

THE RETURN OF THE GODDESS: MYTHOLOGY, WITCHCRAFT AND FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

The historical transition from the Late Antique world to the Early Middle Ages was characterized by the decline of traditional polytheistic paganism and its replacement by Christian Trinitarian monotheism in Europe. In the early modern era colonial expansion and missions established this form of religion throughout the world (Neill, 1975 [1964]; Lewis, 2004). The Christian God is male, transcendent, and separate from creation, and Christian institutions and social *mores* exemplified these qualities, with male religious functionaries and patriarchal social organizations. With the advent of modernity and particularly the Enlightenment, reason and secularism challenged Christian normativity and the influence of churches declined. The secularization thesis initially argued that religion would wither and die entirely; such faith would be unnecessary, as science would provide undisputed and rationally evidenced meaning for human life (Clark, 2003: 559–560). However, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw an upsurge in scholarly and popular interest in non-Christian religions, both ancient and modern. Of particular importance was a strand of ideas that argued for matriarchy as the original human social organization and the worship of the Goddess as the original religion of humanity. Early anthropological writings on magic and witchcraft, and publications in the Western esoteric tradition (for example, on hermeticism and Kabbalah), also contributed to interest in alternative religion and the Goddess (Jencson, 1989: 2–4).

In the twentieth century these intellectual currents crossed the boundary between academic interest and actual religious practice, and dramatically manifested in a variety of new religions devoted to the revived worship of the Goddess, including Wicca (the Craft), Feminist Spirituality and Ecopaganism (Hanegraff, 1998: 85–88). This paper investigates the mythology of originary matriarchy and the Great Goddess, and examines Wicca, Feminist Spirituality (primarily

Goddess-centred but also within the Judeo-Christian tradition) and the broader Pagan movement as new traditions actively reviving the Goddess, whether as sole deity or as part of a revisioning of polytheism, where the goddesses and gods are worshipped. In both cases the Goddess serves to critique the Christian God; her gender challenges the masculine norm and her sometime multiplicity challenges monotheistic unity and erasing of difference (Morgan, 1999: 51–59). Goddess religion particularly seeks healing from wounds created by the patriarchy and worshippers of the Goddess, male and female, view themselves as revitalizing a decadent and dying Western society, and as participants in a revolution that will save the environment and assure a better future for humanity (Rountree, 2002: 486). Finally, this paper will comment briefly on the effect of the return of the Goddess on the academic study of religion.¹

The Great Goddess and the Golden Age of Matriarchy

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), the Late Antique bishop and theologian, witnessed processions honouring the Mother of the Gods, Berecynthia, in the streets of Hippo during his youth. A fervent Christian, to him memories of these events were shameful and impure (Borgeaud, 2004: 120). When Augustine died, the paganism of the ancient world was rapidly declining, and the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, had become the only manifestation of the divine feminine in the emerging medieval Christian world, with churches dedicated to her being established in cities like Ephesus and Soissons, formerly devoted to the goddesses such as Diana, and Isis (Warner, 1990 [1976]: *passim*). Devotion to Mary and the elevated status ascribed to her, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church, departs significantly from the information available in the New Testament. As Baring and Cashford (1991: 549) perceptively note, “Mary’s birth and death are not even mentioned in the Scriptures, so this picture of her cannot...[be] a factual description of a particular historical person, but must, yet again, be the continuing story of the human imagination.” The prominence

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of Marian devotion in the Later Middle Ages was instrumental in the development of the Jewish mystical system of Kabbalah that accorded central importance to the figure of Shekhinah, the female hypostasis of the presence of God. The tradition of commentary on the *Song of Songs* provided the bridge between the two religions (Green, 2002: 21–22).

From the Renaissance onwards, the revival of classical learning, interest in the occult sciences (including alchemy, astrology, divination and angelic communication), and the increasingly secular attitude to knowledge, facilitated the development of modern science. This also created an intellectual space in which the academic study of non-Christian religions, pioneered by Friedrich Max Müller and C.P. Tiele, could flourish (Sharpe, 1986: 35–46). Practitioners of the *philosophia occulta* appropriated Kabbalah into esoteric Christianity, completing the circle of influence (Faivre and Voss, 1995: 48–53), and, among others, the pioneering female doctor, anti-vivisectionist, vegetarian and Hermeticist Anna Kingsford (1846–1888) identified Mary with Venus and other pagan goddesses: “is not Venus our Lady of Love? ... And Love is the Woman of Heaven, Maria, Astraea, Venus, Aphrodite, by whatever name she is known and is dear to us” (Pert, 2006: 85). Nineteenth century intellectuals pioneered new theories that challenged the Christian metanarrative and basic Western social institutions; for example, the theory of evolution and Marxist economic theory (Irvine, 1967: *passim*). The nineteenth century also saw the birth of the new disciplines of archaeology and anthropology, and it was from these that much of the evidence for originary matriarchy, and the worship of the Goddess, was later sourced.

The theory itself was proposed by the German classicist Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887), who published his three-volume *Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World (Das Mutterrecht)* in 1861. He argued that humanity had passed through three stages of social development. These are: the hetaeric, characterised by men having sexual access to all women and named from *hetaera*, the Greek for ‘prostitute’; the matriarchal, in which “women revolted against male sexual promiscuity and forced men to accept monogamous unions, which were dominated by women as mothers and in which descent of children was traced through the mother” (Ruether, 2005: 256); and finally, the patriarchal, in which men asserted authority over women and establishment of children’s paternity was paramount. The evidence from which Bachofen derived this theory was the corpus of mythology surviving from ancient Greece

and Rome, in which he believed all three stages could be detected. For example, Aphrodite's sexual freedom gives insight into the hetaeric phase; powerful goddesses such as Athena and Diana, who exist without consorts or sons, give insights into the matriarchal phase; and the rule of Olympians Zeus is evidence of the final triumph of patriarchy. His theories influenced many important scholars, but particularly Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928), one of the first female scholars who taught Classics at Cambridge and published works on Greek religion, concerned with “the emergence of religion from pre-Hellenic chthonic patterns to Olympian forms and then to postclassical asceticism of the Orphic and Gnostic type” (Ruether, 2005: 260).

When Bachofen published *Mother Right* the academic study of religion, anthropology and archaeology was in its infancy, and Troy, Knossos and Babylon were yet to be discovered. It has been argued that Bachofen's reliance on mythology and unscientific scholarly methods identified him with the past and with Romanticism, but Ann Taylor Allen has countered that criticism by noting that “in many ways, Bachofen's analysis of mythology as a form of symbolic expression, though it looked backward to the Romantic movement, also anticipated much later insights of psychoanalysis and modern social science” (Allen, 1999: 1090). This view is supported by the use made of Bachofen's thesis by Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, published in 1884. Engels' materialist interpretation focused on the development of private property (including one's children and slaves), which he identified as characteristic of the patriarchy and absent from matriarchy (Ruether, 2005: 264). The importance of the Romantic strain in Bachofen's work cannot be overemphasised, however, as the triumphant return of the Goddess owes much to the Romantic rebellion against Enlightenment rationalism, and to the privileging of feeling over thought, intuition over evidence (McCrickard, 1991: 62). The contemporary Goddess movement is revitalization movement, in that it views patriarchal culture and the monotheist God as unsatisfactory and seeks to innovate “a new cultural system” (Porterfield, 1987: 237). Jacques Barzun paints a similar picture of the Romantic movement between 1780 and 1850 as concerned with “cultural renovation... [a]live to diversity... [o]bservant and imaginative” (Barzun, 1961, 137).

What is interesting about these nineteenth century scholarly assertions that matriarchy preceded patriarchy is that they do not argue for the superiority of matriarchy, but rather accept that its replacement by patriarchy was an evolutionary process. Original matriarchy

acquired connotations of superiority and the worship of the Goddess, the first deity, through the work of the Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994), who was born in the decade when the matriarchal thesis was finally and decisively abandoned within anthropology. Gimbutas contributed to the revival of the Goddess in her last three books; *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1974), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991). These books bore fruit among the feminist community, which had come into existence in the 1960s and gained strength in the 1970s. Initially concerned with politics, feminist writers such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Judith Plaskow challenged the patriarchal Judeo-Christian religions and aimed to revolutionize their institutions. Other key thinkers, including Mary Daly and Carol Christ, advocated abandoning the male god and reviving the worship of the Goddess (Yates, 1983: 59–73). It became important for feminists to develop adequate explanations for the patriarchy, while not endorsing its existence in any way. The development of feminist spirituality was contemporaneous with the counterculture of the 1960s and the sharp and unanticipated rise in new religious movements in America and the West (Stark, 1999: 2462–264). The secularisation thesis was thus revised: sociologists of religion realized that the real effects of the decline of institutional religion were a proliferation of smaller, new religions; the uncoupling of religion and the sacred, resulting in many apparently secular activities taking on spiritual overtones while apparently religious activities became secularized; and the shift from public religious observance to private spiritual practice (Cusack and Digance, 2008: 227–228).

In the 1980s, Gimbutas's research into Old Europe (the Neolithic period between 7000 BCE and approximately 1700 BCE, which marks the start of the Bronze Age in northern Europe) was utilized by Goddess feminists in several groundbreaking books. This essay will discuss the Goddess myth in three of these: Marilyn French's *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals* (1985), Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), and Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor's *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (1987). Essentially, all three tell the same story; they are all eloquent expositions of the sacred history (or myth) of the Goddess movement. French's weighty volume begins with explanations of how the patriarchy may have developed, focusing on the idea of control, and contrasts this with matricentric societies. These are loosely structured: "families clustered around a mother or set of mothers (sisters), who had strong bonds with

their children, especially with daughters... Men were marginal in the matriline; the closest bond for men was with their mates and the children of their sisters" (French, 1985: 67). French takes pains to demonstrate that patriarchy is not always the norm and that matricentric societies have existed throughout history. Her book is painstakingly referenced and refers to detailed scholarship to support her position, though it is not uncontroversial. In terms of the Goddess movement, *Beyond Power* is more a political treatise than a religious call to arms, although it treats the shift from Goddess worship to worship of the male God as an essential part of the growth of patriarchy, and a female deity as central to the woman-oriented society she advocates. French's avowed goal is "feminizing the world" (French, 1985: 545) and she views this as non-negotiable. Her powerful closing words are "[t]he choice may be between death and life. There is no choice" (French, 1985: 546).

This apocalyptic tone is much stronger, and the urgent need for the goddess to be rediscovered and returned to her central position as supreme deity is more palpable, in Riane Eisler's best-selling *The Chalice and the Blade*. Eisler, too, frames her argument in terms of political necessity, invoking recent and contemporary violence and disasters (including the Holocaust) as the motivation for her researches. The book "tells a new story of our cultural origins. It shows that war and the 'war of the sexes' are neither divinely nor biologically ordained. And it provides verification that a better future *is* possible—and is in fact firmly rooted in the haunting drama of what actually happened in our past" (Eisler, 1987: xv). Eisler asserts that the Goddess is the logical primary deity; life comes from women's bodies. Eisler, however, sees both patriarchy and matriarchy as incomplete, both versions of the 'dominator' model; a positive and nurturing society is a mutual partnership between women and men. Like French, Eisler begins with archaeological matricentricity, based on the work of James Mellaart (the controversial excavator of Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia, modern Turkey) and Gimbutas. The narrative of *The Chalice and the Blade* seeks to trace the inheritance of this older mode of society throughout Western history, finding vestiges in ancient Crete, medieval Christianity, and heretical groups. Like Marilyn French, she examines the shift from the chalice (feminine, nurturing) to the blade (masculine, violent) as a story of the Fall, equivalent to that of Genesis in the Judeo-Christian scriptures in that it explains the loss of a ideal world (Eisler, 1987: 42–58). Though solidly referenced, Eisler's book is less dryly academic than French's, and her crucial association

of the masculinist religion with “warfare, slavery and sacrifice” packs a considerable punch. In the final chapter, “Breakthrough in Evolution: Towards a Partnership Future,” Eisler tackles the issue of “what *kinds* of symbols and myths are to fill and guide our minds: prohuman or antihuman, gylanic or androcratic” (Eisler, 1987: 184).

This is an important issue, as many critics of the Goddess movement have questioned the efficacy of deliberately creating a religion, and have (somewhat naïvely) assumed that adherents to new forms of religion must believe literally in their mythology, or their rituals and spiritual states will be ‘inauthentic’. This criticism is almost always taken further, with the equation of the contemporary myth-making of Paganism (in all its multitudinous varieties) with the spiritual programme of Nazism:

[i]f this is to be taken at face value, we are in deep water here. For while most witches emphasise the notion of ... Goddess worship as a means for ... female empowerment, and often go to great lengths to insist that their own intentions as not just benign but downright redemptive, a call for ancient female principles to help heal a wounded earth, this talk of genetic memory has unpleasant overtones (Rieff, 1993: 24).

A second, related criticism is the labelling of Paganism as anti-modern, a rejection of technology and progress, and a retreat into an idealized, imaginary past. These issues of the invention of myth(s) and the perceived anti-modern orientation of Paganism will be addressed later in this chapter. What is significant here is that Eisler asserts that human beings can choose the myths and symbols they live by, and that such a choice has moral implications for individual existence and for the continued existence of humanity and the earth. Her conclusions are identical to French’s; humanity is at a crucial turning point and the reality is that there is no choice.

As this exposition of French and Eisler has concentrated on the tragic loss of the prehistoric Golden Age, the discussion of Sjöö and Mor’s *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* will focus on the nature and attributes of the Goddess and the qualities associated with her worship. *The Great Cosmic Mother* describes the Great Mother Goddess religion as dominant in prehistory for 300,000 years and identifies her rites as mysteries involving the moon, fecundity and agriculture. “Agriculture ... domestication of animals, together with a more settled village life” are all female inventions, and hunting (traditionally understood as a male activity) was therefore redundant (Sjöö and Mor, 1987: 238). The Goddess was all-powerful, the mother of all,

and “[d]eath, rebirth, and ecstasy through her being, experienced in joyful, fearful, and orgiastic rites, are crucial to the psychic balance and health of men as of women” (Sjöö and Mor, 1987: 248). The Goddess was worshipped in nature; her rites were conducted in caves and groves, beside springs and on mountains. The main source of contemporary knowledge of the Goddess is the mythology of past societies; Sjöö and Mor cite Bachofen approvingly, and they assert that; “myth records the real history of the ancient preliterate world” (Sjöö and Mor, 1987: 247). The identification of the Goddess with the moon and the male with the sun results in a cosmology where “the cause of the world’s ills is something called the *solar principle*, the male spiritual force. The rational faculty, or masculine way of thinking is *Sun-consciousness*, the influence of the solar principle on the human mind” (McCrickard, 1991: 63).

This foundational myth of the Goddess movement has circulated widely and is popular and meaningful for many people, not all of who are committed Goddess worshippers (Bloch, 1997: 181–190). Scholarly criticism of the evidence that is adduced to support it and the methodological lenses through which the evidence is interpreted has had little success in curbing its influence (Fleming, 1969; Binford, 1982: 541–561). Rituals have been developed which are based on the myth of the Golden Age of matriarchy, and pilgrimage tourism to the sites of ancient Goddess cults has become a popular spiritual activity. Most religious practices associated with Goddess worship are directed to “healing the wounds of the patriarchy” (Rountree, 2002: 486) and ritual is viewed as dynamic and empowering; “feminist ritual seeks to replace the patriarchal traditions not only with an image of the female as divine, but also with an image of strength and power that is internalised as part of the self” (Jacobs, 1990: 43). Rountree’s research on Goddess pilgrims, who visit a range of principally European sites (including Stonehenge, Delphi, Knossos, Çatal Hüyük and the Neolithic temples of Malta), reveals that visiting sacred places provides the pilgrim with access to sacred time, where the linear time is experienced as evaporating, leaving only the timeless Golden Age of the Goddess. In this religious experience “nostalgia and healing powerfully merge.” One pilgrim at the Hagar Qim temple on Malta performed a ritual “whose effect was to inscribe on her body the revelation she had experienced.” (Rountree, 2002: 486–487). Rountree states that:

[e]ntering the temple one symbolically enters the body of the Goddess. By lying down and curving her body into the curved limestone walls of

the temple in which the “fat” statues had once stood, the woman maps the Goddess’s body onto her own and further embodies her self-recognition as Goddess. She turns her body into a living souvenir of the place and her experience of it... (Rountree, 2002: 487).

This emphasis on the body and self-reflexive identity leads Goddess worshippers to advocate “organic and intuitive” methods of research and the sharing of “experience” (Livingstone, 2005: 7, 9). In conclusion, the sacred history or foundation myth of the Goddess movement offers an effective explanation of the “existence and persistence of male dominance” without condoning it (Eller, 1991: 281) and argues that women hold the key to the future. The future is intimately connected with the Golden Age of the distant past; in fact, it is the recovery of that past. Thus, the Goddess movement has apocalyptic overtones and a utopian (no-place) vision of the future, which creates meaning in the present; “the historical events that hasten this eventuality [the restoration of the Goddess and the matricentric society] are no longer simply barbarities to be endured, but events rich with portents of better things to come” (Eller, 191: 295).

Gerald Gardner and Wicca: Witchcraft and the Worship of the Goddess

The modern revival of witchcraft is a major artery of the Goddess revival, and, like the foundation myth discussed above, it has its roots in the nineteenth century and its flowering in the mid-twentieth century. In 1899, Charles Godfrey Leland (1824–1903), a “highly respected folklorist, linguist, and founder of Britain’s Gypsy Lore Society” (Jencson, 1989: 3), published *Aradia: or the Gospel of the Witches*. This book was based on fieldwork among Gypsies and peasant communities practicing folk magic in England, Italy and Eastern Europe. His findings were that a witchcraft religion, focused on Aradia (the name is derived from Herodias, the evil wife of King Herod and mother of Salome, who brings about the death of John the Baptist in the Christian New Testament), the daughter of the goddess Diana and the first witch, who taught the magic arts to humanity, was the ‘old religion’ of Europe (Magliocco, 2005: 67–69). Diana, the Roman equivalent of the Greek Artemis, is usually understood as a virgin huntress, but Leland’s informant, a Florentine woman called Maddalena, told him that “the moon goddess Diana” had a consort called Lucifer; “Lucifer, whose name means ‘bearer of light,’ is not the conventional Christian devil

in this narrative, but both the brother and lover of Diana” (Magliocco, 2005: 56). Responses to *Aradia* were mixed; Leland was suspected of having invented much of the material, and perhaps even Maddalena herself. Yet its influence was considerable, and several direct contributions to contemporary Witchcraft must be cited: “specific practices (full moon meetings; the goddess name of Aradia; the practice of naked worship... and the Charge of the Goddess), as well as the concept of witchcraft as a form of peasant resistance and cultural critique” (Magliocco, 2005: 58).

The next important contribution to the revival of witchcraft was the publication of Margaret Murray’s (1863–1963) controversial *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (1921), which was also immensely influential. Murray, a professional Egyptologist, examined transcripts of the witch-trials of early modern Europe “and concluded that the inquisitors were persecuting an underground Pagan religious movement that worshipped the Horned God” (Crowley, 1996: 31). Though modern Wiccans are often keen to claim Margaret Murray as one of their own, in fact she was a thoroughgoing rationalist and sceptic (unlike Leland, who was wont to boast of his magical powers). *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches* (1933) were both derided by scholars, who accused Murray of manipulating her sources and of methodological incompetence (Cohn, 1975: *passim*). For the purposes of this essay it is more important to ask; why did general readers find her thesis plausible? Jacqueline Simpson notes two important attractions inherent in Murray’s portrayal of witchcraft: her proposal of a mediating position between the Christian assertion that witches were devil worshippers and the secularist assertion that witches were innocent victims of Christian fanaticism; and, more speculatively, “[p]erhaps this picture of a highly disciplined organization secretly permeating society suited the outlook of her times. Conspiracy theories... flourished since the nineteenth century... Her readers may have found it natural to read such ideas back into history, and to equate a coven with a revolutionary cell” (Simpson, 1994: 91). This is perceptive, because although Murray herself did not create the enduring and powerful myth of ‘the Burning Times’ which is central for modern Witchcraft, her focus on the trials and deaths of early modern witches laid the groundwork for later assertions that the Burning Times were the Wiccan equivalent of the Holocaust, with a figure of nine million victims frequently being cited (Starhawk, 1979: 6–7).

Murray's witches worshipped the Horned God, but modern Witchcraft is focussed on the Goddess, who is envisaged not as sole deity but in a duotheism, partnered by the Horned God. The origins of modern Witchcraft (also known as Wicca or 'The Craft') are directly traceable to an English civil servant, Gerald Brousseau Gardner (1884–1964) who retired to England in 1936 after living and working in Borneo and Malaya. Gardner was a folklorist, naturalist, and Freemason, and claimed to have been initiated into a traditional coven in 1939 by a hereditary witch, Dorothy Clutterbuck (Pearson, 2007: 1–2). After the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951, he published *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959). It appears undeniable that Gardnerian Wicca owes a substantial debt to Murray's writings (Hutton, 2000: 104, 110–112). In the 1940s and 1950s Margaret Murray's reputation was high and she was President of the Folklore Society, of which Gardner was a member. Further, she wrote the 'Introduction' to *Witchcraft Today*, in which she praises Gardner for showing "how much of the so-called 'witchcraft' is descended from ancient rituals, and has nothing to do with spell-casting and other evil practices" (Gardner, 1970[1954]: 16).

Wicca as established by Gardner was a form of pagan worship directed toward the Goddess and her consort the Horned God, organized in covens led by a High Priest and High Priestess, and transmitted by initiation (of which there were three levels). Male and female members of covens claim the name 'witch' proudly and 'Wicca' is said to be an Anglo-Saxon word for 'male witch,' derived either "from the root 'wit' or wisdom... or from the Indo-European roots 'wic' and 'weik,' meaning to bend or turn" (Adler, 1986: 11). The ancient Celtic festivals of Samhain (1 November), Imbolc (1 February), Beltane (1 May), and Lughnasa (1 August), were combined with the equinoxes and the solstices to form the 'Wheel of the Year,' the eight sabbats, or major seasonal festivals (Eason, 1996: 10, 130, 134). Additionally, ceremonies were performed at the thirteen full-moon esbats (Luhrmann, 2001: 115). Rituals were performed 'sky-clad' (naked) and Gardner as High Priest worked in partnership with High Priestesses; in the beginning with a woman known only as 'Dafo,' and later with Doreen Valiente (1922–1999), whom he initiated in 1953, and with whom he wrote certain key Wiccan rituals (Urban, 2006: 170). He was also influenced by Leland in that the version of the 'Charge of the Goddess' attributed to Valiente is based on the version Leland records in *Aradia* (Magliocco, 2005: 58). Describing these influences on Gardner, Jencson remarks

that fifty years after *Aradia* “Gardner’s brand of Wicca . . . wed Leland’s Goddess to Murray’s God” (Jencson, 1989: 3).

Gerald Gardner died in 1964. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rapid expansion of Wicca and its mutation into forms that he could not have foreseen. In Britain Alex Sanders (1926–1988) began a type of Wicca that differed somewhat from Gardner’s, known as ‘Alexandrian’ Wicca (from his personal name, not the ancient city of Alexandria). Sanders, with his High Priestess wife Maxine, took Wicca to the European continent, especially Germany and Scandinavia (Pearson, 2007: 2, 7). Alexandrian Wicca placed greater emphasis on ceremonial magic and elaborate ritual. Gardnerian Wicca arrived in the United States in 1967, and it is in America that the radical transformation of the religion took place. In 1967 America was in the grip of multiple protest movements, constituting the ‘counter-culture’. These included agitations to end the Vietnam War, the demand that women be given equal rights to men, the fight for equal rights for Black Americans, and the struggle for gay rights (Kent, 1988: 104–118). These political movements took place amidst a cultural revolution in which eastern religious teachers (Hindu gurus, Japanese Zen masters and Tibetan monks, among others) gained adherents among young Americans (Hanegraaff, 1998: 10–12, 96–97, 106–107). Wicca, which in Britain was initiatory and hierarchical, rapidly democratised and developed new and radically different forms. For the purposes of this essay, the most significant of these is Feminist Wicca, which developed in the 1970s and conflated the alternative vision of secular feminism with that of Goddess-worshipping Paganism.

Wiccans believed their religion is revival of an ancient Pagan faith. The Goddess is of central importance in Gardnerian Wicca and the majority of its multifarious offshoots. She is known by many names and is worshipped in her triple form as Maiden, Mother and Crone. Vivianne Crowley, an academic psychologist and Wiccan High Priestess, writing about the way that the Virgin Mary preserved the Goddess in Christianity, comments that:

the Goddess is commonly seen as having three major aspects . . . The *Virgin Mother* aspect of the Goddess is associated with the waxing Moon and the Virgin Mary in Catholicism was often depicted as standing on the moon with seven stars above her head. The second aspect is the *Lover-Mother*, the sexual Mother. The third is the *Dark Mother*, the *Hag* or Wise One, who appears in some older Christian churches in the guise of the Black Virgin. The Goddess must contain all three aspects—Virgin, Lover-Mother

and Hag—if she is to provide the model of psychological wholeness that must be the goal of woman and man (Crowley, 1996: 138).

The Horned God, her consort, while important, generally receives less attention and is perceived as being less powerful. This is in keeping with many of the ancient myths that Wiccans utilise: Isis searched for the dismembered corpse of her husband Osiris, and her love and power restored him to life and fertility; and Attis, Adonis and Tammuz are the son-consorts of the more powerful Cybele, Venus and Ishtar. These myths draw attention to vital dimension of Wicca as Gerald Gardner established it; it is strongly heterosexual in orientation and this is manifested in sex-magic, featuring symbolic or actual heterosexual intercourse (Urban, 2006: 172–178).

Gardner, as keen naturalist, had a very positive attitude to the human body and was a strong advocate of the great power inherent in sex magic, or ‘the Great Rite.’ This was the centrepiece of the third and highest degree of Wiccan initiation. In the 1950s this fact was sensationalised by the press, and contributed to Gardner’s scandalous reputation in mainstream society. However, Urban argues that Gardner anticipated a number of the liberating trends of the 1960s, in that the sexual revolution was central to the counter-culture. Also, the tendency to detect or to posit deep structures in religions across cultures is typically 1960s; the Wiccan “coven as a circle made up of male-female couples is very similar to the organization of the Tantric *chakra puja*” (Urban, 2006: 176). Doreen Valiente later noted the similarity between the Great Rite and Tantric ritual: “[t]hese basic ideas of the great cosmic sacred marriage and its reflection at the human level, of the use of the sexual act as a sacrament... seem to indicate that what became Tantra in the East became Witchcraft in the West” (Urban, 2006: 177). When, in America, Wicca was fused with feminism to produce Feminist or Dianic Wicca, these heterosexual rites were abandoned in favour of a celebration of the female body akin to that found in the Goddess movement generally.

Feminist Wicca may be traced to the early 1970s when Hungarian-born Zsuzsanna Budapest began teaching witchcraft in California and founded the Susan B. Anthony Coven, #1 (Griffin, 1995: 35). The 1975 publication of *The Feminist Book of Light and Shadows* (which was reissued in 1989 as *The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries*) by Budapest disseminated her lesbian feminist spiritual vision, and Dianic Wicca, based on the worship of the Virgin Huntress Diana (who exists entirely apart from

male deities and is thus often perceived as lesbian), became the latest instantiation of the Wiccan tradition. This form of Wicca departs from Gardnerian and Alexandrian tradition by worshipping only the Goddess, and being constituted by women-only covens. These covens utilise the sabbats and esbats of Gardnerian Wicca, but the emphasis in ritual is to 'heal the wounds of patriarchy,' much in the way that the Goddess movement sought to, and Dianic ritual focuses on Women's Mysteries:

[t]hese are the five uterine blood mysteries: being born, menarche, giving birth/lactation, menopause, and death, which acknowledge women's ability to create life, sustain life, and return our bodies to the Goddess in death. Dianic rituals also celebrate the earth's seasonal cycles of birth, death and regeneration, as it is reflected in women's own life cycles, and not on an exclusively heterosexual fertility cycle. Dianic tradition specifically includes the creation of rituals whose intention is to help women heal from, and counter the effects of misogynist, patriarchal social institutions and religions (Barrett, 2003: 18).

This emphasis leads to a ritual concentration on embodiment and a conception of the Goddess as immanent in all women. Thus, the classic Wiccan ritual of Drawing Down the Moon, in which the High Priestess either invokes the Goddess to descent into her or rather evokes the Goddess from within (Adler, 1986: 19), becomes definitely more the latter than the former. While the powerful Hag or Crone is often invoked in Dianic Wicca, Wendy Griffin's research categorically dismisses the erroneous notion that such rituals might be unnecessarily 'serious' or lacking in humour. Her participant observance of an all-female coven, Redwood Moon, revealed cheekiness and humour, as well as deep seriousness, in the group members' manifestations of the goddess (Griffin, 1995: 42–45).

Dianic Wiccans are also politically engaged and radical feminists. They vociferously denounce the 'Burning Times' as a female Holocaust, fight against sexism and all patriarchal hostility to women, and are active in environmental causes, as they revere the earth and nature as the Goddess (Foltz, 2000: 410). This points the way to the final aspects of Wicca to be considered in this essay: eco-theology and indigenous paganism. The 1979 publication of the Witchcraft classic *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk (also known as Miriam Simos) also has great significance for Feminist Wicca (although not the separatist Dianic strand). Starhawk's vision allows for male participation, but is included in this section because of its profound ecofeminist orientation and passionate

advocacy of Goddess worship. Starhawk is the co-founder of a movement for change called Reclaiming, which has merged Paganism, feminism, eco-theology and pro-peace protests (Urban, 2006: 183). She is the convenor of the Earth Activist Training Seminars and her understanding of Paganism is unique amongst those discussed thus far, in that it incorporates notions of indigeneity, and appropriates indigenous practices such as shamanism in drawing up a lineage of Witchcraft. Her central image, the Spiral Dance, is manifested in the dance of the shaman, and “also in the sky: in the moon, who monthly dies and is reborn; in the sun, whose waxing light brings summer’s warmth and whose waning brings the chill of winter” (Starhawk, 1979: 3). Further, Starhawk understands claiming freedom for women’s sexuality is profoundly political; this is the point of connection with Dianic Wicca that leads Dianics to revere Starhawk.

Starhawk herself has become increasingly involved in political issues, including the plight of women in prisons and organizing non-violent protests against economic injustice (Baring and Cashford, 1991: 284). Finally, Ecopagan approach to the earth and to environmental issues connects Starhawk to scientist James Lovelock, whose *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979) posited that the Earth is alive, a conscious organism. The ‘Gaia hypothesis’ was originally launched as a scientific theory but has become theologically-freighted over the past three decades, and now enjoys widespread approval because of its apparently exemplary scientific credentials combined with indisputable spiritual authority (Connor, 1993: 22–25). What it effectively does is introduce an Eastern element into Western esoteric religion; it demands that humans review their exclusive position in relation to the rest of the physical world (Baring and Cashford, 1991: 679).

In conclusion, Wicca is one of the main revivals of the worship of the Goddess in the contemporary world. It fascinates because it manifests both as originally conceived in a duotheism (Crowley, 1996: 1), and as reformed by radical feminism as a virtual monotheism. The Goddess in Wicca is chiefly identified with the moon, which is in harmony with the mythology of the Goddess movement described above. Yet she is also the earth, and she is manifest in every woman. Wicca frequently employs the language of psychology to discuss spiritual realities, and this is a significant theme in the whole of modern Paganism. The theories of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), which located spiritual and religious symbols within the individual human unconscious or the collective unconscious, have encouraged the notion that rather than something

outside of the Self, the deity is an archetype encompassed within the individual person (Tacey, 2001: 20). This is profoundly compatible with the picture of Goddess worship which positions the Goddess tradition in contra-distinction to the Judeo-Christian tradition: the worship of the Goddess is immanent, embodied, unstructured, anti-authoritarian, nurturing and liberating; whereas the worship of the One God is transcendent, disembodied, hierarchical, authoritarian, disciplinarian and enslaving (McCrickard, 1991: 59).

The centrality of magic and 'the Craft' to Wicca can be related to this opposition to monotheism. Judeo-Christianity categorises witchcraft as demonic and rejects magic in favour of miracle. Margot Adler describes the Wiccan attitude to magic in overtly naturalistic and psychological terms:

[m]agic is a collection of techniques, all of which involve the mind... including the mobilization of confidence, will and emotion... the use of imaginative faculties, in order to begin to understand how other beings function in nature so we can use this knowledge to achieve necessary ends (Adler, 1986: 8).

Over the past three decades Wicca has moved further away from Gardner's original blueprint, with many witches self-initiating and practicing as solitaires, or engaging as part of internet-based communities (Cunningham, 2005: 79–82). This shift reflects the fact that de-institutionalisation and the focus on private, interiorized spirituality is a trend impacting on new religions as well as long-established religious traditions (Lyon, 2002[2000]: *passim*).

*The Pagan Movement, Feminist Spirituality and Reforming
the Judeo-Christian Tradition*

This paper has considered the revival of the worship of the Goddess thus far in only two contexts; where the Goddess is sole deity, and where the Goddess is the dominant partner in a duotheism. The broader Pagan movement also embraces the worship of the Goddess as part of the revitalization of polytheism, and within the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition there have been efforts made to locate a variety of possible images of the female divine. The efforts of Pagan communities engage our attention more compellingly here, but it is important to note that male-God monotheism and Goddess Paganism have cross-fertilised each other in the last four decades:

[f]or example, Mary Daly (1968), the premier prophet of Goddess religion, began her career as a feminist critic within the Roman Catholic church... Rosemary Radford Ruether (1985), the... prominent spokeswoman for Christian feminism... has compiled a guidebook of readings on female religious imagery for persons interested [in] nonpatriarchal images of God that includes excerpts from several texts about ancient goddesses... [H]er reader for Catholics interested in understanding images of Mary (1977) exemplifies the interest on the part of Christian feminists in finding a goddess tradition within biblical theology. Ruether's interest in Goddess imagery is a good example of the inspirational role that the countercultural movement of Goddess religion has played in the... reflections of Christian feminists (p. 237).

It has already been noted that Christianity kept alive the flame of the Goddess through the Virgin Mary. Feminist theologians and advocates of women's rights in the Judeo-Christian tradition have employed Mary as a contemporary Goddess that Christian women might seek empowerment through; but they have not limited themselves to Mary, retrieving other female figures from the Biblical and extra-Biblical tradition, including Mary Magdalene (Starbird, 1993) and Lilith (Yates, 1983: 64). One of the reasons feminist theologians who start out within traditional religions often become advocates of the Goddess is that they perceive that 'reform' can only go so far, and that it is better to opt for revolution (Stepaniants, 1992: 242). Rita Gross, an academic Indologist, without becoming a thoroughgoing adherent of the Goddess movement, proposed drawing upon Hinduism, the one contemporary 'world religion' that has an extensive array of powerful goddess figures that Western women could utilise as a resource in their efforts to re-image the divine (Gross, 1978: 269–291). As the Goddess in contemporary Paganism is the subject of this essay it is sufficient to note these efforts within Judeo-Christian religion, without further investigation.

While Wicca is a particularly well-known manifestation of the contemporary Pagan movement, in fact Paganism is characterised by extreme variety and difference, which in itself constitutes a challenge to the unity and normativity of Christian monotheism. In Europe and European-derived societies such as America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, revived Paganism focusing on the gods of the ancient European pantheons predominates, although indigenous traditions are represented also. These Pagan groups include Romuva, the revived traditional religion of Lithuania (Strmiska, 2005: 241–297) and the traditions of pagan Russia and the Ukraine (Matossian, 1973: 325–343; Ivakhiv, 2005: 209–239). In the Russian tradition, goddesses including

Baba Yaga (who with her two spinning companions resembles the three Fates of Greek, Roman and Norse mythology), the *rusalki* or water and grove nymphs, and Ge, or Mother Earth are worshipped (Matossian, 1973: 332, 334). Revived Greek and Roman paganism, celebrating Athena and Hera/Juno, Demeter/Ceres and Hestia/Vesta among others, and Ásatrú or Heathenry, following the Norse deities, are also important movements that worship goddesses from the European past (Flowers, 1981: 279–294).

Ásatrú ('those true to the gods'), a form of modern Germanic Heathenry, emerged in early 1970s America, when Stephen McNallen decided consciously to worship the Scandinavian gods and goddesses. He founded the Viking Brotherhood in 1972 and the Ásatrú Free Assembly in 1976 (McNallen, 2003–4: 203–206). At much the same time groups in Britain and Iceland also formed, and in the last forty years Heathenry has spread throughout the Western world. Leaders in the religion are often scholars, creating a strong emphasis within Heathenry on the careful use of sources in ritual and theology. For this reason this section will consider the Norse goddesses and their worship. The main sources for Scandinavian Paganism are two Christian thirteenth-century texts: the *Poetic Edda*, which is a collection of heroic and mythological poems; and the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, which is a commentary on and prose retelling of the poems (Turville-Petre, 1975[1964]: 1–35). The Norse gods consist of two groups or families, the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*. Major deities include Odin, ruler of the gods, his sons Thor the thunder god, and Balder the god of justice and goodness, Njörðr the sea god, the warrior-god Tyr, and Frey, god of fertility. The goddesses include Frigg the wife of Odin, Freyja the goddess of sexuality and fertility, the ski-goddess Skaði, Hel, the grim guardian of the underworld, and the three Norns (fates), Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld (Ellis Davidson, 1981[1964]: 25–32).

Certain of the Norse goddesses have roles and attributes that call to mind those of the Great Goddess. Frigg is the patron of marriage and guardian of women and children, and the primary mythical narrative in which she plays a decisive role concerns her attempts to protect her son Balder from fate and death: "Frigg exacted an oath from fire and water, iron and all kinds of metals, stones, earth, trees, ailments, beasts, birds, poison and serpents, that they would not harm Balder" (Sturluson, 1954: 80). The gods make sport by throwing weapons at Balder, all of which bounce off harmlessly. However, Balder is treacherously killed, by

the villainous god Loki. Loki made a mistletoe dart when he heard that Frigg had felt that the plant was too young and harmless to demand an oath from it. His agent in this crime was Höðr, the blind god. After Balder's death the gods seek to persuade the all creatures in the world to weep him out of Hel, but this effort fails. Though Balder is her son, not her lover or husband, there are aspects of this myth that resemble Isis's seeking and resurrecting Osiris, and Ishtar's grief over the death of Tammuz (Warner, 1990[1976]: 206–209). Freyja's unbridled sexuality and great beauty, coupled with the fact that her husband is missing and she is thus free, heightens a resemblance between her and Aphrodite or Venus, goddess of love and sex in the Classical world (Harris and Platzner, 1995: 56–57, 926–931). The powerful and mysterious Norns or Fates are especially fascinating as examples of female power in the spiritual cosmology of Germanic Pagans. The meaning of the names Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld is disputed, but they are often translated as 'Fate, Being and Necessity,' and it has been observed that there is a temporal pattern which is evident, making it possible to associate the three females with past present and future (Winterbourne, 2004: 86–88). The Norse gods are themselves bound by Fate; the Norns spin the thread of life, measure it out and cut it, as do the Fates in Greek and Roman religion.

It is interesting that modern Germanic Heathenry is often characterised as a male-oriented religion, lacking the strong goddess so apparent in Wicca and other Celtic-derived form of Paganism (Harvey, 1996: 49–64). Yet Frigg and Freyja, the Norns, and the female priestesses found in the saga literature suggest a religion in which the divine feminine is recognized and honoured. In contemporary Heathenry there are important female leaders and teachers, and the practice of *seiðr*, although associated with Odin, is a specifically female form of magic, originally taught to Odin by Freyja. The famous account from the medieval *Eirik the Red's Saga*, of a seeress's ritual which took place in Greenland, has been particularly influential:

[a]t this time there was a great famine in Greenland... There was a woman there is in the Settlement whose name was Thorbjorg; she was a seeress and was called the Little Sibyl. She had had nine sisters, all of them seeresses but now only she was left alive. It was Thorbjorg's practice of a winter to attend feasts and those men in particular invited her to their homes who were curious to know their fate... The women now formed a circle around the platform on which Thorbjorg was seated. Gudrid recited the chant so beautifully and well... The seeress thanked her for

the chant, adding that many spirits had been drawn there now...the chant had been so admirably delivered—spirits ‘who before wished to keep their distance from us and give us no hearing. And now many things are apparent to me which earlier were hidden from me as from many others. And I can tell you, Thorkel, that this famine will not last longer than this winter...’(Jones, 1980: 133–136).

Thorbjorg goes on to communicate many more messages from the spirits to members of the community. This description shows a religion in which women encircle a female mystic, and where even those with different religious beliefs and loyalties are willing to participate for the good of the community (Gudrid, who sings the chant, is a devout Christian and has to be persuaded to take part).

This type of practice, *seiðr*, is a trance ritual in which the seeress becomes a conduit for the spirit world, which in Heathenry is filled with minor spirit beings as well as the great gods and goddesses. Freya Aswynn (born Elizabeth Hooijschuur in Holland), an important Ásatrú leader and author, is a teacher and practitioner of *seiðr*, and she describes it as a magical and shamanic practice, a form of ‘soul journeying’ (Harvey, 1997: 62). This associates Heathenry with the discourses of indigeneity and environmentalism that have already been noted in relation to Goddess worship and Wicca. Medieval Scandinavian Pagans were in close contact with the Suomi (Finns) and Saami (Lapps), who were practitioners of shamanism and there are borrowings from this indigenous tradition in past and present-day Northern Paganism (DuBois, 1999: 122–138). Diana L. Paxson, a North American Ásatrú leader and author has also been active in reviving this form of shamanistic trance as well (Strmiska and Sigurvinson, 2005: 160).

The ritual calendar of Nordic Paganism is not as elaborate or extensive as that of Wicca, and true traditionalists only formally celebrate the three festivals that are attested in medieval Scandinavian sources; *Sigrblót* (Victory Offering), *Vetrnaeter* (Winter Nights) and *Jul* (Yule) (Flowers, 1981: 291). *Sigrblót* takes place around the spring equinox, and the other two are winter festivals. However, Heathen spirituality is intimately connected with the earth, the seasons, and all natural cycles, and individual gods and goddesses may be honoured at appropriate times. One such goddess is Eostre (or Ostara) who gives her name to the Christian festival of ‘Easter,’ and who is known from Anglo-Saxon and continental German sources but not from the Scandinavian corpus. She is associated with the coming of spring and the dawn, and her festival is celebrated at the spring equinox. Because she brings renewal, rebirth

from the death of winter, some Heathens associated Eostre with Idunn, keeper of the apples of youth in Scandinavian mythology. The joy of the coming of spring is vibrantly expressed in this invocation:

Hail Ostara, eastward arising,
 Laughing goddess, Lady of light—
 To dawn, dominion over darkness
 Thy glory has granted, gone is the night!

Winter's wrath by winds of warmth
 The Maiden's might has melted here;
 Everywhere green plants are growing,
 Flowers flourish, she-beasts bear.
 (home.earthlink.net/~jordsvin/Blots/Ostara%20Blot.htm)

Three commonly employed terms within Heathenry for ritual gatherings are *blót*, *sumbel* and *thing*; the first is a sacrifice or offering, the second a drinking rite, and the third a 'gathering,' more often used in civic than religious contexts.

The final ritual analysed here is a *Disting* working. It was mentioned earlier that the Norse Pagan cosmos is filled with minor and mysterious divine beings. Many of these are female: these include the *fylgjur*, guardian spirits; the *hamingja*, also guardian spirits; the *valkyries*, warrior-maidens who take the slain from the battlefield to Odin in Valhalla; and the *disir*, 'ladies,' who sometimes include major goddesses as well as minor female divine beings (Turville-Petre, 1975[1964]). Freyja is known as the 'Lady of the Vanir,' the *Vanadís*. *Disting* is usually celebrated in late February. But the most frequently employed working at this time of year is the *Váli Blót*, a rite celebrating Odin's revenge for the death of his son Balder. To assuage Frigg's grief Odin had a son, Váli, with the giantess Rind. Váli kills Höðr in revenge, restoring cosmic balance. The goddess playing a major role in the *Váli Blót* is Freyja, who blesses Váli after his ordeal, and the meaning of her role here is esoteric rather than plainly apparent:

we also have an indication about the feminine side of the Northern Mysteries—Freyja, like Odhinn, is pierced by the spear and undergoes a close encounter with death, the result of this encounter is rebirth into a state of magical abundance. Structurally this is the same initiatory process that Odhinn undergoes. Here we encounter an aspect of the feminine mysteries—Freyja's magical power is, in part, the result of an initiatory encounter with death. It is in this respect that the feminine aspects of the mysteries go beyond *seiðh* magic and into the field of initiatory experiences and transformation (Ragnar, n.d.).

This ritual working indicates the importance of the feminine divine even in those activities that are seemingly entirely masculine; revenge and killing. The goddess in contemporary Heathenry has cosmic, social, and magical powers which profoundly affect the gods and the masculine sphere of activity.²

The Academic Study of Religion and the Goddess

Linda Jencson has drawn attention to the fact that at the very beginning of the revival of witchcraft, with the researches of Charles Godfrey Leland, there was an existing confusion between the roles of participant and scholar. Leland frequently referred to his own magical abilities, and in order to get informants to reveal their secrets to him, he traded “something highly valued by his informants—magical data, incantations and amulets. Thus Leland himself served as a medium for the spread and growth of the very phenomena he was studying...” (Jencson, 1989: 3). This is of great interest for two reasons. When the academic study of religion began in the first half of the nineteenth century Hindu and Buddhist texts were translated into modern European languages and the ideas they contained were enthusiastically taken up by scholars. But there was, at that stage, no understanding that exposure to religious texts might act as a spur for conversion. It was assumed that their interest was purely academic. The founding of the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 by Madame Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott was a watershed in that it marked the recognition that Western people may decide to turn away from the Judeo-Christian tradition and convert to an alien religion (Sharpe, 1986: 256). Within Witchcraft and other esoteric pursuits, the rate of participant-observers among scholars of religion has tended to be high. Gerald Gardner does not qualify as a scholar by rigorous modern standards, yet he was an enthusiastic folklorist and student of the occult sciences. Jencson’s interesting article accords Gardner some credit for this. She eventually reveals her own cards; a professional anthropologist, she is also a Wiccan practitioner

² My thanks are due to Ragnar, Sigilind and Egill of Hearth Al-Þyðja of the Assembly of the Elder Troth (AET), Sydney, Australia for making their *Disting Information Package* available to me.

and sees no conflict between these roles, but rather a mutual cross-fertilisation (Jencson, 1989: 4).

It is obviously no accident that feminist theology is done by women, that Goddess worshippers are generally female, and that Wicca is a majority female religious movement. Considering the profound emphasis on women's bodies in both the Goddess movement and Wicca, it is fascinating to note that the higher degree of religiosity which is observed among women in traditional, patriarchal religions such as Christianity has been linked in academic research to "the vulnerability of the physical body" and women's "greater contact with birth and death" (Walter and Davie, 1998: 640). Consequently, the fact that many of these women, like Linda Jencson, have become active participants in the academic fields which investigate their religious practices and spiritual interests is unsurprising. Christian males made a substantial contribution to the formative stages of the academic study of religion; more than a century later Christian females did the same for feminist theology and the nascent Goddess movement (Morgan, 1999: 47–50). It is important to recognize that it there is only a small step to be taken from participant-observation in the academic sense to activism. This is demonstrated within the broad Goddess movement, Wicca and the Pagan revival generally by the number of prominent figures who have done doctorates and achieved other scholarly credentials. Within Heathenry Stephen Flowers (Edred Thorsson) and Stephan Grundy (Kveldulfr Gundarsson) have doctorates; and Vivianne Crowley, Ronald Hutton, Graham Harvey and Jo Pearson, among others, have achieved similar distinction in the broader Pagan community.

Therefore, Pagans can and do mount sophisticated defences of their beliefs and practices when sceptics assert that the invention of myths, rituals and traditions is an inauthentic spiritual strategy or that Paganism is to be rejected because of its perceived condemnation of modernity and progress. The issue of the invention of tradition is particularly interesting; this essays has not explored the issue of whether Goddess worship, Wicca and Paganism, and feminist theology are modern, late modern or postmodern projects, and whether these classifications would assist in 'placing' these phenomena more accurately (Raphael, 1996: 199–213). What is important is to realise that contemporary religious phenomena are increasingly subjective and personal, interiorised and emotional, and that the former structures of institutional hierarchy, doctrinal pronouncement and ritual conformity have become irrelevant

for Christianity as well as for new religious movements (Lyon, 2002 [2000]: *passim*). It is now recognized that all religions were once new; small, marginalized and believed to promote implausible doctrines and encourage anti-social behaviour. Pagans are in general pragmatic: they adhere to their myths because they work. Erik Davis has drawn attention to the literary quality of many Pagan foundation myths:

my favourite Pagan origin story is not Gardner's New Forest initiation but the birth of the Church of All Worlds at Westminster College, Missouri in 1962. Undergrad Lance Christian and Tim Zell were obsessed with Ayn Rand and Maslow's self-actualizing philosophy. Then they read Robert Heinlein's *A Stranger in a Strange Land*, which described the communal non-monogamist Church of All Worlds founded by the Martian exile Valentine Michael Smith. Grokking their deepest desires in the SF text, the two students and some female friends performed Smith's sacred water-sharing ritual, hopped in the sack and founded a church. Later Zell renamed himself Otter, penned a prescient form of the Gaia hypothesis, and started using the word 'Pagan' to describe CAW's increasingly earthy and eclectic religion. As Zell recently put it, 'we're a sequel to a myth that hasn't even happened yet' (Davis, 1993).

This originary myth, which is at first glance quite different from the Golden Age of prehistoric matriarch and worship of the Great Goddess myth, nevertheless has certain key similarities that must be noted. The founding thinkers of Pagan movements are often great readers and discern truths in texts which are not only not scripture, but are often self-confessed fictions or speculations. Yet, Pagans recognize the truth in the myth. This is not a new technique: interpreters of myth in the past frequently resorted to allegory and other figurative reading. What is new is the insistence that any narrative can become a myth, and that myths must have personal, social and psychological significance for the lives of modern individuals (Csapo, 2005: 283–301). In the highly interiorised world of new religious movements that is a given; the Pagan attitude to self-appointed myth oscillates between the assertion that it is not myth but true (because it expresses certain core truths for the adherent) to a cheeky admission that it is not true but still entirely authentic (because it expresses certain core truths for the adherent). This attitude tends to diminish the value of the related criticism, that Paganism is a retrograde movement, rejecting the positive contributions of modernity and clinging to an idealised view of the past (Possamai, 2005: 99–111). The Goddess movement locates the Golden Age in the distant past; Wiccan, spiritual feminists and Pagans generally hearken to

communities in the less distant past for inspiration and models for living. But the community that participates enthusiastically in the revived worship of the Goddess/goddesses tends to be middle-class, well-educated and technologically aware. There is no evidence that the worship of the Goddess will take humanity back to a pre-technological universe. Rather, the worship of the Goddess, whether as sole deity, as part of a duotheism in Wicca, or a part of a vibrant polytheism featuring many gods and goddesses, rather seems to point toward the future, rather than the past, of religion in the West and perhaps the world.

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