

## **Why Do Men Need the Goddess?**

### **Male Creation of Female Religious Symbols**

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*Sexism and Godtalk*, 1993 Beacon; *Gaia and God*. 1994 Harper SanFrancisco; *Women and Redemption*, 1998 Fortress; *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*. 2000, Beaon; *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization and World Religion*, Rowman and Littlefield; *Goddess and the Divine Feminine*, 2005 University of California Berkeley.

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It has become a kind of dogma among many contemporary feminists interested in religious history that patriarchal religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, suppress all female symbols for the divine. Therefore if any female personified symbols for divinity exist in such religions, they must be "remnants" of some earlier, pre-patriarchal women-centered religion. It is also assumed that female religious symbols must have been created primarily by women and are intrinsically empowering to women. But these are questionable assumptions. A recent collection of essays by feminist scholars of Hinduism has challenged these views. A collection of essays entitled *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* (Alf Hildebeitel and Kathleen Erndl, eds. New York University Press, 2000) concludes that most of the Hindu Goddesses were created by men to empower men and to keep women in their place.

In my recently published volume, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, May, 2005) I come to similar conclusions about the female religious symbols that have existed in Judaism and Christianity and also raise questions about the pro-woman content of the ancient Near Eastern Goddess, such as Inanna/Ishtar, Isis, Anath and Demeter. Were these Goddesses survivals of an earlier

matriarchal era, or were they primarily created in early patriarchy and served mainly male upper class ends?

For many feminists who have identified with these ancient Goddesses as the basis of a renewed Goddess-centered religion today, the first view has been taken as a kind of unquestionable article of faith, integral to a myth of origins. This myth of origins assumes that there was once a culture, possibly world wide, for most of human history until the last few thousand years, in which a matricentric, if not matriarchal, society flourished, humans were in harmony with each other and nature, and a female-personified deity expressed the immanent life energy that cycled through the earth as one community. This happy culture was over thrown by patriarchy and its female deity repressed, replaced by a male monotheism that enshrined estrangement, hierarchy, domination and violence.

Any continuing ways in which deity is symbolized as female/feminine can only then be "survivals" of that earlier matricentric religion, continuing covertly within patriarchy. The suppression of all female symbolism, not only for God, but even for the collective human, is the dominant agenda of patriarchal religion and reached its climax in Puritan Protestantism. The truth about the original matricentric society and culture began to be discovered in nineteenth century anthropology and archaeology. Now there is a full-fledged rediscovery of this earlier culture, together with its redevelopment, which must serve as a redemptive alternative from these long dark ages of violence and domination from which we presently suffer.

Although I am very sympathetic to the need for a redemptive alternative to the systems of violence that presently threaten humanity and the earth, I find myself skeptical toward a great deal of this explanatory story line or myth of origins. We cannot know with much certainty what the cultures were like before written history in the Ancient Near East, or elsewhere. I find it likely that pre-agricultural gatherer societies were more egalitarian, in the sense of societies with little class hierarchy, but gender arrangements may have varied. At best perhaps some had parallel spheres of men and women where both were more or less equally valued.

Most feminist paleoanthropologists doubt that there were societies that were female dominated and totally harmonious between men and women, humans and nature. In my view some of the tensions from which later hierarchy developed were probably present before in nascent form. Growing ability to accumulate and concentrate wealth allowed these nascent tensions to become explicit. These are guesses from complex sets of fragmentary evidence pulled together from many sources.

My historical research suggests that the powerful goddesses that we find in second and first millennia BCE societies in Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt and Greece, such as Inanna, Ishtar, Anat, Isis and Demeter, were not "survivals" of some original pro-woman great goddess that goes back to Paleolithic times. Rather these kingly and queenly Gods and Goddesses were an invention of the early urban period of the 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, reflecting the same process by which urban society, social hierarchy and literacy were developing. Such immortal, aristocratic Gods and Goddesses themselves reflect a splitting between ordinary humans and physical nature and celestial beings that come to be located in the mountains, the underworld, and especially in the heavens, identified with the stars and planets.

In earlier times humans surely experienced energies that circulated in humans, male and female, in the animals, plants and earth around them. But why visualize these as Gods and Goddesses, personified as ruling class humans, yet separated as immortal? This very process of social separation and projection that generates such an image of deities is itself a complex process that needs to be explained, rather than assumed to be aboriginal.

By the time we have literary texts this process is already well developed. Gods and Goddesses are presumed to exist in some space in the heavens separated from humans, mostly personified as humans, although sometimes with animal attributes (especially in Egypt), immortal in contrast to humans as mortals, although some also die and rise, much more powerful than humans. Typically they are imaged as an aristocracy writ large. This very idea of Gods and Goddesses, therefore, enshrines a concept of cosmological hierarchy that itself has been built on and reflects the development of class hierarchy, as hierarchy of aristocracy over slaves and workers.

There were surely earlier ways of imaging different spheres of the natural world, and of human male and female interaction with it, that were not yet constructed as royal or aristocratic Gods and Goddesses, but we cannot readily imagine how those were "thought about" without some ability to hear the spoken voice of those earlier people. What became imaged as Goddesses likely had some earlier roots in these imaginations of human females in relation to human and non-human life processes. But Goddesses, such as Inanna, that we find depicted in epics, hymns and poetry in the earliest writing of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC is not so much a "survival" of some earlier way of symbolizing the female that valued and promoted women as a gender group, but a new construction that privileges a royal ruling class that developed in the context of early urban hierarchical societies.

Such concepts of Goddesses bear the clear marks of classist and indeed royal ideology. Creating such Goddesses was the work of men and women of the royal and priestly classes, reflecting their interests and validating their roles. One cannot separate here a decisive difference between what men and what women in these classes might have imagined. The writing of the high priestess Enheduanna of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC makes clear that a priestess of this class created hymns that reflected the same royal ideology as that of her father, Sargon. True, the Goddess empowers her as well, but empowers her, not as a representative of "women" in general, but as a representative of a royal family, as a royal princess and high priestess.

Of the ancient Goddesses I studied in this volume, Demeter seems to me a major exception to this theme of royal ideology. True, her priests were the established male leaders of the Eleusinian city-state, and her cult was understood as servicing the whole society. Yet her story suggests something of the anger of women against abuse by males. In the Thesmophoria we get at least a hint of a community of women who gathered yearly to speak of their own needs as women and perhaps also about their anger at male abuse of them and their daughters. Yet clearly such anger does not reflect a pre-patriarchal time, but a response to abusive patriarchal conditions.

When we turn to the early Hebrew religious world, we see something more like the sort of pattern of developing patriarchal monotheism and "survivals" of Goddesses from the Canaanite world that we have been led to expect. But Yahweh and his female consort, Asherah was a religious imagery embraced by Israelite merchant class men as well. One can assume but can only guess how Israelite women valued Asherah as addressing their particular interests as women. But the expected story of the gradual repression of this female consort of Yahweh takes an unexpected turn after the Exile. No sooner is the "Goddess" apparently finally excluded from the rebuilt temple, than we find a new "Goddess" being invented.

This is Wisdom. She is not on the edges, but in the center of the imagination of a new male teaching class. She is used in the Wisdom literature, such as Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, to image the foundations of the universe and the embodiment of Jewish revelation and learning. But is this Hebrew Goddess feminist? Is she the creation of women? Is she the reflection of women's roles? Does she empower women? The answer to all these questions I am sorry to say is mostly "No," although her image might be modeled on some idealized mothers and wives.

Goddesses did not disappear from the Mediterranean world in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, even though patriarchal social structures were long established. On the contrary, religious rites focusing on Goddesses, such as Cybele and Isis, flourished across the empire. Most of what we know of them reflect the views of male leaders and initiates, but women were present in them as priestesses and devotees. Unfortunately we hear about these women from male friends or in artistic representations, rather than in their own voice. What did devotion to the Goddess mean to these women?

Likewise the diverse movements called gnosticism of the first and second centuries AD featured floridly androgynous visions of deity, as well as startling reversals in the roles of female figures, such as Eve. A new female figure, Norea, Eve's daughter, plays the role of the heroine against the cosmic powers and mother of the redeemed humanity. In the gnostic Christian gospels Mary Magdalene and other women disciples play leading roles and their presence is defended against misogynist disciples, such as Peter. Yet the theology and anthropology of these writings feature femaleness as mostly derivative of a dominant maleness and linked with error and material existence to be given up in order to return to the higher spiritual world. Women are included in the redeemed community. A demonic maleness that rules the fallen cosmos is subverted, but in ways that are ambivalent for women's ordinary sexual and bodily existence.

Early Christianity appropriated the Jewish Wisdom tradition, but mostly masculinized it in ways that veil its female personification. Yet Christianity also invented new role models for women as virgins and ascetics who renounce marriage for a new independence and who develop female bonding in women's religious circles and communities. As bridal soul and Mother Church a new female symbolism for the individual and collective humanity in relation to God is elaborated. Late Patristic and Medieval Christianity will shape an increasingly exalted female mediatrix and object of devotion in Mary, "Our Lady." Never touched by sin, incorruptible, ascending to the celestial realm immediately after death to be crowned as Queen of Heaven, appearing in endless visions and celebrated in tens of thousands of pieces of art, she is functionally the Christian Goddess, although officially simply the representative of our original nature, our best human potential.

The existence of women's religious communities in Medieval Christianity also allowed women mystical theologians to flourish, to teach, to write, to have their work circulated to those devoted to their work and preserved for future generations. Thus for the first time in Western history we have, not just an occasional and fragmentary preservation of the work of a women religious writer, but a large body of women's religious writings. Here we find an extraordinary elaboration

of a theology of female-personified Wisdom shaped by and for women's empowerment. Here we have a precious example of how women might take a male-created symbol and refashion it for women's spiritual empowerment

Mainstream Protestantism eliminated most of this devotion to Mary, female saints and personified Wisdom. But a whole new stream of mystical millennialist Protestantism arose on the edges of official Protestantism and redeveloped a theology of Wisdom that restored a female personification to God as mediator of creation and redemption. This is found particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme and those he influences, including the American mystical millennialist movement, the Shakers.

Yet much of this elaboration of Mariology and bridal mysticism through Christian history is the work of men, not women. Rather than totally repressing female symbols for God and for the individual and collective human, Jewish and Christian men, within patriarchal societies and religious systems, continually reinvent the "religious feminine." So my central question in this talk is 'what does this mean'? Inverting Carol Christ's feminist query, "why women need the Goddess," I ask, in light of this history, "why do men need the Goddess?" Why do they periodically reinvent female personifications of the divine and of the individual and collective human, even imagining themselves as brides and as mothers, impregnated, giving birth and nursing children with full breasts, images very typical of Medieval bridal mysticism in monastic men like Bernard of Clairvaux?

A full answer to this question would take psychoanalytical directions that go well beyond the expertise of this writer. Writers such as Michael Carroll have explored the psychic role played by Marian devotion in the lives of celibate Catholic males and mostly pronounced it sick-making.<sup>1</sup> I do not automatically rush to this judgment. I simply wish to make the obvious point that most of the Goddesses that we know about from art and literary texts in the Ancient Near East and Western religion have been invented by men to serve male interests. So what are these male interests that the Goddess serves?

In the Ancient Near East, Goddesses, such as Inanna, Ishtar, Anat, and Isis, were figures that protected men in power. Politically, Goddesses seem to have played a key role in installing upstart men in power, elevating them through marriage into the older systems of divine and royal legitimacy. Ecologically, in a natural environment in which yearly drought and death threatened survival, the Goddess was the sustaining power behind the renewal of life who called the dying lover, husband or daughter back to life, restoring the fertility of the earth. In a

world threatened by war, the Goddess rode in front of the war chariot of the king with lightening bolts in her hands and brought defeated captives to crouch under his foot. In Egypt the young Pharaoh depended his mother, Isis, to birth him, to protect and nurture him and to secure his ascendancy to the throne seated upon her lap. The Goddess was literally the power behind the throne.

As ancient empires expanded and men felt ever more vulnerable to "fickle Fortune" the Goddess Isis played new more individualized roles of protection. Through her transforming power, Lucian in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Hellenistic novel, The Golden Ass, is rescued from a disastrous fall into asinine bondage, restored to his humanity and assured of ongoing protection of his good fortune under Isis' protective mantle. Do men, nurtured by mothers in patriarchal families, assume that divine females are more caring, more accessible, more reliable intermediaries in the volatile world of shifting forces of life and death than male deities?

When we move to the world of early Judaism and then of Christianity, where a male monotheistic God and heterosexist culture reign officially, a new problem develops for male spirituality and its relation to the divine. For males to love God is for a human male to love a divine male. This means the structure of spirituality in male monotheism is homoerotic. Since Catholic Christianity gives priority to the celibate male as spiritual leader, males whose psycho-sexual orientation is homoerotic may have been particularly attracted to such leadership. Yet the official heterosexist ethic forbade an explicit elaboration of male-male eros, such as was found in classic Greece. Thus male lovers of a male God or Christ must veil the homoerotic structure of their spirituality by imagining themselves as females, as blushing brides led to the marriage bed with Christ, longing to be kissed "by the kisses of his mouth."<sup>2</sup>

One way that heterosexual males, perhaps seeking an alternative to this homoerotic spirituality, could open up other vistas of spirituality was by reinventing female spiritual love objects. Mary, as God's bride and mother, could also become the bride and love object of the male devotee. By imaging her as virginal mother, the male devotee could also become the beloved child nurtured by a mother who belonged to him alone, rescued from the phallic father that would defile her through the sexual act by which the child was conceived. Another option for Christian males is to rediscover the female or Wisdom side of God and envision the soul as bridegroom and lover ever seeking the gracious response of his celestial Lady Love.

Male bridal mysticism, whether imaging the soul as bride of a male Christ, a child-lover nurtured by Mary or a bridegroom of Wisdom, is, however, seldom positive toward women. On the

contrary, it is primarily a spirituality by which the male devotee turns away from and despises relationship with actual women, imagining such relationship as debasing to his soul, to devote himself to these more elevating celestial loves. Misogyny is the covert and often overt subtext of male spirituality that seeks the love of God, as Father or as Mother, Bridegroom or as Lady Love.

What then of women in this construction of gendered spirituality? Can a Jewish Goddess, Wisdom or Shekinah, or a Christian Goddess, Holy Spirit, Wisdom or Mary, be converted to feminism? Our evidence is scanty for answering this question. Most of the record of women's devotion to female religious symbols has been silenced, by excluding women from teaching and writing and their work from preservation as part of the teaching tradition. A contemporary Mexican feminist, seeking to understand how women relate to the Virgin of Guadalupe, might get at this by sociological research, by interviewing Mexican women and letting them to express their relationship to La Morena.<sup>3</sup> But such a method of inquiry is not available to us for women of past generations.

Those women of medieval and early modern religious communities that did gain access to teaching, writing and transmission of their thoughts were themselves marginal to the dominant church teaching institutions. What they knew of Mary or Wisdom they learned from male teachers and male constructed texts. Yet even with all these handicaps what has come down to us from medieval women mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch, Marguerite Porete, Julian of Norwich and others, as well as more recent figures, such as Jane Leade, makes it evident that women can make tentative and sometimes very bold reconstructions of these female symbols to express their own relation to them and redemptive transformation in and through them.

For Hildegard of Bingen female personified spiritual beings encompass the entire cosmos and salvation history from start to finish. Mechthild images a male Christ who is not only her lover, but kneels to her as his beloved. Hadewijch engages in a gender-bending fluidity of identity, as bride of Christ and as bridegroom seeking a fickle celestial Lady Love. Marguerite Porete trumps one-eyed Lady Reason and Holy Church the Little by a triumphant Lady Love who liberates her into Holy Church the Great beyond the spiritual reach of institutional male clerical power. Finally burned at the stake as a heretic, even in her fiery death at their hands, she rose superior to their hostile power which could not control or dominate her soaring spirit.

Julian of Norwich in her anchorite cell creates a more homey vision of God as kindly father and kindly mother, both reassuring the troubled soul that no one is finally rejected by God, that in the end "all will be well, all will be very well." 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestant mystic Jane Leade imagined Lady Wisdom as a celestial sister that leads her to a liberating kingdom of transformed life in which all that is corruptible has been left behind.

One might well say that all these spiritual visions, built mainly on flight from finitude, physical sexuality and the body, are hardly the liberating messages that feminist women seek today. But these women were operating with other cosmologies and views of the self than ours. They reshaped the gender symbolism of these spiritualities in a way that clearly made them agents of their own lives and visionaries in their own right, as well as prophetic and pastoral teachers for their communities who valued them and carefully preserved their teachings for us to read today. This is surely some part of feminism.

Today we are in quite a different situation. Thanks to two centuries of feminist teaching and organizing, women, particularly in the West, have access to all levels of education. They can teach in most venues of scholarship. They have property rights and access to income in their own name. They can study these inherited religious traditions and seek to reshape them in ways that will overcome sexist hierarchy in all its social and symbolic ramifications. This has hardly been fully accomplished. Public media of communication still seeks to make the very word "feminism" an object of derision. Fundamentalist backlash in all the patriarchal religious traditions seek to reestablish female subjugation and its ideological justifications and re-socialize women to accept this. We still have a long way to go.

But the battle has been joined in more decisive way than any previous centuries since the shaping of patriarchal hierarchical societies in antiquity. Precisely because women and men have caught a new vision of gender mutuality no longer built on domination and subordination, and have begun to reorganize their relations to embody this, those who seek to maintain traditional patterns have grown more hostile and aggressive. In the current Bush administration the war against women has become increasingly explicit in every area, but particularly in the arena of reproductive rights. Renewed apocalyptic language of a male warrior God crusading against evil buttresses the many efforts to establish a new level of neocolonial hegemony of the Western elite male. Silencing feminist critique, or trivializing it as simply the token inclusion of a Black female in the seats of power totally docile to the Bush agenda,<sup>4</sup> are key weapons in the arsenal of renewed power of domination.

Feminists interested in the religious aspects of overcoming patriarchy have pursued several strategies. Some have seen the most meaningful road as the reclaiming of prophetic liberative themes in Judaism and Christianity and seeking to reinterpret them for feminism within their historical communities. Others have sought other religions, Buddhism or Hinduism, with either no male God or God at all<sup>5</sup> or a great plurality of Goddesses, which can be claimed for a feminist spirituality. Yet another group has despaired of any effort to reinterpret established religious systems shaped by millennia of patriarchy and have sought to go back behind the rise of patriarchy to some original Goddess seen as an alternative to be reprimed today for a new revolutionary transformation of self and society.

This quest for an original feminist Goddess, although it might not be based on good history, clearly speaks to deep psycho-cultural needs in our culture that lie in many religious traditions, including Christianity. One might say that the lost feminist alternative is not so much a literal historical era of the past, as a symbol of faith, faith in the possibility of a better self and society against their distortion by systems of domination. This faith is rooted in a deep sense that we do indeed have a better self and capacity for good social relations that can be resurrected from beneath the patterns of alienation. Its validity, like that of the myth of the Garden Eden on which it is built, is theological, rather than historical. For this reason this symbol of a utopian pre-patriarchal past to be recovered today speaks powerfully and convincingly to many people's intuitive feelings, even as it arouses skepticism from others when it is defended as literal history.

I regard all these paths as equally legitimate. There are difficulties, but also rich creativity to be found in each of these paths of the feminist religious quest. I personally am more inspired by the first path. That there are probably not clearly feminist Goddesses and cultures from pre-patriarchal histories only means that reclaiming Goddesses from the Ancient Near East, such as Inanna, Isis or Demeter, or Kali and Durga from India, is also a work of feminist reinterpretation for today, not a ready made feminist spirituality to be laid hold of literally in its ancient historical form and reprimed. This means taking responsibility for our own work of reinterpretation and new myth-making today, not engaging in a kind of "feminist fundamentalism" that claims to be reclaiming the "old time religion."

I also see a great deal of convergence between different roads of interpretation of an ecofeminist spirituality, whether it be an Indian ecofeminist such as Vandana Shiva speaking from an Indian context and reclaiming Shakti as the female power of the universe,<sup>6</sup> or a Catholic ecofeminist such as Ivone Gebara of Brazil reimagining the Christian Trinity as a dialectic of immanent relationships of life energy<sup>7</sup> or a pagan priestess, such as Selene Fox of the Circle

Sanctuary honoring the cycle of life which continually renews nature as the context in which she stands. These many visions converge on a considerable degree of common ground.

There is no one source for this emerging commonality.<sup>8</sup> Rather its roots lie in the processes by which we are all responding to similar challenges and coming up with similar solutions in the context of a twenty-first century world threatened by military violence, economic exploitation and ecological collapse. It is based on a shared recognition that a male hierarchical concept of the divine is a major ideological reinforcement of these patterns of social domination. This recognition is creating a view of the divine, of humanity and the earth in relation to the divine that, if not exactly the same, has a great deal of similarity. One can perhaps begin to speak of an ecumenical and inter-religious common ground of ecofeminist theology and spirituality.

Some of these characteristics of a common ecofeminist theology are the following. The rejection of the splitting of the divine from the earth, as "God or Goddess," or personified immortal entities, located in some super-celestial realm outside the earth. The very concept of God is deconstructed. Instead the divine is seen as the matrix of life-giving energy that is in, through and under all things, sustaining and renewing life. This life-giving matrix should be seen, not as a reduction to what is, for what is includes the structures of domination, but as immanently transcendent and transcendently immanent. That is to say, it not only sustains the cycling seasons, but empowers us to struggle against the hierarchies of dominance and to seek to recreate relationships of mutuality.

This divine energy for life and renewal of life in and through all things can be imaged as female or male, not in ways that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, but in ways that celebrate our diverse bodies and energies. But it is neither male, female, or anthropomorphic in any essential or exclusive sense. It is the font of life that wells up to create and recreate all living things in ecozoic community. It calls us to repent of power over others and to reclaim power within and power with one another, as pagan priestess Starhawk has said.

This is a vision of life energy that calls us all into life-giving community from many strands of tradition, culture and history. This common theology, I believe, must also call us to stand shoulder to shoulder and arm in arm to oppose the system of economic, military and ecological violence that are threatening to undo the very fabric of planetary life. This, as Thomas Berry has said, is the "great work" of our generation.

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton, NJ:

Princeton University Press, 1989; also Madonnas that Maim: Popular Catholicism in Italy since the Fifteenth Century (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> On the homoerotic character of male monotheistic spirituality, see Jeffrey M. Kripel, "A Garland of Talking Heads for the Goddess: Some Autobiographical and Psychoanalytical Reflections on the Western Kali," in Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses, Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl, eds. (New York: NYUP, 2000), pp. 239-268; also Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism (Boston: Beacon, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Jeanette Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment of Mexican-American Women (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> The Bush administration has been very astute in both rejecting affirmative action in principle, yet selecting men and women of color that are total supporters of its agenda as token "race" and "gender" cards.

<sup>5</sup> Rita Gross has argued that Buddhism is liberating for women precisely because it not only has no male God, but no God at all: see her Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development (London: Zed, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Ivone Gebara, A Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 137-171.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Christ has suggested that ecofeminist Christians are "stealing" from Goddess theology: see her "Feminist Theology in Post-Traditional Theology" in The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology, Susan Frank Parsons, ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 8