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HERETICS AND OUTSIDERS: The Struggle Over Female Power In Western Religion*

CAROL P. CHRIST

I APPROACH THIS TOPIC as one who views herself as an outsider to the canons and traditions of the West. It is no secret that the "great works" of the Western tradition are written from a male-centered perspective in which the experiences specific to women are ignored, suppressed, or treated only in relation to the interests of men.

The Illiad is a case in point. Its major dramatic conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon generates Achilles' "metaphysical dilemma" of whether to seek honor and live a short but glorious life, or to refuse honor and live long but unmemorably. Critics rarely note that both the dramatic conflict and the metaphysical dilemma are generated by an argument between two men over one of the most precious spoils of war, the "spear captive" Briseis. Briseis is a raped woman, a victim of the wars of men, yet her tragedy is treated simply as the occasion for the conflicts of men. How can I find myself in such a tradition without losing my identity as a woman?

This sense of myself as outsider has led me to question many conventional pieties about canons and traditions, particularly

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the largely unexamined premise that the so-called "great works" have become central and authoritative primarily because they express the struggles and aspirations of humanity in a compelling and beautiful way.

Biblical scholar James Sanders, for example, expresses such a view when he says that his book *Torah and Canon* is a "quest for the essence of the power of life the Bible demonstrably has. This power is evident not only in the Bible's remarkable survival for over 2,500 years," he writes, "but in its function as the vehicle of survival to the communities whose identities and life-styles issue from their adherence to it."¹ Sanders apparently assumes that canonical works survive because of an intrinsic vision which commends itself to the hearts and minds of communities. Certainly the Bible has had a compelling power for some in the West; I only note that this view is deceptively one-sided. Sanders does not ask to what extent the survival of the Bible might also be due to political struggles, including slander and repression of rival traditions. Nor does he ask for whom Biblical tradition is a power of life, and for whom, perhaps, a power of death.

It is precisely this mundane question which I wish to address here. My first point is simple, obvious, and often overlooked: the existence of a canon or a canonical tradition implies the existence of outsiders and heretics. Now the consequences of being outside a canonical tradition (in the West at least) are as follows: texts outside the canon are slandered, often suppressed, sometimes destroyed; groups existing outside canonical authority are often declared heretical; adherents of heretical groups are often persecuted, sometimes killed.

My second point is an hypothesis which I will explore through the discussion of three historic struggles between the proponents of the traditions which became canonical and those whom they declared to be outsiders and heretics. This hypothesis is as follows: myths suppressed by the canonical tradition often contained powerful female symbolism; the texts or traditions transmitting this symbolism may often have had a special appeal for women because they offered greater opportunities for the expression of female power; and the persons persecuted by the canonical tradition may have been disproportionately female.

I will explore this hypothesis by examining some intriguing evidence concerning the struggles between the proponents of views which became canonical and persons whom they identified

as outsiders and heretics. Instances of such struggles will be drawn from ancient Hebrew religion, early Christianity, and the middle Christian period. The juxtaposition of these three periods presents a disturbing pattern of suppression of female symbolism and power by the traditions which became canonical in the West.

I do not wish to belabor the feminist criticism of Western religion as male-centered in its specific teachings on the place of women in family, church, and society, and in its core symbolism of divinity. Rather, I wish to examine the apologetic argument which states that the male symbolisms and hierarchies of the Jewish and Christian religions were a spontaneous and natural development given their historical contexts. I will argue to the contrary that the Jewish and Christian traditions were not passive with regard to their environments. At crucial points proponents of the canonical traditions engaged in ideological struggles with competing religious traditions in the course of which female symbolism and female power were actively suppressed.

The historical arguments which I make here are more difficult to document than the familiar charges of sexism in Western religion. Because histories of Western religion do not usually ask how Western religion came to be male-centered, there is no body of secondary scholarship to which to appeal. Moreover, the practitioners of defeated religious traditions have been slandered as idol worshippers, whores, and worse in the official texts of the canonical tradition, and few scholars have been willing to challenge this official view. Finally, the texts of competing religious traditions were often destroyed by the canonical groups, for example, in the burning of the library at Alexandria and the book burnings of the middle Christian period. Because the evidence on which a clear picture of the outsiders and heretics in Western tradition could be constructed is too often nonexistent or not adequately interpreted by scholarship, the argument of this paper will have to be somewhat more hypothetical than I could wish.

The interest of non-canonical groups in female power and female symbols is no longer hypothetical in the contemporary period, however. In the traditions being developed by some of today's most conspicuous outsiders and heretics, the women in the women's spirituality movement and the feminist witches, there is a resurgence of interest in female power and female

symbolism. In a final section of this paper I will briefly discuss this new development in contemporary religious consciousness, particularly as it bears on the relation of canon and anti-canon.

THE SUPPRESSION OF THE GODDESS IN ANCIENT HEBREW RELIGION

According to a widely held view, the official religion of ancient Israel was largely a monotheistic worship of one God, Yahweh. The Hebrew people held to their monotheistic tradition against the temptations presented by the polytheistic traditions of neighboring peoples, because monotheism was ethically and religiously superior to polytheism. Only rarely did the people of Israel succumb to polytheistic practices, referred to as "Baalism," "fetishism" (often synonymous with goddess worship), and "cult prostitution." The prophets criticized these "excesses" and "aberrations" of faith and returned the people to monotheism. Recent scholarship and archaeological discoveries have challenged this interpretive paradigm. Scholars have discovered that the religion of the Hebrew people was more pluralistic than the monotheistic paradigm indicates, and that the religion of the Canaanites was not mere fetishism and idolatry. Nonetheless the paradigm of a dominant Yahwistic monotheism remains a major interpretive scheme through which the history of Biblical religion is taught.²

In his book, *Palestinian Parties and Politics Which Shaped the Old Testament*,³ Morton Smith questioned the standard paradigm of Biblical religion. He argued that widespread adherence to monotheism in ancient Israel was a fiction created by ultimately victorious "Yahweh alone" groups which established control of Israelite religion after the Babylonian exile. These "Yahweh alone" groups edited and rewrote the texts which became the Biblical canon to make them conform to their view that the worship of Yahweh alone was the true religion of ancient Israel and Judah from the beginning and that worship of gods and goddesses other than Yahweh constituted heretical deviation. According to Smith the dominant groups in ancient Israel and Judah were polytheistic, worshipping several gods and goddesses, including Baal, Anath, Asherah, El, and others, alongside Yahweh. The defining characteristic of ancient Hebrew religion was worship of Yahweh, but not worship of Yahweh only. Mythologist Raphael Patai's work, *The Hebrew Goddess*,⁴ com-

plements Smith's work. Patai also argues that goddess worship was prevalent in the official religions of ancient Israel and Judah. He cites the books of *I* and *II Kings* as one record of struggles between worshippers of Yahweh and worshippers of other gods and goddesses. Though these books were edited to slander the worshippers of gods and goddesses other than Yahweh as followers after "abomination," they acknowledge the widespread occurrence of polytheism and goddess worship in the biblical period, not only among the populace, but in the official state cults. According to Patai's count the goddess Asherah was worshipped in the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem for 236 of its 370 years of existence. In the Northern Kingdom Asherah was consistently worshipped in the capital city of Samaria from the time of Jezebel. Even if these precise figures are rendered problematic by the recognition that they may be the product of partisan editorship, as Smith suggests they are, the general picture of polytheistic worship in both kingdoms must be accepted. This picture is further supported by the discovery of female figures in archaeological digs at sites connected with worship in ancient Israel and Judah.

Based on the evidence brought forth by Smith and Patai, we might reverse the conventional notion of ancient Hebrew religion, and speak instead of a dominant tradition of polytheism and goddess worship in the official cult, which was broken only occasionally by the victories of Yahweh alone groups.

It should be stressed that the struggles between the Yahweh alone groups and the others were not mere ideological battles. They were political struggles in which force was often used. *Exodus* records that the Levites ordained themselves for the service of Yahweh by murdering 3000 worshippers of the golden calf (*Exodus* 32:25-29).⁵ After Elijah's victory over Elisha 450 prophets of Baal were killed (*I Kings* 18:40).⁶ Jehu killed the worshippers of Baal in the house of Baal in order to solidify his ascension to the throne following the slaying of Jezebel (*II Kings* 10:18-30).

Clearly the struggles between the Yahweh alone groups and the other groups were not simple struggles between women worshippers of the goddess and men worshippers of Yahweh. Men and women were involved in both the worship of Yahweh and the worship of gods and goddesses other than Yahweh. And the polytheistic groups were not exclusively devoted to the god-

ness. Still we may note that one consequence of the suppression of polytheism by the Yahweh alone groups was the elimination of goddess worship. And we may ask whether women may have been particularly attracted to the worship of the goddess as an expression of female power. There is some evidence to suggest that this may have been the case.

In the books of *I* and *II Kings* and *I* and *II Chronicles* the worship of the goddess in the cult sites is often blamed on the influence of foreign queens, wives of the kings. Jezebel is the most notorious example. Now it is possible that the queens worshipped the goddess because they were foreign, not because they were women. And it is also possible, though unlikely, that the misogynist biblical editors attributed everything they considered evil to the influence of women, but that women were not in fact central figures in the institution and defense of goddess worship. Nonetheless it is intriguing to speculate that foreign and native women, like the queens of Israel and Judah, were attracted to the worship of the goddess as a symbol for female power. The murder of Jezebel (*II Kings* 9:30-37) would then have been a political attack on the religion of the goddess.⁷ And the prohibitions at the time of the second Temple against Israelites taking foreign wives would have been part of an attempt finally to suppress goddess worship and polytheism since women who had been reared in goddess worshipping traditions would not easily give up the symbol of female power.

The book of *Jeremiah* offers further evidence in support of the view that women were especially devoted to the goddess. In *Jeremiah* the following words are put in the mouth of "all the people":

As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of Yahweh—we shall not listen to you. But we shall do everything as we said: we shall burn incense to the Queen of Heaven, and shall pour her libations as we used to do, we, our fathers, our kings, and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and we all were well and saw no evil.

To these words the women added:

Is it we alone who burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour her libations? Is it without our husbands that we make her cakes in her image and that we pour her libations? (*44:15-17*)

Though the passage indicates that all the people participated in

the worship of the Queen of Heaven, it also suggests that women performed many of the acts related to the cult and that women may have been viewed as the instigators or special devotees of goddess worship.

Women's attraction to goddess worship may not have been only a symbolic preference. In *When God Was A Woman* Merlin Stone brings together a great deal of evidence in support of her view that the status of women was higher in matrilineal goddess worshipping cultures than it was in patrilineal Israel and Judah. In Egypt the woman was often head of the family, while in Babylon the wife could acquire property, take legal action and make contracts.⁸ In Israel and Judah these rights were curtailed.

These lines of evidence point to the conclusion that the Bible was shaped by politically victorious Yahweh alone groups whose victory had the effect (if not the intent) of slandering and prohibiting goddess worship, declaring the religious inclinations of many women to be outside the tradition and depriving women of many of the rights which they had had in goddess worshipping cultures. If this conclusion is correct, then we must ask whose "power of life" the Biblical tradition expressed, and we must entertain the conclusion that it was not women's.

SUPPRESSION OF THE Gnostic "HERETICS"

The victory of Christianity signaled the suppression of goddess worship in the ancient world. The temples of the goddess at Aphaca, Eleusis, Rome, Ephesus, Athens, and elsewhere were forcibly closed in the fourth and fifth centuries c.e. This was the end of public goddess worship in the Christian West. However, it is not the struggle between Christianity and other religions over female symbolism and female power which I wish to consider here. Rather I wish to consider a suppression of female symbolism and power which occurred *within* the Christian tradition in the struggles which led to the formation of the Christian canon.

A study of the religion of the gnostic Christians suggests that the question of female symbolism and power was also a significant factor in their struggle with those who became orthodox Christians. In fact, if we are to believe the recent Vatican declaration denying the priesthood to women, the ordination of women by the gnostics was one of the reasons the orthodox church suppressed them. "A few heretical sects in the first century,

especially Gnostic ones, entrusted the priestly ministry to women," the Vatican statement reports, and "this innovation was immediately noted and condemned by the fathers."⁹

A common paradigm used to interpret early Christian history assumes that the early Christian communities which grew up after the death of Jesus were founded by Peter and Paul and the other male disciples, and that there was a fairly smooth transition between these groups and the early orthodox Church. If they are mentioned at all, the gnostics are viewed as libertine heretics who denied the central Christian doctrine of the unity of the spirit and the flesh, and whose factionalizing influence was rightly suppressed by the Church Fathers. So widespread is this view, that "gnosticism" has become a pejorative theological shorthand for any antinomian spiritualizing tendency.

As recent discoveries of gnostic gospels have proved, this conventional view is more polemical than factual. Early Christianity seems to have been far more plural than is generally recognized. Both the gnostic Christians and those groups which later declared themselves orthodox and canonical had their own gospels and claimed to be followers of the religion of Jesus Christ. Only after political struggles did some groups emerge victorious and declare the others heretical.

Elaine Pagels' recent study¹⁰ offers convincing evidence that the gnostic Christian groups provided more avenues for the expression of female symbolism and female power than did their orthodox Christian opponents. Gnostic Christian groups, as Pagels describes them, abounded in female imagery of God. The Valentinians, for example, imaged the divine as a Dyad consisting of two elements, on the one hand, the Ineffable, the Source, the Primal Father, and on the other, the Silence, the Mother of All Things. Other gnostics viewed the Holy Spirit as a divine Mother, and still others characterized the female element in God as the Holy Wisdom, following Hebrew traditions of Wisdom as the companion of God.

Were the gnostics declared heretical primarily because they employed female symbolism? Pagels rejects this conclusion as simplistic. However, among the "scandals" the victorious Christian groups claimed to find in the heretics, she notes the often repeated charge that they allowed women authority in their communities. Gnostic works like the *Gospel of Mary* provide further evidence of a political struggle between female and male

disciples of Jesus over the issue of female leadership. In the *Gospel of Mary*, Peter objects to Mary's claim to have received a special revelation from Jesus and he is rebuked by Levi who says, "Peter you are always irascible. You object to the women as our enemies do. Surely the Lord knew her very well, and indeed loved her more than us. . . ." Mary is then allowed to speak with authority of the revelation Jesus entrusted to her.

From this evidence Pagels concludes that, whether or not it was the primary cause, one of the effects of the condemnation of the gnostics by the canonical tradition was that female symbolism and leadership were suppressed.

This evidence from the early Christian era suggests that the suppression of female symbolism and power was one of the results of the political struggles which led to the establishment of the Christian canon, a pattern similar to that which seems to have occurred in the establishment of the Hebrew canon. Again we must ask whose "power of life" the victorious tradition reflected. Perhaps women found themselves better represented by the traditions which were declared heretical.

WITCH PERSECUTION IN THE MIDDLE CHRISTIAN PERIOD

The story of the suppression of female symbolism and female power by the canonical traditions of the West could be continued through a discussion of other "heretical" movements which surfaced within Christianity.¹² But I will instead focus on a conflict between the tradition and the outsiders in which the suppression of female power was carried out in particularly violent fashion, the witch persecution of the middle Christian period.

As with the goddess worshippers and the gnostics, the canonical view of the witches has impeded unbiased treatment of their practices and beliefs. It is commonly thought that witches worshipped the devil in bizarre rites in which children were sacrificed and that participants engaged in perverse sexual practices.

This view is the product of Christian polemic such as that found in *The Malleus Maleficarum*, but it has also influenced two standard paradigms used in scholarship concerning witchcraft. On the one side, the "ultra-conservative" scholars accept the charges of the persecutors that witchcraft was an anti-Christian rite inspired by the devil. On the other side the "liberal rationalists" view witchcraft as the creation of the witch perse-

cutors and deny the historic reality of witch practice.¹³ A third and different view is reflected in the much disputed hypothesis of Margaret Murray that witchcraft was a survival of the pagan religions of Western Europe. Murray's work has been widely challenged by scholars but her general theory has recently been defended by Mircea Eliade, a leading historian of religions.

Unfortunately less is known about witch practice and belief than about the religions of the goddess worshippers and the gnostics. After the forced closing of their temples and the suppression of their priesthoods and priestesses in the early Christian period, European pagan traditions survived only in folk custom and in secret societies, and were communicated orally. The major written documents concerning witch practice and belief are the trial documents, and writings and decrees of Christian theologians and Church councils, which are biased. Thus the picture of witchcraft presented here will have to be somewhat hypothetical.

Though scholars disagree about what witchcraft was, except for the ultraconservatives, they agree that many of the charges against the witches were fabricated by their persecutors. It is further agreed by all that large numbers of people were killed as witches between the years 1400 and 1700 as a result of persecutions carried out in the name of the Catholic and Protestant faiths. Estimates of the numbers killed range from 100,000 to 3,000,000 or more, with some scholars settling on 1,000,000 as a reasonably *conservative* estimate,¹⁴ staggering numbers considering the smaller population of Europe at the time. Though scholars are also agreed that women figured disproportionately among those persecuted as witches, few have asked why this was so.¹⁵

Often portrayed as resulting from peasant hysteria, the witch persecutions were in fact instigated by an educated elite who saw themselves as defenders of canonical tradition. In 1484 Pope Innocent issued a bull¹⁶ which made official the Church's intention to persecute witches. Two Dominican theologians, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger were the authors of *The Malleus Maleficarum*,¹⁷ which became the classic text for witch "hammering." Kramer and Sprenger argue that women are more attracted to witchcraft than men, providing arguments from scripture and tradition to support their view. In answer to the question, "Why is it that women are chiefly addicted to evil superstitions?"

they assert that women are more credulous and light-minded, more impressionable, and more given to gossip than men. But the most compelling reason "is that a woman is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations." Or as they sum it up, "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which in women is insatiable." The crimes of the witches which Kramer and Sprenger find most objectionable are related to women's alleged sexual nature, including copulating with devils, obstructing the act of generation, making the male organ disappear, and offering newborn children to the devil. Other crimes Sprenger and Kramer allege against witches can be interpreted as species of folk magic, folk medicine, and folk psychology, including methods of preventing conception, procuring abortion, harming animals or crops, producing hail, and predicting the future through a variety of means.

The preoccupation of Sprenger and Kramer with crimes relating to female sexuality, female control over the birth process, and male impotence suggest that the witch persecutions were an attempt to suppress a form of female power which was threatening to the male authorities of church and state.

The question is, what sort of female power did witchcraft represent? Was it simply female sexuality which threatened the witch persecutors, or was witchcraft a competing religious system in which female symbolism and female power were recognized to a greater extent than they were in Christianity? A conclusive answer to this question cannot be obtained at present, but a number of lines of evidence suggest that the witch persecutions may fit into the pattern of suppression of female symbolism and female power which was hypothesized for the periods in which the Hebrew and Christian canons were formed.

Two recent feminist interpretations, which fall into the liberal-rationalist camp, offer intriguing interpretations of the nature of the female power which was suppressed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English in their study, *Witches, Nurses, and Midwives*,¹⁹ suggest that many of those persecuted as witches were country doctors, midwives, and herbalists, women who delivered babies, cured the sick, and of course had patients who died. Ehrenreich and English argue that women healers were persecuted because their power over life and death challenged the Church's claim that God and his male deputies, the priests, held all power over life and death. This hypothesis is supported

by those portions of the *Malleus* which specifically accuse midwives of using witchcraft to control conception and produce abortion.

In "Why Witches Were Women"²⁰ Mary Nelson proposes a plausible explanation of some of the more scandalous charges against the witches. The common allegation that witches took away men's generative powers, killed infants, and publicly indulged their sexual lust were projections, she believes, of men's fear of a type of female power which had some basis in social reality. According to Nelson, the years of witch persecution were periods of massive social displacement and poverty, bringing about increases in the numbers of prostitutes (women who publicly indulged sexual lust) and making it necessary to limit family size. Moreover, the most common methods of birth control may have been *coitus interruptus* (women who took away men's generative power) and infanticide of female babies (women who killed infants). Poor women's only ways of surviving the poverty produced by social disruption may have led to their persecution.

In 1921 Margaret Murray²¹ challenged both the Christian and the rationalist views of witchcraft and proposed the then startling thesis that witchcraft was a pagan religion and that the persecution of witches was part of a religious war. While many of the details of Murray's view of witch religion have been challenged, her basic hypothesis that witchcraft was a pagan survival has been supported by such scholars of religion as Mircea Eliade²² and Rosemary Ruether.

Briefly, Murray's hypothesis, deduced from coherences she discovered in the testimony given at witch trials, is that witchcraft in Western Europe was an organized religion with a fairly uniform set of symbols, rituals and social structures. The witches worshipped a deity who could be incarnate as a male figure (Janus or Dianus), a female figure (Diana), or an animal. The deity personified natural energy and was associated with fertility. Witches met in covens of thirteen and their major celebrations were on May Eve and November Eve. Women had access to leadership positions in the covens.

Rosemary Ruether²³ disputes Murray's theory that witchcraft was an organized religion at the time of the persecutions. She believes that Christianity had already succeeded in destroying the official cults and priesthoods or priestesses of pagan religions by the middle Christian period. What survived,

Ruether believes, was folk religion, that stratum of religion which belongs to village daily life, the rituals of home and farming life which people carry on by themselves. It included group celebrations such as dances and festivals at planting and harvest times, folk magic, and folk superstition. Ruether believes that women were the primary cultivators of folk magic, or the use of charms, spells, and herbal remedies for curing. According to Ruether, those persecuted as witches were female charismatics, inheritors of traditions of folk religion and the powers derived from it.

In my opinion the theories of witches as midwives and healers should not be set over against the theories of witches as inheritors and transmitters of folk religion, for in these traditions, religion, medicine, and magic probably were not clearly distinguished. If the more spectacular charges of the witch persecutors (copulation with the devil, sacrifice of children) are discounted, a remarkably coherent picture of the practices of the witches can be suggested. Witches were wise and powerful women, practitioners of folk religion, magic, and medicine, whose knowledge of charms, spells, and herbal lore brought them to the bedside at times of birth, illness, and death. The wise woman was summoned at the crises of the life cycle *before* the priest; she delivered the baby, while the priest was called upon later to perform baptism. She was the first to be called upon to cure illness or treat the dying, while the priest was called in after all other remedies had failed, to administer the last rites. Moreover, if the wise woman had knowledge of herbs which could aid or prevent conception or cause abortion, she had a power over the life process which clearly was superior to that of the priest, and which according to official theology made her a rival of God himself. If, moreover, she appealed to pagan deities, some of them probably female, in the performance of divinations or blessings and spells used to promote healing and ward off evil, then it is not difficult to see why she was persecuted by an insecure and misogynist Church which could not tolerate rival power, especially the power of women.

Though the evidence concerning witchcraft is inconclusive due to the lack of direct verification from the free testimony or written texts of witches, the lines of evidence cited here suggest that witch persecution followed the pattern of suppression of female symbolism and female power which seems to have oc-

curred in the formative periods of the Hebrew and Christian traditions.

A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This examination of three instances of conflict between the proponents of traditions which were or became canonical and the outsiders or heretics suggests that one of the issues at stake in the definition and defense of canonical tradition in the West was the suppression of female symbolism and power.

Given the persistence of this pattern in the history of the Western tradition, we must ask why scholarship has not been more vigorous in exploring it. The answer to this question seems to be that even the so-called objective traditions of scholarship in the university are not entirely free from certain biases of the canonical tradition. Specifically, the scholarly tradition has largely accepted three canonical views: (1) the ethical and religious superiority of monotheism to polytheism; (2) the inferiority of religious traditions in which sexuality and fertility are central concerns, and the equation of female symbolism with sexuality and fertility; and (3) the importance of maintaining order, and the interpretation of challenges to authorities as antinomian and therefore bad. In addition the androcentrism of the scholarly tradition, which renders questions about women, female power, or female symbolism trivial and uninteresting because it accepts the subordinate status of women as a given, has blinded scholars to the fascinating history of the suppression of female power and symbolism by the traditions they study. But since an examination of androcentric and other biases in the *scholarly tradition*²⁴ could form the subject of another paper, I will not pursue it here.

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE GODDESS AS SYMBOL FOR FEMALE POWER

The suppression of female symbolism and female power by the canonical traditions of the West is being reversed as modern women lay claim to their own forms of spirituality and power. If female symbolism was suppressed at least in part because it was viewed as an expression of female power, then it should not be surprising to discover that symbols of female sacrality are re-emerging as women begin to re-claim their spiritual power.

The battles for the ordination of women in the major denomi-

nations of Protestantism and in the liberal wings of Judaism are only the most apparent manifestation of a widespread spiritual resurgence among women. During the past several years, a non-institutionalized women's spirituality movement has become one of the major currents in the new wave of feminism. Susan Rennie and Kirsten Grimstad describe this current in their introduction to the spirituality section of *The New Women's Survival Sourcebook*:

We found that wherever there are feminist communities, women are exploring psychic and nonmaterial phenomena: reinterpreting astrology; creating and celebrating feminist rituals around birth, death, menstruation; reading the Tarot; studying pre-patriarchal forms of religion; reviving and exploring esoteric goddess-centered belief systems such as wicca; developing and cultivating dream analysis, ESP, astral projection, precognition; learning psychic and homeopathic healing; rescuing the holistic perspective of the right hemisphere of the brain from the contempt of left-brain linear mindedness. . . .²⁵

Out of the key motifs of this spirituality movement is a new naming of ultimate power or powers. Many women are re-discovering that *one of the oldest names for the fundamental energy—the energy of natural processes, the energy of life and death, the energy of sexual attraction and repulsion, the energy concentrated in meditation and ritual, the energy felt vibrating in a room when people are really speaking to one another, the energy of psychic healing—is goddess.*

Barbry MyOwn described the experience of the goddess as energy in a womanspirit circle called Ursa Major. "We have not defined 'goddess' except in loose terms, 'woman-energy.' We hope to invoke a materialization of that woman energy, to love it, to play with it, exult in it."²⁶ "Spiritually we see our bodies as divine manifestations of womanenergy."²⁷ Barbry MyOwn and Hallie Mountaining created a menstruation ritual in which they named themselves sisters of the same mother and invoked "the Goddess whose blood, like our blood, flows with the cycles of the universe."²⁸ A combination of deep seriousness and playfulness is characteristic of a new attitude toward religion in these women's groups. Knowledge that they are invoking and connecting with fundamental power accounts for the deep seriousness of these women; but they dare to create new ritual forms

because they do it playfully and only for themselves at a certain time and place—not for all times and places, not for other women whose experiences may be different.

WomanSpirit magazine²⁹ provides a space for women from around the country to name the sources of their power by sharing fantasies, rituals, poems, stories, drawings, and photographs on the themes of energy, healing, power, process, nature, wise women, the goddess, and many more. Through *WomanSpirit* women are discovering, creating, choosing their own religious identities. Though the goddess was less frequently mentioned in the early issues, it is not surprising that her presence as a symbol for female power is becoming increasingly felt as the journal's contributors gather and share power with each other. While an important center, *WomanSpirit* is not the only expression of the new feminist spirituality movement. In 1976 a conference in Boston called "Through the Looking Glass" brought together hundreds of women from around the country who shared notes on witchcraft, healing, tarot, the goddess, and much more.³⁰ Similar conferences have followed. A new journal, *Lady-Unique-Inclination-of-the-Night*,³¹ dedicated to a Mayan moon goddess and the expression of feminine spirituality, has recently issued forth from New Brunswick, New Jersey. Most important, women are beginning to gather together in their own womanspirit circles and feminist witchcraft covens all around the country.

The new manifestations of the goddess are manifold. A woman named Mountainspirit expressed her sense of the goddess in the following way. "I believe the goddess is within and without. . . . Energy is within and without. Exterior and interior, all the dualities we function under lose their meaning when you go deep enough. But we are not all conscious of the goddess within us."³² Gail Walker sought the goddess through a study of the mythology associated with the moon and wrote, "The time seems ripe to explore the Moon as a spiritual reflection of the Goddess. . . . The moon's rhythm never misses a beat as her curved shape and arc path vary. The new moon increases and decreases in crescents, bits of her own elemental form. . . . The moon is everchanging, reaching all of her points but rhythmically and in due time."³³ A third woman, Sarah Wisdom wrote of encountering the goddess in a dream:

A wise woman
sat there in the twilight
"You must watch ahead," she said,
"You must walk only on the edge of the sea.
There is danger in the deep
But in the sandy desert you will lose your way."

So it is my sisters
We are on empty shores
uncreated spaces,

filled with echoes of the primitive and the timeless
and the mysteries of the deep.³⁴

Wisdom's poem seems to me to express the situation of women who stand outside the canon on the "empty shores," but who sense their unique opportunity to reconnect with sources of wisdom deeper than those expressed in the canon.

Z Budapest, high priestess of the Susan B. Anthony coven in Los Angeles, has begun to develop a feminist witchcraft tradition in which female power and female symbolism have a central place. Budapest believes that Western religion was developed to celebrate and legitimate male power and that women's liberation requires a secure grounding in women's religion. Budapest's Dianic tradition celebrates the female principle of the universe, the birthing power, as the ultimate sacred power and traces its heritage back to the goddess worshippers of the ancient world and the witches of the middle Christian period.³⁵

WOMEN AS ANTI-CANON OR CREATORS OF A NEW CANON?

One might ask whether these developments in women's spirituality signal the creation of a new canon in which women will name God and define reality for themselves, claiming the power denied them in the canonical traditions of the West. This is an intriguing notion. However, it is not surprising to find that many women who stand outside the traditional canon object to the formation of a new canon.

Joan Mallonee states the view of many women in the women's spirituality movement when she says, "I became reluctant to set down interpretations of the Goddess image in my dreams because of a sense that not only was I violating my own material but

also in so doing the material would evolve into a dogma, a theology. I had a strong desire to speak about the images which were so strong and powerful, so individual and personal, but I had no desire to create the implication that She would be the same for others as She was for me."³⁶

Mary Daly also has taken her stand against canonical traditions. In *Beyond God the Father* she speaks of "sisterhood" as "Anti-Church," a symbol which expresses women's position as outsiders in Western canonical tradition. For Daly, the essence of Anti-Church would be negated if women were to create a new authoritative tradition with official texts and liturgies. Daly envisions a "world without models" as the ideal, and speaks of a feminist liturgy as a contradiction in terms, an "attempt to put new wine, women's awareness, into the old skins of forms that will female self-affirmation and turn female consciousness against itself."³⁷ Jean Mountaingrove is even more explicit about the destructive potential of fixed feminist liturgies. "I think it is important," she says, "that we do not create new ways for women to fail, because we all have had so much failure. That's why I think it is important for rituals to be open and for each woman to feel her own way so that no one has to feel that they did it wrong. . . . We don't want to say that there is one way to be a feminist spiritual person and you are bad if you don't do it that way."³⁸ Like Jean Mountaingrove, Daly sees a need for developing new rituals, but asserts that they must remain open. "There is every reason for women to celebrate our history," Daly writes, "but in ever new ways, not encrusted in stagnant, repetitious ritual."³⁹ Women who reject the idea of forming a new canon have a

negative view of the canonical process as one which rigidly defines reality and declares certain texts, rituals, and experiences as authoritative while slandering and suppressing those which reflect alternate views of reality. They view canons as promoting conformity and authoritarian mind sets while denying individual experience and initiative. There is no question that canons function in this way, at least at some times and for some people, perhaps much of the time for women. But there is a second and more positive notion of canon. In this view a canon functions as Sanders noted, as a "power of life" for a community, reflecting shared histories and shared perceptions of reality. Indeed, as Ralph Norman has argued,⁴⁰ there is a sense in which the possibility of communication and community requires im-

licit acceptance of a minimal canon. If canon is understood as the shared perceptions of reality which make communication possible, then a community which is totally anti-canon is an impossibility. And certainly the women's spirituality movement is not without a canon in this second sense. Conversations about women's spirituality are deeper and more meaningful if those who participate have read Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, Z Budapest, and *WomanSpirit*.

Rather than rejecting the notion of canons, women might better assume the responsibility for the creation of a new canon. It is important for women to celebrate their shared perceptions of ultimate reality and their power of life in rituals. Women need a heritage and a tradition which will enable them to express and act out the vision of female power which they have discovered outside the canons and traditions of patriarchy.

If the creation of a new canon is inevitable, then the question is whether a new canon can be created which will not also repeat the most destructive features of the old canon: the suppression of individual experience and the slander and destruction of rival traditions and their adherents. While it is probably not possible for a community to support and legitimate in the same degree the experiences of all of its members, it may be possible to create a tradition which is less oppressive than the ones we have known in the West. As Susan Wittig has stated,⁴¹ one sign of a vital tradition is the image which the tradition holds of itself and its relation to the outsiders and heretics, or as she names them, the innovators on the periphery of the canon. The canonical traditions of Western religion do not fare well when judged by this criterion. Perhaps this is the reason many people, especially women, consider the traditional canons moribund. The challenge facing those who have deeply experienced exclusion as part of their own history is to create new traditions that do not exclude others.

NOTES

1. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), x.
2. Bernard W. Anderson's widely used text, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Second Edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1966) typifies the problem created when the new evidence about Canaanite religion is discussed within the old paradigm of dominant monotheism. Anderson

takes account of the latest historical and archeological evidence. However, the narrative structure of *Understanding the Old Testament* follows the Yahwistic narrative line, from exodus covenant with Yahweh at Sinai (chs. 1 and 2) to struggle between faith and culture (ch. 4) to prophetic criticism (ch. 7) to renewal of covenant (chs. 12-14), etc. Within the chapter on Canaanite religion, Anderson improves on previous scholarship. "In many respects, this (the religion portrayed in the Ras Shamra texts) was a highly developed, sophisticated religion, far ahead of the belief in local fertility spirits which scholars once thought the religion of the Baals and Ashtarts to have been (104)." Yet Anderson's discussion of Canaanite religion is set within a chapter in which the narrative line stresses "the great dangers and temptations of life in Canaan" (100), a Yahwistic interpretation which Anderson adopts without acknowledging that he is presenting a Yahwistic viewpoint which may have been a minority opinion in Israel at the time of settlement in Canaan. A work on the religion of the Hebrew people not biased by the Yahwistic viewpoint would not speak of Canaanite religion as a "temptation," but rather as a plausible "solution" to the problems engendered by the settlement.

3. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

4. (New York: KTAV, 1967). See especially pp. 42-43, 50, 58-61.

5. The "J" or Yahwistic source in *Exodus*, which records the political-religious murders of the worshippers of the golden calf in the pre-settlement period, may not be historically reliable. Still it reflects a pattern of murder of opponents of Yahwism which the "J" editors wished to legitimate by reading it back into the pre-settlement period.

6. The precise figures may not be historical but the pattern of suppression of competing religious groups through murder probably is. Also note that *1 Kings* 18:19 mentions that Elijah called 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, but the test is waged only with the prophets of Baal for some reason that the text leaves unexplained.

7. See Merlin Stone, *When God Was A Woman* (New York: The Dial Press, 1976), 57-58.

8. *Ibid.*, esp. 30-61, and Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, Vol. I, *Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), 39-40.

9. Excerpts from Vatican's Declaration Affirming Prohibition on Women Priests," *New York Times* (January 28, 1977), 8.

10. "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *Signs*, 2/2 (Winter, 1976), 293-303, esp. 295, 299, 300-301. *Ibid.*, 300-301.

11. Gnosticism is not the only heretical movement which provided greater outlets for female power than canonical tradition. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes that women had authority and leading positions in Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism, Donatism, Priscillianism, Messalianism, and Pelagianism, and that they were found among the bishops and priests of the Quinillians, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies*, 36/4 (December, 1975), 618. See also Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (University of California Press, 1972), 228-30, and Gottfried Koch, *Frauenfrage und Ketzerium im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1962), both cited by Anne Driver in "Materials Not Included in the Canon of Religious Studies: A Neolithic Goddess Cult," 6 (unpublished).

12. Mircea Eliade divides scholarship on witchcraft into the two groups dis-

- cussed here. See his "Some Observations on European Witchcraft," *History of Religions*, 14/3 (February, 1975), 150-51. He notes that the ultraconservative view is also held by some modern occultists and Luciferians.
14. Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 111.
 15. See, e.g., Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1971), 255-70, and Ruether, 89.
 16. See Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, translated with an introduction and notes by Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), xliii-xlv.
 17. *Ibid.*, esp. 41, 44, 47, 54-61, 66, 80-82, 144-50.
 18. *Ibid.*, 44, 47.
 19. *A History of Women Healers*, Second Edition (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1973).
 20. Published in Jo Freeman, ed., *Women: A Feminist Perspective* (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1975), 335-50.
 21. *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, op.cit.
 22. Eliade, op.cit. Eliade discusses evidence which shows how pagan religious groups gradually came to incorporate practices alleged of them by their persecutors.
 23. *New Woman/New Earth*, 89-114.
 24. See Rita Gross, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Women and Religion: Review, Criticism, and Redefinition," in Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold Romero, eds., *Women and Religion*, Revised Edition (Missoula, Montana: AAR and Scholars' Press, 1974), 153-65; also see Valerie Saiving, "Androcentrism in Religious Studies," *Journal of Religion*, 56/2 (April, 1976), 177-96.
 25. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 191.
 26. "A Ritual Celebration," *WomanSpirit*, 2/5 (Fall Equinox, 1975), 27.
 27. *Ibid.*, 25.
 28. *Ibid.*, 28.
 29. Published quarterly from Box 263, Wolf Creek, Oregon.
 30. See the movie "Musereel" #1—A Tapestry of Womanspirit, by Denise Bostrom, Carol Clement, Ariel Dougherty, Nancy Peck, Marilyn Ries.
 31. Sowing Circle Press (New Brunswick: New Jersey).
 32. *WomanSpirit*, 3/9 (Fall Equinox, 1976), 5.
 33. "Moon Change," *Lady-Unique*, 1 (Autumn, 1976), 5.
 34. "Sea Dream," *WomanSpirit*, 3/10 (Winter Solstice, 1976), 30. Used by permission of the author.
 35. See Z Budapest, *The Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows* (Luna Publications, 1976).
 36. *Lady-Unique*, 1 (Autumn, 1976), 12.
 37. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 145, also see 69ff. and 132ff.
 38. "What Is This Goddess Business," *WomanSpirit*, 3/9 (Fall Equinox, 1976), 9.
 39. Daly, op cit., 146.
 40. See his paper in this collection.
 41. See Susan Wittig's paper in this collection.