

A STATEMENT OF FEMINIST THEALOGY

by the Rev. Shirley Ann Ranck, Ph.D.

“Women have no past, no history and no religion,” wrote Simone de Beauvoir in 1949.⁷ Today we know that women definitely have a rich past, an illustrious herstory, and a great variety of religious experience. We have been unaware of our female heritage because for many centuries the major world religions have expressed primarily male experience and views of the world and have ignored or suppressed female experience. Women have been here all along, of course, and now that we have women historians, archaeologists, linguists, and theologians, our enormous contributions to human culture and religion are being recognized.

Women within the traditions of Judaism and Christianity are discovering strong biblical women, pointing out biblical passages where the divine is imaged as female, and finding feminist attitudes in the teachings of Jesus. These women are now demanding that the love and justice proclaimed by these traditions be applied to women as well as to men. Women within all the major world religions are challenging the male biases that they feel have distorted the original intent of their religions.

Other women are looking to the pre-patriarchal religions of the ancient world in their search for female roots. Before the advent of the major world religions as we know them, and for a long time after their birth, human beings of many cultures practiced Earth-centered, woman-centered religions for millennia. For many years, (male) archaeologists, anthropologists, and theologians dismissed these religions as primitive, amoral, and of little interest to us. In recent years, however, archaeological and anthropological findings—many made by women who are redefining their fields—have stimulated a new interest in and respect for the earlier religions of humankind. Women have been particularly interested to learn that many of these very ancient religions revolved around a powerful Goddess who was expected to assure the health and prosperity of the people and of the Earth. Only in later patriarchal times did dominating male deities become increasingly important. What would it have been like to grow up in a world where the

divine was imagined to be female?

Some women claim that the Goddess religions of the Ancient Near East and Europe never really died but came down to us in the form of Witchcraft. Witchcraft? Yes! We have been trained to have the utmost contempt for the alleged superstitions and “devil worship” of Witchcraft, but this attitude reflects the patriarchal bias of the religions that took over. There is much evidence to support the theory that ancient religions were deliberately slandered by the Church of Rome as it struggled to gain political power over all aspects of people’s lives.⁸ “Superstition” and “devil worship” are certainly not accurate descriptions of contemporary Earth-based Witchcraft. Women are rediscovering and seriously studying the centuries-old female lore of magic and the Goddess. Others are exploring the indigenous religions of Africa, Asia, and the Americas and finding the wealth of woman-honoring and Earth-honoring mythology only partly hidden beneath layers of patriarchal overlay.

PLURALISM

Perhaps the most important religious task of the 21st century will be learning to take pluralism seriously. It is necessary for each of us to begin to see our own tradition as one among many and to understand that no one tradition has the whole truth. Such pluralism cuts across all the old boundaries of race and nationality and gender. In the words of Luisah Teish, Priestess of Oshun in the Yoruba Lucumi Tradition:

*I will not wear
your narrow racial jackets
as the blood of many nations
runs sweetly thru my veins.⁹*

Unitarian Universalists are in a unique position to develop a truly creative feminist thealogy. We have roots in the biblical tradition of course, but during the 20th century most of us came to perceive that tradition as one among many avenues to

spiritual enlightenment. To put it another way, we take pluralism seriously. Our sanctuaries make use of the symbols of many religions, and our ministers draw inspiration from many sacred and secular texts. We are under no obligation to make the Bible or any other writings authoritative for the community of faith. Our faith is in our human freedom to choose what we find of value in any religious or secular writings. Of course, until recently, almost all these resources were just as mired in patriarchal assumptions as the biblical material. But we do have that freedom.

The question facing Unitarian Universalist women is whether or not that freedom can be exercised to include women's religious herstory. We have long had religious education materials about the insights of Akhenaten and the Buddha as well as of Moses and Jesus. Are we now open to acquiring an understanding of the many thousands of years of the human heritage, from Ice Age artists to the suppression of the last Goddess cultures in Europe, when female deities were revered?

To be truly open to the insights of many traditions we must look not only to our own and other patriarchal traditions but also to the authority of our own female experience. For women, especially, to tap into the power of authentic selfhood is to be painfully aware of the myriad ways in which society works against the expression of female experience. To express that experience is to be in conflict with almost everything in society—the language, the legal system, the government, the economy, the structure of the family, and the symbolism of most world religions.

For a woman of color the task is even more complex, for she faces not only the sexism in all these institutions but also the white racism, classism, and genocide that have been so much a part of her experience. African American women scholars have developed a body of research that explores their particular religious herstory. Many define themselves and their work as *womanist* rather than *feminist*. Others prefer to call themselves *black feminists*. *Womanist* is a term coined by poet Alice Walker

in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She defines *womanist* as follows:

1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."¹⁰

Religious studies scholar Monica Coleman¹¹ raises important questions about the work of womanist religious scholars. She suggests that “womanists have often assumed that black women’s experiences are Christian.” This assumption, she feels, does not speak to the needs of many multi-faith black women, and in fact departs from Walker’s much broader original definition. She also suggests that womanist religious scholars “have done very little to address the theological, spiritual and religious experiences of black Lesbians”

In a response to Coleman’s article, religious studies scholar and educator Arisika Razak, who says of herself, “I am not a Christian, but I am an activist and healer,” does embrace Walker’s definition of womanist. She writes, “For me, the struggles for racial justice, women’s rights, and the right to love whomever I wish—of whatever race or gender I choose—along with my freedom to worship the sacred as I know, name, and experience it, come together in a weave that honors my slave and free ancestors of African lineage, my Euro-American and indigenous roots, and my love and respect for the healing powers of the earth. For me, this holistic tapestry of liberation is best named by the term womanist, a term that is feminist, Afrocentric, healing, embodied, and spiritual.”¹²

As an important first step toward a more complete sacred truth honoring the whole of human experience, women of all races and traditions need to dig into herstory and hold up to light the symbols of female divinity and power. We cannot integrate male and female symbols in any religion if we have not first examined female symbols of Divine power.

RELIGIONS AND THEIR SYMBOLS

Religions and their symbols change. The deities have changed before and they are changing now. In vast areas of the ancient world female deities were revered for thousands of years, and only later were they superseded by male deities. The archaeological discoveries of the late 20th century provide overwhelming documentation in the

form of thousands of Goddess images and figures, elaborate shrines and temples devoted to powerful Goddesses, and sacred writings never before available to us. A theme running through much of the ancient mythology from a variety of cultures is the contest for power between the ancient Goddess and younger male deities. In many of these myths She is ultimately either destroyed in a grand battle or tricked into giving up Her power to the male. This shift in Divine power occurred gradually, over many centuries, and during early historical times most cultures had both male and female deities, with varying amounts of power. Archaeologist Raphael Patai¹³ and others have suggested that the Israelites were no exception and that for many centuries Yahweh had a powerful female consort.

The idea that deities and religions change is not a new one. Many years ago biblical scholar Harry Emerson Fosdick traced what he perceived to be the changes in Yahweh’s characteristics, which occur as we move from earliest biblical sources to later ones. He suggested that Yahweh is at first a tribal deity who travels from place to place with his people. Only later does he develop the quality of omnipresence. He is at first a jealous and vengeful deity, only later acquiring the attributes of mercy and love.¹⁴ Theologian Ernst Troeltsch pointed out that a crucial part of any religion is the world view that supports and is supported by it. He traced the changes in world view that made medieval Christianity a strikingly different religion from that of the early church in the days of the Roman Empire and from the ascetic Protestantism of later times. Troeltsch concluded that the world view of ascetic Protestantism was not adequate for the 20th century and that a new world view would mean a new formulation of religion.¹⁵

A SHIFT FROM OUTER TO INNER

We need to be aware of the world view that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century and the radical changes that are occurring in our concept of divinity. We are trying to come of age as human

beings, trying to give up our dependence on a parental deity enthroned in a supernatural realm. We have learned that transcendent does not need to mean supernatural or over-against the natural world. It is not enough to pronounce the patriarchal God dead. We are still faced with the ultimate questions about life and death and meaningful existence. Naomi Goldenberg¹⁶ suggests that what is happening is the internalization of religion, the awareness of an immanent God or Goddess within each of us, and an inner spiritual journey toward value and meaning as adults. Such a transformation of religion to an emphasis on the inner makes each of us responsible for our values. It requires us to become fully aware of our personal and social situation and to articulate that experience. It gives validity to female as well as male experience. It challenges us to alter society whenever it fails to support harmony within the self, among selves, and in relation to Nature.

If women really articulate the realities of their experience, they call into question the very symbolism of Judaism, Christianity, and other world religions where that symbolism is overwhelmingly male and hierarchical. This is a difficult task because we have taken that male symbolism for granted and have been raised to believe it is the only symbolism that ever existed. That is why knowing of the existence of powerful as well as nurturing female images of the divine in the ancient world is so important. We cannot revive uncritically religions whose world view was so different from ours. But we need to know that they existed and that for thousands of years both men and women found the veneration of female divinity meaningful. Whatever we may call the religions of the future, if they take women seriously, they cannot perpetuate exclusively male symbols.

A RETURN FROM SUPERNATURAL TO NATURAL

The suppression of women in religion and culture around the world has been closely related to

the exploitation of the Earth. The Earth today is in a severe crisis because of the damage and pollution caused by human beings. Such damage and exploitation flow directly from the belief that Nature is fallen and sinful, and the world-wide patriarchal belief that the cyclic death imposed by Nature must be conquered. Feminist thealogy rejects that idea. Instead, human beings are perceived as part of a natural world. We need a realistic assessment of the human potential, not a dualistic one based upon ideas of good and evil; nor do we need a negative prejudging of the situation based on belief in a “higher” supernatural realm and the sinfulness of “lowly humans.” We can assert our limited but quite real freedom to discern and to choose the good. This assertion is based on an emerging scientific world view that encompasses constant change and startling novelty and therefore the possibility of freedom. For a further discussion of this statement, see my article “Points of Theological Convergence between Feminism and Post-Modern Science,” in the *International Journal of Women’s Studies*.¹⁷

Philosopher-scientist Elisabet Sahtouris¹⁸ raises another interesting question: “What if modern science and our view of human society had evolved from organic biology rather than from mechanical physics?” Our heritage has been to see ourselves as separate from the rest of Nature rather than as living beings within a larger living being—the Earth. As the old mechanical worldview gave way to an organic view, we have had to take a new look at evolution. We find that cooperation rather than competition has made the emergence of new and more complex organisms possible. Perhaps humanity can once more learn to resolve conflicts and to live in harmony with the rest of Nature by means of cooperation instead of competition.

One of the most important thea/ological statements made by Unitarian Universalists in the late 20th century may be the seventh principle added to the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association. During a lengthy study process (initiated in part to remove sexist language) many people felt that a new statement about

our relationship to the Earth was also needed. The following statement was added and received affirmative votes at two General Assemblies: "We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

Such a statement means that as creatures of the natural world, we participate in the same power that resides in all of Nature. To the extent that feminist thealogy perceives the divine as "out there" as well as within, it is identified with the natural world and not with a supernatural realm. Being in harmony with the Goddess of the natural world does not, for example, give one power over anyone or anything. The fear that feminist Goddess imagery is a demand for female dominance over men is based on a concept of the divine as supernatural, as "over against" the natural world rather than immanent in it. To be in service to that kind of supernatural deity is indeed to demand "dominance over." But feminist thealogy identifies the divine with the natural world and seeks power in harmony rather than through dominance. The shift to an understanding of Nature, including ourselves, as sacred is crucial for our relationship with the Earth.

WHAT ABOUT JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY?

Although Judaism and Christianity are but two among many sources of religious inspiration around the world, they are nevertheless the traditions that undergird the structures of Western society. However liberal or unorthodox our current beliefs, many of us have strong emotional ties to either Judaism or Christianity. Many therefore seek ways to reinterpret or transform these traditions so that they will be meaningful to contemporary feminists, both women and men. Elizabeth Cady Stanton pointed out many years ago, "So long as tens of thousands of Bibles are printed every year, and circulated over the whole habitable globe, and the masses in all English-speaking nations revere it as the word of God, it is vain to belittle its influence.

The sentimental feelings we all have for those things we were educated to believe sacred, do not readily yield to pure reason."¹⁹ She gathered a committee of learned women, and they produced a commentary on every biblical passage that mentions women. Stanton dryly remarked, "As all such passages combined form but one-tenth of the Scriptures, the undertaking will not be so laborious as, at the first thought, one would imagine."²⁰

Today some feminist theologians insist that male scholars and clergy down through the centuries have misinterpreted and distorted the message of the biblical tradition which proclaims justice and love for all persons, male and female. The God of the Bible was at times described with female imagery; there were female prophets and judges; Jesus treated women with the same dignity that he did men; in the early Christian church women preached and taught and shared all responsibilities equally with men; and Paul at his best proclaimed that "in Christ there is neither male nor female." In later centuries Jesus' mother Mary became an exalted female presence within Christianity. Church history is being reexamined to discover the contributions of strong women, and the writings of female mystics are being read with new interest. For women who wish to maintain their commitment to the biblical tradition there are many new approaches.

One of the most interesting discoveries in recent years was a large collection of ancient manuscripts buried in Upper Egypt by early Christians. These writings included a number of gospels, versions of Jesus' life and work written by very early Gnostic Christians never before available to us. Elaine Pagels,²¹ who has analyzed a large number of these writings, points out that Gnostic Christians used many female images to refer to the Divine, and that women had far more power and responsibility in Gnostic churches than in those that became orthodox. It is interesting too that Mary Magdalene was considered a person of power and influence, perhaps even an apostle, among the Gnostic Christians. Another phenomenon of interest to

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women is that the organization of Gnostic churches appears to have been nonhierarchical and non-authoritarian. These ancient texts give strong support to the notion that the suppression of women in the Christian Church as we have known it occurred for political reasons and is a distortion of Christianity as it was known in the early churches.

CONCLUSION

As women we have a desire to know our female religious roots from diverse cultures. It is important to remember that *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven: In Ancient Times* presents only part of our herstory, that of the Ancient Near East, Old Europe, and the roots of the dominant Western culture. Another course, *Rise Up and Call Her Name*,²² explores our heritage on a global level. Wherever we begin, it is up to us to relate that herstory to our own experience as women in the modern world and to demand that our roots and our experience be taken seriously in the formulation of new nonsexist thea/ologies. What follows is a guide for beginning such a spiritual journey, a journey into the relationship between our ancient past and our personal experience as women.



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“Gaia” and Shirley Ann Ranck