

Notes From the Field
**The Body of the Goddess:
Women's Trans-national and Cross-religion
Eco-Spiritual Activism**

Laura Corradi
Università Della Calabria

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Abstract

A counter-tendency to the virtualization of social relations and the deepening of the separation between body, mind and spirit may be represented by the re-birth of Goddesses' worship, which calls for a re-embodiment of women's spirituality and feminist politics. This work starts from representations of the body of the Goddess – in different ages and parts of the world – in their relation with the four elements. Through the iconological analysis of female divinities we realize that each of them also represents specific aspects of womanhood. An exploratory research on the contemporary religious experience of the Goddess indicates the existence of a phenomenon of Internet-activism, where women from different cultures, ethnicities and beliefs systems discuss their spiritual issues in a trans-national and inter-religious way. A diffused spirituality, free from institutional and patriarchal control, can be seen as a form of resistance to dogmas and codes that are often perceived as oppressive and far from responding to contemporary needs. Today women as gender are able to confront patriarchal dominance also on the religious terrain, and feminist theology can be seen as a process of overcoming dualities, hierarchies, oppositions – as a leading force toward social and political change in the direction of the common good. A shift of emphasis from God the father to God the mother, from masculine to feminine values, may affect also institutional religions, by empowering women activism around peace, social justice and ecology.

Keywords

Gender, Feminism, Paganism, Ecology

In this work I will focus on women's new forms of spirituality starting from representations of the body of the Goddess – as mother earth, as a warrior in defence of children and nature, as a symbol of supreme harmony - in different ages and parts of the world. Many images today are available in publications and in digital form – which allow us to reflect upon their commonalities and differences – our commonalities

and differences. Through the iconological analysis of female divinities we realize that each of them represents specific aspects of womanhood; Goddesses seem to be related to the four elements that compose life in the planet, as we are going to see. Hundreds of virtual spaces are available in the form of websites, where women all over the planet - from different cultures, ethnicities and beliefs systems - are enabled to discuss their spiritual questions in a transversal way. For the first time in history, women as a gender can confront patriarchal dominance at a global level also on the religious field: one of the last bastions of male supremacy along with science.

Contemporary technologies have established new forms of reproduction, external to the mother's body - from in-vitro fertilization to surrogate motherhood - with little or no concern about women's health and the raise of an international market of ova and wombs (Corradi 2008). The affirmation of cyber-feminism 'I would rather be a cyborg than a Goddess' (Haraway 1991) advocates for an overcoming of the body in favour of telematic extensions of the self. A science supposed to be neutral promises a world of virtual relations where inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual preferences and different ability will not count any more, since the individual has become invisible to the other and, in a way, is perceived as immaterial. Genderless, with no class, no colour and no confines due to personal or social attributes, the cyborg can pretend to be anybody he/she likes, by acquiring any race or status: once emancipated from the body, the subject is seen as boundless, free to play with numerous possible identities as if they were social masks. (Corradi 1993,1996). The dominion of digital speed allows endless forms of time-space compression (Harvey 1990) producing an individual exhausted and anesthetized, with diminishing memory and resources for listening to inner sensations.

The scientific reduction of nature, including human body and its parts, precedes the birth of a disembodied form of knowledge, which represents itself as the sole form of knowing - in an increasingly disembodied society where social representations of the body are reduced to *simulacra*. Here a gender difference may be usefully pointed out: women have always been experiencing different types of *knowledge related to the body* and different types of separation from the body with respect to men: this is the result of centuries of subjugations,

dispossession and enslavement - cancellation of women's knowledge through persecution and witch hunts – the systematic negation of human rights. For such a reason many women perceive the body as a place of liberation – and feminist movements made body politics a central issue. Sexuality is an important place of self-realization and struggle, experienced as an unknown terrain of discovery and adventure, as a magic journey into the inner self – a path toward something inside that goes beyond material life (Christ 1987).

A powerful counter-tendency to the supremacy of western science and technology – which translates to the dominion of rationality and the separation between body, mind and spirit - may be represented by the re-birth of Goddesses worship, which calls for a re-embodiment of women's spirituality and politics, the overcoming of national and religious boundaries, and new forms of social responsibility and ecological commitment.

A NEW SOCIAL PHENOMENON: THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE GODDESS

Women's spirituality has become a field of study in archeology, history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and theology, affecting alternative and institutional religions, monotheistic and polytheistic creeds. We are going to look at how women are increasingly turning towards feminine refinements of the concept of 'divine': the Goddess body forms seem to give a sense of fulfilment, value, empowerment, and creativity.

Such a new awareness may help to narrow gender inequality in society and disparity of power within the feminist movement, where relations of exploitation and oppression among women are still unquestioned and unresolved. By encouraging women's dialogue with 'the Goddess within,' and with each other, an influential political and ethical process is taking place.

An early metaphor of women as Goddesses can be attributed to the "father" of sociology, August Comte, who addressed positivism not just as an emancipating force for women but as a process of re-sacralising femaleness:

Positivism ... encourages, on intellectual as well as on moral ground, full and systematic expression of the feeling of veneration for Woman in public as well as in private life, collectively as well as individually. Born to love and to be loved, relieved from the burdens of practical life, free in the sacred retirement of their homes, the women of the West will receive from Positivists the tribute of deep and sincere admiration which their life inspires. They will feel no scruple in accepting their position as spontaneous priestesses of Humanity; they will fear no longer the rivalry of a vindictive Deity In a word, Man in those days will kneel to Woman and to Woman alone' (Comte 1865:288).

A century went by before women started to identify as 'spontaneous priestesses' and look at their life as a sacred space. In the last three decades, an incredible plethora of articles and books on ancient Goddesses has appeared written by feminists attempting to meet the needs of women searching for a spirituality that speaks directly to them. (Black Koltuv 1987; Christ 1987,1998, 2003; Donaldson 1986; Gomberg 2001; Harding 1993; Monaghan 1997; Sjöo and Mor 1991) A vast array of visual images has been produced to satisfy an ongoing hunger for acceptable feminist symbols. Especially prominent among them are the female statuettes dating to the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods (Figure 1: Great Mother).



Figure 1 — Great mother

Far less common are images of classical Greek and Egyptian Goddesses, even though we can record a growing interest also in this field of studies to new forms of worship. Elinor Gadon has described these icons as models of ‘empowered selfhood’ (Gadon 1989). Her collection of essays comprises many works by historians and archaeologists, with a wide range of specialties, who explored female divinities ferrying them from myth to evidence.

Spiritual interest in ancient Goddesses in the West is a new social phenomenon that emerges from the archaeological investigations by feminist scholars such as Marija Gimbutas – author of prodigious research: a dozen books about ancient and living Goddesses. She wrote in the conviction that through an understanding of what the Goddess was, we can better understand nature and ourselves (Gimbutas 1991). Gimbutas is considered to be largely responsible for the contemporary resurgence of Goddess-oriented religions and neopaganism by both her admirers and her detractors.

A work inspired by Gimbutas’ discoveries has made an important link between religious devotion and political struggles. Social-anthropologist Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, author of *Black Madonnas*, at first made a connection between 300 representations of the Virgin Mary in Italy (who can be defined as ‘coloured’) and pagan temples where female divinities were worshipped in the past as the testimony of an unbreakable path of love and loyalty toward a mother-like protective figure (Chiavola Birnbaum 1993). A second and

suggestive thesis was forwarded: the sites where Black Madonnas were still venerated had also witnessed important political uprisings and peasants' occupations of lands, where often the black divinity was carried by the crowds as a shield, to defend the rebellious community.

The first consistent feminist theorization having Goddesses as a discursive centre was the text *When God Was a Woman* by Merlin Stone in the mid seventies, a ground-breaking and provocative analysis around the war against the Goddess, declared by spreading patriarchy and male monotheism (Stone 1976). A bloody confrontation, started by Judaism, was carried on by Christianity with crusades and witch hunts, the latter defined by feminist historians as the largest 'sexocide' of the past (Federici 2004). The war against 'God the mother' and all forms of women's autonomous spirituality seems to find a new energy in the contemporary struggle engaged by Muslims against polytheisms and pagan religions.

A sociological analysis of contemporary Goddess worship needs to move from a reconsideration of two violent historical processes: the eradication of women's medical knowledge of herbs and plants, fertility and love; and the destruction of pagan religions in the past.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, who used to be a professor of Feminist Theology in Berkeley, California, in her recent 'Goddesses and the Divine Feminine' examines the phenomenon of neo-paganism, considering as key passage a feminist re-writing of *Witchcraft as the pre-Christian form of Goddess-worshipping religion in Europe* (Radford Ruether 2005). In such a definition she is referring to the interpretation proposed by Zsuzsanna Budapest's 'thealogy' – in a non-scholarly work (Budapest 1980). Such a concept had a considerable impact in shaping feminist thinking around religion and in the growth of 'Wicca' a spiritual movement defined as the modern revival of the ancient indigenous, pre-Christian Goddess religions of Europe and the Middle East. Wicca is considered to be very similar in its spiritual practice and principles to Native American spirituality, and to that of other indigenous peoples (Curott 1999). Even though Goddess cults were suppressed by centuries of witch hunts, today Wicca - according to the Institute for the Study of American Religions - is the fastest growing religion in the U.S., where Wicca is a recognized creed also in institutions, such as the military, and in

prisons, alongside other small religions such as the Native American Church and the Baha'i Faith.

While encountering the opposition of Christian fundamentalists, these achievements meet the encouragement of Christians open to ecumenical dialogue, especially women (Radford Ruether 2005:297). In the United States, the Covenant of the Goddess is the national league of covens, legally recognized as a Church since 1975. It rejects the idea of the existence of evil: everything that happens is an expression of God, and the devil is just a biblical invention. Wicca - as neo-pagan cult of the Goddess - obtained recognition and respect in the struggle to defend its religious freedom. Since 1993, Wicca representatives have sat in the 'Parliament of the World's Religions'. This is another sign of normalization after which the Catholic Pope John Paul II apologized for the persecutions of women during Inquisition times (Menapace 2000).

In the Wicca movement, a very successful woman spiritual activist, writer and leader Starhawk, restored women activism around sacred places and ritual practices of re-enchanting the world, reviving magic in all our relations. She advocates for neo-paganism in everyday life and in politics. Starhawk rejects a polarized vision of women and men by stating that it is patriarchal cultures that split them into hardly communicating dualities. Wicca also is seen as a form of shamanism, meant to create interconnection, harmony and community among different individuals and peoples instead of competition and antagonism. In her critique of the existing relations, Starhawk (1979) distinguishes between power *over*, power *within* and power *with*. The first is equated to domination and exploitation of humans and nature, today exemplified with the greedy behaviour of multinational corporations that put profit before people: they are seen as main agents of the process of de-sacralizing the relation with nature and among people. The second is explained as internal growth – achieved through rituals, dance, visualizations and other practices meant to purify oneself from hierarchical thinking, self hate and internalized oppression. The third type of power suggests cooperation in the diversity, mutual aid and support in changing society. Magic has to do with a type of self transformation, in the sense of overcoming individualism and violence, a personal process that becomes collective — a transformative force of the existing reality.

What is the religious experience of those who worship the Goddess today? The exploratory research I carried out on the Internet highlights an intense debate and a variety of statements published on websites. One of the leaders of this spiritual movement, Selene Fox, a net-activist from Circle Sanctuary of Mount Horeb in Wisconsin states:

I am Pagan. I am part of the whole of Nature. The Rocks, the Animals, the Plants, the Elements, and Stars are my relatives. Other humans are my sisters and brothers, whatever their races, colours, genders, sexual orientation, nationalities, religions, lifestyles. Planet Earth is my home. I am part of this large family of Nature, not the master of it. I have my own special part to play and I seek to discover and play that part to the best of my ability. I seek to live in harmony with others in the family of Nature, treating others with respect¹.

Religious experience of Goddess worshipping has often to do with 'a higher state of consciousness' and phenomena of trance or ecstasy which are at times perceived as comparable to shamanic episodes. Also spiritual activism and the creation of 'Goddess art' are considered to be a religious experience. The wide range of phenomena mentioned on websites as personal or collective religious experience among Goddess worshippers inspired my sociological attention and two types of investigation through an iconological research on the different ways the body of the Goddess is represented, and an exploratory study on trans-national and cross-religion mailing-lists. Both of them are briefly reported and discussed in the following pages.

THE BODY OF THE GODDESS

Women's body has an important role as a place of consciousness and resistance against patriarchy and capitalism in different ways, still to be fully investigated (Corradi 2004). The body of the Goddess is perceived as symbolically linked to all women's

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body – in a non dual way, as mothers and as warriors – as an expression of the feminine *power within*.

In Budapest's *thealogy*, the Goddess symbolizes the immanent life process of the universe. This life principle is one of plurality in dynamic interconnection, symbolized as trinity, or threeness. Maleness has a place with in this female-centred plurality, as the expression of the dying and rising of life within the sustaining female life principle. Patriarchal maleness, however, splits off this male function of dying and rising from its maternal matrix, distorting it into death in a purely destructive sense. Patriarchal Gods thus are typically war God, Gods of death and devastation. In patriarchal religion and culture, dynamic plurality in interconnection is distorted into mutually exclusive dualities of 'good' and 'evil.' The body, the woman, and the earth are both subordinated and identified with the negative pole in male-dominant dualism' (Radford Ruether 2005:278-9).

From a subjugated, inferiorized and disempowered corporeity, many changes occur in order to give birth to a liberated being. In this revolution, the body of the Goddess is inspiration, healing power, encouragement, protection, source of infinite love and strength. The experience of contemplating Her is like an irresistible abandonment to the sweetest symphony: the body of the Goddess is a supreme *signifier*, radiating transforming power.

Felines and Goddesses: Women's Strength

Ancient icons of women and men with a feline head are dated tens of thousands of years ago since it was common during rituals to depict humans with the attributes of animals — their skills, visual capacity, strength, speed, intelligence. Perhaps the most ancient story regards Nyavirezi (Figure 2)



Figure 2 — Nyavirezi

She is represented as a princess-lion still very popular in Rwanda: in ancient times (oral history sources speak about 5000 years ago) she was the daughter of a king who transformed herself in a feline divinity during a conflict. Sometimes she is portrayed standing in a fighting pose in order to protect herself or her offspring, with her two upper breasts full of milk, conveying the message that deep inside every woman there is a lioness that can manifest herself when needed.

Later in time, in ancient Egypt we find again the image of a sacred lady-lioness responding to the name of Sekhmet (Figure 3) which means ‘the Powerful’.



Figure 3 — Sekhmet

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She was worshipped on the last day of the year, to signify the end of what is old and the beginning of what is new: a necessary passage to assure the continuity of life. We can find an early duality that is going to be manifested also in other female deities: the body of the Goddess is life giving and life taking at the same time. On one side, Sekhmet is a nourishing divinity, protector of nursing women and Lady of Medicine; on the other she is the Goddess of war. In the Egyptian trinity, Ptah is the creator of good things, Sekhmet is the destroyer of bad ones, and Nefertum is the reconstructor of the good things. Being the elimination of what is not meant to last, Sekhmet is also called Nesert (Burning Flame). She symbolizes Time, which devours everything belonging to it.

Here we can observe many similarities between Sekhmet and a divinity considered to be much older: Mata Kali (Goddess Kali) the most powerful in the Hindu pantheon. Kali is both Amma, the mother of everything - and the destroyer. In Sanskrit language Kali is related to Time (kala), and she represents its horrific aspect, an aspect that was assigned by the Greeks to a male character Kronos, represented as devouring his children.

Kali is born from the union of all the Trimurti Gods and Goddesses, when the demons are about to take over the earth, and the divine principle of life is threatened. Kali is born as absolute Shakti, uncontaminated feminine energy. Kali is the 'Ego breaker,' represented as the belligerent aspect of dormant Shiva, her meditative husband. She can overwhelm him, and at the end the Great Goddess wins against the demons. Kali is also represented as a subsidiary energy, a spirit emerging from the worried eyebrow of Durga, the warrior Goddess who rides on a tiger, or flanked by lions that once roamed in India (Figures 4 A and B).



Figure 4 A — Maha Kali Goddess



Figure 4 B — Durga Goddess

Here again we see a representation of the relationship between women and felines. Still today, women who worship Sekhmet or other feline-related Goddesses, look at her as the embodiment of ‘resistance, independence and affirmation, Goddess of medicine, justice and protector’ (Maria Giusi Ricotti²). A survival of this aspect of the Goddess can be seen also in the European Tarot cards (the oldest decks have been dated to the 14 hundreds in the area between Marseille, France and Vitoria, Basque country). We can see among the 22 major arcans ‘The Strength’, represented as a woman in the position of effortlessly dominating a lion or opening its mouth with a serene smile on her face. The type of power she signifies is not robust, muscular or brutal; it is a form of command made of authority, control, and fairness, the strength of sweetness and wisdom. Quite late in the witch hunts, in the 16 hundreds, Tarots became illegal, considered as a witchcraft tool by the Inquisition prosecutors.

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In the Aryan Trimurti, the three main Gods - Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (respectively the creator, the conservator, and the transformer/destroyer) – also have a Goddess side. They are often represented as a whole: an harmonious embodiment of the masculine and the feminine principles as a guarantee of the continuity of life. Saraswati, Goddess of all the arts is coupled with God Brahma, the creator. Laksmi, Goddess of abundance, is associated to Vishnu, Lord of conservation. God Shiva, the transformer is married with Kali in the non-warrior aspect, named Parvati, Goddess of fertility and symbol of maternity. She is linked to the sacred cow as well as other maternal figures, in Hinduism all mothers are dispensers of life, milk, love. (Figure 5).



Figure 5 — Krishna and Ashode

The Four Elements and The Moon

Goddesses may be divided in four groups: each female divinity seems to have a preference for one of the elements - earth, fire, wind and water – even though, occasionally, devotees associate more aspects to the same deity. Earth Goddesses are typically associated to fertility, maternity, abundance of crops and food, such as Cybele and all ancient large Goddesses from Anatolia, Cyprus, Malta. Archeological evidence shows Earth Mothers sided by felines, to represent the women's strength, immanent to the reproduction of life, but also as symbols of power and command, as part of a throne. (Figure 6).



Figure 6 — Great Mother from Anatolia

A different category is represented by Goddesses related to fire and conflict: their prevalent aspect is combatant, warrior-like, or expressing rage, such as Sekhmet, Kali, Durga, and Pele - the Hawaii Goddess of Vulcan, who is irate for human misdeeds. Other female divinities seem to be related to the feminine element of water and to wind, like Oya, Yemanya, Obatalà, Oshun: these are female Orisha – guardian spirits - very beloved in the Yoruba religion, in the Santeria and Condomble'. Yemaya, Goddess of all waters is the more sensual,

often represented as a siren; she is the lady of the ocean, endless source of life.

Oshun is the Patron Saint in Cuba – considered to be the most beautiful ‘virgin of charity,’ Lady of love, music and dance – she protects the embryo with the help of Yemanjá. In Nigeria she is considered to be the defender of the foetus – while Obatalá will give human form, and later the power of speech, to the child. All Orisha have many faces, each one highly symbolized, each one with a history and endless versions: an inextricable labyrinth of archetypes and metaphors. Oya is the Goddess of change and she governs the winds. For this reason she is also related to our breathing - from the first to the last, and became the protector of cemeteries, which are also called ‘Oya gardens’.

The theme of life and death is common: the Goddess’ menstrual power evokes the blood of the beginning and the blood of the end, as Turner (2001) pointed out. Life creation is a female task and can be represented as a beautiful young mother or a pregnant deity (Figure 7 A and B)



Figure 7 (A and B) — Pregnant Goddesses

Another lady has the disturbing task of signifying death in popular iconology: the crone. This is one of the aspect of the Goddess' trinity (maiden-mother-crone) representing a re-generative body, the eternal capacity of nature to reproduce life in different forms that can be confused and mixed, in a never ending spiral (Gomberg 2001).

Among the Celtic divinities Cerridwen represents fire both materially and as a symbol of inspiration – the internal fire. She embodies the wisdom of late age, the big pot where knowledge can produce food for spiritual strength: her name means *calderon*. But she also represents the moon (related to water) all the lunar phases and menopause. She is the crone, the judge, the witch and a lady of death.

Somewhat related to Cerridwen and to the witches' traditions around female menstrual cycles, we can find the Tibetan princess Tara, also called 'Wisdom of the Moon'. She becomes Dolma, 'star of salvation' and a liberated being: the Buddha in female form. Disregarding the obstacles due to monastic conventions she gave

proof of her devotion – she wanted to be a Buddha and a woman (Elbaum Jootla 1988). She represents female energy: in Hinduism she is Shakti power. After the death of the historical Buddha she is recognized as the mother of all Buddhas and later appears also in Hinduism, Jainism and in the Tibetan Lamaism as Goddess of mysticism, protecting all beings while they navigate in the sea of life.

Also in China we have a Moon Goddess, called Chang O: she represents loneliness. Her transformation from Princess to silver planet happened in the pre-historical times following the ‘great heat’, due to the existence of ten suns burning the earth. Once again the moon is related to fresh water and restoration. Her body seems to represent an icy revitalizing presence. Her smile has no age, her complexion recalls the colour of the moon, the quintessence of feminine principles. The personification of the moon with womanhood is probably one of the strongest archetypes we find in literature and iconology related to the Goddess. New images of water and moon as female divinities are produced also today in many websites, where women artists show their inspiration in creating contemporary representations of the Goddess, with increased attention to the lunar calendar, its meaning in agriculture and in determining female cycles of fertility.

Goddess’ images in relation with water and the moon are widely diffused also in meso-american cultures: Ix Chel, the Mayan deity of medicine, sits near a lake and is adorned with shells. Such a link is irrefutable. We are predominantly made of liquid; if the moon can move oceans, millions of tons of water, it can also move the water within us. When the child is ready to come out of the mother’s body, it is a breaking of waters that announces a new life is about to be born. When we are sad or in pain, salty tears like sea drops come in our eyes, as a reminder of our connection with the primordial water - mother of all life forms – and the transient, liquid character of all things, ideas, emotions, feelings: all is ephemeral and will eventually pass, nothing is permanent.

The awareness of change, sufferance and death is present in the Condomblè spiritual path in the Caribbean. Erzuli Dantor is a voodoo loa (spirit) patroness of lesbians and single mothers in Haiti. She came from Africa and evolved into many aspects, some are warrior-like, others are nurturing. She is very dark skinned and is often

shown in a Madonna-like pose with a dark child, unlike many 'Black Madonnas,' whose boy is depicted with white skin. She carries tribal scars on her face that also identify her with Africa, even if she displays Dravidic physiognomy – and often she is replaced with the Virgin of Guadalupe, with added scars on her cheek. Her body is small, compact, athletic and powerful. Dances in her honor celebrate the feast day with exciting and warlike music. She is a Petro deity, 'born out of rage'; in contrast to Rada deities, which are contemplative and emotional and suggest integration, stability, and benevolence. The duality of the Goddess is manifested here in a complex way. Even peaceful maternal divinities are passive unless provoked: in such a case they would become Ge/rouge 'the inarticulate song of in/turned cosmic rage'. In no case can the fury of the Goddess be considered evil: as Maya Deren points out, it is the ire against the fate which the African suffered, the brutality of displacement and enslavement. 'It is the violence that rose out of that rage to protest against it' (Deren 1953:62).

In the warrior aspect, Erzuli can be compared with Hindu Goddesses Kali and Durga who defeat iniquity and wickedness, while Erzuli Freda of Dahomey is the maternal aspect of this Goddess. Anthropologist Mischa Benson Adams, in an interview I carried out in 2009, describes her as partly Venus/beauty, and partly Yemaya/water, object of fertility rituals, as having 'a womanly generous round and giving body. A little vain, yet regal, she dances with all the men until she exhausts all of them. Then she weeps in sorrow and frustration for these poor humans who can't sustain her passion'. As Maya Deren adds, it is because of these tears that the women, who might otherwise resent her, are so gentle. In their real, reasonable world there is no grief like this (Deren 1953). What makes the Goddess so earthly also makes her so divine.

Even though the nourishing and the warrior aspects of the Goddess are often combined in her own body and blend in the religious experience of her devotees, we should mention an impressive iconological work carried out by professor of Classics in Athens, Nannò Marinatos, who re-states the objectivity of such a separation. After considering images of naked Goddesses, and their relation with power from the beginning of the second millennium B.C., to their legacy in Greek religion - her research conclusions establish two main

categories:

- 1) the 'vegetation Goddess with the upraised arms' (whose presence in Crete continued during the Iron age and survived in Cyprus until the sixth century B.C.) sometimes surrounded by animals, is considered as the archetype of most nature and fertility Goddesses, and patroness of women (Marinatos 2000);
- 2) the 'Mistress of animals' (which was shaped in Greece but comes from North Syria and the Levant) usually portrayed holding animals forcibly. She is related to the institution of male warriors and heroes, especially young ephebes. The Mistress of animals is not a nurturing Goddess: even though softer versions are bound to initiation rites for the protection of young females, Nannò Marinatos argues that there is no evidence of a correlation with nature and fertility (Marinatos 2000). These deities are the ancestors of many Goddesses considered to be patroness of men: Athena, Hera, Artemis. The presence of such deities also sign the passage from matriarchal types of societies, based on agriculture and the value of fertility, to a patriarchal revolution. The holiness of body and the primacy of motherhood evaporates in favor of aspects of rationality, masculine energy and fierce ideals of conquest. Athena herself is generated from the head of her father, Zeus, and not from the womb of a mother.

The Goddess is not the warrior, claims Marinatos and the two are not to be confused: images should be seen for what they are, and respected in their meaning (Marinatos 2000:129). I would add an explanation, in light of my iconological research: the simultaneous presence of elements recalling motherhood and symbols of strength (or weapons) in matriarchal deities (Sekhmet, Kali, Durga, Erzuli) are

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to be interpreted in a context of self-defense, which marks a distance from the male-like warriors or army patrons (Athena, Diana, Santa Barbara) at times engaging patriarchal wars of conquest or vindication, with the aim of destroying an enemy.

FEMINIST THEOLOGY, NET-ACTIVISM AND WOMEN SPIRITUALITY GROUPS

Much of the feminist literature on Goddesses deals with issues of power, moving from an analysis of pre-patriarchal societies, questioning the theoretical knots of the existence of patriarchy and relating to the field of matriarchal studies (Vaughan 1997,2004; Gottner-Abendroth 1991,1995,2007,2009). A milestone on the subject was represented by the book *The First Sex*, where Elizabeth Gould Davis argued that women were the original human beings, instead of a derivation of males, as in the Biblical version. While matriarchy is described as a superior form of civilization, pacific, based on agriculture and the cult of female deities, nature and life (Gould Davis 1971).

The Goddess as Great Mother necessarily brings us back to ancient times, when the generative power of women was considered sacred and was represented in temples (Figure 8).



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Figure 8 — Woman giving birth.

Amongst monotheistic religions, we can see how women's power to give life is exalted, especially in Christianity, where the Madonna is glorified as mother and detains the highest ranking status among all women. Her warrior side is completely internal: the struggle is within, to accept a pregnancy as a virgin and to lose her child in a supreme sacrifice. She embodies the complete surrender to the divine will. The vast iconology represents the social construction of a privileged relationship between mother and male son, in patriarchy with the overcoming of the matri-linearity typical of Hebraism.

There are various ways men and women in the past 'imagined the organization of gender and religion in ancient times' (Radford Ruether 2005:251). The debate regarding the relationship between matriarchy with religion (specifically with Goddesses worship) had been contended in various ways in the nineteenth-century literatures, even among socialists such as Bebel. In the twentieth century, this 'assumed correlation of Goddesses and matriarchy, or the high status of women, would give birth to new religious movements that sought to revive Goddess worship as part of a new valuing of women and the feminine in society and nature' (Radford Ruether 2005:273).

Among the mothers of a spiritual-political path having female divinities as subjects eco-feminist, ethicist and theologian Mary Daly (1973,1990) analysed how patriarchal religions have destroyed matricentric cultures. The awakening of a Goddess worship is also the awakening of women's political agency in ecology and social movements meant to re-sacralize the relationship with nature and among people.

Searching through many materials published on web-sites about the topic of Goddess worship, we can collect a myriad of personal and collective experiences. As Hillman posits, when we consider the personification of archetypes as 'divinities', they become something more than forms of behaviour, something more than images in the psyche. Each one becomes a 'person', with a consciousness style and presents herself as a *spiritus rector* with modes of thinking, talking, ethical positions, reactions and requests of emotional participation. These 'persons' start governing our life that becomes the product of a variety of relationships with them.

Divinities save us because we have sentiments for them that are not related to our ego and our experience: we talk to them and they talk to us, as independent witness of our heart. We can contemplate them, yet never possess them — we are remembered, protected, and enlightened by their beauty (Hillman 1995).

In terms of religious experience, the awakening of the Goddess for many western women has to do with a deep realization; the symbolic un-burial of an ancestor; a development of a concealed part of the self, hidden to our conscious life; the comprehension of aspects of our femininity; a profound understanding of what connects all women in the world. Such a discovery has effects on reality both at the individual and social level. The personal outcome signifies a change in everyday life: a recovery from addiction; a bodily transformation; a psychical renovation. Sometimes the inner revolution gives origin to a new self, in terms of social activism, commitment, dedication to other humans, animals or ecological causes (Nightmare 2001).

The awakening of the Goddess also interests non western women: Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva, a scientist against the exploitation of women and the environment opposes genetic manipulation in favour of bio-integrity and looks at female divinities in the Hindu pantheon as protectors of nature (which includes human beings) and as a source of female creative strength to be mobilized against the destructive power of multinationals (Shiva 1997,2001). The battle against genetically modified seeds, imposed by Monsanto in India, has been successful and Goddess Durga – the one who rides on tigers – became one of the symbols of ecofeminist struggles.

As Feminist *theologist*, Carol Christ argues, women spirituality typically begins from experience, rather than moving from theory to practice. Leonard Shlain, in his work, *The Alphabet Versus The Goddess. The Conflict Between Word and Image*, believes there is a gendered difference in women religious experience: holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete views of the world are the essential characteristics of a feminine outlook. A linear, sequential, reductionist, and abstract thinking defines the masculine, even though every individual is generously endowed with all the features of both (Shlain 1998).

For Christ, women spirituality is related to an awareness of

life's complex interconnectedness; thus, feminist spirituality is typically ecologically centered. It encounters resistance from patriarchal systems that discourage heterodox religious visions (Christ 1997,2003). Radford Ruether considers Christ as a leading scholar in *theology*, also committed to establishing the Goddess worship in the contemporary debate. Christ radically rejects dualisms and hierarchies, and believes in the unity of all beings in harmony with nature. As well as Starhawk, she thinks a much needed social change cannot be assured by prayers and rituals alone. Spiritual activism also means being committed to changing all our relations and experimenting new forms of interaction in life-giving types of community. If the Goddess is an intelligent and superior form of love, then contemplation is not enough: love should permeate actions and thinking. Love means changing social causes of injustice and sufferance. The only evil, for Carol Christ, resides in the refusal to love.

Neo-paganism, as well as native religions, express themselves through several forms of net-activism, such as the Pagan Education Network³ focused on the preservation of still existing nature-centred indigenous cultures, to the activism of the Indigenous Women Network⁴ which states as explicit goal the recognition of their own culture and the protection of Mother Earth for future generations (Figure 9).



Figure 9 — Mother Nature
(Murales at University of California, Santa Cruz)

With the publication of *The Invisible Religion* by Thomas Luckmann, the notion of diffused religiosity has been gradually accepted with the effect of opening up the international debate. The concept may be applied to prevailing monotheistic religions as well as

polytheistic creeds and other beliefs and faiths that cannot be assimilated to organized spiritual convictions. Even though institutionalized religions are still dominant, the existence of invisible and diffused spirituality (Cipriani 2003) can be seen as a form of resistance to dogmas and codes, perceived as oppressive and far from responding to contemporary needs. The rebirth of Goddess' religions and female divinities cults, far from being a New Age type of phenomena, have to do with three main processes: the revival of ancient forms of mysticism because of the identification of women with female divinities; the birth of feminist theology, which is re-interpreting religions and religiosity from gendered perspectives; and the influence of indigenous spirituality in social and environmental movements. There is an undeniable connection between feminism, ecology and spirituality – a link that became famous during the ecological efforts of the Chipko women activism in India in the 1970s and 1980s – that gave birth to a tree-hugging worldwide movement. A few hundred indigenous women won the battle against powerful loggers and the pulp and paper industry threatening their environment – while the males of the tribes were willing to give up and settle for compensation. Many other examples of the relation between gender, spirituality, and indigenous struggles could be made, from the U'Wa in Amazzonia to the Mayan in Chiapas: the connection between feminism, ecology and spirituality is widespread and never obvious, given women's critical capacities to look at the future and elaborate difference.

BREAKING RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES IN WOMEN'S SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

Even though most of women spiritual net-activism can be considered progressive or alternative (proposing a gendered re-reading of the sacred texts) we can also witness the presence of conservative women spirituality groups, Jewish, Christian, Methodist, Pentecostal, Orthodox, Sufi and Muslim traditional women believers are willing to connect with others. The analysis of 42 email subscription lists (offered on a website dealing with 'Women related religions and spirituality'⁵), show evidence of the transnational and inter-religious character of the mailing lists. Even though the logo in their homepage only displays the symbols of the three main

monotheistic religions, 16 out of 42 email lists have as a focus either non-western religions or an explicit interfaith approach. Each group offers a brief description and instructions to subscribe to the list; some groups request a priced membership. While many virtual collectives are open to anyone who wants to join, some set affiliation boundaries meant to appeal to a specific portion of the audience. Some groups allow male participation, others are strictly for women only; purposes and goals also have a wide variety. By organizing groups by creed, it emerges that out of 42 email lists, 15 are Christian; 8 Jewish; 3 Muslims; 4 Buddhist; 4 Pagan; and 8 interfaith

The richness of devotion forms, the social, ecological, political commitment, the passion for intellectual discussions and the need of establishing a dialogue with other female devotees offer a clear idea of the feminist agency eruption in spiritual matters. The diversity of religious experiences confirms how women spirituality is not one phenomenon but in fact many – and not related to New Age and similar cultural processes. A common trait of women spirituality – be it Christian or Muslim, Jewish or Pagan, Hindu or Buddhist - is the one of surrender to a greater energy (an embodied entity, a symbol of nature, anything considered to be sacred). An admission of defeat, or a capitulation of rationality in face of something inexplicable, the breaking of the ego or other forms of renunciation, create the humbleness necessary in accepting life burdens, and one's own place in the struggle against injustice.

As opposed to surrender, New Age implies that individuals can twist reality to their own desire, having attained determination, self-control, will power, character, clarity of mind or purity of the spirit. In other words, with the right type of strength (the right type of stone or amulet, colour to wear or mantra to recite) any person could turn adverse situations into positive ones, aspirations into successful realizations and so on. New Age is not a form of submission, it is a magnification of individuality and sometimes individualism; for many it is a very commodified form of spirituality, more a market phenomenon than a religious one. Yet, neo-paganism and the Goddess cults are often confused even among experts, because of the appropriation of symbols and practices considered to be fashionable and saleable. In a interview with a Native American elder woman I carried out in 2009 in California, she underlined the importance of

re-establishing the *sweat lodge* in her community, even though whites turned it into one of the most colonized spiritual practices, a profitable business. Indigenous art craft is also regularly copied and traded: for this very reason it cannot be given up; instead, it should become object of cultural re-appropriation.

Both neo-paganism and native religions express themselves through several forms of net-activism, such as the Pagan Education Network focused on the preservation of still existing nature-centred indigenous cultures, to the activism of the Indigenous Women Network that states as explicit goal the recognition of their own culture and the protection of Mother Earth for future generations.

At the end of the exploratory research, some distinctive processes emerge about contemporary women spirituality around Goddesses. In synthesis, this new social phenomenon seems to:

- a. extend spiritual options: female divinities mostly appeal to women who rejected organized religions, and were left with no alternative;
- b. increase women participation into mystical quests and the search for holiness (such an individual and collective pursuit may have long terms effects on society at large);
- c. participate in the growth of non western religions where women are overrepresented;
- d. encourage democratization of institutional religions in terms of gender deconstruction of power roles; re-equilibrium of authority, and women's visibility;
- e. increase the tendency toward diffusiveness of contemporary religiosity;
- f. promote interfaith processes, dialogue and tolerance;

- g. bring a keener attention to ecological transformations threatening human health and life on the planet;
- h. represent a significant countertendency to aggressive patriarchal fundamentalisms, since trans-national inter-religious dialogue evolves in favour of peace making processes.

These early results indicate more research is needed at least in two areas: the first regards the *religious experience* where the category of identification plays an important role in women's interest around the body of the Goddess. The second field is the one of *social activism informed by spiritual intentions*. Further studies should be conducted with more in-depth interviews, focus groups and other qualitative methods.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, literature about and images of the Goddess both as Great Mother and as a protecting warrior have been analyzed by looking at the new social phenomenon of western women spirituality around female divinities either ancient or belonging to the non-western world. Some interpretative lines have been drawn around specific traits of women's spiritual activism, which seems to affect also traditional religions. The reconnaissance of the public space of Internet, as a new *agorà* where people meet, made some features of this phenomenon observable. A shift of emphasis from God-father to Goddess-mother, from masculine values to feminine ones seems to affect also institutional religions in terms of a renewed women protagonism. Feminist *theology* can be seen as a process of overcoming dualities, hierarchies, oppositions, and as a leading force toward compatibility. Theologist Rosemary Radford Ruether, proposes the concept of *complementary spiritualities* to address women's need of harmonizing religions. She analyses three different forms of spirituality: pagan, prophetic and contemplative:

Pagan spirituality, typical of most indigenous religions, focuses on the renewal of the earth and human life within the changing seasons. Prophetic

spirituality focuses on the struggle to restore just and harmonious relations among humans and with the earth in a covenantal relation with a creating and redeeming God, over against a world dominated by great systems of oppression and injustice. Contemplative spirituality withdraws from the 'illusion' of transitory existence and seeks to unite the soul with the permanent source of reality. I saw ancient Judaism building on pagan spirituality and reinterpreting it in the light of a historical and prophetic viewpoint. In the Hellenistic era, Jewish thinkers such as Philo appropriated Neoplatonic thought and used it to develop a mystical hermeneutics and a contemplative practice of Judaism. Christianity also built on and reinterpreted these many layers of spirituality. In its focus on ascetic, monastic life, it emphasized the contemplative path for more than a millennium, but it never lost the seasonal spirituality on which the church year was based. Periodically, prophetic spirituality was recovered in order to struggle against systems of injustice, including those within the church itself. Today, modern ecological movements have rediscovered the spirituality of earth renewal, marrying it to prophetic critique. Thus, each of these spiritualities not only has a distinct validity but also continually interacts with the others in new and creative ways (Radford Ruether 2005:2).

Women's presence in non-western religions seems to be prevalent, as well as their work in interfaith processes, transversal identity politics, peace and ecology movements. Listening to prize-winning author, Alice Walker (one of the voices of contemporary Afro-American women's spirituality) we see that her religious experience has to do with 'Eros' or sensuality that is

expressed as a celebration of life and nature, as love for everything and the need to battle against those entities treating the earth with total disregard (Walker 1983). She is actively involved in protest movements and her devotion to social causes is parallel to a type of religious commitment that cannot be understood with the patriarchal Judaeo-Christian paradigm. Emilie Townes agrees with Walker, her visions, and hopes: if we choose to seek 'the Spirit', in opposing injustices we construct a 'liberative image of God' (Townes 1995).

Goddess worshippers subscribe to the 'four irrevocable directives' or commitments to which the Parliament of the World's Religions pledged itself in 1993: nonviolence and respect for all of life; justice and solidarity; truthfulness and tolerance; equality and partnership between men and women. Walker's words are a tribute to mother Earth: 'We have a beautiful mother: Her green lap immense, Her brown embrace eternal, Her blue body everything we know' (Smith, 1998). Great social transformations can be carried out across nations and religions, with 'revolutionary tenderness', combining Eros and political activism; love for nature and for people; science and spirituality; lay ethics and appreciation of the divine in ourselves. In all our relations.

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Endnotes

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Laura Corradi is a sociologist of the body. Carried out research projects on women's health and environment; the critique of science; human costs of neoliberal globalization; women's activism and feminist leadership. She authored or co-authored about 50 publications. Former blue collar in an Italian food factory, graduated as a student worker in Political Sciences (Padua, 1989); Ph.D in Sociology from University of California (Santa Cruz, 1995). World traveler since then, committed to research-action in the margins (native populations, refugees camps), taught qualitative methodology at the University of Venice. Presently working on 'feminist semiotics and the political sociology of the body in commercials' with an intersectional perspective (class, race, gender, sexual orientation, age); and teaches 'Sociology of Health and Environment' and 'Gender Studies' at the University of Calabria, in south-Italy. Since 2010 she is Elected Representative for Europe (east and west) for Research Committee 32 – 'Women in Society' International Sociology Association.

