

THINKING GODDESS/NATURE: FEMINIST METAPHYSICS AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Paul Reid-Bowen

A thesis submitted to the University of Gloucestershire
in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities.

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ABSTRACT: This thesis contributes to a small but growing body of academic research that is concerned with the late twentieth and early twenty-first century religion of Goddess feminism and the religio-political discourse of thealogy. Current academic approaches to Goddess feminism have been primarily historical, phenomenological, psychological and sociological studies that have presented descriptive and/or functional accounts of this religion. Relatively little academic work has emerged from within Goddess feminism. Still less has attempted to delineate the meaning of a female/feminist deity and religious worldview in a philosophical manner.

This thesis attends to these areas of academic neglect by combining philosophical concerns and methods with a position of theological advocacy. By developing a theological reading of the principal reality-claims embedded within a number of influential Goddess feminist texts it is, I propose, possible to address philosophical questions that have not, as yet, been confronted by Goddess feminists,

and also theorize the contours and coherence of what may be termed a feminist metaphysic.

Most Goddess feminists, I contend, presently emphasize the affective, experiential and performative dimensions of their religion, to the detriment or exclusion of the conceptual, philosophical and metaphysical. I argue in this thesis that there are no compelling reasons why Goddess feminists should reject philosophy and metaphysics. There are, rather, good political, practical and religious reasons for feminist theologians to produce an alternative metaphysic of deity and the world to those deployed by patriarchy. Throughout this constructive work of theology recurrent Goddess feminist models, myths and reality-claims, such as those of the cosmogonic womb, the cycling processes of Birth-Death-Rebirth, and the web of life, are conceptually unpacked, developed and elucidated so as to provide a comprehensive theological, and thereby metaphysical, account of the fundamental organization of reality and the human condition. The originality and significance of this thesis lies in its elaboration of a feminist metaphysical account of the Goddess as nature, Goddess/Nature, that has largely been assumed rather than articulated by most Goddess feminists. I conclude that although it is not, as yet, possible to articulate a complete Goddess feminist metaphysical theory, it is possible to develop a philosophical and systematic theology that delineates the primary metaphysical commitments and reality-claims implicit within Goddess feminist discourse in a coherent manner. This thesis is a prolegomena to future works of philosophical theology and feminist metaphysical theorizing.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of author and in no way represent those of the University of Gloucestershire.

Signed.....

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INTRODUCTION

RADICAL BEGINNINGS

The Goddess can be seen as the symbol, the normative image of immanence. She represents the divine embodied in nature, in human beings, in the flesh. ... She includes the male in her aspects ... Yet the femaleness of the Goddess is primary not to denigrate the male, but because it represents bringing life into the world, valuing the world.¹

From among the many developments and transformations in Western religious ideas and practices to have taken place during the late-twentieth century, one of the most significant has been the growth of feminist religions and the re-emergence of a reverence for female deities.² In the wake of a period in which the relations between the sexes have undergone an unprecedented re-assessment and re-organization, the intervention of feminist criticism and activism in religious thought and practice has had a profound impact upon the ways in which divinity and sacrality are conceived and related to in the West. Many established religions have found it necessary to question their activities, concepts and narratives, with regard to the meaning and valuation of sexual difference. New religions have taken shape that directly address the dramatic shift in cultural, political and social understandings of sexual difference, often by placing women in a more central role. Many religious feminists, in agreement with theorists who have suggested that sexual difference may be the philosophical issue of our age, have pushed the issue of sexual difference towards

1. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997 [1982]), p. 9.

2. The West is a somewhat artificial geo-political category that, in this context, encompasses most of Europe, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

what may be its ultimate conclusion: theorizing the meaning of sexual difference at the level of deity.³ This thesis is specifically concerned with those religious feminists who are both attentive to the politics of sexual difference and are also articulating an account of deity that is explicitly sexed as female. That is, this thesis is concerned with the religion of Goddess feminism and the religio-political discourse of theology.

I PURPOSE

The overall purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the small but growing body of academic work that is explicating and interpreting the feminist account of female deity emerging in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Current academic approaches to feminist religions have so far focused primarily upon the historical, political, psychological and sociological meaning and value of revering female deities,⁴ phenomenological studies that provide a descriptive account/interpretation of

3. Luce Irigaray claims that '[s]exual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our "salvation" if we thought it through.' Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 5.

4. See Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (eds), *The Concept of Goddess* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Jane Caputi, 'Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking' in Carolyne Larrington (ed.), *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (London: The Pandora Press, 1992); Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 'Witches of the West: Neopaganism and Goddess Worship as Enlightenment Religions', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 5, no.1, Spring 1989, pp. 75-95; Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (eds), *Is the Goddess a Feminist: The Politics of South Asian Goddesses* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001); Karen L. King and Karen Jo Torgesen (eds), *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1997); Asphodel Long, 'The Goddess Movement in Britain Today', *Feminist Theology*, no. 5, January 1994, pp. 11-39; Pam Lunn, 'Do Women Need the GODDESS? Some Phenomenological and Sociological Reflections', *Feminist Theology*, no. 4, pp. 17-38; Melissa Raphael, 'Truth in Flux: Goddess Feminism as a Late Modern Religion', *Religion*, vol. 26, 1996, pp. 199-213.

the beliefs and practices of the members of those feminist religions,⁵ and comparative works, wherein feminist Goddess religions are contrasted with the dominant religious tradition of the West: Christianity.⁶ Relatively little academic work has either emerged from within the feminist religions themselves, or else attempted to delineate the meaning of female deity in a philosophical and systematic manner.⁷ There may be legitimate reasons to explain this academic neglect, namely a suspicion of the patriarchal form and content of the academy amongst Goddess feminists, but a sustained account of the meaning of a female concept of deity from a position of theological advocacy or philosophical enquiry is of considerable value to the academic

5. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000) and *Thealogy and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

6. Positive comparisons between modern Goddess religions and Christianity may be located within Richard Grigg's *When God Becomes Goddess: The Transformation of American Religion* (New York: Continuum, 1995), Carl McColman *Embracing Jesus and the Goddess* (Far Winds Press, 2001); Tim Freke and Pete Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess* (Harper Collins, 2001); while negative comparisons are evident in Philip G. Davis' *Goddess Unmasked: The Rise of Neopagan Feminist Spirituality* (Spence Publishing Company, 1999) and Susan Heine's *Christianity and the Goddesses* (London: SCM Press, 1988). Less explicitly critical, but nonetheless pro-Christian, accounts are Craig Hawkins and Alan W. Gomes, *Goddess Worship, Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism, Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements, No. 11* (Zondervan Publishing Company, 1998); Mary Grey, 'Does Christianity Need the Goddess? Or, Can Christianity Embrace the Goddess and Still be Christianity?', *Theology in Green*, no. 6, 1993, pp. 4-11; and Dorothy A. Lee, 'Goddess Religion and Women's Spirituality: A Christian Feminist Response', *Theology*, no. 805, 1999, pp. 19-28.

7. Notable exceptions to this generalisation are Carol Christ's *Rebirth of the Goddess* and the writings of the feminist philosopher of religion Beverley Clack. Christ explicitly claims that her most recent work is a systematic thealogy. She observes that in developing such a thealogy 'it is important to be as clear, coherent, and consistent as possible', p. xv. Beverley Clack, in turn, has started to identify some of her academic work as explicitly theological and has begun to bring a number of perennial philosophical concerns to bear upon thealogy. C.f. Beverley Clack, 'The Denial of Dualism: Theological Reflections on the Sexual and the Spiritual', *Feminist Theology*, no. 10, 1995, pp. 102-115; Beverley Clack, 'Thealogy and Theology: Mutually Exclusive or Creatively Interdependent', *Feminist*

study of religion and also long overdue. The present thesis addresses these areas of academic neglect.

In this thesis the feminist project of reconceiving the nature and meaning of deity in political and female terms is approached in both a descriptive and constructive manner. The methodological emphasis of this approach is philosophical. But it is also acknowledged that the thesis is located within the environs of a committed religious discourse about the nature of a female deity. That is, the thesis is also theological. Although Goddess feminists arguably already possess a coherent religious worldview, as exemplified by Carol Christ's systematic theology and as elucidated in the writings of Melissa Raphael, there has been little interest amongst feminist theologians in reflecting on the coherence and consistency of their beliefs and practices in a sustained or systematic manner. This thesis attends to the lack of theological engagement with what are principally philosophical concerns by developing a detailed reading of the, often largely implicit, metaphysical commitments, models and reality-claims embedded within Goddess feminist texts. By elucidating Goddess feminist reality-claims it is, I assert, possible to raise and address philosophical issues that have not, as yet, been confronted by feminist theologians and also delineate what may be termed a theological metaphysic. This thesis proceeds with the general contention that Goddess feminist reality-claims can be organized to provide a coherent religious and metaphysical account of the whole of reality.

In Chapter One the main features of Goddess feminist discourse are delineated and the relationship of Goddess feminism to philosophical and, specifically,

Theology, no. 21, May 1999, pp. 21-38; Beverley Clack, 'Revisioning Death: A Theological Approach to the "Evils" of Mortality', *Feminist Theology*, no. 22, September, 1999, pp. 67-77.

metaphysical modes of thought are examined. This chapter encompasses a number of substantive arguments and develops the contention that the religious myths, metaphors and models deployed by Goddess feminists are, in a significant sense, reality-depicting. Although there are a number of reasons why Goddess feminism may be considered to be antimetaphysical in character, there are, I contend, no convincing reasons why metaphysics *per se* should be rejected. It is argued, rather, that metaphysical thinking and theorizing may be of value to Goddess feminists in articulating their account of the female generativity and transformative processes inherent within the natural/cosmic whole.

In Chapter Two the task of constructing a coherent account of the Goddess feminist view of reality, by delineating the metaphors, models and myths of deity favoured by Goddess feminists, is initiated. First, Goddess feminist attitudes to the religious/philosophical categories of monotheism and polytheism are introduced and conceptually unpacked. It is argued that, although Goddess feminists are apt to evoke and revere deity in many different forms, ultimately deity is understood as one: that is, as *the* Goddess whose meaning is then elucidated further by reference to the theological models of the Great Goddess, the Mother Goddess and the Triple Goddess. Second, the Goddess feminist assertion that the Goddess is wholly immanent in the world is clarified in metaphysical terms, and the meaning of the theological assertion that the Goddess is the living body of nature is philosophically developed. It is argued in this section that the Goddess feminist concept of deity is pantheistic, rather than theistic, and many of the critiques that are typically directed towards Goddess

feminism are misplaced because they target a theistic concept of deity. The concept of deity developed in this chapter is non-personal, female and generative.

In Chapter Three the concepts and religious models introduced in Chapter Two are expanded upon by developing a theology of nature. Working with the assumption that the Goddess is the whole of nature, this chapter clarifies, develops and constructs how nature is conceived by Goddess feminists. In the first section, Goddess feminist construals of the origins and order of the universe or whole are considered and the theological models of the cave, the cauldron and the cosmogonic womb are examined. It is argued throughout this section that processes of emergence, female generativity and transformation are privileged in the Goddess feminist worldview. In the second section, the Goddess feminist engagement with the eco-political movement of ecofeminism is considered; the Goddess feminist understanding of the practice of dividing reality according to a binary logic is assessed in metaphysical terms; and the meaning of the theological model of the web of life is elucidated and developed. It is argued that a theological understanding of nature as fundamentally interconnected coheres with the pantheistic concept of nature as alive and generative, and it is explained that this view of nature has been expanded upon by Goddess feminists by recourse to two contemporary scientific discourses: Gaia theory and ecology. Both of these are summarized and assessed in terms of their relationship to a Goddess feminist metaphysic.

In Chapter Four a theological understanding of time and becoming is delineated. First, the manner in which a theological concept of time coheres with the theology of nature outlined in the preceding sections of this chapter is assessed and

certain significant differences between feminist theological and masculinist theological concepts of time are identified, with special reference to the concepts of history, teleology and eschatology. This analysis of theological time is then expanded to encompass what may be termed a gynocentric account of time. It is argued that theological time is necessarily a gynocentric form of time and it is explained how this concept of time coheres and converges with theological claims concerning the female generativity of nature. Second, it is argued that the new mathematics, sciences and metaphysics of chaos and complexity share many features in common with the Goddess feminist worldview; and the theories of chaos and complexity can lend philosophical precision to a Goddess feminist metaphysic. Goddess feminist views of time and becoming and chaos systemic theories are correlated in this chapter, demonstrating significant elements of convergence.

In Chapter Five many of the issues raised in the preceding chapters are drawn together and applied to a Goddess feminist account of the human condition. This chapter addresses the metaphysical understanding of human being-in-the-world evidenced in the Goddess feminist worldview and applies these insights to such issues as human mortality, the privileged position of women in Goddess feminism, and the nature of evil, ethics and political praxis. The arguments and conclusions expressed in this chapter emerge from the metaphysical and theological understanding of the world that has been developed throughout the thesis.

I conclude this work by providing recommendations for future forms of theology. This thesis is, I contend, a foray into a new discipline of philosophical theology and also provides conceptual resources for feminist metaphysical theorizing.

No claims as to theoretical completeness are made on my part, and I acknowledge that the concerns of this thesis are broad. This thesis represents an initial attempt to draw feminist theological reality-claims towards a point of philosophical coherence. The thesis does not claim to speak for all Goddess feminists. But it does claim to be *a* feminist theology whose originality and significance lies in its development of a metaphysical account of the Goddess as nature, Goddess/Nature, that has largely been assumed rather than articulated by Goddess feminists.

II METHODOLOGY

An introduction demands that the primary methodological and contextual issues that define and direct a research project are mapped out and considered. In this and the following section methodological issues pertaining to the academic disciplines utilised in this research are outlined and a number of pressing epistemological, moral and religious concerns, relating to my own status as researcher, are raised and critically reflected upon. It is argued that this project is unique, with regard to its methodological relationship to the academic disciplines/discourses of philosophy, theology and feminism, and also has an ambiguous status with regard to the positioning of myself as a male researcher working with(in) feminist religious disciplines/discourses.

Feminist disciplines and discourses

The nature, methods and tasks of academic disciplines have been constituted within a framework of masculinist concerns and biases that feminists working within many

different fields of enquiry have called into question.⁸ This is not a point that I wish to belabour in this section. There are, it has been argued, radically different ways of conceiving these academic disciplines, and these alternatives should be actively pursued if the errors and injustices of the patriarchal academy are to be corrected. Within the academic study of religion feminist theologians have been working at this task in a sustained manner for nearly thirty years,⁹ feminist anthropologists, historians, psychologists and sociologists have made important contributions during the last twenty years,¹⁰ and, more recently, feminists philosophers such as Pamela Sue

8. For commentaries and collections of papers on this subject, see Christie Farnham (ed.), *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Elizabeth Langland and Walter Grove (eds), *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy. The Difference It Makes* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981); Dale Spender (ed.), *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on Academic Disciplines* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981). For examples of this work see, Sandra Harding, and Merrill B. Hinitikka, (eds), *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel Publishing Company, 1983); Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (London: Virago, 1986); Sandra Harding (ed.), *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987).

9. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in Feminist Perspective – A Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey. Perspectives on Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1986); Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989); Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

10. Mary E. Giles (ed.), *The Feminist Mystic and Other Essays on Women and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain (eds), *Speaking of Faith: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change* (London: The Women's Press, 1986); Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak. Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Naomi Goldenberg, *Returning Words to Flesh. Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Resurrection of the Body* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis*

Anderson and Grace Jantzen, have laid down much needed groundwork for the philosophy of religion.¹¹

This thesis occupies the conceptual terrain that has been reshaped by feminist interventions in the study of religion, and the insights of feminist theorists are a guiding methodological element of this research. Somewhat problematically, however, this research also straddles two academic and religious discourses that may be incompatible with one another, namely philosophy and theology, and some explanatory commentary is required to elucidate this mixed methodological approach.

Towards a philosophical theology

Initially, this research may be defined as philosophical in character and method. That is, the research may be said to be located within the environs of the philosophy of religion. I affirm from the outset that conceptual analysis, the clarification of truth-claims, issues of coherence and consistency, and specifically the construction of a metaphysical theory, are a central concern of this work, and these concerns are perennially philosophical. Problems arise, however, when it is also acknowledged that this research is contributing to a form of feminist religious discourse: namely theology. Although philosophy has worked in the service of religion at various points throughout human history, the degree of methodological compatibility between philosophy and the feminist discourse of theology requires careful evaluation.

and Reconstruction of Buddhism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); Marsha Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995); Ursula King (ed.), *Religion and Gender* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995).

11. Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) and Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

Thealogy, discourse about the Goddess (or the logos of *thea*), is a term that is probably unfamiliar to many; and, with certainty, is a term that may be readily misheard, mis-read or mis-spelled as simply 'theology'. Indeed, the substitution of the prefix *thea* (Goddess) for *theo* (God) has a tendency to either slide past ones attention completely, or, when it does register, is easily interpreted as a mere political move, a feminist intervention with regard to the gendered and/or sexist nature of religious language. That is, thealogy may be characterized as a "politically correct" label for a discipline which is, for all intents and purposes, still theological in orientation. The possibility that thealogy may be in any way methodologically and theoretically distinct from theology is rarely recognized or given serious academic consideration.

Significantly, however, thealogy has emerged within a non-traditional religious context; it is a religious discourse that often identifies itself as methodologically opposed to theology; and it is remarkably difficult to link thealogy with a specific religious institution or belief-system. That is, thealogy is a form of discourse or discipline that has taken shape in a grass-roots fashion from a diverse array of religious/cultural resources evident throughout North America, Western Europe and Australasia during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the contextual and substantive factors that define thealogy are explicated more thoroughly later in this Introduction and in the following chapter, it is necessary to affirm that thealogy is a form of radical feminist religious discourse that identifies itself as opposed to many of the male-identified discursive and methodological practices that have preceded it. Notably, thealogy is highly suspicious of philosophical enquiry (because philosophy is

identified with the patriarchal academy) and has not as yet chosen to engage with philosophical concerns directly. Indeed, as Cynthia Eller observes,

spiritual feminists are iconoclasts: they love to flout the rules of the theological discipline, to challenge the categories usually used to think about the sacred. They don't think most of the categories apply to what they experience anyway. Or rather, they think all of them apply indiscriminately, even those categories that were originally set up to be mutually exclusive.¹²

Clearly there are problems of methodological compatibility between an academic discipline such as philosophy, that is concerned with the analysis, discrimination and organization of categories, and a religious discourse such as theology, that believes that rules can be flouted and categories indiscriminately ignored or mixed. While theologians may have good feminist reasons to challenge and critique pre-existing theological categories and methods, to propose no systematic way of articulating those concerns may render theology inaccessible to and wholly incommensurable with other forms of religious discourse and enquiry. This is a concern that I address in this thesis. There is, I contend, a tension between theology and philosophy that needs to be confronted and resolved. Theological discourse and philosophical enquiry can, I propose, be drawn into a closer and far more productive relationship than is currently in evidence or assumed by most Goddess feminists.

The theological commentator Emily Culpepper claimed in the 1980s that theological discourse was fundamentally opposed to conceptual precision and philosophical enquiry. She noted that '[i]nherent in its grassroots manner of creativity is the instinct to elude attempts at logical systematizing. Goddess logic includes, but is not limited by the rational; it is primarily created through a wide-ranging spiritual

12. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 130.

free thinking.’¹³ This I would claim is a fair description of the discursive terrain that constituted the beginnings of theology. But it does not provide any reason to believe that theology currently is, or will always be, restricted to grassroots creativity and resistant to logical systematization. Despite the diversity of ideas that have been expressed through theology in the last thirty years, an overview of contemporary theology reveals considerable uniformity of thought and many areas of conceptual agreement and convergence.¹⁴ Moreover, the suggestion that theology includes but is not limited to the rational does not necessitate a rejection of philosophical thought *per se*. The philosophies of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries have conceived rationality in a wide variety of ways, and in many respects have not limited themselves to the rational.¹⁵ Feminist philosophy, in particular, has been concerned to reconceive the nature of rationality and to reclaim human desire, embodiment and the passions as important components of philosophical enquiry.¹⁶ Theology, therefore, cannot reject philosophy on the grounds that it is in some sense ‘limited by the rational’.

13. Emily Culpepper, ‘Contemporary Goddess Theology: A Sympathetic Critique’ in C. W. Atkinson, C. H. Buchanan and M. R. Miles (eds), *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 55.

14. See Raphael, *Introducing Theology and Theology and Embodiment*.

15. A significant divide in philosophical attitudes to rationality in the West can be located in Anglo-American and Continental schools of thought. This division is somewhat artificial, but Continental philosophy arguably draws upon a variety of cultural, linguistic and psychological theories that problematize rationality in a manner that is not acknowledged in Anglo-American philosophy. For a comprehensive introduction to the differences between Anglo-American and Continental philosophies, specifically as they relate to the philosophy of religion, see Grace M. Jantzen, ‘What’s the Difference? Knowledge and Gender in (Post)Modern Philosophy of Religion’, *Religious Studies*, no. 32, 1996, pp. 431-448.

16. See, for example, articles in Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford (eds), *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1988); Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo (eds), *Gender/Body/Knowledge* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Alison Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

This thesis proceeds with the understanding that theology can reap certain benefits from an increased degree of conceptual precision in the articulation of its ideas and truth-claims. Many of the critiques that are currently directed towards theology focus upon the lack of coherence and intelligibility within the theological worldview. This is a lack that can, I contend, be corrected by recourse to the application of a certain amount of philosophical rigour. This philosophical endeavour need not entail the denial or rejection of all theological principles. Theology is a vital element in a political/spiritual feminist struggle to think beyond the boundaries, methods and theories of male-identified disciplines and discourses. It is an attempt to reflect on and re-construct the meaning of deity in terms that are feminist and sexed/gendered as female.¹⁷ Feminist philosophers too are engaged in a similar task of reconstructing male-identified discourses, and there is no more reason to assume that philosophy is not open to feminist modification than a discourse about the nature of deity. A feminist philosophical theology need not be a methodological contradiction in terms.

Philosophical concerns relating to coherence, consistency and conceptual analysis are applied to feminist theology in this thesis, and a plausible reading of the central reality-claims and metaphysical commitments of the Goddess feminist movement is developed systematically. That is, theology and philosophy are drawn into a close working relationship and applied to the Goddess feminist worldview in a constructive manner. Methodologically this work is a first step towards addressing issues that will confront any Goddess feminist who seeks to provide a coherent

17. For a comprehensive exposition and analysis of the development and nature of Goddess feminism and theology, see Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Theology*.

account of their ideas and values in the future. This thesis may be characterised as a prolegomena to a future philosophical theology or a form of feminist metaphysical theorizing.

Problematically, though, all of the methodological aims and principles outlined above are complicated because of my own status as a feminist, philosopher and theologian. That is, as a male academic, my relations to feminist philosophy and feminist theology are at best vexed, and at worst, impossible. It is to a consideration of these very specific methodological difficulties that I turn next.

III REFLEXIVITY: SITUATING THE SELF

In this section I provide methodological commentary on the placement of men, and specifically myself, within relationship to both feminist research and a feminist religious discourse about a female deity (i.e. theology). That is, I address the problematic nature of men working with, or within, the feminist academic study of religion. This may seem to be a marginal methodological issue at present. However, the issue is a particularly acute and pressing one for myself, and will, I hope, also need to be faced by other men in the future.

For the past ten years now I have been academically and emotionally engaged with the critical and constructive projects of feminism, and this commitment to feminism has most recently cohered around this thesis; a research endeavour that is aimed at elucidating certain recurrent philosophical features of an emergent feminist religious movement (Goddess feminism) and its discursive practices, reality-claims and worldview (what may be termed the theological imagination). It is this research,

however, that has promoted a number of methodological, theoretical and also very personal ambivalences and difficulties, with regard to my status as a male academic working with feminist disciplines/discourses. I have found myself having to question what exactly it is that I am doing; and, more importantly, I have had to carefully evaluate whether I can or rather *ought* (morally, politically and academically) to be doing it.

Many of my methodological concerns have, admittedly, been confronted by men working within a broad range of academic disciplines and fields of enquiry in recent years; and the contentious issues raised by “men in feminism” and “men doing feminism” have been addressed in several books and collected volumes of papers during the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ However, the issues and questions that I continue to struggle with flow directly from my engagement with the radical feminist religious discourse of theology, and there is a virtual silence with regard to men working within this subject area.

Feminist discourses: new horizons and impossible relations

Clearly serious difficulties confront any man who wishes to engage with a religious discourse/discipline that identifies itself as grounded within a feminist and/or female consciousness. On the most basic level of analysis there is the pervasive cultural perception that feminism and men are necessarily locked into an adversarial relationship with one another; while on other levels there are epistemological

18. See Tom Digby (ed.), *Men Doing Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998); John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (Portland, Oregon: Breitenbush Books, 1989); Michael Kaufman (ed.), *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on*

questions pertaining to the horizons and nature of sexed/gendered knowledge to be considered, and complex ethical questions relating to men's beneficial participation within a patriarchal framework of systemic gender oppression. For myself, the question of what it means for a male academic to take feminism seriously is undoubtedly at the root of my research dilemma, although issues of religious commitment and the limits of a man's ability to engage with the theological imagination are also particularly relevant. To state the problem as explicitly as I am able, I have had to consider whether I can, in any meaningful way, write about a radical feminist religion, largely by means of feminist academic disciplines, from a position of advocacy and commitment, as a man?

Admittedly, from a social constructionist perspective my gender in the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo's words, only 'forms one axis of a complex heterogeneous construction, [a construction that is] constantly interpenetrating in historically specific ways with multiple other axes of identity.'¹⁹ That is, variables such as age, class, ethnicity, health, race and sexual orientation may play a more significant role in the formation of my identity than gender alone. Moreover, my relationship to feminism need not be unduly problematic in this respect in so far as I am not readily reducible to a single category or essence called 'man'. I am a composite identity who, in principle at least, may construe and construct myself as feminist. However, this position arguably surrenders far too much to constructionism. Without engaging directly with the ongoing and increasingly nuanced debates between constructionist and what are

Pleasure, Power, and Change (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

19. Susan Bordo, 'Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism' in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 139.

commonly identified as essentialist schools of thought, one may reasonably point out that sexual difference is real (even if not merely or purely dichotomous) and arguably makes an immense difference to one's identity-formation and life-prospects within nearly any imaginable cultural/historical situation. The problem is knowing the difference that sexual difference makes.

In my own circumstances, as a man socially conditioned and sexualized within a patriarchal cultural/religious/social framework, my sexual difference is problematic for feminism; and, if it were not so, it is probable that feminism in its current form(s) would not need to exist. Quite simply, the categories "men" and "women" possess very different meanings in feminism; and any claims that a man might make on behalf of feminism possess a different relationship to male power and the patriarchal status quo than if a woman were to make those claims. The fact that social constructionist perspectives, as well as feminist standpoint epistemologies, seemingly permit the possibility of male feminist subjectivities does not itself surmount the issue/problem of male sexual difference.²⁰ To the extent that I may be identified by others, or else self-identify, with the categories "men" or "maleness", my relations with feminism remain awkward and perhaps impossible.

For myself, it is my very engagement with the feminist religion that I am researching that may be the most challenging issue of all. As Richard Roberts has cogently noted, '[t]he borderline between empathetic understanding and the psychological vortex of identity-transformation is often hard to discern and even more

20. The most systematic and persuasive defense of male feminist subjectivities from a is presented by Sandra Harding, 'Can Men Be Subjects of Feminist Thought?' in Digby (ed.), *Men Doing Feminism*, pp. 171-195.

difficult to control.²¹ In my own case, I have been intellectually and spiritually attracted to Goddess feminism and thealogy for a number of years, and my research has only served to intensify that level of engagement. My positioning along the old, and perhaps somewhat outdated, neutrality-commitment and insider-outsider (*emic-etic*) continua of religious studies has shifted dramatically in the past few years, and I am now faced with the possibility that I may be doing or writing feminist thealogy.

As a man who takes feminist concerns seriously, I am preoccupied with the degree to which I am taking perennial masculinist methodological concerns and imposing them upon a feminist religion that is actively opposed to them. In this research the elucidation and systematization of theological reality-claims is a methodological concern; and it is a concern that runs problematically against the claims of many interpreters and practitioners of Goddess feminism. As Emily Culpepper claimed earlier: 'I do not believe that thealogy can be adequately conveyed or developed in the forms used by traditional theological discourse. Inherent in its grassroots manner of creativity is the instinct to elude attempts at logical systematizing.'²² Or, to expand upon Culpepper's point, Goddess feminism is primarily concerned with mythopoetics, ritual activity and the affective dimensions of religion; it is a religious movement that encompasses a wide-range of religious perspectives and practices but is not overly concerned with the elucidation and/or coherence of those perspectives and practices. Goddess feminists share many values, notably feminist and ecological values that are on the side of life, but any discussion

21. Richard Roberts, 'The Chthonic Imperative: Gender, Religion and the Battle for the Earth' in Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts and Geoffrey Samuels (eds), *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 73.

22. Culpepper, 'Contemporary Goddess Thealogy', p. 55.

of belief-systems, conceptual coherence and systematization is usually rejected as inherently patriarchal and oppressive. That is, in their efforts to subvert and transform patriarchy, Goddess feminists often exclude issues and fields of enquiry that, arguably, require more careful consideration and critical evaluation.

Feminist theologians and philosophers are, I reiterate, attempting to think the nature and tasks of their disciplines differently from the patriarchal norm, without completely giving up on issues of coherence, elucidation and systematization, and I want to suggest that feminist theologians ought to do the same (and this is arguably particularly important if Goddess feminism is to survive into the future, or in the words of Melissa Raphael, ‘become the world-altering religion most of its adherents would want it to be’).²³ But, I hesitate, do they need to? And, more importantly, what exactly is it that I am projecting upon the theological imagination as a man? How exactly is it possible to traverse these feminist religious concerns, in a serious and sympathetic manner, as a male academic, without being reduced to a state of research paralysis?

In the final part of this section I raise a number of the issues that make answering the preceding questions as difficult as I believe they ought to be, and I also propose that these are issues that men working with(in) feminist religious disciplines/discourses need to engage with and reflect upon. Self-censure, silence and strategic-withdrawal are perhaps more attractive and ethical options for men at the present moment in feminism’s history, but questions relating to men’s complex and ambiguous relationship to feminist religious disciplines/discourses need to be struggled with.

Discursive colonization and violence

First, it is important to consider issues of colonization and violence. For a male academic to think seriously about his relationship to feminist religious disciplines and discourses he must carefully reflect upon a number of boundary issues. In what respects are his relations to those disciplines/discourses analogous to those of a colonizer? In what sense is the discursive terrain of a feminist discipline/discourse an environment that should not be entered?; and what damage is his male presence likely to do to the ecology/integrity of that discipline or discourse? Reflection on the long history of patriarchal colonization around the world is not only relevant when applied to discursive environments, it is also remarkably illuminating. Consider, for example, the fact that indigenous populations have been harmed, emergent ways of life have been distorted and exploited, fragile ecosystems have been disrupted and stripped of their essential resources by the forces of colonization. For a man to enter into a relationship with a feminist religious discipline or discourse is for him to potentially cross a boundary that should be passed only with great care; the environment may be exotic, stimulating and also rewarding, but his male presence within that environment may also be damaging and wholly unwanted. If one can speak of discursive ecologies, the environs of feminist religious discourses are not a natural home to men and should be approached accordingly; that is, with something akin to an ecological consciousness and attitude of respect. Entering with confidence may be a mistake, entering without due sensitivity to one's foreign and possibly toxic status may be catastrophic. As has been cogently noted by Cary Nelson, 'unresolvable pain can be the result of men's interrelations with feminism [and] this throws discourse into a

23. Raphael, 'Truth in Flux', p. 199.

material domain that most academics are generally wholly unprepared for.’²⁴ Feminist discourses are admittedly not unique in this respect; painful disagreements may arise in countless discursive environments and spheres of life. But given the dynamics and history of patriarchal power, and the relations of feminist discourses to that power, one must endeavour as a male academic to proceed carefully. All conversations are, as Donna Haraway observes, power-charged, and careful attention needs to be given, therefore, to the flow and balance of that power.²⁵ To not do so is to possibly duplicate a logic of colonization, a colonizing identity, and to do violence to something with which one may fundamentally agree.

Men’s desires and interests

My second main methodological concern relates to men’s desires and interests; or what exactly it is that men want from feminism? A recurrent question that I am confronted with commonly takes the form of, “why the interest in feminism?” or “why did you become a feminist?” Occasionally I feel as if I should be able to recount something akin to a conversion experience in answer to this question, but unfortunately there is nothing quite so experientially ready to hand. It is relatively easy to cite rational arguments why one ought to be a feminist, but the question seemingly addresses something far deeper than this: i.e. what were the psychological and social conditions, drives, events and processes that caused me to become a feminist? If one takes seriously any of the various depth psychologies, accounts of the

24. Cary Nelson, ‘Men, Feminism: The Materiality of Discourse’ in Jardine and Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism*, p. 162.

unconscious, and significantly feminist problematizations of the self, one cannot avoid giving some serious thought to one's feminist motives and desires as a man.

Roland Barthes once commented that we study what we desire or fear, a suggestion that I think points toward one of the core problems that men, and specifically heterosexual men, must navigate in relation to their interest in feminism.²⁶ There may, I contend, be a fear of the feminist/female "other" at work in any man's interest in feminism (and perhaps also a corresponding desire to control the dangerous feminist other), or, more plausibly, a desire to relate more closely to the female other. In my own case, I would probably have to admit that an element of desire is and always has been at work in my feminist commitments. The subject of feminism is primarily women and, for a heterosexual man, feminist discourses and theories can undoubtedly be based upon a desire that, in the broadest sense of the term, may be identified as erotic. What one does with this insight, I'm not sure. What it does point towards, however, is the fact that men's desires are always already active in their feminist commitments; and while men may also find feminist discourses attractive because they are areas of vital intellectual activity within their professions, or else perhaps routes to their own personal growth, this only serves to further emphasize that it is their desires and interests that are being served.²⁷ A heterosexual man's commitment to feminism can rarely be said to be entirely in women's interests, and this is a reality that men need to reflect upon.

25. Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of the Partial Perspective' *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p. 198.

26. Cited in Stephen Heath, 'Male Feminism' in Jardine and Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism*, p. 6.

27. Nelson, 'Men, Feminism', p. 161.

Similarly, in a powerful and sweeping analysis of why male feminism may be an oxymoron, David Kahane examines the probable limits of men's feminist knowledge and emphasizes that men with feminist commitments may inevitably engage in various forms of self-deception and bad-faith.²⁸ Kahane's central point is that, when men fight patriarchy, they are, to a significant degree, also fighting themselves (and this necessarily includes their male desires and interests). If women are suspicious of men's feminist commitments, it is for this obvious but far from trivial reason. And it is arguable that it is for this, and perhaps no other reason, that the status of men within relation to feminism must remain marginalized, at least in the present society. The degree to which men can transform themselves, and reconfigure their desires and interests in a manner that no longer contributes to women's oppression, is an open question.

Reflexive transformations

In short, any man who takes the concerns of feminism seriously ought to be prepared to accept entry into a state of what the social theorist Anthony Giddens has referred to as chronic reflexivity.²⁹ Indeed, if any man is comfortable with his feminism, I would suggest that there is something seriously amiss. As David Kahane observes:

To the extent that a man understands feminism in more than a shallow way, he faces epistemological uncertainty, ethical discomfort, emotional turmoil, and extensive political demands. It can be difficult to figure out where to start, how to proceed, or when to allow oneself to rest.³⁰

28. David Kahane, 'Male Feminism as Oxymoron' in Digby (ed.), *Men Doing Feminism*, pp. 213-235.

29. See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

30. Kahane, 'Male Feminism as Oxymoron', pp. 230-231.

Men need to realize that feminism is not a tool or strategy that they can pick up, use and then put down. Feminism, as I understand it today, is about personal and social transformation and developing ways of acting and thinking differently in the world. Men who take feminism seriously need to remain reflexive, self-critical and open to criticism by feminists. But they also need to acknowledge that they will be changed by their engagement with feminism, and, in Stephen Heath's words, changed 'beyond any position to fall back on, beyond any foregone security.'³¹ Once this reflexive process of transformation is acknowledged, what profeminist men need to do is to become active in their support of feminism. The best measure of one's feminist consciousness is arguably how one acts and how one's actions affect others. Kahane's analysis of male feminism highlights the fact that men's uncertainty in the face of their feminist commitments can be conveniently immobilizing; and, for the intellectual especially, a desire to find the correct theory, the unambiguous answer before one acts, can result in paralysis. Crucially, though, '[f]eminist knowledge should itself be a goad to action, and is enriched by activist experience.'³² Men who desire to engage with feminist religious discourse/disciplines must be prepared to become involved in the complexities of feminist political/spiritual struggles and transformations.

With regard to the status of male feminist theologians, I recognise, in agreement with Sandra Bartky, 'that many women want and need their own spaces and places; such spaces – and the organizations to which they have given birth – are life enhancing, indeed life saving for many women.'³³ But I equally accept that there

31. Stephen Heath, 'Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory' in Jardine and Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism*, p. 45.

32. Kahane, 'Male Feminism as Oxymoron', p. 231.

33. Sandra Bartky, 'Foreword' in Digby (ed.), *Men Doing Feminism*, p. xii.

is a deeply pragmatic political need for “gender traitors,” and lots of them, to effect a thorough reform of our institutions and a wholesale movement to a new plateau of consciousness.’³⁴ Separatism in many areas of feminism may still be desirable and understandable, but there is also a need for men to become part of the feminist solution to patriarchy, rather than remaining forever configured and overdetermined as the problem. The challenge that any radical feminist religion, discipline or discourse presents to men is for them to transform themselves into “gender traitors” and participate in the dissolution of patriarchy.³⁵ I endeavour, therefore, to work as a theologian while accepting that my sex/gender functions as both a resource and a problem for my theology.

In the final three sections of this Introduction Goddess feminism is situated in relationship to broader feminist, social and religious trends and forces that have exerted a strong influence upon its character and self-understanding. Significant features of the Goddess feminist movement and worldview are identified, influential Goddess feminists and theologians are introduced, and a working definition of Goddess feminism is developed. These sections serve as a vital point of entry into the more detailed philosophical and theological analysis that is to follow.

IV FEMINISM AND THE SACRED

The feminist critique of patriarchal society has in recent years begun to develop a highly reflexive attitude to the category and phenomenon of religion. Although

34. Ibid.

35. Cf. Sandra Harding on men’s relations to radical feminism, ‘Can Men Be Subjects of Feminist Thought?’, pp. 179-183.

feminist interventions and engagements with such religious traditions as Christianity can be traced back to the 1890s,³⁶ it is only since the 1970s that feminism has begun to focus, with growing intensity, upon the patriarchal form and content of the world religions; and, in the process, given voice to the dissatisfaction and discontent of substantial numbers of women within those religions. Feminism can be said to have come to understand that just as society as a whole is androcentric,³⁷ masculinist,³⁸ and phallogentric,³⁹ that is, fundamentally biased in favour of the male, so too are the religious beliefs, practices and traditions that interpenetrate and subtend the socio-cultural environs of patriarchy. The majority of the world's religious narratives, practices and symbols have, upon critical feminist examination, been identified as replete with sexism (not to mention racism, speciesism and other forms of oppressive hierarchical thinking), and can be understood to function as vehicles for the transmission of a specifically patriarchal message.⁴⁰

36. See, for example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, 2 volumes (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895-98) and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church & State* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press [1893] 1980 reprint).

37. For a succinct account of androcentrism, particularly as evidenced in its religious form, see Rosemary Radford Ruether's article 'Androcentrism' in M. Eliade (editor in chief), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 272-275.

38. Masculinist is a term used to refer to practices and values that are normative under patriarchy; that is practices and values that are diametrically opposed to those of feminism.

39. A minimal definition of the sometimes ambiguous term phallogentricism can be located in Elizabeth Grosz's article 'Philosophy' in S. Gunew (ed.), *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 147-174: 'Phallogentricism is a specifically discursive series of procedures, a strategy for collapsing representations of the two sexes into a single model called 'human' or 'man, but which is in fact congruent only with the masculine. It is the universalisation of particular features of masculinity, as if these were truly representative of both sexes', p. 150.

40. Feminist analyses of oppressive hierarchical thinking, and the interrelated nature of 'isms' of domination, are too numerous to adequately catalogue. Two representative examples can be located in the historical and theological writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether and the ecological and philosophical writings of Karen J. Warren.

Patriarchal religious narratives and systems have, many feminists argue, informed and legitimated a worldview and ethos in which the male of the species is both idealized and normative.⁴¹ This, in turn, has supported an array of ethical, legal, political and socio-economic frameworks that both systematically denigrate female value and self-worth and severely curtail the life-options available to women. Feminists have realised that, in the words of Carol Christ, 'religion has such a compelling hold on the deep psyches of so many people, [they] cannot afford to leave it in the hands of the fathers.'⁴²

Feminist responses to the problem of patriarchal religions have been varied. However, broadly speaking, feminists can be understood to have adopted two courses of action and, dependent upon their chosen course, can be identified as either reformists or revolutionaries.⁴³ Reformists are by definition those women who remain within established patriarchal religious traditions and attempt to emphasize and preserve that which is good within them (that is, not tainted by sexism, misogyny etc.), and critique, reconstruct and transform that which is not. They believe that their religious traditions are simply distorted or contaminated by patriarchy and are, in principle, salvageable. Revolutionaries, by contrast, consider the established religious traditions to be either irredeemably patriarchal, or simply not worth the monumental investment of time and energy required to reconstruct them. For these feminists

41. Most feminist writings on religion and theology make this point, an exemplary case is presented by Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

42. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections' in C. Christ and J. Plaskow (eds.) (1992), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco:Harper Colins), p. 274.

patriarchal religions are damaging to women and as such should be abandoned in favour of something better; and if something better does not exist, it should be created.

Despite the usefulness of the reformist/revolutionary distinction, there is considerable variation in the manner in which feminists implement reform or revolt.⁴⁴ Reformists, for example, differ both in the form of their religious commitments and in their methodological approaches to the problem of reform. Thus, certain reformists engage in feminist hermeneutical re-readings of sacred texts, others focus upon praxis and issues of justice and liberation, or endeavour to explicate the historical and philosophical roots of patriarchal religious traditions, while still more seek to appropriate and emphasize the non-sexist, egalitarian and/or woman empowering myths or narratives embedded within their particular tradition(s).⁴⁵ Revolutionaries, in turn, may adopt a thorough going critique of religion and spirituality *in toto*, or, more commonly, may explore and create new forms of spiritual and religious life for themselves - an activity that may be pursued individually or in community. These forms of revolt can be located within what may be termed the feminist spirituality movement; they can on occasion be characterized in terms of post-traditional religious identities (e.g. post-Christian, post-Buddhist, post-Hindu); they are in the West almost inevitably influenced by the spiritual orientations of the New Age Movement and

43. The reformer-revolutionary distinction appears in Christ and Plaskow's *Womanspirit Rising*, but was probably originally coined by Sheila D. Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1974).

44. For a cogent and sympathetic critique of the reformist/revolutionary distinction, see the introduction to Judith Plaskow & Carol Christ (eds), *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

45. A cross-section of these approaches may include the works of such feminist theologians as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Carter Heyward, Sallie McFague, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Judith Plaskow, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Phyllis Trible.

Paganism; and they may find their most developed form within the contemporary Goddess movement.

V THE GODDESS MOVEMENT

The Goddess movement is an umbrella term for a diverse array of spiritual orientations and perspectives whose membership can generally be linked by a shared reverence for female sacrality and goddesses (or a single Goddess) and an associated interest in matriarchal or matrifocal cultures and societies. The movement has grown in parallel with the feminist critique of the patriarchal form and content of the World's religions and is primarily a grass-roots phenomenon that has emerged from the interaction of small generally counter-cultural groups of women discovering and exploring shared spiritual concerns within a nominally safe environment.⁴⁶ The women of the movement can be understood to be involved in the following activities: creating alternative goddess and woman-centred spiritual orientations to the world (and/or re-creating or re-connecting with an ancient pre-patriarchal spirituality); reconceiving the nature of the sacred (and/or reclaiming a distorted or forgotten goddess-centred concept of the sacred); and, exploring new ways (and/or rediscovering old ways) of experiencing, invoking and revering the (female) sacred. These activities are cognate with the principles of spiritual feminist revolt noted above, and are particularly significant in so far as they have typically taken place outside of traditional, predominantly male-dominated, religious institutions and spaces. An overview of the contours and central concerns of the Goddess movement

46. See Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* and King, *Women and Spirituality*.

will be outlined below, before attention is directed towards the more politically active arm of the movement: Goddess feminism.

Empowerment and the Goddess within

The Goddess movement has been shaped by numerous cultural, counter-cultural, religious and socio-economic forces and trends in the late twentieth century, including forms of new social movement and activism (notably the ecology and peace movements), experimental work within the arts and with alternative lifestyle choices, and specifically the political influence of the women's movement and an outpouring of feminist research in anthropology, archaeology, history, religious studies and theology. It is also often characterized as the consequence of 'women trusting their own experience and evolving their spiritual consciousness, power and strength within and among themselves.'⁴⁷ That is, the Goddess movement is often understood explicitly as a product of women's consciousness-raising, empowerment and self-realization. Female deity or divinity is identified with the power, purpose and inner-strength of individual women.

Comprised of women whose experiences have led them to discover and incorporate a sense of female divinity into their lives, the Goddess movement has conjoined an understanding of female sacrality with a powerful sense of female self-worth; and in many respects this modern reclamation of female deity has served to legitimize female power within an environment in which it was previously denigrated. It was this understanding of the value of the Goddess that was highlighted during the earliest years of the movement by Carol Christ, in her article 'Why Women Need the

Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections.’⁴⁸ Christ’s argument was that the symbol of the Goddess possessed wide-ranging psychological and political benefits for women. The Goddess affirmed the legitimacy of female power in a manner similar to that in which the male God-head had served to legitimize male power within patriarchy. And while recognising that there were other important understandings of the reality of the Goddess, Christ focused in this article on the significance of the Goddess as a symbol and inner reality for women’s empowerment and political, psychological and spiritual well-being. This understanding of the meaning of female deity has retained considerable currency within the movement; and, in a recent overview of the contours of the Goddess movement in Britain, Asphodel Long identified the inner reality of the Goddess, and the corresponding affirmation of the sacrality of femaleness, as the definitive characteristic of the movement.⁴⁹ For many women the reality of female deity remains primarily situated within themselves, it concerns their own sense of power, sacrality and self-worth.⁵⁰

Matriarchies and the Goddess in history

In addition to its interest in the inner reality and symbol of the Goddess, the Goddess movement is also deeply committed to a revisionist account of history and pre-history. Although individual interpretations vary, most members of the Goddess movement hold to a common belief that patriarchy is not an historical constant but has a beginning in the past and may also have an end in the future. Furthermore (and more

47. King, *Women and Spirituality*, p. 115.

48. Christ, ‘Why Women Need the Goddess’.

49. Long, ‘The Goddess Movement in Britain Today’, pp. 14-15.

50. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 141-3.

significantly), prior to the development of patriarchy there existed a social and religious order that was woman-centred, or at minimum egalitarian with regard to relations between the sexes, goddess worshipping, ecological, peaceful and universal. This socio-religious order, alternatively defined as matriarchal, matrifocal, matristic or gylanic, constituted a form of “golden-age” or prelapsarian world in which there existed none of the hierarchical structures and practices of domination that constitute the patriarchal status quo today.⁵¹ This period is typically posited as stretching back to the beginnings of human cultural organization (70-30,000 BCE.) and is said to have begun to crumble only with the shift towards a patriarchal paradigm (3,000-2,000 BCE). It is taken by most women in the Goddess movement as evidence that goddess worship was the original religion of the world, that personal, political and social relations between the sexes can be dramatically improved, and that patriarchy is an historical aberration.

Support for the pre-patriarchal age is often linked to the writings of J. J. Bachofen in the 19th century and Robert Briffault in the early 20th century, although the primary evidence for the existence of ancient matriarchies is derived from the work of academics and researchers working within the past thirty years.⁵² Prompted

51. There is some disagreement concerning both the terminology used to describe the pre-patriarchal age and also the exact nature of the socio-religious organization that was present at that time. For some in the Goddess movement, matriarchy does imply a reversal of father-rule with mother-rule. However, there are many other descriptions of the pre-patriarchal age. Terms such as matrilineal, matrifocal, matristic and gylanic societies are often used by members of the Goddess movement to indicate that there was no simple reversal of power; rather society was structured according to very different egalitarian, peaceful, life-affirming principles and values.

52. J. J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother-Right: Selected Writings*, edited by Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967 [1870]); Robert Briffault, *The Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions*, three volumes (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952 [1927]).

in part by a feminist questioning of the received academic canon, several lines of recent research have served to re-evaluate the status of both goddesses and women within the societies of the distant past. Archaeologists and historians such as Marija Gimbutas, Merlin Stone and, more recently, Riane Eisler and Cristina Biaggi, have developed alternative readings of the nature of civilization, goddesses and gender relations in pre-history.⁵³ These developments have, in turn, been explored further in what may be termed matriarchy study groups and have been taken up by many within the Goddess movement as a form of sacred history or article of faith.⁵⁴

It is important to note that the matriarchy thesis, in most of its recent formulations, has been subjected to considerable criticism by the mainstream academy. For many researchers and commentators the methodologies that underpin the matriarchy thesis are viewed as highly suspect, while for others the conclusions are considered to be either based upon questionable assumptions or else are understood to be distorted by a feminist ideology and constitute a form of feminist religious fundamentalism or simple-minded wishful thinking.⁵⁵ These objections have in turn

53. Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991); *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe - 7000-3000 b.c* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974); *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989); Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1978); *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood* (Montpelier, Vermont: New Sibylline Books, 1979); Cristina Biaggi, *Habitations of the Great Goddess* (Knowledge, Ideas & Trends Inc., 1994).

54. For a concise overview of some of the theories of matriarchy and patriarchy, see Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 50-69; Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 162-170; Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, pp. 75-96; and also, Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

55. Sally Binford, 'Are Goddesses and Matriarchies Merely Figments of the Feminist Imagination' in C. Spretnak (ed.), *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement* (New York: Anchor Press, 1982); Margaret Conkey and Ruth Tringham, 'Archaeology and the Goddess: Exploring the Contours of Feminist Archaeology,' in A. Stewart and D. Stanton (eds), *Feminisms in the Academy: Rethinking the Disciplines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 199 - 247; Ronald Hutton, 'The Discovery of the Modern Goddess' in Pearson, Roberts and Samuels

been counter-critiqued as attempts to maintain the patriarchal status quo, or have been questioned with regard to the issue of what exactly it is that counts as evidence (i.e. the central problem of studying pre-history is that it is pre-literate, and thus not textually accessible, and, as in so many areas of the academy, it is the written word that is given authority).⁵⁶ The debate at present remains unresolved, and it is unlikely to be resolved given the multiple interpretations of the evidence that are available. What is significant, however, is that the matriarchy thesis has considerable mythopoetic value for the Goddess movement: it affirms that the world was not always distorted by patriarchy, it contributes moral meaning to the state of the world today, and it aids in an imaginative revisioning of a better goddess-centred future.⁵⁷

(eds), *Nature Religion Today*, pp. 89-100; Pam Lunn, 'Do Women Need the GODDESS? Some Phenomenological and Sociological Reflections', *Feminist Theology*, no. 4, September 1993, pp. 17-38; Lynn Meskell, 'Goddesses, Gimbutas and "New Age" Archaeology,' *Antiquity*, no. 69, 1995, pp. 74-86; Lotte Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Joan B. Townsend, 'The Goddess: Fact, Fallacy, and Revitalization Movement' in Larry W. Hurtado, (ed.), *Goddesses in Religion and Modern Debate* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); Ruth Tringham, 'Review of "Civilization of the Goddess",' *American Anthropologist*, no. 95, 1993, pp. 196-7. The most sustained critique of the Goddess movement's attitude to ancient matriarchies is Cynthia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000). See also a critique of Eller's argument by Kristy Coleman, 'Matriarchy and Myth', *Religion*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2001, pp. 247-263, Cynthia Eller's 'Response', pp. 265-270 and Coleman's 'Reply', pp. 271-273.

56. Carol Christ provides an account of the resistance to a Goddess history in *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 70-88. John Hinnell's provides a useful introduction to the authority of texts, and also related issues of media-blindness, in the academic study of religion in U. King (ed.), *Turning Points in Religious Studies: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Parrinder* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990).

57. Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, pp. 95-96; Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 89; Mary Jo Weaver, 'Who is the Goddess and Where Does She Get Us?', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 5, no. 1, Spring 1989, pp. 61-64.

The New Age Movement

Having identified its commitment to a largely inaccessible pre-historic socio-religious order, it is important to note that the Goddess movement shares affinities with two late-twentieth century religious movements: the New Age and Paganism. Partly defined in the present by the influence of these larger and more diffuse spiritualities, it is necessary to say a little about the contribution that each makes to the current shape of the Goddess movement. Each of these movements has a far-reaching effect upon the way in which the Goddess movement constructs its theological understanding of the world.

The New Age movement can, despite the widely disputed meaning of the term, be productively interpreted by reference to Paul Heelas' typology as a form of Self-spirituality.⁵⁸ That is, the New Age movement encompasses a spiritual orientation that repeatedly emphasizes themes relating to the divinity/sacrality of the self, self-help and self-improvement, self-mastery and self-transformation. In the New Age movement each individual is typically understood to be on a form of personal journey or spiritual quest towards becoming the best that they can be; each individual is already in a sense divine, a vessel of incredible power and potential (in Paul Heelas' terminology we are all 'Gods and Goddesses in exile'), and the religious task that every person faces is to awaken or discover that divinity, that is, their physical,

58. Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Alternative, although not contradictory, interpretations of the New Age are provided by Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the American Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

psychic and spiritual potential.⁵⁹ While people's current lives are typically conceived and experienced by members of the New Age movement as dysfunctional and not working, it is also considered to be within each person's power to change that situation.⁶⁰ Each person can heal themselves, transcend and transform themselves, and ultimately determine their own reality and reshape their world. Arguably the central concept or the *lingua franca* of the New Age is transformation, and it is the human individual or self that is the primary vehicle and subject of transformation. Links to traditional religious authorities are jettisoned by members of the New Age Movement and authority is understood to be something that rests within the hands, or rather the power and divinity, of each individual. Each person must discover and construct their own path towards spiritual and self-transformation (i.e. they must participate in what some religious commentators have referred to as a "do it yourself spirituality") and under the heading of New Age phenomena there exists a remarkably broad and diverse range of resources that each individual may draw upon.⁶¹

59. Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, pp. 19-20.

60. Ibid., pp. 18-19.

61. Consider, for example, a categorization of New Age materials from the *The New Age Catalogue: Access to Information and Resources*. Eight headings are utilized in the catalogue, each of which encompasses a broad range of concerns and practices: (1) intuitive development/channelling, this includes such topics as channelling, psychic functioning, chakras/auras, crystals, divination, numerology, astrology, tarot, palmistry, dowsing, oracles and the I Ching; (2) create your own reality/transformational journeys, self-help, subliminal programming, meditation, dream work, astral projection/OOBE, brain-mind technology, inspiration, creativity; (3) transitions/births, past life regression, near death experiences and reincarnation; (4) Spirituality, mystics and masters, esoterica and magical traditions, shamanism, Native American spirituality, women's spirituality, witchcraft and Earth religions; (5) holistic healing and health, oriental medicines, homeopathy, herbology and nutrition; (6) bodywork/movement, various forms of exercise, dance, yoga, sports and lifestyle; (7) new lifestyles/communities, various topics of literature, music, art, economics and alternative lifestyles options; (8) the Planet/planetary visions, this includes what may be called planetary visionaries, global concerns, Gaia theory and cosmology, earth spirits, ancient mysteries and UFOlogy and extraterrestrial life.

Not surprisingly, the New Age movement informs and is initially attractive to members of the Goddess movement for a number of reasons. First, the New Age movement assumes that the self is sacred (which necessarily includes female selves); an assumption that supports the notion of female divinity as an inner reality for all women. Second, the New Age movement incorporates a rhetoric of self-actualization or self-empowerment; an orientation that is cognate with the feminist principles held and promoted by many women within the Goddess movement. Third, the New Age Movement's rejection of external religious authorities and its focus upon the authority of the self closely parallels the Goddess movement's rejection of patriarchal religious authorities and its focus upon women's spiritual experiences as self-validating. That is, in a similar manner to the New Age movement, the Goddess movement actively supports and promotes the idea that women should be free to discover their own spirituality. Fourth, the Goddess movement draws upon many resources that are explicitly identified as New Age in character. One may readily find women in the Goddess movement tapping into such diverse "New Age" resources as esoterica, mystery traditions, magical theories and practices; astrology, dream interpretation, tarot reading, and other divinatory techniques; shamanism and meditation; past life regression; Eastern theories of karma and reincarnation; psychic healing; various self-help practices and programmes;⁶² and, perhaps most notably, psychotherapeutic

62. One example of self-help programmes may be located in the way in which Goddess spiritualities have been linked with an improved sex life. See, Z. Budapest, *Goddess in the Bedroom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); Sirona Knight, *Greenfire: Making Love With the Goddess* (St Paul, MN.: Llewellyn Publications, 1995) and *Moonflower: Erotic Dreaming With the Goddess* (St Paul, MN.: Llewellyn Publications, 1995); Linda E. Savage, *Reclaiming Goddess Sexuality: The Power of the Feminine Way* (Hay House Inc., 1999).

theories and Jungian psychology.⁶³ Indeed, the Goddess movement in its entirety is often identified as simply an aspect or sub-category of the New Age movement. It is only when one reflects upon the two movement's attitudes towards deity, femaleness, politics and nature that one is able to discern significant differences in their spiritual aims and values.

It should be affirmed that while conceiving, experiencing and valuing themselves as inherently sacred, members of the Goddess movement are at least equally concerned with experiencing, valuing and acting as if the Earth, its human and non-human inhabitants, and the whole of nature is sacred and in need of moral and religious consideration, respect and reverence. In contrast with the New Age movement, which is concerned primarily with the sacrality, salvation and transformation of the self (whether this is realised through enlightenment, astrological or esoteric knowledge, magical power, self-programming and/or other psychological/spiritual techniques), members of the Goddess movement consider the whole of nature as in some sense divine and in need of a range of religious (and often also political) attitudes and practices. The human self is not the only, or even the primary, locus or instantiation of divinity in the Goddess movement.

Furthermore, many members of the Goddess movement have identified and actively critiqued the New Age movement as utilising and emphasising ideas and themes that are central to patriarchal religions (e.g. an emphasis upon light, mind/spirit

63. Notable Jungian based or inspired approaches to the Goddess include Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963); Sylvia Brinton Perera, *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981); Edward C. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess* (New York: Continuum [1982] 1997); Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the*

and transcendence to the detriment of darkness, matter and immanence; a search or quest for perfection, control and mastery rather than an engagement with ambiguity, finitude and limitation; and an exaltation of individual striving rather than communal work and political action). This New Age involvement with patriarchal religious ideas and themes is viewed as deeply problematic by many members of the Goddess movement and is an important example of how the two movements can be distinguished and separated from one another. Notably, members of the Goddess movement have opposed New Age perspectives and practices on the grounds of their spiritual imperialism and lack of respect for other traditions,⁶⁴ their complicity and participation in an unjust and exploitative capitalist economy,⁶⁵ and a range of other explicitly feminist, moral and religious issues.⁶⁶ While the New Age movement encompasses a diverse array of psychological, spiritual and religious resources,

Goddess: Evolution of an Image (London: Viking Arkana, 1991); and Clarrisa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (London: Rider, 1993).

64. *The journal of radical feminist spirituality, magic and the goddess*, entitled *From the Flames*, grew from the 'Challenging New Age Patriarchy' conference, Malvern, September 1990. The journal has regularly featured articles critiquing the patriarchal content of the New Age, in addition to addressing issues of spiritual imperialism and cultural theft; e.g. 'How to Survive an Attack of New Age Ideology - Deciphering New Age Doublespeak', issue 1, Spring 1991, pp. 26-29, 'For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life', issue 2, Summer 1991, pp. 4-6 and 'Inventing Our Own Spirituality', issue 7, Autumn 1992, pp. 19-22.

65. Joanne Pearson draws attention to the profit making focus of the New Age in her paper 'Assumed Affinities: Wicca and New Age' in Pearson, Roberts and Samuels (eds), *Nature Religion Today*, pp. 55-56. She, in turn, is reiterating Margot Adler's comment that the difference between the Paganism and the New Age is the decimal point, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 420. Pagan (and Goddess) workshops, as non-profit making, cost approximately a tenth of those put on by the New Age. It is notable that Marsha Hewitt draws attention to class and wealth issues within the Goddess movement itself in her article, 'Cyborgs, Drag Queens, and Goddesses: Emanicpatory-Regressive paths in Feminist Theory', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 5/2, 1993, pp. 134-154 and, specifically, 150-151.

66. The most sustained assault on the New Age from within the Goddess movement comes in the form of Monica Sjoo's *New Age & Armageddon: The Goddess or the Gurus? Towards a Feminist Vision of the Future* (London: The Women's Press, 1992). See also, Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, pp. 223-224, 280-281 and Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 124-5, 133-4, 144, 166. Christ notes, '[s]pell casting, tarot card reading, and other forms of

resources that are admittedly attractive to many women in the Goddess movement, the New Age is often critiqued by members of the Goddess movement because it is insensitive to oppressive political realities and may reproduce patriarchal values (albeit in an eclectic and syncretic manner). The New Age movement is understood to be capable of damaging and ultimately overwhelming both the Goddess and feminist/women's spirituality movements through its focus upon the self rather than the world. As one member of the Goddess movement noted recently:

Slowly over the years, as I have seen a rise in goddess consciousness and a growth in the wimmin's spirituality movement, I have also seen a decline in radicalism. Somehow, and it happened gradually, the re-emerging goddess has been co-opted into the new 'growth movement'. She has been 'prettied up', tamed and made acceptable. Instead of being something elementally challenging, our spirituality has been subtly absorbed. Instead of being dangerous it has become cosy.⁶⁷

In a telling summary of the way in which the New Age participates in patriarchal power-relations, by not questioning their economic and material realities, she adds that for the New Age movement the 'Goddess is good business.'⁶⁸ This is a commodification and taming of the Goddess that is, for many women in the Goddess movement, wholly unacceptable. It is felt necessary to move beyond the New Age movement's political naivety, spiritual eclecticism and individualism; to embrace an elementally challenging, world-affirming and politically-engaged spirituality. It is this emphasis that in many ways defines the more politically active and radical arm of the Goddess movement: Goddess feminism, and it is this emphasis that identifies the

divination often were, for me, yet another head-trip, a very American way of trying to control reality and achieve individual desire', p. 42.

67. 'Despair and Empowerment', *From the Flames*, issue 1, Spring 1991, p. 4.

68. *Ibid.*, p.5.

movement more closely with aspects of another late-twentieth century religious movement: Paganism.

Paganism, the Craft and Wicca

The Goddess movement's practical connections and genealogical links with the Pagan community are particularly well developed and charted. Despite there being certain differences between the two groups' favoured mythologies, forms of political commitment and spiritual praxis, both affirm the immanence of the sacred in nature. Both tend to be drawn towards environmentalism, nature mysticism and seasonal celebrations. Both revere the sacred nature of femaleness as Goddess, although typically many Pagans also revere a male principle alongside the female in a manner that most members of the Goddess movement do not.⁶⁹ Furthermore, it is notable that the Goddess movement has absorbed and defined itself in relation to aspects of the Wiccan and Craft traditions of Paganism (nominally under the rubric of feminist Witchcraft) and frequently identifies the history of witchcraft as being of considerable relevance to both the contemporary feminist and Goddess movements.⁷⁰

For many academics and students of religion modern witchcraft is understood as a post-World War II phenomenon, a specifically new religious movement, while for others witchcraft is viewed, in part at least, as the continuation of a nature and mystery

69. See Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*; Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman (eds), *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Thorsons, 1996); Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London: Hurst, 1997); Pearson, Roberts and Samuels (eds), *Nature Religion Today*; Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 49-61.

70. See Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, pp. 142-147; King, *Women and Spirituality*, pp. 127-133; Starhawk, 'Witchcraft and Women's Culture' in Christ & Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising*, pp. 259-268.

religion that was practiced in pre-history (a survival of the religion practiced in the pre-patriarchal age advocated by the Goddess movement).⁷¹ However, even if origins are disputed, today witchcraft is a widespread cultural and religious phenomenon in the West and constitutes perhaps the most influential and well-developed system of magico-religious ideas and practices to be found at work within the Goddess movement. The popularisation of the idea of an “Old religion” or “Witch-cult” by Gerald Gardner⁷² (coupled with Doreen Valiente’s pro-Goddess influence upon Gardner’s work),⁷³ the more recent and prolific writings of such practicing Wiccans as Vivianne Crowley,⁷⁴ Scott Cunningham⁷⁵ and Janet and Stewart Farrar,⁷⁶ plus the increasing cultural engagement with the image of the witch from the 1980s onwards, have all transformed witchcraft into a spiritual option that is accessible and open to a wide (albeit predominantly middle class, Euro-American) audience; an option that many women (and some men) with a reverence for nature and goddesses have found to be highly compatible with their spiritual needs. The Goddess movement is

71. See Vivianne Crowley, ‘Wicca as Nature Religion’ in Pearson, Roberts and Samuels (eds), *Nature Religion Today*; Rosemary Ellen Guiley, ‘Witchcraft as Goddess Worship’ in Larrington (ed.), *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, pp. 411-424.

72. Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (New York: Magickal Childe Publishing, 1954); *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (New York: Magickal Childe, 1982 [1959]).

73. Doreen Valiente, *An ABC of Witchcraft Past and Present* (London: Robert Hale, [1973] 1986); *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* (Custer, WA.: Phoenix, 1978); *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (Custer, WA: Phoenix, 1989).

74. Vivianne Crowley, *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Millenium* (London: Thorsons, [1989] 1996); ‘Priestess and Witch’ in Caitlin Matthews (ed.), *Voices of the Goddess: A Chorus of Sibyls* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1990).

75. Scott Cunningham, *The Truth About Witchcraft Today* (St Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 1988); *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (St Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 1988).

76. Janet and Stewart Farrar, *Eight Sabbats for Witches* (London: Robert Hale, [1981] 1989); *The Witches’ Way: Principles, Rituals and Beliefs of Modern Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale, 1984); *The Witches’ Goddess* (Custer, Wash.: Phoenix, 1987); *Spells and How They Work* (Custer, Wash.: Phoenix, 1990); *A Witches’ Bible Compleat* (New York; Magickal Childe, 1991).

comprised of many women who readily identify themselves as Pagans, Wiccans/witches and/or Priestesses of the Craft, including such media figures as Hungarian-American Priestess Zsuzsanna Budapest,⁷⁷ American attorney and Wiccan Phyllis Curott,⁷⁸ Celtic-British Priestess Shan Jayran⁷⁹ and the Jewish-American Wiccan activist Starhawk.⁸⁰ The influence of these figures upon the religious worldview, self-understanding and theology of the contemporary Goddess movement is far-reaching.

Under increased academic scrutiny in recent years, affinities between the worldviews of modern Pagans (and particularly Wiccans) and the Goddess movement have begun to be explored in some depth. Thus it can be noted that the Goddess movement has found in Paganism a shared commitment to a nature or earth-centred spirituality and praxis, characterised by the religious themes of animism, pantheism and polytheism, while in Wicca it has found the freedom and resources to discover and explore magical practices, nature mysticism and ritual within an often explicitly

77. Budapest is founder of The Susan B. Anthony Coven and author of *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* (London: Robert Hale Ltd, 1990 [1980]); *The Grandmother of Time: A Women's Book of Celebrations, Spells, and Sacred Objects for Every Month of the Year* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); *Grandmother Moon* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); *Goddess in the Bedroom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); *The Goddess in the Office: A Personal Energy Guide for the Spiritual Warrior at Work* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

78. Phyllis Curott, *The Book of Shadows: A Modern Woman's Journey into the Wisdom of Witchcraft and the Magic of the Goddess* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999).

79. Shan Jayran is Priestess of the House of the Goddess in London, and author of *Circlework, A DIY Handbook for Working Ritual, Psychology and Magic* (House of the Goddess, 1994).

80. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, [1979] 1989); *Dreaming the Dark, Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power and Mystery* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (London: Thorsons, 1993); Starhawk, Anne Hill and Diane Baker, *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998).

woman-centred context.⁸¹ One can also discern in the Goddess movement's interchange with Paganism a shift in emphasis away from the inner or psychological reality of female divinity towards an understanding of a female deity that is embodied in nature. Rather than accepting the politically passive spiritualities of the New Age, and their corresponding emphasis upon the individual and self, many in the Goddess movement have begun to connect political commitments and realities to a deity that is immanent in (or equivalent to) the whole of nature; a shift that may also be interpreted in terms of a change from philosophical non-realism towards realism.⁸² It is this shift in emphasis that is the central concern of this thesis.

While recognizing that the Goddess movement encompasses orientations and perspectives that remain anti or non-feminist, or disavow a political dimension, or else are concerned primarily with goddesses as an inner or psychic reality (archetypes, metaphors, symbols, useful fictions etc.), this thesis is concerned primarily with that part of the movement which is both political and working with a realist account of deity. This part of the movement is, I contend, highly significant: first, because it is in dialogue with feminist concerns and theories (and thus tapping in to a radically politicized and critical account of human being-in-the-world); second, because it is influential and growing (and therefore indicative of certain religious trends); third, because it is readily accessible in text form (and thus open to discourse and

81. Joanne Pearson has made a case that modern Paganism emerged from Wicca and that the two spiritualities have now gone their separate ways ('Method and Theory in the Study of Pagan Religions' paper given at the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies Conference, University of Derby, 13th April 1999).

82. For a comprehensive consideration of this topic, see Melissa Raphael, 'Monotheism in Contemporary Goddess Religion: A Betrayal of Early Theological Non-Realism?' in Deborah Sawyer and Diane Colliers (eds), *Is There A Future for Feminist Theology?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

philosophical analysis); and, fourth, because it is working with recurrent themes and exhibits a high level of coherence. All of these factors identify this part of the movement as representative of an emergent religious tradition rather than a movement: a distinctive form of radical feminist religious revolt that is in need of identification and study.

VI GODDESS FEMINISM

Questions of definition

Today the Goddess movement manifests itself in a number of organizational and networking structures which inevitably interconnect with those of other movements.⁸³

These networks generate courses, gatherings, holidays, pilgrimages and workshops, produce magazines and internet sites,⁸⁴ but possess no centralised or overarching institutional structure.⁸⁵ The Goddess movement includes such different women's perspectives as those of Carol Christ,⁸⁶ Deanna Conway,⁸⁷ Asphodel Long,⁸⁸ Caitlin

83. Goddess oriented networks, organizations and temples include, in the United States, The Covenant of the Goddess and Reclaiming, in the United Kingdom the House of the Goddess, and worldwide the Fellowship of Isis.

84. *WomanSpirit, Goddessing Regenerated, From the Flames, Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network, Arachne.*

85. In the U.S. legal recognition (with tax benefits) and training courses can be understood to be raising questions of institutional power and traditionalization. See Wendy Griffin, 'Diana's Daughters: Postmodern Priestessing in America', paper given at the colloquium 'Ambivalent Goddesses: An Exploration of the Current State of the Study of Goddesses and Goddess Spirituality', King Alfred's College of Higher Education, Winchester, 26th March 1997.

86. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess'; *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1987); *Odyssey of the Goddess* (New York: Continuum, 1995); *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1997).

87. D. J. Conway, *Maiden, Mother, Crone: The Myth & Reality of the Triple Goddess* (St Paul: MN: Llewlllyn Publications, 1996).

88. Asphodel Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: The Search for the Female in Deity* (London: The Woman's Press, 1992); 'The Goddess Movement in Britain Today,' *Feminist*

Matthews,⁸⁹ Teresa Moorey,⁹⁰ Naomi Ozaniec⁹¹ Monica Sjöo and Barbara Mor,⁹² and Donna Wilshire,⁹³ in addition to those women mentioned in the preceding section. This, however, remains a far from representative sample as it includes only published authors and completely ignores the grass-roots level of the movement. How, therefore, can one begin to define and focus upon a sub-category of the movement called Goddess feminism? Upon which religious phenomena is such an enquiry to focus? Whose perspectives are to be considered or privileged? And is this reification either tenable or warranted?

One solution to the problem of categorizing and focusing upon the Goddess feminist aspect of the Goddess movement can be located in George Lakoff's development of prototype theory.⁹⁴ It is Lakoff's general thesis that category membership is not an all or nothing affair, it is rather a matter of degree and family resemblance, and within such a model certain members of a particular category (such as Goddess feminism) will be more prototypical than others. Members of a category may be related to one another while individually sharing few characteristics or properties with one another. Although the selection and measurement of degrees of prototypicality may remain a matter requiring the application of critical judgement,

Theology, no. 5, January 1994, pp. 11-39; 'The One and the Many: The Great Goddess Revisited', *Feminist Theology*, no. 15, May 1997, pp. 13-29.

89. Caitlin Matthews, *The Elements of the Goddess* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1989); (ed.), *Voices of the Goddess: A Chorus of Sibyls* (Wellinborough: The Aquarian Press, 1990); *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom* (London: The Aquarian Press, 1992).

90. Teresa Moorey, *The Goddess: a beginners guide* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997).

91. Naomi Ozaniec, *Daughter of the Goddess* (London: Aquarian, 1993).

92. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*; Monica Sjöo, *New Age & Armageddon: The Goddess or the Gurus?*

93. Donna Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone: Myths and Mysteries of the Triple Goddess* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1994).

there are normally sufficient insider and outsider understandings of social and religious categories to make this a feasible undertaking. The primary task is to select a number of characteristics that may constitute a prototype.

It is noteworthy that Cynthia Eller adopts a similar approach to Lakoff's when defining spiritual feminism.⁹⁵ She notes that 'it is most helpful to think of feminist spirituality as a cluster of characteristics, and that any woman revealing some proportion of those characteristics counts as a spiritual feminist.'⁹⁶ The characteristics that she identifies as significant are 'valuing women's empowerment, practicing ritual and/or magic, revering nature, using the feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis, and espousing the revisionist version of Western history favoured by the movement.' Furthermore, she counts any woman who exhibits three or more of these characteristics as a spiritual feminist; in addition to 'any woman who sincerely believes herself to be one, whatever she may believe or practice.'⁹⁷ The working definition of Goddess feminism that I intend to use in this enquiry is similar to the one developed by Eller, although I will focus primarily upon those women who exhibit all of the characteristics that I identify below.

Goddess feminism: a working definition

In attempting to define Goddess feminism, I identify four characteristics as prototypical. These characteristics can be summarized in terms of the concepts or

94. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

95. Eller, in turn, is drawing upon Jonathan Z. Smith's taxonomies of religion from *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), pp. 2-4.

96. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 6.

categories of deity, femaleness, nature and politics. By this definition, Goddess feminism is comprised of those women (and some men) who relate to these concepts in a similar way. And, while I am not asserting that the individual beliefs, commitments and practices of these women are the same (or necessarily ought to be), I am indicating that for Goddess feminists these concepts are both individually meaningful and also significantly interrelated. That is, Goddess feminists are those women for whom these concepts are necessarily interrelated and have a direct bearing upon their spiritual lives and theologies. I shall endeavour to explain.

First, Goddess feminists possess a concept of deity. This concept of deity may seemingly confound many theological categories (e.g. monotheism and polytheism), may receive literally hundreds of epithets and names (Aphrodite, Astarte, Cerridwen, Isis, Kali, Tara etc.), and may be evoked, invoked and ritually revered in a diverse number of ways (e.g. circle work, magic, shamanic dance). Nonetheless, the Goddess feminist concept of deity draws upon and is informed by the concepts of femaleness, nature and politics. That is, deity is conceived in female terms (Goddess) and may be understood to exhibit a special relationship to human and other forms of femaleness. Deity is literally understood to be nature (i.e. Goddess/Nature), wherein nature is conceived as all that exists. Deity is political, that is, relevant to and informed by human worldly praxis; and for Goddess feminists, the personal, the political and the spiritual are understood to be necessarily and intimately entwined with one another.⁹⁸

97. Ibid.

98. Emily Culpepper, 'The Spiritual, Political Journey of a Feminist Freethinker' in P. M. Cooley et al. (eds), *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 146.

At minimum, Goddess feminists must possess some concept of deity, and this concept must be delineated by reference to the concepts noted above.

Second, Goddess feminists emphasize the importance of the category of femaleness. This emphasis is political: femaleness is understood to have been devalued and distorted by patriarchal power-relations, conceptual frameworks and practices, and is served by feminism (a political orientation to the world which is committed to the ongoing liberation of the female). Femaleness is spiritual/divine, deity is conceived and experienced as female, and is inseparable from the natural world: metaphoric, ontological and political connections and continuities between femaleness and nature are affirmed, nature is conceived as in some sense a female environment or reality.

Third, nature is conceived as sacred (nature is the Goddess), nature is in a significant sense female (e.g. conceived as a birthing event, or analogous to a 'Mother'), nature is political (everything is interconnected; nature is not passive or separable from cultural, economic and social realities). Nature, despite the contested and multiple meanings of the term in everyday usage, is understood to be in part constituted by concepts of deity, femaleness and the political in Goddess feminist discourse.

Fourth, Goddess feminism is informed by political considerations. The political is associated with human relations within and towards the world and the transformation of a destructive and oppressive patriarchal present into a life-affirming and peaceful feminist future. The political is a catchword for collective feminist action and worldly praxis. A concept of politics informs all Goddess feminist projects

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indicative of areas of coherence and convergence; areas that, in turn, are in need of sustained examination because they indicate emergent concepts and the internal logic of the movement. This research offers a plausible reading of several of the positions at work within Goddess feminism.

Goddess feminist resources

Three Goddess feminists are focused upon in this project, although a significant number of secondary theological resources and voices are also drawn upon. Each of these women has been involved with the Goddess movement for over twenty years, each has exerted considerable influence upon the movement's self-understanding, and each has incorporated the concepts of deity, femaleness, nature and politics into their spiritualities and theologies. These feminist theologians are Carol Christ, Monica Sjöö (with Barbara Mor) and Starhawk. Secondary theological perspectives are provided by, among others, Donna Wilshire, Zsuzsanna Budapest and Charlene Spretnak.

Carol Christ is perhaps the only theologian to have actively worked within the academy as a full-time career, and to a large extent her theological writings reflect this fact. Her theological position has developed over nearly three decades and can be traced from an influential and cogent appraisal of the value of the inner reality and symbol of the Goddess, through a deeply personal and experiential form of narrative theology (in which her relationship to the Goddess as Aphrodite is closely interwoven with and expressed through her life in Crete and Greece), and finds its most complete articulation today in her work of systematic theology: *Rebirth of the Goddess*. Christ is attentive to many of the key themes at work within the Goddess movement, is

99. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 4.

herself committed to feminism, and also supports a realist account of the Goddess. Her theology is perhaps unique in so far as it often engages strongly with academic theology and also attempts to draw upon theological resources in order to illuminate theological issues (e.g. Martin Buber's 'I-thou' relationship, Paul Tillich's 'ground of being', and, most recently, Charles Hartshorne's process theological frameworks). She has argued that theology needs to move beyond theological categories and concepts, although it remains uncertain that she entirely succeeds in doing so.

Monica Sjöö is an artist whose Goddess spirituality has manifested itself directly in both her work as an artist and her political activism as a feminist. Since the late 1960s Sjöö has produced a wide range of visionary goddess and matriarchal paintings and has been involved with the peace, women's and emergent Goddess movements for a similar span of time. In 1975 she produced a pamphlet outlining the basis of her theological position, essentially her understanding of the Goddess and how this was the foundation of her work, and subsequently this was greatly expanded upon by the poet Barbara Mor in the collaborative theological project *The Great Cosmic Mother*. In *The Great Cosmic Mother* Sjöö and Mor combine mythical, historical and archaeological evidence with biological and anthropological resources and arguments in an effort to illuminate both the matriarchal past and the femaleness of the sacred.¹⁰⁰ Sjöö's theological perspective identifies Goddess worship as the first religion of the earth, affirms a strong version of the matriarchy thesis, and promotes a realist understanding of the Goddess as the divine matrix/mother of the universe. Sjöö is content to call herself a Pagan and has also been one of the fiercest critics of the patriarchal content of the New Age movement.

Starhawk is perhaps one of the most famous and well publicised figures in the Goddess movement. She has in the past twenty five years combined political activism (ecological, feminist and peace), Goddess worship, Wicca and Paganism, with writing and a busy schedule of lecturing and teaching. Her theological position can be shown to have developed from a primarily Wiccan (albeit also feminist) understanding of the Goddess in the late seventies, to a more thoroughly ecumenical, inclusive and politicized standpoint today. Her activities assume that the Goddess is immanent and manifest in nature and her theological writings can be read as a sustained attempt to relate politics, praxis and ritual directly to this understanding of deity and nature. At present Starhawk divides her time between working with the San Francisco Pagan community, specifically the Reclaiming Collective, which offers classes, workshops and public rituals in the Goddess tradition, and practicing permaculture on a forty-acre ranch. Although interested in the matriarchal past and systematic theological speculation, her work is predominantly directed towards creating a Goddess feminist praxis for the future; an emphasis that is reflected in her recent collaborative works on raising children in Goddess traditions, developing resources and rituals for coping with death and dying, and her writing of a Goddess-centred science fiction novel.

All of the above women, despite their different backgrounds and entry points into Goddess feminism, are working with similar understandings of the Goddess. And while theology is a young discourse, a discourse that is only beginning to discover its own sense of identity, it is possible to begin to discern recurrent organizing principles, regulative ideas and ultimate concerns within its boundaries, principles, ideas and concerns that are indicative of a common view of the nature of reality. The present

100. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 9.

research is explicitly concerned with exploring Goddess feminism's conceptual terrain as a means of commenting upon the content, coherence, contours and trajectory of a specifically metaphysical worldview. It is, thereby, an endeavour that also requires an expanded understanding of the nature and meaning of theology.

CHAPTER 1

THEALOGY AND METAPHYSICS

I THE NATURE AND TASKS OF THEALOGY

Carol Christ, in what may be one of the first self-conscious steps towards developing a systematic thealogy, has affirmed that ‘the binary oppositions of traditional theology, including transcendence-immanence, theism-pantheism, and monotheism-polytheism, do not accurately describe the meaning of the Goddess.’¹⁰² Her suggestion is that thealogy must develop alternative ways of thinking, alternative conceptual tools, and alternative methodologies to those that have been deployed by traditional, patriarchal theology. And, given that thealogy is an emergent discourse, arising primarily in a grass-roots fashion from a diverse array of non-traditional sources, one may reasonably argue that different conceptual, discursive and methodological approaches are inevitable. One need only reflect upon the contortions that modern theology is going through as it encounters critical theory, deconstruction, and the various challenges of globalization, postmodernization, and the cultural logic of late capitalism, to conclude that aporias, paradigm-shifts and ruptures in human reflection on the sacred are probably inescapable.¹⁰³ Thealogy may indeed need to be different; particularly in so far as it is arguably premised upon a feminist opposition to the

102. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 101.

103. Modern/postmodern shifts in human reflection on the sacred can be located in the coexistence of diverse theological voices such as Liberation, Womanist and Mujerista theologies, Holocaust theologies, Postliberal theologies, Creation Spiritualities, and The Sea of Faith movement.

perceived procedural and substantive errors of patriarchal theologies in the past. The question then arises: to what degree is this possible?

Patriarchal theology, in its Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and other tradition-based forms, is not, after all, reducible to a common methodology. That is, methodological approaches to understanding the patriarchal God-head (Father, Logos or Absolute), and his relationship to the world and humanity, have taken numerous, often highly diverse forms throughout human history. While feminism may rightly critique the androcentric, masculinist and phallogocentric biases inherent in the various religious traditions, the targeting of specific methods and reflective practices is somewhat more difficult. The degree to which theology may be able to completely separate itself from patriarchal methodologies is questionable.

Theology, for example, may be methodologically understood to include expository, hermeneutical, and constructive approaches. That is, it may entail commentary on the doctrines, primary revelation and sacred texts of a particular tradition (exposition); may involve interpretive approaches that endeavour to decode the meaning of a text, so that it may be understood and acted upon within a particular context (hermeneutics); or else it may imaginatively draw upon material from non-religious sources, such as the arts, humanities, sciences etc., in order to articulate the concept of God (construction). Furthermore, theology may also be characterised as partaking of both poetry and philosophy: poetry in so far as it must be sensitive to the metaphors that are consonant with a particular faith, and appropriate for the articulation of that faith within particular historical and cultural contexts, philosophy in so far as it must elucidate in a coherent, comprehensive, and systematic way the

implications of the metaphors, models and myths of a particular tradition.¹⁰⁴ Or, as Graham Ward has noted, theology is and always has been interdisciplinary.¹⁰⁵ Since theology has always been transgressive of disciplinary boundaries, the question of what may be distinctive of thealogy is, therefore, further problematized. It is uncertain that thealogy can be distinguished from theology so broadly conceived.

Several points are worth making in light of the foregoing discussion. First, it is notable that thealogy does not engage in exposition in any traditional theological sense. Quite simply Goddess feminism does not draw upon authoritative sacred texts or primary revelation, and commentary and exposition are, therefore, largely irrelevant to Goddess feminists themselves. This tendency may admittedly be changing, as certain contemporary Goddess texts are (somewhat ironically) acquiring an authoritative or popularist status, and as the academy continues to show a growing interest in the phenomenon of Goddess religions. But, at present, an analytical, redactive and largely self-contained approach to thealogy is virtually non-existent.

Second, thealogy as hermeneutics is rather more well developed in Goddess feminism. Although respecting no singular text or corpus of texts as authoritative, Goddess feminism is engaged in a wide-ranging and often eclectic reading of religious narratives from across the world.¹⁰⁶ Both ancient and traditional religious

104. Paraphrased from McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 32. For a further discussion of links between poetic, philosophical and religious language, see Frank Burch Brown, *Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and the Languages of Religious Belief* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

105. Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 1.

106. There is, however, a Eurocentric bias present in the gyno- and theacentric myths and narratives that are selected (specifically a Greek bias). This is a point that is made by

mythologies (mythologies constituting a genuinely multi-cultural and pan-historic resource) tend to be examined in light of a feminist hermeneutic and are raided for their Goddess and gynocentric stories, images and symbols.¹⁰⁷ In a highly selective reading, patriarchal elements and narratives are suppressed while female empowering elements are appropriated and emphasized. Mythmaking and mythologization constitute significant activities in both the Goddess and feminist spirituality movements, as do critical re-readings of patriarchal history. All of these activities are themselves deeply hermeneutical in character, and thealogy may therefore share certain methodological continuities with theology.¹⁰⁸

Third, thealogy may be understood as a constructive endeavour. This methodological approach, with a number of important qualifications, comes remarkably close to the theological *modus operandi*. Thealogy by definition may be argued to be a constructive project; particularly in so far as it understands itself to be imaginatively revisioning the world, that is, creating and exploring alternative, specifically post-patriarchal, models and practices by which to relate to the sacred. Goddess feminism draws upon a large number of resources in its diverse attempts to articulate the meaning of the Goddess, including the social sciences, psychology

Culpepper in 'Contemporary Goddess Thealogy' but it is also regularly acknowledged by other theologians (e.g. Christ, Starhawk, Wilshire, Spretnak).

107. See Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, pp. 270-1; Jane Caputi, 'Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking' and Diane Purkiss 'Women's Rewriting of Myth' in Larrington (ed.), *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*.

108. These continuities only apply to theology broadly conceived. For certain forms of Christian theology, and their focus upon a series of revelatory events, the continuities certainly are not applicable. Also, hermeneutics may be viewed as an activity applicable to all forms of understanding and, therefore, is not methodologically distinctive of any single academic discipline (or indeed any human endeavour).

(notably Jungian),¹⁰⁹ the natural sciences (chaos theory, ecology and Gaia theory),¹¹⁰ and the arts (drama, literature, painting, poetry, sculpture etc.).¹¹¹ The only difference from the patriarchal understanding of a constructive methodology that Goddess feminism exhibits is that constructive theological projects tend to be systematic, comprehensive and conceptual,¹¹² while the theological approach is much more eclectic, metaphorical and performative: a tendency that indicates a great deal about the limits and overall structure of theology *in toto*.

109. As noted earlier (see footnote 63), many Goddess texts draw heavily upon Jung's theories of archetypes, the anima and animus, and the collective unconscious, to articulate an account of the divine feminine as it is instantiated in human consciousness. Other theologians have found the psychoanalytic speculations of Melanie Klein and Luce Irigaray, or the object relations theories of D. W. Winnicott to be applicable to their work. For a brief account of the theological relevance of these works, see Naomi Goldenberg, 'The Return of the Goddess: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Shift from Theology to Theology' in Ursula King (ed.), *Religion and Gender* (Oxford (UK) & Cambridge (USA): Blackwell, 1995). Many more women in the Goddess movement also draw upon transpersonal and depth psychological insights in their theological rituals and practices.

110. Both Jane Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons and Crones: The Fates of the Earth* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company Publishing, 1993) and Melissa Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, have drawn attention to affinities between theological accounts of nature and the insights of the so-called postmodern science of chaos theory. Insights derived from ecology and Gaia theory are recurrent in all of the theological texts considered in this thesis and are considered in detail in Chapter 3 of this study. The theological value of chaos theory is assessed in Chapter 4 of this study.

111. It is notable that many Goddess feminists and theologians are active in the arts and, more importantly, draw upon their artistic practice in their theologies. E.g. Barbara Mor and Monica Sjöö, the authors of *The Great Cosmic Mother*, are a poet and a painter respectively; Donna Wilshire, author of *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, is a professional actress and playwright; Starhawk writes fiction as well as theological works, and has also arguably taken theological ritual to the level of performance art. It is also significant that two popular works on the contemporary emergence of Goddess imagery and reverence focus almost exclusively upon the phenomena from the perspective of the arts: see G. F. Orenstein, *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (New York: Pergamon, The Athene Series, 1990) and Elinor Gadon, *The Once & Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time* (London: Thorsons, 1995).

Theological priorities and values

It is arguable that theology, as a textual discourse, does, perhaps inevitably, draw upon theological methods. However, there remains a significant difference in its priorities and values. With reference to an earlier distinction, modern theology arguably prioritizes philosophical precision, while theology favours poetics.¹¹³ And while, on the one hand, patriarchal theologies may critique theology as anti-intellectual, incoherent or merely engaged in mythopoetics, on the other, theology carries with it a feminist critique of the philosophical rationality, phallocentrism and so-called objective reason upon which many patriarchal theologies are based. In its efforts to distance itself from contamination by what it perceives to be the invidious errors of patriarchal methodologies and theorizing, theology works with what Carol Christ and Mary Daly have referred to as a “non-method”: a questioning of one of the most unquestioned assumptions of all, the notion that scholarship is or should be objective.¹¹⁴ In a rejection of what is considered to be most problematic in patriarchal theology – that is, its overt focus upon the cognitive functions of religion, belief-systems and theory construction – theology can be understood to have embraced the

112. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 196.

113. By modern theology, I am specifically referring to the dominant trends in both Catholic and Protestant Christian theology: the forms of theology that are contextually co-present with the emergence of Goddess feminism in the West. It is arguable that Eastern Orthodox theology has not encountered or needed any of the dramatic shifts that have defined theology in the West (e.g. Renaissance, Reformation or Enlightenment), and its relationship with modernity is much more ambiguous than that of either Catholic or Protestant theologies.

114. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 33; see also Mary Daly on “Methodolatry” in *Beyond God the Father*, pp. 11-12: ‘One of the false gods of theologians, philosophers and other academics is called Method. It commonly happens that the choice of a problem is determined by method, instead of method being determined by the problem. ... The tyranny of methodolatry hinders new discoveries. It prevents us from raising questions never asked before and from being illumined by ideas that do not fit into pre-established boxes and forms’, p. 11.

affective dimensions of religion: embodied-thinking, experience and ritual praxis. Theology skeptically resists the authority and false universalism of so-called grand or metanarratives, specifically because of their associations with patriarchal domination, and prioritizes instead the self-authenticating experiences of individual women, the pre-discursive and primordial reality of embodiment and nature, and an experimental, open-ended and reflexive way of talking about the divine; an array of priorities that may themselves be problematic.

Theology, experience and essentialism

For theology, the term experience is broadly conceived as being ‘embodied, relational, communal, social, and historical.’ It is premised on the fact that the sum of everything that one has thought, felt or intuited through one’s life is inevitably embodied.¹¹⁵ And in so far as theology has a distinctive method, that method is rooted in its specific attitudes to embodied thinking.¹¹⁶ I shall endeavour to explain.

First, building upon the conviction that all thinking is embodied (i.e. shaped by biological desires, needs, passions and physiological capacities and limitations), theologians are apt to reject most philosophical and theological claims concerning such issues as objectivity, transcendence, truth, universals and the nature of the sacred as mistaken. Basically such claims are understood to be premised upon patriarchal assumptions about the possibility of attaining an epistemically privileged view from nowhere, or else the ability of the mind to neutrally comprehend and/or reflect reality. Goddess feminists claim that they ignore the fact that all human reflection is engaged,

passionate and inevitably embodied. In contrast, as Carol Christ notes, by thinking through ‘the body, we reflect on the standpoints embedded in our life experiences, histories, values, judgements, and interests. Not presuming to speak universally or dispassionately, we acknowledge that our perspectives are finite and limited.’¹¹⁷ The ethos of objectivity that remains implicit in much academic theorizing, particularly that pre-dating the postmodern turn, is considered an error by most theologians.

Second, the Goddess is understood to be embodied and wholly immanent in nature by most theologians. Correspondingly, the Goddess is in principle equally accessible to all women (although not necessarily to all men), and may be experienced and commented upon by all women. As Melissa Raphael elucidates, ‘[t]o make the Goddess transcendent of individual women could imply that some experiences are more approximate to the truth of the Goddess than others. And if this were so, the magisterial elaboration of that truth into mutually compatible claims might silence some voices and privilege others.’¹¹⁸ This is a state of affairs that is not, as yet, tolerable within the Goddess movement. All women, as Cynthia Eller notes, ‘are given at least token respect, however wild and ridiculous their ideas may seem to the majority of their sisters.’¹¹⁹ All women’s experiences and understandings of the Goddess are judged valuable, and it is incredibly rare for any woman to be granted authority over even one other.¹²⁰ As Raphael further observes,

115. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 37.

116. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-40. See also, Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*.

117. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 34-5.

118. Raphael, ‘Truth in Flux’, p. 201.

119. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 7.

120. Raphael, ‘Truth in Flux’, p. 201.

the only authority on which Goddess religion is based is derived from confidence in one's own experience. Espousing the spiritual benefits of democratic plurivocality, theologians are then compelled to welcome its result: transient, local, incommensurate theological claims loosely unified by consensual statements, which like Starhawk's declaration that 'All that lives (and all that is, lives), all that serves life, is Goddess', are sufficiently vague as to virtually guarantee inclusivity.¹²¹

Indeed, such is the Goddess movement's fear of privileging certain women's voices and silencing others, coupled with its unwillingness to create argumentative (masculinist) relations within its discourse, that its method (or non-method) would seem to echo the sentiments of the Wiccan Rede (or creed), "Do as thou will but harm none."¹²² The theological attitude to method closely parallels the "anything goes" approach to science championed by Paul Feyerabend,¹²³ or the conceptualization of "philosophy as conversation" argued for by Richard Rorty.¹²⁴ The primary constraints upon a theological method would seem to be ethical ones, coupled with a deep-rooted feminist aversion to the perceived errors and excesses of patriarchal theorizing. It is only when one takes account of the Goddess movement's attitude to essentialism that one can begin say anything further about a general theological attitude to method.

Although I cannot at this point do justice to the diverse ways in which issues of essentialism, sexual difference and human being-in-the-world are dealt with in the Goddess feminism (these issues are addressed more thoroughly in Chapter Five of the present study), it is important to emphasize that these issues have a direct bearing

121. Ibid., p. 200.

122. This principle is elaborated upon in C. S. Clifton 'What has Alexandria to do with Boston? Some Sources of Modern Pagan Ethics' in J. R. Lewis (ed), *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

123. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: Verso, 1978).

124. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

upon theological attitudes to method and theory construction. By self-consciously working with sexed images, metaphors and symbols, that is, by identifying the divine with the category of femaleness, Goddess feminism *can* imply that sexual difference is the defining existential and ontological division of reality. This distinctive metaphysic can place constraints upon how theology is and/or ideally ought to be practiced. If Goddess feminists assume that femaleness, female experience and/or female embodiment grant, in some sense, privileged access to the nature of the Goddess, then there is a strong justification for theology being a specifically woman-identified religious discourse; that is, women *qua* embodied females and subjects of female experience would possess an epistemic and/or ontologically advantaged means of apprehending and comprehending the divine in comparison with non-females (namely men). And, although there are numerous objections to this essentialist conceptualization of the female subject position (e.g. feminist, social constructionist and queer theoretical perspectives),¹²⁵ it is this issue that most clearly distinguishes theology from patriarchal theologies. The theological prioritization and sacralization of femaleness (and the corresponding emphasis upon female embodiment) may be as significant as the sacralization of maleness (and the corresponding emphasis upon male reason) has been in the history of patriarchal theologies. The theological privileging of femaleness (ontologically as well as politically) may, particularly in the long term, set up methodological parameters and resonances as far reaching as those that have shaped the history of patriarchal religious discourses

125. See in particular the work of Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990); *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive*

In the remainder of this section I elucidate how the discursive privileges of theology are mediated and provide a framework for understanding how the theological imagination articulates and manifests itself.

Theology as an imaginative construct

While theology can be said to begin with experience, and perhaps more importantly prioritizes female experience (for ontological and political reasons), the theological method can, I contend, be most productively interpreted in terms of an established theological orientation. As mentioned above, the theological method approximates a form of constructive endeavour; an endeavour that draws upon a diverse array of cultural, disciplinary and religious resources in order to articulate its understanding of the divine. This orientation identifies theology as possessing close affinities with what may be termed a form of third-order liberal theology (third-order in the sense that it is highly pragmatic and reflexive in its attitude to, and also choice and manipulation of, religious myths, models and symbols, liberal in the sense that it is radically open to a diverse range of cultural and religious influences).¹²⁶ It is an orientation that is

Limits of Sex (London: Routledge, 1993); *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

126. Wayne Proudfoot, 'Regulae fidae and Regulative Idea: Two Contemporary Theological Strategies' in Sheila Greeve Davaney (ed.), *Theology at the End of Modernity* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1991), p. 107: 'First-order theology ... is executed when theologians claim to explain God and the world as they really are. Second-order theology emerges when the theologian realizes that her concepts are constructs of the imagination. Third-order theology ... comes into being when the theologian actively takes control of these concepts and images of God and the world, deliberately shapes them to humane ends, and seeks to interpret experience in light of them.'

remarkably close to the methods and theories developed and expounded by the theologians Gordon Kaufman¹²⁷ and Sallie McFague.¹²⁸

The theological approach of Kaufman and McFague provides the primary means of interpretative access to Goddess feminism's theological method in the context of this thesis. The theological oeuvre of Kaufman and McFague is readily applicable and assimilable to theological aims, and it is their theological work that supplies many of the categories and motifs that are to be found within the present study.¹²⁹ Both Kaufman and McFague, in different but complementary ways, support the premise that theology is an imaginative human construct: a construct that is largely justified by pragmatic considerations, and must ultimately be 'judged by its contribution to life's sustenance and enhancement, that is, to its ongoing humanization.'¹³⁰ Theology incorporates a similar orientation and legitimization strategy; although, in the Goddess feminist case, it is feminist and ecological values, rather than humanization, that supply the critical measures against which models and concepts of deity are constructed and tested. Kaufman and McFague understand 'that theology is (and always has been) essentially a constructive work of the human imagination, an expression of the imagination's activity helping to provide orientation for human life

127. Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979); *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985); and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

128. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983); *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (London: SCM Press, 1987); and *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

129. My phrase 'the theological imagination' is an intentional play on Kaufman's own term 'the theological imagination.'

through developing a symbolical “picture” of the world roundabout and of the human place within that world.’¹³¹ Theology is similarly constructive and imaginative, concerned as it is with re-mythologizing, re-orientating and re-sacralizing a world understood to be fundamentally distorted by patriarchy. Kaufman considers the long history of reflection on the symbol (or “image/concept”)¹³² of God as developing into what he terms “the theological imagination”: an imaginative praxis that ‘devotes itself to the continuing critical reconstruction of the symbol “God,” so that it can with greater effectiveness orient contemporary and future human life’.¹³³ Arguably the upsurge of interest in Goddess images, myths and narratives in the West, as evidenced in the feminist spirituality and Goddess movements, can also be said to be developing into “the theological imagination”: an equally important and valuable human attempt to orient life in the present and towards the future.

It is the purpose of this thesis to reflect upon the imaginative constructs of feminist theology, albeit in order to elucidate the coherence, meaning and originality of the metaphysical worldview of Goddess feminism. Theologians such as Kaufman and McFague provide fertile resources for understanding the nature and methods of theology, although it must be affirmed that their conclusions are not necessarily in agreement with those of the particular theologians to be considered. Kaufman and McFague are theologians in a Protestant Christian tradition, while the theologians

130. Davaney (ed.), *Theology at the End of Modernity*, p. 3.

131. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, p. 11.

132. Ibid., p. 12. Kaufman recognizes that the meaning of the term God is necessarily ambiguous and not readily reducible to purely conceptual forms. “Image/concept” is one of the terms he uses to make this point: ‘[c]onceptual, symbolic, and imagistic elements are each involved in all serious uses of “God-talk,” and failing to recognize this will impoverish and falsify our understanding.’

under consideration come from an emergent, non-traditional and primarily feminist religious movement. Despite methodological affinities, the ethos, normative vision, and worldviews of these positions are quite likely to differ on certain issues.¹³⁴ To restate an earlier point, feminist theology emphasizes the importance of embodiment, the elemental reality of nature and femaleness; an emphasis not wholly commensurate with the liberal Christian theologies of Kaufman¹³⁵ and McFague.¹³⁶ The purpose of using Kaufman and McFague is to provide interpretive access to theological method, not content, although it may not be possible to separate the two.

II MYTHS, METAPHORS AND MODELS OF GODDESS

Feminist mythmaking and theology

It has been noted that one of the most significant aspects of the contemporary feminist movement is its drive to reclaim from patriarchy the power of symbolizing and naming, to define femaleness from a female perspective and with a female voice, 'to discover, revitalize and create a female oral and visual tradition and use it, ultimately,

133. Ibid.

134. For example, see Carol Christ's criticisms of Gordon Kaufman's humanocentrism and understanding of the "web of life" in 'Rethinking Theology and Nature' in Irene Diamond and G. F. Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), pp. 58-69.

135. Carol Christ both critiques and supports aspects of Kaufman's work in 'Embodied Thinking: Reflections on Feminist Theological Method', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1989, pp. 7-15. She notes, for example, '[w]hile I find many admirable aspects in the Kaufmanian theological program, I suggest that its intellectual detachment, its side-stepping of the question of the referential nature of religious symbols in the lives of those for whom they have meaning, is its greatest weakness, and is a weakness feminist theologians would do well *not* to emulate', p. 13.

136. McFague's theological position and Carol Christ's theological method are usefully compared in Terence Reynolds, 'Two McFagues: Meaning, Truth, and Justification in *Models of God*', *Modern Theology*, vol. 11, no. 3, July 1995, pp. 289-313. Reynolds argues that their strategies for legitimating their truth claims are very close to one another.

to change the world.’¹³⁷ That is, in recognizing that languages and symbols mediate and shape reality (and most significantly patriarchal reality), many feminists have adopted a pro-active and interventionist role with regard to the formation and utilization of languages, narratives and symbols. By deconstructing patriarchal narratives and symbols, and by constructing and re-claiming gynocentric ones, many feminists contend that they are contributing to the transformation of the world; an activity that is judged by Goddess and spiritual feminists to begin at the level of mythmaking and mythopoetics.

Myths may be understood as narratives which enshrine a number of religious and cultural meanings within a framework where exceptional and supernatural events may take place; they are imaginative construals or presentations, in story form, relating to such issues as the origins and nature of the universe and the meaning of life; they possess a certain explanatory power; they reflect aspects of a particular world of meaning; and in most cases provide an interpretive lens by which to understand the world. Difficult questions admittedly arise when myth and history are conflated or confused, and when one attempts to assess the epistemic status of a myth. However, it is important to emphasize that myths are, first and foremost, imaginative stories that carry with them a cluster of meanings relating to the way significant things originally were, or are, or ought to be.¹³⁸

137. Jane Caputi, ‘Psychic Activism’, p. 425.

138. For a recent collection of philosophical perspectives on the nature of myth, see Kevin Schilbrack (ed.), *Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002). For a cross-section of religious attitudes to myth, see Jean Holm with John Bowker (eds), *Myth and History* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994).

Myths may also serve to legitimate certain states of affairs that may be either oppressive or empowering, they may be subject to revision or stagnation, or else may lose credibility in the face of alternative or competing narratives. For Goddess feminists, patriarchy is understood to have produced myths that have served to legitimate the oppression of women and the degradation of the non-human world, and also systematically empowered men to the detriment of women. Goddess feminists, in turn, recognize that patriarchal myths must be challenged by the creation or reclamation of gynocentric alternatives. That is, women must be empowered, female power legitimated, and human relations with the rest of nature improved, by a process of re-mythologization. The invidious ethos of patriarchy can, it is asserted by many Goddess feminists, only be supplanted by the provision of an alternative feminist mythos or worldview.¹³⁹

The creation of gynocentric myths is conceived of theologically as a necessary component in the development of a post-patriarchal society, and also as vital to an ongoing process of female ontological and political becoming and liberation. Feminist mythmaking – whether understood as ‘psychic activism’ or as ‘re-spelling the world’¹⁴⁰ – is a primary aspect of Goddess feminism’s theological activity. It is to a consideration of the central features of theological mythmaking that I turn next; specifically with regard to the use of images, metaphors and models of the Goddess

139. See Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 48-49, 160-171; Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 410-431; Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, pp. 214-229

140. Psychic activism is Jane Caputi’s term for feminist mythmaking, ‘On Psychic Activism’, p. 426; re-spelling the world is the term favoured by Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 425-431.

and an evaluation of how these inform Goddess feminist reality-claims and metaphysics.¹⁴¹

Image and metaphor in thealogy

Although I have argued that thealogy exhibits methodological affinities and continuities with certain forms of theology, it is also notable that the theological imagination primarily expresses itself through poetics or mythopoetics, while theology traditionally, but not invariably, favours philosophical precision. Thealogy favours imagistic and metaphorical language, while theology has tended towards abstraction and conceptual analysis. More specifically, thealogy is a discourse currently accessible to the majority of its religious community, while theology remains largely the concern of highly specialized elites (the academy or priesthood). By drawing upon David Tracey's distinction between what is referred to as fundamental, systematic and practical theologies (and their respective subject realms: the larger society, the academy and the church), one is able to note that thealogy is a non-specialist discourse.¹⁴² As the product of a highly diffuse and non-hierarchical religious movement, a movement that strives toward inclusivity, thealogy can be understood to be working with the most accessible forms of religious media available, such as imagery, metaphors and myths in addition to ritual, music and dance, rather than exclusivist media such as philosophical discourses and specialised terminologies. Thealogy has not, as yet, divided its linguistic or discursive labours so as to address

141. For a philosophical analysis and evaluation of different feminist approaches to mythmaking, see Pamela Sue Anderson, 'Myth and Feminist Philosophy' in Schilbrack (ed.), *Thinking Through Myths*, pp. 101-122.

different subject realms or specialist markets; although one can delineate the beginnings of a shift away from a grass-roots, oral and ritual form of theology towards an academic and text-focused form (or a polarization of popular and academic forms of Goddess feminism).

Based upon its drive toward democratic plurivocality and inclusivity, it is perhaps understandable that Goddess feminist discourse has focused upon the use of imagery, metaphor, myth and poetics. By asserting that multiple (or all) women's perspectives are relevant to the articulation of the meaning of Goddess, Goddess feminist discourse almost inevitably commits itself to engaging in a highly metaphorical form of theology. That is, the theological emphasis upon metaphor permits the voicing of many interpretations and understandings of the Goddess, without any one readily being granted authority over any other. As McFague observes, '[m]etaphor always has the character of "is" and "is not": an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition.'¹⁴³ Metaphor does not capture meaning, it is rather a means of thinking of one thing in terms of something else, it suggests both similarity and dissimilarity. As Starhawk notes, with regard to feminist Wicca, '[t]he myths, legends, and teachings are recognized as metaphors for "That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told," the absolute reality our limited minds can never completely know.'¹⁴⁴ Or, as McFague clarifies, 'what a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly or apart from it, for if it could be, one would have said it directly. ... it is an

142. David Tracey, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 31.

143. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 33.

144. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 32.

attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, an attempt to speak about what we do not know in terms of what we do know.’¹⁴⁵

Thealogy rarely confuses its metaphors of the Goddess with the Goddess Herself. As Starhawk notes, religions become dogmatic when they identify the metaphor with the thing itself; and this is a state of affairs that Goddess feminists and theologians are intent upon resisting.¹⁴⁶ Rather, theologians are apt to note that ‘[t]he Goddess has infinite aspects and thousands of names - She is the reality behind many metaphors. She is reality, the manifest deity, omnipresent in all of life, in each of us.’¹⁴⁷ Many metaphors may be relevant for speaking about the Goddess, but no metaphors may completely capture the meaning of the Goddess.¹⁴⁸ Correspondingly, all women are permitted to speak about their experiences of the Goddess in thealogy because the metaphors they choose may ultimately be understood to illuminate some characteristics and qualities of the Goddess that are meaningful. Certain metaphors may be judged to be better than others, but none are ruled out *a priori*, and neither are any considered beyond critique. The metaphor of the Goddess as a Mother, for example, may be particularly significant in the Goddess feminist movement, but it nonetheless remains open to revision (e.g. it is possible to emphasize the manner in which the Goddess “is-not” a mother).¹⁴⁹

145. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 33.

146. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, pp. 32-33.

147. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

148. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 34: ‘The point that metaphor underscores is that in certain matters there can be no direct description.’

149. For an account of why Mother Goddess images and metaphors are problematic, see Emily Culpepper’s ‘Contemporary Goddess Thealogy’ and Chapter 2.II of this thesis.

It is important to affirm at this point that there are spiritual and Goddess feminist writers who focus almost exclusively upon the metaphorical nature of Goddess. Women such as Nelle Morton, Barbara Walker and perhaps also Mary Daly and Jane Caputi construe "Goddess" as primarily an image, metaphor or symbol, albeit one that is vital for feminist and ecological purposes.¹⁵⁰ That is, for these writers the metaphors of female deity may be viewed as something wonderful and empowering to women, but they are also metaphors that may be jettisoned when their liberatory work has been completed. This attitude is, I contend, not representative of all Goddess feminists, and specifically not the Goddess feminists central to this thesis (i.e. Christ, Sjöo, Mor, Starhawk). For these Goddess feminists there is a responsive element bound up with their use of metaphor, that is, there is an ontological claim implicit in their use of images and metaphors of the Goddess. The Goddess is understood as a reality that is responded to and interacted with, rather than simply something that is constructed according to human/feminist needs or according to a process of Feuerbachian projection. This theological attitude to metaphorical language is not without precedent, it is an important element in Paul Ricoeur's detailed treatment of metaphor,¹⁵¹ it is examined in the work of Janet Soskice on metaphor,¹⁵² and it is also an issue that is raised and acknowledged in McFague's own

150. See Nelle Morton's article 'The Goddess as Metaphoric Image' in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds), *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) and, for a detailed discussion of theological realism vs. non-realism, Melissa Raphael, 'Monotheism in Contemporary Goddess Religion', pp. 139-149.

151. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

152. Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

writings.¹⁵³ For the purposes of this thesis, it is those Goddess feminists who are self-consciously making ontological claims through their use of metaphorical Goddess-talk, rather than those who may be termed theological non-realists, that are to be focused upon.

Metaphorical constructive theology

It has already been asserted that feminist theology possesses hermeneutical and constructive dimensions. I now wish to add that by drawing attention to the imagistic and metaphorical tendencies in Goddess feminist discourse it is possible to identify close affinities between feminist theology and Sallie McFague's notion of a metaphorical constructive theology, and theology as a heuristic venture. It is McFague's basic argument that theology should, if it is on the side of life, be pragmatic in its attitude to religious images, metaphors and models. Theology should be prepared to adapt to changing situations, times and understandings of the world. If certain religious metaphors and models are or become destructive or oppressive, then alternatives should be imagined, constructed and/or experimented with. Theology should be pragmatic and heuristic in its speculations about the sacred. In McFague's words,

[a] heuristic theology will be one that experiments and tests, that thinks in an as-if fashion, that imagines possibilities that are novel, that dares to think differently. It will not accept on the basis of authority but will acknowledge only what it finds convincing and persuasive; it will not, however, be fantasy or mere play but will assume that there is something to find out and that if some imagined possibilities fail, others may succeed.¹⁵⁴

153. See David Tracy's 'Models of God: Three Observations' and Sallie McFague's 'Response' in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, no. 5, Spring, 1988, pp. 24-28 and pp. 38-44.

154. McFague, *Models of God*, pp. 35-36.

Given the anti-authoritarian, eclectic and experimental nature of Goddess feminism, it is arguable that theology fulfils all of McFague's criteria for a heuristic theology. Indeed, it may be the case that McFague's theological method is more readily applicable to Goddess feminism than it is to the Protestant Christian tradition towards which it is specifically directed: feminist theology is first and foremost a constructive endeavour; it arose in an environment where the distinctions between the personal, the political and the spiritual were early recognised as illusory; it has drawn upon numerous disparate resources in its efforts to articulate and engage with the sacred from its very beginnings; and its collective imagination is motivated by feminist and ecological values approximately cognate with McFague's own.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, McFague notes that 'a metaphorical, constructive theology has a distinctive emphasis: *it will be more experimental, imagistic, and pluralistic than most theologies that fall in the constructive category*'.¹⁵⁶ Sociological and genealogical studies of the Goddess feminist movement suggest that theology may readily fulfil the experimental and pluralistic criteria,¹⁵⁷ while a recent cross-disciplinary study (encompassing the history of religions, media theory and neurology) has argued that woman-centred Goddess religions may possess an inherent predisposition towards imagistic forms of expression.¹⁵⁸ Although it is arguable that Goddess feminism's experimental, reflexive and pluralistic character 'imposes immense strains upon its capacity to be or become the world-altering religion most of its adherents would want

155. As Daphne Hampson has noted, it is difficult to ascertain if McFague's writings are necessarily still Christian, *Theology and Feminism*, pp. 158-159.

156. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 37, emphasis mine

157. See Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon* and Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*.

it to be',¹⁵⁹ a metaphorical constructive and heuristic theology may be what McFague calls the 'kind of theology [*sic*] especially well suited for times of uncertainty and change, when systematic, comprehensive construction seems inappropriate if not impossible.'¹⁶⁰

McFague's account of the methods and tasks of theology is, I suggest, comparable and compatible with the current form and trajectory of feminist theology and, from this point onwards, it will be productive to reflect on some of McFague's specific insights regarding religious language as a means of approaching Goddess feminism's metaphysical thinking. Although McFague contrasts metaphorical constructive theology with the design of comprehensive and systematic theological frameworks, she readily admits that one does not avoid making reality-claims while engaged in metaphorical constructive theology; reality-claims are implicit in this form of theology and one also makes extensive use of religious models that are themselves reality-depicting. Goddess feminists, by contrast, typically do not acknowledge or reflect on the reality-depicting nature of the religious language that they utilise. McFague's work is useful because it illuminates these reality-depicting aspects of what Goddess feminists are doing methodologically. In contrast to both McFague and most Goddess feminists, I will later argue that there remains a need today for systematic and comprehensive theological and theological construction, particularly in terms of metaphysical theorizing. First, however, it is important to examine how a feminist theology, as a form of metaphorical constructive theology, is a reality-

158. See Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: Male Words and Female Images* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999).

159. Raphael, 'Truth in Flux', p. 199.

depicting discourse. By reflecting on the nature of religious models, a form of thinking between the imagistic or poetic and the conceptual or philosophical, it is possible to begin to render explicit Goddess feminism's often implicit reality-claims.

Models of Goddess

It has already been noted that theology favours imagistic, metaphorical and poetic forms of language, as opposed to the predominantly abstract and conceptual forms favoured by philosophy and traditional theology. However, it is also important to emphasize that these forms of discourse and language use are not wholly incommensurate with or opposed to one another. Metaphors and concepts simply occupy different points within a shared continuum, and there exist intermediate or mixed forms of language-use and thought: forms such as those evidenced in models.

Models constitute a movement away from the emotive, open-ended and often transitory character of metaphors towards the more invariable and precise character of concepts. That is, models provide a more lasting and fixed view of reality than that provided by metaphors. In Sallie McFague's words, a model is best understood as 'a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power.'¹⁶¹ While a metaphor may point towards an aspect of reality, and may often dramatically elicit a highly individual and meaningful response, a model is more descriptive and not so readily open to individual interpretation. Indeed, a model may provide an interpretive lens through which to view the world. As McFague observes, models 'give us something to think about when we do not know what to think, a way of talking when we do not know

160. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 37.

how to talk.’¹⁶² That is, models (and, to a different degree, metaphors) constitute not only what we know about the world but more significantly they define how we know the world; models are not simply what we think and talk about, they are also what we think with.¹⁶³ Furthermore, ‘in all matters except the most conventional (where widely accepted perspectives or models are already operating), thinking by metaphor and hence by models is not optional but necessary.’¹⁶⁴

Goddess feminists may be understood to be engaged in a radical critique of patriarchal religious models and are attempting to construct empowering woman-centred religious models as an alternative to the oppressive and androcentric models utilized by patriarchy. Moreover the aforementioned feminist theological re-reading of patriarchal myths, coupled with the creation of new mythic narratives and rituals, is one of the primary ways by which Goddess feminists are developing new religious models. Religious models are, as Ian Barbour observes, closely informed by religious myths. A ‘model represents the enduring structural components which myths dramatize in narrative form’ and, while lacking the affective and emotive power of a myth, a model is often constituted of features that are common to a number of myths.¹⁶⁵ If one reflects on the reclamation and re-writing of myth implemented by Goddess feminists many recurrent components, features and themes are in evidence. If one carefully examines the movement’s growing wealth of myths, narratives and

161. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 23.

162. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

163. For a relevant discussion of the significance of how we know as opposed what we know, see June O’Connor, ‘The Epistemological Significance of Feminist Research in Religion’ in King (ed.), *Religion & Gender*.

164. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 24.

rituals one can readily discern the form and content of the models favoured by Goddess feminists.

It should be affirmed at this point that for Goddess feminists the use of models may be viewed as questionable and problematic because it is in the nature of models to be exclusionary. As McFague observes of models,

they are also dangerous, for they exclude other ways of thinking and talking, and in so doing they can easily become literalized, that is, identified as *the* one and only way of understanding a subject. This danger is more prevalent with models than with metaphors because models have a wider range and are more permanent; they tend to object to competition in ways that metaphors do not.¹⁶⁶

In opposition to this, Goddess feminists have endeavoured to adopt an inclusivist position with regard to religious language and thought. They have been tolerant of different interpretations and understandings of the Goddess, and they have typically identified and condemned exclusivist forms of discourse as patriarchal.

It is crucial to note, however, that Goddess feminists cannot escape developing models; and neither can they sidestep the exclusivist aspect of models. Goddess feminists draw distinctions, make judgements, and express particular perspectives on the world, particularly in and through their mythmaking and rituals, in a manner that is comparable to that evidenced in most of the world's religions. Moreover, feminist theology excludes and objects to countless patriarchal philosophical and theological interpretations and models of reality. It is difficult to comprehend how feminist theology can, in the interests of non-self-contradiction, resist developing religious models. Indeed, for Goddess feminism the construction of new religious models may

165. Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models & Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1974), p. 27.

166. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 24.

be essential to its developing into a viable post-patriarchal religious tradition; or it may, at minimum, be at least as important as its more enthusiastic engagements with mythmaking and poetics. As Ian Barbour comments, religious models can ‘fulfil many of the non-cognitive functions of myth, particularly in the expression of attitudes ... Models embodied in myths evoke commitment to ethical norms and policies of action. Like metaphors, religious models elicit emotional and valuational responses. ... Like myths, they offer ways of life and patterns of behaviour.’¹⁶⁷ Each of these functions is arguably of vital importance to a feminist religion that is concerned with transforming the world. Goddess feminists need religious models in order to maintain and articulate a coherent worldview and to support their projects of religious and political action; and Goddess feminists are, I contend, already developing religious models, as may be evidenced in their careful selection and creation of life-affirming gynocentric myths, and their sustained opposition to patriarchal religious models. Significantly for this thesis the development of religious models is also an important step towards conceptual precision, philosophical thought and metaphysical theorizing. Models, as Barbour claims, ‘lead to conceptually formulated, systematic, coherent, religious beliefs which can be critically analyzed and evaluated.’¹⁶⁸ This thesis is explicitly concerned with the elucidation and analysis of Goddess feminist models as a means of theorizing the coherence and contours of Goddess feminism’s view of the fundamental organization and nature of reality.

167. Barbour, *Myths, Models & Paradigms*, p. 28.

168. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

III THEOLOGICAL REALITY-CLAIMS: GODDESS/NATURE

If feminist theology is a form of metaphorical constructive theology, as I argue it is, then, in Sallie McFague's own words, 'it cannot stop at the level of models.'¹⁶⁹ Goddess feminists cannot, in the long term, avoid developing and articulating concepts of Goddess. McFague's description of a metaphorical and constructive theology supports this proposal.

McFague observes that in the continuum of religious discourses an engagement with highly conceptual language and philosophical thought is inevitable. The movement from metaphors and myths to models, and then to concepts, is a natural and understandable one; although not one that is meant to prioritize concepts over metaphors and models. She notes that,

as dominant metaphors, models manifest priorities within a religious tradition; as organizing networks of images, they are well on the way to systematic thought; as comprehensive ways of envisioning reality, they implicitly raise questions of truth and reference; as metaphors that control the ways people envision both human and divine reality, they cannot avoid the issue of criteria in the choice of certain models and the exclusion of others. A further step of interpretation ... is called for: conceptual interpretation and criticism.¹⁷⁰

Her point is that conceptual language and thought develops in any religious tradition that confronts the consequences of its use of metaphors and models: it constitutes an attempt to systematize and to 'generalize at the level of abstraction concerning competing and, at times, contradictory metaphors and models.'¹⁷¹ It is the special function of concepts to reconcile and summarize models; to explicate and mediate highly complex realities in a manner that images and metaphors cannot; to

169. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 25.

170. Ibid.

attempt to answer questions of reference and truth. In turn, conceptual language tends toward univocity and precise meanings for ambiguous and multileveled imagistic, metaphoric and poetic language. While individual models may compete and emphasize their uniqueness, it is in the nature of conceptual thought to identify the commonalities, connections and similarities between models. By abstraction, concepts are intended to depict, explicate and manage complexity.¹⁷²

It is both my own and McFague's assertion that images, metaphors, models and concepts are all essential to the functioning of a well developed religious discourse. That is, although these components of discourse serve different functions, they are all integral to the task of interpreting and expressing our being-in-the-world and our relationship to the sacred. Furthermore, the relationship between these different aspects of religious discourse can perhaps best be understood to be a symbiotic one. In McFague's words, '[i]mages "feed" concepts; concepts "discipline" images. Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile.'¹⁷³ This reciprocity prompts consideration of those religious discourses that privilege one form of language use over another.

McFague claims that in 'a metaphorical theology, there is no suggestion of a hierarchy among metaphors, models, and concepts: concepts are not higher, better, or more necessary than images, or vice versa.'¹⁷⁴ This is not true, however, of the theological positions under consideration in this thesis. While Goddess feminists are

171. Ibid., p. 26.

172. Ibid., pp. 25-26. See also, Gordon Kaufman, 'Models of God: Is Metaphor Enough?' in *Religion & Intellectual Life*, no. 5, Spring 1988, pp. 11-18.

173. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 26.

174. Ibid.

critical of the privileging of overly conceptual discourses in modern patriarchal theologies, their own developing theologies privilege metaphoric and poetic forms of discourse. Both of these tendencies indicate a hierarchical evaluation of metaphors, models and concepts. Goddess feminist discourses may be metaphorical and constructive, but they are not open to or tolerant of highly systematic conceptual language or thought.

The central concern of this thesis is that developed forms of conceptual thought, such as philosophy, are an important, if currently neglected, aspect of feminist theology. That is, given the function of concepts to interpret, explicate and manage complexity, coupled with their symbiotic relationship with images and metaphors, one may argue that Goddess feminism is neglecting a significant part of its theological work. One may sympathize with the reasons for a Goddess feminist resistance to conceptual thought: notably the connections that are understood to exist between patriarchal philosophies and the worldly realities of patriarchal domination; as well as the need for theology to be accessible to as broad a range of women as possible. However, concepts remain a necessary part of any sustained religious discourse. In the long term, any religious system or tradition, in the interests of such demands as applicability, coherence, meaning and survival, needs to work with conceptual as well as imagistic and metaphorical forms of language and thought. As McFague elucidates:

Images are never free of the need for interpretation by concepts, their critique of competing images, or their demythologizing of literalized models. Concepts are never free of the need for funding by images, the affectional and existential richness of images, and the qualification against conceptual pretensions supplied by the plurality of images. In no sense can systematic thought be said to explain

metaphors and models so that they become mere illustrations for concepts; rather, the task of conceptual thought is to generalize (often in philosophical language, the generalizing language), to criticize images, to raise questions of their meaning and truth in explicit ways.¹⁷⁵

It is the purpose of this work to begin to construct and develop explicit theological concepts as a balance to the prevailing imagistic and mythopoetic tendencies within Goddess feminist discourse. In turn, this imposed Goddess feminist engagement with conceptual analysis and interpretation may constitute a useful first step toward articulating a radical feminist revisioning of metaphysics. The religious models and myths that Goddess feminists favour are, I reiterate, meant to make ontological claims, albeit, in McFague's words, 'shy ones;' they are offered as redescriptions of prevailing theistic understandings of the relationship between deity and the world; and they are expressed with the conviction that they are truer and more life-affirming accounts of the world than the patriarchal alternatives.¹⁷⁶

The theological imagination may, I affirm, be expressing or nurturing a new attitude to metaphysical thinking. Certain recent developments in feminist philosophy have emphasized the importance of woman-centered or female perspectives on such realities as being-in-the-world, cosmology and temporality. This thesis explores this line of enquiry within a religious context, and considers the possibility that there may be a convergence between Goddess feminist perspectives on the nature of reality and feminist philosophical approaches to metaphysics. There are, I acknowledge, significant problems attached to any feminist project that identifies itself as metaphysical. However, Goddess feminist reality-claims are drawn towards a point of

175. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 26.

systematic coherence in this thesis, and such an endeavour is broadly-speaking metaphysical in character. In the following four chapters a new level of conceptual precision is introduced into Goddess feminism as I propose a metaphysical account of the Goddess as nature: Goddess/Nature.

IV GODDESS FEMINISM AS ANTIMETAPHYSICAL

In this section I provide a critical commentary on Goddess feminist attitudes to metaphysical thinking and the philosophical discipline of metaphysics. There are, I contend, a number of reasons why Goddess feminists may be considered to be antimetaphysical in their attitude to the world (reasons that may be related to the cultural, intellectual and political environment in which Goddess feminism has taken shape). But it does not follow from this that Goddess feminists can or ought to reject metaphysics. The Goddess feminist attitude to metaphysics is not unique a one; it is one manifestation of an antimetaphysical attitude that is pervasive throughout the feminist movement. Whether one examines feminist critical theories, politics, philosophies or theologies, one encounters a widespread opposition to the discipline of metaphysics. In this chapter I challenge this feminist attitude and argue that there are no compelling reasons why feminists ought to reject metaphysics *per se*. There are, rather, a number of persuasive reasons why feminists ought to constructively engage in metaphysical theorizing, and this is particularly true of Goddess feminists and theologians.

176. Adapted and paraphrased from Sallie McFague's 'Response' in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, no. 5, Spring, 1988, p. 42.

A century of skepticism: the antimetaphysical mood

By reflecting on the history of ideas and Western philosophy one may observe that the twentieth century bore witness to a growing crisis in the project of Western metaphysics; a crisis that culminated in proclamations of the “death of metaphysics” and also corresponding cries of the “death of God”, the “death of history”, the “death of man” and the “death of the subject”.¹⁷⁷ A skepticism, and some would argue a nihilism, which has definite antecedents and resonances in earlier philosophical schools, cohered during the twentieth century and gave rise to a broad range of critical theories and a wide-ranging hermeneutics of suspicion. Theoretical positions advocating the value of contextualism, historicism, perspectivism and relativism all served to define a cultural and intellectual mood in which the very possibility of making any authoritative statements and locating any ahistorical certainties was cast into serious doubt. It was within this environment, often problematically referred to during the late twentieth century as that of postmodernity, that Goddess feminism took shape, and there are strong reasons for believing that feminist theological attitudes to metaphysical thinking were and continue to be strongly influenced by the underlying assumptions, principles and conclusions of this period.¹⁷⁸ That is, there are strong reasons for concluding that Goddess feminism is antimetaphysical in intention and character. Several points may be made.

177. Cornel West, ‘Metaphysics’ in Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 487. For feminist introductions to these ideas, see Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1990) and Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1994), pp. 211-225.

First, twentieth and twenty-first century philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, Jean François Lyotard, Richard Rorty and Ludwig Wittgenstein have, often via very different theoretical routes, strategies and tropes, challenged the authority, legitimacy and possibility of metaphysics. The search for a universally valid explanatory framework, language, stable ground, or *arche*, as exemplified by the project of Western metaphysics, has been identified as representing, serving and perpetuating the interests of discrete cultural, social and religious power structures. That is, metaphysics has been revealed to be an inevitably socially produced and historically specific discourse, located within a complex network of power relations and/or language games, and as such has no authority to claim for itself the status of the privileged representative of the real. Within the environs of what are termed postmodern philosophies, metaphysics is at best simply one discourse among many, a discourse that is shaped by individual interests and often unconscious desires, and a number of contingent cultural, economic, historical and social forces. At worst, metaphysics is a totalizing and exclusionary discourse or metanarrative that does great violence to the human understanding of both individuals and the cosmos whose irreducible differences it attempts to capture.¹⁷⁹ Goddess feminism, with its focus

178. For a discussion of Goddess feminism's relationship to modernity and postmodernity, see Raphael, 'Truth in Flux', pp. 199-213 and *Introducing Thealogy*, pp. 46-51. See also, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 'Witches of the West', pp. 75-95.

179. It is important to emphasize that the term postmodern is deeply problematic and is used to encompass a very broad range of positions and philosophical ideas. There are often large differences between the theories of thinkers identified as postmodern and many of those who are identified as postmodern explicitly reject the title. One of the major divergences in the use of the term postmodern can be located in what may be termed deconstructive forms of postmodernism and constructive or ecological forms of postmodernism. Deconstructive forms of postmodernism are of the type characterised in this section. In David R. Griffin's words, this is a form of postmodernism that 'overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-

upon individual experience, imaginative mythmaking, poetics and ritual activity, seemingly accepts the sentiments of this attitude to metaphysics and rejects the idea that systems of logical thought can provide a fixed and true representation of the universe or real.

Second, the contemporary philosophical opposition to metaphysics (and indeed all metanarratives) is closely allied with a feminist opposition to patriarchal philosophies. For many feminist theorists, the academic discipline of philosophy is understood to have functioned as a masculinist, phallogentric and oppressive discourse throughout the history of Western thought; an understanding of philosophy that affirms many so-called postmodern insights concerning the manner in which discourses are embedded within networks of power and serve particular corporate or individual interests. Not only are patriarchal philosophies understood to have served the interests of men to the detriment of women, but they have arguably also defined themselves by excluding and expelling characteristics and traits that they have associated with women or femaleness (e.g. the body, emotion, illusion, irrationality, madness); they have defined femaleness and its perceived limitations (e.g. in terms of a lack of moral sense, or limited reasoning ability, or poor physical constitution) by recourse to metaphysical categories such as essence and substance; and, finally, they

worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence. While motivated in some cases by the ethical concern to forestall totalitarian systems, this type of postmodern thought issues in relativism, even nihilism.’ In contrast to this, constructive or ecological postmodernism ‘seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and concepts. This constructive or revisionary postmodernism involves a new unity of science, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions.’ David R. Griffin, ‘Introduction to SUNY

have reified and elevated male reason to the point at which it can, supposedly, reflect upon and represent, in an *a*contextual, *a*historical and wholly transcendent manner, the fabric and nature of reality.¹⁸⁰ Feminist theorists have thoroughly critiqued these patriarchal philosophical practices and presuppositions as invidious, oppressive and/or the product of gender-blindness.¹⁸¹ Moreover those feminist critiques have drawn upon many of the intellectual and postmodern resources that have promoted a skeptical attitude toward the truth-claims of the philosophical canon, and they have influenced a generation of feminist attitudes to the discipline of metaphysics.

Feminist philosophy and metaphysics

Despite there being many feminists who work within the academic discipline of philosophy, there is some disagreement about the exact degree to which the discipline may be adaptable to feminist purposes.¹⁸² In a similar manner to the way in which feminist responses to patriarchal religions are ambivalent and multiple, often polarised between attitudes of reform or revolt, so too are feminist responses to philosophy divided. Given the participation of philosophy in the structuring of patriarchal knowledges, and indeed the organisation of the entire social and political order, there

Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought' in Frederick Ferré, *Being and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Metaphysics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p. xvi.

180. For a cogent introduction to these topics, see Grosz, 'Philosophy', pp. 147-174.

181. See for example Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987); Michèle Le Dœuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (Methuen: London, 1984).

182. For an overview of the current state of feminist work in philosophy, see Jaggar and Manion Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* and Miranda Fricker and Jennifer

is reason to believe that philosophy is unacceptable to feminism in its current form. While questions and issues concerning the nature of knowledge, morality and politics remain vital for the development of feminist theory and praxis, there is a deep suspicion amongst feminists about how these philosophical topics have been approached and conceived in the past; a suspicion that is exemplified in feminist attitudes towards metaphysics.

Often characterized as “first philosophy”, metaphysics is the facet of the Western philosophical tradition that has been judged most irredeemable by feminist academics (and the “death of metaphysics” is a postulate that has seemingly been accepted by most feminists as a welcome truism). Contemporary constructive work in feminist theory, as opposed to its more critical practices, has concerned itself almost exclusively with epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and politics, while side-stepping the discipline of metaphysics completely; an anti-metaphysical stance that is arguably duplicated in Goddess feminism’s religious emphasis on mythmaking, empowerment, poetics and ritual. Indeed it may be argued that a feminist rejection of metaphysics, if it is legitimate, necessitates a corresponding Goddess feminist rejection of metaphysics. Goddess feminism, as a carrier of feminist principles (multiple and contested as these may be) and a constructive endeavour that draws upon numerous academic and cultural resources, is inevitably shaped by feminist theoretical commitments outside of its immediate sphere of interest. Goddess feminism *qua* feminism may necessarily be antimetaphysical.

Hornsby (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Additional support for the argument that Goddess feminism is, or ought to be, antimetaphysical can be located in the theological focus upon the categories of experience and nature. By giving priority to experience, specifically individual women's experiences, and by asserting that theology begins in experience, Goddess feminism is engaging with a line of thought that is suspicious of the ability of reason and systematic thought to comprehensively define the nature of reality. Although experience is notoriously difficult to characterize and theorize, the theological focus is such that each individual, as a distinctive site or subject of experiences, is their own ultimate authority on the nature of the world. Questions relating to interpretation admittedly obtrude upon and complicate such understandings of experience, as do highly relevant issues concerning the nature of religious experience and mysticism. However, the overriding concern in theology is that *a priori* reasoning and logical argumentation cannot capture the complexity of the world. All that one can reasonably speak of in most feminist theology is one's own experience of the nature of reality and deity.

Furthermore, reality and deity are theologically understood by most Goddess feminists to be equivalent to nature; and, more significantly, nature is all that can be said to exist. As the Goddess feminist Zsuzsanna Budapest explains in an interview,

is any part of the Goddess beyond nature? No, there's nothing beyond it. There's just more nature beyond nature. Everything is nature even if you don't know it yet. A hundred years from now we may learn something new but that was nature all along, we just didn't get it.¹⁸³

183. Zsuzsanna Budapest cited in S. Bridle, 'Daughter of the Goddess: an interview with Z. Budapest', *What is Enlightenment?*, no. 5, 1996, p. 68.

Metaphysics, as a form of philosophical enquiry into a reality that transcends nature, is, therefore, a non-discipline for Goddess feminists. The translation of metaphysics as “after the things of nature” effectively draws out the Goddess feminist attitude towards metaphysics. For Goddess feminists there is nothing after or beyond nature, there is only more nature. There is no *meta ta physica*, there is only *physica*. Even theological commentators such as Naomi Goldenberg claim that ‘[w]hen theology becomes thealogy, the metaphysical comes home to the physical.’¹⁸⁴ Goddess feminists are antimetaphysical, therefore, in the very specific sense that the classical distinction between appearance and reality (and existence and essence) is understood as unnecessary and spurious.

V METAPHYSICS RECONSIDERED

Metaphysics has so far been characterised in its classical and traditional philosophical forms, and it has been observed that in the modern/postmodern period the project of Western metaphysics has entered a state of crisis; a crisis that, according to certain proclamations, may be terminal. Furthermore, it has been argued that, for a number of reasons, Goddess feminism can be considered to be antimetaphysical in character: Goddess feminism has emerged within a cultural and historical period where metaphysics is viewed with suspicion; Goddess feminism is informed by a feminist philosophical opposition to metaphysics as an irredeemably patriarchal aspect of the Western philosophical canon; Goddess feminism emphasizes the affective dimensions

184. Naomi Goldenberg, ‘The Return of the Goddess: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Shift from Theology to Thealogy’ in King (ed.), *Religion & Gender*, p. 160.

of religion, in the forms of mythmaking, empowerment, poetics and ritual, above the cognitive dimensions, as reflected in belief-systems, systematic thought and metaphysical theorizing; and Goddess feminism focuses upon experience and nature (*physica*), as opposed to intellectual speculation concerning a reality that transcends nature (*meta ta physica*). Each of these points can lead one towards the conclusion that metaphysics and metaphysical thinking have no place within Goddess feminism. This, however, is a conclusion that I wish to contest and reject. Not only is it possible to argue that Goddess feminists already implicitly engage in metaphysical thinking to a limited degree, it is also possible to argue that Goddess feminists ought to engage more explicitly with the philosophical discipline of metaphysics. Metaphysics has a value that Goddess feminists need to acknowledge, reflect upon and explore.

In what follows three interconnected arguments will be developed. First, it will be argued that claims concerning the “death of metaphysics” are overstated (they pivot upon a rather limited reading of the history of metaphysics) and the modern/postmodern skepticism directed towards metaphysics has limited consequences (it only targets certain metaphysical methods and truth-claims rather than the discipline *per se*). Second, it will be argued that feminism has been premature in foreclosing on metaphysics. Metaphysics is not *a priori* invidious for feminism. Feminist metaphysics is not an oxymoronic term. Third, it will be argued that theology and metaphysics are similar projects and Goddess feminism ought to embrace metaphysical theorizing as a valuable part of its religio-political struggle to reclaim the world from patriarchy.

The persistence of metaphysical thinking: metaphysics revived

Philosophical arguments supporting the “death of metaphysics” thesis tend to come in two forms: a strong and a weak version. The strong version developed by Martin Heidegger, and revisited and adapted by Jacques Derrida, is premised upon the argument that the history of Western metaphysics is reducible to a metaphysics of presence: a form of metaphysics that privileges the real as, in Derrida’s words, an ‘invariable presence – *eidos, arche, telos, energisia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alethia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth’¹⁸⁵ – and this is problematic in so far as it conceals a more primordial sense of Being (Heidegger) or devalues, displaces, and suppresses absence and otherness (Derrida).¹⁸⁶ The weak version, as exemplified in the work of Richard Rorty, argues, in turn, that in the face of such principles as contextualism and historicism the discipline of philosophy can no longer claim for itself the status of privileged metadiscourse of legitimation. Philosophy, as characterised by Rorty as epistemology, but as expressed through metaphysics, can no longer claim for itself the foundational ability to either judge the validity of truth-claims or mirror the nature of reality.¹⁸⁷

It is significant that each of the above formulations of the death of metaphysics thesis question the status of metaphysics, but neither formulation critically undermines the metaphysical project *in toto*. Metaphysics may still have value, even if its methods and truth-claims are to be viewed with suspicion, or even if it may be

185. Cited in Richard J. Bernstein, *A New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 175.

186. Summarised in Bernstein, *A New Constellation*, pp. 175-77, 210-17 and Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, pp. 223-224.

187. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

characterized as privileging presence. Only a particular formation or philosophical understanding of metaphysics is critiqued, not metaphysics *per se*.

The strong “death of metaphysics” thesis is itself a highly contentious argument in so far as, in the words of Seyla Benhabib, it ‘flattens out the history of modern philosophy and the competing conceptual schemes it contains to the point of unrecognizability’;¹⁸⁸ a move that grants it the rhetorical advantage of presenting what is being argued against in its least defensible form.¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, the reduction of the history of Western metaphysics to a collection of theories that privilege presence constitutes a refusal to acknowledge that there may be useful resources concerning absence, otherness or Being within the philosophical past. That is, the thesis may itself encompass ‘a *metaphysical* move, in that it picks out “presence” as the defining characteristic of Western metaphysics, and identifies it as the permanent that persists through change.’¹⁹⁰ And, as such, it is a move that displays, to paraphrase Christine Battersby, a single minded unwillingness to think metaphysics *otherwise*.¹⁹¹

The weak version of the “death of metaphysics” thesis is, in turn, best understood as a product of modern/postmodern accounts of the limits of human knowledge, and is not itself a refutation of metaphysical theorizing *per se*. The thesis is, rather, an attack upon how legitimation strategies and truth-claims function within metaphysics, it is a line of argument that disrupts the notion that reason and logical systems of thought can definitively reveal the way the universe really is organized. By arguing that there is no Archimedean point, view from nowhere, or specifically

188. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 224.

189. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

190. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 92.

acontextual, ahistorical and value-neutral standpoint from which to reflect upon the nature of reality, the thesis asserts that metaphysics is critically undermined. All metaphysical projects are inevitably situated – constructed by countless contextual, historical and psychological circumstances, forces and drives – and, therefore, cannot claim to be universally applicable. However, this assumes that metaphysics needs to make such a claim. At best the weak “death of metaphysics” thesis affirms that there will inevitably be competing metaphysical frameworks; and the authoritative statements and universal claims of those metaphysical frameworks must be viewed with suspicion. It does not demonstrate that metaphysics has no value or that issues of legitimation and notions of truth and falsity have no place in metaphysics.

As the philosopher Frederick Ferré explains ‘metaphysics is nothing more (nor less) than the theory of reality in general.’¹⁹² Only the comprehensiveness of metaphysical theorizing, the fact that it attempts to encompass literally everything, distinguishes metaphysics from other forms of theory construction. In most respects, ‘theorizing about reality in general shares most of the normal traits of theorizing about anything.’¹⁹³ That is, metaphysics is typically structured by general standards of theory construction: consistency, coherence, applicability and adequacy.¹⁹⁴ Consistency is a minimal internal standard of any theory that addresses the question of whether the theory is meaningful and avoids self-contradiction. Inconsistencies and contradictory elements are something to be eliminated from any theoretical construct if it is to be meaningful. Coherence, in turn, is the more positive and demanding

191. Ibid., p. 98.

192. Ferré, *Being and Value*, p. 1.

193. Ibid., p. 2.

requirement that the concepts and parts of any theory should fit together closely and effectively. If a theory is coherent it should be possible to move between the various components of the theory without difficulty. Together, consistency and coherence form the internal standards that bear upon an theoretical framework. To these standards of theory construction, though, one can also add the external standards of applicability and adequacy. Applicability is the minimal requirement that a theory has some degree of bearing upon relevant data; it must illuminate something and be applicable to the world to some degree. As with consistency, applicability is a minimal standard for thinking about anything in particular. Adequacy, by contrast, is a more pressing external standard of evidential completeness. If a theory is to be adequate, then all of the available evidence and data must fit the theory. Clearly the standards of coherence and particularly adequacy are rarely met to an absolute degree in any form of theorizing. But, as Ferré observes, both ‘set worthy goals and thus provide useful standards for assessing better or worse as attempted theories approach or fall short of them by greater or lesser extent.’¹⁹⁵

There is certainly a degree of arrogance attached to the desire to theorize the whole of reality (‘the sheer presumption ... of trying to pour the ocean of reality into our minds’), and many feminist critiques of metaphysical projects in this regard are probably well-placed.¹⁹⁶ But it is also arguable that by confining one’s thinking to the narrow context, while neglecting the broadest context of life, one may be acting in an irresponsible manner. That is, if one’s thinking about the larger context can be shown

194. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

195. Ibid., p. 3.

196. Ibid., p. 5.

to be wrong, this can have very serious repercussions for one's entire life. The new awareness of the interconnectivity and sensitivity of the world's ecosystems, for example, is one case in point where a change in understanding of the larger context has altered people's lives dramatically; in this case with an increased concern for the environment and activities relating to consumption, pollution, the recycling of wastes and the preservation of species. Although postmodern philosophers have critiqued metaphysics because of what they claim is an oppressive aspect of theorizing the whole of reality, as Ferré cogently notes, they

are quite wrong to derogate metaphysics as such. Abandonment of the attempt to think about reality with as much coherence as possible is no guaranteed escape from oppression. On the contrary, it exposes persons without coherent worldviews to the oppressions of unchecked partial perspectives and the frustrations of fragmentation in mind and action.¹⁹⁷

Indeed, metaphysical theorizing, the philosophical attempt to think about the whole of reality in as coherent a manner as possible, can arguably be said to represent a human longing for wholeness and an 'imperative toward health in mind and action.'¹⁹⁸ While many criticisms of metaphysics voice important concerns, particularly with regard to the epistemological hubris and suppression of "other" perspectives that metaphysics can entail, the attempt to think about the whole of reality in as consistent and as coherent a manner as possible is not an *a priori* invidious undertaking; and it may, in a sense, be necessary and conducive to well-being.

Metaphysics, models and worldviews

It is important at this point to differentiate metaphysical theories from what may be termed worldviews, as the two terms are not synonymous with one another. Although all people inevitably possess particular ways of interpreting and valuing the world, ways that are often so deeply ingrained so as to be almost invisible to them, these understandings of the world, or worldviews, are the product of the cultural, linguistic, religious and social biographies of each individual.¹⁹⁹ These worldviews are not systematically developed coherent accounts of the whole of reality. Relatively few people feel the need to develop a comprehensive theory of reality in general, while all humans possess a worldview that incorporates numerous ideas about the nature of reality. A worldview may have been shaped by metaphysical theories in its recent or distant past. Thus, the mechanistic worldview of the industrialized world was influenced by the metaphysical theories of Descartes, Newton and other thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁰⁰ But the relations between metaphysical theories and worldviews are usually complex and varied. The resources for metaphysical theorizing may emerge from worldviews. A metaphysical theory may exert its influence over one or more worldviews. Or, as Frederick Ferré claims,

[c]omprehensive visions of reality, worldviews, need not necessarily derive from prior metaphysical theorizing. They may instead arise from the “final context” poetry we call myth. Mythic imagery in turn may play a large role in supplying vivid and evocative models to suggest and interpret explicit

197. Ibid., p. 375.

198. Ibid.

199. For further discussion of worldviews and their relation to metaphysics, see Clifford Geertz's 'Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols' in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 126-141.

200. Ferré, *Being and Value*, pp. 10-12; cf. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

metaphysical theories. In this way, metaphysical theorizing and mythic tradition may work powerfully in tandem.²⁰¹

This is a vital point for this thesis. Metaphysical theories may be distinguished from worldviews because of the systematic manner in which they articulate an understanding of the whole of reality. But religious myths, models and worldviews are able to provide fertile resources for metaphysical theorizing. Although models and myths are not identical with the subject matter that they seek to illuminate, they are both reality-depicting and powerful aids to coherent thinking.²⁰² The central concern of this thesis is to examine the religious models and reality-claims favoured by Goddess feminists and to begin to articulate the kind of metaphysical theorizing that is conducive to Goddess feminism.

VI FEMINIST METAPHYSICS

Feminism has foreclosed on metaphysics for a number of reasons; many of which are similar to those that comprise the weak version of the “death of metaphysics” thesis, others of which are directly attributable to the androcentrism and sexism that has manifested itself through metaphysical categories and theories in the past. None of these reasons, however, can be said to emerge from a conclusive refutation of the discipline of metaphysics *per se*. It has in fact been observed that the feminist attitude to metaphysics ought to be characterised as a feminist skepticism toward the claims of transcendent reason, rather than as a simple acceptance of the death of the

201. Ferré, *Being and Value*, p. 11.

discipline.²⁰³ One may admit that the truth-claims of metaphysics have been overstated in the past, or else imbued with a unique and misplaced kind of certainty, but it does not follow from this that feminists should reject metaphysical theorizing altogether. As in so many other disciplines and fields of enquiry, once feminist theorists have sufficiently developed the critical stage of their work, there is normally a process of reconstruction and a refiguring of how a discipline may operate under the influence of feminist insights and principles. This is a stage that has barely been entered into with regard to the discipline of metaphysics. In the words of the feminist philosopher Charlotte Witt, it may be claimed that ‘the contribution of feminist theory to metaphysics is the metaphilosophical position that one ought to stop doing metaphysics in order to theorize in an appropriately feminist manner.’²⁰⁴ It is rarely acknowledged that feminism may have a unique contribution to make to metaphysics.²⁰⁵

Distinct problems are raised for feminism by accepting metaphysics as *a priori* invidious, or by neglecting or rejecting the discipline for other reasons. In so doing feminists are displaying an unwillingness to think metaphysics otherwise.²⁰⁶ They are refusing to explore what metaphysics may mean if shaped by feminist commitments

202. For a powerful philosophical argument supporting the relevance of myth to metaphysics, and vice-versa, see Kevin Schilbrack, ‘Myth and Metaphysics’ in Schilbrack (ed.), *Thinking Through Myths*, pp. 85-100.

203. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 213.

204. Charlotte Witt, ‘Feminist Metaphysics’ in Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (eds), *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), p. 273.

205. Ibid; cf. Sally Haslanger, ‘Feminism in metaphysics: Negotiating the natural’ in Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 107-126.

206. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 98.

and concerns; and, in a sense, they are leaving an area of the patriarchal discursive terrain unworked (damaged by critique, but not reconstructed or fundamentally transformed). If feminism is concerned with transforming the world, a strong case can be made for arguing that it must also concern itself with how the world is most fundamentally or ultimately conceived (the subject realm of which has historically been the concern of metaphysics and religion). At minimum, by accepting a negative position with regard to metaphysics, feminism is refusing to explore certain imaginative and theoretical options and is also actively denying the possibility of an alternative feminist metaphysic. This is not a position that feminism should necessarily adopt. As the feminist scholar of religions Morny Joy asks,

[s]hould women necessarily subscribe to the principles of whatever is the fashionable theoretical postulate? Should they automatically follow the debates of male established norms of reflection, be they metaphysical, empirical or postmodern?²⁰⁷

To accept that metaphysics is not a live option for feminism is seemingly to accept such a position. It is arguably time for feminists, both philosophers and theologians, to address metaphysics constructively and proactively, rather than critically and reactively.

Towards a feminist metaphysic

Certain brief comments can be made with regard to what a feminist approach to metaphysics may entail. First, it is notable that the exclusion of women from Western philosophy may have inhibited the exploration and development of certain

207. Morny Joy, 'God and Gender: Some Reflections on Women's Invocations of the Divine' in King (ed.), *Religion and Gender*, p. 130.

metaphysical models and theories. For example, in many masculinist existentialist philosophies, considerable attention has been directed towards the nature and meaning of death and mortality, while little or no attention has been given over to the realities of birth and natality. Is this focus upon death explicable because metaphysics has been almost exclusively written from the perspective of a subject position that cannot give birth? What kind of metaphysic, one may ask, may be derived from a subject position that is, at least potentially, understood to possess the ability to give birth? As Penelope Washbourn suggests, in an article linking process philosophy with female experience, 'those of us who experience reality embodied in femaleness and its cycles of fertility have a particular avenue to a metaphysical perspective on the nature of reality.'²⁰⁸ What kind of insights may a feminist metaphysical project derive from such a perspective? The feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz is more restrained than Washbourn in her comments, but she is nonetheless open to the possibility of a different female metaphysic when she notes:

It is not clear that men and women conceive of space or time in the same way, whether their experiences are neutrally presented within dominant mathematical and physics models, and what the space-time framework appropriate to women, or to the *two* sexes may be. ... [T]he bodies of each sex need to be accorded the possibility of a different space-time framework.²⁰⁹

It is, I contend, remarkably important that feminists at least explore these different conceptual and theoretical possibilities and perspectives; and this is a task that is perhaps best undertaken by recourse to metaphysical theorizing. The feminist

208. Penelope Washbourn, 'The Dynamics of Female Experience: Process Models and Human Values' in S. G. Davaney (ed.), *Feminism and Process Thought* (New York & Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), pp. 97-8.

209. Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p 100.

philosopher Christine Battersby has recently taken up this challenge by developing a metaphysic founded on ‘a body that is capable of generating a new body from within its “own” flesh and from “within” the horizons of its “own” space-time.’²¹⁰ Hers is a project that has attempted to ‘find new models of the self-other relationship and new ways of thinking “identity” – and, in particular, persistence of an embodied self through mutation, birth and change.’²¹¹ There is also the suggestion that feminist philosophers such as Donna Haraway and Luce Irigaray are also working with revisionist versions of metaphysics, although their works are rarely read in terms of metaphysical theory.²¹²

Second, feminists need to acknowledge that metaphysics can be conducted in a non- or anti-foundationalist manner. Most modern/postmodern critiques of metaphysics are directed towards the foundationalist epistemologies on which the discipline has been based in the past. But, as the feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger observes, metaphysics has also worked in the past, and can also work in the future, with alternative epistemological frameworks.²¹³ It is quite possible to make justified claims about the world without having direct or privileged access to it. Metaphysical theories can be constructed without making any claims to authority over other forms of enquiry. Metaphysics can be responsive to a broad range of experiences, as well as

210. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 6.

211. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

212. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14, 48-53. The metaphysical thought of Haraway is addressed in detail in Chapter 4. IV of this thesis.

213. Haslanger, ‘Feminism in metaphysics’, pp. 112-115.

theoretical considerations in other domains, including normative enquiry in aesthetics, epistemology and moral theory.²¹⁴

Third, building on the previous two points, feminists need to acknowledge that questions of value and religious experience and meaning cannot *a priori* be bracketed out of metaphysical enquiry and theory construction. Values and religious concerns are themselves metaphysical hypotheses and data to be incorporated into any theory of the whole of reality. Although it is certainly possible for a metaphysic not to be explicitly religious in character, and also for it not to take religious experiences and models as the basis for its theory construction, it is also important to note that any metaphysical theory must include and account for values. Moreover, models and conceptual resources derived from religious worldviews can, quite plausibly, provide a more consistent, coherent and applicable basis for a metaphysical account of the whole of reality than the available alternatives. Philosophical and religious forms of metaphysics are not mutually exclusive affairs.²¹⁵

Feminist theology and metaphysics

A primary conjecture of this thesis is that feminist theology and feminist metaphysics are not only viable disciplines, but they are also, in certain significant respects, complementary. It has been argued that feminist theology is an imaginative construct that needs to engage to a greater degree with philosophical thought, and it has been claimed that feminist metaphysics may be the principal means by which it may

214. Paraphrased from Haslanger, 'Feminism in metaphysics', p. 114. Cf. W. H. Walsh, 'The Nature of Metaphysics' in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 305.

achieve this. If one attends to the recurrent myths, models and root metaphors of Goddess feminist discourse one can readily discern a movement toward interpreting the whole of reality in terms of a limited array of organizing principles; and this is a move that is distinctively metaphysical in orientation. In many significant respects, theology and metaphysics are similar imaginative human activities.²¹⁶ Metaphysics is arguably unique in its drive to systematically apply its interpretative framework to the whole world, but its arguments are, like those of theology, as well as theology and also literary criticism, similar in so far as they reach no apparent end, and often result in insights that are often more personal than public.²¹⁷

Amongst Goddess feminists there is a wish to articulate and realize a new religious and social order; there is a desire to replace a dysfunctional and oppressive patriarchal “order” with a functional and empowering alternative. And by changing the manner in which the world is fundamentally conceived and perceived, most Goddess feminists would agree that it is possible to radically change the way in which the world is treated.²¹⁸ This is a task that Gordon Kaufman has argued may be aided

215. Ferré, *Being and Value*, pp. 376-378.

216. Gordon Kauffman develops the argument that theology and metaphysics are similar imaginative human activities in *The Theological Imagination*, pp. 239-262. Cf. Frank Burch Brown’s commentary on the philosopher A. N. Whitehead’s thoughts on the relationship between religion, metaphysics and the imagination in *Transfiguration*. Burch Brown observes that ‘Whitehead also argues that the language of metaphysics, although highly rational, fundamentally derives from an act of imagination. Its concepts are always to some extent ontologically imprecise even as they reach further toward the truth, slowly clarifying our dim understanding. This is what makes metaphysical discourse an adventure. Metaphysics itself – whether philosophical or theological – constitutes a significant transformation of our ordinary modes of thought. Contributing no certain knowledge, it nonetheless gives insight into the ideas and faith by which we live’, pp. 143-144.

217. Walsh, ‘Nature of Metaphysics’, p. 305.

218. See, for example, the conclusions of three of the main theological works considered in this thesis, each of which emphasizes the importance of re-imagining the world and changing the manner in which the world is fundamentally perceived. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, pp.

by metaphysics. He claims that, ‘the metaphysician is attempting to set out the “worldview” which underlies a segment of human life and history’ (e.g. a Goddess feminist segment of human life and history); the consequence of which is that ‘metaphysics helps to bring human experience and life to greater self-consciousness, thus making it possible for men and women to take fuller responsibility for their own life and action.’²¹⁹ This insight is particularly valuable to this thesis because it affirms that metaphysics is informed by certain aspects of human experience and is directly relevant to the illumination of other aspects of experience. Experience is relevant to metaphysics and, therefore, amenable to theological insights and values. A metaphysical position may be construed as the elaboration of some aspect of experience that is considered to be particularly significant or valuable to a community (e.g. the experience of the world as female, generative and sacred), rather than as the product of a detached form of reason.

To reiterate, metaphysics can serve to articulate the religio-political worldview that Goddess feminists ultimately value. And the notion that Goddess feminism may measure its metaphysics with moral, religious and political concerns cannot be taken as a criticism in these circumstances. It is a charge that simply acknowledges the inevitably situated nature of such endeavours, a charge that may be readily levelled against all discursive practices. A Goddess feminist metaphysic, once articulated, would constitute the attempt to present a coherent vision of the world based upon the conviction that it was a better and truer interpretation of reality than the patriarchal

214-229; Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 160-177; Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 425-431.

219. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, p. 256.

alternatives; an interpretation that, at the same time, also happens to be feminist, ecological and non-oppressive. As Kaufman clarifies,

The elaboration of a metaphysical position, therefore, is not so much the working out of a scientific theory of the nature of the whole as it is the expression of a *faith* that this or that model or metaphor drawn from experience can properly serve as a paradigm in terms of which the world can be grasped.²²⁰

In the case of a Goddess feminist metaphysic, the models and metaphors drawn from experience might also happen to be ones that have been suppressed or silenced in the past by patriarchal domination, as well as ones that have been shaped by the very latest cultural, philosophical and scientific understandings of the world. A Goddess feminist metaphysic would not necessarily claim to present a finished account of the way the world really is, but it would rather attempt to express the most valuable account (in terms of Goddess feminist values) at this particular moment in history.

In conclusion, metaphysics and theology may be understood to be similar imaginative and constructive projects; both of which draw upon similar experiential, imagistic and metaphorical resources, and both of which are arguably crucial if Goddess feminism is to grow into the world transforming religion many of its adherents want it to be. As Kaufman observes with regard to the similarities between metaphysics and theology:

Both are concerned with imaginative construction of a concept or image of the overall context (the “world”) within which human life transpires, and neither can claim to base that construction on direct inspection of “the nature of things,” for the simple reason that such direct inspection is impossible.²²¹

It may be objected at this point that Goddess feminism does retain a notion of ‘direct inspection of “the nature of things,”’ primarily because of the manner in which it

conceives religious experience and practices such as nature mysticism, ritual and shamanism. However, Goddess feminists also emphasize human finitude and limitation, ambiguity and the mystery of the Goddess, and they do not as a rule associate mystical, ritual or shamanic states of being-in-the-world with the granting of privileged epistemic access to the true nature of reality. Rather such religious states may be better understood as granting an altered relationship to nature, an emphasis that is arguably ontological/existential rather than purely epistemological.

Furthermore, Goddess feminism cannot easily lay claim to an anti-metaphysical stance or an attitude of metaphysical agnosticism. Metaphysical concerns and commitments are implicit in all Goddess feminist activities, no matter how much Goddess feminists may deny it, and a theological focus upon nature (or *physica*) offers no escape (as Kaufman notes, “nature” itself ‘is a metaphysical concept and involves an understanding of what is (ultimately) real’).²²² One may acknowledge that modern/postmodern arguments and insights, concerning the contextual, historical and perspectival nature of all knowledges and truth-claims, problematize earlier understandings of metaphysical projects. However, metaphysical thinking *per se* cannot be side-stepped.²²³ Organizing principles, regulative ideas and broad

220. Ibid., p. 247.

221. Ibid., p. 254.

222. Ibid., p. 219.

223. This is a point that modern/postmodern critics of metaphysics, such as Heidegger, Derrida and Irigaray readily acknowledge. See, Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 210 and Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). As Derrida claims, ‘the idea that we might be able to get outside of metaphysics has always struck me as naive, ... we cannot really say that we are “locked into” or “condemned” to metaphysics, for we are, strictly speaking, neither inside nor outside’, Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 210. As Tina Chanter observes ‘[n]either Heidegger nor Irigaray think it is possible to overcome Western metaphysical thinking in the sense of leaving

interpretive frameworks remain an inescapable part of the human attempt to understand and function within the world. It is simply the degree to which these broadly metaphysical notions are systematically worked through, or else considered absolutely authoritative, that has changed through history.

Goddess feminism's engagement with metaphysics is problematic only in so far as most Goddess feminists remain resistant to philosophical enquiry and system building for reasons already articulated. It is notable that Goddess feminists possess favoured religious images, myths, models and root-metaphors, and these are central to their understanding of the whole of reality. What is lacking at present, however, is a thorough unpacking of these images, myths, models and metaphors. There has been little effort to outline a Goddess feminist metaphysic. This task is arguably essential if Goddess feminism is to grow and adequately express and defend its post-patriarchal worldview. Goddess feminism's rhetoric already attempts to persuade others that its particular understanding of the world is more plausible and valuable than the patriarchal alternatives. What it needs to do now is to take the 'intuitive' or 'self-evident' plausibility of its favoured models and root-metaphors and explore their coherence in a philosophically precise and systematic manner; a move that should not be conceived of as antithetical to its political commitments, but rather may in fact be demanded by them. As Melissa Raphael suggests,

conceptual precision in radical religious feminism is not an authoritarian contradiction in terms. Concepts are merely provisional frames or structures which exist to be subverted. Certainly theologians insist that theology is

it behind completely in order to move on to something new. ... Insofar as metaphysics remains determinative of even the thinkers who try to break away from or rethink its most fundamental categories and assumptions, it is less a matter of divorcing oneself entirely from metaphysics, and more a matter of finding a new relation to it', *Ethics of Eros*, pp. 129-130.

experiential before it is conceptual. But experience is surely only experienced when it is conceptualised as such and playful negotiations with received theological concepts are signs that the discourse is alive and open to the future.²²⁴

As a provisional first step towards interpreting what may one day be a more carefully articulated theological position, this project proceeds with the understanding that Goddess feminism may benefit from more conceptual clarity than is currently in evidence, and that a form of feminist metaphysic may be taking shape within the theological imagination. The central concern of this work is to begin to outline recurrent Goddess feminist metaphors, models and myths, and to theorize the coherence, contours and trajectory of Goddess feminism's largely implicit metaphysic.

224. Raphael, 'Monotheism in Contemporary Goddess Religion', p. 149.

CHAPTER 2

MODELS OF GODDESS/NATURE

I THE ONE AND THE MANY: SHE OF 10,000 NAMES

Goddess feminism's use of religio-philosophical categories such as monotheism and polytheism, pantheism and theism can be characterised as being eclectic, inconsistent and often also paradoxical in nature. Statements such as 'I worship the Great Goddess, and I'm polytheistic and pantheistic and monotheistic too'²²⁵ can confound the possibility of any sustained philosophical analysis or dialogue, and may also evoke mainstream academic condemnation because they are apparently indicative of confused, irrational or sloppy thinking. Some Goddess feminists and religious commentators may note, in defence of such claims, that the application of categories to a deity understood to be ineffable and mysterious is itself a questionable activity; and the use of contradictory categories and paradox is, therefore, useful in so far as it serves to evoke the sense of mystery surrounding deity.²²⁶ However, as has been argued in the previous chapter, Goddess feminists are concerned with constructing models, categories or concepts of deity. Or rather Goddess feminists are predisposed toward conceiving of deity in certain terms (e.g. as embodied within nature and femaleness), rather than others (e.g. as a transcendent male creator), in a manner that is not compatible with the assertion that deity is wholly unknowable and/or

225. Cited in Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 132-133.

226. See Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 131 and Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, pp. 32-33.

indescribable. While the combining of monotheism and polytheism in one religious worldview may rest upon an intellectual failure, or else may reflect an attitude of poetic playfulness or intellectual subversiveness, there is an alternative explanation. It is possible that the meaning of the Goddess, as Carol Christ suggests, entails a reinterpretation or transformation of the traditional religio-philosophical categories.²²⁷

The apparently incompatible categories of monotheism and polytheism may be reconcilable within Goddess feminism's theological imagination, it is simply the case that Goddess feminism's aversion to systematic and philosophical theology leaves such a question radically open.

Monotheism and polytheism

Monotheism and polytheism are typically understood to refer to the recognition and worship of either one or many gods; and both of these terms are, often from a specifically Western theological standpoint, also commonly linked with evolutionary and historical accounts of religious development. That is, monotheism is often explicitly defined as representing a higher stage of religious maturity than is evidenced by polytheism, which, in turn, may be characterised as representing a higher stage than that evidenced in the worship of spiritual powers or beings in the form of what may be termed animism and polydaemonism.²²⁸ The reasons put forward to explain and justify the development and value of monotheism are numerous, often encompassing political, intellectual, moral and soteriological

227. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 101.

228. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, 'Polytheism' in Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 436.

arguments and motives; and it is perhaps significant that relatively little has been written about the value of polytheism.²²⁹ In many respects monotheism can be understood to have arisen in antagonism to other religious views of reality; and it is reasonable to argue that monotheistic faiths are particularly intolerant of polytheism.²³⁰ Monotheism is centred upon a conception of a unified divine will and power, while polytheism encompasses many divine wills and powers which interact together to make a functioning cosmic whole.²³¹ Moreover, the theological projects of the dominant monotheistic faiths of the world (i.e. Christianity, Islam and Judaism) have also shown a tendency to expand upon the basic monotheistic notion that deity is one (or God is One) to the point at which deity is also understood to be 'perfect, immutable, creator of the world from nothing, distinct from the world, personal, and worthy of being worshipped by all creatures.'²³² And although these further characteristics can and have been contested, it is notable that monotheism has become the frame of reference within which nearly all theological debates have taken place in the West. Theology is a discourse about a God who is One; it is rarely, if ever, a discourse about a divine reality comprised of many deities, whether male, female or otherwise.

It is important to note at this point that monotheism and polytheism are not the only religious options; there are both different categorizations of divine power and also remarkable differences in the manner in which monotheism and polytheism

229. Keith Ward, *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), pp. 106-7;

230. Theodore M. Ludwig, 'Monotheism' in Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 71-2.

231. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

232. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

manifest themselves in practice. For example, it is possible to note that there are religious systems and traditions wherein many deities are acknowledged to exist, although one deity is granted authority over or worshipped to the exclusion of the others (henotheism). There are also monotheistic religions wherein other supernatural or semi-divine beings are acknowledged to exist (e.g. angels, devils and saints within Christian traditions, angels, demons and djinn in Islam). Although within such traditions deity is still envisaged as one. There are non-theistic forms of religion that, at one level of understanding, retain a notion of divine power similar to that expressed by polytheism, but which at another level may reject the idea of deity altogether (e.g. Mahayana Buddhism). There are also forms of religion that may engage in what may be termed “pseudo-polytheism”, a practice that retains a polytheistic terminology but which in fact views its deities as emanations or manifestations of one divine principle (e.g. aspects of Hinduism).²³³ The primary purpose of raising these alternatives is to emphasise that Goddess feminism may be able to conceptually reconcile its attitude to monotheism and polytheism without falling into either incoherence or self-contradiction. The challenge for a systematic or philosophical theology is for it to confront these issues by recourse to a greater degree of conceptual precision than is currently in evidence.

Although certain Goddess feminists may contend that it is not important if female deity is singular or plural, it is arguable that the manner in which deity is conceived has far-reaching consequences. In saying that the distinction is unimportant, emphasis is commonly shifted to the existential, psychological and

233. Werblowsky, ‘Polytheism’, p. 439.

political value of female deities for women. For Goddess feminists such as Asphodel Long, it is the *idea* of female deity that is significant to women (whether conceived of as the Goddess (One) or goddesses (Many)); and it is significant because it affirms ‘that women can have a close relationship with the divine.’²³⁴ The idea of female deity is understood to be ‘a way of knowing divinity’; it is an idea that may powerfully relate divinity or sacrality to the female self. The idea of ‘the Goddess’ confirms that women may fully participate in the ‘divine - *however that divine is envisaged*’.²³⁵ The question of whether to conceive deity as one or many is understood by Long to be an unwanted distraction for women who are attempting to reclaim from patriarchy their own sense of sacrality and spirituality. Debates about the nature and ontological status of female deity are viewed as an unnecessary and unwarranted complication, and are so bound up with issues of authority and power that they are best avoided (at least for the moment).²³⁶

Now clearly if the manner in which the divine is envisaged is irrelevant to women, then a great amount of feminist critique with regard to the patriarchal form and content of the world's religions is also irrelevant; and this is a point that Long and probably all Goddess feminists would be unwilling to concede. Models of warrior gods, dying gods, sky gods, transcendent and omnipotent gods have all been the subject of a sustained feminist critique because they are understood to have consequences that are detrimental both to women and the world in general. The attributes, qualities and traits of those deities have been judged to be problematic for

234. Long, ‘The One and the Many’, p. 22.

235. Ibid., p. 25.

236. Long, ‘The Goddess Movement in Britain Today’, pp. 13-16.

particular reasons. Patriarchal male deities are not invidious simply because of their maleness, and most feminists would agree that certain male deities are far more objectionable than others. Is it reasonable to conclude, therefore, that all differences and distinctions between female deities are irrelevant purely because all such deities are female or in some sense empower women's relationship to the divine? The insight that affirmations of female divinity empower women is an important one, but it fails to address the question of whether some models of female divinity are better (e.g. more empowering) than others. By adopting this position, certain Goddess feminists are failing to extend the same range of critical faculties to their own subject realm as they extend to those of patriarchal religions. This is an understandable focus, given the movement's history, political commitments and self-understanding. Yet if Goddess feminists are to engage in sustained theological discourse they need to develop criteria for internal critique and evaluation. As a logical possibility, certain models of goddesses may be more empowering to women, or particular groups of women, than others. With respect to relations to the divine, certain models of deity may draw one into a closer relationship to the divine than others; and, with regard to the nature of the divine, certain images, metaphors, models and concepts may better evoke and express that nature than others. As Carol Christ and Donna Wilshire claim, for example, concepts and models of warrior goddesses are unacceptable in their theologies because of the manner in which they advocate human violence, rather than simply asserting the reality of death within the cycles of nature.²³⁷

237. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 97-98; Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 61.

Warrior goddesses are personality deities, not immanent deities. No matter how worthy their wars seem to be, these female warriors are not aspects of the immanent Goddess of pre-history. A warrior deity – male or female – models violence as an authentic, sacred way of being-in-the-world. I cannot accept that as an enduring truth about human life or as an aspect of the Model the Goddess embodies.²³⁸

Returning to the issue of monotheism and polytheism, it may be better (either in terms of psychological or political benefits to women, or in terms of theoretical applicability and coherence) for Goddess feminists to conceive of female deity in the singular, the plural, or as some hybrid form of the two. It is the responsibility of feminist theologians and the present thesis to consider these alternatives.

The Goddess as One and Many

Goddess feminism's relationship to the categories of monotheism and polytheism is problematic precisely because most Goddess feminists utilize the model of a Great Goddess, who literally is the whole of nature, as well as a plurality of seemingly independently existing goddesses. In Goddess feminist discourse and practice literally hundreds of goddesses from diverse cultures, historical periods and religious narratives are drawn upon and revered. It is possible to find such different goddesses as Aphrodite, Arianrhod, Artemis, Astarte, Bast, Brigid, Cerridwen, Demeter, Durga, Tiamat, Uma, Vesta, Yemanjá and Zoe all being invoked within a single religious context. Further to this invocation of many goddesses, however, is the equally common Goddess feminist practice of speaking of deity in the singular definitive

238. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 61.

article as *the Goddess*.²³⁹ In their apparently mutually exclusive forms, it is difficult to reconcile this theological use of monotheistic and polytheistic terminologies. One may reasonably ask whether the plurality of goddesses possess the same ontological status as the Goddess who is the whole of nature? Are the many goddesses representatives or modes of the single Goddess? Is Goddess feminism similar to certain forms of Hinduism which conceive the plurality of deities as aspects or emanations of one divine principle?

The most widespread theological resolution to the problem of the One and the Many is elucidated by Starhawk when she claims that while ‘speaking of the Goddess as the whole, the underlying unity of which all things are aspects ... there are also *Goddesses*, specific ways to imagine and experience that whole, different roads to the centre. They are each real, in the sense that they are powerful forces and distinct paths.’²⁴⁰ In Starhawk’s theological statement the numerous individual goddesses are primarily powerful heuristic devices for conceiving, contacting and relating to the sacred ‘whole,’ ‘centre’ or ‘underlying unity’. Each goddess, with her associated image, persona, powers and traits, may supply illuminating possibilities for the Goddess feminist who is seeking a relationship with the divine. Each goddess may aid in orienting the Goddess feminist toward the divine, although the manner in which

239. Christ, Sjöö and Mor, and Starhawk’s primary theological works all refer to female deity in the singular, e.g. *Rebirth of the Goddess* (Christ), *The Great Cosmic Mother* (Sjöö and Mor) and *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (Starhawk). As Cynthia Eller observes, ‘[a] quick review of the titles of thirty-two books on female deities indicates the prevalence of some type of modified monotheism in feminist spirituality: twenty-five titles refer to goddess in the singular (“the goddess,” “our mother,” “the great goddess”) while only seven are explicitly plural (“goddesses”)', *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 133.

240. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, pp. 244.

each goddess does so is likely to be unique and dependent on the interests and needs of the individual invoking her. This theological attitude to monotheism and polytheism is supported by Cynthia Eller when she claims that amongst spiritual feminists, ‘the goddess [sic] is worshipped in many aspects and invoked by many names, but in the front of the practitioner’s consciousness is the conviction that the goddess [sic] is truly one.’²⁴¹ That is, Goddess feminists are seemingly polytheistic in religious practice, but typically conceive of nature/reality in terms of a single unified deity. A unifying function is theologially assigned to the Great Goddess; a function that Carol Christ focuses upon when she notes that ‘an intuition of the unity of being is found in most if not all religions.’²⁴² For Goddess feminists such as Christ, Sjöö and Mor, Starhawk and Spretnak, there is a female deity who constitutes the unified whole of nature, and there are also goddesses who are aspects, manifestations or purely symbols of that whole. As Sjöö claims, ‘Isis, Mawu-Lisa, Demeter, Gaia, Shakti, Dakinis, Shekhinah, Astarte, Ishtar, Rhea, Freya, Nerthus, Brigid, Danu – *call Her what you may* – has been with us from the beginning and awaits us now’.²⁴³ This is a theological statement that affirms the existence of a single Goddess (“Her”) who encompasses, precedes, and has priority over all of the other goddesses named.²⁴⁴ It is this theological concept of deity that is the central concern in this thesis.

241. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 133.

242. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 109.

243. Sjöö, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. xviii, emphasis mine.

244. The Goddess feminist understanding of a single female deity who encompasses all other deities coheres closely with Hindu theologies of the Mahādevī or Great Goddess. Cf. David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 132-150.

As I elucidate throughout the present study, Goddess feminists prioritize themes such as female generativity, immanence, interconnection, organicism, relationality and community in a manner that promotes understanding divinity, power and value in terms of a single unified whole. The ritual invocation of a plurality of goddesses may serve a number of important functions in Goddess feminism: notably a heuristic function, wherein the different goddesses provide diverse resources for relating to the sacred; an empowering function, wherein the plurality of the goddesses affirms the sacrality of femaleness; and an epistemic function, wherein the diversity of goddesses can help one to perceive and experience the presence of diversity and difference in the world. But, for most Goddess feminists, nature taken as a whole is theologically conceived as a single female deity: the Great Goddess, Mother Goddess, or Great Cosmic Mother.

The current chapter is concerned with elucidating and theorizing the manner in which the theological imagination has synthesized the whole of reality into a unified model of a single Goddess. Although I recognize that there are Goddess feminists who postulate a plurality of independently existing goddesses (in both formally polytheistic and realist senses of the term),²⁴⁵ the present study is directed towards an emergent consensus among Goddess feminists; or, at minimum, it is concerned with the writings of influential feminist theologians (e.g. Christ, Sjöo, Starhawk). Goddess feminist polytheists constitute a minority position in the movement, they are the exception rather than the rule, and none of the Goddess feminists considered in this thesis express such a perspective. The focus upon models of Goddess in the singular

is not meant to carry with it a negative judgement with regard to the coherence and value of polytheistic understandings of female deity; for it is possible that such understandings may be closer to the theological truth than the alternatives. Rather, the decision to focus upon the Goddess is based upon a desire to theorize the coherence and trajectory of the Goddess feminist movement's metaphysical worldview; and it is, therefore, directed toward the prevailing trends in the movement's theological and metaphysical imaginations. Moreover the present study is also methodologically curtailed by the availability of Goddess feminist discursive material, the majority of which focuses upon the concept of a single Goddess. Both of these considerations warrant setting aside Goddess feminist polytheisms on what are primarily practical and heuristic grounds.

II GREAT GODDESS, MOTHER GODDESS, TRIPLE GODDESS

Certain metaphysical themes and reality-claims arise from a Goddess feminist understanding of the Goddess as the whole of nature, and these themes and reality-claims are informed by, and are also contingent upon, the prevailing models of the Goddess taking shape within Goddess feminism today: the models of the Great Goddess, the Mother Goddess and the Triple Goddess. In attempting to construct a Goddess feminist metaphysic, or rather in raising some of the conceptual and specifically philosophical implications of the recurrent Goddess feminist use of

245. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 133-35; Long, 'The One and the Many', pp. 18-20; Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, pp. 59-60.

certain metaphors, myths and models, a close examination and analysis of these models of the Goddess is vital.

It is important to note from the outset that the models of the Goddess to be considered in this section are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although valuable distinctions between the models may be drawn, and although these distinctions are occasionally emphasized so as to impart a qualitatively different sense and reality to each form of the Goddess,²⁴⁶ one may in principle accommodate these different understandings under a unifying concept or theory. Thus, a central assertion running throughout this section is that the model of the Great Goddess is conceptually defined and elucidated primarily by reference to the models of the Mother Goddess and Triple Goddess within Goddess feminism.

The Great Goddess as Mother Goddess

Drawing upon the work of Ken Wilber, Ursula King highlights a distinction that may be drawn between two models of female deity: the Great Goddess and the Mother Goddess. The Great Goddess is, she notes, a metaphysical construal of the nature of reality, a term that expresses the already acknowledged Goddess feminist claim that the whole of nature is one, a divine unity. The term 'Great Goddess' is, then, equivalent to the metaphysical understanding of the Goddess that this thesis is attempting to elucidate. In contrast, however, is the Mother Goddess, an understanding of the Goddess that is linked with a 'mythic-membership level of reality

246. King, *Women and Spirituality*, pp. 142-143.

when human beings were still close to the body, instincts and nature'.²⁴⁷ This latter model of the Goddess is patterned upon biological and female capacities relating to pregnancy, birthing and breast feeding, behavioural norms associated with motherhood, such as care, nurture and support, and broader naturalistic forces or principles, such as fertility, generativity and growth. A distinction between the Great Goddess and the Mother Goddess is, both Wilber and King argue, necessary and valuable in so far as the conflating of metaphysical insights with biological realities is understood as limiting, problematic, or simply an error. In Wilber's understanding, "primitive" fertility or immanent models of deity must be kept separate from more profound metaphysical and transcendent models. In King's understanding, although 'dimensions of immanence and transcendence can come close together, touch each other and be intertwined in the understanding of the Goddess, the human vision and conceptualisation of the Divine can never be solely grounded in women's experience of motherhood as exclusive starting point for reflection about ultimate reality.'²⁴⁸

Two critical objections may be made with reference to the foregoing distinction. First, the model of the Goddess as Mother may have metaphysical relevance; embodied maternal experiences may, as has already been suggested in Chapter One, serve as the basis for metaphysical as well as theological speculation. Second, the model of the Mother Goddess may, as a consequence of the first possibility, be successfully combined with the model of the Great Goddess. Indeed, in the theological imagination such an identification between the Mother Goddess and the Great Goddess is often already made, most notably in Sjöö and Mor's invocation of

247. Ibid, p. 143.

the Great Cosmic Mother. While King may be correct in asserting that the experience of motherhood cannot be the sole ground for reflection on ultimate reality, it would be difficult to demonstrate that it cannot be. And, from both a feminist and ecological perspective, the model of the Goddess as Mother is arguably one that needs to be experimented with, rather than quickly dismissed. Although it may be the case that the model of Goddess as Mother cannot serve as the sole basis for metaphysical and theological reflection on the nature of the world, it would be difficult to argue that such reflection can be any less significant or far-reaching as reflection upon the model of God as Father has been for Christian theology.

The Model of the Mother Goddess

The model of the Goddess as Mother is arguably the most widespread understanding of the Goddess to be found in Goddess feminism. Constituted of the biological and behavioural realities that are associated with motherhood, the model presents a number of wide-ranging implications relating to the manner in which deity, world, nature, self and other are ultimately conceived. Most notably the model emphasizes a specific understanding or revisioning of creativity, relationality and becoming. These three concepts are introduced in this section, although they are also revisited in later chapters. In many respects the model of the Goddess as Mother, when combined with or simply informed by the model of the Triple Goddess, serves as the core around which all subsequent theological reflection on such issues as cosmogony, nature, time and the human condition is founded.

248. Ibid.

The first implication of the model of the Mother Goddess relates to creativity. Reflection on the image, metaphor or model of the mother carries with it the sense that creation is itself an embodied and also specifically female act. And, when extrapolated to a macrocosmic scale, the model of the mother may theologically be understood to mean that the world is either born of the Goddess, that is, literally bodied forth from Her own physical essence, or is still contained within and supported by Her pregnant body/womb.

There is no definitive answer within Goddess feminist texts as to which of these models is privileged (the Goddess as giving birth to the world or the Goddess as pregnant with the world), and it may be reasonable to conclude that the issue is theologically unimportant. While the biological and spatial relations between mothers and their children pre- and post-birth are qualitatively different, theologically the model may be understood to emphasize that creation is contingent upon the female body and its continued presence and support in early life. Although it may be objected that once the child/world is born it is, in a sense, separate from its mother, the theological point is that the connections between the two remain in place; the child remains reliant upon the mother for its sustenance, growth and ultimate survival.

The model of the Goddess as Mother is one that is felt by most Goddess feminists to present a better account of the acts and processes of creation and creativity than the patriarchal alternatives. The application of a biological model to a cosmological and metaphysical level of reality may be questioned, but Goddess feminists proceed with the conviction that the model of mother is both more plausible and more attractive than that of the model of a male-identified deity who creates by an

act of will or word from nothing (*ex nihilo*). In reply to the criticism that such a biological model of creation runs foul of the requirement of a male contribution, and thus necessitates either two deities (male and female), or else a single androgynous, gynandrous or hermaphroditic deity, many theologians draw attention to the model of parthenogenesis; a model in which femaleness can reproduce itself in nature by recourse to a form of cloning process. The Goddess, in an analogous manner to this biological model, therefore, may be viewed as a self-reproducing Mother who requires no contribution from the male.²⁴⁹

Potentially interesting theological questions and conclusions follow from the model of the parthenogenetic Mother Goddess. For example, in what sense would the Goddess contain Herself within Herself during pregnancy? In what sense would the Goddess give birth to Herself as She generated the world? Would the Goddess literally be the world, in the sense that the world She gave birth to would be a duplicate of Herself? And would the Goddess be eternal in the sense that She could reproduce Herself infinitely, but temporally finite in the sense that each version of Herself would be equivalent to the life-span of the world? Obviously metaphors and models of the Goddess as a biological Mother can collapse into nonsense when one focuses upon the mechanisms and processes involved in human reproduction (e.g. material genitalia, sexual drives and motives, chromosome and DNA transfer etc.); and theologians such as Starhawk actually note, '[t]he Goddess, the whole, of course

249. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 2-3; Melissa Raphael, 'Thealogy and the Parthenogenetic Reproduction of Femaleness' in Michael A. Hayes, Wendy Porter and David Tombs (eds), *Religion and Sexuality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 213-225.

has no genitalia (or is all genitalia).²⁵⁰ However, this is not to say that the model of the mother cannot be conceptually meaningful as opposed to being simply spiritually and politically attractive as an image or metaphor. Many of the criticisms that are levelled against the theological model of the Goddess as Mother are ones which miss the conceptual implications and strengths of the model completely; and the criticisms fall instead upon the detrimental consequences for women that such a model entails.

Culpepper's critique of the Mother Goddess

Current feminist criticisms of the model of Goddess as Mother focus upon the manner in which the model may 'function to limit perception of the realities of many women.'²⁵¹ Thus, in Emily Culpepper's "sympathetic critique" of the Mother Goddess, it is asserted that women are not necessarily, or want, or ought to be mothers; pregnancy and birth are not the only forms of creativity open to women; the model of the mother may obscure alternative sexual practices (such as lesbianism); the model obscures the reality of single women (a corollary of the first assertion); the model is too often that of a white mother; and, finally, the model is not original enough.²⁵² Each of these points, save perhaps the last, is judged by Culpepper to be significant because it highlights the manner in which a single model may fail to represent the experiences and realities of countless individuals; and, in the process devalues or denigrates those experiences or realities. The critique emphasizes the particular ways in which a model may exclude, ignore or suppress diversity.

250. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

251. Culpepper, 'Contemporary Goddess Thealogy,' p. 61.

252. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-65.

In response to Culpepper's critique, it should be noted that most of the above points are readily acknowledged by Goddess feminists. Furthermore, all of the Goddess feminists considered in this thesis affirm, and go to considerable lengths to stress, the diversity of women's (and men's) lived experiences and realities. Why, therefore, one may ask, does the model of the mother remain? If the model is not applicable to some women's lives, why should it not be rejected? Why should it be in the interests of Goddess feminists to retain the model of the mother in the face of such criticism? One answer may be drawn from the fact that models by their nature exclude, and are not intended to capture the diversity of reality *in toto*. That is, models provide a lens through which to see the world, they are not meant to summarize the world. What Culpepper and others such as Pam Lunn fail to do, when they draw attention to what a model excludes, is to emphasize what it is that the model does include.²⁵³ Specifically, they fail to note what the maternal model highlights within the context of an entire worldview.

While Culpepper is correct in pointing out that not all women are, or want to be, mothers, the primary theological point of the model may be understood to revolve around the fact that, as the feminist theologian Donna Wilshire notes, '*everyone - female and male - has had a mother and would like still to have a good one at the center of his or her life.*'²⁵⁴ The model of the mother may theologically be understood to direct attention to such issues as the conditions of one's existence, the nature of biological and existential contingency, and ultimately relationality (in the broadest sense of the term), rather than simply being a prescriptive model for human behaviour

253. Lunn, 'Do Women Need the GODDESS?', pp. 17-38.

(as Culpepper implies). Also, in contrast to the patriarchally associated theses that suggest we are in a sense “thrown” into the world (Heidegger), or else that the world emerges from the self (Kant), the model of the mother may powerfully prompt reflection on the idea that everything emerges from, exists in a relationship to, and is often dependent upon, something existing prior to it (a mother, world, nature or Goddess); an insight that may be understood to far outweigh any possible negative associations connected with the model.

For theologians, the model of the Mother is a powerful means of drawing attention to the bodily realities, connections, dependencies and relationships that shape not only human life but the whole of existence, and which are also evoked by the category of materiality. As the psychologist of religion and theological commentator Naomi Goldenberg elucidates:

Since every human life begins in the body of a woman, the image of woman, whether thought of as mother or Goddess, always points to an early history of connectedness: Mother-*mater*-matter-matrix. ‘Woman’ is the stuff out of which all people are made. In the beginning was her flesh, and, after that beginning, she continues to suggest human connection to and dependence upon the outside world.²⁵⁵

Theologians such as Sjöö and Mor expand upon this understanding of the mother at length by developing the notion that the Goddess is the cosmogonic womb/matrix out of which everything arises.²⁵⁶ Starhawk prompts reflection on the model of the Goddess as mother as a means of affirming the ground upon which one stands, a power that is ‘beyond the triumphs and failures of your own personal mother, that allows you to know in yourself the movements of the great powers of life and

254. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 116.

255. Goldenberg, ‘The Return of the Goddess,’ p. 154.

death, of nurturing and limitation, of which your own infancy, your own mother, was only one expression.²⁵⁷ And Christ, although she ultimately opts for terms derived from philosophical theology to evoke her understanding of the Goddess, both draws attention to the significance of images and models of motherhood in the past and supports the relevance of such images in the present.²⁵⁸ It is also arguable that Christ's characterization of the Goddess as 'intelligent embodied love' and 'the ground of all being' is itself a more complex, abstract way of saying that the Goddess is a Mother.²⁵⁹ As Christ claims at one point in her theology:

Our lives are dependent in more ways than we can begin to imagine on support and nurture from the web of life, from the earth body. The first gift that we are given as human beings is our birth, and the second is nurture, both food and love. Without these gifts, we would not be here, and we would not survive. Embodied intelligent love *really* is the ground of our being.²⁶⁰

Objections to the model of mother, such as Culpepper's, rarely give complete credit to how such a model may function within a larger religious framework. For Goddess feminism, the model of the mother may be productively understood to be one part of a broader, albeit largely implicit, concept of the Goddess. The motherhood of the Goddess is a part of an emergent theological system of ideas, myths and models, rather than an exclusive means of apprehending the divine. It is quite feasible for Goddess feminism to attend to the diversity of women's lives, and address different forms of creativity to those of birth, without having to abandon the arguably oppressive model of the Mother Goddess. Theologians and philosophers in

256. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*.

257. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 79.

258. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 50-53, 91-93.

259. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-109.

260. *Ibid.*, p. 136. Christ's emphasis.

traditionally patriarchal religious traditions are beginning to consider ‘how the world as the divine body is better envisaged as an actually or potentially pregnant body.’²⁶¹

A strength of the Goddess feminist understanding of the Goddess may rest upon the fact that the model of the mother is both appropriate to its religious and woman-centred worldview and also applicable to a broad range of theological and metaphysical concerns.

In Culpepper’s defence, it is significant that she comes remarkably close to the metaphysics of the model of divine motherhood when she notes that it has

more than simply an anthropomorphic meaning for many individuals. They see “Mother” as much in the model of seasonal changes, the cycles of plant and animal and human life, cycles of moon, sun and stars, and geological processes as in the reproductive process of human females. They see all such cycles *as metaphorically analogous with each other*, all participating in the interwoven rhythmic pulse of life.²⁶²

It is this understanding of the Goddess as Mother that is the central concern of this thesis. Culpepper contends that such a model is not suitably new or original to concern women (it ‘is the ghost of the One God/Father and the mindset of monotheism’).²⁶³ Contra Culpepper, this thesis suggests that such a model is a new and radical challenge to the understandings of the deity-world relationship that have dominated the Western religious imagination. The difference of opinion between Culpepper and contemporary Goddess feminists is, however, based upon how the theological task is ultimately envisaged. Speaking for her times, Culpepper sees ‘theology at its best when it is understood as part of and rooted in the broader

261. James Hart, ‘Models of God: Evangel-Logic’ in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, p. 34; cf. McFague, *Model’s of God*, pp. 97-123.

262. Culpepper, ‘Contemporary Goddess Theology,’ p. 55.

263. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

activities of consciousness raising, sympathetic criticism, and political activism.’²⁶⁴ The present thesis is concerned with the power of feminist theology to reconceive the world, to propose alternative understandings of deity, nature and humanity, and to express post-patriarchal readings of the relationship between the sacred and the world. Culpepper’s understanding emphasizes a praxis dimension of theology, this project emphasizes a theoretical dimension. The two dimensions are, however, inseparably entwined with one another.

The Model of the Triple Goddess

Building upon the theological and metaphysical issues introduced by the models of the Great Goddess as One and the Goddess as Mother, it is now necessary to expand this survey to encompass the model of the Triple Goddess; a model that provides a number of critical insights and resources with regard to the manner in which Goddess feminists employ metaphysical thinking.

The model of the Triple Goddess is comprised of three idealized or normative stages of female development: the youthful and independent Maiden (or Virgin), the fecund and relational Mother, and the degenerative and wise Crone. This understanding of the Goddess, according to Donna Wilshire, is ‘a personification of characteristics and potentials shared by every woman who has ever lived.’²⁶⁵ The model is noted to be a globally recurrent one, although theological focus is often placed upon either Greek or Celtic models (Persephone-Demeter-Hecate, Hebe-Hera-Hecate, or the triune Brigid or Morrigan). It is emphasized as of theological

264. Ibid., p. 68.

significance that groupings of three goddesses are widespread (e.g. three Norns, three Fates, three Furies) and that ‘many single goddesses can be perceived to be triple upon investigation’.²⁶⁶ It is also often asserted that the model of the Triple Goddess is the precursor and/or basis for all subsequent religious trinities.²⁶⁷ Today the model of the Goddess as Triple is, although primarily associated with Wiccan forms of Goddess feminism, an integral part of the theological imagination.²⁶⁸

Various characteristics, traits and modes of being-in-the-world are associated with the three aspects of the Triple Goddess, although, as Donna Wilshire observes, no aspect ‘is meant to be perceived as having a fixed identity that keeps it from sharing to some extent, the identity of the other two.’²⁶⁹ That is, the three aspects of the Goddess, Maiden-Mother-Crone, are theologically understood not only to be post-patriarchal models of female identity, but also a dynamic whole: three aspects of a unity. And, while extensive theological energy has been invested into charting the character and meaning of each of these different aspects of the Triple Goddess, this thesis is concerned with how the model functions as a dynamic whole. Notably, the model of the Triple Goddess is understood to have metaphysical significance because it is theologically understood to illuminate broader patterns occurring within the whole construed as nature and the world. The Triple Goddess emphasizes not only

265. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 23.

266. Moorey, *The Goddess*, p. 29.

267. Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), pp. 1018-1020.

268. For a cross-section of perspectives on the Triple Goddess, see Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*; Conway, *Maiden, Mother, Crone*; Barbara Walker, *The Skeptical Feminist: Discovering the Virgin, Mother and Crone* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Moorey, *The Goddess*, pp. 28-40.

269. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 25.

changes, cycles and transitions in terms of a female life-pattern, but also with respect to cosmology and ecology (lunar and seasonal cycles) and existential and metaphysical processes and states (birth/emergence, growth/generation, decay/degeneration, death and rebirth/ regeneration).

Just as Emily Culpepper drew attention to how the term 'Mother' may theologically possess a broader meaning than is extended to it within everyday usage, so too may the female life-pattern, as identified with the model of the Triple Goddess, be understood to be analogous to patterns and regularities occurring elsewhere within nature. Thus, images of the Triple Goddess are closely associated with the cycles of the moon (Maiden as the waxing moon, Mother as the full, Crone as the waning) and the movement of the seasons (Maiden as Spring, Mother as Summer, Crone as Autumn). Theologically significant affinities are noted to exist between the phases of the moon and the female menstrual cycle and, in turn, all of these Goddess-Woman-Nature patterns are linked with transitional cycles of the broadest possible (and, therefore, metaphysical) scope. In Wilshire's terms, 'the shape-shifting, all-encompassing Goddess [as Triple] is the personification of the unending, unbroken sacred cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth found throughout the cosmos. Nature is experienced as the Goddess's ever-changing, cycling, divine Body-Self-Wisdom.'²⁷⁰

The Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle, theologically outlined in the model of the Triple Goddess, is understood by Goddess feminists to illuminate aspects of the functioning whole of nature, and arguably also possesses a theological meaning equivalent to that of a metaphysical principle. All of the Goddess feminists considered in this thesis

view the patterns, phases and cycles of the Triple Goddess to be indicative of processes occurring throughout nature, although some variance may be evidenced in the manner in which the model is ultimately conceived. Moreover, all Goddess feminists affirm the importance of ceremonies and rituals that mark and celebrate those processes.

It is important to note that, as theologian Teresa Moorey elucidates, in addition to the three primary aspects of 'the Triple Goddess, a fourth aspect may be discerned, hard to define, mysterious, and yet suggested by the trio.'²⁷¹ This fourth aspect represents the hidden, or logically opaque, death and rebirth aspects of the model. In lunar terms it is the dark moon, in seasonal terms it is winter, and in terms of the female life stages it signifies death itself. In many theological interpretations this aspect is often merged with that of the Crone, although there are good reasons for keeping it separate. For example, the merging of the two aspects appertains to the Crone a disproportionate segment of what may be termed the yearly round and the lunar cycle; while, in terms of purely metaphysical categories, the Death-Rebirth aspect of the model is conceptually separable from those of growth, fullness and decay. The Death-Rebirth aspect of the model may be understood to be a liminal zone, a boundary that is both mysterious and yet also theologically essential to the functioning of the whole.

The metaphysic suggested by the Triple Goddess and the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle will be expanded upon and evaluated in greater depth in subsequent sections of this thesis. The primary point to make here is that the model of the Goddess as Triple

270. Ibid., p. 22.

introduces themes relating to transitional change (both in women and the world) and also cyclical recurrence within a unified whole (whether understood as Goddess, nature or world). The Goddess, according to this model, may be viewed as always changing, while at the same time manifest within recurrent patterns. Reflection upon the earlier models of the Goddess may be understood to raise a number of equally significant metaphysical themes. Thus, the plurality of goddesses may serve to evoke a notion of diversity and difference within nature. The Great Goddess may be understood to thematize the sacred whole, or rather the unity of nature, while the Goddess as Mother raises issues of contingency, emergence and relationality. Each of these themes has a bearing upon a theological metaphysic, and each of these themes may be accommodated within the sweep of Goddess feminist concept of deity. A further step toward unifying these models of deity may be taken by reflecting upon the Goddess feminist treatment of the categories of immanence and transcendence, pantheism and theism.

III ORGANICISM AND UNITY: THE BODY OF THE GODDESS

In the preceding two sections a number of core theological models were introduced, and specifically models that outlined the metaphysical aspects of Goddess feminism's attitudes to monotheism and polytheism. It is the purpose of this section to further examine the religio-philosophical underpinnings of those models; an endeavour which entails clarifying the Goddess feminist understanding of the relationship between the Goddess and the world, and specifically the Goddess feminist engagement with the

271. Moorey, *The Goddess*, p. 36.

concepts of immanence and pantheism. The Goddess feminist concept of deity is, it is argued within the course of this section, a pantheistic one; an understanding of the Goddess that is informed by a theological root-metaphor of organism (the notion that the Goddess *as* nature is alive) and a sense that the world and the divine are a unity (a notion that identifies Goddess feminism with certain other forms of pantheism). Although areas of conceptual ambiguity and tension may arise between the intersecting theological models and the categories of immanence and pantheism, and in particular with regard to the question of whether the Goddess is personal, it is suggested that many of the possible contradictions and difficulties may be reconciled. This chapter proceeds with the understanding that immanence and pantheism may be interpreted in a manner that is highly compatible with Goddess feminism's models of deity and reality-claims.

It is noteworthy that both immanence and pantheism have tended to receive a negative valuation within the major (masculinist) theological and religio-philosophical traditions of the West. That is, transcendent aspects of deity (e.g. those that emphasize the distinctiveness, remoteness, otherness or superiority of deity) have generally been privileged over those that emphasize the immanence, proximity, presence or in-dwelling of the divine. Furthermore, religious positions which advocate the identification of deity with the world, that is, positions which push the immanence of deity towards its ultimate conclusion or formalization (pantheism), have tended to be quickly dismissed as flawed, misguided and/or vacuous. Some academics have noted that this dismissal of pantheism is perhaps revealingly over-rapid, and it is also pointed out that relatively little intellectual rigour has been

brought to bear upon pantheism *per se*.²⁷² However, as a religio-philosophical position that (in some sense) identifies deity with the world, pantheism seemingly constitutes an understanding of the divine that is at odds with the prevailing models and concepts of deity in the West. The Goddess feminist engagement with pantheistic thinking, therefore, requires careful exposition.

Many of the theological models introduced in the preceding section draw heavily upon what may be termed a common root-metaphor (a metaphor of organism) and a sense that the world constitutes a divine unity. By drawing attention to this metaphor and sense of unity it is possible to emphasize the manner in which Goddess feminists conceive of the Goddess as immanent and, more specifically, pantheistic in character. For example, in Goddess feminism deity is not simply conceived as being embodied in the world, but rather the whole of nature, the cosmos and the world are theologically conceived as being the living body of the Goddess. As Starhawk observes, 'Goddess is the living body of a living cosmos, the awareness that infuses matter and the energy that produces change.'²⁷³ Or, as she affirms elsewhere, the Goddess is 'one living organism.'²⁷⁴ Carol Christ, in turn, echoes these sentiments when she notes that, '[a]s the organism uniting the cells of the earth body, the Goddess is the firm foundation of changing life.'²⁷⁵ Each of these claims stresses that the

272. Grace Jantzen draws attention to the rapid dismissal of pantheism in *Becoming Divine*, pp. 267-268. Michael Levine makes similar observations in *Pantheism: A Non-theistic Concept of Deity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) and his work can be read a sustained attempt to address this academic failure.

273. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

274. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

275. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 106.

Goddess is theologically conceived as a living organism or body; an organism or body that serves to unite the diverse and changing elements of the world.

Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor expand upon the above themes by claiming that the first religions of the world were founded upon an organicist understanding of deity and world.²⁷⁶ These religions, often conceived of as the matrifocal ancestors of the newly emergent Goddess feminist movement, are claimed by Sjöö and Mor to have expressed a worldview within which there existed no separation between spirit and matter, or spirituality and politics. In this worldview the Goddess was neither a mode of consciousness, a symbol or archetype, or a deity accessible only to a privileged few. Rather, the Goddess was understood to be immanent throughout the world; an understanding of deity that is considered particularly significant by Goddess feminists, as well as Pagans, in the modern world.²⁷⁷ In Teresa Moorey's words, immanence 'implies that deity exists within matter, that all is divine, all sacred.'²⁷⁸ In contrast, patriarchal models of deity are theologically understood to have distanced the sacred from matter and the world; they have devalued and disenchanted nature (patriarchally conceived as everything non-human) to a point at which its domination and exploitation is legitimated (or else is rendered morally and religiously trivial); and have placed access to the divine into the hands of trained elites and regimented hierarchical institutions. For most Goddess feminists, however, the Goddess is

276. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 50-54.

277. See Dennis D. Carpenter, 'Emergent Nature Spirituality: An Examination of the Major Spiritual Contours of the Contemporary Pagan Worldview' in James R. Lewis (ed.), *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996); Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 136-138; Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London: Hurst, 1997).

278. Moorey, *The Goddess*, p. 3.

conceived as accessible to all and present throughout nature. As Clare Prout expresses it, the Goddess is

[n]ot an archetype or an idea but a sentient female energy that is accessible to and part of women and men (and everything else) as individuals. I can approach Her on a Hammersmith bound train or at Avebury. She is there when I sit and think at the end of the day, when I protest against animal exports, or when I attend an elaborate ritual. I do the last less and less because of my increasing discomfort with these growing systems of exclusivity, where someone who is “more experienced”, i.e. “better than” me, tells me what the Goddess is saying.²⁷⁹

For Prout, the growing exclusivist trends in many rituals do not conform with her own sense of the meaning of a wholly immanent Goddess; and this is a concern that is shared by other Goddess feminists. In a cautionary manner Starhawk warns that ‘the Goddess could be taken as an object of external worship in a context no less hierarchical than that of any religion of patriarchy.’²⁸⁰ Her point being that undue focus upon the symbol of the Goddess could result in people forgetting ‘*the principles it represents.*’²⁸¹ That is, for Starhawk, the concept of immanence possesses a theological and metaphysical meaning that must not fall from view. Immanence is a principle, or rather a construal of reality, that has consequences for both ethics and praxis. While these issues are examined in greater detail in Chapter Five of this study, Sjöö and Mor effectively point toward the ethical, practical and theological meaning of immanence when they assert that the Goddess does not

“live” solely in elite separatist retreats, dancing naked in the piney woods under a white and well-fed moon. The Goddess at this moment is starving to death in refugee camps, with a skeletal child clutched to her dry nipples. The Goddess at this moment is undergoing a routine strip-and-squat search inside an American prison. The Goddess is on welfare, raising her children in a ghetto next to a

279. *Wood and Water*, no. 52, Autumn Equinox, 1995, p. 8.

280. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 11.

281. *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

freeway interchange that fills their blood cells and neurons with lead. The Goddess is an eight-year-old girl being used for the special sexual thrills of visiting businessmen in a Brazilian brothel.²⁸²

Or, to put the point even more explicitly, ‘the Goddess IS the world - the Goddess is *in* the world. And *nobody* can escape the world.’²⁸³

One may note at this point that there is a conceptual difference between the assertion that “the Goddess *is* the world” and “the Goddess is *in* the world.” Most contemporary theological positions express the view that deity is (in some sense) present or active within the world. That is, many modern theologies articulate a form of panentheism (literally, all is in God) and endeavour to balance the transcendence of deity with certain forms of divine immanence. However, it is only pantheism that contends that deity is the world, and only pantheism tends to reject the notion that deity is radically other or superior to the world. Pantheism may retain certain forms of transcendence.²⁸⁴ For example, all pantheists are likely to acknowledge that in certain respects deity is mysterious, logically opaque, beyond human understanding (either beyond the human capacity to know, or beyond the human capacity to describe) and, therefore, epistemically transcendent. What is rejected by pantheists, however, is the idea that deity is ontologically transcendent of the world. In panentheistic frameworks, which attempt to accommodate a form of divine immanence, a notion of divine ontological otherness or superiority to the world is retained as necessary. For pantheists, by contrast, any ontological distinction between deity and world is rejected as either invidious or superfluous.

282. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 417-8

283. *Ibid.*, p. 418.

284. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 93-113.

As already noted, in Goddess feminism a pantheistic understanding of deity manifests itself primarily in the identification of the Goddess and the world as a living organism. The Goddess is not elevated above the world, either in the sense that She can be said to have authority or mastery over the world, or in the sense that She is essentially, substantially or ontologically distinct from the world. The world is literally the Goddess's mode of being. Her cycles, rhythms and processes are the world's cycles, rhythms and processes; or, as Christ observes, '[t]he Goddess cannot change the natural cycles of birth, death and renewal that form the context of all life because the Goddess does not stand outside the "laws of nature." The cycles of nature are her cycles.'²⁸⁵

However, is this understanding of the Goddess adequate? Are there unanswered questions surrounding a Goddess feminist engagement with pantheism? As Christ cogently asks, '[i]f the Goddess is found in nature, is she simply an image for the sum total of natural processes? Is it being denied that the Goddess is in some sense a personality who cares about the world?'²⁸⁶ It is to a consideration of these questions that we turn next.

In one of the few systematic treatments of pantheism to be located within the philosophy of religion, Michael Levine examines the coherence and meaning of pantheism as a religious orientation which equates deity with a non-personal and all-inclusive sacred unity (or Unity). He notes that,

With some exceptions, pantheism is non-theistic but is not atheistic. It is a form of non-theistic monotheism, or non-personal theism. It is the belief in one God

285. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 106.

286. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

[sic], a God identical to the all-inclusive unity, but it does not believe God is a person or anything like a person.²⁸⁷

In a lengthy analysis, Levine draws attention to the fact that many of the conceptual problems that have historically been associated with pantheism are in fact the product of a specifically theistic understanding of what counts as deity (i.e. a personal deity). Furthermore, attempts to incorporate pantheism into existing theological frameworks often flounder precisely because pantheism does not so much presuppose theism as deny it. Pantheism is a live religious option, but it is an option which has been greatly misunderstood in the history and philosophy of Western religion.²⁸⁸

Levine makes a number of significant points concerning pantheism(s) in general; and these are points that are also relevant to the task of clarifying a Goddess feminist understanding of the Goddess, as well as addressing the question of whether the Goddess, in Christ's words, in some sense cares about the world. First, pantheists rarely view deity and the world as synonymous with one another; although they may have the same sense and reference according to a certain interpretation of each.²⁸⁹ For Goddess feminists too, it is not clear that Goddess and the world mean exactly the same thing; terms such as Goddess, cosmos, nature and world are not completely interchangeable with one another in theology. It is also arguable that referring to the world as the Goddess is to say something significant about the world, rather than simply using an equivalent term. Second, the notion of an all-inclusive unity is not the same as all-inclusiveness *per se*; such an assertion would simply, and somewhat

287. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 2-3.

288. Ibid. Chapters 1 & 2 of Levine, *Pantheism* outline philosophical and theological misunderstandings of pantheism.

289. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 28.

vacuously, claim that ‘everything is (of course) all-inclusively everything.’²⁹⁰ For Goddess feminists to assert that the world is an all-inclusive unity is to say something significant about it. Third, the main point ‘is that the pantheist believes things to be true of the all-inclusive Unity that is the world that non-pantheists do not.’²⁹¹ Since, for the pantheist, the world is both divine and unified, comparable points may be made with respect to the Goddess feminist attitude to the world. Divinity (Goddess) is the all-inclusive whole, the everything that is appropriately unified, and without the unifying element the all-inclusive whole probably could not be considered to be either divine or a unity.

Levine’s treatment of pantheism clarifies Goddess feminism’s emergent concept of deity. Indeed, most of the concerns that mark pantheism as the major religious alternative to theism are shared by Goddess feminists. In common with pantheism (as defined by Levine), Goddess feminism is biased toward affectivity and avoids over-conceptualizing the feeling content of religion in the manner to which theism has tended to.²⁹² Pantheism often finds expression through mysticism (particularly nature mysticism) and the arts (e.g. poetry and music)²⁹³ and it can occur ‘among individuals who reject both theism and atheism as equally unviable for making sense of the cosmic status quo’.²⁹⁴ Pantheism may ideally be practiced

290. Ibid., p. 29.

291. Ibid., p. 30.

292. Ibid., pp. 61-62. See Chapter 1.I of this thesis for an account of the affective biases of Goddess feminism.

293. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 43-44. See the Introduction and Chapter 1.I. of this thesis for accounts of Goddess feminism’s favoured media of expression.

294. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 67.

through ceremonies and rituals which attend to the rhythms and cycles of nature;²⁹⁵ favours an attitude of celebration, reverence and respect for divinity, rather than one of worship or prayer;²⁹⁶ and, most significantly, advocates an understanding of deity as a unity which organizes the diversity of the world. Critical attention, however, must also be focused upon the ways in which Goddess feminism's emergent concept of deity seemingly diverges from Levine's account of pantheism. While Goddess feminism does express a sense of a divine unity, it also claims, at various points within its theological speculations, that the Goddess is personal; a point of view that is at odds with the account of pantheism developed by Levine.

IV THE ACTION OF THE GODDESS: AGENCY OR UNIFYING PRINCIPLE?

It is important to note that there is no one pantheism and no one meaning of either unity or divinity at work within pantheism; there are alternative pantheisms just as there are alternative theisms.²⁹⁷ Levine acknowledges that there may be personal forms of pantheism, and it may be difficult to ascertain the exact meaning of any particular pantheism one encounters. The task that must be addressed at this point, however, concerns clarifying what form of pantheism it is that Goddess feminism favours. If the Goddess is conceived as active in the world, in what sense is the Goddess active? Is the Goddess to be conceived of as 'a "minded" Being that possesses the characteristic properties of a "person," such as having "intentional"

295. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 311f. See also, Harold W. Wood Jr., 'Modern Pantheism as an Approach to Environmental Ethics,' *Environmental Ethics*, no. 7, 1985, pp. 151-163.

296. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 313-328.

297. Ibid., pp. 25-26. See also, Paul Harrison, *The Elements of Pantheism: Understanding the Divinity in Nature and the Universe* (Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd, 1999), pp. 1-38.

states, and the associated capacities like the ability to make decisions’?²⁹⁸ This is the position that is typically denied by most pantheists, and it is notable that Christ asks if the same thing is being denied about the Goddess. Is the Goddess feminist concept of deity best described in terms of personal agency, in terms of non-personal forces and principles, or else by some other means?

For Christ, ‘the Goddess is intelligent, aware, alive, a kind of “person” with whom we can enter into relation.’²⁹⁹ While she views pantheism as attractive, Christ also experiences the Goddess as a personal presence in her life; a presence that she once referred to as Aphrodite but now defines as the ‘intelligent embodied love that is the ground of all being.’³⁰⁰ Monica Sjöö, in turn, experiences the Goddess and the Earth as the living sacred body of a/the Mother, who is also a great spirit being, conscious, intelligent and supremely active/creative.³⁰¹ And Starhawk observes that, when she is in an ‘anthropomorphic mood’, she likes to think of the Goddess as, for example, ‘trying to amuse herself by creating moments of beauty, pleasure, humour and drama’; an activity that attributes to the Goddess a personality, desires and intentional states (e.g. the desire to play and the intentional state of evolving humans to aid in her play).³⁰² Each of these accounts of the Goddess draws upon a model of personal agency and utilizes traits commonly associated with personhood (e.g. awareness, consciousness and intelligence), and these are associations that are recurrent throughout theological discourse. Unfortunately, it is not altogether clear

298. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 2.

299. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 106.

300. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

301. Sjöö, *Matriarchy Research & Reclaim Network*, no. 82, Autumn Equinox, p. 7.

302. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

what is meant when personal models are invoked in Goddess feminism, or, more importantly, it is unclear how the personal models are meant to relate to the non-personal models that are also deployed (such as those of the cave, cauldron, womb and web of life to be outlined in the following chapters).

Both Christ's notion of "love" and Starhawk's idea of the Goddess attempting to "amuse herself" may be associated with the traits of a human person, but it is uncertain if these traits are meant to imply that the Goddess has a personality in the strictest sense of the term. In Christ's case it is notable that the personality of the Goddess is not developed in terms other than those that may be derived from her notion of "embodied love," and the concept of embodied love is itself defined almost exclusively in terms of the power of the Goddess (e.g. '[t]he power of the Goddess is the intelligent embodied love that is the ground of all being.').³⁰³ Here love is arguably far closer to being a form of metaphysical principle, a universal drive, energy or force, rather than an aspect of a personality (i.e. one which is subject to a complex range of desires, decision-making processes, dispositions and intentions). Embodied love admittedly says something significant about the nature of the Goddess: that the Goddess "favours" certain states of affairs rather than others, but it is not a concept that is necessarily contingent upon a personality or personal agency. Christ's use of a personal model of deity in her theology is more complex and nuanced than a cursory reading would suggest, and the same is arguably equally true of Sjöö and Starhawk.

Christ, Sjöö and Starhawk's theologies are not only ambivalent with regard to the use of personal models but they also seem to be attempting to move beyond them.

While Goddess feminism draws upon many mythological narratives, and outlines the personalities of individual goddesses in considerable detail, there is a certain reticence about ascribing a personality to the Goddess conceived as the whole of nature. As will be shown in the following chapter, several models of the Goddess are theologically understood to reconcile, transcend or unite binary oppositions and dualisms (e.g. in the cycling cauldron/womb of the Goddess oppositional thinking becomes meaningless). It is likewise arguable that a personal-impersonal dualism would also be viewed with suspicion by theologians.

Christ suggests that many contemporary moral and theological problems arise directly from an anthropocentric attitude and an unwillingness to think of intelligence and consciousness in a broader context.³⁰⁴ In common with certain other feminists, philosophers and religious theorists, she proposes a rethinking of such binaries as active-passive and personal-impersonal (as well as immanence-transcendence, monotheism-polytheism) by utilizing the metaphysical theories of process philosophy and (Christian) process theology.³⁰⁵ Christ claims that process frameworks are an

303. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 107.

304. Christ, 'Rethinking Theology and Nature' in Diamond and Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World*, pp. 58-69. See also, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 98-101, 113-123.

305. Process philosophy and its main religious interpretation process theology is essentially a development of the metaphysical framework of the mathematician and philosopher A. N. Whitehead. Echoing principles to be located within the works of G. W. F. Hegel, Henri Bergson, and the early Greek philosophers (notably Heraclitus), Whitehead's system of thought has proved to be an influential means of envisioning the fundamental nature of the cosmos, God, and the human relationship to God, from the second half the twentieth century onwards. Defended and expanded upon by such thinkers as John Cobb, David Griffin, Charles Hartshorne, Bernard Loomer and Schubert Ogden, process theology constitutes a concept-laden, internally coherent metaphysical framework; and, despite the fact that Whitehead was resistant to his ideas being classed as a system, process thought has been developed into a paradigmatic example of a systematic philosophical theology. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978 [1929]). For a succinct introduction to Whitehead's life and

attractive and constructive theological resource precisely because they bypass the received dualisms of Western patriarchal theology by recourse to a philosophy of organism. Process thought accounts for how the Goddess can relate to a finite changing world, in a manner analogous to how an organism relates to individual cells, and explains exactly why the Goddess cannot intervene in the world.³⁰⁶

In terminology taken directly from process theology Christ explains that the power of the Goddess is persuasive, rather than coercive, and, over the course of two pages of theological discourse, juxtaposes and conflates a process metaphysical view of God with her own understanding of the power of the Goddess.³⁰⁷ One encounters a clear convergence between process theological and Goddess feminist reality-claims in such phrases as:

As the ground of being and life, God attempts to “persuade” or inspire all beings to seek the greatest harmony of the whole. ... Those who violate the web of life do so by ignoring or denying the “persuasion” that God is offering them. When this happens, God’s body is diminished. God suffers.³⁰⁸

The Goddess is always attempting to persuade us to love intelligently, concretely, and inclusively. When we do so, the “will of the Goddess” is achieved, and she rejoices. ... When we violate the web of life, we fail to recognize, ignore, or deny the persuasions of the Goddess. The body of the Goddess is desecrated. She suffers.³⁰⁹

work, see Frederick Ferré, *Being and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Metaphysics* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 258-273. Cf. J. B. Cobb, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969); J. B. Cobb and D. R. Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd, 1977); D. R. Griffin, *God & Religion in the Postmodern World* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989); Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Reality: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948) and *Man’s Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1964); Bernard Loomer, ‘The Size of God’, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 8, no. 1, Jan 1987, pp. 20-51.

306. Ibid., pp. 105-106.

307. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 106-107.

308. Ibid., p. 105.

309. Ibid., p. 106.

Christ explicitly claims that she is drawing on the basic insights of process theology, as opposed to accepting the process metaphysical framework in its totality. She acknowledges that she has been most influenced by the process theology of Charles Hartshorne, the works of John Cobb and his feminist students Marjorie Suchocki and Catherine Keller, and expresses concerns about some of the overly atomistic aspects of Whitehead's philosophy.³¹⁰

However, despite qualifying her theological understanding of the agency and power of the Goddess in process metaphysical terms, Christ fails to clarify how her process understanding of the Goddess coheres with a number of other theological resources that she chooses to appropriate.³¹¹ Moreover, it is also arguable that there exists within the background of her work the moral/personal and ontologically transcendent deity of Christian process theology; a deity from whom the Goddess needs to be thoroughly disentangled for a number of feminist theological reasons.³¹² Although there are striking affinities between a Goddess feminist view of nature as the living body of the Goddess and the process metaphysical understanding of God and

310. Ibid., p. 202, note: 57.

311. Notably, borrowing from the work of the Christian theologian Paul Tillich, Christ deploys the concept/metaphor 'the ground of all being' to help describe the power of the Goddess without also explaining how this theological evocation of being can be reconciled with the process metaphysical prioritization of becoming. Christ admits that she interprets the concept of the 'ground of all being' differently to Tillich, specifically because she is using a process ontology, but it remains unclear how the two concepts interconnect with one another in her systematic theology.

312. Process theologians do not completely reject the concept of ontological transcendence from their metaphysical understanding of God. Rather, by a number of different philosophical routes, they account for how God possesses both transcendent and immanent qualities. Whitehead, for example, despite wishing to emphasize the immanence of God, claims that the primordial nature of God is in some sense ontologically transcendent of what is actual; and, in Charles Hartshorne's terms, the God of process theology is panentheistic (rather than theistic or pantheistic); God is world-inclusive (unlike the God of classical theism) but also transcends

world as an organism, there are also many tensions that need to be resolved. Process metaphysics must be adapted, rather than adopted, by feminist theologians if it is to cohere with the experiences, metaphysical commitments, reality-claims, and values of most Goddess feminists.³¹³

Christ's utilization of process theology does not successfully address all of the Christian, theistic and theologically problematic elements embedded within the process metaphysical framework. Her references to the Goddess as 'a kind of "person"', as utilizing 'persuasion' and as 'intelligent embodied love' remain obscure and in need of further philosophical clarification.³¹⁴ It is significant, though, that her theological concern to escape from a theistic understanding of a personal deity is shared by other Goddess feminists. Sjöö and Mor, for example, propose an ontology wherein '[e]verything touches everything in the real world, [and where] there are no borders', in an effort to avoid the patriarchal errors of a subject-object dualism;³¹⁵ while Starhawk admits that her own use of a personal model is the product of an 'anthropomorphic mood,' rather than a belief that the Goddess is a kind of person, and her theological attention focuses primarily upon the concepts of immanence,

the world in certain respects (unlike the deity of pantheism). This process theological use of transcendence is unacceptable to most Goddess feminists.

313. As Ian Barbour has commented, with reference to the value of process metaphysics for theistic religious traditions, 'the theologian should be cautious about identifying religious beliefs with any closed metaphysical system. ... The theologian must adapt, not adopt, a metaphysics; many of the process insights can be accepted without accepting the total Whiteheadian scheme.' Barbour, *Myths, Models & Paradigms*, p. 170. This insight is, I suggest, equally applicable to feminist theologians.

314. Christ is, at the time of writing this thesis, developing a work that clarifies her process metaphysical position by recourse to the process theology of Charles Hartshorne. It remains uncertain, however, as to what extent she will adapt her process theology so that that it coheres with the experiences, metaphysical commitments and values of such Goddess feminists as Starhawk, Donna Wilshire and Monica Sjöö. Personal conversation with Carol Christ at 'Goddess Studies Now!', University of Bristol, 27th March 2001.

interconnection and community as a means of delineating the meaning of the Goddess.³¹⁶ More expansively, Donna Wilshire asserts that the ‘Goddess is a model of seeing all extremes, not as struggling opposites but as many complementary moments – all potentially wonderful – in one cycling, changing continuum of experiences.’³¹⁷ None of these theological positions advocates an understanding of the Goddess that is personal in a theistic sense, and many Goddess feminist concepts of deity may, I contend, be constructively interpreted in terms of Levine’s non-personal account of pantheism. Further comments may now be made upon the nature of a Goddess feminist pantheism.

The Goddess as a pantheistic Unity

Central to Levine’s account of pantheism is the concept of unity. Understanding how Goddess feminism conceives of unity is vital to the task of delineating the emergent Goddess feminist concept of deity and metaphysic. Levine notes that within any particular pantheism several possible explanations of unity may be at work, and these different explanations may be closely entwined or even mutually entail one another. In a brief typology he argues that unity may be ‘interpreted (1) ontologically; (2) naturalistically - in terms of ordering principle(s), force(s) or plan(s); (3) substantively - where this is distinguished from “ontologically”; and (4) genealogically - in terms of

315. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 428.

316. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 22; cf. ‘Power, Authority, and Mystery: Ecofeminism and Earth-based Spirituality’ in Diamond and Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World*, pp. 73-86.

317. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 8.

origin.’³¹⁸ Of these four types he observes that the ontological model is perhaps the vaguest, and usually requires elaboration via the other models, while the naturalistic model is the most common. Both the ontological and naturalistic models are relevant to Goddess feminism, while the models of substance and genealogy may be viewed as largely derivative of the ontological and naturalistic models.

In terms of an ontological account of unity, Goddess feminism’s focus upon organicism is the central point of reference (as could be Carol Christ’s concept of ‘embodied love as the ground of all being’). By conceiving of the Goddess in terms of a single living organism, Goddess feminists display a notion of a divine oneness or a sacred whole that is thoroughly ontological in its scope. This concept of the whole as an organism need not deny that the countless entities that constitute the whole exist in their own right, thus the Goddess may contain ‘diversity within unity’ without difficulty.³¹⁹ But as a metaphysical description of the whole, organicism is in need of explication. That is, while it may be religiously meaningful to assert that the world is a single living organism, the manner in which the world is unified or organized arguably requires further development in order for it be judged religiously significant or satisfactory as a guide to practice. Goddess feminism, along with countless other forms of pantheism, draws upon a naturalistic model to further account for the unity of the world.

Naturalistic pantheist models tend to account for the existence of unity in terms of unifying forces or principles immanent within the whole. These forces and principles may be closely related to so-called natural laws or forces of nature, or may

318. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 36.

be equivalent to them. However, it should also be noted that the attribution of the term “natural” does not mean that they are incapable of being understood in metaphysical terms, or are not in some sense divine.³²⁰ The unifying forces and principles are naturalistic in the sense that they are an intrinsic part of the whole.

A number of unifying forces or principles can be understood to constitute, or at minimum inform, a Goddess feminist concept of divinity and unity. Consider, for example, Carol Christ’s enthusiastic citation of Hallie Iglehart Austen:

*The unity of birth, growth, death and rebirth ... are the basis of the Goddess’ teachings. They are reflected daily to us in cycles of night and day, waking and sleeping, creating and letting go. Thus the Goddess is she who gives life and, when the form is no longer viable, transforms it through death. And then, through the exquisite pleasures of creativity and sexuality, she brings forth new life.*³²¹

This passage emphasizes the importance of the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle in theology, a cycle that was introduced in the preceding section as implicit in the model of the Triple Goddess and which is expanded upon in the models of the cave, cauldron and cosmogonic womb in the following chapter. This theological cycle is both a Goddess feminist and pantheistic unifying principle. Not only is the Goddess identified with the cycle and the cycle identified as a unity, but the cycle itself is characterised as the basis of the Goddess’ teachings. It is, in other words, a primary revelation. Starhawk adds further support to these ideas when she also claims that ‘[t]he core theology of Goddess religion centers around the cycle of birth, growth, death, decay, and regeneration revealed in every aspect of a dynamic conscious universe.’³²² In this

319. Spretnak, *States of Grace*, p. 137

320. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 38-39.

321. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 99-100, emphasis mine.

322. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

statement the cycle is once again granted a position of central theological importance, only in this instance the cycle is also explicitly identified with the whole. Moreover, the cycle is not only applicable to the biological community (e.g. bacteria, animals, plants etc.), but is theologically understood to possess universal scope. That is, the cycle can be said to be the fundamental principle at work in the world; it can express the rhythms and processes of the Goddess; it can constitute the Goddess' primary mode of being; and, as noted in the previous chapter, the cycle itself can be said to define the Goddess.³²³ Or as theologian Donna Wilshire expresses the matter, the 'all-encompassing Goddess is the personification of the unending, unbroken sacred cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth found throughout the cosmos.'³²⁴ The Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle is a pantheistic unifying principle, the metaphysical meaning of which cannot be underestimated within the context of this thesis.

In Goddess feminism, the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle is not simply another fact about the world, or even the primary fact about the world, it also possesses an axiological dimension. As Levine observes, all pantheistic accounts of unity must ultimately resort to explanations that are provided at least partially in terms of value. The notion that unity can be accounted for purely by recourse to the facts is difficult to support; at some point, the facts must be accounted for in terms of extra-factual criteria (i.e. values) or else a vicious regress ensues.³²⁵ The premise that values are an integral dimension of metaphysical frameworks and projects is seemingly accepted

323. The cycle is also presented by Carol Christ as one of the three most commonly accepted understandings of the meaning of the Goddess, 'Why Women Need the Goddess', p. 278.

324. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 22.

325. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 40.

within many African, Eastern and Native religions and philosophies, wherein interpretations of reality are not separated from questions of value. Yet this has often been denied in the patriarchal philosophies of the West.³²⁶ Furthermore, the notion that values must inform and shape a religious worldview is central to McFague's understanding of the task of a metaphorical constructive theology and is supported in Goddess feminist practice and theology. For McFague, models of deity and world must be constructed and explored that are 'on the side of life and its fulfilment in our time.'³²⁷ While for Goddess feminists such as Starhawk, religious constructs are evaluated in terms of whether they are 'life-affirming and nourishing ... or life-negating and oppressive. Metaphysics is measured with ethics.'³²⁸ That is, in Goddess feminism, '[w]hat is considered true "dogmatically" cannot be considered true "in fact" if it does not liberate people and sanctify all life.'³²⁹ Goddess feminism's worldview is informed by its values (feminist and ecological), and this is equally true of its concept of Goddess and the unifying principles that constitute Her.

In Goddess feminism, principles as natural facts about the world and principles as moral norms and values are mutually entwined. Nature, unity and world are understood to possess an intrinsic moral or value dimension, and this dimension is readily understood in terms of organizing and unifying forces or principles active

326. Cornel West, 'Metaphysics' in Eliade (ed), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 485.

327. McFague, 'Response' in *Religion & Intellectual Life*, pp. 43; cf. McFague, *Models of God*, Chapters 1 & 2.

328. Jone Salomonsen, 'Feminist Witchcraft and Holy Hermeneutics' in Pearson, Roberts and Samuel, *Nature Religion Today*, p. 149.

329. Ibid.

throughout the whole; an understanding of unity that may also constitute the most accessible and plausible form of pantheism available.³³⁰ As Levine observes:

Whereas Unity explained in terms of substance, ontology etc. is too abstract a basis for religious belief, an account in terms of a unifying principle is not. There are of course varying interpretations of such principles. But often it is in terms of explicitly moral and evaluative categories such as goodness, justice, beauty or love - vague as these may be. Unifying principles are themselves taken to be good etc., or evaluative judgements are seen as following from them.³³¹

From this account, one may begin to more clearly understand Christ's concept of the power of the Goddess as embodied love in a pantheistic context. That is, embodied love can be readily interpreted in terms of both a moral category and as a unifying principle, it does not need to be related to a form of personal agency. With respect to the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle, this can be understood to directly inform and reflect Goddess feminist values. Although the cycle affirms the importance of death, and may therefore seem to encompass a life-denying ethic, it is arguably the unifying movement of the cycle that is paramount. Notably, birth and life and death are theologically conceived as part of an ongoing process, a divine unity, wherein death is followed by rebirth and transformation. Rather than being equivalent to annihilation as an absolute end, death is viewed as 'subject to higher order (i.e. pantheistically more fundamental) principles.'³³² That is, death is subsumed by a broader principle of life: a principle that defines the concept of a living divine unity or Goddess. As Starhawk observes of the Goddess, 'She is life eternally attempting to maintain itself,

330. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 44.

331. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

332. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

reproduce itself, diversify, evolve, and breed more life; a force more implacable than death, although death itself is an aspect of life.’³³³ Or as Charlene Spretnak claims:

The central understanding in contemporary Goddess spirituality is that the divine – creativity in the universe, or ultimate mystery – is laced throughout the cosmic manifestation in and around us. ... The Goddess, as a metaphor for divine immanence and the transcendent sacred whole, expresses ongoing regeneration with the cycles of her Earthbody and contains the mystery of diversity within unity: the extraordinary range of differentiation in forms of life on Earth issued from her dynamic form and are kin.³³⁴

These theological reality-claims draw upon the unifying forces and principles that have been delineated so far with reference to a pantheist concept of unity. Starhawk identifies the Goddess with a force or principle of life, a force of life that takes the form of a universal process (the cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth) rather than the life of any single organism. Life, in this theological sense, functions as a metaphysical principle that is imbued with value: life as an ongoing process is an ultimate good. It is this process that Spretnak also identifies with the Goddess as ‘creativity in the universe’ and ‘ongoing regeneration’. Both of these understandings of the Goddess emerge from the pantheistic concept of deity that has been introduced in this section, although each is also informed by a number of contemporary models and scientific theories of nature. These models and theories contribute further detail to the Goddess feminist concepts of immanence and pantheism, clarify further the organizing and unifying principles that inform the Goddess feminist concept of deity, and delineate what may be termed a theology of nature. It is to a consideration of these models and theories that I turn next.

333. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

334. Spretnak, *States of Grace*, pp. 136-7.

CHAPTER 3

A THEALOGY OF NATURE

In the introduction to this work it was claimed that Goddess feminism could be characterized by reference to its attitudes to the categories of deity, femaleness, nature and politics. That is, it was claimed that for the Goddess feminist these categories are conceived and experienced as inseparable from and mutually informing one another. It is important to affirm at this point, however, that in Goddess feminism it is the whole of reality *qua* nature that is divine, sexed and politicized; an understanding of reality that is rarely emphasized in other contemporary religions and spiritualities. For Goddess feminists, reflection on nature is coextensive with reflection on the meaning of deity, femaleness and politics, and by delineating what may be termed a thealogy of nature, a broad cross-section of reality-claims may be illuminated. The purpose of this chapter is to begin to propose what a Goddess feminist thealogy of nature might look like and how it informs and interlocks with its metaphysical worldview.

In the first two sections, Goddess feminist construals of the origins and order of the universe or whole are considered through the lenses of cosmogony and cosmology. Theological attitudes towards processes of emergence, generativity and transformation are outlined, and these attitudes are used to clarify the manner in which the Goddess is understood to originate, organize and relate to the whole of nature. Goddess feminist models of the cave, the cauldron and the cosmogonic womb are then examined, so as to contribute to an expanded understanding of the organicist and pantheist concept of the Goddess *as* nature (introduced in the previous chapter) and, specifically, to clarify

further what may be termed the processes and rhythms of the Goddess: notably the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle. I argue throughout these sections that the Goddess feminist worldview privileges and thematizes complex processes of emergence and transformation, an emphasis that is closely related to the models of the Great Mother and Triple Goddess outlined in Chapter Two.³³⁵

The second two sections of the chapter further develop a feminist theology of nature in several steps. First, the Goddess feminist engagement with the form of eco-politics and green movement/theory termed ecofeminism is introduced as a means of raising the main conceptual preoccupations and values of a feminist theology of nature. Second, a Goddess feminist understanding of the practice of dividing reality according to a logic of binary oppositions or dualisms is examined in metaphysical terms; the purpose of which is to address some common misconceptions and criticisms of Goddess feminism's reality-claims and worldview. Third, an image/concept is introduced that is central to many Goddess feminist construals of deity and reality *as* nature, and indeed to all subsequent theological exposition on nature as a metaphysical concept: the web of life. Fourth, the pantheistic and theological concepts of organicism and unity introduced in the previous chapter are expanded upon by recourse to two scientific theories that have been enthusiastically appropriated by Goddess feminists: Gaia theory (the theory that the Earth is a living organism) and ecology (the study of the unity of life in its home environment). Both of these

335. Similar arguments concerning the thematic predispositions of Goddess feminism can be located in Melissa Raphael's *Thealogy and Embodiment, Introducing Thealogy*, 'Thealogy and the Parthenogenetic Reproduction of Femaleness', 'Monotheism in Contemporary Goddess Religion' and 'Thealogy, Redemption and the Call of the Wild'.

scientific theories are summarized and a Goddess feminist interpretation of each considered in light of an emergent metaphysical worldview and theology of nature.

I FEMALE GENERATIVITY AND ELEMENTAL NATURE

Cosmogony and cosmology refer to accounts or theories of the origination and organization of the universe as a whole. Both speculative and explanatory in character, cosmogonic and cosmological forms of thought can be traced back to the dawn of human history, are an important aspect of most of the world's religious mythologies and narratives, and also constitute a vital field of enquiry within the natural sciences.³³⁶ Reflection on the origins and order of the universe as a whole is arguably a highly significant endeavour; one that is capable of contextualizing human existence and providing unique modes of perception, organizing principles and creative energy.³³⁷

Goddess feminism's engagement with cosmogonic and cosmological thought, however, requires careful consideration. As explained in Chapter One, Goddess

336. Charles H. Long, 'Cosmogony', in Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 94-100, Kees W. Bolle, 'Cosmology' in Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 100-107. See also, M. R. Wright, *Cosmology in Antiquity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and *Myth and Reality* (Waveland Press, 1998); Stephen Toulmin, *The Return to Cosmology: Postmodern Science and the Theology of Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); John Leslie (ed.), *Modern Cosmology & Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998); Edward R. Harrison, *Cosmology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

337. Charles Long asserts that these are vital aspects of all cosmogonic and cosmological myths, 'Cosmogony,' p. 94. See also the works of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, Charlene Spretnak and Sallie McFague who all attend to the importance of cosmological narratives for the shaping of human purposes and praxis. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988); Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); Brian Smimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Bear and Company Publishing, 1984); Spretnak, *States of Grace*; and McFague, *The Body of God*.

feminism draws upon a diverse array of mythological and religious resources and is not predisposed toward developing and expressing those resources in a systematic manner. One may, therefore, reasonably enquire to what extent Goddess feminism is capable of presenting a coherent account of the whole? Is there a distinctive and unified Goddess feminist perspective on the origination and organization of the whole of nature or the universe?

In answer to the above concerns, I reiterate that despite their enthusiastic engagement with a wide array of religious narratives and resources, Goddess feminists are relatively consistent with regard to the models and themes that they ultimately choose to work with. There is a high degree of thematic uniformity in Goddess feminism's theological imagination and this is particularly true of Goddess feminist attitudes to the whole of nature. Specifically, Goddess feminism's cosmogonic and cosmological thought coheres very closely with the models of the Great Mother, the Triple Goddess and the pantheist model of the Goddess *as* nature: Goddess/Nature. From a wide array of cosmogonic and cosmological sources, Goddess feminist accounts of the origination and the organization of the whole are elucidated upon by models and narratives that link female generativity with what are theologically conceived as "fundamental" principles and properties observable within nature: principles of emergence and transformation (the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle) and the properties of chaos/primordality and the elements (primarily the earth, water and darkness). As Emily Culpepper explains, one may find that for Goddess feminists

the metaphorical links between human motherhood and natural life forces are experienced in a different, almost reverse order of comparison than we might expect. A person might describe the ocean as Mother, a primal womb and source of life, and the human female's womb is seen as comparable to the ocean

and appreciated in relation to this sense of life source as much or even *more than* the other way round.³³⁸

And although Goddess feminists do not necessarily all conceive or experience the world in the manner outlined above, the theological practice of affirming associations between aspects of femaleness and the elements is remarkably common. Analogies and identifications between female generativity and what may be termed elemental nature form the basis of Goddess feminist understandings of the origins and organization of the whole. Consider, for example, Sjöö and Mor's claim:

In the beginning ... was a very female sea. For two-and-a-half billion years on earth all life forms floated in the womb-like environment of the planetary ocean - nourished and protected by its fluid chemicals, rocked by the lunar tidal rhythms. ... In the beginning life did not gestate within the body of any creature but within the ocean womb containing all organic life.³³⁹

The theological point that Sjöö and Mor endeavour to make, through their use of the terms 'female sea', 'womb-like environment' and 'ocean womb', is that life is dependent upon capacities that are best conceived and valued as female. Conceptions of the emergence of life are closer to a female model of existence than any available alternative. This perspective is supported by other Goddess feminists (e.g. Starhawk and Wilshire) and the practice of conceiving and poetically linking the properties of what is accepted as the matrix of female generativity (i.e. the womb) with other natural "life-giving" phenomena is theologically widespread. Goddess feminism is replete with womb/earth, womb/water and womb/darkness associations and one may encounter considerable theological agreement with such statements as '[c]reation invariably begins with a uterine environment, characterized by darkness, waters, churning movement, "the Deep," and a non-differentiation of elements, of inner from

338. Culpepper, 'Contemporary Goddess Theology', p. 58.

outer, of self from other.³⁴⁰ Femaleness and organicism are the primary theological resources for conceiving and interpreting the cosmic whole; a religious orientation that is the virtual antithesis of most patriarchal forms of cosmogonic and cosmological thought.

Patriarchal accounts of the origins and organization of the whole are understood by Goddess feminists to be founded upon the denial and/or systemic distortion of female and birth-centred models and myths. The concept of the cosmos as ordered is argued by theologians to be rendered intelligible in patriarchal narratives specifically by reference to a divine male exerting control over a primordial female environment; and considerable hostility is directed toward the generative capacities of femaleness in patriarchal religions. Femaleness is patriarchally construed as chaotic, disorderly and threatening dissolution, it is something that is to be either denied or mastered. Numerous references to the patriarchal denigration of female generativity and its displacement by male creativity can be located within Goddess feminist texts, and the cross cultural pervasiveness of this process is repeatedly stressed.³⁴¹ Most notable amongst the theological critiques of patriarchal accounts of the cosmos, however, is that which is directed toward the destruction, dismemberment and reorganization of the oceanic and primordial Great Mother of Life, Tiamat, in the Babylonian creation myth the *Enuma Elish*.³⁴²

339. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 2.

340. Walker, *The Crone*, p. 113.

341. One may, however, discern a theological focus upon Greek sources. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*; Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Mythology* (Berkeley: Moon Books, 1978).

342. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 62-64; Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 249-251; Starhawk, *Truth or Dare*, pp. 60-67; Rachel Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess*, pp. 133, 236; Conway, *Maiden, Mother, Crone*, pp. 15-16, 89-90; Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother*,

The *Enuma Elish* is cited in nearly all theological texts and is generally viewed as a prototype for many later patriarchal cosmogonies.³⁴³ Dating from the early second millennium BCE, the myth provides the first textually accessible account of how universal order is established by the conquest/murder of a primordial Mother Goddess: Tiamat. The story describes in some considerable detail how Tiamat, depicted in the myth as a draconian and oceanic form of the Great Mother, in response to the murder of her consort Apsu, threatens the lives of the younger gods of the Babylonian pantheon (her children) and is challenged, defeated and ultimately dismembered by the sky god Marduk. It is through the dismemberment of Tiamat that Marduk initiates a new creation, and it is also through this activity that many theologians identify the emergence of a recurrent pattern of patriarchal cosmogonic and cosmological thought. In Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's words, '[t]he *Enuma Elish* is the first story of the replacing of a mother goddess who generates creation as part of herself by a god who "makes" creation as something separate from himself.'³⁴⁴

The male act of creation presented in the *Enuma Elish* is accomplished through the murder and mutilation of the primordial Mother Goddess, arguably the most extreme and invidious denial of female generativity conceivable. But, in addition to

Crone, pp. 31, 59, 293. See also, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, pp. 273-298; Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), pp. 73-83, 88-90; Iris Furlong, 'The Mythology of the Ancient Near East' in Larrington (ed.), *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, pp. 5-9. Feminist theological commentaries on the patriarchal relevance of the myth can also be located in Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1995 [1979]), pp. 107-110; Catherine Keller, 'Women Against Wasting the World' in Diamond and Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World*, pp. 259-260; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, pp. 16-19.

343. As Anne Baring and Jules Cashford observe, the 'mythological roots of the three [prophetic] patriarchal religions descend from the *Enuma Elish*, which was known over the ancient world.' Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 275.

344. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

this act of matricide, the basic substance of the world is also patriarchally identified as something separate from the male creator (i.e. dead matter/mother), it is something that is subject to organization by the action of a divine male. Again, as Baring and Cashford elucidate, in the *Enuma Elish*

the god becomes the *maker* of heaven and earth whereas the goddess *was* heaven and earth. The concept of “making” is radically different from “being”, in the sense that what is made is not necessarily of the same substance as its maker, and may be conceived as inferior to him; while what emerges from the mother is necessarily part of her and she of it.³⁴⁵

This statement identifies for Goddess feminists a critical point of departure from the models of deity and creation favoured by earlier religious worldviews towards the theistic models that are the basis of most patriarchal religions today. The whole is patriarchally conceived either as a dangerous female environment, identified with primordial chaos, waters and/or darkness, that must be subdued, controlled and organized according to a divine male will (and Goddess feminists direct attention toward the subordinate position of “the Deep” (*Tehom*), darkness and waters in Genesis 1:2),³⁴⁶ or else in certain later theological developments and reifications it becomes the product of male will or word alone (with the need for female matter/mother being erased completely). Separation from the cosmos, the universe and the whole becomes a crucial measure of divinity within these patriarchal cosmogonic and cosmological models. As the maker of the cosmos, the male creator deity is conceived as preceding and existing independently of the universe; and, moreover, the universe is itself conceived as incapable of existing independently of its maker.

345. Ibid., p. 274.

For Goddess feminists, the *Enuma Elish* is a paradigm of everything that they desire to counter, reconceive and re-value in their theological accounts of the cosmic whole. In Carol Christ's words, the myth

discredits the Goddess as Birth, Death and Regeneration ... glorifies the warrior who kills her ... has the warrior commit the ultimate sacrilege of defiling the womb that previous mythologies had named the Source of Life. [And] is regularly reenacted ... to reinforce the long-lasting moods and motivations it is designed to engender.³⁴⁷

Patriarchal cosmogonies and cosmologies are, Goddess feminists contend, founded upon an interrelated array of problematic and invidious concepts and fears: they are womb-denying, promote the control of and/or a separation from femaleness, and associate such states as chaos and flux explicitly with femaleness. Goddess feminist cosmogonies and cosmologies, in contrast, are concerned with reclaiming, re-evaluating and re-remembering what has been colonized, denigrated and repressed by patriarchy;³⁴⁸ and significantly this theological endeavour entails not only constructing different models and relationships based on female and organicist models and principles (e.g. female generativity), it also necessitates rethinking those states of nature that have been patriarchally conceived as dangerous (e.g. states of chaos and flux).³⁴⁹ Patriarchal religious narratives which conceive the origins and organization

346. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 249; Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 65; Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, p. 998.

347. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 63.

348. See, for example, the account of a large Goddess feminist ritual involving a retelling of the *Enuma Elish* and a re-remembering of the patriarchally dismembered Great Mother Tiamat in Salomonsen, 'Feminist Witchcraft and Holy Hermeneutics', pp. 152-155.

349. Christ, for example, notes that '[w]hen Mircea Eliade defined the sacred as standing in opposition to what he called the "chaotic and dangerous flux of things," he was not expressing a private or idiosyncratic prejudice. He was restating a widely accepted idea about the nature of the divine.' *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 99.

of the cosmic whole as a 'victory over the waters' or as 'an end to chaos and darkness' are wholly unacceptable to Goddess feminists.³⁵⁰

In agreement with feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, Goddess feminists consider the patriarchal denigration of certain aspects of nature and the elements as invidiously distorting the manner in which the world is ultimately conceived, experienced and theorized; or, in Carol Christ's terms, such denigration engenders certain long-lasting moods and motivations.³⁵¹ For Irigaray, the entire project of Western metaphysics may be read as a wilful forgetting of certain elements: "Metaphysics is written neither in/on water, nor in/on the air, nor in/on fire." Metaphysics, in its incessant search for grounds on which to construct its theories is based on the solidity and density of the earth.³⁵² For Goddess feminists, in turn, the patriarchal denigration of water, darkness, chaos and the womb has been linked with the vilification of the Goddess in a manner that has denied these things value as resources for constructively thinking about the fundamental organization and nature of the whole. Irigaray views the reclamation of the elements to be a means of deconstructing and bypassing the exclusivist structures of patriarchal theorizing, a way of opening a space for thinking about femaleness, culture and religion in post-patriarchal terms.³⁵³ Goddess feminists consider that many of the concepts, models and narratives that have been patriarchally suppressed and identified with femaleness, and particularly female deity, provide more valuable (i.e. empowering, feminist, life-

350. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 250-251.

351. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 63; cf. 'Why Women Need the Goddess'.

352. Luce Irigaray, *L'oubli de l'air: chez Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), p. 10, cited and translated in Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 164.

affirming and ecologically authentic) accounts of the world than those that are currently operative. In each case, the models, theories and means by which the cosmic whole may be interpreted are understood to have been severely restricted by patriarchy. For both feminist philosophers and Goddess feminists there exists a shared conviction that thinking post-patriarchally is of vital importance and, that by so doing, one may solve many of the dilemmas and problems that patriarchy perpetuates.

It is notable that conceptual issues and problems that arise within patriarchal theistic religions are not ones that are necessarily relevant to Goddess feminism. If a divine male victory over female chaos, darkness and waters, or a separation from and superiority to the universe, constitute essential elements of patriarchal cosmogonies and cosmologies, Goddess feminists exhibit a very different attitude toward these issues. Philosophical problems pertaining to whether God creates necessarily, or in what sense God existed before creation and time, are not ones that are readily applicable to Goddess feminist positions that deny or eschew the central reality-claims of patriarchal theistic traditions. Admittedly if certain questions (e.g. questions of cosmic origins and order) are relevant to religious positions *per se* then Goddess feminism must take account of them.³⁵⁴ But theological answers to those questions can take a radically different form to those that have arisen within patriarchal theistic positions.

For example, Goddess feminists *qua* pantheists can quite plausibly accept existence as a given for which no explanation is necessary; that is, the divinity and unity of the whole (i.e. nature) need not require any explanation in terms of origination

353. Cf. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 55-56, 60-62.

or creation.³⁵⁵ For most theistic traditions, in contrast, accounts of creation are an inseparable aspect of their accounts of the power of the divine, they are one aspect of a more encompassing religious narrative – doctrine, revelation or scripture – from which they cannot be readily separated or abstracted.³⁵⁶ It is quite possible that cosmogony may be a component of a Goddess feminist theology of nature, but the relationship is not an intrinsic or necessary one. Thus, Carol Christ remains remarkably silent with regard to the issue of cosmogony in her work of systematic theology.³⁵⁷ The Goddess constitutes both the ground and the processes of nature, but the origination of nature is apparently not an issue that is in need of theological discussion or exposition. The divinity, existence and unity of nature is an inexplicable, albeit valuable, given.

Furthermore, in Goddess feminist discourse the femaleness and organicism of nature (i.e. Goddess/Nature) results in an opposition to one of the key concepts of traditional and classical metaphysics, that is, the concept of nothingness. It has long been asserted in philosophy that it is meaningful to ask why is there something rather than nothing; or, it has been argued that one can reasonably assert that there could be nothing.³⁵⁸ Goddess feminists, by contrast, are likely to consider the concept of nothingness as either irrelevant or simply the product of a patriarchal obsession with death and nihilism; in feminist philosophical terms, to oppose nothingness in an absolute sense to existence may be said to embrace a masculinist pseudo-idea and engender masculinist pseudo-problems. For Goddess feminists, there is only nature.

354. This point is adapted from Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 178.

355. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 179-180.

356. Ibid., pp. 177-179.

357. The exception to this statement is the short poem 'Evrynome – A Story of Creation' by Chris Lavdas, which appears as a prologue to *Rebirth of the Goddess*.

There is no absence in nature and neither can nature be destroyed, negated or transcended, there is only more nature.³⁵⁹ Although a theological distinction may be drawn between the visible empirical reality of daily life and various invisible sub-universes that may be experienced through magic, ritual trance, and revelatory or mystical moments of altered consciousness,³⁶⁰ there is no discourse of nothingness at work in theological cosmogonies and cosmologies. As Jane Caputi affirms, with reference to the Goddess (or, more specifically, elemental Female Powers), ‘we don’t have to fear anomie, meaninglessness, or “nothingness”, for truly *there is no such thing*.’³⁶¹ Goddess feminism’s organicist models of deity imply that the universe is alive, a fullness that is continuously subject to processes and rhythms of becoming and transformation, rather than something that exists in an obscure relationship to creation *ex nihilo* or a state of nothingness.

It is also notable that while Goddess feminists emphasize the femaleness and organicism of the whole of nature, this is not an orientation that confines them exclusively to cosmogonic and cosmological models of pregnancy and birth. Female/organicist models that focus upon the creativity of sexual pleasure (orgasm or *jouissance*) and the power to create structures by spinning are also present in theology. Starhawk, for example, explains how what she terms the “big orgasm” (or, playing with the title of a recent work of cosmology, the “she-bang”) could poetically and

358. In the twentieth century one may note that the philosophers Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre and Ludwig Wittgenstein have all addressed this question.

359. Zsuzsanna Budapest makes this point in *Bridle*, ‘Daughter of the Goddess’, p. 68. See also, Donna Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, pp. 220-221.

360. See Jone Salomonsen’s article ‘Feminist Witchcraft and Holy Hermeneutics’.

361. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons and Crones*, p. 284.

theologically express contemporary scientific accounts of the “big bang.”³⁶² Theologian Donna Wilshire, in turn, provides one of her favoured accounts of the Goddess by drawing together the Hindu religious concepts of divine female creativity, in the forms of Shakti and karuna, with philosopher Julia Kristeva’s model of ‘*la mere qui jouit* - a good mother who enjoys good sex.’³⁶³ And myths of the creative activity of spider goddesses, such as the Navajo Spider Woman, who spin the world into being from their own bodily substance, are also approvingly cited in many Goddess feminist writings.³⁶⁴ The organicist principles and values of Goddess feminism permit a range of alternative positions to those of patriarchal accounts of divine creativity; although I reiterate that certain theological models occupy a more central position in Goddess feminism’s imagination than others.³⁶⁵

II THE CAVE, THE CAULDRON AND THE COSMOGONIC WOMB

Of the cosmogonic and cosmological models that Goddess feminism works with, probably central are those of the cave, the cauldron and the womb. It is these closely interrelated models that serve as the primary theological devices for evoking the recurrent Goddess feminist themes of emergence, life-as-process and transformation,

362. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 267. Starhawk cites the cosmological work of Timothy Ferris, *The Whole Shebang: a State-of-the-Universe Report* (London: Phoenix Press, 1998).

363. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, pp. 270-271.

364. The importance and meaning of theological models of spiders and webs is examined in greater depth in a later section of this chapter: ‘Thealogy and the the web of life.’ The most systematic account of the theological significance of the generativity of spiders can be located in Catherine Keller’s *From A Broken Web*, pp. 216-252. Keller does not identify herself as a Goddess feminist, but her work is broadly speaking theological and is also cited by many Goddess feminists.

365. Cf. Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, pp. 262-288 and ‘Thealogy and the Parthenogenetic Reproduction of Femaleness’.

and it is these models that are a crucial resource for delineating a theology of nature. Each of the models makes a number of specific reality-claims and thematizes and contributes further detail to the Goddess feminist understanding of the Great Mother and the Goddess as nature: Goddess/Nature. The models outline theological notions of generativity and organicism and also exhibit their own particular range of emphases.

Beginning with the model of the cave, in Goddess feminist thought the cave is associated with the earth-womb,³⁶⁶ or the earth as womb of the Goddess.³⁶⁷ Drawing upon interpretations of evidence gathered from Paleolithic caves,³⁶⁸ plus numerous cross-cultural associations between tombs, barrow mounds, subterranean religious sites and aspects of female anatomy (pubic mounds, vaginal openings etc.),³⁶⁹ Goddess feminists have identified the cave as a highly significant aspect and model of the Goddess. That is, the cave is theologically conceived as analogous or equivalent to an entry point into the chthonic/earthly body of the Goddess; or, as theologian Rachel Pollack expresses the point, '[i]f the Earth is our Mother, then the cave becomes an image of Her womb and a place to enter into Her actual body.'³⁷⁰

So invested with numinous meaning has the cave become for some Goddess feminists that many caves have acquired a hierophanic status and begun to function as sacred sites and places of pilgrimage and worship. The cave is theologically

366. Nancy A. Falk, 'Feminine Sacrality' in Eliade (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 304.

367. Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, pp. 15-18.

368. For theological introductions to this topic, see *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 51-2; Rachel Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess: Sacred Wisdom in Myth, Landscape and Culture* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1997); Gadon, *The Once & Future Goddess*, pp. 3-14; Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 104-9.

369. Pollack, *Body of the Goddess*; Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, p. 1092.

370. Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess*, p. 17.

conceived and experienced as a potent post-patriarchal and sacred space, with Goddess feminists such as Carol Christ and Monica Sjöö attributing some of their most significant experiences of the Goddess to time spent within caves.³⁷¹ But what can one say about the cosmogonic and cosmological meaning of the cave? The cave is evocative in terms of its associations with the Goddess as embodied in the landscape and nature. Moreover, theologians attribute considerable significance to the cross-cultural and historical pervasiveness of links between caves, religious sites and the earth as a womb-like environment.

Most basically the theological model of the cave is understood to thematize the womb of the Goddess as Great Mother: specifically in terms of birth and emergence, but also with respect to containment and shelter. In many mythic narratives the origins of the human race are traced to emergence from a womb-like cave, and ancient images of goddesses frequently identify the womb of the goddess with the earth.³⁷² The contemporary theological interpretation of these myths and images affirms that human existence itself emerges within the shelter of the earth; or, restated, the ground or basis of human existence is the earth. The model of the cave serves to evoke a strong theological sense of the ground and the space from which life emerges (and also to which it must ultimately return). Earth/womb and darkness/womb associations converge in the model of the cave and it is commonly understood by Goddess feminists as a maternal space, a place of mystery and transformation, a microcosm of the macrocosmic whole. However, as a model of the cosmic whole, the cave tends not

371. See accounts of pilgrimages to caves by Sjöö, *New Age & Armageddon: The Goddess of the Gurus?*; Carol Christ, *Odyssey with the Goddess: A Spiritual Quest in Crete* (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 45-7 and *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 96-97. Cf. numerous first person narratives in magazines such as *Goddessing Regenerated*.

to be particularly dynamic. The accessibility of the model of the cave – *qua* a site of pilgrimage and numinous encounter – grants it considerable affective strength, but the model does not present a pattern that is readily applicable to the universe in its entirety. A more fertile theological model of the universal whole has proved to be that of the cauldron.

The cauldron, like the cave, appears in a diverse array of cultural contexts, myths and narratives – from Babylonian, Celtic, Egyptian, Greek, Hebrew, Siberian, to Christo-Arthurian (i.e. the Grail narratives) – and is directly linked with themes of life, death, transformation and rebirth.³⁷³ That is, the cauldron provides a further theological means of thinking about the cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth introduced through the model of the Triple Goddess and the pantheistic unifying principle outlined in the previous chapter. The cauldron is a model of the cycling processes of transformation that are central to contemporary Goddess feminist understandings of the meaning of the Goddess; and, moreover, is applicable to a multitude of levels of existence, up to and including the cosmological. As Barbara Walker explains, in the old Pagan religions:

Always the cauldron was understood to signify the cosmic womb, source of regeneration and rebirth. All life, mind, matter, and energy arose in various forms from the ever-boiling vessel, only to return thereto, when each form came to its destined end. As ingredients dissolved and mingled in boiling, so the elements that made all things were separated and recombined in the cauldron: so ran the basic theory.³⁷⁴

Furthermore, a long historical association with the Triple Goddess was attached to the cauldron, and for many centuries the Pagan model of the cauldron also served as the

372. Falk, 'Feminine Sacrality', p. 303.

373. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, pp. 150-4 and *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 99-122.

major religious alternative to the Christian model of the cross.³⁷⁵ The cauldron was an image of cyclical or spiralling processes of change that were understood to be embodied in nature, rather than the linear form of life, death and postmortem existence indicated by the Christian cross. In countless Pagan contexts, '[e]ndlessly churning, endlessly turning, a boiling matrix, a soup of elemental raw materials in the cosmic womb, the cauldron represented the stuff of creation, the Mother's "eternal flux."³⁷⁶ And unlike the cave, the cauldron encompassed not only themes of emergence and maternal containment but was also a model of energetic fullness, specifically female generative activity and potential on a universal scale. The cauldron evokes powers and states of primordiality and transformation; powers and states which in theology are definitively female and 'in which all of us originate and to which all of us will return, to change once again.'³⁷⁷ The cauldron is a theological model of the primordial cosmic womb of the Great Mother, perhaps the primary theological motif of the cycling and generative female whole, or as Starhawk describes it: 'the gestation ground of all birth.'³⁷⁸

In the Goddess feminist worldview the womb of the Great Mother is the cosmogonic and cosmological construct *par excellence*. Building upon metaphoric and mythopoetic associations between female reproductive capacities (womb, menstruation, pregnancy etc.) and the structures and processes of the universe in its entirety, Goddess feminism can be understood to affirm a form of ontological

374. Walker, *The Crone*, p. 103.

375. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, p. 150 and Walker, *The Crone*, p. 99 ff.

376. Walker, *The Crone*, p. 111.

377. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, p. 281.

378. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 93.

continuity between microcosmic female generativity and the macrocosmic reality of Goddess/Nature. In a theologically significant sense, the universe is conceived as either female or a female environment/matrix.³⁷⁹ The exact meaning of this premise is slippery (*poemagogic*),³⁸⁰ and often deferred by theologians, but it is also strongly defended on the grounds that it is a superior metaphor and model for illuminating the actual human and/or universal situation.³⁸¹ As Melissa Raphael elucidates, ‘theology frames an ontology of femaleness as a cosmogonic principle in and of itself ... [and it] ... can do this because Goddess feminism draws no absolute ontological distinction between women and the Goddess.’³⁸²

Comprised of an array of myths and images, the womb of the Great Mother is a religious model that is undergoing a process of revival and evolution within contemporary Goddess feminism. By drawing upon ideas gleaned from such sources as the archaeology of Paleolithic caves and ancient myths of primordial oceanic goddesses, Goddess feminism has begun to construct a cosmogony and cosmology that is both specifically female and also arguably metaphysically complex and original. In Goddess feminism, images and models of caves, cauldrons, abyssal depths and earth-wombs have all been appropriated and incorporated into a theological narrative that speaks of a thoroughly embodied and female deity/universe. The cosmic whole is theologically understood to be the body of the Goddess, and the Goddess is

379. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 2.

380. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 33; Starhawk takes the term from Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (London: Paladin, 1967).

381. For example, see Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, pp. 25, 220-221. Also, while eulogizing the Goddess feminist worldview of Starhawk, cosmologist Brian Swimme expressed the viewpoint that ‘[o]ur universe is quite clearly a great swelling birthing event’. Swimme, ‘How to Heal a Lobotomy’ in Diamond and Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World*, p. 19.

understood to be womb-like in character. In agreement with Sjöö and Mor, most Goddess feminists would affirm that '[t]he mother's womb is a condensed experience of the cosmos.'³⁸³ Moreover, models and narratives of caves and cauldrons would also be accepted as primarily heuristic theological devices for better articulating an understanding or vision of the womb of the Goddess as the cosmos.

Carol Christ, as I noted in the previous chapter, is perhaps the only Goddess feminist to side-step this particular topic in her theological writings, but her identification of the Goddess as the "loving ground of being" is I suggest a more abstract way of delineating models and themes that identify the Goddess as womb-like. I reiterate that Christ is concerned with life-giving, nurturing and transformative principles of the womb. Christ attends to the theological meaning and patriarchal denigration of the womb of the Goddess at several points in the first half of *Rebirth of the Goddess*, and it is only at the centerpoint of her work, when the constructive/systematic aspect of her project begins to be developed, that references to the womb of the Goddess fall from view; to be replaced, I suggest, by her more abstract model. Theological language that Sjöö and Mor utilize to describe the meaning of the Goddess as womb-like is practically the same as that which Christ utilizes to clarify the meaning of the Goddess as the 'embodied love that is ground of all being': Sjöö, Mor and Christ all write of feelings and ecstatic states of deep connection and integration; Sjöö and Mor draw analogies between a longing to return to the womb and a desire to re-establish a sense of cosmic connection. Christ writes of feelings of deep connection associated with a realization of being surrounded by a

382. Raphael 'Theology and the Parthenogenetic Reproduction of Femeness', p. 222.

383. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 52.

great matrix of love; and all three theologians link their theological concepts and experiences of the nature of reality as supportive/grounding and loving/ecstatic with femaleness and motherhood (and, perhaps significantly, Christ attributes this ‘ontological insight’ with the death of her own mother).³⁸⁴ Despite the failure of Christ to render the model of the womb explicit in her systematic theology, for which several reasons may be offered, womb-like models of female generativity remain thematically present in her work.³⁸⁵ More explicitly rendered theological accounts of the generative meaning of the womb of the Goddess are however presented by other Goddess feminists.

The theologian Donna Wilshire effectively expresses and summarizes the Goddess feminist models of divine female generativity, cosmic origination and organization in the following terms:

If we posit that the Goddess is ever full of potential, *nothingness cannot be a part of Her nature*. She would not create *ex nihilo* as the transcendent male deity is said to, for She who is always pregnant with possibility has no emptiness about her. She has no ego and no Plan. But She always has the raw materials for new forms in Her belly, womb, or cauldron. She is always stirring them, constantly changing, re-newing, re-forming, re-creating them. As a model of non-linear, non-dualistic reality, the Goddess is always *in media res*, already *is* from every moment. She always has been - and has always been full of Potential. A periodic Big Bang is Her way of getting things re-shuffled and reenergized from time to time.³⁸⁶

In this theological narrative it is relatively clear that birth and death are simply followed by a rebirth through a process of cosmological and ontological re-

384. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 107.

385. It may be possible that Christ is simply unaware of the correspondences between her abstract model of intelligent embodied love as the ground of all being and that of the womb of the Goddess. This is unlikely but not impossible. However, it is more likely that there may be pragmatic and strategic reasons for her distancing of her model from that of the womb (e.g a desire to avoid many of the critiques that are directed toward models of motherhood and reproductive imagery).

organization and transformation; 'nothing is actually destroyed. Although things die constantly, everything that dies is merely reorganized, re-distributed, re-formed, then reborn, recycled back into the process, back into the whole.'³⁸⁷ As a matter supposedly confirmable by simple observation, the Goddess as nature is identified as always already changing; and human life is but one part of that dynamic and ongoing process. As the theologian Deanna Conway observes, 'we go out from the Crone's recycling cauldron into existence, then eventually return again to Her waiting vessel. Physical death is part of life's cycle of wholeness.'³⁸⁸

It is also important to reiterate Goddess feminist understandings of the immanence and organicism of the Goddess. One must remember that for Goddess feminists deity and nature are far more intimately connected to one another than they are in most patriarchal theistic worldviews. While the God of classical theism may be separable from nature, that is, He may be said to have created it *ex nihilo*, is ontologically other than or precedes nature, or, at minimum, transcends its immanent specificities and processes, the Goddess is inseparable from nature, She is embodied within nature; nature is Her primary mode of being. Moreover, while the God of classical theism is commonly conceived as omniscient and omnipotent, capable of intervening in creation *sub specie aeternitatis*, or rather incapable of creative error or misdeed, the Goddess is conceived primarily as the cosmic matrix of potential, possibility and transformation. That is, the Goddess as nature is theologically conceived as female, alive and generative; the cosmic or cosmogonic womb is that which is theologically understood to exemplify the femaleness, organicism and

386. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 220.

387. *Ibid.*

generative capacity of the Goddess; and the terms ‘potential,’ ‘possibility’ and ‘transformation’ are theologically understood to cohere closely with the model of the Goddess as womb-like.

The above conception of the Goddess as nature also implies that the Goddess is not exempt from those principles that are theologically understood to operate throughout nature; the Goddess is, rather, the primary exemplification of those principles. Thus the processes of Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle, that Goddess feminists view as pervasive throughout nature, can be understood to bear upon the Goddess *qua* the whole of nature. A Goddess feminist account of cosmogony can be understood to be explicable specifically by recourse to one rather obvious model: that of birth or natality. Goddess feminists have not systematically worked through the consequences of many of their reality-claims, but if the macrocosmic whole of nature is theologically characterized as female, alive/organic and generative, one can reasonably expect there to be a certain level of continuity and consistency with what these characteristics are understood to mean in the particularities of biological femaleness. To identify the Goddess as a female organism, for example, suggests that not only is the Goddess in some sense born, but She too is also subject to growth, degeneration and ultimately death. The Goddess as nature is a finite and temporal being, rather than an infinite and eternal one.

388. Conway, *Maiden, Mother, Crone*, p. 77.

III CONTINUITY, INTERCONNECTION AND THE DENIAL OF DUALISM

Goddess feminism's concern for nature is most clearly identifiable through its political commitments. As Cynthia Eller observes, when questioned about their politics spiritual feminists most commonly respond: “environmentalism,” “animal rights,” “green politics,” “ecology.”³⁸⁹ Goddess feminists, in turn, conduct their political activities predominantly through what are ecological, environmental or green projects, before those that promote the emancipation, social equality or liberation of women; a focus that may seem puzzling given the supposedly feminist and woman-centered orientation of the movement. It is these concerns, however, that serve to reveal the basis of a feminist theology of nature. While Goddess feminism undoubtedly is a woman-centred religious movement, there is an important sense in which it understands the whole of nature to possess an intrinsic value that exists independently of human needs and purposes, and also conceives the political status and treatment of women as inseparable from that of nature; an understanding of the world that identifies close affinities between Goddess feminism and what is termed ecofeminism.³⁹⁰

Ecofeminism is one of several eco-political or green theoretical positions that have emerged during the latter part of the twentieth century in response to a growing awareness of an ecological crisis. Commonly contrasted with deep ecology and social ecology, ecofeminism identifies the degradation of the environment and ecosystem as,

389. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 191-193.

390. The term ecofeminism is commonly attributed to Françoise d'Eaubonne, who in 1972 established “Écologie-Féminisme” arguing that ‘the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motive inherent in male power.’ Two years later she introduced the term ecofeminism (*eco-féminisme*) in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort (Feminism or Death)*. Paraphrased from Carol J. Adams (ed.), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. xi.

in certain significant respects, related to the domination of women. Rather than ecological problems being conceived as the product of anthropocentrism, the systemic privileging of human concerns and perspectives, which is a central concern of deep ecology, or as primarily the result of intra-human domination and social hierarchalization, the central concern of social ecology, they are principally conceived by ecofeminists as the result of androcentrism and patriarchy.³⁹¹ Moreover, ecofeminists consider the status of women and nature to be linked to one another in manner that deep ecologists and social ecologists do not.

By various routes, ecofeminists argue that “women” and “nature” are (in some sense) linked together and systemically devalued and oppressed under patriarchy; and connections are posited to exist within the conceptual frameworks and power-relations of patriarchy that make the domination of women and the degradation of nature interrelated phenomena or shared projects. Consequently, ecofeminists argue that any movement that is concerned with the liberation of women should, as a matter of consistency and/or strategy, also be a movement that is concerned with the liberation of nature (and vice-versa). Differences between ecofeminists, and there are arguably as many forms of ecofeminism as there are forms of feminism, tend to arise from what are often widely divergent interpretations of the connections that are understood to exist between women and nature; an issue that pivots upon a recurrent cluster of feminist problems associated with the concepts and theories of dualism, essentialism

391. Marti Kheel, ‘Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology’ in Diamond and Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World*, p. 129. Cf. Val Plumwood, ‘The Ecopolitics Debate and the Politics of Nature’ in Karen J. Warren (ed.), *Ecological Feminism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

and social constructionism.³⁹² Ecofeminists rarely disagree that the interconnections between women and nature are their central concern; however, remarkably different attitudes to the character, permanence and ultimate value of those connections are common.

In order to explicate the principle metaphysical issues underlying Goddess feminism's engagement with ecofeminism it is necessary to, first, briefly reiterate that Goddess feminists conceive and experience nature as the living body of the Goddess (and subsequently develop a number of religious/metaphysical models that inform and cohere with this concept/experience) and, second, argue that Goddess feminists exhibit a unique attitude to dualistic and binary oppositional ways of thinking. The meaning of the first of these points is addressed throughout the current thesis, but warrants repeating because of a tendency amongst many ecofeminists to attempt to separate themselves from religious/spiritual concerns. For the reasons outlined in greater detail in Chapter One, contemporary feminist theorists and philosophers tend to reject metaphysical thinking and theorizing as outdated, problematic and/or a wholly invidious activity. Many ecofeminists, in turn, duplicate this tendency and criticize and/or reject those forms of ecofeminism that they identify as pre-occupied with metaphysical concerns and frameworks: notably religious/spiritual forms of ecofeminism and their engagement with such concepts and theoretical postulates as deity and pantheism, spirit and vitalism. It is the concern of this thesis, however, to challenge any blanket feminist rejection of metaphysical concepts, and particularly religious/spiritual ones. The contributions that religious/spiritual positions can make

392. There is no comprehensive overview of these contentious topics, but a useful introductory text is Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*

to ecofeminism in terms of their metaphysical concepts need be taken seriously rather than dismissed; they need to be examined constructively for the imaginative and existential possibilities that they may open up, rather than exclusively being critiqued and rejected. More specifically, the artificial boundary and often adversarial relationship that exists between philosophical/secular and religious/spiritual forms of ecofeminism needs to be brought to an end. In the remainder of this chapter some of the ways in which self-identified secular ecofeminists have misunderstood the metaphysical ideas deployed by Goddess feminists are examined and a Goddess feminist metaphysical and theological understanding of nature is philosophically elucidated/constructed. This sympathetic enquiry into spiritual ecofeminisms and Goddess feminist metaphysics begins with a recurrent concern in ecofeminist philosophies: dualisms and binary oppositions.

Dualisms and binary thinking

Dualistic and binary oppositional ways of thinking possess metaphysical significance in so far as they divide reality according to a logic of fundamental categories or ontic types; and, rather than being a purely conceptual or epistemic framework, this division is meant to illuminate the way the world really is structured. Considerable effort has been directed toward analyzing the history, meaning and value of this system of thought in recent years, particularly by feminist theorists.³⁹³ The present analysis, however, is concerned primarily with ecofeminist and Goddess feminist construals of

(London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

393. See Sherry B. Ortner 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 67-87; and Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*.

dualism.³⁹⁴ This excursus, into what is fairly well-trodden philosophical and feminist ground, is of value to this thesis because it draws attention to several of the ways by which a theological understanding of the nature of reality is misrepresented by its critics. Goddess feminists do not conceive dualisms in the manner that they are characteristically identified as doing by their main opponents. In the Goddess feminist metaphysical worldview dualisms possess a unique meaning that requires very careful elucidation.

Nearly all ecofeminists observe that within dualistic systems of thought there is both a tendency to value one aspect of each dualism more highly than the other, as well as a move to associate the different dualisms together via what may be termed linking postulates.³⁹⁵ Thus, the male is commonly linked to culture, mind, spirit and reason, and positively valued within the societies of Western patriarchy, while the female is linked to nature, body, matter and emotion, and either devalued or actively denigrated. These forms of value-dualism and value-hierarchical thinking are central to the more philosophically-inclined ecofeminist analyses, and are considered to be intrinsic to what has been called a logic of domination (i.e. ‘an argumentative structure that “justifies” the power and privilege of those who are “up” over those who are “down”’).³⁹⁶

Ecofeminist responses to these dualistic frameworks can be understood to take three basic forms. First, the basic dualistic structures may be left intact but the values

394. A number of the most prevalent and influential dualisms are Female - Male, Nature - Culture, Body - Mind, Matter - Spirit, Emotion - Reason, Object - Subject, Other - Self, Passive - Active, Profane - Sacred.

395. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 45.

assigned to each pole may be reversed. Thus, femaleness, nature and the body may be privileged within certain forms of ecofeminism, above maleness, culture and mind, while the postulates linking the various dualisms remain (albeit occasionally being reconceived or strengthened). Second, many of the dualisms may be accepted and left untouched while the postulates that link the dualisms together are challenged and/or denied. Thus, it may be noted that it is only the associations between femaleness, nature and the body that have proved problematic in the past. The primary concern for women should be to claim their cultural agency, reason and rationality, while denying those factors that have detrimentally linked them to nature and the body in the past. According to this form of ecofeminism the degradation of nature remains a problem, but it is first and foremost a problem produced by inter and intra-human domination. Before environmental problems can be adequately addressed, women must disentangle themselves from their patriarchal association with nature, bodiliness and the emotions.³⁹⁷ Third, dualistic and binary oppositional ways of thinking are viewed as intrinsically problematic and are actively critiqued as the foundation of a 'logic of domination' that damages women, nature and, indeed, countless other categories and groups of people and things.

Of the above three types of ecofeminist attitude to dualism, it is notable that spiritual forms of ecofeminism tend to be identified with the first type (namely those that reverse the values assigned to the poles of the dualisms) and are also often

396. Karen J. Warren, 'A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on Ecofeminist Spiritualities' in Adams (ed.), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, p. 123; cf. Karen J. Warren, 'The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism,' *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 12, 1990, pp. 125-46.

397. See social ecological and existentialist forms of feminism. Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) and Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Random House, 1968).

criticized because they fail to adopt a sufficiently reflexive or critical attitude to the issue of dualism. That is, because many spiritual ecofeminisms revere and sacralize nature (as well as femaleness, the body, matter etc.), in addition to affirming and celebrating associations and bonds between women and nature, they are often thoroughly critiqued by philosophical/secular ecofeminists as being naive, non-political and reactionary; or, as Stacy Alaimo claims, their 'attempts to valorize women and nature via glorification and mystification may only bind them more securely to narratives of phallic domination.'³⁹⁸ While there is an extensive amount of literature within the genre of what one may call spiritual ecofeminism,³⁹⁹ the more philosophically and secularly inclined and self-identified ecofeminists argue that it is only by deconstructing binary oppositions and dualisms that the domination of women and nature can be properly understood and tackled;⁴⁰⁰ and it is significant that this approach is beginning to acquire the authority to define what it is that counts as an ecofeminism (as opposed to what is somewhat dismissively termed the merely

398. Stacy Alaimo, 'Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmentalism,' *Feminist Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, Spring 1994, p. 144.

399. Three anthologies are indicative of the breadth of spiritual ecofeminist material: Carol J. Adams (ed.), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993); Irene Diamond and Gloria F. Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), Judith Plant (ed.), *Healing the Wounds: The Power and Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia and Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers, 1989).

400. See D. J. Buege's 'Rethinking Again: A Defense of Ecofeminist Philosophy' in Warren (ed.), *Ecological Feminism*, pp. 42-63, wherein recurrent criticisms of ecofeminism are identified exclusively with spiritual forms of ecofeminism, rather than with the more philosophically sophisticated forms championed by Karen Warren, Jim Cheney, Val Plumwood and, one is to assume, Buege himself. See also, Victoria Davion's questioning of spiritual ecofeminisms, 'Is Ecofeminism Feminist?' in Warren (ed.), *Ecological Feminism*, pp. 8-27, and Val Plumwood's rapid dismissal of Goddess pantheism in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, pp. 126-128. Davion and Plumwood both make cogent points but are obviously not interested in expanding their analyses of spiritual ecofeminism(s) beyond a cursory level of engagement.

ecofeminine).⁴⁰¹ A feminist philosophical/secular approach to nature, with a corresponding deconstructive attitude to dualism, is beginning to redefine, or, in the words of Julie Crook, colonize ecofeminism.⁴⁰²

Secular forms of ecofeminism, as represented by authors such as Janet Biehl, Val Plumwood and Karen Warren, present a challenge to Goddess feminism *qua* ecofeminism. While spiritual ecofeminisms are perceived by some secular ecofeminists as being of some pragmatic value (i.e. serving a number of important empowering and political functions),⁴⁰³ they are also consistently criticized as conceptually confused and perpetuating certain gender hierarchies and inequalities. The question that arises, then, is whether this representation is fair. Is Goddess feminism as politically and philosophically confused as is suggested by many philosophical/secular ecofeminists? Is the philosophical and broadly secular focus of these ecofeminist critiques inattentive to the meaning and scope of a Goddess feminist concept or theology of nature? As a corollary point, it might also be asked whether the rift between religious/spiritual and philosophical/secular forms of ecofeminism is itself indicative of a form of invidious dualistic thinking.

Goddess feminism and the denial of dualism

In answer to the preceding questions, it is arguable that the Goddess feminist engagement with ecofeminism may be understood to be problematic from the perspective of those ecofeminisms that are not postulated upon a theology precisely

401. See Davion, 'Is Ecofeminism Feminist?'

402. Julie Crook, 'The Philosophical Colonization of Ecofeminism,' *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 20, no. 3, Fall 1998, pp. 227-246.

because it is informed by a worldview that exceeds their particular concerns. While Goddess feminists are concerned with analyses that chart the interlocking dominations of women and nature, they also value the construction of cosmologies, mythopoetic narratives and religio-political rituals that reconceive and reorientate the human relationship to nature. Goddess feminists consider the development and expression of a post-patriarchal sense of deity (femaleness, nature, the whole etc.) to be at least as important a means of addressing the ecological and social crisis as theorizing the various conceptual, epistemic and institutional structures of domination. Contemporary philosophical/secular forms of ecofeminism, by contrast, do not tend to recognize the relevance or value of this broader endeavour. They display a widespread feminist rejection of cosmological, ontological and religious/metaphysical frameworks and fail to acknowledge that such perspectives may be coherent, valid and/or produce long-term benefits. Although Goddess feminist models, narratives and concepts may be in need of some form of philosophical clarification and/or internal critique, the current philosophical/secular ecofeminist attitude to them is one of uncritical rejection without engagement. The narrow focus of philosophical/secular ecofeminism(s) upon analyses of domination does not recognize that, as a logical possibility, the religious and metaphysical concerns of Goddess feminism may ultimately override many of the criticisms that are levelled against them.

For example, consider ecofeminist construals of dualism. In most of the sustained feminist philosophical analyses of dualism it is noted that there is an either/or logic at work, a logic that endeavours to essentialize and reify the differences

403. Warren, 'A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on Ecofeminist Spiritualities', pp. 119-132.

between the two terms of the dualism. That is, dualisms are understood to operate according to a logic of discontinuity, exclusion and separation, wherein things are either A or Not-A (e.g. either female or male, either natural or cultural) and possess distinct and impermeable boundaries. This is a logic that secular ecofeminist Val Plumwood claims is tied directly to the evaluative and oppressive aspect of dualisms.

She observes that,

[b]ecause the other [of the dualism] is to be treated as not merely different but inferior, part of a lower, different order of being, differentiation from it demands not merely distinctness but radical exclusion, not merely separation but hyperseparation. Radical exclusion is a key indicator of dualism.⁴⁰⁴

In contrast to this process of radical exclusion, Goddess feminist attitudes to dualisms emphasize a logic of continuity, inclusion and interconnection, wherein things are both A and Not-A and possess fuzzy and permeable boundaries. This is a form of logic that can be readily discerned in the Goddess feminist concepts and models of the Great Mother and Triple Goddess, the cosmological models of the cauldron and cosmogonic womb, and the pantheistic notions of organicism and unity. Although secular ecofeminisms criticize the manner in which Goddess feminism is implicated in promoting a number of potentially invidious patriarchal dualisms, predominantly by celebrating and valorizing femaleness, bodiliness, the emotions and nature, the Goddess feminist attitude to those dualisms is radically different to the one that it is often characterized as possessing. By focusing upon Goddess feminism's metaphysical commitments and reality-claims, one may discern that Goddess feminists conceive of exclusion and separation as specifically patriarchal pre-occupations. The Goddess feminist worldview is premised upon an account of reality

404. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 49.

that emphasizes continuity and interconnection within nature, is apt to define separation in terms of evil, and is fundamentally non-dualistic in orientation.⁴⁰⁵

Goddess feminism and the denial of all distinctions

The Goddess feminist focus upon the themes of continuity and interconnection is rarely acknowledged as entailing a denial of dualistic thinking by its philosophical/secular commentators and critics. Rather, when the Goddess feminist focus upon continuity is recognized, it is commonly characterized and criticized as resulting in a deeply problematic denial of all distinction(s). That is, critiques of the Goddess feminist worldview tend to alternate between the targeting of dualistic and essentialist tendencies, on the one hand, and pointing out the consequences of adopting a logic of continuity, on the other. They do not, as a rule, reflect on the contradictory nature of these two perspectives, or attempt to consider how the two perspectives may be reconciled, mutually correct one another, or simply fit together within a single system of thought. This philosophical/secular reading is, as I have argued earlier, questionable and requires correction by a more sympathetic and systematic analysis.

The assertion that there exists a metaphysical continuity between all things is not unique to Goddess feminism. It is also common to an eco-philosophical perspective advocated by many deep ecologists, as well as being integral to the philosophies of a number of the world's religions. Philosophical and secular ecofeminist criticisms of these positions, however, tend to be applicable to each of these positions. Statements

405. See Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 113-134, Starhawk's account of estrangement in *Dreaming the Dark*, Chapter 1, and, in particular, Sjöö and Mor's account of evil as

by spiritual ecofeminists, such as Susan Griffin that ‘between my arm and the air, between the movements of a flame and what we call the solid mass of wood, there is no boundary’,⁴⁰⁶ and deep ecologists, such as Warwick Fox that ‘there is no bifurcation in reality between human and the nonhuman realms ... to the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness’,⁴⁰⁷ are said by secular ecofeminists such as Janet Biehl and Val Plumwood to be founded on the same confusions and are subject to the same criticisms.

As Val Plumwood has argued, the assertion of ontological continuity and a world without boundaries creates an ‘indistinguishability metaphysics of unbroken wholeness’ and results in ‘the obliteration of distinction.’⁴⁰⁸ To assert that there are no boundaries removes the very possibility of distinguishing between the beings, objects and subjects of the world. To propose a form of metaphysical continuity and boundarylessness is to ultimately deny all differences and particularities.⁴⁰⁹ Although a logic of continuity is commonly linked with the expansion of one’s ethical awareness, in that a recognition of continuity can help one understand that the interests and needs of others (nonhuman and human) are also one’s own, this position is argued by Plumwood to be untenable. If a logic of continuity were true, it is argued, it would be impossible to decide whose interests or needs would count.⁴¹⁰ If there were no

separation in *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 416-417.

406. Cited in Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, p.81.

407. Cited in Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 176.

408. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 177.

409. Cf. Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, p. 82.

410. Ibid., p. 178. Plumwood cites poet and deep ecologist John Seed’s identification with the needs of the rainforest in this respect. Seed claims, ‘I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.’ Plumwood observes that ‘[w]hat John Seed seems to have in mind here is that once one has realised that one is

boundaries, dispositions and states such as interest and need, identity and relationship, would become meaningless. In Michael Zimmerman's words, 'relationships can only obtain between individuals that have some measure of importance and reality of their own.'⁴¹¹ To claim that boundaries do not exist, or that they are in some sense illusory and need to be overcome/transcended, is to deny that any form or sense of identity is possible (excepting, that is, the identity of the whole). It is to become lost, in Plumwood's terms, in an 'Ocean of Continuity.'⁴¹²

Admittedly the acknowledgement and attempt to overcome the illusory nature of the world, its distinctions and boundaries, is an ultimate concern for certain of the world's religions and philosophies; and these religions and philosophies have their own answers to the criticisms noted above (answers that commonly centre upon metaphysical accounts of the relations that exist between a differentiated world of appearances and an undifferentiated world of the real). The concern of this thesis, however, is with how Goddess feminists can respond to this critique. Does a theological denial of dualism lead necessarily into a denial of all distinctions and an Ocean of Continuity? Are Goddess feminists committed to claiming that the world of boundaries and distinctions is in some sense illusory?

In answer to the charge that it denies all distinctions, one may note that in Goddess feminism there are significant countervailing reality-claims and values at work; and specifically claims and values that theologically prioritize the importance of differentiation and diversity within nature. Certainly there are Goddess feminists who

indistinguishable from the rainforest, its needs will become one's own. But there is nothing to guarantee this - one could equally take one's own needs for its.'

411. Michael E. Zimmerman, 'Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism: The Emerging Dialogue' in Diamond and Orenstein, (eds), *Reweaving the World*, p. 147.

seemingly do push continuity toward the level at which all differences are merged in an oceanic oneness, notably Sjöö and Mor's proposal of an ontology wherein '[e]verything touches everything in the real world, [where] there are no borders'.⁴¹³ However, this is not the theological norm and is unrepresentative of the worldview of Goddess feminists taken as a whole or assessed systematically.

As further counterevidence to a Goddess feminist denial of all distinctions, consider Carol Christ's explicit claim that '[t]o live in awareness of the deep connection of all beings in the web of life does not mean that all is absorbed in a oneness of unity where difference is denied. Difference and diversity are the great principles of nature.'⁴¹⁴ Or reflect on Starhawk's claim that 'the Goddess, like nature, loves diversity'⁴¹⁵ and Charlene Spretnak's point that the Goddess 'contains the mystery of diversity within unity: the extraordinary range of differentiation in forms of life on Earth issued from her dynamic form and are kin.'⁴¹⁶ Each of these theological reality-claims emphasizes the importance and presence of differentiation and diversity in nature, and nowhere within Goddess feminist discourse can one find a statement that suggests that differentiation and diversity are either illusory or *a priori* problematic. Goddess feminists are, I reiterate, predominantly religious realists who conceive and experience nature in pantheistic terms. In significant respects nature is considered to be a oneness or unity, a sacred whole that is unified as Goddess/Nature. But this neither negates the reality of differentiation and diversity, or denies that the

412. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 3.

413. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 428.

414. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 119.

415. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 27.

416. Spretnak, *States of Grace*, pp. 136-7.

things that constitute the whole do not exist in their own right.⁴¹⁷ In reply to suggestions that a Goddess feminist denial of dualism must lead inevitably toward a denial of all distinctions, it is necessary to clarify that Goddess feminists do not so much deny dualisms and distinctions as stress that boundaries, categories and indeed all things are permeable and subject to change and transformation; a claim that is emphasized in the previous section's accounts of cosmological models, and is expanded upon in accounts of Goddess feminism's privileging of a logic of becoming in subsequent chapters.

There is, I contend, a world of difference between affirming that boundaries are permeable and in a state of flux and claiming that there are no boundaries. Goddess feminists are critical of what they consider to be the patriarchal attitudes towards and practices associated with boundaries and dualisms: notably, the use of an either/or logic that is insensitive to difference and novelty, the extreme efforts that often need to be taken in order to keep categories separate, and the hierarchical and oppressive uses to which the dualisms have historically been put. The Goddess feminist attitude to boundaries and dualisms is, I reiterate, one that is informed by a metaphysical concept of nature wherein everything is subject to dissolution, flux and transformation. Boundaries exist, but they shift.

In most patriarchal accounts of dualism(s), '[s]uch is the weight of the threat of chaos and general corruption, the boundar[ies] must be shored up at great cost to prevent total dissolution of all categories, and life itself as we know it (or think we

417. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 37.

do).⁴¹⁸ For Goddess feminists, by contrast, '[t]he Goddess is a model of seeing all extremes, not as struggling opposites but as many different complementary moments - all potentially wonderful - in one cycling, changing continuum of experiences.'⁴¹⁹ This is a theological understanding of nature that shares affinities with certain other religious/metaphysical worldviews (Buddhism and Taoism both propose that a universal feature of reality is that everything is constantly changing, impermanent and in state of flux). Yet for Goddess feminism the emphasis is unique in that models such as the pregnant Great Mother, within whom the boundaries between self and other become blurred, and the cycling, complexifying, cosmogonic cauldron/womb of the Goddess, serve, according to theologian Donna Wilshire, to present 'possibilities that our dualistic thinking has arbitrarily put a lid on and that our traditional use of language has not even let us imagine!'⁴²⁰

For Goddess feminists, continuity is not pushed toward its apparently ultimate conclusion (i.e. a denial of all distinctions). Rather, emphasis is shifted away from what is theologically understood to be a patriarchal preoccupation with rigid boundaries, discontinuities and separation, towards a more mutable and protean view of reality. At the core of the Goddess feminist worldview is a concept of the ultimate flux and flow of nature, thematized by the cycling and rhythmic processes of birth, growth, death and rebirth, and it is this understanding that is central to a Goddess feminist theology of nature. Constancy, differentiation and organization have an important place within a Goddess feminist understanding of nature (theological and

418. Penelope Margaret Magee, 'Disputing the Sacred: Some Theoretical Approaches to Religion and Gender' in King (ed.), *Religion & Gender*, p. 109.

419. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 8.

420. *Ibid.*

metaphysical), but it is the concept that everything in nature is subject to change and transformation that has priority. The manner by which Goddess feminists construe and imaginatively conceive the constancy and organization of nature against a background of change and flux is considered in the following sections.

IV GAIA AND ECOLOGY: ORGANICISM AND UNITY RECONCEIVED

This section is concerned with clarifying Goddess feminism's understanding of continuity, organization and interconnection in nature by recourse to an ancient image/concept of nature: the web of life, and specifically to two contemporary scientific theories: Gaia theory and ecology. Goddess feminists consider the image/concept of the web to be of special theological significance, primarily because of its presence within a wide array of Goddess myths and narratives, while both Gaia theory and ecology have been appropriated because of their focus upon nature in terms of organicism and unity. Outlining the relationship between the web of life, Gaia theory, ecology and the themes of continuity, organization and interconnection is the main task of this section.

Thealogy and the Web of Life.

Despite the image/concept of the web of life being a popular one today, appearing as it does in a wide variety of discourses, essays and theories on ecology and nature, Goddess feminists have traced the origins of the web back to numerous images, myths and narratives of ancient goddess worship. Associations between webs (as well as the closely related images/concepts of the net and knot), the powers of life (and also of

death), and the spinning and weaving activities of many female deities, have been identified by Goddess feminists as being of considerable theological, feminist and also ecological significance.⁴²¹ These associations have, in turn, served to inform the manner in which nature is ultimately conceived and subsequently described by Goddess feminists as fundamentally interconnected.

Carol Christ draws extensively upon the image/concept of the web of life in her work of systematic theology *Rebirth of the Goddess*. Utilizing the web in two chapter headings, and as a means of outlining her own theological concept of nature, Christ opens her first chapter on the web of life in the following terms: ‘To know ourselves of this earth is to know our deep connection to all people and all beings. All beings are interdependent in the web of life. This is the distinctive conception of nature and our place in it found in Goddess religion.’⁴²² In this account, the web of life is first linked to a conception of one’s being connected to the earth (and, consequently, to all other things on the earth) and, second, implies that interconnection necessitates interdependence. Christ’s term “deep connection” suggests that certain metaphysical commitments are at work in her use of the web, and these commitments become explicit when she claims that the condition of interdependence in the web of life is a universal phenomenon (i.e. “All beings”).

Similar metaphysical uses of the web and the concepts of weaving and spinning as Christs appear throughout Goddess feminist discourse. Thus, Sjöö and Mor affirm that ‘[e]verything is interconnected in a vast webwork of cosmic being - a universal weaving - in which each individual thing, or life form, is a kind of energy knot, or

421. Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, pp. 148-152; Moorey, *The Goddess*, p. 17.

422. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 111.

interlock, in the overall vibrating pattern.’⁴²³ Starhawk writes of the importance of reflecting upon the model of the Goddess as weaver and spider, as well as paying close attention to the work of the spiders that one may encounter everyday, and observes that reflection upon the ‘rhythm of strands and spaces’ and the ‘points of connection and openings’ within a web can serve as a model for reflecting upon the diverse relationships in life.⁴²⁴ Moreover, the web can act as a model for functional, non-hierarchical and post-patriarchal organizations and practices.⁴²⁵ Indeed, the metaphysical meaning and scope of the web for Goddess feminists is perhaps most clearly and succinctly communicated in the popular Goddess chant, ‘We are the flow, we are the ebb, We are the weavers, we are the web’.⁴²⁶ The model of the web pervades Goddess feminist understandings of their relation to the world.

How, though, are the metaphysical meanings of the web, and the associated activities of spinning and weaving, to be interpreted? Is the web of life primarily a metaphor and poetic affirmation of metaphysical interconnection in nature? Or is the web meant to possess more explanatory power than this? How, for example, is connection understood by Goddess feminists? Does the web inform and relate in a coherent manner to the preceding Goddess feminist notions of pantheism, organicism and unity; and, if so, what part does the web have to play in Goddess feminist concepts of deity and nature? Does interdependence necessarily follow from interconnection? It is one thing to make use of an image, model or concept to affirm

423. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 51.

424. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 74.

425. Ibid., p. 114 f.

426. Cited in Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 225.

or evoke a notion of interconnectedness in nature, it is quite another to explain what exactly it is that interconnection may mean.

The preceding questions are not ones that are answered explicitly by Goddess feminists, at least not by means of systematic philosophical or metaphysical exposition. Rather, in so far as Goddess feminists have attempted to elucidate the meaning and coherence of such images and concepts of nature as the web of life, they would seem to have done so primarily by appropriating certain contemporary scientific theories of nature, notably Gaia theory and ecology. In what follows, the appropriation of these scientific theories and their contribution to theological reality-claims is examined and analyzed.

Gaia theory: organicism reconceived

Gaia theory is founded upon the hypothesis developed by British chemist James Lovelock during the 1960s that proposed that the complexity and organization of a life-supporting world like the Earth is such that it is a form of superorganism.⁴²⁷ From what may be termed a systemic perspective, the countless forms of life on Earth can be understood to dynamically interact with one another and their environment in a manner that suggests that the Earth taken as a whole – evocatively named Gaia⁴²⁸ – is a single self-organizing and self-regulating system.⁴²⁹

427. James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* (New York: Bantam, 1988), p. 19.

428. Lovelock recounts how ‘fellow villager. the novelist William Golding, suggested that anything as identifiable as a superorganism deserves a name, and what better than Gaia, the name the Greeks used for the Earth Goddess’, *The Ages of Gaia*, p. 3.

429. The Gaia hypothesis was first formulated by Lovelock during time spent working at NASA as part of a team of scientists attempting to design experiments to test for life on Mars. While at NASA Lovelock began to think seriously about the interactions that take place

For Goddess feminists the organicist concept of the world introduced by Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, and subsequently developed with the aid of Lynn Margulis into Gaia theory, is a pleasing scientific rejection of the mechanistic and patriarchal worldview that has dominated the cultural, religious and scientific imagination of the west for the past several centuries.⁴³⁰ Drawing upon a religious worldview where the divine is conceived and experienced as the living whole of nature, Goddess feminists have embraced Gaia theory as providing an account of the world that is apparently in harmony with their own. Not only is a concept of organicism extended to encompass the entire Earth in Gaia theory, a concept that is central to Goddess feminist understandings of divine immanence and nature, but Gaia

between living organisms and the atmosphere of a planet and noted that all living organisms take in energy/matter and discard waste products; a flow of energy/matter that produces observable changes within the atmosphere, and also results in a state of atmospheric disequilibrium. Lovelock hypothesized from this that worlds whose atmospheric conditions are very close to equilibrium are also worlds that are very unlikely to bear life; and these thoughts, in turn, prompted a long process of reflection upon the close relationships that he believed must exist between the life of a planet and its environmental conditions. Lovelock's initial attempts to discuss the Gaia hypothesis in the scientific community were met with a wall of opposition; and, from the mid-1970s, Lovelock began to collaborate with microbiologist Lynn Margulis in an effort to provide detailed scientific explanations for how Gaia functioned as an organism. One of Lovelock's earliest observations in support of his organicist concept of the Earth was that the Earth's mean surface temperature had remained constant over the past four billion years, at a level suitable for life, despite the Sun's heat emissions having increased by at least twenty five percent within the same time period. This state of affairs was possible, Lovelock argued, precisely because the Earth was a form of superorganism and capable of self-regulation. By working together with Margulis, Lovelock began to outline a number of the ways by which microbes, plants and animals interacted both with one another and the Earth's atmosphere, geology and oceans so as to produce such widespread effects as planetary temperature regulation; and the Gaia hypothesis slowly developed into what is today accepted as Gaia theory. The scientific model of the Earth as an organism remains a contentious one, but Gaia theory is increasingly supported by a growing number of other theories that have also adopted what may be termed a systemic perspective. Gaia theory represents, what is for many, a welcome shift in scientific focus: a shift away from reductionist methodologies and mechanistic models towards a study of complex wholes, systems and organisms.

430. For a detailed account of the decline of the organicist concept of the Earth during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and its replacement by a mechanistic model, see Merchant, *The Death of Nature*.

theory provides an account of the Earth's complex ability to self-regulate itself that is viewed by many Goddess feminists as comparable to accounts of the agency and creativity of the Goddess. Furthermore, although Gaia theory does not claim to have any religious or specifically metaphysical meaning,⁴³¹ Goddess feminists like Charlene Spretnak have been quick to interpret the theory in a manner that draws forth or imposes a religious meaning; and they have also clarified and expanded upon theological themes of community and interconnection in nature almost exclusively by recourse to Gaia theory.

For most Goddess feminists Gaia theory has a special religious and metaphysical significance, and it is possible to argue that Gaia theory is becoming so closely entwined with the Goddess feminist worldview that the term "Gaian" may in the future be an acceptable means of identifying members of the movement.⁴³² In contemporary Goddess feminist literature, Gaia theory is woven directly into theological accounts of the interconnected nature of life on Earth and is also often cited as providing scientific support for what are primarily metaphysical assertions. For example, while suggesting that process metaphysics is adaptable to theological purposes, Carol Christ claims that Gaia 'theory is compatible with and provides a partial scientific grounding for process theology's view of God.'⁴³³ Subsequent to this

431. Lovelock does not deny that Gaia may possess a religious or spiritual meaning for many people, although he is careful to state that there is no such meaning implicit in the theory. For a clarification of this issue, see 'God and Gaia' in *The Ages of Gaia*, pp. 191-209.

432. Wendy Griffin has claimed that all of the Goddess and spiritual feminists that she has encountered and interviewed are content to be referred to by the collective term Gaian. W. Griffin, 'Diana's Daughters: Postmodern Priestessing in America', a paper given at the conference 'Ambivalent Goddesses: An Exploration of the Current State of the Study of Goddesses and Goddess Spirituality,' King Alfred's College of Higher Education, Winchester, March 1997.

433. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 105-106.

assertion, she again draws upon Gaia theory to render explicit her theological account of the web of life.⁴³⁴ Monica Sjöö, in turn, utilizes imagery of Gaia as Earth Mother and concepts taken directly from Gaia theory in a single theological narrative. Thus,

Gaia, the Earth Mother, is a gigantic, living cosmic being with a self-regulatory system and the air and moisture surrounding us in the atmosphere is Her in-and-out breath. The tropical forests, now being cut down for short-term economic profits, are the lungs of the Earth and wells are the menstrual flow of Her underground blood-water arteries.⁴³⁵

Both Christ and Sjöö's appropriations of Gaia theory are typical of a general Goddess feminist attitude. In each case, the theoretical framework of Lovelock and Margulis is drawn into a close relationship with the worldview of Goddess feminism and interpreted by means of a particular set of political and religious commitments and values (notably values that are on the side of life and its fulfilment).⁴³⁶ Gaia theory is not conceived purely in terms of a scientific theory, it is understood within the context of a particular religious worldview (and ethos) and contributes to what is for many Goddess feminists the meaning of the Goddess as nature. Gaia theory and Gaia science (or what Lovelock has termed geophysiology) provide what are for many Goddess feminists theologically acceptable accounts of the being and physiology of the Goddess. As theologian Rachel Pollack claims,

Both the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Gaia Theory address our very deep sense of the world as composed of isolated fragments, each one of them seemingly alone, and yet all of them, all of us, connected at some fundamental level.⁴³⁷

And, expanding upon this theological understanding of an agreement or convergence between myth and science, she adds:

434. Ibid., pp. 118-120.

435. Sjöö, *New Age & Armageddon*, p. 134.

436. For a comprehensive feminist theological analysis of Gaia theory, see Anne Primavesi, *Sacred Gaia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

Modern biology returns us to the same idea as that represented by the Goddess Persephone rising from the land of the dead - that we are all alive, all joined with each other, with the animals and the plants, with stars and the dust, together in the body of the Goddess.⁴³⁸

It is this theological understanding of Gaia theory that requires further elucidation; a task that must, inevitably, also encompass the Goddess feminist understanding of the science of ecology.

Ecological communities and networks

Theologians acknowledge that Gaia theory and ecology are not equivalent disciplines. As Pollack observes, '[e]cology studies the unity of life *on* Earth. The Gaia Theory describes the Earth itself as alive.'⁴³⁹ Derived from the Greek *oikos* ('home' or 'household'), ecology is concerned with studying the interactions and relationships that exist between organisms within their 'home' environment or ecosystem. Gaia theory is concerned with studying the Earth as a living organism. As disciplines that study nature and life in terms of complex wholes (unity: ecology, organism: Gaia), however, Goddess feminists are deeply concerned with the insights and concepts of both.

Central to ecological theories are the concepts of community and network; concepts that are, as already elucidated, central to Goddess feminist thought. Ecology studies the manner in which living organisms form themselves into communities (communities which can be productively studied as complexly interrelated functional wholes), and these ecological communities are themselves subject to further study in

437. Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess*, p. 7.

438. Ibid.

439. Ibid., p. 224.

terms of their defining relationships; that is, by recourse to the study of networks. For Goddess feminists, it is the focus upon communities and networks within ecological theory that has effectively rendered the ancient image/concept of the web of life meaningful within the context of contemporary science. For ecology moves between thinking about organisms, communities and networks in a manner that is comparable with their own intuitions and reflections about nature. That is, ecological theories provide Goddess feminists with a conceptual framework or resource capable of detailing what community, interconnection and the web of life may mean, metaphysically as well as theologically.

In the twentieth anniversary edition of *the Spiral Dance*, Starhawk clarifies her current understanding of the Goddess specifically by reference to ecological concepts. In agreement with other Goddess feminists (e.g. Christ, Sjöö and Mor, and Native American theologians Paula Gunn Allen and Carol Lee Sanchez),⁴⁴⁰ Starhawk suggests that there is an important sense in which the Goddess has historically been conceived, experienced, celebrated and revered through a close relationship with a particular place, region or ecosystem; an understanding of the Goddess that is particularly relevant today. Thus, she claims:

Today, I experience the Goddess primarily as the expression of land and place. As we begin to understand the earth as an organism, the Goddess is the consciousness of the earth being, and her various aspects are reflections of the land/climate/ecology web of a given area. So the Goddess Demeter, patroness of agriculture and barley, hailed from Eleusis, once the most fertile plain in Greece ... Her sister Athena, Goddess of the olive, which will grow on stony hillsides, hailed from the drier uplands of Athens.⁴⁴¹

440. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) and Carol Lee Sanchez, 'New World Tribal Communities' in Plaskow and Christ (eds), *Weaving the Visions*, pp. 344-356.

441. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p.271.

While affirming that the Goddess is immanent within the whole of nature, Starhawk and the aforementioned Goddess feminists all claim that Goddess/Nature has many aspects, and stress the importance of rooting their political, religious and ritual activities within particular, concrete understandings of those different aspects. It is important that Goddess/Nature is revered, ritualized and understood in Her specificity, that is, locally, regionally and ecologically.

Human interactions with nature are theologically conceived as necessarily constrained by various epistemic, physiological and practical limitations such as perceptual and sensory limits, biological needs for sustenance and rest, ties to community and family. Moreover, those limitations are defined and shaped by the environment within which one either lives or finds oneself. That is, humans are themselves participants in ecological communities and networks. Humans do not interact with nature as an abstraction or impartially, although they may endeavour to reflect upon nature in such terms, rather they interact with and respond to nature as a concrete reality. Furthermore, by the very nature of their embodiment and being-in-the-world, humans are biased toward interacting with a particular scale of events; and it is this bias that renders a sense of place meaningful for Goddess feminists. All interactions within nature, and within the Goddess as nature, take place, first and foremost, in their particularity: first, arguably through one's own being and embodiment, but then locally through contact with particular places, regions and ecological communities.

Carol Christ draws attention to the theological importance of reflecting on a sense of place in *Rebirth of the Goddess* and claims that this sense can become

distorted, with detrimental consequences, in the modern world;⁴⁴² a fact that she notes need not be an inevitable consequence of simply living in large cities.⁴⁴³ Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, in turn, are remarkably attentive to the meaning of the Goddess in Her various chthonic manifestations; and throughout *The Great Cosmic Mother* they trace reverence for the Goddess through a connection to many geographical features, places and sites (e.g. from Eastern Europe to Silbury Hill in England, from Arabia and Egypt to the Aztec and Mayan lands of South America).⁴⁴⁴ Rachel Pollack's work *The Body of the Goddess* is itself a sustained reflection on the relationship of the Goddess to locality, landscape and place; and it is notable that large numbers of women are increasingly undertaking pilgrimages in an effort to reconnect with the Goddess as nature by visiting particular places.⁴⁴⁵

Returning to Starhawk, her Goddess feminist practice has recently turned toward closely observing and trying to understand nature, an endeavour that has been informed by models and theories drawn from ecology. In her own words:

I loved nature: I worshipped her and had often gone to jail defending her, but in many ways I really knew very little about her. ... [Consequently] I shifted my personal practice to spend some time each day ... observing what is going on around me, whether I'm in the forest or in a backyard in the city. ... I took a

442. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 121-122.

443. Ibid., p. 122; cf. Irene Javors 'Goddess in the Metropolis: Reflections on the Sacred in an Urban Setting' in Diamond and Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World*, pp. 211-214.

444. Sjöö and Mor's understandings of the Goddess in *The Great Cosmic Mother* are predominantly grounded through concrete ties to particular places/sites.

445. Pilgrimages to Goddess sites are regularly advertised and recounted in magazines such as *Goddessing Regenerated*. Christ's *Laughter of Aphrodite - Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* and *Odyssey with the Goddess: A Spiritual Quest in Crete* are both theological texts with a strong sense of discovery, pilgrimage and place. Moreover, there are also books that not only chart and map important Goddess sites but also list specific ways of approaching and attuning oneself to those sites, Anneli Rufus and Kristan Lawson, *Goddess Sites: Europe* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) and Philip Heselton, *Secret Places of the Goddess* (Capall Bann Publishing, 1995).

permaculture design course that offered training in reading the land, working with nature, and in ecological design.⁴⁴⁶

For Starhawk ecological knowledge has become increasingly relevant to her understanding of the meaning of Goddess as nature; images, models and symbols of the Goddess have begun to converge with those of ecology, and she writes that her

current passion is to integrate more closely the worship of nature with knowledge that comes from the observation of nature, and to infuse science, ecological design, and environmental activism with the deep connectedness that comes from acknowledging the sacred.⁴⁴⁷

The central argument of this section is that ecological theory is already well integrated within Goddess feminism's understanding of the Goddess as nature. Compare, for example, Sjöö and Mor's aforementioned theological quote that '[e]verything is interconnected in a vast webwork of cosmic being - a universal weaving - in which each individual thing, or life form, is a kind of energy knot, or interlock, in the overall vibrating pattern'⁴⁴⁸ with the ecological concept that 'we can picture an ecosystem schematically as a network with a few nodes. Each node represents an organism [and] ... each node, when magnified, appears itself as a network.'⁴⁴⁹ For Goddess feminists the model of the web of life is a way of speaking about the fundamentally interconnected nature of reality, for ecologists the web of life is an appropriate model for describing the unity of life on Earth, and increasingly ecological models and terminologies are an acceptable means of expressing theological principles and reality-claims. The theological model of the web of life coheres so closely with models drawn from ecology as to be almost analogous.

446. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 8.

447. Ibid., p. 9; cf. p. 220.

448. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 51.

In ecology, 'organisms are not only members of ecological communities but are also complex ecosystems themselves, containing a host of smaller organisms that have considerable autonomy and yet are integrated harmoniously into the functioning of the whole.'⁴⁵⁰ Goddess feminists such as Starhawk and Charlene Spretnak accept and work with these insights as they both inform their organicist understanding of the Goddess and support their sense of place within the Goddess as nature.⁴⁵¹ The Goddess is the overarching organism and ecosystem, the whole or totality of which all other organisms and ecosystems are parts. Humans occupy a particular place within the whole and are responsive to a particular scale of events within it/Her. Gaia, or the earthbody, in turn, occupies another place and is arguably responsive to another scale. All of these places and scales, however, are interconnected and it is significant that in both ecology and Goddess feminism 'there is no "above" or "below." There are no hierarchies, there are only networks nestling within other networks.'⁴⁵²

The life of the Goddess as nature

The language of communities, networks, organisms and systems is central to the account of life and nature supplied by the sciences of ecology and Gaia theory, and it

449. Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p. 35.

450. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

451. Starhawk, for example, claims that 'Witchcraft [which for her encompasses Goddess feminism] can be seen as a religion of ecology', the purpose of which 'is harmony with nature, so that life may not just survive, but thrive', *The Spiral Dance*, p. 25. For Spretnak, see *States of Grace* and also *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). Goddess feminist Shan Jayran makes a similar point when she claims 'I live in the Goddess, as the universe and every part and aspect of it is her body. So I am like a cell or a subatomic particle in her.' Personal communication by e-mail, Tues March 7th 2000, 20.17pm.

452. Capra, *The Web of Life*, p. 35.

is this language that is permitting Goddess feminists to redefine their concept of the “aliveness” of the Goddess as nature: Goddess/Nature. Critiques that have previously been directed toward the hylozoism or cosmological vitalism proposed by Goddess feminists, particularly by secular ecofeminists, are starting to lose their plausibility when directed against a theology of nature that eagerly draws upon the insights of postmodern science. Philosophical/secular ecofeminist Janet Biehl argued in 1991 that,

[w]hat is wrong with hylozoism, vitalism, and divine immanence, particularly when any of them are associated with women, is that they are false in terms of what we know. Ultimately, the universe, the solar system, and the earth are not living organisms, however much there may be life in the cosmos.⁴⁵³

In this statement, Biehl exhibits a rather narrow understanding of a complex and increasingly contested term (i.e. life), and consequently her critique of a Goddess feminist concept of the “aliveness” of nature rests upon insecure ground. By her own chosen criteria of argument, i.e. “what we know” (by which she means what we know scientifically), it is possible to dispute her claim. The central premise of Gaia theory is that the Earth is alive, a form of superorganism, and this theory is gaining increasing currency within the scientific community. Goddess feminism’s concept of life is, admittedly, broader than that of contemporary science. Goddess feminists readily claim that the whole (Goddess/Nature), which necessarily encompasses the Universe, is alive. However the contemporary understanding of life is changing in such a manner that the distinctions between organic and non-organic matter, as they serve to define life, are no longer as clear as they once were. While Gaia theory founder James Lovelock restricts himself to conceiving of the Earth as alive (it is, he claims, a

453. Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, pp. 79-80.

manageable concept),⁴⁵⁴ he acknowledges that in the future it may ‘become possible to encompass the metaphor of a living Universe.’⁴⁵⁵ Moreover, scientists such as Erich Jantsch have already theorized the meaning and nature of a self-organizing Universe in a manner that would probably be acceptable to the organicist principles of a feminist theology of nature.⁴⁵⁶

Although Biehl contends that,

[t]he “femaleness” of “Mother Earth” cannot be extended to the universe as a whole, or to nature conceived as the macrocosm. From a cosmological viewpoint, macrocosmic nature includes not only the earth but also the sun, stars and celestial bodies, as well as principles of organization and development that are not exclusively premised on organismic principles.⁴⁵⁷

In counterargument, it is possible through the theories of postmodern science to display how organismic and organicist models and principles can encompass large scale systems; a point that is addressed more comprehensively in the following chapter when the scientific theories of chaos and complexity are examined. The appropriateness of attributing the label ‘femaleness’ to such principles is, of course, a different issue. But in so far as the Earth may be characterized as female, or as a mother, there is little reason to believe that the Universe or cosmological whole cannot also be so identified.

Furthermore, in opposition to theorists such as Biehl who wish to maintain a firm distinction between living and non-living matter, theologians such as Rachel Pollack point toward not only Gaia theory but the fact that ‘95 percent of a redwood tree is actually dead wood, yet the tree lives’; the fact ‘that over vast time rock

454. Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia*, p. 194.

455. Ibid., p. 204. See also, Capra, *The Web of Life*, pp. 211-212.

456. Erich Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe* (New York: Pergamon, 1980); cf. David Layzer, *Cosmogogenesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

transforms into living creatures which then eventually transform back into rock'; 'the dust in our homes comes from skin that has flaked off our bodies during the course of the day' and 'the Earth itself and everything on it comes from starlight, for the dust which originally formed the planets began as the remains of exploding stars.'⁴⁵⁸

For Goddess feminists, a broader concept of life is at work within their theological understanding of nature than is currently evident within many philosophical/secular, mechanistic and reductionistic worldviews; and, more importantly, this concept of life is not one that can be easily separated from the Goddess feminist concept of place. Goddess feminists conceive and experience everything as divine and as subject to cosmological principles and processes of becoming and transformation – principles and processes that apply to all matter/energy. Life for Goddess feminists is arguably comprehensible as a form of pantheistic principle (the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle introduced in Chapter Two), a principle that is valued by Goddess feminists as an ultimate given at the macrocosmic level of Goddess/Nature, and as something which necessarily permeates throughout the whole: from the cosmological level, to the planetary and geological, the animal and plant, the bacterial and viroid, to the chemical and subatomic. All of nature is subject to the life processes of the Goddess as nature.

To clarify the theological importance of this principle one may observe that Christ speaks of the desire of the Goddess 'to manifest life ever more fully in the world.' She claims that '[d]eath is not the enemy. It is a part of the cycle of life.'⁴⁵⁹

457. Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, p. 69.

458. Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess*, p. 227. Pollack is approvingly drawing upon the work of ecofeminist philosopher of science Elisabet Sahtouris.

459. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 106.

Starhawk claims of the Goddess, 'She is life eternally attempting to maintain itself, diversify, evolve, and breed more life; a force more implacable than death, although death itself is an aspect of life.'⁴⁶⁰ Spretnak speaks of an 'ongoing birthing process of cosmological unfolding'⁴⁶¹ and Sjöo and Mor, somewhat more negatively, but arguably more revealingly, claim '*Evil [is] that which prevents the unfolding of the One.*'⁴⁶² In each of these theological statements a notion of growth and unfolding is linked with the Goddess, a characteristic which according to the latest scientific theories is an inherent property of all living systems.⁴⁶³ Moreover, it is through these new systemic theories of life (i.e. ecology and Gaia) that we can understand the nature of the Goddess and 'begin to recapture a sense of ourselves, and the universe, as dynamic, as rotting and growing, as everchanging. Alive.'⁴⁶⁴

Contributing further detail to the theological concept of the unfolding life processes of the Goddess, it is notable that Gaia theory does not agree with two of the models of evolution that have dominated the cultural and scientific landscape of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather than evolution being conceived primarily in terms of competition (Darwinian and Neo-Darwinian accounts), or by recourse to linear, teleological accounts, or what may be characterized as escalator models,⁴⁶⁵ Gaia theory proposes that '[l]ife and its environment are so closely coupled that

460. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 228.

461. Spretnak, *States of Grace*, p. 134.

462. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 413.

463. Capra, *The Web of Life*, Chapter Ten: 'The Unfolding of Life.'

464. Pollack, *The Body of Goddess*, p. 230.

465. For an account and analysis of escalator accounts of evolution, see Mary Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985).

evolution concerns Gaia, not the organisms or the environment taken separately.⁴⁶⁶

This shift of evolutionary focus is interpreted by certain Goddess feminists as emphasizing, or rather confirming, a more cooperative and open-ended view of evolution. Drawing particularly upon the recent work of Gaia theorist Elisabet Sahtouris,⁴⁶⁷ as well as developments in microbiology (perhaps significantly the work of Lynn Margulis),⁴⁶⁸ Goddess feminists have endeavoured to highlight how the interconnections that exist between the often apparently disparate elements of nature are such that cooperation and co-evolution, as well as sharing and symbiosis, are the primary principles of life.⁴⁶⁹

The ecological and Gaia theory view of life as a cooperative process is one that informs the meaning of community and political praxis for Goddess feminists. Life and evolution are conceived not as a battle between isolated individuals, or as a steady advance toward a single goal or telos. Life emerges and exists within communities and is a dynamic process. Or, more specifically, life unfolds only within the complex interactions and processes of a community. Starhawk, for example, claims that community is concerned primarily with 'the growth and transformation that comes

466. Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia*, p. 20.

467. Elisabet Sahtouris, *Gaia: The Human Journey from Chaos to Cosmos* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989).

468. Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Microbial Evolution* (New York: Summit Books, 1986); Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, *What is Life?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Lynn Margulis, *Symbiosis in Cell Evolution* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1993).

469. For example, Christ cites Sahtouris' work in support of her own account of nature as interdependent, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 118-120; Starhawk recommends Sahtouris' book as her 'favorite of the books on the Gaia hypothesis.' <http://www.reclaiming.org/cauldron/starhawk/headwaters.html> ; Sjöö and Mor approvingly cite Gaia interpreter William Irwin Thompson's theory of human evolution as cooperative and woman-centered, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 9-10, 408-409; Rachel Pollack draws out extensive links between the work of Lovelock, Margulis and Sahtouris and Goddess religions, *The Body of the Goddess*, pp. 223-238.

through intimate interactions and common struggles. Community includes not only people but also the animals, plants, soil, air and water and energy systems that support our lives.⁴⁷⁰ For Goddess feminists community is an organicist concept that is applicable to many aspects of existence. Thus, the Goddess as nature is an ecological community, Gaia is an ecological community, and humans themselves may be understood as ecological communities. The point that is theologically significant, however, is that these communities are in some senses biological: interactive, open-ended and subject to transformation.

470. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 11.

CHAPTER 4

TIME AND BECOMING

In the preceding chapter Goddess feminist understandings of cosmogony, cosmology and nature were described and examined in order to clarify the ways in which Goddess feminists conceive the fundamental organization of reality. By constructing what may be termed a thealogy of nature, many Goddess feminist reality-claims and metaphysical commitments were rendered explicit and presented so as to make their coherence and plausibility accessible to future philosophical enquiry and metaphysical theorizing. This chapter continues this process by explicating how metaphysical concepts, models and themes of becoming, rather than of being, are privileged by Goddess feminists.

First, the manner in which a theological concept of time coheres with and is informed by the thealogy of nature developed in the previous chapter is explained, specifically by reference to a Goddess feminist understanding of place (and space). A Goddess feminist concept of time is, it is argued, not separable from a theological concept and deeply felt sense of place. Theological time is defined by patterns occurring within nature; patterns that on a cosmological or planetary scale may be identified as cyclical or spiralling. Second, certain critical differences between feminist theological and masculinist theological concepts of time are raised and examined, with special critical attention being directed towards the temporal concepts of history, teleology and eschatology. Theological time resists linearity and does not readily cohere with concepts of a fixed human or divine purpose. Theological time is

open-ended and is shaped by the organic rhythms of nature taken as a whole: Goddess/Nature. Third, a theology of time is identified as in most significant respects a gynocentric account of time. A typology of gynocentric time is developed and the meaning of a female temporal order is explained in terms of its coherence and consistency with a Goddess feminist understanding of the femaleness and generativity of nature.

Fourth, the Goddess feminist understanding of time and female generativity is expanded upon to incorporate the (post)modern theorization of chaotic systems and complexity. It is explained that the new mathematical and scientific theories of chaos and complexity prioritize metaphysical themes of becoming in a manner that is not only compatible with Goddess feminist reality-claims, but is also capable of contributing philosophical precision to a theological metaphysic. Areas of agreement and convergence between feminist theological reality-claims and chaos systemic views of nature are identified, as are possible areas of disagreement and tension. Fifth, a feminist appropriation of chaos/complexity theory that does not evidently cohere with Goddess feminist reality-claims and values is examined (i.e. cyberfeminism) as a means of clarifying the distinctive nature of a Goddess feminist metaphysic. This chapter concludes with a theological account of the value of the unpredictable and wild processes of metaphysical becoming and chaos that Goddess feminists claim define nature.

I CYCLICAL AND SPIRALLING TIME

It is notable that Pagan, pantheistic and nature-centered religious worldviews are commonly associated with the categories of space and ahistorical nature, rather than with time and human history; an association that also serves as the basis for a critique and/or rejection of those religious options. It is rarely acknowledged that the identification and critique of these 'Pagan' concepts of space and time can or ought to be questioned. That is, it is rarely observed that an alternative view of time is either philosophically coherent or religiously and existentially valuable. A theological understanding of time does, however, provides an alternative to these predominantly patriarchal constructions and valuations of space and time, as well as history and nature, and revives concepts and perceptions of time that are of both ancient lineage and contemporary philosophical significance.

As Sallie McFague notes, it is in the discourse of space versus time that 'the old dichotomy of nature versus history is played out.'⁴⁷¹ And, while this 'dichotomy is certainly not absolute, for history takes place in nature and nature itself has a history, ... for the past several hundred years at least ... the focus and preference of Western thought has been on history to the detriment of nature.'⁴⁷² Theology, by contrast, with its treatment of nature as the primary real (i.e. Goddess/Nature), interprets time and history in a significantly different manner to that preferred by Western religious and philosophical thought. For Goddess feminists it is observable changes in the natural world that constitute the primary evidence of temporal flow; changes that at a certain level of perception may be characterized as cyclical and repetitive. In patriarchal

471. McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 100.

theologies, as indeed in patriarchal consciousness and culture as a whole, it is the changes implemented by humans (individually, communally and nationally) that are emphasized. Time is conceived as something that is both linear and progressive. This polarization of religious temporal viewpoints is, of course, somewhat oversimplistic. The above religious accounts of time can be understood to confine theology to what Mircea Eliade has described as the world of the eternal return - and, more specifically, 'an ontology uncontaminated by time or becoming.'⁴⁷³ Patriarchal theologies, in turn, may be understood as implicated in a closed system wherein underlying principles are understood to be moving humanity towards a specific end or eschatological horizon. Both of these viewpoints, the cyclical/repetitive and the linear/ teleological may be stated in this stark form, and with certainty have been so stated in the past, but the actual relationship between these two positions is considerably more complex and nuanced than this.

As clarified in the previous section, Goddess feminists are particularly interested in reclaiming their sense of place within nature. That is, they are concerned with developing an expanded understanding of their positioning within the complex webwork of ecological relationships that constitutes the Goddess as nature. This theological interest is one that closely allies Goddess feminists with a worldview shared by many Native peoples, and it is also an interest that points toward a special understanding of the categories of time and space. As the philosopher David Abram explains in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, for Native and premodern peoples time and space are conceived and experienced in a radically different manner to how they

472. Ibid.

473. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 89.

are by the literate peoples of the modern/postmodern world. For Native/premodern peoples, time and space constitute a unified phenomenon that is interpreted primarily through a complex experience of place. In stark contrast to the abstract and scientifically informed modern/post-modern understanding of a sequential time and a homogenous space, the Native/premodern concept and experience of time and space is based on immanent and recurrent patterns that are observable within specific places or localities. Just as nature is dynamic and subject to patterns of change that are often identifiably cyclical, from the perspective of a Native/premodern person time and space are governed by cyclical patterns and dynamic processes; there exists no metaphysical concept of time that can be readily abstracted from an awareness of spatiality and place.⁴⁷⁴

The theology of nature described in the previous chapter is consistent and coheres closely with the dynamic and unified concept of time and space held by Native/premodern peoples. The cosmology of Goddess feminism is nonlinear, focusing upon the continuously churning and transformative properties and processes of the cosmic womb of the Goddess. Moreover, any form of relationship with the Goddess is one that begins necessarily with one's own embodiment and one's experience of a particular place and ecological community. Cycles that exist within nature are understood as an hierophanic instantiation of the rhythms and processes of the Goddess as nature, and they are conceived and experienced by Goddess feminists as the primary measure of time and temporal flow. These cycles are most clearly evidenced in patterns of female fertility/menstruality, the phases of the moon, the

474 . David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human-World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 181-223.

movement of the stars and the seasons, and find their metaphysical exemplification in the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle. Thus, as Starhawk observes, '[l]ike the moon cycle, the seasonal cycle is one of the key ways in which we see the processes of birth, growth, death, and rebirth play themselves out.'⁴⁷⁵ Even for those Goddess feminists who do not closely associate themselves with a Pagan worldview (a contemporary correlate of the Native/premodern worldview) and its attendant calendar (The Wheel of Year), the 'seasonal round can easily be related to the Triple Goddess, ... spring naturally relating to the Maiden, summer to the Mother, and autumn and winter to the Crone - or, of course, winter may be related to the Unseen Goddess.'⁴⁷⁶ Theological reflection on the seasons illuminates both the temporal flow of nature and the ever-changing nature of the Goddess; as Donna Wilshire elucidates, 'Her shape-shifting follows the cycle of each year, each season having a distinct character, yet each flowing without clear boundary into the others.'⁴⁷⁷ For Goddess feminists who conceive and experience the cosmos as the living body of the Goddess, time, space and deity are not separate or separable categories.

How, though, can one engage with an understanding of time that is based upon cyclical processes within nature without being committed to a metaphysic wherein everything is ultimately a form of repetition (i.e. the world of the eternal return)? It is certainly not the case that the combining of time and space is philosophically problematic *per se*. Einstein, for example, mathematically combined time and space in a unified continuum (space-time) in his special theory of relativity; while three of

475. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

476. Moorey, *The Goddess*, p. 37. The Unseen aspect of the Triple Goddess is referred to in Chapter 2. II of this thesis.

477. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 22.

the leading male phenomenologists of the twentieth century actively questioned the distinction between time and space (at the level of preconceptual experience) during their later lives.⁴⁷⁸ Rather it is the case that a focus upon cyclical temporal and spatial processes can imply that, in Hegel's words, there is 'nothing new under the sun.' Cyclical processes, no matter how large, eventually produce repetition and sameness, and this is an understanding of time that can severely limit any theorization of history or progress and indeed any program of sustained political action. For those Goddess feminists who maintain an exclusively cyclical view of time, there is a risk of encountering considerable conceptual difficulties when attempting to reconcile their temporal worldview with their motives for studying history and/or pursuing political liberation. Significantly, though, Goddess feminists and theologians do not completely reject linear time. Rather both linear and cyclical time are theologically accommodated within a broader temporal framework, and most Goddess feminists work, whether implicitly or explicitly, with what may be termed a spiralling view of time.

The matriarchal cosmos and spiralling time

Heide Göttner-Abendroth is one of the few theologians to have articulated an account of time that combines Goddess feminism's cosmological and mythopoetic narratives in a consistent, coherent and philosophically accessible manner. In her article 'Urania – Time and Space of the Stars', Abendroth draws together Goddess feminist matriarchal historiographies (notably those that refer to the development of astronomy,

478. Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. See Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 204-206.

lunar/seasonal time-keeping and monolithic stone circles, temples, observatories, calendars), a number of contemporary models of the Goddess, and the image/model of the spiral, in order to elucidate and also promote a theological understanding of time.⁴⁷⁹

Beginning with an account of ancient conceptual links between the Goddess, the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle and the spiral, Abendroth notes how 'the mystical spiral was the image of the Goddess herself with her double power: to go from darkness to light or from death to life and conversely, from light to darkness, from life to death. Death as a definite end did not exist; it was only transformation into new life, an intermediate stage before rebirth.'⁴⁸⁰ This understanding of the spiral is theologically significant for most Goddess feminists who value the spiral as an important feature of the Goddess and nature; it is apparent at both micro and macrocosmic levels, and as Starhawk observes, it 'is revealed in the shape of galaxies, shells, whirlpools, DNA.'⁴⁸¹ However, Abendroth proceeds to argue that there is an astronomical and cosmological meaning to the spiral that requires commentary and evaluation if one is to theorize time theologically. She observes that theological time is not readily separable from theological space and, if one reflects on the movement of astronomical bodies through space, spiralling patterns are identifiable as a pervasive feature of the cosmos. Some of these astronomical spiralling motions are introduced by the theologian Rachel Pollack in the following terms:

479. Heide Gottner-Abendroth, 'Urania - Time and Space of the Stars: The Matriarchal Cosmos Through the Lens of Modern Physics' trans. by Lise Weil in F. J. Forman and C. Sowton (eds), *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality* (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), pp. 108-119.

480. Gottner-Abendroth, 'Urania - Time and Space of the Stars', pp. 110-111.

481. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 142.

The Sun rising and setting implies a circle (with the bottom half of the circle invisible) but this circle gets larger or smaller with the change in the Sun's position each day. As we move from winter solstice to summer solstice the circle begins at a wider point each day, so the apparent motion actually forms a clockwise spiral (when facing south, the direction of the Sun). In the other half of the year the apparent spiral stays clockwise but shrinks rather than expands.⁴⁸²

For Abendroth the temporal meaning of spiralling motions in space was well understood in matriarchal times, as can be deduced from its appearance in ancient calendar-temples and dances. These temples and practices were both a means of communicating with a nature conceived and experienced as alive, and 'a representation of the cosmic space in which all visible heavenly bodies move about the earth in an apparent spiral.' This observation is then followed by the claim that '*time is nothing other than the movement of planets and stars in space*', and the conclusion that, '*[f]or this reason, the representation of time was also that of spiralling movement.*'⁴⁸³

Abendroth defends the spiralling account of time on the grounds that it 'means more than the simple juxtaposition of "cyclical" versus "linear" time, where "cyclical" time connotes dull, featureless circles in place, while "linear" time is supposed to correspond to progressing and progressive historical consciousness.'⁴⁸⁴ She notes that 'the concept of spiralling time seems more realistic, for it rests on concrete observation of the movement of stars in space. Moreover, it is more complex, since it connects the circling motion with the progressing movement of always further-reaching spirals.'⁴⁸⁵

482. Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess*, p. 96.

483. Ibid.

484. Ibid., pp. 111-112.

485. Ibid., p. 112.

While Abendroth claims that both cyclical and linear concepts of time are ideological constructs, and acknowledges that the spiralling concept of time is not entirely free of ideology, she adds that the spiralling view is consistent with reflection upon the rhythms and processes of nature. She notes that ‘the first philosophical debates on dialectics in antiquity arose from reflections on the philosophy of nature, and these originated in the spiralling conception of time – which we might well call a “dialectical” conception of time – of the matriarchal ages.’⁴⁸⁶ It was only with the coming of patriarchy that the spiralling model was suppressed and ultimately supplanted by abstract linear models and eschatological narratives of specifically human progress. The time has come, she concludes, to move beyond the abstract mathematical time of patriarchy and return to the curved/spiralling understanding of the cosmos favoured during matriarchal times (an understanding that is now supported, she observes, by modern physics).⁴⁸⁷

Identifying the probable reasons for a shift from cyclical and spiralling models of time towards patriarchal linear models is an endeavour that cannot be pursued in this work (although the development of alphabetic writing, numeracy and new means of quantification provide plausible explanations, in so far as they introduced a previously unrealized level of separation between the knower and the known into the world).⁴⁸⁸ What can be clarified, though, is the manner in which a theological reading of time relates to a linear/patriarchalized view of time and how a gynocentric temporal order is central to a feminist theology of time. In the following sections it will be

486. Ibid.

487. Ibid., p. 119.

488. See both Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* and Leonard Shlain’s *The Alphabet versus the Goddess* for a comprehensive examination of these issues.

noted how a 'linearity pitched toward the future differs radically from living within the cycle of one's own body, the organic cycle of life',⁴⁸⁹ and this will lead on to a consideration of the privileged access to different faces of time that women may be said to have within theological discourse. This discussion will be expanded upon to incorporate a brief typology of gynocentric time and an evaluation of ontological issues relating to the capacity to give birth; for it is implicit in much theological discourse that, '[a]s a collective, women do not only live *in* time (from birth to death), they also *give* time and that act makes a radical difference to Being-in-the-World.'⁴⁹⁰ The consideration of these issues will serve as a bridgehead into a more detailed examination of Goddess feminism's handling of the concepts of becoming and chaos.

II ESCHATOLOGY, TELEOLOGY AND THE END OF HISTORY

Goddess feminists are not completely *ahistorical* in their attitudes to the world, as may be noted by their interest in a premodern matriarchal age, their cataloguing of the invidious development of patriarchy, and their engagement with the liberatory-emancipatory projects of feminism.⁴⁹¹ It is rather the case that historical progress is understood by Goddess feminists to have been conflated with a strict linearity under patriarchy. A patriarchalized concept of time can be said to be primarily concerned with beginnings and ends, a strict series of events that are often believed to be linked together by an implicit *telos*. Furthermore, under patriarchy time is theologically

489. Robbie Pfeuffer Kahn, 'Women and Time in Childbirth and During Lactation' in Forman and Sowton (eds), *Taking Our Time*, p. 21.

490. Frieda Johles Forman, 'Feminizing Time: An Introduction' in Forman and Sowton, (eds), *Taking Our Time*, p. 7.

491. Cf. Raphael, *Introducing Theology*, pp. 75-96 and Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 150-184.

understood to have been reduced to the level of a commodity, through increasing industrialization and the development of clock time, and has been fitted within theological schemata that suggest that 'history is not simply a series of random events but involves the outworking of underlying principles'⁴⁹² Goddess feminists are deeply suspicious of the constraints that patriarchal temporal frameworks impose upon nature. Nature is not something that is subject to organization and dominion by an overarching telos. Neither can nature be escaped/transcended (an implication of many eschatological and soteriological narratives). Nature may admittedly be shaped and transformed by certain principles (e.g. the organic Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle), but for Goddess feminists an end/telos does not organize the process (or justify the means). Human history is important in theology, and a developed historical consciousness is as vital to the identity and self-understanding of Goddess feminists as it is to the members of any religion. But from a theological perspective, the concepts of linear time and history are unrepresentative of the nature and organization of reality and have negative consequences for human life.

A further theological concern with patriarchal time, and specifically its religious interpretations, is that its soteriological and teleological narratives promote the view that there is the possibility of an escape from time itself, an escape from the phenomenal-temporal world into such eternal realms or states as Heaven, Hell, Nirvana or Nothingness. Patriarchal human history, both on an individual and collective level, is theologically conceived as moving along a specific trajectory, towards a definitive end, destiny, omega point, or telos. Even the theory of evolution may be interpreted in terms of an escalator model, wherein humanity is measured as

492. D. Davies, 'Christianity' in Holm and Bowker (eds), *Myth and History*, p. 49.

both the highest current point in earthly evolution and also as the indicator of the trajectory of future evolution. Like the philosopher Mary Midgley, Goddess feminists and theologians are liable to ask '[b]y what right, and in what sense, can we consider ourselves as the directional pointer and aim-bearer of the whole evolutionary process?'⁴⁹³ In Goddess feminism's open-ended cosmology of continuous re-organization and transformation it is all but impossible to confirm the special status of the human or any other species.

The patriarchal focus upon discrete, and increasingly small, quantifiable units of time, eternal trans-temporal realms or states of being, and the concepts and discourses of eschatology and teleology is interpreted by Goddess feminists to not only exalt human (and specifically male) values above those of the rest of nature but also devalues historical as well as biological continuities. In contrast, the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle is theologically understood to stress human continuities across time, while also affirming human participation in a complex and ever-changing web of relationships. Although Melissa Raphael observes that Goddess feminism 'produces a trans-historical consciousness' and is 'an essentially biological phenomenon, marked by the phases of the moon, the tides and the menstrual cycle',⁴⁹⁴ there is an important sense in which feminist theology can accommodate an awareness of historical continuity more successfully than the eschatologically, teleologically and technologically driven accounts of time favoured by patriarchy. Indeed it may be argued that it is within the patriarchal religious discourses of eschatology and soteriology, rather than a Goddess feminist theology, that one can identify what may

493. Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion*, p. 69.

494. Raphael, *Introducing Theology*, p. 90.

be termed a 'tendency to ahistoricity' and a 'desire to create a safe place outside time and circumstance.'⁴⁹⁵ Most traditional patriarchal religious discourses suggest that nature and history can be transcended, or that there are end-times (literally the end of history). From a theological perspective, there is nothing outside of either nature or history, there is nothing beyond nature, and history can be understood to continue for as long as nature persists. Human history is not something that cuts across or determines the history of nature, rather human history is but one thread in the open-ended and indeterminate history of nature.

It should not be concluded from what has been elucidated above, however, that Goddess feminists are completely divorced from ideas about end-times. Recurrent themes and sources of theological speculation relate directly to the end-times of patriarchy (and, often, in a more apocalyptic vein, humanity too). All Goddess feminists passionately desire an end to patriarchal history and all are committed to projects of spiritual-political action that will in some sense contribute to patriarchy's demise. This theological concept of end-times simply differs from the patriarchal concept in two important respects. First, the end of patriarchy is a thoroughly historical phenomenon and does not constitute either the end of history *in toto* or a suspension/transcendence of the natural order as a whole. The end of patriarchy is an event that will take place within the broader context of the history of nature as a whole and the life processes of the Goddess as nature. Second, the Goddess is typically absent from theological accounts of the end of patriarchal history. Unlike the deities in many patriarchal eschatologies, the Goddess does not directly intervene in human

495. Jim Cheney, 'Nature/Theory/Difference: Ecofeminism and the reconstruction of environmental ethics' in Warren (ed.), *Ecological Feminism*, p. 166.

events; She is rather more akin to the condition of their realization. The Goddess is a part of human affairs, but She is not sufficiently separate from those affairs so as to be able to radically redirect or reorganize them. Humanity is one part of the living organism that is the Goddess as nature; and, in an analogous manner, the Goddess exerts no more control over that part of Herself than a human organism might exercise over a cancerous cell. As Starhawk observes, 'the Goddess does not come to save us. It is up to us to save her – if we so choose.'⁴⁹⁶ The well-being of humanity and the Goddess are mutually entwined with one another; although it is unlikely that the Goddess actually needs humanity in the sense that Starhawk suggests. In theological discourse it is implied that humanity can improve or damage the health of the Goddess, but this transformation is arguably a local/minor issue when measured against the cosmological dimensions and stature of the Goddess as nature.

Many Goddess feminists also believe that patriarchal history could ultimately culminate with the destruction of all human life (whether through nuclear war, resource scarcity, ecological imbalances or some other combination of biological, chemical and social catastrophes). This loss would be lamentable, particularly in so far as it would certainly damage many other forms of life on Earth and result in a reduction in the biodiversity present in nature. But it would also be no more than a minor disturbance in the life processes of the Goddess as nature (a playful venture in life that never grew beyond a certain point). Human end-times do not determine the end (or the salvation/perfection) of nature in theological eschatologies. The Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle would persist even if humanity as a species were to become extinct and be recycled back into the whole.

496. Cited in Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 182.

Some Goddess feminists claim that the Goddess has an interest in warning humanity about the end that it is approaching, whether this is through natural signs (e.g. catastrophes, climatic changes, diseases) or an inner/ontological power of persuasion,⁴⁹⁷ but any salvific power that can be said to be at work during the end of patriarchal history is typically said to inhere in femaleness and women themselves. As the Goddess feminist Sallie Gearhart claims, ‘I believe that [womanpower] is on the rise *now* because the human species and its planet home are at a critical point in their interrelationship; history needs now the different energy that only conscious women can bring.’⁴⁹⁸ For Goddess feminists it is human femaleness that is potentially salvific. The Goddess is not directly responsible for humanity, but on a local/microcosmic level women may theologically be understood to instantiate the femaleness of the Goddess (a topic that is addressed more thoroughly in Chapter Five of this work). As Melissa Raphael observes ‘women’s embodiment of the Goddess is an embodiment of her timeless generative energies.’⁴⁹⁹ This point is eschatologically significant because the powers that are theologically understood to be capable of ending and transforming patriarchy are immanent and generative female powers.

III GYNOCENTRIC TIME, NATALITY AND BEING-TOWARDS-BIRTH

It is theologically noteworthy that, ‘[m]ore than with any other philosophical category, there is no entry point for women in the discourse of time and temporality.’⁵⁰⁰ That is, while the masculinist domination of philosophy has either denied women access to its

497. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 104-106.

498. Cited in Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, p. 180.

499. Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, p. 90.

debates, or else actively denigrated their perspectives when they have been articulated, these restrictions have been particularly severe with regard to women's access to the philosophical categories and debates of time and temporality. This is a patriarchal obstruction that may theologially be said to be highly significant. For while masculinist philosophers may argue that women have nothing unique to contribute to the discourses of time and temporality, that sex and gender are irrelevant to such universally rational and objective enquiries, or more invidiously that 'women are essentially incapable of acting otherwise than in accordance with their immediate inclinations or feelings',⁵⁰¹ both feminist philosophers and theologians note that women may have a distinctive or unique contribution to make. Feminist theologians, for example, claim that there are special ties between the cycles and processes of the earth and cosmos, and human biology and embodiment, that grant women a special ability to comment upon time. Thus, Heide Göttner-Abendroth extends her theological commentary on cosmological and spiralling time by claiming that the earth's rotational speed has important links with biology; and the so-called biological clock has a particularly special meaning for women:

The "biological clock" ties us to earthly time relationships in exactly those phases determined by the earth's rotation speed; this is all the more true of the "inner clock" of women, whose complex biological processes, in conjunction with our ability to give birth, indicate even greater adaptation to the monthly ordering of time. This sets a limit to all abstract time and to all abstract utopias.⁵⁰²

500. Johles Forman, 'Feminizing Time', p. 6.

501. This is a summary of the Kantian position on women's mental capacities by Lawrence Blum, 'Kant and Hegel's Moral Rationalism: A Feminist Perspective', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1982, p. 290.

502. Abendroth, 'Urania - Time and Space of the Stars', p. 117.

In this framework the rationalized, sex/gender neutral, ultimately abstract masculinist theorizing of time is implicitly critiqued. Biology is argued to be relevant to the theorization of time because biological embodiment inevitably defines and shapes one's experience and conceptualization of time.

Feminist philosophers have made similar points to those made by Goddess feminists and theologians concerning women's specific capacity to comment upon and experience time. Thus, in a commentary on the feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva's article *Women's Time*, Alice Jardine observes that,

When women allow themselves to think about their own intuitive feel for time, rather than *accepting the linear, departure-and-arrival time sense of the male organized world*, what they discover is something much older. *Because menstruation cycles link them more closely to natural cycles than men, women hold a key to the past that men do not have. Their intuition, Kristeva says, "retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilization."*⁵⁰³

Kristeva proceeds to parallel a Goddess feminist understanding of time by claiming that women have privileged access to a 'premodern form of time that coincides with the phases of the moon, the rising and setting of the sun, the passing of the seasons, and other expressions of cosmic time.'⁵⁰⁴ Furthermore, just as Goddess feminists such as Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor are prepared to argue that the development of civilization is premised upon women's menstrual flow, it is also implicit in theological rhetoric that the temporal orders of the modern and postmodern worlds are ultimately underpinned by the primordial, organic rhythms and process of the Goddess as nature; rhythms and processes to which women may have privileged epistemic access.

503. Jardine is cited in Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, pp. 306-7.

504. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

It may be noted that within the current capitalist context 'the distinctions between the premodern (characterized by a unified temporal order), the modern (exhibiting quantified and commodified time) and the postmodern (that manifests accelerated time tending to simultaneity) can be located in a differentiated continuum that tends towards a point of culmination in the abolition of both temporal succession and future reference'.⁵⁰⁵ However, theologians may envisage an entirely different temporal framework to this. That is, within Goddess feminism's cosmogonic and cosmological narratives, time incorporates both cyclical and linear facets. The current tendency toward simultaneity and the abolition of future reference can theologially be understood to be the result of the patriarchal obsession with one face of time. However, if one is to construct a postmodern or simply a realistic view of time, it may be argued that it needs to be one that can accommodate several aspects and experiences of time. Goddess feminists and theologians may argue that they are critically placed to do this because they both live and function in the patriarchal world of industrialized linear time, and yet are also biologically/ontologically linked to slower cosmological and life-centred states of time. As Robbie Pfeufer Kahn asserts:

Women potentially have privileged access to these states of time which differ from historical, clock, or industrial time. Although the dominant time form of our society militates against it, women can recover something of life-cycle time through the experiences of pregnancy, birth, and lactation.⁵⁰⁶

This theological experience of time, can, in turn, operate on several epistemic levels, grant access to different understandings of reality, such as that of the 'infinite, unbounded and all encompassing time the mystics try, always unsuccessfully, to

505. Richard Roberts, 'Time, Virtuality and the Goddess' in S. Lash, A. Quick and R. Roberts (eds), *Time and Value*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 117.

506. Pfeufer Kahn, 'Women and Time in Childbirth and During Lactation', p. 29.

describe',⁵⁰⁷ and lead to a radical rethinking of masculinist being-in-the-world, with its unrelenting focus upon being-toward-death. Again, as Pfeufer Kahn notes, such different, albeit linked, female experiences as '[p]regnancy, birth, and lactation give us entrance into larger realities grounded in life rather than abstracted from it, as is the case with metaphysical notions. Childbearing allows us to participate in the metafact of mythic time.'⁵⁰⁸

A typology of gynocentric time

Building upon the premise that women potentially have a privileged access to different faces of time, particularly through the experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, birth and lactation, it is possible to begin to formulate an account or typology of gynocentric time. And although such an account is not necessarily theological, that is, although a gynocentric temporality need not necessarily make reference to a female divinity (or the matrix of Goddess/Nature), it is noteworthy that any account of theological time is necessarily gynocentric. Thealogy focuses upon the rhythms and processes of female embodiment, and specifically attends to female experience, as its primary means of accessing and understanding the divine. A gynocentric account of time, in turn, emphasizes the flow of time as experienced by specific women. Both discourses theorize the nature of time against the backdrop of a metaphysical understanding of femaleness and work with the assumption that there are significant epistemic and ontological continuities between human femaleness and the nature of the cosmos.

507. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, p. 307.

508. Pfeufer Kahn, 'Women and Time in Childbirth and During Lactation', p. 27.

Robbie Pfeufer Kahn draws a distinction between what she terms agricultural and industrial time. Firmly identifying patriarchal linear time with industrial time, a time organized around clocks, management and productivity, she contrasts this with agricultural time, ‘a time which is cyclical like the seasons, or the gyre-like motion of the generations.’⁵⁰⁹ It is agricultural time that may be considered the basis for a typology of gynocentric time; and ‘agricultural time, or the organic cycle of life, which the states of pregnancy, birth, and lactation make available for women living in industrial society.’⁵¹⁰ Although Pfeufer Kahn fails to address the temporal insights to be gained by attending to the menstrual rhythms of female embodiment, she distinguishes and comments on three types of time that may be accessed through pregnancy. Furthermore, she observes that men also may find it possible to enter this female ‘agricultural’ time – although she does not expand upon what this may involve, or indeed how it may be possible for the sex that cannot become pregnant – and notes that many women living in an industrial patriarchal society may find it difficult to enter agricultural time. That is, although women have privileged access to these gynocentric faces of time, their access is neither certain nor exclusive. The categories or faces of time that Pfeufer Kahn considers, or rather constructs and theorizes, are those of generic time, mythic time, and maialogical time.⁵¹¹

For Pfeufer Kahn generic time is objective or real time. Generic time is to be contrasted with genderic time (as in gendered time), which is the artificial masculinist time of historical progress and linearity. Generic time is the time of the natural world,

509. Ibid., p. 21.

510. Ibid.

a point that connects Pfeufer Kahn's gynocentric temporal discourse rather revealingly with Goddess feminism's theological discourse on time and nature. As Pfeufer Kahn notes,

Generic time signifies the time of all things of the earth and universe ... To give birth generically is to enter the "great streams of the universe" - not to leave Mother Earth ..., but to participate in her cycle which is part of the longer cycles of the life process of the universe itself.⁵¹²

This is a line of thought, that, with its identification of birth with the "great streams of the universe" and Mother Earth, is distinctively theological in orientation. There is a convergence between Pfeufer Kahn's gynocentric temporal order and feminist theological concerns; a convergence that is reinforced by Pfeufer Kahn's exposition on mythic time.

Mythic time refers to 'a return to origins;' it is a specifically cosmogonic form of 'time sense that belongs to the foundations of any culture, as can be seen in the universality of creation myths.'⁵¹³ Mythic time may have parallels with the oceanic feeling described by mystics, 'is felt most dramatically perhaps during pregnancy, birth, and lactation, but is also present in any moment of love and healing throughout life which re-establishes the connection to origins.'⁵¹⁴ The experience of mythic time is one that emphasizes connection and continuity with the past and the originative processes of life and nature. As Pfeufer Kahn observes, the return to origins experienced through mythic time is particularly well realized in the women's spirituality movement:

511. Ibid., p. 27. Pfeufer Kahn notes that Maia comes from the Greek for "mother or "nurse" and is derived from the Indo-European root "ma", which is imitative of a child's cry for the breast.

512. Ibid., p. 23.

513. Ibid., p. 26.

The women's spirituality movement finds a transformative power in the recovery of origins, which they call finding the "goddess within." By this phrase they mean reconnecting with the transformative energy of the woman ... which lies outside (or before) historical time and its phallic trajectory.⁵¹⁵

This allying of mythic time with Goddess feminism, as the most significant goddess-oriented aspect of the women's spirituality movement, is further complemented and amplified by Pfeufer Kahn's account of maialogical time; an account of time that, as will be shown below and in the following chapters, coheres with and supports the Goddess feminist attitudes to female generativity.

Maialogical time, in Pfeufer Kahn's gynocentric typology, refers to 'a time of mutuality, or interrelatedness .. that period of the woman's life when she bears children and lactates.'⁵¹⁶ Taking childbirth and the mother-child relationship as sites of ontological and temporal significance, maialogical time is she claims 'interactive or reciprocal, unlike the time inhabited by individuated Western man who follows the linear trajectory of history, a time considered to be healthy.'⁵¹⁷ This understanding of time connects specific aspects of human femaleness with the complex processes of the world that make possible the emergence of one form of being from another. Maialogical time marks a temporal order that has largely been denied by masculinist philosophies: it aligns temporal existence with the relational complexity, generativity and openness of birth, rather than with the existential closure of death.

514. Ibid.

515. Ibid.

516. Ibid., p. 27.

517. Ibid., pp. 27-28.

Natality and being-towards-birth and life

Maialogical time also coheres closely with recent feminist interventions in the philosophy of religion with regard to the concept of natality. Drawing upon the work of Hannah Arendt, the feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen identifies natality as both a valuable way of thinking about the bodily and material conditions out of which life emerges, and also as a powerful corrective to the dominant masculinist identification of death as the defining characteristic of human authenticity and existence.⁵¹⁸ Natality is, she argues, inescapably about beginnings, and is something that emerges within the complex relationships of the web of life. Natality is ‘even more basic to our existence than the fact that we will die, since death presupposes birth.’⁵¹⁹ Furthermore, it is through natality ‘that we are connected with every other human being, past present, and future.’⁵²⁰ Both natality and maialogical time challenge an understanding of time that has focused extensively upon the existential meaning of death.

A feminist theology of time is, I contend, one that metaphysically privileges natality. For Goddess feminists, everything is understood to be born of a mother and those masculinist philosophies that have denied that birth has a profound ontological and temporal significance are understood to have committed a gross error. Time is theologically conceived as an aspect of the generativity and organic rhythms of the Goddess as nature; and the giving of time, birth, is both prior to and takes ontological and temporal priority over the taking away of time, death. Theologically it makes

518. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 144-154.

519. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

little sense to accept a philosophical notion of death as the defining characteristic of human temporal consciousness. Indeed, such a notion of temporality, in Frieda Johles Forman's words, 'is inconceivable for women if it is not rendered dialectically with birth, because for us the future as generative is as much a determinant in our lives as is our mortality.'⁵²¹ It may be possible to object that everyone dies, but not everyone gives birth, and subsequently argue that a philosophical/religious focus on death is legitimate; however, everyone that exists, has existed, or will exist, is also born. Contrary to most of the existential philosophies of patriarchy, Goddess feminism grounds its thought in being-toward-birth-and-life rather than being-toward-death; and, more specifically, it privileges metaphysical processes of becoming over fixed states of being. For Goddess feminists it is the very processes of becoming that define a temporality that is identified as female and generative.

At this point it could be informative to draw comparisons between Goddess feminist attitudes to time and becoming and metaphysical concepts such as Plato's womb-like mediator of being and becoming, *chora*,⁵²² and metaphysical theories that

520. Ibid., p. 150. Jantzen is at this point reading the work of another feminist philosopher of natality, Adriana Cavarero. Cf. Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

521. Johles Forman, 'Feminizing Time', p. 7.

522. The womb-like traits of Plato's metaphysical concept of *chora* have proven to be a source of interest to a number of feminist philosophers, including Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz and Philippa Berry, in addition to non-feminist philosophers who are concerned with Early Greek philosophy and the task of thinking beyond the foundational philosophical categories of Western society, notably Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. As Elizabeth Grosz elucidates: 'Chora, then, is the space in which place is made possible, the chasm for the passage of spaceless Forms into a spatialized reality, a dimensionless tunnel opening itself to spatialization, obliterating itself to make others possible and actual. It is the space that engenders without possessing, that nurtures without requirements of its own, that receives without giving, and that gives without receiving, a space that evades all characterizations including the disconcerting logic of identity, of hierarchy, of being, the regulation of order. ... While *chora* cannot be directly identified with the womb ... it does seem to borrow many of the paradoxical attributes of pregnancy and maternity', *Space, Time*

emphasize the importance of becoming and organicism, such as process metaphysics.⁵²³ Unfortunately such an exercise in comparative philosophy is beyond the scope of this particular study. It is, I propose, more constructive to begin to theorize how time and becoming can give rise to particular forms of life and order within a Goddess feminist metaphysical frame. It is necessary to be able to provide a metaphysical account of what Goddess feminists conceive and value as the generativity of chaos.

and Perversion, pp. 116-117. There are, I would suggest, useful points of philosophical comparison to be made between theological construals of nature as womb-like and the Platonic understanding of a womb-like metaphysical category or principle that mediates, or precedes, both being and becoming. See Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, pp. 111-124 and Berry, 'Woman and Space According to Kristeva and Irigaray' in P. Berry and A. Wernick (eds), *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 250-264.

523. There are I contend many valuable parallels to be drawn between a Goddess feminist metaphysic and process metaphysics. As I observed in Chapter Two, the feminist theologian Carol Christ draws upon a process metaphysical framework to elucidate her own understanding of the agency and power of the Goddess. Becoming and organicism are central metaphysical concepts in both Goddess feminist and process metaphysics, and it is arguable that the process metaphysical framework may inform a Goddess feminist metaphysic. However, despite striking affinities, there are also tensions with regard to the significance of human beings, the meaning of transcendence and the moral/personal status of deity that need to be addressed and resolved. Only one process thinker in my own reading has theorized the nature of deity in a manner that is conducive with a feminist theology that focuses upon organicism and embraces the open temporal becoming of the world. Although he has no feminist credentials to mention, Bernard Loomer is an American process philosopher who challenged several process theological orthodoxies during his life. There is, I contend, a clear convergence between his development of process thought in a naturalistic and radical empiricist direction and the metaphysical commitments of many Goddess feminists. In his final essay, 'the Size of God', Loomer pursued the 'contention that if the one world, the experientable world, with its possibilities, is all the reality accessible to us, then one conclusion seems inevitable: God is to be identified with a part or with the totality of the concrete, actual world', p. 20. This specifically pantheist view of deity, which is explored and analysed in process metaphysical terms by Loomer, led to the conclusion that such a deity is a 'struggling, imperfect unfinished, and evolving societal web' and may be characterized 'as the organic restlessness of the whole body of creation', p. 41. There is, I would suggest, much useful material to be drawn from Loomer's work in the construction of a future process theology.

III THE METAPHYSICS OF CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY

In most of the world religions chaos is identified with a primordial and pre-cosmic state of existence; chaos is that which precedes cosmogony, creation, and the formation of the cosmos; chaos is that which the cosmos is not; chaos is neither ordered, organized, predictable, or a habitable space.⁵²⁴ Moreover, within patriarchal religions and philosophies, chaos is closely associated with femaleness and is understood as something that needs to be carefully controlled and managed by the application and exercise of male power. Despite its provenance as an originative source, an elemental basis for cosmogonic and creative events, chaos receives a negative valuation within nearly all religious traditions and philosophical worldviews.

It is important to emphasize, though, that positive concepts and evaluations of chaos do exist within certain religious worldviews. There are, as N. J. Girardot claims, “pro-chaos” religions; and chaos is not simply repulsive but is also attractive in ‘its awful appeal to the religious imagination.’⁵²⁵ The Goddess feminist worldview incorporates just such a re-evaluation of chaos. While patriarchal religions have habitually denigrated femaleness and female divinity by recourse to the language of “chaos” (as well as “darkness,” “oceanic flux,” “chthonic nature”), Goddess feminists have claimed that these religious practices point towards a more authentic account of what is ultimately real and valuable. The patriarchal desire to control, organize and separate itself from what is conceived as a dangerous female state of chaos both conceals and reveals that nature is simply always already subject to complex chaotic processes, and is capable of generating unpredictable behaviour and novelty.

524. N. J. Girardot, ‘Chaos’ in Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 213-218.

Goddess feminists do not deny that order exists, or that nature and the cosmos are in many respects organized and structured (i.e. subject to natural laws, scientific investigation, explanation and prediction etc.). Rather they re-evaluate the generative powers of chaos, and specifically those powers that are evoked in many religious myths as female. They assert that the processes of chaotic change and transformation immanent throughout nature are inherently valuable. Furthermore, chaos and order are theologically understood to exist in a dynamic relationship with one another. Chaos is that which generates or gives birth to order; an order which is neither permanent or eternal, but is itself subject to dissolution and transformation. Certain theologians admittedly identify chaos exclusively with pre-cosmic states of existence: Barbara Walker, for example, describes chaos as 'the undifferentiated nature of raw elements supposed to occupy the World-Goddess's womb before creation and after [the] destruction of each recurrent universe.'⁵²⁶ But a more pervasive theological understanding of the relationship between chaos and cosmos, derived in part from an understanding of the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle, implies that beyond a certain level of analysis the cosmos is fundamentally chaotic, unpredictable, nonlinear and open-ended in nature (as opposed to being ordered, predictable, linear and closed). This Goddess feminist evaluation of chaos has led some theologians and religious commentators to suggest that there are striking similarities between this religious/theological understanding of nature and the (post)modern scientific and mathematical theorization of chaotic systems and complexity. It is to a consideration of this suggestion that we turn next.

525. Ibid., p. 216.

526. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, p. 160.

Introducing chaos and complexity theory

During the past four decades scientists working within a disparate array of disciplines have begun to articulate theories about the nature of unpredictability and nonlinearity within mathematical models and natural/physical phenomena; and it is the collective work of these scientists that has formed the fields of enquiry that are today identified as chaos theory and complexity theory. In the past scientists had predominantly endeavoured to understand the world in terms of predictability and linearity. That is, the world was analyzed with reference to simplicity, regularity and order, laws and equations were generated that were in principle solvable, and irregularities were often ignored or suppressed in order to get elegant and precise results. The contemporary development of chaos and complexity theory, however, represents a scientific attempt to engage with the profoundly interconnected, nonlinear and unpredictable nature of the world. Each of the theories may be summarized in the following terms.⁵²⁷

Chaos theory is a field of enquiry that endeavours to clarify the underlying dynamics of complex systems and change. Chaos theory observes that within complex systems, that is within entities that change with time and include a number of variable factors/forces within their makeup (e.g. ecosystems, the human body, the market economy, or weather systems), behaviour is unpredictable and never exactly repeats itself; even though it may, nonetheless, still display identifiable forms and patterns over periods of time (i.e. order). Chaos theory takes seriously the fact that

527. Useful introductions to chaos and complexity are James Gleick, *Chaos: The Making of a New Science* (London: Heinemann, 1988); Nina Hall (ed.), *The "New Scientist" Guide to Chaos* (London: Penguin Books, 1991); R. Lewin, *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos* (New York: Collier Books, 1993); Ziauddin Sardar and Iwona Abrams, *Introducing Chaos* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999); Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice?* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990); and Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity* (London: Viking, 1992).

many of the forces active within nature are nonlinear and feedback upon one another (i.e. the output of a system may also be a variable within the input of that system, thus being a cause of further change within that system); and it has articulated how minor alterations or perturbations in the initial conditions of any complex system can have far-reaching consequences (the so-called “Butterfly effect” introduced by Edward Lorenz). What chaos theory is not, however, is a theory of everything, and it is not synonymous with randomness *per se*. Chaos theory is applicable to such diverse phenomena as population growth, weather patterns and the rhythmic beating of the human heart, but it is also important to emphasize that it is a science that is beginning to explicate a new form of order within nature: that is, the unpredictable behaviour of chaotic systems is itself produced by an underlying logic (or order) that is capable of generating identifiable patterns within certain mathematical and physical boundaries. Chaos theory draws attention to the fact that the relationship between chaos and order is far more mutable than was once believed; that is, within chaos there lies order, and within apparent order there may be chaos.

Complexity theory, in turn, is essentially a development of chaos theory that examines the nature of complex physical systems in the real world. It is concerned with what exactly it means for things to be intimately interconnected and interrelated; it works towards explicating how the variables at work within any complex system interact with one another; and perhaps most significantly it attempts to elucidate how complex systems have the ability to generate order from chaos. That is, rather than becoming static or collapsing into complete dissolution, complex systems display an ability to adapt, organize and maintain themselves at a point termed “the edge of

chaos.” Complexity theory studies systems that exist at the edge of chaos and is applicable to such diverse phenomena as the emergence of life, the market economy, Gaia and the organization of the cosmos itself.

Towards a theology of chaos and complexity

In many respects the scientific theorization of chaos and complexity confirms what Goddess feminists assert and value about the nature of reality: namely that it is interconnected by an everchanging web of relationships, it is in many ways unpredictable; and, according to certain interpretations, it is alive. I would suggest, though, that the value of chaos/complexity theory to a theological understanding of the world cannot be underestimated and requires further commentary. While it may be objected that Goddess feminists are simply responding to a contemporary and popular scientific trend by drawing analogies with and resources from chaos/complexity theory, there is I contend a genuine convergence of thought between these two positions (despite an absence of conversation). Some theorists have already noted that there are striking affinities between (post)modern chaos/complexity theories and ancient non-Western religious worldviews (e.g. Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist metaphysical concepts that emphasize the interrelatedness and complexity of nature) and it is arguable, in the words of Ziauddin Sardar, that ‘after centuries of denigrating non-Western ideas and notions, science is coming back to non-Western viewpoints.’⁵²⁸

Rather than merely adopting a new scientific paradigm, Goddess feminists can, I think, reasonably claim that the metaphysical foundations of Western science are

528. Sadar and Abrams, *Introducing Chaos*, p. 167.

shifting to converge with their own metaphysical commitments,⁵²⁹ and feminist theologians can justifiably utilize concepts drawn from chaos and complexity theory in order to lend philosophical precision to their own metaphysical worldview. Spiritual and Goddess feminists have been highly critical of patriarchal scientific models that denied the organic complexity of the world for some time, it is arguably now time for those selfsame feminists to draw upon scientific theories that converge with their organicist worldview as part of a more constructive theological endeavour.

The value of chaos/complexity theory, as a conceptual resource for articulating a feminist metaphysic, has already begun to be explored by a spiritual feminist (Jane Caputi),⁵³⁰ a theological commentator (Melissa Raphael)⁵³¹ and a feminist philosopher (Christine Battersby).⁵³² In what follows I introduce and elucidate a number of ideas drawn from chaos/complexity theory that are, or arguably ought to be, of particular philosophical relevance and value to feminist theologians. My concern is to adapt rather than adopt a pre-existing metaphysical theory so that it informs and contributes philosophical precision to a Goddess feminist metaphysic.

Dissipative systems and self-organization

Two concepts to emerge from chaos/complexity theory that can be usefully adapted to a Goddess feminist metaphysic are dissipative systems and self-organization. These concepts, first developed by the Belgian chemist Ilya Prigogine, contribute meaning to a theological understanding of nature as open-ended, organic and subject to complex

529. Willis Harman and Jane Clarke (eds), *New Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Sausalito, CA: Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1994).

530. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, pp. 275-291.

531. Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, pp. 245-255.

processes of transformation. For Prigogine most systems to be found within the universe are complex and open in nature, they are constantly exchanging energy with their environment and other systems, and are permeated with a potentially transformative disorder (rather, that is, than being closed, linear and machine-like).⁵³³ Moreover these complex and open systems can be categorized by reference to their relationship to a state of equilibrium (i.e. certain systems might be in or near equilibrium, while others may exist in a state far from equilibrium). Prigogine observed and theorized that complex systems that are permeated by a particular level of disorder (i.e. systems that are suitably far from equilibrium) can display a special capacity for self-organization. These systems can transform and organize themselves into something completely new. Novel forms of order are able to emerge in the midst of disorder. This systemic insight into the nature of chaos and complexity has, for many scientists, become central to an understanding of how such phenomena as life, organisms and societies emerge. A living organism, for example, is a complex system that is suitably far from equilibrium and open to change (while a dead organism, in contrast, is a system that is in or very close to equilibrium). As Fritjof Capra explains:

A living organism is characterized by continual flow and change in its metabolism, involving thousands of chemical reactions. Chemical and thermal equilibrium exists when all these processes come to halt. In other words, *an organism in equilibrium is a dead organism. Living systems continually maintain themselves in a state far from equilibrium, which is the state of life.*⁵³⁴

Gaia theory too encompasses the concepts of dissipative systems and self-organization and was developed by James Lovelock based on his reflections on the atmospheric

532. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, pp. 50-59.

533. Prigogine, *From Being to Becoming* (Freeman: San Francisco, 1980); Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos* (Bantam: New York, 1984).

534. Capra, *The Web of Life*, pp. 175-176, emphasis mine.

equilibrium of Mars (which he concluded was a “dead” world) compared with the disequilibrium of the Earth (which he identified as a self-regulating form of superorganism). This scientific understanding of the emergence of life from systems that are far from equilibrium is consistent with the theological model of nature as an infinitely complex cauldron/womb of energies and forces that, through continuous stirring and churning, gives rise to particular forms. As Barbara Walker observes of the theological model of the cauldron: ‘[a]ll life, mind, matter, and energy arose in various forms from the ever-boiling vessel, only to return thereto, when each form came to its destined end.’⁵³⁵ The scientific concepts of dissipative systems and self-organization account for how sufficiently complex and interrelated flows of energy and force create forms and novel structures that persist through time; and, from these scientific theories, it is possible to begin to explain how order can emerge from disorder and persist through change. Although the theology of nature outlined in this thesis does not (as yet) duplicate the details of chaos/complexity theory, underlying the theological narratives and scientific theories it is possible to discern shared metaphysical commitments.

Entropy and the “death of the Goddess”

Another area of conceptual convergence, where chaos/complexity theory provides resources for a Goddess feminist metaphysic, is with regard to a cornerstone of modern physics: the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Briefly stated, the Second Law explicates the existence of a fundamental dissymmetry in nature. It explains how the distribution of the energy in the Universe has a direction; energy is decreasing and

535. Walker, *The Crone*, p. 103.

does not spontaneously increase; natural processes are not reversible; and the Universe is inexorably winding down. Open to measurement by reference to a physical quantity termed entropy, the Second Law accounts for how the Universe is moving from a state of order/organization towards disorder. Energy and order in the Universe are decreasing, entropy and disorder are increasing, and it is postulated that the Universe will, eventually, achieve a state of maximum entropy/disorder termed by many physicists and cosmologists 'heat death.' The death and temporality of the Universe is seemingly governed by the Second Law and entropy.

How Goddess feminists can, and should, respond to the Second Law of Thermodynamics is unclear, particularly within the context of their metaphysical worldview. For a feminist theologian to claim that '[a]lthough things die constantly, everything that dies is merely reorganized, re-distributed, re-formed, then reborn, recycled back into the process, back into the whole'⁵³⁶ is seemingly to work with a fixed-sum concept of energy, wherein the total amount of energy available in the Universe remains constant, despite being constantly moved around and reorganized. What is not elucidated, however, is whether this reorganization and re-formation of energy is ongoing or has limits; it is not explained whether the process is winding down and is entropic in nature. Quite plausibly, the Second Law could be accepted and interpreted by feminist theologians as an inevitable consequence of the organic nature of the Goddess. The descent of the Universe into a state of entropic disorder could be viewed as the organic ageing and death of the Goddess, a completely "natural" process that identifies the Goddess as subject to the processes that She encompasses within Her body – a natural theology and scientific description of the

finitude and temporality of the Goddess. Alternatively, though, the Second Law could also be conceived by theologians as in some sense mistaken, irrelevant or, as explained in Chapter Two, 'subject to higher order (i.e. pantheistically more fundamental) principles.'⁵³⁷ For example, for Goddess feminists death is not the paramount metaphysical principle at work within nature. Death is but one aspect of the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle, and this cycle is understood as subject to a "higher" theological principle of life and female generativity. A theological response to the Second Law of Thermodynamics may plausibly be formulated in terms of these higher order principles.

Theories of complexity and chaos are significant with regard to a feminist theological response to the Second Law of Thermodynamics because they explain how the movement towards disorder and entropy is not an inexorable one. Notably, chaos and complexity theory explains how open dissipative systems and structures display a special ability to maintain themselves far from equilibrium and, when suitably interrelated and internally interconnected, have a capacity for anti-entropic behaviour. Ever-increasing levels of organization can emerge within open, dissipative systems in apparent contravention of the Second Law. As Capra elucidates,

Prigogine's theory shows that the behaviour of a dissipative structure far from equilibrium no longer follows any universal law but is unique to the system. Near equilibrium we find repetitive phenomena and universal laws. As we move away from equilibrium, we move from the universal to the unique, towards richness, and variety. This is, is of course, a well-known characteristic of life.⁵³⁸

536. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 220.

537. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 45.

538. Capra, *The Web of Life*, p. 177.

This scientific understanding of the relations between complex systems, entropy and the emergence of life is, I believe, broadly consistent with the Goddess feminists worldview. Goddess feminists can quite reasonably interpret dissipative structures and self-organizing systems as aspects of the inherent female generativity and life of the Goddess as nature. And, although it is certainly not essential that Goddess feminists make this identification, for theologians the exploration of areas of coherence and compatibility between scientific views of reality and their religious commitments and values may have considerable rewards in terms of applicability and credibility.⁵³⁹ It is, of course, a separate issue as to whether Goddess feminists wish to appear credible within a patriarchal society that they are fundamentally opposed to.

The emergence of life in all of its diversity and interrelatedness is expressed in chaos/complexity theoretical terms as the product of complex interactions between physical processes within open systems that are suitably far from equilibrium. This account of emergence converges and coheres with a theological account of the generativity of the Goddess as nature, wherein forms of order and organization are understood to emerge from the constantly churning and cycling energies of the cosmogonic womb/cauldron of the Goddess. Both of these accounts emphasize the open-ended and unpredictable nature of generativity, and both also explain how original forms of being and organization emerge naturally from complex processes immanent within nature.

For feminist theologians, generativity is an inevitable consequence of the churning/cycling energies inherent in the womb/cauldron of the Goddess as nature: 'She always has the raw materials for new forms in Her belly, womb, or cauldron.

539. Cf. McFague, *The Body of God*, pp. 76-77.

She is always stirring them, constantly changing, re-newing, re-forming, re-creating them.⁵⁴⁰ While according to chaos/complexity theory, life emerges from complex systems that are open and suitably far from equilibrium. With these thematic similarities in mind, it is, I contend, legitimate (in terms of philosophical consistency, coherence and precision) for feminist theologians to claim that the Goddess as nature is an open complex dissipative system, that exists in a state far from equilibrium, and is capable of generating new forms of life and organization within Her body/system. And this is, I suggest, exactly what Goddess feminists are claiming, from the perspective of chaos/complexity theory, when they speak of the Goddess as a living organism. When Starhawk, for example, claims that the Goddess 'is life eternally attempting to maintain itself, reproduce itself, diversify, evolve, and breed more life',⁵⁴¹ she is effectively articulating a self-organizing tendency within the living body/system of the Goddess, an organic tendency to create greater complexity and in a sense grow. A similar systemic concept of the life of the Goddess as nature can also be discerned in Sjöö and Mor's claim that '[l]ife does not begin. It is always here. Nature is alive from the beginning, and prodigal. Life does not emerge *from us*, we emerge *from it*. ... From the first cell floating on the first sea at the first out-breath of the world, it has all been alive.'⁵⁴² Forms, order and organization are things that are theologically understood to emerge from the complex and chaotic body/system/processes of the living Goddess.

The preceding systemic concept of the Goddess does carry with it its own theological and philosophical questions and tensions. It may be asked, for example,

540. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 220.

541. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

‘how we can think of the universe, which by definition includes everything, as an open system?’⁵⁴³ Any complex open system needs to exchange energy and matter with other systems, and it is wholly mysterious as to what *other* systems the Goddess may exchange energy/matter with. Furthermore, entropy remains a pressing concern for systemic theories and any theology of nature that may draw upon those theories. While the Goddess may be a living open organic system, constantly attempting to maintain and generate more life within Her body, there is no guarantee that entropy can be finally defeated. Although entropy can decrease on a local scale, as complex systems generate life and new forms of order and organization, entropy continues to increase on a cosmic scale. The death of the Goddess as the living universe is a possibility that philosophically-inclined theologians need to respond to in the future.

The Self-Reproducing Universe

Certain resolutions to the question of the mortality of the Goddess and the problem of entropy may be forthcoming if one is prepared to pursue the model of female organicism and generativity towards coherence. For example, one may reasonably conclude that the Goddess as a living organic Universe was in some cosmogonic sense born from another Goddess/Universe; this Goddess/Universe too is potentially capable of a form of cosmogonic reproduction; and this Goddess/Universe will in the future, as will all living organisms, in some sense die. Furthermore, these theological suggestions are not without scientific analogies and support. Complexity theory explains how open systems are capable of generating new forms of order and

542. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 386.

543. Capra, *The Web of Life*, p. 212.

organization when they reach a suitable level of complexity and a bifurcation point is achieved. If the Universe can be viewed as a complex system one may conjecture that new systems and even entire Universes may emerge from within it if a suitable state of affairs is achieved. This is an idea that has been articulated and developed by the physicist Andrei Linde in his theory of ‘The Self-Reproducing Inflationary Universe.’⁵⁴⁴ Linde’s theory starts with the suggestion that the Universe in which we live developed according to principles of “chaotic inflation” and, in Timothy Ferris’ words, ‘began as a bubble that ballooned out of the spacetime of a preexisting universe.’⁵⁴⁵ Linde’s theory then proceeds to account for how there will in fact be countless universes as ‘one inflationary universe sprouts other inflationary bubbles, which in turn produce other inflationary bubbles.’⁵⁴⁶ This theory speaks of a “maternal spacetime” and a process of eternal inflation, wherein the forces of cosmic evolution serve to generate countless other universes (many of which will exhibit their own laws of physics). And in response to any questions of cosmic origins:

In Linde’s view, asking whether there was “a” universe before “the” big bang is to be quaintly parochial. Our bubble emerged, he says, from “not *the* big bang but a *pretty* big bang.” There were – are – innumerable “pretty big bangs” with countless more to come. ... “The evolution of the universe as a whole has no end, and it may have had no beginning.”⁵⁴⁷

Linde’s theory of self-reproducing universes coheres closely with the theological model of a female, generative and organic deity/nature. Starhawk’s suggestion that the Goddess ‘is life eternally attempting to maintain itself, reproduce itself, diversify,

544. See Ferris, *The Whole Shebang*, pp. 258-264 and Andrei Linde, ‘The Self-Reproducing Inflationary Universe,’ *Scientific American*, November 1994.

545. Ferris, *The Whole Shebang*, p. 259.

546. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

547. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

evolve, and breed more life'⁵⁴⁸ is arguably far more acceptable and coherent when one envisages the evolution of the universe as a whole as having no end. Life in a sense is eternal, it is continuously reproducing itself, rather than being finally terminated by a cosmological telos or the laws of entropy. Equally Wilshire's theological assertion that 'a periodic Big Bang is Her way of getting things re-shuffled and reenergized from time to time'⁵⁴⁹ may make more sense in terms of a cosmological view of innumerable "pretty big bangs" that give birth to new universes, rather than those cosmological theories that have endeavoured to grapple with the special status of "*the* Big Bang."

According to this fusion of cosmological theory and theology one may plausibly speak of countless Goddesses/Universes, a plurality of female deities/universes that both coexist with and precede one another in a remarkably complex familial relationship. In this chaotic and fecund female cosmogony each Goddess/Universe would possess Her own aesthetic beauty and physical laws, and consequently the theological understanding of parthenogenesis as self-identical reproduction would be denied. As life is constantly evolving and emerging from complex and chaotic generative processes, Goddess/Universes would be born and develop exhibiting many different physical properties. These are admittedly speculative theological suggestions, but they are consistent with Goddess feminism's favoured metaphysical and religious models and cohere closely with contemporary scientific theories with which Goddess feminists are in fundamental agreement. The

548. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

549. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 220.

theories of chaos and complexity provide many valuable conceptual resources for the articulation of a constructive theology of nature and a Goddess feminist metaphysic.

Theories of flow and becoming

Further areas of compatibility between chaos/complexity theory and a feminist theology can also be discerned in a shared metaphysical understanding of the transitory fluid nature of reality and an emphasis on becoming rather than being. Feminist theology, process thought and the scientific theorization of chaos/complexity are all concerned with conceiving reality in terms of becoming rather than the stasis of being. Chaos and complexity theory are philosophically important for feminist theologians because they explain the coherence and priority of processes of becoming in scientific terms, rather than by recourse to mythic imagery and narratives. The degree of convergence between the scientific theorization and theological evocation of becoming is significant. Consider, for example, two accounts of the emergence and nature of forms, one of which is a chaos systemic perspective, presented by the feminist philosopher Christine Battersby, while the other is a theological view, presented by Starhawk. For Battersby, who is concerned to explain how the topological models of chaos theory mark a shift from a metaphysic of being to becoming, 'forms are not fixed things, but temporary arrestations in continuous metastable flows, potentialities or evolutionary events.'⁵⁵⁰ For Starhawk, in turn,

all things are swirls of energy, vortexes of moving forces, currents in an everchanging sea. Underlying the appearance of separateness, of fixed objects within a linear stream of time, reality is a field of energies that congeal

550. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 52.

temporarily, into forms. In time, all “fixed” things dissolve only to coalesce again into new forms, new vehicles.⁵⁵¹

In each of these accounts the language used attests to the temporary nature of all forms and the relationship of all forms to an underlying metaphysic of fluidity. Forms are not static or fixed. Forms emerge from complex processes of becoming and flow. As Battersby explains further:

Patterns of fluidity can have their own forms and stabilities. Becoming does not always have to be the underside of being. Thus, to give an example ...: if the speed is great enough, water running through a colander in the sink can remain a stable ‘form’ – as long as the speed of flow into the vessel exceeds the flow of water out of the vessel. Flow, flux, becoming, do not always have to be envisaged in terms of a movement that is alien to persisting identity or to metaphysics itself.⁵⁵²

This understanding of flow, flux and the status of becoming is pervasive throughout theological discourse. Within a cosmological context, a theology of flow and flux is exemplified in the model of the womb/cauldron of the Goddess. To cite Walker again, ‘[a]ll life, mind, matter, and energy arose in various forms from the ever-boiling vessel, only to return thereto, when each form came to its destined end,’⁵⁵³ or, to draw upon Wilshire’s theology, the Goddess is ‘She who reclaims all spent forms back into Her cauldron-womb where She ever remixes them, reshapes them, transforming them into new possibilities, which She then gives birth to.’⁵⁵⁴ This Goddess feminist emphasis on becoming and flow is also readily identifiable in the theological evocation and mythic reclamation of the “oceanic flux” of the Goddess. In apparent agreement with Battersby’s assertion that forms, persisting identity and stability can emerge from patterns of becoming and flow, feminist theologians often claim that the

551. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 42.

552. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 101.

553. Walker, *The Crone*, p. 103.

Goddess is like the ocean and the sea. That is, the Goddess as “oceanic” is a model of oneness and cohesion that persists through change and flow: thus ‘different unbounded streams become one cohesive entity when they flow together to form the sea; but the sea, although it is one entity, is also a vibrant, containing but ultimately uncontainable, unfinished, ever-changing body of water with undulating boundaries.’⁵⁵⁵ This feminist theological (re)turn to a metaphysics of becoming and flow reconceives the nature of ontological boundaries and identities and is attractive not only to Goddess feminists but also to feminist philosophers working within many different fields of enquiry. The aim of these feminist projects has been to challenge the invidious masculinist concepts/theories that have dominated the world for centuries – ideas that have focused upon fixed identities, boundaries, essences, surfaces and presences – and present alternatives that give voice to that which has been obscured, suppressed and vilified by patriarchy. Notably, these feminist philosophies have often begun with concepts and models that are based upon female embodiment.

In her recent work of feminist metaphysics the philosopher Christine Battersby theorized how the world may be reconceived in relation to ‘a body that is capable of generating a new body from within its “own” flesh and from “within” the horizons of its “own” space-time.’⁵⁵⁶ This revisionary feminist metaphysic takes account of the insights of complexity and chaos theory, systematically draws together the ideas of feminist and non-feminist philosophers who have worked with concepts of flow and flux in their theorizing, and argues that the biological reality of pregnancy has proved to be a conceptual blind-spot for patriarchal metaphysics in the past. Her feminist

554. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 21.

555. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

metaphysic, although firmly non-religious in construction, is broadly consistent with the Goddess feminist worldview that has utilized models of female embodiment (e.g. female life-stages, menstruality and specifically pregnancy) as the basis for its theological speculations concerning the nature of reality from the outset. Battersby's paramount concern 'is to show that it is not necessary to think in terms of fixed "essences", permanent "substances" or unchanging "being" to secure stable patternings. Persistence of a "subject" or "object" over time can also emerge from within intersecting force-fields, dependence and flow.'⁵⁵⁷ And theological concepts of forms that are born, grow, decay and are then transformed within a churning womb/cauldron of energy/matter cohere closely with this feminist metaphysical project. For Battersby and feminist theologians alike, models drawn from female bodily experiences are understood to be capable of providing more plausible and fertile conceptual resources for theorizing the nature of the world than the patriarchal alternatives. Drawing constructively upon the writings of Luce Irigaray, Battersby observes how her philosophical critique of patriarchal metaphysics

open[s] up the possibility of another way of mapping reality – a female optics and topography that involves a different relationship to space and time. Irigaray opposes an optics that privileges straight lines, particles and clean cut identities. Instead she proffers a morphology of the female body: structured by gradation, shadows, flows and intensive magnitudes.⁵⁵⁸

For feminist theologians, too, the different ways in which men and women tend to conceive and experience their bodies are viewed as highly significant factors in how one understands and lives in the world. Female-identified concepts and experiences that emphasize boundaries that are permeable and highlight the possibility of

556. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 6.

557. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

containing otherness within the horizons of one's own flesh (e.g. during pregnancy and sexual activity) may, they contend, present a better model for human being-in-the-world than male-identified concepts/experiences that, in Wilshire's words, are 'so keen to set boundaries that discourage or even deliberately prevent intimate exchanges.'⁵⁵⁹ A metaphysic of flow and becoming is attractive to many feminists, theologians or otherwise, because it can promote thinking about female identity in a manner that accommodates the differences amongst women, and also escapes many of the ecological, psychological and socio-political problems that the patriarchal and metaphysical focus on fixed essences and ontological boundaries has created in the past.

Models of nature as a living generative female body and the scientific theories of chaos and complexity all prioritize themes of flow, fluidity and becoming. It would, however, be inappropriate to conclude that all feminist engagements with these ideas and themes are conducive to a Goddess feminist metaphysic. Certain feminist construals of flow and permeable boundaries require careful commentary and consideration before one can, with some safety, conclude whether Goddess feminists may integrate those ideas into a metaphysical frame.

558. Ibid., p. 99.

559. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, pp. 272-273.

IV FEMINIST APPROPRIATIONS OF CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY

Cyberfeminism and feminist theology

One area of feminist philosophy that requires careful consideration before a theological metaphysic can be articulated is that of cyberfeminism. This theoretical position is essentially a product of Donna Haraway's critically acclaimed and widely discussed 1985 article, 'A Cyborg Manifesto';⁵⁶⁰ although it has also been developed into an influential form of postmodern feminism in the intervening years. Haraway's work is significant with regard to the development of a Goddess feminist metaphysic for a number of reasons. First, Haraway is developing a feminist reconceptualization of ontology (or, alternatively, a reinvention of nature) and consequently is also engaging in a project of feminist metaphysics.⁵⁶¹ Second, her feminist metaphysic draws directly upon the scientific theories of chaos/complexity and the ontological themes of flow, flux and boundary fusion, and consequently is connecting with many of the concepts and theories that Goddess feminists favour.⁵⁶² Third, Haraway's theory engages directly with the realities of scientific and technological development, an area that is often viewed as an alienating problematic for and by spiritual and radical feminists generally. Fourth, Haraway raises issues that are directly relevant to theology when she refers to the "death of the goddess" and concludes her 'Cyborg Manifesto' with the claim that '[t]hough both are bound in the spiral dance, I would

560. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, pp. 149-181.

561. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, pp. 13-14, 52-53.

562. For a comprehensive discussion of these issues, see Jill Marsden, 'Virtual sexes and feminist futures: The philosophy of "cyberfeminism"', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 78, July/August, 1996, pp. 6-16.

rather be a cyborg than a goddess.⁵⁶³ Each of these points indicates that a constructive feminist theological metaphysic needs to examine and evaluate the philosophy of cyberfeminism.

The basic aim of Haraway's cyborg manifesto is to provide a new view of the human and specifically feminist/female relationship to the world in the late twentieth century. In her own words, hers 'is an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism.'⁵⁶⁴ This is a myth founded on the model/image of the cyborg. Haraway observes that in the late twentieth century technology has become pervasive and in many respects invisible, the boundaries between humans and machines have become blurred, and these facts have far-reaching consequences for the world of meaning that we inhabit. As she elucidates further:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it give us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality. The two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.⁵⁶⁵

The ontological and metaphysical significance of the model/image of the cyborg is relatively clear in her proposal. It indicates that boundaries between human/machine as well as animal/machine and human/animal are permeable, negotiable and blurred. By thinking in terms of cybernetic systems, complex material processes and emergent properties, it is, Haraway argues, time to move beyond creation myths, notions of origin, essences and other totalizing narratives. Via a materialist analysis of the emergence of properties, earlier dualistic metaphysical frameworks are destabilized and the cultural/natural world is to be understood, instead, in terms of cybernetic

563. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 181.

564. Ibid., p. 149.

fusions, connections, partiality, hybridity, emergent relations and thresholds of coherence. Hers is an argument for taking '*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction.'⁵⁶⁶ We live during a time when ontological boundaries are blurred, and cyborgs are boundary engineers. It is cyborg politics and technologies that offer new possibilities for feminism.

Cyberfeminist philosophy confronts theology with an array of interesting problems. On the one hand, many of the metaphysical commitments of cyberfeminism and theology are the same. They both advocate relationality, connectivity and a metaphysic of flow and boundary (con)fusion. The thinking of both converges with those scientific theories that account for the emergence of order and life from chaotic/complex processes and open-ended dissipative systems. Both are equally suspicious of creation narratives and teleology. As Haraway claims, the model/image of the cyborg is part of a 'utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end. The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history.'⁵⁶⁷ In contrast to these similarities, however, tensions arise when one reflects on the different values that cyberfeminists and feminist theologians attribute to organicism and technology.

Unlike feminist theology, the ontology of cyberfeminism does not promote a relationship with and/or return to a state of organic/ecological unity. Rather the world is understood as based upon the establishment of partial, provisional, intimate and often perverse connections. Ontological, material and political alliances and fusions are things that are established as pragmatically necessary and/or emotionally

565. Ibid., p. 150.

566. Ibid.

pleasurable by cyberfeminists. For the cyborg there is no reference to an underlying order, ideal or life, whether this is oedipal, prelapsarian or pre-patriarchal, and neither is there a felt need to refer to completion in a future whole or cosmos.⁵⁶⁸ The ontology of the cyborg takes the inner logic of chaos/complexity, an analysis of how order, structure and life can emerge from nonlinear and unpredictable material processes, and applies this to the social/political realm. As the products of countless, infinitely complex material processes, humans (and particularly feminists) should take pleasure in their permeable nature(s) and conduct their lives and politics accordingly.

Most Goddess feminists would be unwilling to accept Haraway's cyberfeminist ontology. And it is unlikely that they would consider there to be any compatibility between their view of the whole of nature as the living body of the Goddess and Haraway's concept of a nature defined by partial, perverse and provisional couplings between cybernetic organisms. These concerns are, however, somewhat misplaced. As I will argue below there are strong reasons to consider these two positions to be compatible with and capable of mutually informing one another. The central problem that defines a theological opposition to a cyberfeminist ontology pertains to what exactly it is that is to count as an acceptable form of material union. Specifically, Goddess feminists are highly suspicious and critical of technology and its effects, and the cyborg is, problematically, a concept/reality that conjoins and conflates the technological with the organic/living.

Many feminist critiques that have been directed towards the 'Cyborg Manifesto' echo concerns that are voiced by feminist theologians. These critiques,

567. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 150.

568. Ibid., pp. 149-150.

briefly summarized, pivot upon an understanding of the relations that exist between technology and patriarchy. Technology is understood by many feminists to be something that has been largely defined and shaped by masculinist and patriarchal values and purposes; cyborg realities, metaphors and narratives are closely implicated with patriarchal power and specifically patriarchal militarism and capitalism; the ontology of the cyborg reproduces a patriarchal scientific understanding of nature as machine-like, which, in turn, is understood by many feminists to have negative consequences for the world as a whole. Cyborg images, models and technologies tend to reflect either a male desire to escape and transcend the body/flesh or else a need to render the body/flesh hard, impenetrable and powerful; and in each of these circumstances cyborgs express a dangerous masculinist “will to power” and a desire for control and “power over” the world.

Although feminist critiques of technology have taken many different forms they can be understood, in the case of radical and spiritual feminism(s), to have promoted an ontological separation between nature and technology (as well as between women and technology) and have created an environment in which feminist alliances with technology are viewed with deep suspicion. And it is in this regard that Goddess feminists have profound difficulties with the ontology of the cyborg. Ontological and political alliances, connections and fusions between women and nature, and/or between women and animals, are far more acceptable to Goddess feminists than those between women and technology might be.⁵⁶⁹ Not only is patriarchal power understood to have a greater corrupting hold on technology than

nature, but many technological artifacts are viewed as the direct ontological product or outpouring of patriarchal/male power; they are, to use Jane Caputi's evocative term, "phallotechnologies."⁵⁷⁰

However, this understanding of technology is not consistent with the theological and metaphysical understanding of nature developed in this thesis. It is conceptually and metaphysically inappropriate, albeit perhaps ethically and politically understandable, for feminist theologians to draw a firm ontological distinction between technology and nature. That is, according to their metaphysical commitments and values, for feminist theologians human technologies should be viewed as nothing more or less than another complex formation of energy/matter within the continuously cycling/churning womb of the Goddess as nature. To identify maleness/patriarchy with technology and to separate femaleness/feminism from technology is to render one aspect of reality incommensurable with countless others. This is not an appropriate action for a Goddess feminist metaphysic that repeatedly emphasizes the existence of continuities within nature. As was explained in Chapter Three, Goddess feminists view nature as subject to complex processes of change, flux and transformation, and this understanding of the world is not consistent with an understanding of fixed boundaries between such phenomena as technologies, humans or animals. In terms of their commitment to a fluid and protean view of reality, feminist theological and cyberfeminist attitudes to boundaries are the same, it is their understanding of the meaning and value of organicism that differs.

569. See the works of Susan Griffin for a powerful spiritual feminist evocation of woman/animal and woman/nature alliances and solidarity, notably *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1978).

Feminist theologians such as Carol Christ and Starhawk readily acknowledge that technologies arise within nature, as opposed to being separate from nature. Moreover, many Goddess feminists, are particularly interested in (re)claiming the earliest forms of human artifice (e.g. pottery, basket making and weaving), as the products of the creativity/generativity of women. What is stressed by these Goddess feminists, though, is the ecological and ethical point that technologies have particular, and often detrimental, effects on the web of life. And what humans living within patriarchal societies arguably need to do, with regard to their treatment and utilization of technology, is to change their attitudes so that they take account of ecological/ethical consequences. In Carol Christ's words, '[w]e need to recognize that every technological intervention brings life for some persons or beings, death for others. We must weigh each of our technologies in a scale that includes all beings in the circle of life.'⁵⁷¹

For Goddess feminists technologies need to be adapted to cohere with their ecological, ethical and religious relationship with the whole of nature.⁵⁷² Technologies are problematic only in so far as they can have far-reaching negative effects on the living organic community from which they have emerged. Patriarchy may have created, mass produced and utilized technologies for destructive purposes, but technologies may be adapted and utilized that are ecologically sensitive and contribute to the greater well-being of the whole. As Goddess feminists such as Carol

570. Jane Caputi, 'Seeing Elephants: The Myths of Phallotechnology', *Feminist Studies*, no. 14, Fall 1988, pp. 486-524.

571. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 154-155.

572. Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, pp. 129-130.

Lee Sanchez observe, it is time to affirm and ritualize technologies within the context of a feminist spirituality,

it is time to create new songs of acknowledgement as well as ceremonies that include metals, petrochemicals, and fossil fuels, electricity, modern solar power systems, and water power systems ... the new ways and elements in our lives – from nuclear power ... to plastics and computers.⁵⁷³

I would suggest at this point that the metaphysic implicit in Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto is broadly consistent with the metaphysic outlined in this constructive work of feminist theology and provides conceptual resources for Goddess feminists to draw upon and integrate into their own theory of reality. Human/machine fusions ought, from the metaphysical perspective of Goddess feminists, be no more problematic than human/animal fusions and alliances. It is only when ecological/ethical concerns are brought to the fore that differences between the two theories emerge.

For theologians, human/machine alliances are something that must be forged with ethical attention directed towards the well-being of ecological communities and ultimately the organic whole of nature. For cyberfeminists, though, it is not certain that the cyborg ontology is quite so ethically or ecologically grounded. Although Haraway endeavours to retain an ethical principle in her work, by continually returning to the issue of responsibility in the construction and negotiation of boundaries, this perspective does not, as one commentator has cogently noted, cohere with her account of materialist determinism, decentralised control and the nature of cybernetic communications. By taking chaos/complexity theory seriously, and suggesting that all matter participates in the construction of agency, Haraway's cyborg

573. Cited in Caputi 'On Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking', p. 435.

ontology undermines a specifically human form of freedom, free will and ethics; something that may be read as either a strength or a weakness of the theory. On the positive side, '[u]nderstanding nature cybernetically suggests that "individual" actions are always bound within larger material processes that both traverse and exceed them.'⁵⁷⁴ Thus, one may usefully speak 'in terms of degrees of control, resistance, rates of stability and changes in flow – with all that this implies for diagnosing relations of power.'⁵⁷⁵ On the negative side her ontology offers only a functional account of the nature of political/ethical activity, it is in no sense morally substantive or prescriptive, and consequently her calls for responsibility are vacuous and singularly unhelpful.⁵⁷⁶

The coherence and convergence of the metaphysical theorizing of feminist theologians and cyberfeminists ultimately pivots upon two issues. First, Goddess feminists conceive and value nature as a form of living organism and reject concepts that identify nature as a mechanism (or as dead matter/non-living). The ontology of the cyborg is theologically problematic specifically because it is understood to participate in an understanding of nature as non-organic and mechanistic. Second, for Haraway, notions of a living Goddess are critiqued and rejected because they are understood to evoke and perpetuate a naive understanding of organic wholeness. The organicism of spiritual ecofeminism and feminist paganism can, she claims, 'only be understood in ... terms of oppositional ideologies fitting the late twentieth century'; the

574. Marsden, 'Virtual sexes and feminist futures', p. 14.

575. Ibid.

576. Ibid., pp. 13-15. See also Jane Caputi's comparison of Mary Daly's spiritual feminist concept of ontological boundary confusion, based on 'integrity and reverence', with Haraway's cyberfeminist concept, based on 'transgression and irreverence', Jane Caputi, 'Quintessentialism', *Feminist Theology*, no. 24, 2000, p. 17.

Goddess feminist embrace of organicism 'would simply bewilder anyone not preoccupied with the machines and consciousness of late capitalism.'⁵⁷⁷ Both of these points, however, can be reconciled by reflecting on different interpretations of the concepts of matter and organicism.

For feminist theologians, the Goddess may quite plausibly be said to be the unity and flow of all of the matter within nature; and, because there is no conclusive scientific or philosophical reason why such a configuration of matter cannot also be a form of superorganism and alive, Haraway's concerns about a naive form of feminist organicism may be undermined. The organicism of the Goddess as nature may be understood to include all of the cybernetic and technological processes within it, rather than being diametrically opposed to those processes.⁵⁷⁸ And in response to Haraway's assertion that, although both cyborgs and goddesses are bound *in* the spiral dance, she would rather be a cyborg, most Goddess feminists are likely to claim that the Goddess as nature *is* the spiral dance: thus, in Starhawk's words, '[t]here is only the Goddess, the Mother, the turning spiral that whirls us in and out of existence.'⁵⁷⁹

It is equally important that Goddess feminists attend to the point that a cyborg too is a form of organism (i.e. a cybernetic organism). A cyborg is not something that can be metaphysically distinguished from all other forms of life; a cyborg is simply a combination and configuration of matter in a form other than the biological "norm." Just as the Goddess as the living body of nature incorporates matter that is not self-

577. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 174.

578. Rita Lester makes a similar point to this in her article 'Ecofeminism and the Cyborg', *Feminist Theology*, no. 19, Sept 1998, pp. 11-33. Her claim is that the Earth too may be conceived as both a living/organic and technologically shaped entity, 'the earth is both a goddess and a cyborg', p. 31.

evidently alive or organic – or, as Rachel Pollack claims, ‘95 percent of a redwood tree is actually dead wood, yet the tree lives’⁵⁸⁰ – so too do cyborgs incorporate matter that is nonliving/dead into their organic bodies/nature(s). Indeed, according to this line of reasoning, a cybernetic organism may be a far better model of the Goddess as nature than that of an evolved/biological organism. The Goddess as nature incorporates matter that is not self-evidently alive into Her body, in a manner analogous to a cyborg, yet the whole lives. Goddess feminist concerns with regard to the technological component of a cyborg ontology cannot, I contend, be maintained in the face of their understanding of the Goddess as the living Mother all forms of matter.

Wild nature(s) and the ontologically strange

Of further value to an assessment of areas of agreement and convergence between theological reality-claims and chaos/complexity systemic views of nature are the themes of “wildness” and “monstrosity.” Within feminist theological myths, narratives, political actions and rituals there is a recurrent evocation of a chaotic, untameable “wild” side of nature, a nature that bears striking similarities with the unpredictable and open-ended understanding of nature delineated in the (post)modern scientific theories of chaos and complexity. Moreover the image/model of the “monstrous,” a dangerous state of being which exists outside of the “natural” patriarchal order of things, is a recurrent mythic theme in Goddess feminist discourse that may be related to a chaos systemic view of the world. Both of these themes are of

579. Starhawk, ‘Witchcraft as Goddess Religion’ in Spretnak (ed.), *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, p. 56.

580. Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess*, p. 227.

metaphysical significance and contribute detail to a Goddess feminist understanding of the complex processes of becoming that constitute nature.

The chaotic wildness of nature is something that is valued and ritually evoked by most Goddess feminists as the nature that patriarchy has been unable to subdue and control.⁵⁸¹ For centuries within the patriarchal West there existed a concept of nature as a passive (female) resource, a resource that was subject to manipulation by active (male) reason and which, given time, would surrender all of its secrets and be brought under (male) human control and “tamed.” And, throughout its history, patriarchy is understood by theologians to have effectively smothered the world and femaleness in its efforts to establish dominion over this passive female nature: it has utilised artifice and technology to constrain and order the lives of ecological communities and women; it has ordered the minds and sexualities of humans according to a false consciousness and a libidinal economy; and everything from the cosmetics industry to the international monetary markets may be read as an aspect of the masculinist drive to control nature.

However, beneath the material/social/psychological covering of the world by patriarchy, Goddess feminists contend that nature remains wild, uncontrollable and free. Nature cannot be completely constrained and organized by patriarchy. Nature is fundamentally wild and chaotic; and it is this aspect of nature that needs to be reconnected with and embraced, if patriarchy is to be transformed.

In the writings of radical feminist Mary Daly one may delineate what is arguably the most comprehensive account of an ecologically and psychologically

581. For a comprehensive analysis of the theological theme of wildness, see Raphael, ‘Theology, Redemption and the Call of the Wild’, *Feminist Theology*, no. 15, pp. 55-72.

authentic wild and female nature that has been obscured and repressed by patriarchy; and Daly's entire corpus of work may be read as a metaphysical commentary on how to escape from the bindings of the patriarchal "foreground" and reclaim the biophilic freedom/wildness of the ontological "Background."⁵⁸² But many Goddess feminists have articulated a similar understanding of the meta or post-patriarchal wildness inherent in nature. In the writings of Donna Wilshire, for example, the political, psychological and religious importance of reclaiming a forgotten wild nature is emphasized. This is, she claims, for women at least, an ancient sense of femaleness 'as full of wild Mystery and Potential, as always Becoming, as reliable, giving and capable ... but unpredictable – something like the forest, something like the wilderness itself.'⁵⁸³ Furthermore, feminist theologians often identify the Maiden aspect of the Triple Goddess as a model of the wild, unpredictable and untameable side of nature. As the feminist witch De-Anna Alba expresses it: 'She is the soul of nature – the wild and the free. She loves totally and is filled with joyous sexual passion. She hates vehemently and does away with that which She dislikes, just as all children wish to. A part of Her dwells in all women.'⁵⁸⁴ Wildness and wilderness are concepts that cannot be excluded from a Goddess feminist metaphysic; they possess more than a purely metaphoric or psychological meaning, they are reality-depicting in the broadest metaphysical sense of the term. The female "soul" of nature, as Wilshire and De-Anna Alba claim, is alive with possibility, free, unpredictable and wild. These concepts may be ambiguous, in so far as wilderness may be viewed as a product of the

582. See Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (London: The Women's Press, 1984); *Gyn/Ecology*; and *Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage* (London: The Women's Press, 1993).

583. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 46.

patriarchal degradation of an area as well as a model of untouched, inhospitable female possibility.⁵⁸⁵ But the terms converge with the theories of chaos/complexity in a manner that endows them with a degree of philosophical precision and anchors them firmly within the context of a feminist metaphysic.

What, then, does the chaotic wildness of nature mean in metaphysical terms? From the perspective of chaos/complexity theory, the chaotic wildness of nature is a product of the processes of open systems that are impossible to predict with any accuracy over the long-term, and that are capable of generating novelty and unforeseen events. This is an understanding of nature that has identified humans as full participants within nature, rather than the controllers or stewards of nature, and has challenged the hubris and confidence of the patriarchal sciences. It is a metaphysical worldview that has brought value-choices and judgements explicitly into the domain of science; rather than denying or suppressing those aspects of science. Chaos/complexity theory has led to the development of a scientific posture that fully acknowledges the importance of human values in interactions with the natural world. Whether one considers the effects of global warming, human cloning or genetically modified foods, a remarkably broad range of human values and voices have entered the arena of political and scientific debate; and this has occurred specifically because nature is increasingly understood as, beyond certain unspecifiable limits, impossible to control or predict with any degree of confidence. The scientific focus on the control of a passive female nature has begun to be replaced by issues of risk management within a nature that is understood as active. This “post-normal” and chaos systemic

584. Cited in Raphael, ‘Theology, Redemption and the Call of the Wild’, p. 61.

585. Ibid., p. 68.

scientific understanding of nature converges with the numinous sense of the unpredictability and wildness of nature articulated by feminist theology.⁵⁸⁶

There is also another metaphysical sense in which feminist theology embraces the chaotic wildness of nature in a manner that is conducive with chaos/complexity theory. One of the many insights of the theories of chaos and complexity, as they have been applied to natural phenomena, has been to highlight how human interactions with the world have increasingly perturbed and destabilized ecological systems by the introduction of new substances, energies and species. These are interactions that, in many respects, have been destructive (or catastrophic) for those ecological systems. However they have also, in certain cases, proved capable of generating new life and a new ecological order that may be consistent with a feminist theology of nature. That is, in feminist theological terms, patriarchal attempts to control nature may occasionally succeed in releasing transformational “female powers” that are not necessarily detrimental to the whole. For example, industrial and household pollutants and plastics have been identified as a major cause of increased levels of oestrogen-like compounds in the environment and a marked decrease in male fertility. Unforeseen consequences are an inevitable aspect of chaotic systems. Patriarchy is simply unable to control a nature that is chaotic/wild, it can only attempt to maintain control by continually reinforcing its conceptual and material frameworks and boundaries. Problematically, though, nature is continuously generating and producing that which does not fit within those frameworks and boundaries. Evolution, hybridization, miscegenation, mutation and transformation are all aspects of a nature

586. For an introduction to post-normal science, see Silvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz, *Uncertainty and Quality in Science for Policy* (Kluwer Academic: Dordrecht, 1990).

that is active, chaotic and wild. And while, in the words of feminist theologians Jane Caputi and Paula Gunn Allen, ‘there are horrific mutations wrought by radiation and other technological effects ... some of the mutations that ensue must be beneficial ones. Patriarchal men, whatever their intentions and pretensions, *cannot* control the processes of mutation; and change, or mutation, is, after all, essential to life.’⁵⁸⁷

The point to emphasize at this juncture is that patriarchal control is not an absolute. Despite attempting to control a nature conceived as female and passive, patriarchy frequently encounters a wild “generativity” and “otherness” within nature that exceeds and escapes the conceptual, political and material boundaries that it seeks to establish and maintain. It is this aspect of nature that is valued by Goddess feminists and theologians and which is also described by the theories of chaos and complexity. That which patriarchy has seen as the dangerous “otherness” of nature – the female “generativity” and the ontological “monstrosity” of that which does not fit within and threatens its conceptual schemes – is repeatedly evoked and ritually engaged with by Goddess feminists as of the highest religious value. The mythical figures of Amazons, Gorgons, Crone-like Witches, Lamias and Sphinxes, as well as various shapeshifting and theriomorphic goddesses, wolves and an array of other animals, are all characterized as existing on the edges of patriarchal society and represent for Goddess feminists that which cannot be accommodated within the logic of patriarchal control. They are all models of a chaotic becoming that shocks and disrupts any patriarchal and metaphysical notion of fixed essences, firm ontological boundaries and linear evolution.

587. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, p. 276.

For Goddess feminists “wildness” and “monstrosity” represent the fecundity and generativity of the Goddess as nature; they represent the failures of patriarchal political, scientific and social attempts to control nature; they represent the philosophical futility of focusing upon a metaphysic of being rather than becoming. Nature is not predictable, passive or linear. Nature is chaotic, active and wild. The fixed/impermeable ontological categories of patriarchy are a mistake and chaos is an aspect of nature that cannot be escaped. Monsters, such as Gorgons and Amazons (and which may also include Haraway’s figure of the cyborg), are feminist theological models of the metaphysical openness of nature and the limits of patriarchal control. What it may mean to live within a nature so conceived, and how one ought to conduct one’s life according to this worldview, are issues that are addressed more thoroughly in the following chapter. However, in the words of the feminist theologian Jane Caputi, living in a wild and chaotic state of nature ‘we might conjure up images of the ontologically strange – of the anomie, of the dark that patriarchy has trained us to fear. We might visualize “monsters” – those female Powers that have been stigmatized as alien, inhuman, freakish, turbulent, and chaotic – not to fight them, but to become them.’⁵⁸⁸ For Goddess feminists nature is not something that can be controlled; nature has a chaotic unpredictability and generativity to it that must be embraced, respected and revered. It is only that which curtails the generativity and well-being of nature that must be viewed with suspicion.

588. Ibid., p. 287.

CHAPTER 5

THE HUMAN CONDITION

In the preceding three chapters the primary religious models favoured by Goddess feminists have been drawn together as part of a constructive theological project. The aim throughout these chapters has been to demonstrate that the reality-claims and metaphysical commitments of Goddess feminists can be organized in a consistent and coherent manner. By elucidating Goddess feminist models of deity, cosmos, nature and time, theology has been developed in a more philosophical manner than has been attempted in the past and a Goddess feminist metaphysic has been proposed. However, there is one area of the Goddess feminist worldview that has not been examined directly, and that is the human condition. It has not been elucidated what it means for a Goddess feminist to be human. It has not been considered how a feminist theological understanding of a cosmos and nature that is governed by complex processes of transformation coheres with a Goddess feminist view of human nature. It has not been clarified how Goddess feminists might relate their moral and political activities to a nature that is understood as wild and unpredictable. These are a few of the questions that are addressed and answered in this chapter.

In the first part of this chapter a feminist theological reading of human nature is provided. This account of human being-in-the-world explicates Goddess feminist attitudes to mortality, sexuality and essentialism and correlates these with the theological understanding of nature explicated in the preceding chapters. The special status of femaleness is considered and the plausibility of a privileged connection

between women and nature (and women and the Goddess) is assessed against the backdrop of a metaphysical theory that suggests that everything within nature is interconnected and equally a part of the Goddess as nature.

The second part of this chapter addresses feminist theological ethics and the nature of human action. Given the Goddess feminist understanding of how nature is most fundamentally constituted, questions relating to how humans ought to act in the world are considered. Three separate clusters of issues are examined: first, issues relating to the nature of morality and evil in the Goddess feminist worldview; second, issues pertaining to the ideal human relationship to nature, and third, issues that define the limits and possibilities of human action in the world. These discussions draw together the theological and metaphysical ideas raised in the preceding chapters and draw this work towards closure.

I BODIES: MORTALITY AND SEXUALITY

Any attempt to delineate a Goddess feminist account of human nature must inevitably begin with a theological account of human embodiment. As has been noted at various points throughout this work, embodiment is one of the primary theological resources for constructing models of the world and it is also understood as the only mode of one's being-in-the-world. To be embodied is to exist for feminist theologians, while to be disembodied is arguably a theological contradiction in terms.

Human mortality and finitude

Goddess feminists view and value embodiment as the principal way through which humans are aware of, and participate within, the life of the Goddess as nature. To experience, think and live within the world is to be an embodied being. Unlike other religions, which may view embodiment as problematic (sinful/tainted), a container for a more valuable state of being (soul/spirit), and as a transitory stage of existence that may be transcended or escaped (via a heavenly afterlife, through the attainment of enlightenment and/or by a process of spiritual transmigration), Goddess feminism typically identifies embodiment as intrinsically valuable. Embodiment is the primary state of one's being-in-the-world and an inescapable given. To be an embodied human being is to be an emergent form of life that exists within the churning womb of the Goddess as nature; it is to possess an array of particular capacities, characteristics and existential possibilities. But it is also to be limited in many respects and subject to the complex processes and rhythms of the body of the Goddess as nature.

For Goddess feminists, human mortality and death are accepted as the inescapable consequence of the metaphysical cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth that effects the whole of nature. As Donna Wilshire elucidates, '[f]or those who honor the eternal cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth, *death is real and a certainty*';⁵⁸⁹ and, with regard to meaning of the cycle for human nature and life, 'individual or particular forms of life always change, always decay and die.'⁵⁹⁰ Theologically it is quite natural for humans to age and ultimately die. Processes of degeneration and death are aspects of the complex changes and transformations that shape the whole of nature and which are

589. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 216

590. Ibid.

ultimately good and life generating. As Carol Christ explains, 'Goddess religion counsels us to accept death as part of the cycle of life.'⁵⁹¹ Human mortality is not a problem for Goddess feminists because mortality is an inevitable consequence of the human participation in more expansive cycles and processes of the life of nature. While there may be an objectionable amount of pain and suffering within any individual human life, death is not theologically conceived as an evil. Again, in Carol Christ's terms, '[d]eath is understood as a return to earth, to the womb that gave us birth.'⁵⁹² The Goddess feminist concept of death coheres with the theological understanding of a nature that is always being changed, re-newed, re-formed and re-created within the womb/cauldron of the Goddess. Death does not entail an event or state of ontological transcendence and/or escape *from* nature, as it does within Christian and many other religious worldviews, death is part of a process of ontological re-organization that takes place *within* nature.⁵⁹³

It is important to consider at this point whether a Goddess feminist account of human nature excludes all forms of immortality or postmortem human survival. For theologians such as Donna Wilshire there is a clear statement that there is no immortality within the Goddess worldview, 'only Nature's cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth can be eternal.'⁵⁹⁴ However, this denial is dependent upon one's concept of immortality. One must be prepared to differentiate between personal and impersonal

591. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 132.

592. Ibid.

593. For further discussion of the differences between feminist theological and Christian theological attitudes to death, see Clack, 'Revisioning Death', pp. 67-77.

594. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 216.

forms of survival and also to specify exactly what it is that is understood to survive beyond death.⁵⁹⁵

For Goddess feminists it is usually personal forms of immortality and survival that are denied when a human being is said to have died. This is an attitude that converges with the worldviews of most forms of pantheism; and, as Michael Levine observes, '[h]istorically the denial of personal immortality is one of pantheisms most distinctive features.'⁵⁹⁶ As Levine continues, pantheists however may also be interested in and/or metaphysically committed to a variety of types of impersonal immortality and survival, and this equally true of Goddess feminists. 'Impersonal forms of "immortality", or surviving death, can include "surviving in people's memories, being remembered for one's work, a bone in a reliquary, or becoming another part of the matter/energy cycle once again.'⁵⁹⁷ For Goddess feminists, several of these ideas may be religiously acceptable.

In Carol Christ's terms, we may certainly 'live on for better or worse in the memories and the lives of those who remember us' and human bodies may be said to be 're-in-carnated' in the sense that 'they become food for other beings in the web of life.'⁵⁹⁸ This latter concept of reincarnation is arguably one of the most prevalent understandings of postmortem survival evidenced amongst Goddess feminists. In a discussion on the topic of theological approaches to death and dying, for example, the British Goddess feminist Asphodel Long expressed the belief that she would survive

595. Levine, *Pantheism*, pp. 248-257.

596. *Ibid.*, p. 248

597. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

598. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 132

after death in the sense that parts of her energy would live on in others.⁵⁹⁹ Similarly Starhawk claims that '[t]he secret of immortality lies in seeing death as an integral part of the cycle of life. Nothing is ever lost from the universe' and theological notions of postmortem survival and reincarnation emerge quite naturally 'from a world view that sees all events as continuing processes.'⁶⁰⁰

For most Goddess feminists, life is understood to survive death in the sense that the whole of nature persists beyond the death of any individual organism. This view is consistent with Levine's pantheist account of impersonal postmortem survival 'as becoming another part of the matter/energy cycle once again.'⁶⁰¹ Moreover it is a view that coheres with the theological claim that '[a]lthough things die constantly, everything that dies is merely reorganized, re-distributed, re-formed, then reborn, recycled back into the process, back into the whole.'⁶⁰² Based on the theological metaphysic outlined in this work, humans are transitory forms of being and life that emerge into the world, possess their own special identities, participate in the generation (and deaths) of other forms of life, but ultimately return to the whole. There is, as I will elucidate below, no fixed essence or permanence to human nature or embodiment within theology. In so far as humans may be said to survive death, their postmortem survival is premised upon their continued participation in the life of the whole of nature; and, as Carol Christ suggests, this survival too may be 'conditional

599. This point was made during a discussion of Dr Beverley Clack's paper on theological attitudes to death and dying at the Goddess Studies conference, 'Ambivalent Goddesses: An Exploration of the Current State of the Study of Goddesses and Goddess Spirituality', King Alfred's College of Higher Education, 26th March 1997.

600. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 110.

601. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 249.

602. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 220.

and finite'.⁶⁰³ There may quite plausibly be 'a kind of satisfaction in knowing that world goes on – even if one personally does not.'⁶⁰⁴ But, as explained earlier, it is consistent with the organicist models of the Goddess feminist worldview to conclude that the Goddess too is mortal and temporally finite, as opposed to being immortal and eternal. It would, therefore, be conceptually inappropriate for Goddess feminists to claim that human being is, in any sense, immortal or permanent; it is continuous with the continuum of life.

Reproduction and sexuality

Moving beyond a consideration of the mortal limits of human nature, it is important to examine the theological understanding of the human ability to generate and reproduce new life. The metaphysical commitments of Goddess feminists are in many respects centered on their understanding of the generativity of femaleness and nature, and it is an inescapable fact that the theological cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth is intimately entwined with the concepts of reproduction and sexuality. In this section we may begin to unpack these theological concepts as they are understood to apply to human nature.

As was elucidated with regard to feminist theological attitudes to cosmogony in Chapter Three, there is a metaphysical sense in which femaleness is theologically conceived as the primary generative power at work within nature. Where and whenever new forms of life and being take shape within nature, they are understood to be born from the femaleness of the Great Mother; a form of cosmogonic and

603. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 133.

604. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 251.

ontological generativity that is theologically understood to require no contribution from a male.⁶⁰⁵ The biological model of parthenogenesis is often deployed by Goddess feminists in support of their proposal that femaleness alone is capable reproducing itself, but even when this model is not used, it is noted that it is the female body/womb that gestates, nurtures and gives birth to new life. This metaphysical understanding of the generativity of femaleness can arguably bring to the fore the importance of femaleness at the level of human nature.

In assessing human generativity and reproduction within the context of the generativity of the Goddess as nature, it is important to affirm that nearly all Goddess feminists agree that males are not, in Monica Sjöö's words, 'an unnecessary sex.'⁶⁰⁶ Biological males have an important part to play within the generativity of nature. As Sjöö and Mor claim, '[s]exual reproduction enhances the variety and health of the gene pool, is necessary for the kind of complex evolution that has produced the human species.'⁶⁰⁷ It is simply the case that, again in Sjöö and Mor's words, 'when it comes to the two sexes, one of us has been around a lot longer than the other.'⁶⁰⁸ Femaleness is understood by Goddess feminists as primordial, it possesses a metaphysical meaning that maleness does not. Sexual differentiation and maleness, in turn, are theologically construed as valuable mutations or re-formations of the female generativity of nature that promote the growth of life (i.e. males are 'changed females but females nonetheless').⁶⁰⁹ It has already been claimed that the Goddess as nature loves diversity, and may be viewed as 'life eternally attempting to maintain itself,

605. Cf. Raphael, 'Theology and the Parthenogenetic Reproduction of Femaleness'.

606. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 3.

607. Ibid.

608. Ibid.

reproduce itself, diversify, evolve, and breed more life'.⁶¹⁰ Sexual differentiation is theologically conceived as a means by which the Goddess as nature promotes the diversification, evolution and proliferation of life. As Starhawk explains, '[w]hy are there two sexes? For the same reason we cut the cards when we shuffle the deck. Sexual reproduction is an elegant method of ensuring maximum biological diversity.'⁶¹¹

From this perspective one may understand human sexual reproduction to have theological value because it contributes to the generativity of nature; human sexual differentiation may be viewed as important because it promotes the generation of complexity, diversity and the evolution of new forms of life; and both of these points may lead one to propose that there is an ideal/normative model of human sexuality to be located within the theological understanding of human nature. These issues, however, require some clarification and qualification. While sexual reproduction is certainly valued by Goddess feminists, specifically because it generates new life, the issues of reproduction and sexuality may be conceptually separated from one another. That is, sexuality is theologically understood in a far broader context than simply as the reproductive relations between biological females and males. Sexuality may be articulated by reference to activities that promote relationality and connections, involve intimate exchanges of energy and encompass the exploration and merging of personal/ontological boundaries. These are issues that are more thoroughly clarified in a later section of this chapter, but I note at this point that theological accounts of

609. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, p. 277.

610. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

611. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 9.

human nature are both able to and typically do separate reproductive capacities and sexual activities.

II ESSENCES: THE WOMAN-NATURE CONNECTION

The problem of essentialism

Arguably the core conceptual problem that Goddess feminists must confront, if they are to articulate their reality-claims in a manner that is to be acceptable to a wider feminist audience, is that of essentialism. This is a problem that I have postponed addressing until this point in this work because, while essentialism is certainly relevant to a theological assessment of what it means to be human, it is only by developing other aspects of the metaphysical worldview of Goddess feminism that it is possible to explain precisely why Goddess feminists are not essentialists.

Briefly stated, essentialism is a problem for Goddess feminists because it has long been understood by feminist theorists to have served the interests of patriarchal philosophies and ideologies. Essentialism is for most feminists a self-evident danger zone and an indicator of patriarchal theories and values.⁶¹² As Elizabeth Grosz explains,

[i]n charging theories with these conceptual commitments, feminists assert that they are necessarily complicit in reproducing patriarchal values. In claiming that women's current social roles and positions are the effects of their essence, nature, biology, or universal social position, these theories are guilty of rendering such roles and positions unalterable and necessary, thus providing them with a powerful political justification.⁶¹³

612. For a succinct philosophical analysis of feminist engagements with essentialist thinking, see Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, pp. 15-37. Cf. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, pp. 45-57.

613. Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, p. 49.

Goddess feminists are, therefore, on slippery feminist ground if they propose essentialist notions of what femaleness (or indeed maleness) may be; it is a risk-laden activity for Goddess feminists to invoke essences when they have so often been deployed by patriarchy to place determinate and oppressive limits upon what women can achieve in the past. Many of the severest criticisms of Goddess feminists have focused almost exclusively on the proposition that they are making essentialist claims about women.

The essentialist claims that Goddess feminists are said to make about human nature require careful consideration, and these reality-claims may be usefully divided into two types. First, there are those feminist theological claims that suggest that women are essentially caring, nurturing and biophilic, while men are essentially violent, destructive and necrophilic. These claims may be characterized as a behavioural form of essentialism. Second, there are those claims that suggest that women are somehow closer to the Goddess and/or nature than men. These essentialist ideas may be characterized as pertaining to human being-in-the-world and issues of ontology. Each of these types of essentialist thinking will be assessed in turn.

Essentialism and human behaviour

The first point to make is that Goddess feminists are not social determinists. Nearly all Goddess feminists reject the idea that men are irredeemably evil and immoral while women are necessarily good and moral. Moreover the social/political/religious reality of patriarchy is theologically understood to be a historical aberration rather than a permanent state of affairs. For those Goddess feminists who subscribe to matriarchal

views of human pre-history, men and women are understood to have once lived in a far more egalitarian and harmonious social relationship than they do today. While for those Goddess feminists who do not unduly concern themselves with the events of pre-history there is generally a shared belief that the social organization of the world can be transformed and dramatically improved by political and religious action. The personal, political, religious and social behaviour of humans is not something that is considered to be fixed by Goddess feminists.

Despite the fact that Goddess feminists value aspects of human behaviour that may be characterized as caring, nurturing and life-affirming, and despite the fact these behavioural traits are identified predominantly with women within the current social and historical context, it would be difficult to locate a feminist theologian who would claim that these characteristics are essentially in the possession of women. Neither is patriarchy understood to represent the triumph of men who are always evil and destructive over women who are always good and caring. There is ample evidence to suggest that men are capable of exhibiting nurturing behaviour and are critical of patriarchy while many women are uncaring and also willing participants within the patriarchal status quo. For most Goddess feminists the differences between women and men are judged to be relatively minor. As Carol Christ claims:

Both women and men are embodied. Both men and women are relational and interdependent. Both give and receive love and nurture. Both have created technologies. Both reflect on their lives and the lives of other beings. These qualities are neither female nor male. In most significant ways we are alike.⁶¹⁴

It is far more common for Goddess feminists to talk in terms of predispositions and tendencies, with regard to female, male and human behaviour, rather than in terms of

614. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 149-150.

certainties and fixed essences. Most Goddess feminists would admittedly agree that some aspect of being human has been lost or suppressed by the development of patriarchy, notably an understanding of the meaning of the Goddess and the proper human relationship with nature, and it is this loss that has profound consequences at the level of human behaviour and gender relations. Moreover some Goddess feminists may characterize this loss of human understanding of the Goddess with a loss of contact with the inherent femaleness and generativity of nature. But, even in these cases, there is usually said to be no essential difference between human females and males. As Sjöö and Mor explain in their sweeping analysis and critique of patriarchal religions and mysticism, male mystics are currently unable to realize their full spiritual and religious potential, but this religious failure is not the result of some essential difference between men and women, it is a consequence of the fact that they are socially conditioned and damaged by patriarchy. They ‘are out of contact with female energy – their patriarchal worldviews are based on a biophobic denial of [the] creative female energy *in both* women and men.’⁶¹⁵

Goddess feminists work with concepts and metaphysical models of the female generativity inherent within nature, but their worldview is not one that defines how women, men and humans will behave by recourse to fixed essences or human biology. Human behaviour is theologially conceived as open-ended and subject to complex processes of personal, political and spiritual change and transformation. The problem of essentialism, though, is a persistent one, and confronts Goddess feminists far more forcefully with regard to the question of whether women are closer to Goddess/Nature than men.

615. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 428, emphasis mine.

Essentialism and human being-in-the-world

It is often claimed by Goddess feminists that women possess a closer relationship to nature than men; and this closeness is understood to imply far more than the socio-political identification of women with nature. Rather it is understood to mean that women, as a particular form of embodied being-in-the-world, possess a greater epistemic capacity to understand the processes of nature than men, and may, in some metaphysical sense, be connected to aspects of the world that are inaccessible to men. This closeness to nature may be explained in terms of women's biological constitution (typically by reference to female reproductive and sexual capacities) or, more abstractly, by reference to an overarching ontology (as in the works of Mary Daly). But in each of these cases, there may be said to be essentialist thinking at work: all women are essentially one thing; and all women are essentially different from all men.

How can Goddess feminists respond to these charges when they do make metaphysical claims about a special female connection to nature? First, it is important to state the nature of the problem: are women closer to nature than men? In the words of the feminist theorist Joan Griscombe, '[s]ince we are all part of nature, and since all of us, biology and culture alike, is part of nature, the question ultimately makes no sense.'⁶¹⁶ Would Goddess feminists agree? Carol Christ dedicates a chapter of her work of systematic theology to explaining what she claims is the 'first truth about human beings': namely 'that we are part of nature.'⁶¹⁷ Moreover she goes to considerable lengths to explain how human cultures and technologies arise within nature. Starhawk too makes this claim when she notes that 'culture is an outgrowth of

616. Cited in K. J. Warren, 'Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections', *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 9, 1987, p. 15.

nature – a product of human beings who are part of the natural world.⁶¹⁸ But does it follow from these theological claims that there is or can be no special connection between women and nature? Is it possible for Goddess feminists to affirm that culture exists *within* nature, while also asserting that women are *closer* to nature than men?

It is important to affirm at this point that Goddess feminists possess a metaphysical concept of nature that diverges radically from that held by most other feminists, philosophers and religious thinkers. Significantly Goddess feminists conceive deity and nature in terms of models of female organic embodiment and there is a persistent theological engagement with the idea that aspects of human femaleness are ontologically magnified in the Goddess. This need not entail an anthropomorphization or objectification of the Goddess. As Melissa Raphael explains, '[i]t is possible to affirm the basic reality of a divinity whose cyclic generativity would warrant the description "female" ... without saying that divinity is actually or literally a woman with three faces living under the earth or up in the moon.'⁶¹⁹ But the idea that human femaleness exhibits affinities with the Goddess, in a manner that maleness does not, is a recurrent one in theological discourse. The question that needs to be addressed is whether the similarities between human femaleness and the femaleness of the Goddess as nature entail essentialism. I contend that they do not.

What Goddess feminists typically claim, when they attend to the similarities between human femaleness and the femaleness of nature, is that aspects of human female embodiment grant a special capacity for epistemic insight into the rhythms and

617. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 135

618. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 11.

processes of nature. Female bodily experiences such as pregnancy and birth may, in Carol Christ's words, 'make it easier for women to understand that life is embodied, relational, and interdependent and to recognize the human connection to nature.'⁶²⁰ These female bodily insights, though, are not guaranteed. The capacities, 'if they exist, are subtle, difficult to measure, and not absolute.'⁶²¹ The resemblance between human femaleness and the Goddess as nature is not posited by feminist theologians as a guarantee of ontological or religious knowledge; and neither can it be, given the Goddess feminist understanding of the complexity and everchanging nature of the world. For Goddess feminists, all notions of linear causal relationships and clear cut identities are critically undermined by their metaphysical understanding of a nature that is always changing, churning and transforming itself. The metaphysical worldview of Goddess feminism effectively denies the possibility of a clear, unambiguous understanding of the whole; and, more importantly, it absolutely rejects the possibility of fixed essences.

Essentialism denied: everything changes

Despite the arguments and claims of various theorists, feminists and philosophers, that Goddess feminists are engaged in essentialist thinking, there is considerable difficulty in reconciling these views with a Goddess feminist metaphysic that emphasizes that everything is changing and intimately entwined with everything else. Essentialism is arguably premised upon philosophical concepts of unchanging being and fixed ontological boundaries. Goddess feminism, in turn, favours metaphysical concepts of

619. Raphael, 'Monotheism in Contemporary Goddess Religion', pp. 148-149.

620. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 149.

becoming rather than being. As has been elucidated throughout this work, theologians reject attitudes to nature that emphasize fixity and permanence. For Goddess feminists, everything is subject to change, everything is subject to transformation, nothing is fixed or permanent. The metaphysic of Goddess feminism cannot accommodate, in an internally coherent or consistent manner, essentialist thinking.

One may either accept that Goddess feminists are essentialists in the sense that they are accused of being, in which case their metaphysical worldview as outlined in this thesis is incoherent and requires considerable modification, or one may accept that essentialist critiques of the Goddess feminist worldview entail some kind of misunderstanding of the Goddess feminist position. The latter of these options has not previously been given serious consideration. While there are admittedly reasons to suspect Goddess feminists of being essentialists, specifically because they are interested in articulating commonalities amongst women, it has not been considered how Goddess feminists can philosophically respond to the issue of essentialism.

Goddess feminists can, I propose, plausibly conceive of essences, identities and commonalities amongst women in terms similar to those that are to be found within the scientific theories of complexity and chaos. In agreement with these theories, Goddess feminists can claim that ‘it is not necessary to think in terms of fixed “essences”, permanent “substances” or unchanging “being” to secure stable patternings.’⁶²² One can think, rather, in terms of fluid essences and patterns of organization that emerge from the becoming and flow of nature. As the feminist theologian Paula Gunn Allen has claimed, ‘[f]rom a metaphysical point of view,

621. Ibid.

622. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 12.

everything will change into something else, but that doesn't mean that there are no essences, it just means that all essences are subject to change.'⁶²³ One can speak of essences within the metaphysical worldview of Goddess feminism, but those essences possess a very different meaning to those within patriarchal philosophies. Theological essences possess permeable boundaries and are open to change.

One aspect of the Goddess feminist understanding of fluid essences can be discerned in the widespread theological acknowledgement that human femaleness and maleness exist within a continuum. Humans are constituted by a variety of primary and secondary sexual characteristics, including genitalia, reproductive organs, chromosomes and hormones, and these characteristics are combined in various formations. There is no fixed essential female or male nature, various formations of intersexed humans exist, and these different formations of sexual embodiment are not ethically, metaphysically or theologically problematic for most Goddess feminists. The various human permutations of sexual differentiation simply represent the fluid, generative and protean aspect of the Goddess as nature.⁶²⁴

Femaleness as a privileged site of becoming

For most Goddess feminists femaleness is equivalent to a metaphysical category or principle; a category or principle that the Goddess exemplifies and which individual women instantiate to some degree. Moreover, women *qua* biological females instantiate this metaphysical femaleness in a manner that men *qua* biological males do

623. Cited in Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons and Crones*, p. 275.

624. Ibid., pp. 276-280. Cf. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 148-149.

not. This is, I contend, the primary way in which femaleness functions within the Goddess feminist metaphysical worldview.

It would be a mistake to suggest that human femaleness serves as the primary model for the macrocosmic femaleness of the Goddess as nature. Human femaleness is in a sense analogous to properties and processes to be located throughout nature. As Emily Culpepper observed in her analysis of the Goddess feminist model of the Mother, the model has

more than simply an anthropomorphic meaning for many individuals. They see “Mother” as much in the model of seasonal changes, the cycles of plant and animal and human life, cycles of moon, sun and stars, and geological processes as in the reproductive process of human females. They see all such cycles *as metaphorically analogous with each other*, all participating in the interwoven rhythmic pulse of life.⁶²⁵

This is, I suggest, the metaphysical and essentialist understanding of femaleness that is at work within the Goddess feminist movement. There is no fixed essence of femaleness in the human realm. Rather individual women participate in a metaphysical category or principle of femaleness that is exemplified by the Goddess as nature.

Femaleness is open to issues of degree in its particular, microcosmic instantiations. Thus, as noted above, femaleness in the human realm is biologically identified by a number of factors (chromosomes, hormones, reproductive organs etc), not all of which may be present to the same degree in any given human being-in-the-world. But it is arguably proximity to the metaphysical category/principle of femaleness that is theologically significant.

625. Culpepper, ‘Contemporary Goddess Theology,’ p. 55.

Is it possible to define the theological and metaphysical category/principle of femaleness? I have throughout this work repeatedly elucidated theological concepts of female generativity, becoming and transformation, and I believe that it may be possible to formulate an account of femaleness that coheres with these ideas. Briefly stated, I suggest that theological femaleness may be defined as a site of becoming through which other beings are born/birthered; or, to appropriate Christine Battersby, ‘a body that is capable of generating a new body from within its “own” flesh and from “within” the horizons of its “own” space-time.’⁶²⁶ This definition is, I contend, sufficient to incorporate human and other biological forms of life; it may be extended to apply to any form of “organism” that can produce life from within its own being/space-time; and it may plausibly also encompass ecosystems, Gaia and cosmological wholes. One must not become trapped into thinking in terms of ‘like producing like’ by this definition. This metaphysical account of female generativity is far closer to the self-organizing principles that are described in complexity theory. Metaphysical femaleness is a matter/energy system that is capable of generating new forms of being and order from within its own systemic boundaries.

Certain consequences follow from the above metaphysical definition of femaleness that are relevant to a theological account of human nature. First, women may be linked together because of their biological capacity to instantiate the metaphysical category/principle of femaleness; a commonality amongst women may be theologically grounded in the capacity to birth. This identification of women with birthing in no way denies the incalculable number of differences amongst women, and neither does it place coercive pressures upon how women should act within the world.

626. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 6.

Rather, women are similarly positioned because of their relationship to a metaphysical category. As Battersby observes, ‘whether or not a woman is lesbian, infertile, post-menopausal or childless, in modern western culture she will be assigned a subject-position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth.’⁶²⁷ Furthermore, this perspective is supported by Goddess feminists such as Zsuzsanna Budapest and Charlene Spretnak. Thus as Budapest claims

speaking of bringing forth life does not mean that all women must give birth to children. *It is simply a recognition of our connection with all that is female.* The biological destiny that was used against us actually is the basis of our divinity. People come to me and say, “Z., How can you allow biology to become destiny again? You know what they did with that before.” “I’m sorry,” I reply, “we do give birth, *we do issue forth people, just as the Goddess issues forth the universe.* That is a biological connection and manifestation of the Goddess. It is not something I’m going to keep quiet about. It is what women do, we make people.”⁶²⁸

Similarly Spretnak directs attention away from social constructionist critiques of the categories of “women” and “womanhood” towards what she terms the elemental capacities of female embodiment. Her claim is that,

[n]o matter what kinds of “social production” shape gender within a culture, the physicality of the female body with its elemental capabilities (to grow people of either sex from one’s flesh, to bleed in rhythm with the moon, to transform food into milk for infants) is a core reality to which culture *responds*, usually with considerable elaboration, in negative or positive ways.⁶²⁹

For each of these feminists (Battersby, Budapest and Spretnak), the capacity to birth is identified as something to which culture and society responds rather than creates.

Second, femaleness may be instantiated differently within as well as between different forms of life. Thus, human biological females may not participate in the

627. Ibid., p. 16.

628. Budapest, ‘Self-Blessing Ritual’ in *Womanspirit Rising*, p. 271, emphasis mine.

629. Spretnak, *States of Grace*, p. 238.

femaleness of the Goddess equally, and their instantiation of the category/principle may change over the course of their lives. Non-human forms of life may instantiate the category of femaleness more closely than human forms of femaleness (thus, one may plausibly claim that a tropical rainforest is a “better” instantiation of the female generativity of the Goddess as nature than an individual human being). Third, human femaleness may be transformed, enhanced or diminished in the future. For example, future developments in reproductive technologies may redefine the meaning and nature of human femaleness; and the processes of evolution may plausibly take humans further away from an instantiation of the metaphysical femaleness of the Goddess, rather than closer.

I note that this account of metaphysical femaleness seemingly obscures the complexity of the female life-cycle delineated in the theological model of the Triple Goddess. However, I would contend that all theological accounts of the life-stages of Maiden, Mother and Crone are typically delineated and positioned by explicit reference to the capacity to birth. Moreover, the metaphysical meaning of the cycle, which is an anthropomorphization of the cycle of Birth-Death-Rebirth, is understood by Goddess feminists to be ultimately generative. The model of the Triple Goddess is subsumed or subordinated in most forms of feminist theology to the model of the Great Mother, the primary theological model of cosmic generativity.

In the remainder of this chapter I examine some of the practical and moral implications of the Goddess feminist understanding of nature as a generative female organism, and consider what humans ought to do if they take Goddess feminist metaphysics seriously.

III MORAL REALISM AND THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

My aim in this part of the chapter is to elucidate how humans, according to the metaphysical worldview held by Goddess feminists, can and ought to act in the world. The theological commentator Melissa Raphael has previously claimed that ‘if the Goddess does not, in some sense, judge moral enormities like sadism and the mass extinction of species through human carelessness and greed, then that god/dess [sic] will become too abstracted from the world to satisfy the feminist nature of the religion.’⁶³⁰ This is a claim that I wish to respond to throughout the latter part of this chapter. An array of ethical, political and religious imperatives emerge directly from a Goddess feminist metaphysical understanding of the world. But the exact sense in which the Goddess can “judge moral enormities” or may be “too abstracted from the world” requires careful elaboration.

The existence of evil and suffering in the world is not a pressing problem for Goddess feminists in the same way that it is for many theists. That is, the existence of evil and suffering in the world does not function theologically as empirical counterevidence against the existence of the Goddess. Unlike theists, who typically identify deity as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent and transcendent being, Goddess feminists encounter no conceptual difficulty in reconciling evil with their understanding of deity. Evil and the Goddess do not mutually exclude one another. The Goddess as nature is all that exists, and anything that may be identified as evil is necessarily an aspect of Her nature.

630. Raphael, ‘Truth in Flux’, p. 209.

It would, however, be a serious mistake to conclude that there is not what may be termed a feminist theological problem of evil. Although Goddess feminists such as Starhawk claim that “good” and “evil” are not concepts that are particularly useful in theology,⁶³¹ it is possible to outline many states of affairs that necessitate a theological response because of their moral content. While the Goddess is not the personal/moral transcendent deity of theistic traditions, and does not “judge” the events of the world from a point of elevated detachment and ontological privilege, there is moral meaning to be located within the body of the Goddess as nature. As with many pantheistic religious worldviews, Goddess feminists can explicate morals, ethics and concepts of good and evil in terms of the way in which reality is constituted. Goddess feminists are little different from many Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists and Native religious peoples in this respect. Ethical concepts and lives can be based on a metaphysical understanding of the world that makes no reference to a personal or transcendent deity.

Pantheism and moral realism

Goddess feminists *qua* pantheists are, I propose, moral realists. In Michael Levine’s words “[t]hey believe it is an objective fact that some kinds of actions are right and others wrong, and what is right and wrong is independent of what any person thinks is right and wrong.”⁶³² Moreover those types of actions that Goddess feminists are most likely to identify as objectively right or wrong are I suggest those that in some sense

631. Starhawk, ‘Roundtable Discussion: If God Is God She Is Not Nice’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1989, p. 106.

632. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 219. Moral realism is not confined to pantheism. As Levine claims, “[p]antheists, like theists, tend to be “moral realists.””

enhance or damage the well-being of the Goddess. The fundamental metaphysical premise of the Goddess feminist worldview is that nature is the living body of the Goddess, and for feminist theologians ethical/moral meaning is derived from this understanding of the world. I have argued in Chapter Two that the organicist nature of the Goddess is synonymous with a pantheist concept of deity as an all-inclusive sacred unity. As pantheists, Goddess feminists do, I suggest, try to ‘discern and live in accordance with the Unity and the kind of value intrinsically associated with it.’⁶³³ Notions of “evil” are not meaningless for Goddess feminists and other pantheists. ‘An “evil” action for a pantheist will be one that works against the Unity. It will be seen as one that is disruptive of the Unity in some way.’⁶³⁴ For Goddess feminists *qua* pantheists, ethical views and the problem of evil are inescapably entwined with their metaphysical view of the world.⁶³⁵

One may reasonably ask at this point how Goddess feminists *qua* pantheists can and ought to organize their ethics and lives in terms of a metaphysical worldview that ‘tries to connect what is morally right and wrong with their own natures, the nature of other things and nature of the divine Unity [i.e. the life of the Goddess].’⁶³⁶ Certain guidelines for a theological ethics can, I suggest, be readily discerned in the writings of a number of Goddess feminists. Carol Christ, for example, begins her theological account of ethics with the metaphysical point that ‘moral decision making occurs within a world that is constantly changing and where all interests cannot be

633. Ibid., pp. 235-236. For Goddess feminists the pantheist Unity is not an ‘it’ but is sexed as female, the Goddess as nature: Goddess/Nature.

634. Ibid, p. 209.

635. Ibid., p. 215

636. Ibid., p. 226.

harmonized'.⁶³⁷ Her ethical concerns emerge directly from the theological and metaphysical view of the world as constantly changing and in flux. Moral action, she claims, 'always takes place within the context of the "ambiguity" of life.'⁶³⁸ This point then leads her to suggest that there can be no fixed ethical principles and universal rules, and seemingly denies the possibility that moral decisions can be objectively right and wrong. This, however, misses Christ's point. Christ remains a moral realist in the sense that ethics are to 'discovered within the web of life.'⁶³⁹ One must adapt one's ethical life to the way reality most fundamentally is (i.e. 'the situations in which we live').⁶⁴⁰ She expresses uncertainty about formulating principles that may apply to all situations, but claims that ethical decision making must respond to nature and be judged right or wrong in terms of its effect upon the web of life. Instead of delineating fixed ethical principles, she proposes a number of ethical "touchstones" that may be adapted for use in different contexts and that will bring one into a closer/better relationship with the moral and metaphysical character of nature. Thus, her first touchstone, to nurture life, is she claims, a way 'to manifest the power of the Goddess as the nurturer of life.'⁶⁴¹ By nurturing life, one can enhance the well-being of the Goddess as nature and participate in a morally good act.

In a similar manner to Christ, Starhawk grounds her theological ethics firmly in her understanding of divine immanence and her conviction that the ongoing life of nature is the only "good" that one can safely think about and act upon. She proposes an ethics of integrity wherein moral choices are 'based on internal consistency and

637. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 166.

638. Ibid.

639. Ibid.

640. Ibid.

inherent consequences. They are not based on absolutes imposed upon chaotic nature, but upon the ordering principles inherent in nature.⁶⁴² Her ethical vision has impelled a number of projects of eco-political activism, including several well-documented anti-nuclear campaigns that have been directly informed by an ecological concept of the Goddess as nature. Ecological health, integrity and well-being are, for Starhawk, synonymous with the well-being of the Goddess as nature. In so far as one lives with an ecological consciousness, and promotes the ecological health, integrity and flourishing of nature, one may theologially be said to be living a morally good life.

Nearly all Goddess feminists would agree with the above points, and it is reasonable to interpret most theological/metaphysical understandings of the ecological web of life as providing a basis for ethical living. Just as ‘[l]iving an ethical life and a “good” (i.e. valuable) life for the pantheist means, in part, living a life in accordance with the way in which ultimate reality is constituted’,⁶⁴³ for the Goddess feminist, conceiving nature as a divine, intimately interconnected, ecological and female organism, carries with it ethical duties and a sense of moral direction. Thus, for example, whatever damages and tears the connections of the ecological web of life, can, theologially, be said to be ‘absolutely morally wrong.’⁶⁴⁴

It is important at this point to reaffirm the moral status of the Goddess. As the nonpersonal organic whole of nature, it is inconsistent and incoherent for Goddess feminists to claim that the Goddess intends particular states of affairs and is, therefore, morally accountable for those states of affairs. Rather the Goddess encompasses all

641. Ibid., p. 167.

642. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 35.

643. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 238.

644. Raphael, *Introducing Theology*, p. 113.

the states of nature; the sum total of human suffering may be explicated in terms of the natural processes and cycles of the Goddess; the Goddess is both “creative and destructive,” “light and dark,” “life and death”; and, to all theological intents and purposes, the Goddess is amoral.

For most Goddess feminists, though, the personal amorality of the Goddess is a theological irrelevance. It is the organicism of the Goddess that conveys moral meaning to human and non-human nature(s) alike. By valuing life and understanding that the whole of nature is alive – a living generative female organism – moral meaning and purpose can be delineated *within* nature. For any living organism it is possible to speak positively in terms of health, integrity, well-being and flourishing (as well as negatively in terms of illness, suffering and degradation), and this is equally true of the Goddess as nature. When Goddess feminists, such as Starhawk, Charlene Spretnak and Carol Christ conjoin ecological theories with theological narratives, it is because they are concerned with promoting the health of the living organic whole: Goddess/Nature. In this organicist sense of health, it is possible to define a theological understanding of evil as damage to the body of the Goddess. Evil is anything that severely inhibits the flourishing of the Goddess as nature.

Patriarchy and ecological degradation

There are two clear senses in which Goddess feminists understand the well-being of the Goddess as nature to be damaged and diminished within the world today: patriarchy and ecological degradation. Most Goddess feminists are able to describe various ways in which patriarchy damages the world through its destructive ideologies

and practices (e.g. sexism, militarism, a pervasive 'logic of domination' and capitalist growth for its own sake) and they are also able to provide a swift diagnosis of the current state of the environment and ecosystem. Significantly, though, they are also likely to identify patriarchy as the primary causal agency behind the latter form of evil (ecological degradation), while leaving the causal history of patriarchy largely untheorized. Ecological problems would be greatly diminished with the dissolution of patriarchy. Patriarchy is the primary cause of evil in the world. But the ways by which the social/human evils of patriarchy relate to the health of the web of life are often theologically obscure.

All Goddess feminists would acknowledge that suffering, loss and death are, to some extent, inevitable consequences of the nature of life, but certain forms of suffering and loss are avoidable, extreme and evil. It is, therefore, theologically necessary to measure suffering/loss against the health and well-being of the whole of nature. As Starhawk claims of her ethic, while recognizing 'that life feeds on life and that we must kill in order to survive, life is never taken needlessly, never squandered or wasted. Serving the life force means working to preserve the diversity of natural life, to prevent the poisoning of the environment and the destruction of species.'⁶⁴⁵ From this theological perspective, it can be relatively easy to discern evil in the mass extinction of species and the pollution of ecosystems, but considerably less easy to identify evil in sexual abuse or gender inequalities in wage levels. That is, it is theologically difficult to relate the well-being of metaphysical/ecological wholes to the micro-political realities of patriarchal society. Patriarchy remains difficult for

645. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p.26.

Goddess feminists to capture and theorize by recourse to their, usually implicit, metaphysical principles.

In terms of philosophical consistency it is possible for Goddess feminists to pursue notions of ecological health and well-being down from the macrocosmic level, past the level of Gaia and large ecosystems, down to the level of human bodies, psychology, neurology, and lower if necessary. This is arguably the metaphysically coherent way of theorizing the theological problem of “evil” that is patriarchy. However, there has been little theological uptake, as yet, in drawing the disparate aspects of the life of the Goddess as nature into a coherent whole. There has been a considerable amount of spiritual feminist literature written that is explicitly concerned with healing the female body, mind and spirit, and reclaiming microcosmic human femaleness from damaging patriarchal social practices. But these existentially useful texts rarely attempt to make connections between their somatic/psychological/spiritual advice and the macrocosmic realm of the Goddess as nature; such connections only tend to be identified by theological commentators within the academic study of religion.⁶⁴⁶

The Goddess feminist “good life”

A number of plausible, if speculative, ideas about the direction that a Goddess feminist ethic may take in the future can, I contend, be derived from the metaphysical worldview in this work. I have previously argued that for Goddess feminists, ethics and metaphysics are mutually entwined with one another; and for theologians such as

646. Cf. the works of Raphael and, specifically, *Theology and Embodiment*.

Starhawk '[m]etaphysics is measured with ethics.'⁶⁴⁷ However, this is not to suggest that ethics in any sense precedes metaphysics. Rather ethics and metaphysics converge with one another in theology: the theological "good" informs the theological "true" and vice versa. Theological metaphysics have an ethical meaning and an axiological dimension.

It is possible to claim that there is a metaphysical notion of the "good life" at work within Goddess feminism. For Goddess feminists *qua* pantheists '[t]he nature of Unity [i.e. Goddess/Nature] is the metaphysical basis for a regulative ideal of how one should live. One lives "happily" to the extent one pursues and, to some extent, achieves the ideal.'⁶⁴⁸ Moreover, despite their resistance to teleology, it is possible for Goddess feminists to link these ideas to a *telos* or goal in life. Pursuing an ethical life may, for the Goddess feminist, have some discrete "higher" end within the body of the Goddess as nature. It is these ideas that I wish to explore below.

I have already commented at length on the Goddess feminist engagement with ecological thought, and the theological equation of ecological health with the well-being of the Goddess, and this is not a line of enquiry that I intend to explicate further at this point. Goddess feminists quite simply associate ecological living with the conduct of a good life. What I do wish to consider, however, is what this line of theological reasoning means when pushed outwards towards complete coherence. If it is an ethical imperative to repair the web of life, because the health of nature is important/valuable, it is arguably also an ethical imperative to increase the health of the web further. Rather than "simply" repairing and maintaining the health of

647. Salomonsen, 'Feminist Witchcraft and Holy Hermeneutics', p. 149.

648. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 239.

ecosystems (a monumental task in and of itself), should not humans actively promote ecological flourishing? If the Goddess as nature “desires” to ‘manifest life ever more fully in the world’,⁶⁴⁹ proliferates rather than discriminates,⁶⁵⁰ ‘loves diversity’ and is life continually attempting to ‘reproduce itself, diversify, evolve, and breed more life’,⁶⁵¹ what does it mean for humans to participate positively and proactively in these processes?

Most Goddess feminists readily accept, as a logical consequence of their organicist/pantheist understanding of the Goddess, that the Goddess can be enriched or diminished by human activity.⁶⁵² Thus, commenting on the mutually empowering relationship that exists between women and the Goddess, the British Goddess feminist Asphodel Long claims that ‘[i]n raising Her we raise ourselves; in raising ourselves we raise Her’,⁶⁵³ while Starhawk claims that ‘[t]he Goddess is immanent, but she needs human help to realize her fullest beauty.’⁶⁵⁴ Ethically, religiously and practically, though, these points can be highly demanding. If the ethical, metaphysical and religious convictions of Goddess feminists are drawn towards ultimate coherence, a sweeping vision of human purpose can be delineated. Unlike most theistic religions, within whose frameworks humans endeavour to organize their lives so that they cohere with the morality of a deity whose being/nature exists independently of them, for Goddess feminists human lives participate directly within the life of the divine.

649. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 106.

650. Starhawk, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, p. 207.

651. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

652. Cf. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 348: ‘Pantheists do not create the divine Unity simply by believing in it but they may claim to contribute to it. In bringing about the happiness and accord that are their objectives, the pantheist lessens discord that is anti-thetical to the Unity.’

653. Long, ‘The Goddess Movement in Britain Today’, p. 17.

654. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 36.

Humans can obviously choose to ignore this existential fact, or respond to it in a number of negative or ambivalent ways, but, if they respond positively, they can be committed to the ongoing enhancement and enrichment of the divine.

The fulfillment of a feminist theological good life does, I contend, entail the promotion of biodiversity and the proliferation of life, and it does this specifically because these things enhance and enrich the being/becoming of the Goddess. These religious and existential projects must, admittedly, begin and proceed slowly, because of the inevitable risks of causing further damage to the web of life. As Charlene Spretnak claims, ‘our knowledge of the intricacies of Gaian life is so far from complete that we should make far-reaching changes in the eco-systems only with great caution.’⁶⁵⁵ But the projects are, nonetheless, implied in the Goddess feminist worldview. The movement from the idea that the life of the Goddess *is* valuable and *can* be improved, to the conclusion that the life of the Goddess *ought* to be improved, is relatively easy to make and is also assumed in most forms of feminist theology.⁶⁵⁶ Whether this understanding of the Goddess will motivate and garner support amongst humans is a separate issue. Arguably, though, any theological endeavour to promote and enhance the growth of life and the being of nature is not too ‘abstract’ to satisfy the needs of a feminist religion.⁶⁵⁷

655 Spretnak, *States of Grace*, p. 110.

656. It is a complex question as to whether the move from *is* to *ought* can be made with any philosophical confidence, but, as with several ecological philosophies, Goddess feminists are likely to conclude that ‘an *ought* is not so much derived from an *is* as discovered simultaneously with it’, Holmes Rolston III, ‘Environmental Ethics: Values in and Duties to the Natural World’ in Earl R. Winkler and Jerrold R. Coombs (eds), *Applied Ethics: A Reader* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 292.

657 Raphael, ‘Truth in Flux’, p. 209.

The inner logic of the feminist theological worldview necessarily extends beyond the horizons of the Gaian system to encompass the living cosmic whole. Humans must, as and when they are able, also attend to the support and flourishing of greater communities/wholes than themselves, of which the organic whole of the Goddess as nature is the greatest. To conceive the Universe as alive is also to acknowledge that the health of the Universe is open to improvement or damage. At this point we might appear to be entering the realms of science fiction, with the implication that there may be a Goddess feminist ethical imperative to promote and nurture the growth of life on other worlds and to participate in the development and formation of life-supporting cosmological wholes. However, this proposal is consistent with the Goddess feminist understanding of the Universe as the living generative body of the Goddess. Our knowledge of the life processes and ecosystems of the Earth is currently very limited, and it is only within the realms of the more speculative/theoretical sciences that the topics of a living Universe and the bio- and terraforming of other worlds are discussed; but the trajectory of Goddess feminist metaphysical/ethical thought leads humanity in the direction of practices of cosmic nurturing and bio-proliferation. For theists, the trajectory of human life typically points *beyond* this world to a state of completion/judgement in a postmortem existence. That is, salvation is otherworldly and post-natural. For Goddess feminists *qua* pantheists, though, any notion of human completion or salvation takes place *within* the world and is inherently natural. In Levine's words, for the pantheist 'salvation is not something one achieves or fails to achieve *in toto*.'⁶⁵⁸ Salvation is

658. Levine, *Pantheism*, p. 255.

entwined with the continuing well-being of the Unity, or, in Goddess feminist terms, Goddess/Nature.

One can also interpret a Goddess feminist ethical imperative to nurture life in terms of the development and pursuit of anti-entropic projects. I explained in the previous chapter how entropy may be theologially interpreted as the force of nature that marks the death and mortality of the Goddess; while the emergence of systemic complexity and life indicates how entropy may be resisted on a local level. It is consistent with these scientific and theologial ideas to suggest that the “desire” of the Goddess as nature to create life and proliferate is coextensive with a desire to resist entropy and death. That is, as the Goddess as nature promotes bio-diversification and increasing systemic complexity, entropy and the heat death of the Universe are delayed. And, as the process philosopher Bernard Loomer has suggested, evil itself may be construed as entropic; the creative/generative advance of the cosmos must always overcome the inertia of evil/entropy; evil moves in the direction of creating a closed system.⁶⁵⁹ For Goddess feminists, the future goal of the human race may be to resist entropy and, therefore, lengthen the life-span and generativity of the Goddess as nature.

A feminist theologial concept of the “good life” is, it must be stressed, non-anthropocentric in character. By directing ethical/metaphysical attention towards wholes greater than oneself, and ultimately that whole of which no greater can be conceived, that is, the Goddess, the Goddess feminist worldview relates to other forms of life in a manner that does not actively privilege human interests. This is not the same as the egalitarian respect for all forms of life expressed by the Buddhist or Jain,

but is more of a respect for life based upon eco-systemic importance and value.⁶⁶⁰ Value is attributed to different forms of life based on their contribution to the health of the ecological whole. The life of a section of woodland, for example, is likely to be theologically valued more highly than that of an individual human.

At this point diversity emerges as a vitally important ethical/metaphysical principle for theologians. Diversity is theologically connected with the systemic health of ecological wholes, and diversification is something that is actively encouraged, both in the human and non-human realms, by Goddess feminists.⁶⁶¹ As Starhawk claims, '[t]he ethics of immanence encourage diversity rather than sameness in human endeavours, and within the biological community. Diversity can even be used as a standard of judgement, leading us, perhaps, to favour a salt marsh over a subdivision, or a multitude of small businesses over the interests of a few corporations.'⁶⁶² As a standard of judgement, though, diversity can also have very far-reaching repercussions.

Critically, for Goddess feminists, valuing diversity can imply that the increasing complexity of the world is an inherent good; and it may also be necessary to accept that it is an ethical obligation to promote diversification and complexity in human and nonhuman relations. When the cyberfeminist Donna Haraway claims that ours is a time to take '*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries' and '*responsibility* in their construction',⁶⁶³ she comes remarkably close to articulating a theological

659. Loomer, 'The Size of God', pp. 46-47.

660. See, for example, Starhawk's claim that she has no compunction against killing slugs in her garden because they are not indigenous to the systemic health of the garden.

661. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 152-153.

662. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 38. Cf. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 219

663. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 150.

imperative to ‘diversify, evolve, and breed more life.’⁶⁶⁴ It is arguably an ethical/metaphysical imperative for humans to embrace and proactively participate in the cosmic/divine processes of becoming, evolution, diversification, generativity and proliferation. As Sjöo and Mor claim, ‘[i]f we do not want to die, then we must evolve – and that means we must dance, *expand exponentially* with the dancing cosmos.’⁶⁶⁵ Or, as Charlene Spretnak claims, the common threads of Goddess feminism, speak of ‘the desire to honor the Earthbody and one’s personal body via an *ongoing birthing process of cosmological unfolding* – the intention to articulate as deeply and fully one’s ontological potential as an embodied Earthbeing, a weaver of the cosmic web.’⁶⁶⁶ In each of the theological examples, the purpose of life within the cosmos is explained in terms of growth, expansion and continuous generative activity.

The politics of chaos and interconnection

Although one can discern a number of ethical imperatives and duties within a Goddess feminist metaphysic, notably imperatives or duties to diversify, nurture life and promote the systemic health of the Goddess as nature, the degree to which the world can be transformed by intentional human activity is also contingent upon the fundamental nature of reality. That is, politics too is informed by or grounded in metaphysics. It is important, therefore, to elucidate how human and particularly feminist political action is defined by a Goddess feminist metaphysic. What are the limits of the human ability to transform the world given the metaphysic outlined in this thesis? What types of human actions and organizations are politically effective in

664. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 244.

665. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 430, emphasis mine.

bringing about social and ecological change? Can human society be permanently improved by collective human action based on ethical principles? These are some of the questions that are answered below.

First, it is important to note that for Goddess feminists, politics takes place within a world that is conceived as always changing, open-ended and subject to complex processes of transformation. Nothing, except for certain fundamental metaphysical principles (e.g. the Birth-Death-Rebirth cycle), is fixed within the Goddess feminist worldview. Consequently, a Goddess feminist understanding of politics cannot accommodate a fixed system of justice or a utopian end-point to political action. All political achievements must be acknowledged as temporary and transitory. There is no guarantee that political change is incrementally and steadily progressing towards a better world, and it is conceptually inappropriate to conceive of any future social/ecological arrangement as being everlasting (a point that is, in part, supported by the theological understanding of the fall of ancient matriarchal societies and the rise of patriarchy).

Second, the Goddess feminist understanding of politics in an everchanging world can be clarified further if attention is directed towards the theological and metaphysical meaning of chaos and interconnection. The world is, for Goddess feminists, an intimately interconnected place that is shaped by processes that are impossible to predict beyond anything but the short-term. Moreover, it is a truism for Goddess feminists that 'the personal is political is spiritual' because everything within nature is metaphysically understood to be connected to everything else. The degree to which a small event in one realm of life may effect events in spatially and/or

666. Spretnak, *States of Grace*, pp. 134-135, emphasis mine.

temporally distant realms may be relatively minor, epistemically obscure, or wholly mysterious. But it is theologically accepted that these apparently disconnected events can exert a far-reaching influence upon one another. The organic interconnectivity and chaotic unpredictability of the Goddess as nature is such that all forms of human action are potentially politically, as well as spiritually, significant and meaningful. As Jane Caputi claims, living in a world understood as chaotic and intimately interconnected

means being in a world in which everything coexists in a delicate, exquisite, butterflylike balance. In this world, the commonplace brims with meaning, everything is equally sacred, every moment is portentous, everything is alive, and everything speaks. It is a world where “empty space” is respected – for, of course, no space is empty. It is a world where humans do not try to control nature(s), but communicate with them through ritual and thereby become fateful accomplices in divine processes – in cosmic/chaotic natures.⁶⁶⁷

Politics is for Goddess feminists a form of action that necessarily encompasses and effects the whole of nature because everything is metaphysically and theologically understood as participating equally in the life processes of the Goddess as nature.

Third, the relationship between politics and Goddess feminist metaphysics can be productively explained by recourse to the theories of chaos and complexity delineated in the previous chapter.⁶⁶⁸ In Melissa Raphael’s words, by ‘using the language of chaos theory, it is possible to deconstruct patriarchal social organization as another sort of complex dynamic system that is subject to a variety of unpredictable fluctuations, one of which is the turbulence of feminist reaction.’⁶⁶⁹ That is, by

667. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, p. 285.

668. Three feminist theorists have recently explored the value of thinking of patriarchal society in terms of an open-system that is shaped by chaos/complexity: Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, pp. 275-291; Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, pp. 245-255; Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, pp. 56-57.

669. Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, p. 247.

interpreting social and political organization in terms of the metaphysics of chaos, complexity and dissipative/open systems, it is possible to theorize how patriarchy has maintained itself for centuries, but is also open to radical political transformation in the present and future. The models of systemic organization that have emerged from chaos and complexity theory, models that cohere closely with Goddess feminism's metaphysical worldview, highlight that the nature of interconnectivity in the world is such that relatively minor events in one domain (e.g. the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Brazil) can be sufficient to trigger major events elsewhere (e.g. a tornado in Texas). In a world understood chaotically, small scale events can push any system that is sufficiently far from equilibrium towards a rapid and wide-ranging transformation. As the feminist philosopher Christine Battersby claims,

[a]pplying insights from the new topologies [of chaos and complexity] allows us to see how patriarchy might itself be inherently unstable as a system, and hence how the slight flapping of the wings of a feminist butterfly might – metaphorically – provide the trigger that would enable it to flip over into a state of radical change.⁶⁷⁰

Crucially for Goddess feminists, understanding the world as profoundly interconnected and subject to chaotic processes of change also carries with it the implication that apparently non-political religious/spiritual practices and rituals can have a significant part to play in the political transformation of the world. In Raphael's words, Goddess feminism's "menstrual" behaviours, rituals, direct actions, magical visualizations' and many seemingly '[p]olitically insignificant rituals and revisions on the alternative fringe may be minutely turbulent but could act upon the global consciousness in an unpredictable and far-reaching manner.'⁶⁷¹ The dissolution

670. Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, pp. 56-57.

671. Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, pp. 248, 249.

of patriarchy and the radical re-organization of society may arguably be premised upon a ‘feminist butterfly effect’ contributing its chaotic turbulence to the instabilities of the current social system. Jane Caputi, who was probably the first spiritual feminist to identify affinities between chaos theory and religious feminist activism, calls for women to adopt and ‘develop chaotic political strategies’ in order to challenge patriarchy.⁶⁷² Women, she claims, must aid in stirring ‘the Crone’s turbulent cauldron’ if new existential and political possibilities are to be actualized in the world. According to the metaphysical worldview held by Goddess feminists, a broad range of activities and chaotic strategies may contribute to the political transformation of the world, including the ritualistic and religious, the spiritual and magical, the personal and bodily. It is to a consideration of some of these practices that we turn in the final section of this chapter.

Feminist theology and the patriarchal ‘good’

One troubling point that I will conclude this section with, is the possibility that patriarchy, from the perspective of a Goddess feminist metaphysic, may, in certain respects, constitute a theological ‘good.’ For example, the patriarchal social order may be read from its earliest beginnings as increasing the complexity and diversity of the world. Patriarchal migrations and invasions can be understood to have increased and promoted human diversity. Patriarchal industrialization and technological innovation, as it has emerged through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has introduced unparalleled levels of complexity and connectivity into the world. Many new substances and energies have been formed by the patriarchal sciences. The number of

672. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, p. 283.

potentially “life-forming,” anti-entropic, chaotic instabilities in the world have increased, rather than decreased. There certainly remain plenty of reasons to argue why patriarchy is morally reprehensible and evil, but the theological calculus of weighing the patriarchal damage wrought to women and the world against any possible good may not be straightforward if one takes account of a Goddess feminist metaphysical understanding of the world. Plausibly, patriarchy may be viewed as a painful but important transitional evolutionary stage in the life of Gaia; or it could be a dead-end, in the broadest metaphysical sense, as the Gaian system moves towards becoming a closed system, a dead world.

In order to be able to reflect more fully on theological accounts of well-being in the human realm, it is necessary to attend to the theological understanding of epistemology and, specifically, its account of bodily and metaphysical pleasure, since for Goddess feminists, erotic existential states of pleasure and ecstasy have a profound metaphysical significance.

IV THE EROTIC/ECSTATIC: CARNAL KNOWING AND SENSUAL SOLIDARITIES

Erotic pleasure and states of ecstasy are powerful and recurrent themes in theological discourse. Most Goddess feminist texts give some space to addressing these issues; and the erotic and the ecstatic can be understood to directly inform a feminist theological understanding of ethical human participation in the life of the Goddess as nature. Reasons for the theological focus upon the erotic/ecstatic can plausibly be linked with the social, environmental and emotional effects of patriarchy, and, specifically, the deep psychological damage that phallogocentric structures generate and

perpetuate. That is, in a patriarchal society that systematically damages people, places and emotions, within an environment that does not actively promote the well-being and flourishing of the Goddess as nature, Goddess feminists often contend that the ‘true’ power of the erotic has been lost. What was once a source of mutual joy, empowerment, and a critical guide to ethical participation in the web of life, has been contained, suppressed, and channeled into such masculinist normative structures as the Freudian libidinal economy, heterosexual genital activity, the institutionally mediated pornographic imagination and the aesthetico-political ideologies of female beauty. As Carol Christ claims, ‘[b]ecause we are cut off from the erotic in our daily lives, many identify the erotic primarily with spontaneous sexual expression. But the power of the erotic can be felt in swimming in the sea, watching the sun set, laughing with friends, holding a child, petting a cat, painting a wall, cooking a meal, in any job done well.’⁶⁷³

Goddess feminists, with varying degrees of emphasis, have argued that reclaiming a more thoroughly open-ended, creative and generative (but not necessarily reproductive) form of the erotic is an essential part of any feminist project to heal the web of life. Moreover, Goddess feminists are attempting to articulate a bodily epistemology that directly connects what is ethically/metaphysically “good” for the Goddess as nature with an experiential state of being-in-the-world – a theological project that also encompasses affirming a more empowering form of human sexuality,

673. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 147. Christ allies her understanding of the erotic directly with that of the womanist poet and writer Audre Lorde. She observes that, ‘[a]ccording to Lorde, we can experience the power of the erotic in sexual passion as well as in an “physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual” exchange. It is “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire,” and “a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing”’, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 147-148. Cf. Audre Lorde, ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power’ in Plaskow and Christ (eds), *Weaving the Visions*.

liberating women's pleasure (or *jouissance*), and freeing ecstasy (sexual and religious) from the straightjacket of patriarchal socialization.

The theological "will to ecstasy"

In a metaphysical worldview in which everything is interconnected, where being-in-the-world is in fact becoming-in-relation-to-the-world, and where embodiment is the primary existential given, the erotic/ecstatic dimension of life is theologically apprehended to be of the deepest spiritual and metaphysical significance. Returning to the themes of the previous section, pertaining to bio-diversification, cosmological unfolding, evolution and the proliferation of life, one can discern an underlying metaphysic of ecstasy to be at work; or, more revealingly, one can discern the expression of a radical "will to ecstasy."⁶⁷⁴ As Sjöo and Mor affirm, ecstasy 'is our original state of being. It is the conscious expansion of the universe into a multitude of interconnected dimensions.'⁶⁷⁵ Ecstasy is, for most Goddess feminists, the root experience of living in harmony with the Goddess, '[e]cstasy is the only way through which the soul can lose itself in communion with her.'⁶⁷⁶ When one relates

674. The "will to ecstasy" has been associated with continental philosophers, such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and may also be located in the postmodern a/theology of Mark Taylor. Interestingly, Edith Wyschogrod identifies in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari a 'single-minded quest for ecstasy by way of a hidden monism' - a metaphysical monism that is concealed beneath a philosophically sophisticated 'differential and pluralistic ... version of the real.' Edith Wyschogrod, 'Saintliness and Some Aporias of Postmodernism' in G. Ward, (ed.) *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 342. It is an open, but nonetheless provocative, question, as to what degree the metaphysical worldview of Goddess feminism parallels, converges with, or mimetically duplicates, this form of postmodern theorizing. It is notable that issues of antinomianism, immanence, ecstasy, and monism, circulate at the places where continental (postmodern) philosophy and theology interact, and interesting that feminist theology has been engaging with these issues for some time (albeit, in a different manner to that of masculinist philosophies and theologies).

675. Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 429.

676. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

appropriately with the Goddess as nature, one may experience ecstasy (or a sensation of the erotic). The primary, if not only, barrier that prevents accessing and realizing this theologically desirable and transformational state of physical/religious communion is patriarchy (in all of its disparate forms), and it is at this point that the metaphysical thinking of such Goddess feminists as Sjöö and Mor converges with that of the radical feminist philosopher Mary Daly; it is only their use of language that differs.

In Daly's metaphysical framework it is the patriarchal foreground, the social/cultural realm in which most humans (and all men) live out their existence, that constitutes the primary barrier preventing communion with the Goddess. The metaphysical Background, in contrast, is the realm where communion with the Goddess as nature is fully realized, where in Sjöö and Mor's words 'ecstasy is the inevitable expression of being a conscious form, or living cell, in a cosmic energy sea'.⁶⁷⁷ In Daly's radical feminist philosophy this is 'the Realm of Wild Reality; the Homeland of women's Selves and of all other Others; the Time/Space where auras of plants, planets, stars, animals, and all Other animate beings connect'.⁶⁷⁸ It is a realm that is at once psychological in nature, referring to an expanded experience/perception of reality, and also ontological, referring to the underlying nature of reality, an ethical/metaphysical mode of being-in-the-world. In both of these cases, though, it is femaleness that is most closely associated with the biophilic state of erotic/ecstatic existence. It is women, or at least women who are attuned and open to the Goddess,

677. Ibid., p. 429.

678. Daly, *Outercourse*, p. 1.

who can most readily access this 'original state of being' (Sjöö/Mor) or 'Wild Reality' (Daly).

For theologians, such as Daly, Sjöö and Mor, it is a female mode of being-in-the-world that is epistemically best able to enter into an erotic/ecstatic communion or relationship with Goddess/Nature. Both Sjöö and Mor, for example, draw on neurological evidence to emphasize the greater erotic/ecstatic capacities of women *qua* biological females,⁶⁷⁹ in comparison with the capacities of men *qua* biological males, and conclude that the first religions of the world were founded on the special ability of women to enter into mystical, spiritual and shamanic communion with the cosmos.⁶⁸⁰ They claim that '[i]t is the human female who was designed by evolution itself as the *link* between sexuality and spirit, between biological energy and cosmic soul.'⁶⁸¹ These points, though, do not assume a fixed essential femaleness that does not change. Rather, as I noted in my earlier consideration of theological accounts of human nature, femaleness may be understood in terms of its resemblance to a metaphysical category/principle. The human female instantiation of the metaphysical category of femaleness permits variations of degree, and as Sjöö and Mor claim, it was the evolutionary process that brought human females to this point of epistemic privilege. Human males may bear a degree of resemblance to theological femaleness,⁶⁸² not all human females may participate in theological femaleness equally, and evolution may arguably distance the human species from theological femaleness in the future.

679. Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 53.

680. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

681. *Ibid.*, p. 429.

In modern societies the human capacity to experience the erotic/ecstatic, although patriarchally suppressed and distorted, may be theologically identified as the 'Call of the Wild'⁶⁸³ or perhaps as the awareness of one's being 'surrounded by a great matrix of love'.⁶⁸⁴ In each of these cases the erotic/ecstatic is understood to function as an epistemic bridge between the sacred/natural and patriarchally profane realities; it is an experiential state that can reveal and draw one into a closer relationship with the way in which reality is most fundamentally constituted. While current philosophical and social theoretical trends, notably those falling under the umbrella term 'postmodern', suggest that the human condition is fundamentally fragmented and that all knowledge is discursive, the theological focus on the erotic/ecstatic implies that there is an underlying pre-discursive unity to both the human condition and the cosmos. The theological focus on the erotic/ecstatic can be understood to support the view that there is an ecological notion of unity in diversity.

In many respects Goddess feminists are fundamentally opposed to what they perceive as the nihilistic tendencies and linguistic/discursive concerns of deconstructive postmodern theories and practices.⁶⁸⁵ Despite the fact that Goddess feminism possesses many characteristics and features that may be identified as postmodern,⁶⁸⁶ most Goddess feminists affirm the existence of an extra or pre-discursive reality that is completely alien to deconstructive postmodernism. And

682. As Jane Caputi claims, males are 'changed females but females nonetheless'. Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons & Crones*, p. 277.

683. See Daly's corpus of writings and Melissa Raphael's 'Thealogy, Redemption and the Call of the Wild', *Feminist Theology*, no. 15, pp. 55-72.

684. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 107.

685. For a sustained critique of deconstructive postmodernism from a Goddess feminist perspective, see Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace*.

686. For a discussion of this topic see Melissa Raphael 'Truth in Flux'.

while Goddess feminists also claim that processes of becoming, change/flux and diversification, are inescapable aspects of the human condition, a claim that exhibits close affinities with the postmodern focus upon historicity, context, and difference, they also ground these processes in the unified whole of the Goddess as nature. For the deconstructive postmodernist there is nothing that can be known outside of discourse (or the text), and reality is understood as a social/cultural construct, a relative human concept that varies from place to place and from time to time. For the theologian, by contrast, there *is* a pre-discursive reality that may be experienced directly in erotic and ecstatic states of consciousness. As Donna Wilshire claims (drawing upon the writing Sylvia Perera), it is these states or modes of consciousness that may be most fully apprehended in women's rituals and women's bodies, that put one in touch with 'the affect-laden, magic dimension and archaic depths that are embodied, ecstatic, and transformative; these depths are pre-verbal, often pre-image, capable of taking us over and shaking us to the core.'⁶⁸⁷ In theology pre-verbal, pre-imaginal and pre-discursive experiences are central to an account of the human condition, while in deconstructive postmodernism they have little or no place. As Charlene Spretnak summarizes,

there is no room in this rigidly language-based theory of human existence for all the kinds of experiences that are not "repressed" into total denial simply because they do not fit well into our interior monologue of language when we attempt to label them or reflect on them – a child's quirky magical perception of the world; spiritual experience; the orgasmic state; substance-induced altered states of consciousness; the artistic process; and *feelings*.⁶⁸⁸

The postmodern account of the human condition, at least in its deconstructive forms, grants discourse dominion over reality (to the extent that discourse constructs, defines,

687. Wilshire, *Virgin, Mother, Crone*, p. 132.

mediates and/or creates reality). Theology, in contrast, reflects upon and reveres a unified, non-discursive reality with which humans interact and from which they are inseparable. Significantly, it is through the erotic and the ecstatic that the epistemological and the metaphysical converge in Goddess feminism.

Carnal and sensual epistemologies

The theological focus upon the erotic/ecstatic and the pre-discursive can be understood to constitute a return to what Margaret Miles has termed *carnal knowing*: 'a form of gaining information about the world which is thoroughly embodied and connected to people's senses and sensualities.'⁶⁸⁹ This primarily, although not exclusively, pre-modern form of knowing the world, can, in turn, be contrasted with the modern, and possibly masculinist, form of knowing - *cognitive apprehension*: an orientation wherein knowledge is a wholly mental phenomenon, in which the mind, divorced from the prejudices of the body's passions and senses, provides valid knowledge of the world.⁶⁹⁰ For Goddess feminists, the modern emphasis upon cognitive apprehension, and the postmodern focus upon a universe of potentially unrelated and incommensurable discourses, would be viewed as deeply problematic. Goddess feminists contend that humans are, first and foremost, embodied/natural beings that exist in an inseparable relationship with the rest of nature. The human condition is thoroughly relational and it is only through the recognition and articulation of what

688. Spretnak, *States of Grace*, pp. 234-235.

689. Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling, *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 56. See also, Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

690. Mellor and Shilling, *Re-forming the Body*, p. 24.

this may mean that the world can be healed of the social, ecological and emotional damage wrought by patriarchy. The erotic/ecstatic and carnal (pre-discursive) forms of knowing the world can, despite their being colonized and distorted by patriarchy, serve to reveal what the modern focus upon the mind's ability to abstract and conceptualize and the postmodern focus upon the power of discourse to construct reality has obscured. The erotic/ecstatic can reveal that all aspects of life – bodies, emotions, minds, thoughts and discourses – are meaningfully and morally interconnected. Consequently, for theologians such as Starhawk and Christ, the power of the erotic/ecstatic is of immense epistemic, ethical and existential significance. As Starhawk herself claims,

[t]he erotic can become the bridge that connects feeling with doing; it can infuse our sense of mastery and control with emotion so that it becomes life-serving instead of destructive. In the dialectic of merging and separating, the erotic can confirm our deep oneness with all being. It is the realm in which the spiritual, the political, and the personal come together.⁶⁹¹

Both the erotic and the ecstatic register what may be termed the existential pleasures of becoming-in-relation-to-the-world, and, in turn, may place the individual in contact with a sacred reality that is experienced as both transcendent and immanent. It is in this sense that human sexuality can be theologically understood to have a far broader meaning than heterosexual reproductive relations. The erotic 'dialectic of merging and separating' may take place in many sexual and embodied contexts, but, nonetheless, remains a life-affirming act that is of value to the well-being of the whole.⁶⁹² Whether this sacred whole is referred to as the metaphysical 'Background' (Daly), 'a cosmic energy sea' (Sjöö/Mor), or the 'loving ground of all being' (Christ),

691. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 138.

692. Cf. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 147; Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, pp. 49-50.

the experiences of the erotic/ecstatic serve, as Starhawk notes above, ‘to confirm our deep oneness with all being.’ There is in these experiences, what Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling refer to as, a ‘resurgence of the sacred as a sensually experienced, this-worldly phenomenon.’⁶⁹³ This is a resurgence founded upon the aforementioned return to carnal, distinctively corporeal forms of knowing. But it is also a resurgence connected to shifting patterns of sociality: ‘the realm in which the spiritual, the political, and the personal come together.’⁶⁹⁴ Mellor and Shilling outline forms of sociality that can be expressed in terms of what they refer to as ‘sensual solidarities’, associations that are ‘based on the feelings, emotions and the effervescence which can derive from being with others (as opposed to simply communicating with them in discourse).’⁶⁹⁵ These are thoroughly embodied forms of social relationship; relations that may be theologially interpreted as an affirmation and recognition of a co-nature – a recognition of the oneness of all being – through an erotic/ecstatic, pre-discursive experience of co-presence in the Goddess as nature. Furthermore, associated with the theologial appropriation and re-visioning of the erotic, apparently profane sensual experiences can be understood to connect with a sacred and epistemically transcendent aspect of existence. As Mellor and Shilling observe,

even the most fleeting sensory contacts made in daily life can provide experiences which reveal something beyond the participants. The expressions of sympathy and empathy made between two parents struggling with their babies in a shopping mall, the buying of rounds between friends in a bar, and the sharing of laughter; it is these events which may appear to display an ‘empty nature’, but which can also possess a transcendent character.⁶⁹⁶

693. Mellor and Shilling, *Re-forming the Body*, p. 173.

694. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, p. 138.

695. Mellor and Shilling, *Re-forming the Body*, p. 174.

696. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

This bodily experience of the transcendent coheres closely with the notion of the erotic being cultivated by Goddess feminists. Indeed the so-called transcendent character of many profane or 'ordinary' experiences may serve to reinforce the theological understanding of the human condition as a fundamentally interconnected this-worldly phenomenon, and, affirm the importance of the pre-discursive as a means of knowing and understanding the meaning of the Goddess as nature. One can intuit what Sjöö and Mor's suggestion of a return to harmony, a return to the Goddess, may involve.

There is, at the root of the theological engagement with the erotic/ecstatic a drive towards a perceived authenticity and an ideal moral relationship with the world; an authenticity and relationship distorted by the alienating forces of patriarchal social conditioning. The erotic/ecstatic plausibly moves one beyond a patriarchally conditioned state of alienation from the world into a moral process of becoming-in-relation with the world. The theological embrace of carnal knowing, in turn, may be understood to be a corrective to the social and emotional effects of the modern and postmodern focus upon the mind's ability and discourse, rather than a denial of the value of the mind and discourse *per se*. That is, a return to carnal knowing may be viewed as a necessary pre-condition for a harmonious (i.e. ethically "good") relationship with the Goddess as nature.

CODA

In this thesis I have developed an account of the principal reality-claims implicit in several key Goddess feminist texts and constructively drawn those reality-claims towards coherence within a theological metaphysic. This study was not intended to produce a complete metaphysical theory. However, it has generated a form of systematic theology that tackles a broad array of philosophical questions and proposes solutions to those questions, either by conceptual analysis or by the introduction of conceptual resources that may deliver answers in the future. In agreement with Melissa Raphael I have maintained that ‘conceptual precision in radical religious feminism is not an authoritarian contradiction in terms.’⁶⁹⁷ Highly conceptual language and thought is something that develops in any religious tradition that properly confronts the consequences of its use of metaphors, myths and models. The originality and significance of this study, however, emerges from the fact that very few Goddess feminists, as yet, have chosen to utilize conceptual interpretation and philosophical analysis to articulate and develop their ideas about the nature of the divine.

This thesis is, I propose, a prolegomena to a philosophical theology and provides a range of concepts that may be used in feminist metaphysical theorizing. One may reasonably ask why feminists would want to develop a philosophical theology or a metaphysical theory. But, as I argued in Chapter One, there are important reasons why these endeavours should be actively pursued. First, the attempt

697. Raphael, ‘Monotheism in Contemporary Goddess Religion’, p. 149.

to think about reality with as much coherence as possible can, in Frederick Ferré's words, protect one from 'the oppressions of unchecked partial perspectives and the frustrations of fragmentation in mind and action.' The philosophical attempt to think about the whole of reality, in as coherent a manner as possible, can represent a human longing for wholeness and an 'imperative toward health in mind and action' that is cognate with feminist principles.⁶⁹⁸ Second, conceptual, philosophical and systematic forms of thought are the most effective means by which humans can interpret, explicate and manage the complexity of the world. In the interests of applicability, coherence, self-evaluation and long-term survival, it is arguable that any political, religious or social system needs to be able to occasionally draw upon the types of conceptual language and thought exemplified in philosophy and metaphysics.

I do not expect this work of constructive and philosophical theology to be acceptable to all Goddess feminists. I have, for example, developed a nonpersonal account of the Goddess as the living, generative whole of nature that may be inaccessible or incomprehensible to those Goddess feminists who experience the Goddess as a personal presence in their lives, or who favour conceiving the Goddess through personal models. However, this theology is based on a close reading of the reality-claims made by a number of respected and influential Goddess feminists and develops those claims in a consistent and systematic manner. For those Goddess feminists who might disagree with aspects of my theology, it is, I suggest, important that they take up the tools of conceptual interpretation and criticism and explain precisely how their theology differs from or improves upon this one. If Goddess feminism is to transform the patriarchal status-quo, as most of its adherents want it to,

698. Ferré, *Being and Value*, p. 375.

it is, I contend, vital that there are Goddess feminists who are able to articulate coherent philosophical and metaphysical accounts of deity and the world as an alternative to those deployed by patriarchy.

In this thesis I have taken the recurrent Goddess feminist themes of femaleness, cyclical/spiraling change, generativity, organicism and transformation and demonstrated how those ideas can be developed, in a coherent and comprehensive way, as a metaphysical account of the Goddess as nature: Goddess/Nature. In the future, though, many of the theological models and philosophical ideas introduced and examined in this thesis may be analyzed and developed in far greater detail. Christian, Islamic, Jewish and Hindu philosophies have directed many centuries of critical attention towards elucidating their understandings of the meaning and nature of deity and the world; an ongoing process of analysis and reflection that has encompassed many people's perspectives and produced numerous new religious concepts and practices. It is arguably now time for a Goddess feminist philosophy to begin to elucidate the meaning of a female/feminist deity that is conceived as the organic generative whole of nature; a deity that is radically different to the deities of patriarchy. Many issues and questions need to be addressed. Are prayer and worship, for example, conceptually appropriate activities given the theological concept of deity as the living whole of nature? Does the widespread Goddess feminist practice of magic cohere with a Goddess feminist view of the nature of deity and reality? There is a wealth of theological material awaiting philosophical analysis and elucidation; and this is a task that I would like both to take on personally and also see developed by

others in the future. Philosophical theology is, I contend, an active possibility and a remarkably valuable academic, feminist and religious endeavour.

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