I have encountered hostility over this concept more than once. It seems that for many people, different religions are acceptable if it is the religion of one's people. But to be raised Christian (and it has always been among Christians that I have confronted this) and then choose to reject Christianity, seems to rankle many people.

47 In Womanspirit Rising, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow used these terms to define the two different approaches, although they later stated that they regretted the way their terminology had increased tensions between the two groups.

48 Reuther, Gaia & God, 4.

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The debate between "Biblical" feminist theologians and "countercultural feminists," as Reuther called spiritual feminists, also became heated after she published an inflammatory article in which she called feminist spirituality "escapist," "dangerous," and implied that those involved were "immature." Reuther felt that the new movement questioned the feminist credentials of those who remained in traditional religions:

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."

This controversy spread from the pages of The Christian Century, whose readers largely supported Ruether's interpretation of the movement, to the pages of WomanSpirit and even to Charlene Spretnak's anthology The Politics of Women's Spirituality. WomanSpirit readers, obviously, found Ruether's assessment insulting. Barbara Mor answered her criticisms in "A Woman Against the Bible," which referred to

Christianity, and especially Fundamentalist Christianity, as a "psychosis in which the human mind is twisted into a functional state of paranoia against the terms of its own existence." In a less heated response Spretnak wrote, "'Be like me--or else!' sentiments on either side are sad and clearly divisive. A feminist's decision to live within or without patriarchal religion must be honored as a deeply felt expression of her self-determination." Although less provocative, Spretnak's choice of words and her description of traditional religions as "patriarchal" made it clear which decision she felt was most correct, and her final statement reinforced her view that Goddess worship was more appropriate for a "good feminist." "We honor multiplicity within unity--which many of us feel is most accurately symbolized by the procreative Goddess from Whose womb comes the multiplicity who are of the One."

The larger NeoPagan movement seemed as if it should have been an even more natural ally for feminist

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50 Barbara Mor, "A Woman Against the Bible," WomanSpirit, Fall 1980, 17.

spirituality, but in fact the exclusion of men and male gods at spiritual feminist gatherings caused much contention. When feminists first began gaining a foothold in the Pagan community, criticism ran high in the Pagan press. According to Margot Adler, "Among all these articles and letters, one truly serious criticism of feminist Witchcraft has emerged, albeit often under a pile of chauvinist garbage: the fear that exclusive Goddess worship can lead to a transcendent monotheism." NeoPagans argued that feminist spirituality violated the mostly pantheistic outlook of Pagans and also interfered with the highly regarded Pagan principle of balance (between male and female energy and equal reverence for the Goddess and the God). Spiritual feminists, on the other hand, were often inclined to place the Goddess far above the God, or to worship her exclusively. As one of the Columbus women succinctly stated, "Women need the Goddess to heal, and this whole emphasis on balance is not necessary, the notion of balance is over-rated." Paganism, however, was not a faith with a strict doctrine, so even though the

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52 Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 212.
53 Interview # 14, 17 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
Goddess-only and anti-male sentiments of many spiritual feminists did violate much of traditional Paganism, the Pagan idiom "there is no one true path" permitted this schism to heal rather quickly by the late 1970s.

Finally, in 1988 the Vatican joined the ranks of those condemning feminist spirituality. In a statement issued from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which had been the Holy Office of the Roman Inquisition until 1965, Dominican priest Matthew Fox was ordered to "dissociate himself" from "Wicca, the ideology (note they did not call it a religion) of Starhawk." Fox, himself a founder of an alternative faith known as Creative Spirituality, had given Starhawk a teaching position at the Dominican College he ran in California. Their association, along with his own radicalism, ultimately led to his defrocking in 1993. For Starhawk and the movement she represented, the publicity from the Vatican seemed only to validate spiritual feminist claims that their movement was a fast-growing threat to traditional, patriarchal religions. As Starhawk explained, "In some ways, it's a backhanded
compliment, I guess, that the Vatican is still worried about witches after all this time."®

CONCLUSION

The criticisms lodged against feminist spirituality followed along some common lines. The essentialist framework of feminist spirituality bothered critics of various stripes. Radical feminists and environmental opponents perceived essentialism as an acceptance of traditional gender roles and pointed out that the women's movement had worked diligently to challenge such assumptions. Similarly, the Goddess herself, whether as historic fact or merely a symbol, was also problematic. To secular feminists the Goddess was simply an overly simplistic, and overly commercialized, bandage, and not a cure, for the problem of patriarchy. They viewed the Goddess as a balm that did not heal, but instead misled and betrayed the gains feminists had made, draining the movement of precious "woman-energy" and offering platitudes to a complex problem.

Outside the women's movement, opponents such as feminist theologians, the larger NeoPagan movement, and even the Vatican were frequently protecting their own turf, and other critics raised valid concerns about the intellectual foundations of feminist spirituality. Questions regarding the political merit of feminist spirituality also demonstrated an internal feminist struggle over ownership and definition of the term "radical feminist."

Although feminism was a multi-faceted movement plagued with a variety of internal tensions, feminist spirituality was the only part of the movement regularly termed "self-indulgent" or "escapist" by other feminists. Although many of the arguments made against feminist spirituality have validity, why was it so "self-indulgent" for these women to seek spiritual equality and empowerment when it was not considered inappropriate for them to seek economic or social equality and empowerment? For some of the movement's critics the answer is clear: Christian feminists were themselves struggling for legitimacy, and the Goddess movement seemed a serious threat to any progress they had made; Pagan men did not like being excluded and told that the female Goddess outranked any male deities; the Vatican
had long opposed Pagan rituals and worship; and environmentalists had also worked hard to be taken seriously and did not welcome the sudden equating of environmental politics with Goddess rituals. The vehemence of the attacks within the women's movement itself are more difficult to explain, but seem to suggest that most non-spiritual feminists equated all forms of religion or spirituality with female oppression, and were unable, or unwilling, to concede that for some women, this was not the case.
CHAPTER 4

CREATING A NEW PARADIGM:

FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AND FEMINIST POLITICS

The debate over feminist spirituality was far from a one-sided dialogue, for spiritual feminists, as we have seen, did not suffer in silence all the criticisms directed their way. Many of the early leaders of feminist spirituality considered themselves radical feminists, and many also possessed leadership and organizational skills as well as a certain political savvy. They saw no disjuncture between their feminism and their spirituality and firmly believed that one fed the other. In the words of spiritual feminist and author Diane Stein, feminist spirituality embodied "the feminist values of peace, freedom, earth awareness, personal and global responsibility, and multicultural respect, its practice puts into spiritual and religious context the ethics and political messages of the
women's movement. To Stein, and others like her, feminist spirituality was intensely political.

THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

If a group of women came together to chant, sing, drum, and to ask the Goddess to end war, famine, and all forms of oppression, how political was this gathering? Arguably, not very, but what if this ritual inspired those who might otherwise not have had the courage, or interest, to march in a pro-choice rally, write their political representatives, and donate money to Green Peace? Did it then become a political meeting?

Spiritual feminists have long argued that the very act of empowering women constituted a political action, and it is clear that feminist spirituality and its rituals did empower women. The images and symbolic constructions of

1 Diane Stein, Casting the Circle, 1.

2 Recent studies from a variety of disciplines support the claim that women's involvement in ritual and feminist spirituality is healing. See: Janet L. Jacobs, "The Effects of Ritual Healing on Female Victims of Abuse: A Study of Empowerment and Transformation," Sociological Analysis, Fall 1989, 265-279; Tanya M. Luhrmann, "Resurgence of Romanticism: Contemporary Neo-Paganism, Feminist Spirituality and the Divinity of Nature," ed., Kay Milton,
Pagan Goddesses—the Maiden, Mother and Crone—granted women not only the power of creation (the Mother) but also the power of destruction (the Crone). Furthermore, the Pagan Goddess lived independent of male domination, and, if anything, men existed to serve her. This restructuring of gender and spiritual relations made women, as the embodiment of the Goddess, equal to men at the very least, and superior in the minds of many spiritual feminists. This conception differed greatly from the Jewish and Christian doctrines that severed direct female connections to the Divine and granted women only a subordinate role in religious and spiritual matters.

Not surprisingly, spiritual feminists took particular offense at the allegations that feminist spirituality was apolitical and anti-revolutionary. From their perspective, patriarchal religions formed the cornerstone of patriarchy, and without a direct assault on those institutions, the women’s movement could never be successful. Furthermore, because feminist spirituality empowered women, spiritual feminists felt it was inherently political and

revolutionary. "I am saying," argued one adherent, "that along with inner strength the Goddess or Womanspirit movement offers us an immediate, positive means of combating those institutionalized 'religious' values that have for too long been used to legitimize sexist, racist, and economic oppression."  

Spiritual feminists believed that the reclaiming of women's individual and collective power represented the most political and revolutionary act any woman could commit. Throughout all of my interviews with spiritual feminists, this theme appeared again and again, even among the younger women who had no direct memory of the radical versus cultural feminist debate. Many, in fact, demonstrated an inability to distinguish between politics and spirituality and showed complete amazement when informed that there were feminists who thought the two incompatible. "Why it was the Goddess that brought me to feminism," exclaimed one Columbus Pagan, "Before I knew the Goddess I never thought myself or other women worth fighting for." Nor was she the only woman

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who came to feminism through feminist spirituality.¹ Nine of the women interviewed felt that they had not been feminists until after they became involved in feminist spirituality. One such woman had just attended her first feminist function, marching with NOW to protest violence against women, a few days before our meeting.² For some women, then, feminist spirituality has served as an agent of mobilization for feminist politics, and not as the drain that its opponents commonly believed.

All of the early leaders of feminist spirituality, in fact, insisted that spirituality and politics were flip sides of the same coin. Z. Budapest, Ann Forfreedom, Robin Morgan, and Starhawk all maintained that spirituality and politics did not extinguish each other and that both were necessary for feminism to be successful. As Robin Morgan stated in MS in 1975, "'Praise the Goddess and pass the petition,' as it were. Which is fortunate, because I assume the Goddess is a feminist, and would not be amused at being

¹ Interview # 1, Columbus, Ohio, 17 July 1995.
² Interview # 8, Columbus, Ohio, 25 July 1995.
expected to pick up after others' messes." In the Susan B. Anthony Coven Number One’s Manifesto, entitled “Politics of Women’s Religion,” Budapest was equally clear:

We believe that, just as it is time to fight for the right to control our bodies, it is also time to fight for our sweet women souls. We believe that in order to fight and win a revolution that will stretch for generations into the future, we must find reliable ways to replenish our energies. We believe that without a secure grounding in women’s spiritual strength there will be no victory for us....We are equally committed to political, communal, and personal solutions."

A few lines later, Budapest laid out her explicit claim that feminist spirituality was filled with political meaning.

"What people believe is political because it influences their actions and because it is the vehicle by which a religion perpetuates a social system. Politics and religion are interdependent."

A 1976 WomanSpirit article explained the political aspects of feminist spirituality more fully:

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7 Budapest, Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries, 2.

8 Ibid., 3.
This talk is about how we integrate our spirituality (who we are, our process/experience of energy together) and our politics (how we channel and direct the energy we generate together), and why it is crucial that we do so. We have tended to focus either on spirituality or on politics, either on process or on product. But they are interrelated: spirituality focuses from society to the individual, while politics focuses on our differences which result in our experiences of separateness.  

Well-known ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak was another spiritual feminist who vehemently denied radical feminist (or, as she called them, "materialist feminist") claims that feminist spirituality was apolitical. When the feminist journal *Chrysalis* dedicated an issue to the topic in 1978, Spretnak, along with Gloria Greenfield and Judith Antares, wrote a spirited defense of "The Politics of Women's Spirituality." They not only defended feminist spirituality as inherently political, but further suggested that those feminists who were not spiritual were actually less revolutionary and more indoctrinated by patriarchal assumptions than those who were spiritual. "Patriarchy," Antares contended, "creates a split in consciousness." This

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dualistic thinking, she argued, limits one's perceptions and definitions only to include that which is "material." Such limited perceptions, she continued, perpetuate patriarchal institutions and limit the possibilities of the women's movement to an outdated model shaped by patriarchal rules. "Dismissing spirituality as apolitical, relegating it to a different sphere than the material, is short-sighted and feeds right into the rationalist fears that work to maintain the patriarchy."™ Spretnak, Greenfield, and Antares, much like the women I interviewed, believed that a movement without a spiritual basis for those who need it was doomed to stagnate and wither away.

In fact, in direct contrast to the emotional debates conducted in the feminist press, my research indicated that radical feminist critics misunderstood overall who was involved in feminist spirituality. The critiques of radical feminists implied that most spiritual feminists were former radical feminists who had somehow "gone astray." Of those women surveyed in Columbus, only eight identified with the

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term "radical feminist." Many described their feminism as more of the "armchair variety," although nearly all expressed a desire to become more involved in "political feminism." However, upon closer questioning it became clear that all but seven of the 35 had been involved in either marches, protests, clinic defense, or some other form of political activism. Only one former radical feminist felt that she had become less politically active, and that was more the result of "burn-out" than a lack of commitment.¹¹ "Feminist spirituality does not drive women out of political activism, explained one Columbus witch very involved in gay and lesbian politics, "rather, it is a place where some who have burned-out end-up, but mostly it is a place that helps prevent burn-out by helping women to heal."¹²

Common feminist lore holds that the debate between cultural and radical feminists supposedly ended by the mid-1970s when cultural feminism vanquished its more political foe, radical feminism.¹³ Recently, however, many feminist

¹¹ Interview # 26, Columbus, Ohio, 23 August 1995.
¹² Interview # 15, Columbus, Ohio, 29 September 1995.
¹³ Echols, Daring To Be Bad, 5.
scholars have challenged that belief. "On the contrary," argued Nancy Whittier in her study of the radical women's movement, "a radical feminist challenge persisted throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s in many forms: women's movement organizations, the politicized actions of individuals in their daily lives, and within movements for other causes."¹⁴ Spiritual feminists, many of whom continued to define themselves as radical feminists, strongly believed that their actions were both political and quite radical, and that they were enhancing, and not betraying, radical feminist ideology. As one annoyed spiritual feminist stated in *off our backs*,

> witches have not arrived on broomstick to carry away all you 'political' women to some subterranean grotto to moonbathe and space out. The concept of dropping out is totally absurd but being linear thinkers, you seem to see a one dimensional universe to be either in or out of.¹⁵


THE EMERGENCE OF ECOFEMINISM

Spiritual feminists not only claimed a political nature, but also worked to redefine what constituted a feminist issue. In particular, spiritual feminists added environmental issues to the feminist agenda with the birth of the ecofeminist movement in the mid-1970s. Second wave feminists had expressed an awareness of a connection between women and nature since at least the early 1970s. Articles such as "How Being Female Helps in Understanding the Nature Question," or "Women and Ecology" were common in the feminist press by 1970. An assertion that sounded like something from later ecofeminist conferences appeared in the pages of off our backs in 1970:

Man has treated Nature and all people he considers weaker than himself exactly as he has treated woman--as an object to be oppressed, suppressed, repressed, subjugated, and used-up. Why else do ecologists so commonly refer to the "rape of the land?" (Which, don't forget, is "Mother" Earth). Why else is the act of rape always the culmination, the proof, and the symbol of the conqueror's success in war?


17 Mary Ann Murphy, "Women and Ecology."
In 1974 the first Women in the Environment Conference was held, and by the mid-1970s, according to Charlene Spretnak, women drew upon their own "experiential explorations" and ecofeminism was born. Her definition of this new movement betrayed her radical feminist roots. "Ecofeminism...holds that identifying the dynamics--largely fear and resentment--behind the dominance of male over female is the key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic, industrial forms."\textsuperscript{18}

Eight of the women I interviewed called themselves ecofeminists and were very active in either the Ohio Green Party or the Ohio Environmental Council. In fact, I interviewed two immediately after their involvement in a protest in Columbus on the fiftieth anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For these women, environmental issues were indisputably feminist issues and always had been. "Nuclear weapons," explained one ecofeminist, "are the pinnacle of patriarchal domination,  

they can bring about the apocalypse, and men are proud of their destruction."19 Another explained, "The environmental movement's strongest leaders are women, women who are mothers who want to clean up the earth for their children."20 Even those women who did not actively identify as ecofeminists saw environmental concerns as a natural extension of the women's movement. This assessment fit with their views that women were the natural caretakers of the earth.

Ecofeminist politics embraced a variety of issues ranging from recycling to anti-nuclear protest. Seeing a vital connection between the treatment of women and the treatment of the earth, ecofeminism became, in all its varied forms, the political expression of the feminist spirituality movement. It was not an organized body or coherent wing, but, like the feminist spirituality movement itself, ecofeminism embodied a shared spirit and mission. By blending environmental politics, women's issues, and Goddess spirituality, ecofeminists expanded both the

19 Interview # 5, Columbus, Ohio, 31 July 1995.
20 Interview # 31, Columbus, Ohio, 10 August 1995.
definition of environmentalism and feminism, while also giving feminist spirituality an unmistakable political flavor.

In "Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory," Carolyn Merchant defined ecofeminism as "a response to the perception that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in Western culture and that both can be elevated and liberated through direct political action." Such a definition lent itself to a broader definition of environmental, and feminist, concerns. This definition included not only more traditional environmental interests such as land, resource, and species protection, but also such issues as violence against women and children (including abortion rights, battering, poverty, famine, and inadequate health care), peace activism and anti-militarism, anti-nuclear activism, and even animal-rights and vegetarianism. Under the umbrella of ecofeminism these disparate areas were united as feminist and environmental issues. Male contempt for nature and the earth fueled the violation of the environment and women, and the degradation of both was, according to ecofeminists, associated with the
supplanting of the Great Mother Goddess by the patriarchal male god of Judeo-Christian heritage.\textsuperscript{21}

As with nearly all the terms associated with feminist spirituality, the definition of ecofeminism varied from adherent to adherent. There were women who claimed the term ecofeminist as their own, but who were not vegetarians or pacifists, and vice versa. The boundaries of the term, like feminist spirituality, were amorphous and permeable.

Despite its imprecise nature, ecofeminism still led to direct political actions and not merely theorizing. The Three Mile Island nuclear plant disaster in 1979 inspired two separate feminist conferences to discuss environmental issues, and in 1980 Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND) was founded. In 1985 Starhawk and Ynestra King founded the first national ecofeminist organization, the WomanEarth Feminist Peace Institute, "to bridge the insights of academic feminism and the wisdom of our experience," and in 1995 Starhawk launched the Pagan Political Agenda, an organization whose five-point platform included Sacred Values: Peace, Community, Family; Diversity; Self-

Determination; Environment; and Human Needs and Social Justice. Starhawk, and thousands of other like-minded spiritual feminists, have been involved in a variety of protests, especially at nuclear power and weapons plants, where they have frequently been arrested for their activism.

Starhawk was also well-known for her "Political Despair Ritual" after the re-election of Ronald Reagan in 1984, where participants lit candles to symbolize their commitment to working for a better future, despite Reagan's return to office. 22

Starhawk was not alone in such activism. Spiritual feminists led the way during the early 1980s in second wave involvement in such events as the 1980 Women's Pentagon Action, the 1981-1984 Livermore Action Group in California, and the 1984 women's peace camp in Seneca, New York. At such events spiritual and political feminism met head-on, and, according to sociologist Barbara Epstein's study of

nonviolent direct actions, "women's spirituality became a major presence and virtually overwhelmed secular forms of feminism." The protestors, nearly all women and mostly lesbians, combined traditional civil disobedience with ritual. For example, outside the Pentagon women peace activists planted cardboard tombstones, and with a giant circle of activists they encircled the building and strung webs of "life-affirming women's materials" (such as yarn or ribbons) across its doorways. In a sister demonstration on the West coast, 300 women gathered in San Francisco outside a club frequented by powerful business leaders and politicians. Together they chanted:

We are the flow, we are the ebb.
We are the weavers, we are the web.24

To keep up morale at the women's peace camps, such as the one in New York where women camped for weeks at a time, women participated in similar circles of singing, dancing, and storytelling. According to ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak, these activities were "catalysts of empowerment


24 Starhawk, Dreaming the Dark, 168.
that often were directly informed by feminist spirituality."25 Making a similar argument, Barbara Epstein noted, "Pagan rituals became a routine feature of actions and were often helpful in breaking down barriers and drawing people together."26 Epstein also explained that Pagans were among the first to "grasp the importance of symbolism and ritual on the way people think and of the enormous power of collective action proceeding from a positive vision." She remained, however, critical of any belief that such rituals brought about any definite actions, such as the closing of a nuclear plant, and called such Pagan claims "naive" and "unrealistic."27

NEW DEFINITIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS: REDEFINING FEMINISM

Spiritual feminism, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life, has not only helped to expand the definition of what is a feminist issue, but it has also contributed to a fundamental shift in feminist

25 Spretnak, Politics of Women's Spirituality, xv-xvi.
26 Epstein, Political Protest, 170.
27 Ibid., 183-184.

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theory and vocabulary. Many scholars of the women’s movement in the 1990s have noted that feminists are less likely to speak only of patriarchy, and more likely to focus on opposing domination of any type—men over women, humans over animals and nature, or whites over people of color. Ecofeminists were among the first to adopt this semantic and theoretical shift. For example, in a 1983 article entitled, “Naming the Forces that Push Us Towards War,” Charlene Spretnak blamed male aggression, but she also repeatedly spoke of what she termed a “dominance mode.” “A dominance mode required dehumanizing ‘the other’—women, people of color, or foreign nations—and idealizing oneself.” Spretnak was already emphasizing the connections between dominance and a variety of different forms of oppression.\(^{28}\)

This restructuring of feminist emphasis no longer elevated gender oppression over all other types of oppression, and was, therefore, a far cry from the “sex-class” system that early radical feminists such as Shulamith

\(^{28}\) Charlene Spretnak, “Naming the Forces that Push Us Towards War,” *WomanSpirit*, Fall 1983, 57-60. In *Moving the Mountain*, Davis also credits ecofeminists with having first embraced this terminology, 484.
Firestone had adapted from the work of Simone de Beauvoir. This new paradigm, not surprisingly, met with some resistance, and provoked a 1980 article in off our backs:

The view that every issue is a woman's issue and any struggle by any woman is part of feminism is another way of avoiding the man problem. Women are diverted from ending male supremacy into social welfare and activities against racism, capitalism, war, nukes, and anti-gay bigotry as part of the women's movement. Feminism is the one movement expected to hurl aside its specific goals for every other battle against the world's ills.

Despite such protests, influential writings by women of color, for example, emphasized how sexual discrimination was but one of the many problems faced by women. Such literature provided the movement with a broader perspective, so much so that by 1990 Patricia Hill Collins would write of a "matrix of domination" that incorporated the interlocking systems of oppression regarding race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual preference. Feminist theory by the late 1980s had broadened to the point that it was no longer

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29 Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex.


solely concerned with patriarchy, and issues that spiritual feminists began discussing as feminist concerns as early as the late 1970s were among those commonly accepted as feminist issues by the 1990s.\textsuperscript{32}

The animal rights movement serves as an example of where this new paradigm led feminists. Arguments stressing how men have exploited and dominated women and the earth neatly lent themselves to similar arguments regarding the treatment of animals. As with ecological issues, some feminists argued for a connection between animal rights and feminism early in the 1970s, echoing anti-vivisectionist and vegetarian Mary Kingsford who had made similar claims in the 1870s. In a "Declaration of th[e] Rights of Animals," a ten-point plank demanded an end to all forms of animal abuse, and in "A Vegetarian Feminist Paper," Connie Salamone accused feminists of being "Human Chauvinists."\textsuperscript{33} Salamone


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went on to be one of the first ecofeminists to include animal rights and vegetarianism in the ecofeminist platform, and in 1983 she founded World Women for Animal Rights.\footnote{Joan Beth Clair, "Woman Warrior for Animal Rights: Connie Salamone," \textit{Woman of Power}, Winter/Spring 1986, 18-21.}

That same year a \textit{WomanSpirit} article passionately argued that "Animal Rights is a Feminist Issue," and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) successfully shut-down a laboratory that was testing "tissue damage" by shooting stray animals. PETA co-founder Ingrid E. Newkirk expressed the new language of ecofeminism well: "Animal Rights is a natural step for feminists--it's not just an extension of the struggle against domination and oppression, it's an integral part of it."\footnote{Marti Kheel, "Animal Rights is a Feminist Issue," \textit{WomanSpirit}, Summer 1983, 18-20; Ingrid Newkirk and C. Burnett, "Animal Rights and the Feminist Connection," \textit{Woman of Power}, Spring 1987, 67-69.}

In many cases, however, the contributions of spiritual feminists to feminist dialogue and debate have been ignored. In her history of the women's movement, \textit{Moving the Mountain}, Flora Davis, for example, discussed the revival of \textit{(male/female)} difference in feminist theory (as opposed to...
sameness) in the 1980s. She explained, "As stereotypes paled and women's confidence grew, feminist theorists led the revival of difference feminism." However, typical of the academic tendency to dismiss spirituality, she failed to note adequately the role that feminist spirituality played in this development, even though she quoted Mary Daly. Davis dismissed Daly as "having carried the work of reclaiming women's values to its logical extreme: she argued that women were superior to men, and advocated female bonding and spiritual change."

Spiritual feminists had been under fire for their adherence to difference feminism since the movement's emergence in the 1970s. Certainly part of the criticism was not just that spiritual feminists accepted male/female difference, but that they believed such differences were innate, as opposed to being socially constructed, and that they celebrated such differences. Nevertheless, spiritual feminists had remained dedicated difference feminists even when much of the rest of the larger women's movement was de-

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16 Davis, Moving the Mountain, 476.

17 Ibid.
emphasizing such differences and concentrating on male/female similarities.

Similarly, spiritual feminists were among the first to celebrate motherhood as an empowering female experience, and this was another subject that enraged members of the radical feminist community. Many spiritual feminists, in fact, saw women's ability to give birth, to create life, as the ultimate example of female power. Male fear of that ability, many spiritual feminists believed, was at the heart of patriarchy. "Obviously, to deny motherhood is to deny women," wrote Z. Budapest in her explanation of the origins of patriarchy. Nonetheless, when Davis noted that "a number of scholars began to reevaluate motherhood" in the 1980s and that "several theorists suggested that the experience of mothering gave women unique skills and valuable perspectives," she made no mention that spiritual feminists had advanced this argument all along.

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38 Budapest, Women's Mysteries.

39 Davis, Moving the Mountain, 477.

40 For a good example of these ideas see: Barbara Walker, "Motherhood and Power," WomanSpirit, Spring 1982, 52-55.
Feminist Spirituality and the Sex-Wars

In actuality, spiritual feminists have demonstrated their political acumen by contributing to nearly every major debate in the feminist community, and, as has already been noted, they were among the leaders in many of these dialogues. In some cases, however, their unique positioning within the women's community fostered the stand that they would take on a given issue. In the "sex-wars" of the 1980s, for example, the Pagan belief that sexuality was a "gift from the Goddess" guaranteed that spiritual feminists would align themselves with the "pro-sex" side of the debate.41

Spiritual feminists could hardly remain apart from debates on sexuality, for they were very "pro-sex." Believing that sexuality was meant to be respected and enjoyed, Pagans were rarely prudish on this subject. Many practitioners believed in "sex-magic," and one of the women practitioners believed in "sex-magic," and one of the women

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41 The "sex-wars" began as a debate around the issue of anti-pornography but came to embrace issues regarding women as "victims" or women as "agents." For an excellent discussion and bibliography see: Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 441-453; and, Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture (New York: Routledge, 1995).
interviewed explained, “Every orgasm, alone or with another, produces a child on one plane or another--for initiates and non-initiates alike. Wisdom says, ‘direct your pleasures to serve True Will.’” Ancient Paganism also speaks of the “Great Rite” where a plentiful harvest was assured through various fertility rites. Z Budapest explained, “When the Great Rite was used liberally in sexual festivities in celebration of life, the communities were more closely bound, happy, and fulfilled. Even violent crime decreased, there was no time for it. Sex was Divine and violence was not.” Most modern Pagans still practice some form of the Great Rite, and articles such as “Lesbian Sacred Sexuality,” or “Sex Magic: Sacrament of the Goddess” were common in spiritual publications. Sexuality, therefore, was important to spiritual feminists, lesbian or heterosexual, sometimes as a sacred union, or sometimes as merely a pleasant diversion.

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42 Interview # 16, 5 June 1995, Columbus, Ohio.

43 Budapest, Women’s Mysteries, 99.

Many spiritual feminists also believed "healthier" attitudes regarding sexuality were necessary to transform women's status in society. Voudou witch Luisah Teish, for example, who served the Goddess Oshun—the Voudou Goddess of sensuality and sexuality—claimed that we live in an "erosphobic society," and that her special skill was helping people learn to accept and enjoy their sexuality.\(^{15}\) Z. Budapest also argued that sexual attitudes must change before equality can occur:

> People do not change or truly experience a revolution until they come to terms with a healthy, natural sexuality. When sexual standards changed, so did we. Through our sexuality the Goddess reveals Herself, energizes us and instills a bond that peacefully holds together sizable communities. The sexual mores of the Goddess are free, open and inclusive, never discriminating against the few, the plain, the infirm, the unique.\(^{16}\)

Making a similar claim in the spiritual feminist journal \textit{SageWoman}, Kelly Larson contended:

> Working in a local rape crisis center taught me that fighting "rape culture" was not enough—we needed to create an empowering culture of our own. I learned that a woman who loves sex and knows her


own body is powerful and harder to dominate than one who has only known myths of powerless women abducted by abusive men. We can create new stories in which sex is sacred, and women are teachers.47

Spiritual feminists, like most feminists, understood sex to be about power and power relations, and therefore to have a political dimension, but being "pro-sex," spiritual feminists did not argue against sexuality, but only against a sexuality based on female degradation and shame.

Thus, when the "sex-wars" heated up in the early 1980s, with some feminist anti-pornography activists claiming that all sex acts were "dangerous to women," spiritual feminists opposed this viewpoint and instead argued the "pro-sex" side of the debate. In a letter to off our backs, for instance, Ann Forfreedom wrote:

I have an additional reason to oppose anti-sex views. I am a Feminist Witch, a priestess of the pre-Christian, Goddess-oriented religion of witchcraft....My religion encourages consensual, non-harmful acts of love and pleasure, and favors birth control and abortion. Sexual freedom is, for me, a spiritual as well as a political right. Let's stand for women's rights, not women's repression.48


Although clearly on the "pro-sex" side, some Pagan women still drew the line when it came to sadomasochistic imagery. In the early to mid-1980s, the lesbian community argued bitterly over the appropriateness of sadomasochism, pornography and sexual role-playing among lesbians. One lesbian witch wrote in *off our backs* that she found offensive anything that represented "women seeking to objectify other women, something I find abhorrent and even shocking, taking into account our collective experience as women with the violence of the patriarchy and our constant objectification at their hands." She also asked, "Have we so forgotten the reason that most of us came to love women in the first place?" 49

Sexuality has been a problematic issue for many feminists. For heterosexual women, however, Paganism provided a solution by turning prevailing sexual attitudes upside down. In Pagan sexual rituals, women's pleasure is more important than male pleasure. Men exist to pleasure the Goddess--frequently called the "Sacred Whore" or

49 Adriane Saylor (Shani), "Objectification and Fantasy," *off our backs*, November 1985, 26.
"Insatiable Cunt." The Pagan approach to sexuality allowed heterosexual women to redefine sexual relations with men. No longer were they "sleeping with the enemy," but instead, the "enemy" existed only to pleasure her--the embodiment of the Goddess--and since Pagans saw sexuality as a celebration of life, it also eliminated much of the guilt many American women associated with their own sexuality and bodies. So the Pagan view of sexuality granted all women, but especially heterosexual women, a way to reconcile sexuality with feminism. "To remove its power," explained one Columbus witch, "female sexuality has been satanized," but, she added, feminist spirituality is bringing that "back to the center." 

BATTING FOR THE SACREDNESS OF WOMEN’S BODIES

Just as Pagans believed that women’s sexuality was sacred, they also deemed women’s bodies sacred, and this belief led spiritual feminists directly into the political arena. Despite believing in the sanctity of life, every 

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50 Budapest, Women’s Mysteries, 106.
51 Interview # 20, 16 August 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
spiritual feminist that I have ever met, or read the works of, was pro-choice, and many were active in that movement. "Women's ability to conceive and create life is Divine, giving birth to my daughter was the most spiritual experience of my life, but above all, it should be a choice." 

Similarly, many spiritual feminists are also active in efforts to legalize women's right to be bare-breasted in public. Nearly all of those who marched topless in 1995 during NOW's national conference were spiritual feminists. One of the leaders was a young lesbian witch who was proudly putting herself through college by dancing in a local strip club. She painted "My Body is Sacred" on her back and marched through downtown Columbus, Ohio, to argue what she saw as an important cause--women's right to bare their breasts proudly and "not treat our bodies like symbols of shame." Another Columbus woman explained, "Women's bodies are sacred, it links women with the Divine." Obviously

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52 Interview #21, 26 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
53 Interview # 1, 17 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
54 Interview # 21, 26 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
not all feminists saw the right to be bare-breasted in public as a political statement, but many spiritual feminists believed that treating women's bodies as shameful by requiring that they be covered, or only exposing women's breasts in order to titillate, degraded the value of women's bodies and therefore encouraged violence against women.

The emphasis on the sacredness of women's bodies had the collateral effect of fostering a better body-image for many women. Women, more than men, tend to be uncomfortable with their own bodies and with nudity. Believing that one's body is sacred and that it connected one to the Divine—a Goddess with a similar body—gave some women more self-confidence. "The cosmos is molded on the female body," claimed Starhawk, "which is sacred." Starhawk was adamant on this issue:

The Craft also demands a new relationship with the female body. No longer can it be seen as an object or vilified as something dirty. A woman's body, its odors, secretions, and menstrual blood, are sacred, are worthy of reverence and

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56 Starhawk, Spiral Dance, 99.
celebration. Women’s bodies belong to themselves alone...⁵⁷

Many larger women also took heart from the images of ancient Goddesses that, as off our backs even noted, tended to be "big, round woman."⁵⁸ As one woman wrote in WomanSpirit, "We have a right to love our fat and use our fat for whatever reasons we choose. I want to enjoy my body now."⁵⁹

FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Spiritual feminists seized the political high ground when it came to feminism’s response to attacks from the religious right. Feminists who pursued a relentlessly secular agenda had difficulty articulating an effective argument against right-wing claims that feminists were "moral perverts," "godless humanists," and the "enemies of every decent society."⁶⁰ As Starhawk explained in the Pagan

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⁵⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁸ Sudie Rakusin, "Baubo graphic," off our backs, March 1983, 32.


Political Agenda’s platform, “The terrain of the sacred has been abandoned to the Right Wing Fundamentalists, who put forth an agenda harmful to the earth and devoid of the traditional Christian compassion for the poor.” The backlash against feminism began gaining ground in the 1970s and achieved a coherent and effective platform when members of the Religious Right helped ensure Ronald Reagan’s conservative Republican victory in 1980. Although small in numbers, the Religious Right was well-funded and well-organized, and in a time of low voter turn-out, their votes helped elect, and re-elect, conservative, and anti-feminist candidates.

Feminists had at first ignored the Religious Right as a threat since its views seemed so ludicrous and out-of-touch with mainstream Americans. By the time feminists realized the extent of conservative support, Americans had elected a

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conservative president, and the Right’s backlash against women had swung into high gear.63

Spiritual feminists feel that they have played a key role in the struggle against the Religious Right. "Feminists," argued Spretnak, "must make clear that the patriarchy does not own spirituality and morality." By offering society proof that feminism was not, by definition, a strictly secular movement, spiritual feminists believed that feminist spirituality stood poised to redeem the women's movement. They also believed that the very strength of the Religious Right demonstrated that a movement without a spiritual component was doomed to fail. Most women, they argued, craved some form of spiritual expression, and would it not be better to offer them one that empowered women and the feminist movement, than to lose them to one that opposed it?

CONCLUSION

Far from being the "apolitical cop-out" portrayed by its opponents, feminist spirituality was a movement that had

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63 Spretnak, Holy War Against Feminism, 493.
a clear political edge. Spiritual feminists contributed to a new definition of feminist politics, even though critics claimed that they had instead diluted feminist politics until they ceased to have meaning. By supporting a broader and more inclusive vocabulary, spiritual feminists helped shift the emphasis of the women's movement's from just the destruction of patriarchy to the destruction of all forms of domination. Radical feminist roots remained clear, however, in the continued belief that male domination over women lay at the heart of all forms of domination. Nevertheless, this construct did not mirror the premise of original radical feminist theory, which ranked sexism as the most important, and perhaps only, form of oppression that should occupy feminist time and energy.

The development of ecofeminism in the mid-1970s represented the chief political face of feminist spirituality. Ecofeminists' emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life, and in particular their belief that male exploitation of women and the earth were inseparable, led feminist politics down roads unexpected, and often unwelcomed, by some second wave feminists. To others, however, the connections seemed undeniable, and this
new wave of ecofeminist energy transformed both the women and environmental movements. The environmental movement reflected this change by adopting spirituality, and not just scientific information, as part of its agenda, and the women’s movement expanded to embrace such diverse topics as animal rights and vegetarianism, anti-nuclear activism, and anti-militarism as feminist issues.

Although this shift swelled the range of issues feminists considered worthy of their time, it did not necessarily detract from their work in more traditional feminist areas. After all, 28 of the women I interviewed had been active in the pro-choice movement, NOW, or Women Against Rape (WAR). Furthermore, there was some evidence to suggest that feminist spirituality was also an engine for feminist mobilization, bringing women into the women’s movement, rather than bleeding them from it. Feminist spirituality also demonstrated its political focus by being among the first, and most articulate, to counter the Religious Right’s backlash against the “secular” and "amoral" women’s movement.

In the late 1990s spiritual feminists remain politically active on a variety of issues. Of particular
concern is the preservation of Native American lands, animal rights, violence against women and children, and the pro-choice movement. Criticism against feminist spirituality is still common, for many non-spiritual second wave feminists still believe that feminist spirituality, and other types of cultural feminism, have cost the women’s movement its political relevance. Nonetheless, during a time of severe backlash and shrinking feminist numbers overall, the leaders of feminist spirituality continue proudly to declare their movement the fastest growing segment of the feminist community. Their claim is admittedly unprovable, but likely bears considerable truth, as second wave feminist voices must eventually give way to those of the third wave. This third wave is cutting its feminist teeth on theories of the abuses of domination, and not just the patriarchy, and among this rising generation the voice of the Goddess might be less controversial, and perhaps more welcome.
PRICKS, PRIESTESSES, AND PREJUDICES:
INTERNAL DIVISIONS WITHIN FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Although feminist spirituality is an eclectic movement that holds "there is no one true path" and therefore encourages diversity and individualism, it is not without points of contention. When it comes to worship and ritual, spiritual feminists agree to disagree, but other issues have caused division in the movement. Many of these disagreements—accusations of racism, classism, elitism, cultural appropriation, and even gay/straight tensions—mirrored problems in the larger women's movement, although not without a unique twist or two. The splits that developed reflected the inability of spiritual feminists, similar to other cultural and political reformers, to create new identities and perspectives that would transcend and
supersede more traditional racial, ethnic, and religious identities.

The disagreements of spiritual feminists ranged from such major issues as the pervasiveness of racism and classism in their movement, cultural appropriation, and the inclusion of men and male gods, to more minor concerns such as the use of titles and structural hierarchy or their relationship to the larger New Age movement or the even broader NeoPagan movement. For the most part such disagreements are resolved in the early days of any circle or new group, although the size of the community affects the depth of the discord. In Columbus, the Pagan community was simply not large enough to tolerate deep schisms between its members. On the coasts, however, especially the large West Coast communities, internal disagreements often became permanent splits.

RACE

Racism is an issue that has rent the women’s movement on nearly all fronts. Charges of racism in the women’s movement have been common since its earliest days, and early feminist spirituality, with its almost entirely all-white composition, also faced accusations of racist attitudes and
practices. Critics of feminist spirituality within the larger women's movement leveled some of these charges, but criticism also surfaced within spiritual feminist communities themselves. In 1978 a "WomanSpirit council of Minority Women" asked,

How does our racism and classism affect our personal experiences of community and spiritualism? When we say 'women's community' or 'lesbian community' do we really only conceive of white women as the membership? When we imagine various aspects of the Goddess, or the faces of ancient women, are they white? When we talk about matriarchy, do we look to the power and experience of women of color?

Overall the article concluded that WomanSpirit needed to work harder to reflect a more "multi-cultural approach" by including more writings by women of color and more articles that would be of interest to a larger, more diverse audience. One of the most fascinating aspects of the article was a warning against what would later become known as "cultural appropriation," the appropriation by whites of

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1 For a discussion of feminism and racism see: "Special Spring Issue--by and about Wimmin of Color," off our backs, June 1979 and "Special Issue on Racism and Classism," off our backs, November 1979.

other groups' cultural symbols and accouterments. Warning that white women must "be careful not to participate in cultural rip-off," the article warned against the tendency to romanticize other cultures. First articulated in the late 1970s, this issue became increasingly controversial as the feminist spirituality movement grew and tried to be multi-cultural in its approach.¹

For the most part, discussions of racism among spiritual feminists followed the lines of similar dialogues in the larger women's movement, especially those from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The women involved discussed their own concerns and vowed to make their groups or organizations more diverse.² Unlike more political feminist groups such as NOW, which was nearly torn apart by racial issues as recently as 1993, feminist spirituality avoided deep rancor as it gradually became more racially diverse.³

¹ Ibid.


³ Race issues became increasingly tense in NOW during the late 1970s, and in 1979 former NOW president Aileen
In a 1990 reader survey *Woman of Power*, the most successful successor of *WomanSpirit*, found that only 49 percent of its readers were of white European, Christian extraction. The next largest group was Jewish women (99 percent of the respondents were women) who represented 14 percent of the magazine’s readers.¹

Hernandez, NOW’s only African American national president to date, announced that women of color should not bother to join the organization since there were no women of color in any of the organization’s top positions. In 1993 current NOW president Patricia Ireland faced a serious election threat from a slate of women, three African American and one white, who challenged her leadership for being “too conservative.” Ireland was re-elected by a nearly three-to-one ratio, but became more determined than ever to make NOW more responsive to the needs of women of color, and to diversify its leadership. Currently a little more one-third of NOW’s National Board is comprised of women of color. For an excellent account of NOW’s history and current concerns, please see: Helen Zia, “How NOW?,” *MS*, July/August 1996, 49-59.


In my own research on Columbus, Ohio, however, I was only able to locate two women who were not white; one was a Native American and the other was Hispanic. Furthermore, nearly all of the women I interviewed commented on how their groups were all white women (or men) and that even at major regional or even national gatherings they see almost exclusively white faces. In her research Cynthia Eller makes similar observations. Consequently, I was quite surprised by the results of the *Woman of Power* survey that seems to indicate a far more diverse following to feminist spirituality.
Although diversity and multi-culturalism have become important--even controversial--aspects of feminist spirituality (any issue of Woman of Power, for example, contains numerous references to a multi-cultural array of Goddesses and strong women), in its earliest days the movement was primarily focused on white European images. WomanSpirit, which ran from 1974 to 1984, was mostly devoid of any examples of non-European Goddesses, as were many of the earliest books and articles on the topic. African American women, already critical of the ways in which feminist theory and actions focused on a white, middle-class framework, were among the first to address this problem. In 1979, one of the most powerful examples came from poet Audre Lorde in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly." Reacting to Daly’s book Gyn/Ecology, Lorde discussed the ways in which Daly took the experiences of white European women and made them the normative experiences of all women, thus

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claiming a universality that, as Lorde explained, "distorted and trivialized" black women's reality. "For then beyond sisterhood, is still racism," Lorde explained, asking Daly, "Why are her goddess-images only white, western-european, judeo-christian?"*

Lorde did not receive an immediate answer to the questions that she raised, for in a *WomanSpirit* review of Daly's book the author concluded, "Mary Daly is seeking to name and share one of the richest mysteries of the cosmos, the delicious bonding of women, even over class and race barriers." In her subsequent book, *Wickedary*, Daly was more inclusive and portrayed women of color as more than simple victims of patriarchy, so in the long run, Lorde's message was heard. Furthermore, feminist spirituality publications themselves diversified. *Lady-Unique-Inclination-of-the-Night*, for example, concentrated on South American Goddesses, and *The Voodoo Woman's Wisdom* was a

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* Mary Daly, *Wickedary*.
woman-centered magazine of voodoo. Nevertheless, feminist spirituality, although one of the most diverse parts of the women's movement, still has a European-Pagan focus, and is still predominantly a white movement.

In Columbus, the Pagan community is so racially homogenous that racial tension of any sort is rare, if not nonexistent. The owner of one of Columbus's magical supplies shops assured me that he had African American customers, usually practitioners of Santería, but that they exhibited no interest in mingling with the mostly white Columbus Pagan community, despite frequent invitations to do so. I, unfortunately, was never able to break into this community as none of my leads ever developed. Conversely, this circumstance does reinforce the idea that feminist spirituality is primarily a white, middle-class movement, especially outside of the major coastal communities.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Another question that prompted considerable debate in feminist circles beginning in the mid-1980s was the issue of

11 Interview # 41, 27 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.

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cultural appropriation. This topic remains one of the most hotly debated topics in the Pagan (and feminist) press, and practitioners view the controversy from many different perspectives. Practices most under attack are those that borrow liberally from Native American beliefs and customs. Many find the thought of white, middle-class women engaging in vision quests and ceremonial sweats as the final injustice perpetrated by white Europeans on Native Americans. According to this perspective, whites, having stolen everything else from Native Americans, are now even trying to steal their spirituality—a need, many argue, precipitated by the spiritually bankrupt religions of most westerners. For others, a spiritual truth is not something that can be owned or claimed only by one group.

Furthermore, many white Americans (both Pagan and New Age) believe themselves to have been Native Americans in "past lives," and thus claim a certain ownership to such spirituality on that basis. The frequency of this claim prompted a 1991 article in the feminist spirituality
Cherokee activist Andy Smith lambasted white feminists who, in her opinion, were "continuing the same genocidal practices of their forefathers/foremothers." Smith argued that white feminists turn to Indian spirituality to "disassociate themselves from their whiteness" and the guilt they feel over the many sins of white Europeans regarding their treatment of the earth and aboriginal peoples. She also stated that such behaviors:

> trivialize Native American practices so that these practices lose their spiritual power....This trivialization of our oppression is compounded by the fact that, nowadays, anyone can be Indian if she wants to be. All that is required is that a white woman be Indian in a former life or that she take part in a sweat lodge or be mentored by a 'medicine woman' or read a 'how to' book....White feminists should know that as long as they take part in Indian spiritual abuse...Indian women will consider white 'feminists' to be nothing more than agents in the genocide of our people. Our spirituality is not for sale."

Smith was not alone in her irritation over this issue. Leslie Gray, another Native American activist, made similar

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13 Ibid.
comments in a 1988 interview, "I don't know what I'll do if one more person comes to me and says, 'I'm sure I was Indian in my past life.' There weren't that many Indians."

In 1991 the issue of cultural appropriation created waves at that year's Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. In a protest largely precipitated by a position paper written by Smith and presented at the 1989 National Women's Studies Association conference, "an organized group of womyn of color, [were] angrily shouting something like 'Stop spiritual exploitation.' 'We are not for sale,' and handing out position papers entitled 'Indian Spiritual Abuse.'" Noting that "Every Michigan festival has a major issue," spiritual feminist and musician Kay Gardner identified this as the most important note of controversy during the 1991 festival. In an article entitled, "Are White Spiritual Feminists Exploiting Native American Spirituality?" Gardner acknowledged the validity of claims of exploitation and encouraged white women to look to their "own backgrounds--

and discover what the good parts are, the parts that celebrate life and diversity and healing."^®

The "violent confrontation" at the festival nonetheless disturbed Gardner, and she was also bothered because many of the items that white women were accused of exploiting or stealing from Native Americans were items actually used by many different cultures, including ancient Europeans. For example, the frame drum, one of the items at the center of the controversy, was also an instrument used in ancient Ireland and Greece. She did agree that if the instruments were being sold as Native American drums even though they were made by white craftswomen, then that was exploitation, but the use or building of the instrument itself was not by definition exploitative. Gardner made a similar argument regarding the use of feathers and shields in artwork and jewelry. "We must all be very careful not to presume that any one culture owns any of Nature's gifts."^®


16 Ibid.
The controversy also made the pages of *off our backs*. Reacting to criticism directed towards white performers for borrowing an instrument considered sacred to Australia's aboriginals, one musician declined to perform a piece of music that she had written for that instrument. Joanne Stato, a musician herself, wrote that at first she was angered by this action, but that later she realized how truly oppressive it was for a white artist to borrow from an oppressed people's traditions:

> When I was reacting with anger and insecurity to the painful issues being presented...I was still under the delusion that being a musician...exempted me from any involvement in oppression because making music is a positive thing. But I have learned from this incident at Michigan that any work which sits upon unchallenged racist roots is bound to cause hurt eventually to someone. Learning to perceive the structure of racism can only make one's work more fruitful.\(^{17}\)

Overall, Stato and others like her accepted the idea that cultural appropriation was a serious problem and one that

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required white feminists to look more deeply at their own racism.\(^{18}\)

Shamanism and the ownership of the term "shaman" has been the focus of a similar dispute since the mid-1980s. In North America the term "shaman" is suggestive of Native American "medicine women" or "medicine men," individuals who served as their people's spiritual leaders and healers. It was a position of power and respect, and since it was open to both men and women the concept holds particular appeal to modern spiritual feminists. Not only is the female shaman an empowering symbol to women, but their existence offers a real example of female spiritual leadership and power. Its appeal, however, has not been limited just to women, as men across the country have also employed the term.

"I have a lot of trouble with the way the word 'shaman' gets bandied about these days," claimed Starhawk in a 1989 interview. "We can learn from those [indigenous peoples'] practices, but I think it is extremely arrogant for middle-class white Americans to call themselves shamans."

\(^{18}\) For example, see Marilyn T's letter on this matter in "Letters," off our backs, October 1991, 21; and Margaret McKenty's letter, "Cultural Appropriation," off our backs, November 1992, 20.
Starhawk, like many other Pagans, encouraged those of European descent to look to their own past for spiritual inspiration. She did not argue against shamans from a western tradition, but she did claim that one cannot be a shaman of any tradition outside one's own.

To really be a shaman means that you're the healer of a particular tradition, of a particular people, who are your own people. It's not something you can learn in a weekend workshop or a summer training program; it's something you grow up with and live with. It takes years and years of being identified with a particular culture.19

Making a similar argument, Native American shaman and clinical psychologist Leslie Gray was even more critical than Starhawk of whites who wanted to "play Indian." Like Andy Smith, she argued that white guilt and spiritual hunger heightened this tendency. She described it as "a desperate spiritual struggle to feel connected as the land is being destroyed...and we're on the point of the possible annihilation of the human race. People are looking

around...for anything they can hold on to." She also recommended that whites turn to their own ancestry and get in touch with ancient European shamanic traditions. Gray did, however, make one point that many ignored in their admonishments to whites hungering for a divine connection. She claimed that as Western society embraced modern technology "it threw out two things: connection with the Earth and connection with spirit. And those are the essential features of shamanism." This raised a practical point that those less sympathetic failed to acknowledge. How can one get in touch with a tradition so ancient that its very existence is questionable, when right at hand is a living and breathing example that is beautiful and available?  

One Columbus spiritual feminist explained that many white, middle class Americans have lost touch with their European roots. Most white Americans are actually a blend of many different European ethnicities and do not see themselves as having any one cultural identity or heritage.  

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20 Leslie Gray, "Interview on Shamanism," The Sun, March 1988, 6-9.  

21 Interview # 6, 1 August 1995. Columbus, Ohio.
Perhaps this characterization is less true of more recent immigrants, but it does describe many in the socio-economic groups mostly found in spiritual feminism—white and middle-class. For white Americans who may be a blend of German, Scandinavian, Irish, English, Italian or Slavic heritage to what culture should they turn? Also many white Americans can claim (or at least believe that they can claim) some Native American blood, however distant, and for many, that heritage is no more removed from their current existence than their ancient Irish or German ancestors—all are equally distant. Many feel, therefore, that embracing Native American traditions is no more false than reclaiming long-lost Celtic traditions for an individual who is several generations removed from the Celtic homelands.

"I live here now," explained a white, spiritual feminist who works for national NOW in Washington, D.C.
I have never been to Europe, and neither have my parents or grandparents, or even, I think, my great-grandparents. It is the spirits of this land where I live that I wish to connect with. It is their power I feel in the seasons and the setting and rising of the sun. How can I connect with ancient European traditions when I do not consider myself a European?\textsuperscript{22}

Others, like one white Columbus woman who regularly volunteered at that city's Native American center, saw the entire question of cultural appropriation as a non-issue. "A spiritual truth is a spiritual truth for all people, and can not be claimed by only one group."\textsuperscript{23}

The issue of cultural appropriation, whether related to spirituality, music, or literature, is a problem rarely seen at strictly political feminist gatherings and is more directly a problem of cultural feminism. Second wave feminism, and first wave too, has often been rightfully criticized for its white, middle-class focus; however, when cultural feminists attempted to make cultural feminism more diverse, charges of cultural appropriation began to appear. National leaders and the feminist press have clearly

\textsuperscript{22} Interview # 37, 23 October 1995, Durham, North Carolina.

\textsuperscript{23} Interview # 6, 1 August 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
indicated that such charges are valid and not to be ignored, but, on the other hand, many white feminists are uncertain on how to celebrate multi-culturalism but avoid cultural appropriation.

Among the Columbus women, for example, only two argued adamantly that one’s spirituality should reflect one’s own ethnic heritage, and one of these women was Native American. Most of the others were unfamiliar with the issue, or unconvinced that it was an act of disrespect. Perhaps this speaks more to the location of my interviews and the fact that there are so few women of color involved in Columbus’s feminist spirituality community. Significantly, however, the only ritual from which I was turned away during my research was at the Native American Center in Columbus. Uncomfortable with my presence as a researcher, one of the women politely asked me to leave before the women’s circle began. She did, however, agree to be interviewed at a later date, and during our discussion it was clear that she felt whites too often trivialized Native American beliefs and was therefore careful in all of her

24 Interview # 11, 20 May 1995, Columbus, Ohio; Interview # 24, 15 August 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
answers to me. She was especially bothered by the practice of turning Native American beliefs into a "pretty legend" to be "trivialized" in works of fiction. Nevertheless she spoke proudly of the fact that Native Americans do not separate spirituality from everyday life and that women are empowered by their spiritual customs.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{ANTI-SEMITISM}

Accusations of Anti-Semitism provided another source of disharmony in the feminist spirituality movement. Spiritual feminists often severely criticized Judaism, like Christianity, for being anti-woman. Such assertions, however, led some Jewish feminists to condemn feminist spirituality for being anti-Semitic, and even the "mother" of feminist spirituality, Z. Budapest, came under fire on this issue. Once again, as with the issue of race, feminist

\textsuperscript{25} Interview # 24, 15 August 1995, Columbus, Ohio. In our discussion, I mentioned a novel I had read by Linda Lay Schuler called \textit{She Who Remembers} (New York: Penguin Books, 1989). Although the term "cultural appropriation" was not mentioned, my interviewee made it clear that she resented taking the story of the White Buffalo, which was at the heart of Native American creation beliefs, and turning it into a "pretty legend."

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spirituality was unable to transcend completely older ethnic and religious identities.

Questions of appropriate terminology led to the first direct discussions of anti-Semitism in feminist spirituality. Beginning in the winter of 1980, a debate between spiritual feminists raged in the pages of WomanSpirit and carried on through the next three issues of this quarterly publication. Claiming pride as both "a Jew" and a "daughter of the Goddess," Jane R. Litwoman took offense at several comments that Barbara Mor had made in an article entitled "A Woman Against the Bible." Although delivered in response to feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether's criticism of feminist spirituality for its total abandonment of Christianity, Mor instead provoked a commentary on her use of the term "Judeo-Christian" and her condemnation of both Christianity and Judaism. Labeling Mor's article "anti-Semitic," Litwoman argued that Mor "inappropriately includes Judaism in a criticism aimed at Christianity," and that "No Jew, from orthodox rabbi to Jewish witch, could possibly agree with her eight point explanation of 'Biblical religions.'" Litwoman was clear
that she considered Judaism flawed and often patriarchal, but that she nevertheless found Mor's article offensive.\(^\text{26}\)

Not all "Jewish witches" shared her feelings, however, for in the same issue that Litwoman's letter was published another letter by Marilyn explained that though "a Jewish woman," she could not "sit through the ritual and ceremonies of a faith born out of hatred of the Goddess and women." She further added that "at this stage of my journey, Judaism is no 'better' than Christianity or Islam, or Hinduism or any of the other religions of the God." She concluded that "To me, putting each other down isn't the way. We are many flowers budding in an open field." Thus she, like those who supported Budapest, stressed solidarity over difference in an effort to encourage diversity and acceptance.\(^\text{27}\)

In retrospect, the 1980 exchange in WomanSpirit represented merely the opening stage of a controversy that would erupt full scale the following year. This new episode unfolded in the pages of off our backs, centered around


"founding mother" Z. Budapest, and resulted in a bruising battle of misunderstandings, name-calling, and a public airing of the women's movement's dirty laundry. A passage from Budapest's book *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* triggered the exchange:

The Jews, however, carried a deep burden of guilt about what they had done to Lilith, the Great Goddess, and to cherubs in general. Lilith cursed them as a result, and in effect told them that nothing would go right for Jews again until her worship had been reinstated. Could this be the final solution to the Middle East crisis?²⁸

Budapest's use of the phrase "final solution" could not have been more poorly chosen, and understandably it struck a raw nerve with Jewish women. The June 1981 *off our backs* published two highly critical letters that openly accused Budapest of anti-Semitism. Beyond Budapest's unfortunate choice of words, Jewish feminists found unacceptable the entire premise that Jews were being punished for having forsaken the Goddess. Bev, the author of one of the letters, explained bluntly, "Saying there's a goddess-curse

²⁸ The letter in *off our backs*, Bev, "Anti-Semitic 'Holy Book'," June 1981, 21, quoted this passage from page 197 of Budapest's book. However, the passage must have been removed from later recent printings as I was unable to locate it anywhere in my 1993 edition.
on the Jewish people is like saying Hitler and the Nazi's were doing the goddess's work....Does this mean Z. supports genocide or believes the Jewish people got what they deserved?"^{29}

In another letter, written by Naomi Dykestein, Budapest was taken to task for using the phrase "Judeo-Christian" in The Holy Book. This term, according to Dykestein, invariably means only Christian, and thus ignores the genuine Jewish experience, an experience, as she pointed out, which has included oppression and racial hatred. Dykestein was also highly critical of the "final solution" passage. She accused Budapest of blatant anti-Semitism and racial hatred, and suggested that anyone who bought or advertised her book was guilty of the same offense.

Budapest's public response was decidedly measured. Some of the points, she agreed, were well made, and she printed an apology, which she inserted into as many copies of her book as she could lay her hands on. She also sent notices to many other feminist publications, and she ran an apology in her newsletter Themis. Nonetheless, Budapest

^{29} Ibid.
still felt that many of the accusations were unjust, and in a letter in *off our backs* she addressed those points. She claimed that blaming her for employing a commonly used term like "Judeo-Christian" was unfair, and she added that "From a witch's point of view, Jewish and Christian religions boil down to part one and part two of the same political propaganda against all wimmin."\(^{30}\)

For many women, especially Jewish feminists, Budapest's actions were insufficient, and in the next several issues of *off our backs* a debate over Budapest and anti-Semitism followed. The correspondents seemed rather evenly split on the issue, for numerous letters condemned Budapest while others argued that she was being falsely accused. It became clear during the exchange that Budapest had also written a personal reply to Dykestein, which did nothing to ease the tension. When portions of this letter became public, Budapest appeared far less reasonable in her response, and the accusations of anti-Semitism only mounted. Furthermore, fearing a public "trashing" or "blood letting" Budapest avoided a public confrontation and instead members of the

Susan B. Anthony Coven, many Jewish themselves, spoke on her behalf. Starhawk, herself a Jew, also spoke in Budapest's defense.

New and old identities clashed openly in the controversy over Budapest. For those supporting Budapest, the issue was unity in the women's community and the preservation of a new world view. For others who felt Budapest's words and actions betrayed the depth of anti-Semitism within the women's movement, or at least apathy towards the issue, she was but the most blatant example of a common problem. As late as November 1981 letters were still appearing in the pages of *off our backs* and other feminist publications, but for the most part emotions waned, the ordeal passed, and few, if any, seemed to have changed their original impressions. For Jewish women who had embraced the identity of feminist spirituality--and many of the movement's most well-known leaders were Jewish--Merlin Stone, Starhawk, and Diane Stein, for example--Budapest's comments did not seem to have caused any problems. Among

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31 This issue raged throughout the "Letters" sections of the June, August-September, and November issues of 1981 in *off our backs*. It was also widely covered in the feminist press, especially in west-coast publications.
the critics, those who remained strongest in their criticism were women who had distanced themselves from any religious faith. In fact, many made the point that while they had rejected their religion, they could not reject the ramifications of being Jewish, even within the so-called safety of the feminist community. Thus in the case of Z. Budapest, here was an example of political concerns presenting a challenge to the unity of the feminist spiritual identity. For the most part, spiritual feminists closed ranks, but other loyalties still tugged at them.

For many Jewish women, a simple abandonment of their Judaism was not as easy as it seemed to have been for many women raised Christian. After all, Christianity is not an ethnic or racial identity, and Christians have not faced mass persecution and pogroms for centuries. The strong presence of Jewish women in the feminist spirituality community nevertheless indicated that many Jewish feminists were attracted to the feminist spirituality movement.\(^{32}\)

\(^{32}\) As indicated earlier in the chapter, a reader survey of Woman of Power found that 14 percent of its readers were Jewish.
Jewish feminists also identified anti-Semitism as a problem in the larger women's movement. In both spiritual and political circles Jewish feminists often felt that they were required to check their Judaism at the door. In Columbus, for example, this issue caused one member of the Women's Action Collective to leave the organization on rather unpleasant terms. Angry that she was required to work on a Jewish holiday while the feminist bookstore was closed for certain Christian holidays, she quit Fan the Flames feminist bookstore. Afterwards the Collective changed some of its policies and claimed, "Our insensitivity to these issues remains a point of dialogue within Fan the Flames." This assessment, however, came only after several angry exchanges and accusations of anti-Semitism within the Collective as a whole. Eventually WAC hosted a support group for Jewish feminists, but the problem of anti-Semitism also appeared at the organization's "Struggle Session" on racism in 1981, where many in WAC complained about minority women still being too religious.  

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Among the Columbus women that I interviewed only two women had any Jewish background. One woman called herself a "Jewish-Unitarian-Pagan," thereby demonstrating her unwillingness to relinquish that part of her identity, and the other had a Jewish stepfather as a child and had therefore "flirted with Judaism when a little girl," but ultimately felt herself raised with no clear religious upbringing.

THE GAY-STRAIGHT SPLIT

The gay/straight split that wracked the women's movement in the 1970s and early 1980s took an unusual form in the feminist spirituality movement. The split itself originated after lesbian feminists, whose energies were so crucial to the development of the modern women's movement, asked that the movement make lesbian rights an important feminist issue. Their demands met with a chilly reception. NOW founder Betty Friedan dubbed the lesbian platform the "lavender menace," and in response lesbian activists charged that straight women in the movement should face their own homophobia and heterosexual privilege. The debate proved wrenching for the women's movement, as homophobia was,
initially, a major problem, and the movement belatedly moved
to address lesbian concerns.\textsuperscript{34} With time, however, many
heterosexual women felt that the pendulum had swung too far
and they were now the ones whose lifestyle was under attack
and whose feminism was called into question. Marilyn Frye's
famous query, "do you have to be a lesbian to be a
feminist," became a common discussion in feminist circles.\textsuperscript{35}
The mostly lesbian women of Columbus's WAC concluded that
"lesbianism is the lifestyle most consistent with radical
feminist theory," and radical feminist publications such as
\textit{off our backs} and Iowa City's \textit{Ain't I A Woman} ran numerous
articles and letters arguing that heterosexual women, still
shackled by their need for male approval, could not be good
feminists.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} NOW, for example, did not add lesbian rights to its
platform until its fifth national convention in 1972. "NOW

\textsuperscript{35} Marilyn Frye, "Do you Have to be a Lesbian to be a
Feminist?" (Paper presented at the National Woman's Studies
Association Conference, 1990), \textit{off our backs}, August-
September 1990, 21-23.

\textsuperscript{36} "A Note to 'Straight' Sisters," \textit{Spectre}, May-June
1974, 6, Herstory I, Reel 6; "This is For Straight, Bi-
Sexual, and Lesbian Women Who Won't Let Go of Men," \textit{Ain't I
A Woman}, Iowa City, 20 July 1973, 4, Herstory I Continuing
Update, Reel 1; \textit{off our backs} ran many articles and letters
Spiritual feminism has often been perceived as a mostly lesbian movement, although research indicates that this is not an accurate perception. In Columbus, only 13 percent of the women interviewed identified themselves as lesbians or bisexuals, suggesting that while the feminist spirituality movement may have a higher proportion than the general population, lesbians are not a majority in this movement.\(^7\) Despite their minority status in feminist spirituality, lesbians have rarely felt the sting of lesbian-baiting in this part of the women’s movement. “After all,” explained one bisexual woman in Columbus, “lesbians and straight women have the same spiritual needs, but not necessarily the same political needs.”\(^8\) In fact, the tensions that existed between heterosexual and lesbian women in the late 1970s and early 1980s were often perceived by heterosexual women. Cynthia Eller noted, for example, “that lesbian sexuality is celebrated while heterosexuality is (sometimes) tolerated,” on this issue, but the three positions statements of the Collective Lesbian International Terrors (CLIT) each caused quite a fervor.

\(^7\) Cynthia Eller in Lap of the Goddess draws a similar conclusion, p. 21.

\(^8\) Interview # 7, 12 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
and that if a woman’s sexual partners are men, “she would be risking social censure to talk too long or loudly about her lovers or about male sexuality or the sexuality that they share together.” The elevation of lesbian sexuality in feminist spirituality contradicted a basic Pagan belief. Paganism is not a religion of self-abnegation, but rather one worships the Goddess by taking delight in her gifts. Sexuality is one of the Goddesses' greatest gifts to humankind, and to denigrate any form of honest sexual expression should be antithetical to any Pagan. Perhaps the valorization of lesbianism reflected the fact that although many spiritual feminists considered themselves Pagans, others saw feminist spirituality as a separate movement and, therefore, did not feel constrained by its beliefs.

One of feminist spirituality’s earliest and most outspoken proponents, Ann Forfreedom, claimed that she has been attacked for her heterosexual preferences and for her willingness to do ritual with men and to honor the male god as well as the Goddess. In 1977 Forfreedom helped found the now defunct Matilda Joslyn Gage Dianic Coven, and since

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39 Ibid.

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Forfreedom allowed men and revered the God and the Goddess, she claimed that her use of the word “Dianic” provoked a controversy over the right to define that term. Forfreedom defined it as a Coven that was “primarily Goddess-oriented,” but not lesbian separatist. Forfreedom was not alone in her broader definition of the term, as Pagan leaders Morgan McFarland and Mark Roberts had used the term “Dianic” to describe their circles in Texas earlier in the 1970s. According to Ann Forfreedom, however, Z. Budapest defined “Dianic” as lesbian separatist and informed Forfreedom that she should use another term to describe her coven. Forfreedom refused to do so and continues to use the term today.40

In an article written by Forfreedom she also claimed that Budapest “disliked my heterosexuality and even attributed my views to my heterosexuality.” Forfreedom also asserted that at a Wiccan study group she was derided for objecting to references to men as “mutants,” and that she grew annoyed as the leader of the group spent “week after

week attacking Starhawk and her book (Starhawk is also heterosexual), ostensibly because of the chapter on 'The God' and various references supposedly indicating a heterosexual bias." Forfreedom did not hesitate to strike back at those that she felt were harming the movement. "It seems to me that heterosexual women and any women who tolerate men are the actual targets, and victims, of lesbian-separatism," and she further stated, "Dianic Witchcraft has become distorted in its practices because of the influence of lesbian-separatists," and that "both women's heritage and 'the Craft' have suffered from the power plays inherent in lesbian-separatism."  

Budapest, however, claimed that she never told Forfreedom that she could not use the term "Dianic," and insisted that "Dianic is not for lesbians only, it's for women only." Although it is clear that to Budapest the term does mean woman-only space, nowhere have I found her insisting that heterosexual women could not claim the term as their own. Budapest also initiated Starhawk as a

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41 Ibid.

42 Z. Budapest, Personal electronic mail correspondence with author, 8 June 1997.
priestess and is highly regarded by Margot Adler, both heterosexuals, so it seems unlikely that she was as hostile to heterosexual women in the Craft as Forfreedom believed her to be. Nonetheless, the gay-straight split did not leave feminist spirituality unaffected, producing strong emotions and feelings of defensiveness in a movement with stated goals of harmony and community.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tensions between heterosexual and lesbian women continued in feminist spirituality, but now lesbians were the ones on the defensive. A new controversy emerged, and it again found expression on the pages of a publication. In fact, the journal Woman of Power itself became the object of debate. When WomanSpirit ceased publication in 1984, a number of new publications started to fill that void, and Woman of Power was one of the most successful. Woman of Power’s Statement of Philosophy read, “if we are to survive as a species, it is necessary for women to come into power, and for feminist principles to rebuild the foundations of our culture.”

Unlike WomanSpirit, which had been published by Jean and

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"Statement of Philosophy, Woman of Power, Spring 1984, 1."
Ruth Mountaingrove and which looked at most issues through a lesbian lens, Woman of Power was less obviously lesbian in its approach. Nevertheless, the articles that did address lesbian themes proved unsettling to some readers by the early 1990s, a reflection that feminist spirituality, perhaps, was becoming less lesbian in numbers and identification. Though relatively few in numbers, those readers who did react negatively to lesbian topics in Woman of Power became the focus of this debate.

In the fall of 1990 Woman of Power conducted a "Reader Survey," and the results of that questionnaire led to an accusation that the magazine was "homophobic." In a letter printed in off our backs, reader Shana R. Blessing objected to the fact that in response to the question, "what you've least enjoyed," four percent--out of over 800 respondents--claimed the magazine had "Too much lesbianism," or that lesbianism was "glorified," and that five percent responded that they would like to see "less lesbianism" in the future. Blessing argued that by printing these responses Woman of Power had demonstrated an "overt acceptance of lesbophobia."
"There is," she claimed, "no acceptable context in which to print these statements." 44

In an accompanying letter, the editor of Woman of Power, Char McKee, asserted that they (the editorial staff) had "felt a commitment to accurately represent [their] readers' comments." She also pointed out that after each response that Blessing had found objectionable, there were totally opposite findings. Three percent of the respondents felt that the magazine did not have enough on lesbians, and another four percent claimed that they would like to see more on lesbianism. Since the survey was anonymous, it and the resulting debate perhaps better than anything else demonstrated that there were, in fact, lingering tensions over sexual preferences even in the supposedly diverse and accepting feminist spirituality community. 45

On the local level in Columbus, however, I found almost no evidence of any gay/straight tensions in the Pagan community. When asked directly most respondents cited the


45 Ibid.
common Pagan prescript that sexuality is a gift from the Goddess meant to be enjoyed in all its varied forms. Even if sentiments to the contrary remained, they no longer generated the strong emotions necessary to bring them to the surface. The same could not be said on the issue of elitism in the movement.

CLASS

Analogous to the controversies over racism and sexuality, those tensions that revolved around class issues also reflected similar tension in the larger women’s movement. In the late 1970s feminist businesses began emerging, and the entire concept of making money from other women came under attack in feminist circles. Radical feminists were particularly vehement, for they often shared a socialist interpretation of capitalism as inherently evil. Everything from feminist retreats and conferences to feminist bookstores and other feminist businesses came under attack as being classist since poor women might not be able to afford to partake. For spiritual feminists a similar

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46 Echols, Daring to Be Bad, 273-281.
debate emerged over conferences and retreats, but also over the charging of fees for psychic/healing services. The opponents of charging any fees argued that such skills were "a gift from the Goddess" and thus it would be inappropriate to profit from such talents. Others, like Debra Carroll, editor of Shaman's Drum, argued that "since we no longer live an agrarian lifestyle," one must have cash to survive, and if forced to charge for healing/psychic gifts rather than work a "conventional job," charging was acceptable. She even argued that printing advertisements allowed "less wealthy people to participate (in the concepts described in the magazine) at a much lower cost."  

Carroll's editorial did not cap the dialogue, and in the next issue, "firewalker and witch-healer" Debbie Gregg agreed that charging was acceptable, but argued that fees should not be random. They should, she claimed, be "based on income level and number of dependents," adding, "Fees are just if they are affordable to everyone." She was also adamant that since the high cost of most workshops excluded poor people, many of whom are people of color, traditional

ceremonies and rituals should never charge an attendance fee. "Mother Earth is not for sale and neither is the ability to heal her. Ritual skills should be shared, not hoarded." The editor added a postscript to this letter noting that many workshops offer work exchange in lieu of cash payments, and that most instructors also regularly offer free rituals and ceremonies open to anyone interested.\textsuperscript{48} By the 1990s, most feminist gatherings offered such options to help those unable to pay for workshops or conferences. This solution is imperfect since it still forces the individual to admit that they are unable to pay and to ask for help.

Another interesting aspect of this debate centered around the fact that many of those with low incomes were actually middle-class individuals who chose to embrace "downward mobility." For many spiritual feminists, downward movement is an attractive option because it reduced their guilt over the high amount of the Earth's natural resources consumed by Americans, and because it allowed them to retreat from the patriarchal world of mainstream business.

As early as 1978 a WomanSpirit letter was critical of downward mobility as a solution to classism, since it did not really eradicate one's class upbringing, and since "taking a job below our educational qualifications, we often rob a working class woman of the job she needs." 49 Classism, like racism, remains a problematic issue for all types of feminists. Every year NOW's national convention provokes discussions of the classist nature of a conference that only very financially comfortable women can afford to travel to, and similar arguments appeared regarding the 1995 International Women's Conference in Beijing.

"THE PRICK IN HER HEAD"

In contrast to class, race, and the other issues already discussed, the role of men and male imagery in feminist spirituality sparked much less discord within the spirituality movement itself. If there was one subject upon which most spiritual feminists could agree, it was that men had a baleful influence. The only exception to this unity was the division that such attitudes towards men spawned in

the larger NeoPagan community. Within the larger Pagan ranks, the feminist spiritualists attitudes were divisive, so much so that nationally known spiritual feminist Shekhinah Mountainwater wrote in 1988 in response to Neo-Pagan debate that “It seems that we are more polarized on the issue of men than anything else.”

Feminist spirituality originally had a clear “no male policy.” In the original manifesto of the Susan B. Anthony Coven Number One, written in 1971, chief author Z. Budapest penned, “We are opposed to teaching our craft to men until the equality of the sexes is a reality.” By 1989 Budapest herself had revised her thinking, and in the latest introduction to her Holy Book of Women's Mysteries, she claimed, “The only thing that I would change--and we have changed--is the part about men. The men are changing rapidly, thank heaven. We recognize this historical fact.”

51 Budapest, Women’s Mysteries, 3.
52 Ibid., xiii.
This pattern was typical of many spiritual feminists who in their first flush of the Goddess resurgence wanted nothing to do with mixed gender groups. For many, however, this attitude changed with time as they "healed" from the "damage of patriarchal religions." Many Pagan women will work with men on at least certain occasions, although most still prefer to work in same-sex groups on a regular basis. "Women need their time together," explained one very spiritual ecofeminist in Columbus, "they need to connect back to the earth and their creative energy, they need a healing time from their damaged, second-class status."  

This comment reflected a common feminist belief that men in a group will try to take-over and control the group, or that at the very least the dynamic will change in a way that discourages female leadership and equal participation. "Women need to be together to make change," explained a committed ecofeminist, "when men enter the dynamic changes. Women's space is rare and is important."  

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53 Interview # 5, 31 July 1995, Dayton, Ohio.  
54 Interview # 19, 9 August 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
In theory, the Pagan emphasis on balance between male and female energy should not allow Pagan men to be at all sexist. The Goddess is highly revered in all Pagan rituals, and many Pagan women clearly feel that Pagan men are as good as men can be. "Only men who revere the Goddess see women as not 'other,' but instead as a manifestation of the Goddess." Theory, of course, does not always match reality, and some Pagan men have been accused of wanting free-love-mother-earth-type women who will participate in Great Rite sex and then prepare a wholesome meal from organically grown wheat ground by her own hands. Or, as one woman in Columbus explained, "some Pagan men just want you to ritualistically suck their dicks." Another Columbus woman felt that there was a place for men in feminist spirituality, as "the providers of child care." This issue is not one likely to be resolved easily, particularly since it seems to be related to the length of time each woman has been involved in goddess-worship, and will

55 Interview # 2, 25 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
56 Interview # 13, 27 August 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
57 Interview # 15, 29 September 1995, Columbus, Ohio.
continue to be controversial as new initiates enter with similar—though perhaps temporary—anti-male sentiments.

Interestingly, it was almost always heterosexual women who made the harshest criticisms about men and were often the most insistent that they not regularly perform ritual with men. It was a heterosexual woman who, borrowing liberally from Elizabeth Gould Davis, explained that men were "mutants" who developed later than women in the evolutionary process and were therefore "incomplete" and "less evolved." Perhaps this sentiment came from a need to prove independence from men, or perhaps because they, unlike their lesbian counterparts, had to deal directly with men in their personal relationships and really were more frustrated by male behavior.

CONCLUSION

Given the eclectic nature of the NeoPagan movement and feminist spirituality, discord was all but unavoidable. Overall, however, disagreements among Pagan feminists have been less detrimental to that movement than similar

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58 Interview # 2, 25 July 1995, Columbus, Ohio.

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controversies in the larger women's movement. Perhaps because the women's movement sought to speak for all women, its failures were more deeply felt. Radical feminist theory itself also provides another part of the answer. By positing sexism as the original form of oppression, radical feminists slighted other types of oppression, thus alienating women who were not white or middle-class. Also, when sisterhood failed to deliver all it had promised, the women who had made sisterhood the answer to all of their needs were shattered by its failure. Feminism, by definition, required group action and a shared agenda and identity; there is no such thing as a "solitary practitioner" in the women's movement. Perhaps the Goddess might hear a single voice, but the church or state would not, and in the face of a severe anti-feminist backlash the women's movement needs to remain a united front.

Nonetheless, some issues remain problematic for the feminist spirituality movement. For example, the difficult task of trying to make feminist spirituality more racially and ethnically diverse, but at the same time avoiding cultural appropriation, remains unresolved and intensely controversial. Similarly, the appropriate role of men and
male gods continues to spark debate, and many spiritual feminists are still torn over the use of ranks and titles in their circles. For the most part, however, the feminist spirituality movement's amorphous definitions and lack of dogma allow for such differences to coexist without destroying the movement. The lack of a sharply defined ideological framework has allowed feminist spirituality to unfurl a more inclusive banner.
CONCLUSION

On December 21, 1995, I met with five other women at a home in Durham, North Carolina. We gathered to celebrate the Winter Solstice and to honor the Goddess. Each woman entered the ritual area according to her age. The oldest, and most revered, entered first, and the youngest entered last. We faced each of the four directions, and a different woman had the honor of calling the spirits representing each direction. Then together we grounded the center and welcomed the Goddess into our presence. During the ritual we each exchanged something from the past season that we were proud to have accomplished, and something we had failed to do. Together, we celebrated our strengths and commiserated over our weaknesses.

After the ritual, while exchanging Yule gifts and sharing wine and food, the conversation inexorably turned to politics. "Would President Clinton be reelected?" "What if the anti-feminist Republicans regained the White House?"
One woman, chair of the local organization opposed to conservative North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, expressed concern that they just could not beat him (and she was correct, as Helms was reelected in 1996). Still, she continued, "they had to try." Yet another woman spoke of her activism at a local battered woman’s shelter, and the youngest woman present, only 16 years old, had recently participated in an abortion clinic defense. These are the women, I sat there thinking, commonly accused of being "apolitical." As we left, I felt empowered and energized in a way that I had not felt since 1989 when I marched with over 100,000 other women to support abortion rights and other feminist issues in the nation’s capital. So this is sisterhood, I mused.

For myself and for thousands of other women politicized by the women’s movement itself in the 1980s, we entered a movement in the throes of a painful, although necessary, reappraisal of the differences between women created by class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Also, by joining the movement during a time of severe backlash, not only have we missed feeling the rapture of sisterhood, but we have rarely known the headiness of success. Instead, we
have seen an increasingly conservative nation gradually erode feminist gains, and we entered a movement labeled "dead" by the popular media. Meanwhile, second wave feminists, women whom I admired deeply, basically agreed with this assessment by bemoaning the fact that no third wave seemed to be forming to follow their lead.

One of the major reasons I wrote this dissertation was to demonstrate the inaccuracy of that belief. There is a third wave of feminism. I have seen it grow and watched it emerge in my women's history classes and in the faces of young women at rituals like the one described above. It does not, however, look, or act, just like its predecessor. The values, language, and even agenda of the third wave differ, and the feminist spirituality movement, itself a child of the second wave, has played a major role in that recasting—but not without its own share of growing pains, from both within and outside its own ranks.

If, as many early spiritual feminists claimed, the "cr-session" gave birth to the ritual circle, then in many ways the process of creating feminist awareness continues to live. When the myth of sisterhood--built only upon a white, middle-class, heterosexual framework--shattered, many women,
still hungry for something "bigger than themselves," found it in the Goddess. For others, especially younger women who entered a movement that had already faced the limits of sisterhood, the Goddess was, in fact, the starting point in their feminist journey, and not the dead-end opponents of feminist spirituality have painted it to be.

Specifically, spiritual feminists expanded the notion that the personal was political to include a spiritual dimension. Through this process, they helped pave the way to a new definition of feminism that was in certain ways even more radical than that which had preceded it. It was decidedly more encompassing in scope and therefore more politically appealing to a broader spectrum of women. By accepting traditionally assigned gender characteristics such as female compassion and nurturing, spiritual feminists, like religious radicals in the first wave of American feminism, did not directly challenge age-old gender notions. They did, however, demand that such characteristics be revalued, if not more highly valued, than those characteristics that were typically deemed male, and therefore, unlike their radical feminist opponents, did not
continue to devalue facets of life, such as motherhood, that many women cherished.

Furthermore, by spreading feminist values and strengths into other movements such as environmentalism, feminist spirituality has allowed the women's movement to survive in a hostile environment, while not completely abandoning its goals. Ecofeminism, for example, has forever altered the tactics and strategies with which environmental politics is waged, and simultaneously strengthened the credibility of feminist politics.

By broadening the field of feminist politics, feminism went from being a laundry list of women's issues to a world-view that still saw gender as the central, but not the only, form of oppression. Also, by linking the oppression and exploitation of women to that of the earth and nature in general, feminist theory made room for a more complex understanding of interlocking systems of oppression that also included racism, classism, and heterosexism.

In retrospect, the feminist spirituality movement was part of the process whereby the women's movement redefined itself and broadened its central message. It was also the only branch of feminism consistently to challenge the power
of traditional religions and not simply reject them. For many women, particularly Jewish women or women of color, religion was part of their ethnic or racial identity, and simple rejection was not a solution or even a desirable option. In fact, the unwritten movement assumption that a “good” feminist was an atheist, or at least agnostic, contributed to the racial tensions within the women’s movement and lessened the movement’s appeal to minority women.

By studying how the feminist spirituality movement emerged and developed, and by analyzing its impact on, and relationship with, the larger women’s movement, this dissertation has documented the changing nature of the American women’s movement. It has demonstrated that religion was a difficult issue for both waves of American feminism, and that religious radicals in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sought to blend their spirituality with their feminism. I have also argued that despite resistance to these efforts on the part of some second wave feminists, feminist spirituality overall has had a positive effect on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of feminism. In the first few years of its existence feminist
spirituality was one thread that helped close the gap between radical and liberal feminists, and there is some evidence to suggest that this movement has been an agent of mobilization, particularly among younger women. Nor has feminist spirituality drained the women's movement of feminist energy or political acuity. Contrary to the claims of its detractors, I believe that feminist spirituality has strengthened the modern American women's movement.

Feminist spirituality, however, is not without shortcomings. Its intellectual foundations are rather fuzzy, and one might seriously question the wedding of one marginal movement--feminism--to other marginalized movements such as NeoPaganism or animal rights groups such as PETA. Also, even though spiritual feminists may feel that they are countering feminist critics who hold that feminism is a "godless" and "amoral" movement, how well are such claims rebutted by a movement that the general public commonly believes worships the devil? Finally, by spreading the definition of feminism and feminist issues to such a broad spectrum, has the central message of feminism--the oppression of women by men--been lost, or at least compromised?
The answer lies in the inextricable political connections that accompany spiritual feminist beliefs. Whether or not matriarchies ever truly existed, simply to be able to imagine them is empowering to women. Witches, regardless of whether they wielded magical power, did defy the established churches and live apart from male control, and, therefore, are an appropriate feminist symbol. Traditional Judeo-Christian doctrine does deny women any direct claim to the Divine, and for many women this void was a painful one that they needed to fill. Marginalized or not, an empowered Goddess worshiper is a stronger feminist than one who feels empty and incomplete, and even though not all feminists share this need, the fact that so many do speaks to its merit in the women's movement.

Change, of course, has not come without a price, and for some time in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist spirituality met with trepidation, if not overt hostility, on the part of those feminists not spiritually inclined. Such antagonism was divisive and, in the short-run, like the disruptive gay/straight split or the agony of movement racism, harmful to the women's movement. But to survive and continue to be relevant, a social and political movement must allow for
change. Otherwise, the movement will wither away as its core constituency ages or loses interest.

Feminism has not faded, but instead has many new faces, and "the Goddess of the Ten Thousand Names" is a better analogy than most for a movement that has moved to a global scale, as was demonstrated at the 1995 United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing. In that Chinese city women gathered from all parts of the globe to discuss how to improve the status of women--all women--and many invoked the Goddess by one of those many names. This conference also reflected well the changes that have occurred in the feminist framework. The number one and number two "areas of concern," as spelled-out in the conference's "Beijing Declaration," were poverty and equal access to education, but other areas reflected an ecofeminist perspective. For example, women's health issues were cited as an area of concern, as was violence against women, a demand for world peace, and a plea that women be involved in "environmental decision-making at all levels."

The feminist spirituality movement has overcome its own internal disagreements, as well as open hostility on the part of many secular feminists. Proponents claim that it is the fastest growing segment of the women's movement today, or that it is, at least, one of the most dynamic.\(^2\) Given the nature of the movement, such a claim is impossible to prove. What is clear, however, is that feminist spirituality has become a vital aspect of modern feminism, that its numbers do continue to grow, and that it can only enrich the modern women's movement.

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