

**Why Conversations About the Body Matter: How Goddess Scholars View the Female Body  
and Topics of Embodiment**

by

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## **Abstract**

In this research paper, I present some representative goddess scholarship in the West. I make the argument that goddess scholarship is profoundly influenced by feminism and discourse about the female body. This paper attempts to unravel how three goddess scholars view “the body”.

Through close examination of the contemporary study of gender, which is fraught with problematics concerning the construct of feminism, the main purpose of this paper is to reveal possible answers to questions about “the body” and how it intersects with goddess scholarship. In order to present these possible intersections, the first chapter presents Starhawk’s writing on goddess scholarship by carefully demonstrating recent changing definitions and debates over “feminist” bodies. The second chapter engages the work of another key player of goddess scholarship, Carol P. Christ where I examine her scholarship to identify where topics of embodiment, the body, and bodies are found throughout her work. In the third chapter, I look at Cynthia Eller who makes the argument that female bodies can be found in the media as a new cultural phenomenon. In other words, she suggests that the female body can be found on display everywhere, which, I then argue, seeps into the study of religion. The fourth and final chapter offers concluding remarks that bring all the previous sections together using Diana Coole’s conversations about “the body” as a lens. I attempt to show how conversations about the female body differ for each scholar and reveal why, how, and where these conversations overlap with the history of goddess scholarship as it relates to the study of religion.

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## **Introduction: How Do Goddess Scholars View the Female Body in Discourse?**

Over the last forty years, there has been a rise in critical feminist scholarship in the study of religion. Anthropologists, theologians, feminist critics, psychologists, sociologists, and cognitive scientists have begun to consider how issues of gender impact our perceptions of religion.<sup>1</sup> Gendered bodies appear in mainstream art, advertising on television, and perhaps more importantly remain a central focus in political discourse in the West.<sup>2</sup> The bodies that are discussed in media where political discourse is concerned are often the same bodies discussed in goddess scholarship. One hardly has to look very far to find “the body” on display in the media and in the academic study of religion. This paper aims to uncover how gendered bodies, particularly female bodies, are viewed by scholars who are particularly interested in representations of the goddess, what I here call “goddess scholarship.”

In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, Diana Coole raises questions about “the body”, such as “what is a body?” “is each body distinctly biological?” and to what extent are certain bodies “imaginary and symbolic aspects of the cultural body”?<sup>3</sup> Many of the questions raised by Coole about what the body is and where bodies can be found are reflected within goddess-scholarship. I use these questions to provide a window into the way the body is conceptualized. My aim is to notice where goddess scholars are having discussions about gendered bodies and to offer conclusions that compare some of the differences about how goddess scholars view the female body. It is important to outline how goddess scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, Juliette, “The Concept of the Goddess,” *The Concept of the Goddess*, London: Routledge, 1996, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Eller, Cynthia. “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1, 23-34. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Coole, Diana. “Theorizing the Body: Enduring Questions, Distinctive Approaches.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, edited by Waylen, Georgina et al., 161-259. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 166

looked at concepts such as “feminism”, “gender”, and “privilege” because these topics shape goddess scholarship within the academic study of religion.

The goddess movement, as a new religious phenomenon in the West is a part of a shift from public interest in religion (i.e., where the church ruled in the past) to a personalized model of spirituality. According to Christ, a central figure in goddess-studies, the goddess movement is a widespread, noncentralized trend in Neopaganism, and therefore has no centralized tenets of belief. Practices vary widely, from the name and number of goddesses worshipped to the specific rituals and rites used to do so. Some, such as Dianic Wicca, exclusively worship female deities, while others do not. Belief systems range from monotheistic to polytheistic to pantheistic, encompassing a range of theological variety similar to that in the broader Neopagan community. For instance, a self-identified goddess worshiper could theoretically worship any number of different goddesses from cultures all over the world. Goddesses and the female body have been the focus of attention by scholars Starhawk, Carol Christ, and Cynthia Eller, among other scholars, where the body is a crucial point of interest.

The goddess movement has a network of members that are difficult to track because there is no common meeting place. It has a do-it-yourself skeleton where anyone can ‘join’, and it has no single goddess that its participants worship - its limberness and reflexivity make it ripe for critique, a prime postmodern movement.

Gendered social organization often propels ‘spiritual’ movements (e.g., the Goddess movement) and influences its membership.

One lens that makes connections between the body and goddess scholarship can be drawn from Diana Coole’s chapter “Theorizing the Body: Enduring Questions, Distinctive Approaches,” when she writes:

In addition to the body's role in locating individuals within a division of labour, it is recognized to serve as a key index of differential experience and practices; a significant marker of identity; a vehicle for long-standing myths and rituals; a means of expression, pleasure, and agency; a target for and instrument of power; and a site of desire or vulnerability where violence and seduction occur.<sup>4</sup>

Coole's chapter offers six concepts that raise questions that I will apply to some representative figures in goddess scholarship in the conclusions of my paper. I use this framework as follows to guide my research:

- 1) the body as an index of differential experience → How does goddess scholarship understand the body as an index of differential experience? Does this change over time?
- 2) a marker of identity → How is individual self-expression and personal choice found in goddess scholarship?
- 3) a vehicle for long-standing myths and rituals → What is the role of embodiment in understanding matriarchal history and in neopagan ritual?
- 4) a means of expression, pleasure and agency → How are the embodied images studied in goddess scholarship seen as a means of expression, pleasure and agency?
- 5) the body as a target for and instrument of power → How does goddess scholarship reflect the use of symbols of goddesses to empower/disempower the female body? Where are these symbols presented as disempowering to some bodies and empowering to 'other' bodies (e.g., male bodies, racialized bodies, underprivileged bodies)?
- 6) the body as a site for desire and vulnerability where violence and seduction occur → Has violence against the female body been influential in writing about goddesses? Where have female bodies been seduced or eroticized? Are images of vulnerable bodies romanticized in goddess scholarship?<sup>5</sup>

By using Coole's approach I juxtapose goddess scholarship against her six-fold view of scholarly ways to understanding the body. The goal is to use these questions formulated from Coole's to interrogate some views of the female body found in goddess scholarship.

### *Theoretical Background*

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<sup>4</sup> Coole, Diana. "Theorizing the Body: Enduring Questions, Distinctive Approaches." In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, edited by Waylen, Georgina et al., 161-259. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 167.

<sup>5</sup> Coole, "Theorizing the Body: Enduring Questions, Distinctive Approaches," 167-169.

The central focus of goddess studies has often been to ask why goddesses are important for both men and women.<sup>6</sup> Although there has been considerable research conducted on goddess religion in neopagan communities (e.g., Cynthia Eller, Rosemary Ruether, Carol Christ), there is a significant need to study the impacts of goddess culture as a phenomenology of religion - that is, as an experiential religious tradition – which is why examining goddess-studies is essential to the study of the divine feminine.

The key research questions that this paper explores are first, how the female body is presented by some goddess scholars and second, why conversations about “the body” might be relevant for the study of feminist spirituality and feminism more generally. To tackle these key theoretical questions, the framework used in this paper will be *thematic* using Coole’s six approaches to guide my paper.

To begin to untangle these questions, I will present the views of three pioneers of the study of the Goddess because it is important to know the origin of goddess-based spiritual traditions and their reactions to modernity and secularism where gendered bodies are concerned.

### *Methodological Approach*

I have organized the following paper into four chapters. I will first draw attention to similar themes that topics relating to the female body share with goddess spirituality. That is, I ask how the body is a marker of identity, an instrument of power, or a site for long standing myths and rituals. I employ questions drawn from Coole’s work to determine if the body has been a site for individual self-expression and if images of female bodies have been romanticized in goddess scholarship. I intend to canvass Starhawk, Carol P. Christ and Cynthia Eller, well-

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<sup>6</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford. “Why Do Men Need the Goddess? Male Creation of Female Religious Symbols,” In *Dialog A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 3, 234-236. Wiley Online Library, 2005, 234.



known goddess scholars. This approach will allow me to determine how these goddess scholars view the female body. By observing what the role of embodiment is within matriarchal history and in neopagan ritual this paper seeks to reveal if targeting some bodies is disempowering to some and empowering to “other” bodies (e.g., male bodies, racialized bodies, underprivileged bodies). These three goddess scholars will provide ample evidence to support my argument that these scholars use the female body as a means to discuss goddess culture in the West as it relates to the study of feminist spirituality.

## Chapter 1: Starhawk: Re-imagining Goddess ‘Religion’

### *The Body As A Means of Individual Self-Expression*

In Starhawk’s book, *the Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*<sup>7</sup>, she describes how groups of women in the West have been known to form consciousness-raising groups that celebrate goddesses and female spirituality. She presents a vivid account of poetry, song and dance that exemplify what goddess religion looks like in the late 1970s which remains revolutionary for those who practice goddess rituals (whom she calls Witches) in the western world. Her work represents the body in a variety of ways. First, she begins by mentioning the kinds of bodies that are central to goddess religion: Goddess as maiden, mother, and crone, who in her words come in “all shapes and colors and ages.”<sup>8</sup> These are the types of bodies she places value on in her writing, suggesting that “we honor women for strength as well as for beauty, for knowledge and experience and the power that comes from within, for She is the Mother of inspiration,” a statement which highlights the power of women by placing emphasis on the words “She,” “Mother”, and later “Her” by capitalizing them as one would do if referring to male power in biblical texts (e.g., Father, He, Him). A literary device which clearly articulates which bodies have power and which ones do not.

Starhawk’s “Witchcraft as Goddess Religion,” in *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement* chronicles how the “mechanisms for the oppression of women” provide an “unconscious model (that) continues to shape perceptions even those who have consciously rejected religion.”<sup>9</sup> But, I would like to

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<sup>7</sup> Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Starhawk. “Witchcraft as Goddess Religion.” In *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, edited by Spretnak, C., 1-590. New York: Anchor Books, 1982, 50.

question, which “women” she is referring to in this context because it is important to notice how gender constructs influence the study of the Goddess. Does she refer to religious women or non-religious women? Whose bodies does she discuss and why? To try to unravel *whom* she is writing about, I would draw attention to where Starhawk writes about the body. She very clearly communicates that “A woman has the sacred right to control her own body, as does a man,” a statement that does not mention who these women are, but does prescribe what “they” should be able to do.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in this chapter, she paints a very convincing picture of what kinds of characteristics make up the Craft (Witchcraft as she puts it) by using descriptors such as “birthright” which implies a pure female following. What is more, she mentions “bodies” on several occasions which I argue carries the underlying political message that “women” should reclaim their bodies and “men” should support, listen, and recognize societal ills. To provide an example, Starhawk makes a few suggestions about why goddess religion is a beneficial tool to battle oppression in the West:

Regardless of how abstract the underlying concept of God may be, the symbol, avatars, preachers, prophets, gurus, and Buddhas are overwhelmingly male. Women are not encouraged to explore their own strengths and realizations; they are taught to submit to male authority, to identify masculine perceptions as their spiritual ideals, to deny their bodies and sexuality, to fit their insights into a male mold.<sup>11</sup>

What is overwhelmingly evident in her remarks is that she is carefully criticizing male authority on religion, not only in the western hemisphere, but also in other major “religions” that use women’s bodies to support male authority.

Starhawk quotes Mary Daly, a radical feminist and theologian who critiqued the “Father God” in support of her feminist causes. I suggest, it is important to observe how Starhawk refers

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<sup>10</sup> Starhawk, “Witchcraft as Goddess Religion,” 55.

<sup>11</sup> Starhawk, “Witchcraft as Goddess Religion,” 50.

to other well-recognized feminist activists in her writing to support her argument that male dominated religion(s) serve a special function, the devastating persecution of the female spirit and domination of female sexual liberation. She uses famous bodies (i.e., Mary Daly), to make invisible bodies, the women who accept their place in patriarchal religion, recognized. In her words, “the importance of the Goddess symbol for women cannot be overstressed...our bodies are sacred.”<sup>12</sup> Still, when she talks about “our bodies”, it remains unclear as to who her readers are and who belongs to the “our” she is writing about. Who is her audience? Are they the “our” she says can benefit from the symbol of the goddess? Are they the women and men who participate in Witchcraft? Are they the broader academic audience who might be reading about the politics of women’s spirituality? Starhawk does not say to whom she is referring, but what she does say is that the rise of goddess religion and Witchcraft “makes some politically oriented feminists uneasy.”<sup>13</sup> This reference to the uneasiness that some feminists feel about goddess religion is perhaps a response to the controversial nature of Witchcraft in the West. The controversial nature of employing the symbol of the Goddess in religious practice is notable. Because Witchcraft has a tendency to be devout to the female form, I would perhaps suggest that this uneasiness stems from an uneasiness with using the female body as a be-all-end-all emblem of neopagan goddess-based religions.

Starhawk’s political ideals are similarly reflected in excerpts from *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions*, where her understanding of the female body seems to change with the new century.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, the best way to demonstrate this transformation is to illustrate

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<sup>12</sup> Starhawk, “Witchcraft as Goddess Religion,” 51.

<sup>13</sup> Starhawk, “Witchcraft as Goddess Religion,” 51.

<sup>14</sup> Starhawk et al., *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions*, New York: Bantam, Random House, 2000.

how Starhawk describes the Reclaiming Community of women and men in San Francisco Bay who she describes “have been working together, teaching and creating public rituals, for almost two decades.”<sup>15</sup> One way she depicts this community is by offering suggestions as to how children can be raised in Goddess traditions. Now, not only is there a relevance for female spirituality, but for the children of those females – a new generation of bodies to consider. This paradigm shift reflects the need to include a broader range of people in Goddess traditions for their survival, a rebirth of feminist ideals, which I would suggest is perhaps connected to a new generation of feminists. As remarked upon by Starhawk, goddess religion is an “evolving tradition” that has roots and connections to “nonviolent direct-action politics of groups” (e.g., Abalone Alliance).<sup>16</sup> Social action, or in her voice “direct-action,” is what Starhawk is calling for yet again. In this new era, she calls out to parents of the young, where membership includes those who are “more of us women than men, but...many men and boys.”<sup>17</sup> Women, girls, men, boys are the bodies she is talking about – all are able to relate, support, and be allies according to Starhawk. These differentiations are important and worth mentioning because they demonstrate how gender relations and public awareness concerning the female body, how it is treated, and how the children of those bodies are taught are constantly evolving.

In her book *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, written in her earlier years as a scholar she makes reference to how the Goddess and nature share several similarities. She notes that the Goddess is all-in-one “birthgiver, weaver, earth and growing plant, wind and ocean,”<sup>18</sup> suggesting that the Goddess as an immanent theological figure brings religion and nature

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<sup>15</sup> Starhawk et al. *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Starhawk et al. *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Starhawk et al. *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1982, 4.

together. The Goddess can be understood as both an immanent and transcendent religious phenomenon: transcendent in the sense that she exists apart from or beyond the limitations of the material universe; and immanent because she *is* an embodiment of nature (e.g., Mother Earth). To focus on the latter, the Goddess as immanent demonstrates how the figure of the Goddess is emblematic of the earth and its natural processes, claims Starhawk. Goddess traditions reveal many goddess types which include: a) the Goddess as the Moon and the greater cosmos, b) the Goddess as atmospheric conditions (e.g., storms), and c) the Goddess as the planet herself, as a part of the soil and all that is naturally created. Her purpose is to do more than provide an exhaustive list of examples of where the goddess is symbolic of nature's processes, rather she thinks the goddess is relevant for environmental issues and planetary thinking. In this sense, the female body represents these environmental issues.

#### *Goddess Religion and the Body as a Vehicle for Long-Standing Myth and Ritual*

According to Starhawk, goddess religion has existed since the beginning of civilization and can be found in the prominence of storytelling about astonishing females who have used their gender as a weapon to help heroes conquer villains, be the heroes themselves, or at the very least play some kind of influential role in myths that star women as playing a prominent part in the making of history. The establishment of myths where women are key players is deeply rooted in many stories told in the history of religion as well. To name a few, there is a longstanding history of temple prostitution in the Ancient Near East, fertility cult activity in ancient Rome, and even tales about women casting love spells which were highly sought after in medieval Europe. People have searched for meaning through erotic experiences where the female body is front and centre in storytelling for centuries as evidenced by the obsession that humans have with

the human body (male and female). To provide a more concrete example, phallic representations of the male anatomy are rampant in ancient Greek inscriptions where bulls, staffs, trees all represent the strength of the Gods. Yet, in contrast there is also exaggerated iconography of the female body that can be found in Northern France where Paleolithic cave art is historically well-documented. Gods and goddesses are present in religious texts, archaeological evidence and in historical records worldwide, especially where nature is concerned as supreme deities are often depicted as controlling the weather and other elements of the environment (e.g., the wind, water, darkness/night, sky, air controlled by various goddesses in the Greek Pantheon). For instance, and ironically so, Chaos (Khaos) “the primeval goddess of the gap between heaven and earth was the air which men breathed. Below Chaos lay the flat body of the earth, and above the mists. She was the mother of darkness and night and of the birds.”<sup>19</sup> This example shows how goddesses have been used by people to represent their lives for centuries. All of these examples of early goddess religions in the history of Christianity in both the East and the West, are just a few notable instances where the fear of the female body plays a role in stories told about the making of human civilization.

Perhaps I digress, but one aspect remains clear as Starhawk suggests, the revival of the Goddess and her popularity in the late twentieth century is tied to both the sexual revolution and the eco-feminist movement as its purpose was to liberate women while adhering to standards which protected the environment. What does goddess scholarship have to do with nature as it connects to the history of the world religions? One answer lies in the explanation that new forms of social movements, especially the rise in peace movements (e.g., Rachel Carson advancing

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<sup>19</sup> Note: see the Theoi Project: "Sky Gods." Sky Gods & Goddesses, in *Theoi Greek Mythology*. Accessed December 24, 2016. <http://www.theoi.com/greek-mythology/sky-gods.html>. 2000,1.

global awareness about environmental concerns and ecology) are influenced by global concerns, such as environmental problems led by popular female leaders. In more recent history, the environmental movements of the late twentieth century had a profound impact on everyday activism, which are in turn linked to spiritual feminist activity as well. Activism, is a common theme found within storytelling. There is always a hero or heroine, a bad ‘guy’ or bad ‘girl’ that threatens society, and the female body is usually to blame. In short, political agendas regarding the safeguarding of the planet were at a high point in history in the 1970s and were often tangled up with feminist agendas as it would have been difficult to discuss one topic and disregard the other.

While concepts of nature and the environment are only briefly mentioned in Starhawk’s writing, still it is evident that studying the goddess as the creatress of the earth provides some people with a framework – epistemological explanations and origin stories about how the world functions and came to be at the beginning – that allow humans to connect to nature. The concept of the Goddess is a social construct of sorts – a shapeshifting symbol that tells what people care about (i.e., planetary ills), argues Starhawk. The female body, like a planetary body or the planet earth is the perfect example of something that is protected, sacred, and valued.

An attack on the environment is an attack on the female body. According to Starhawk, female bodies are associated with the environment as a marker of identity.<sup>20</sup> Starhawk further suggests that perhaps living one’s liberated erotic-goddess-like life is indeed to resist, battle, and oppose all harm to the “planetary body” - where the immanent body of the Goddess is a metaphor for the earth’s well-being. At base, there is a planetary ethic – an ethical obligation to

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<sup>20</sup> Starhawk et al., “Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions,” 6.



look after one's body and the greater environment. The protection of the earth and of the female body is fundamental to feminist spirituality because 'the sexual' as it relates to the erotic, is religious. The personal is political is spiritual, in that everything is connected. The political body and the environmental well-being of nature are metaphors for how well the female body is being treated by the male body.

In the rare occasion that Starhawk comments on her own study of goddesses, she makes the comment "my conception of the Goddess and God have changed," where she scrutinizes her own thoughts saying that she sees these divine figures as "even less as psychological abstracts and more as real personalities that are derived from real places, real interactions of plant, animal, and human communities," real people, real personalities and perhaps most importantly, real bodies. And, while she does not define what "reality" is per se, she does suggest that her scholarship is influenced by real-time events.

### *The Body as a Site for Desire, Pleasure and Agency*

In other respects, Starhawk uses several eloquent approaches to portray the female body where she explains that female spirituality brings "a comfort, a sense of being at home" in one's body.<sup>21</sup> She also calls it a place where "we take pleasure," that mimics "the internal landscape in which we live."<sup>22</sup> In other words, the female body is a source of everyday empowerment that brings comfort, pleasure, and imitates the landscape (political, social etc.) in which we live in while also providing spiritual support – as many religions do. She continuously references the body and various body parts such as the penis, vaginal passage, breasts, wombs, cunt, mound, crack, thighs, hips, genitals, calves, feet, shoulders, mouth, jaw, throat, neck, face, hair, eyes,

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<sup>21</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 70.

hands, flesh, among numerous other parts of the human body. The number of references to bodily functions and body parts is, I would suggest, systematically representative of the influence of the female body and what it connotes. As a more profound societal concern, it is clear that concepts of gender and how gender is coupled with the body is of particular interest to goddess scholars such as Starhawk.

## Chapter 2: Carol P. Christ: Where Gendered Bodies Often Appear

### *Goddess Bodies are the Battlefield*

To begin to explore Carol P. Christ's work as it relates to how she views the female body, one must first contextualize what it is about goddess bodies and people who care about them that matters in her writing. In Carol P. Christ's *Why Women Need the Goddess*, women's experiences with goddess worship are a result of the widespread interest in New Age spirituality. Christ urges religious studies scholars to consider "the effect of male symbolism of God on women," where the godhead serves to legitimize male authority within patriarchal political systems.<sup>23</sup> She makes the observation that female bodies, or what I will call here, 'goddess bodies' are symbols of everyday empowerment for women. She notices that there is a shift from a monotheistic male-god-system to an emphasis on female liberation – the Goddess is political product. This distinction is crucial to her work because it denotes how "women's" bodies, particularly but not exclusively in white middle-class neopagan communities, are associated with goddesses as a new religious phenomenon. Christ comments on how chiefly neopagan communities in the West have often used images of motherhood to create mix-and-match makeshift shrines and rituals

Careful and systematic analysis of the nuances of Christ's book, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* reveals how resistance to Goddess history has been a

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<sup>23</sup> Christ, Carol P., "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections" In *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, edited by Spretnak, C., New York: Anchor Books, 1979, 6.

prominent feature of feminist spirituality in the West.<sup>24</sup> She posits, for example, that Eliade cannot imagine that women or female symbolism were central in Paleolithic religion “at the time of origins,” and that in contrast, he “finds the alleged symbols of hunting religion, including a male Supreme Being, sacrificial death... validated in later patriarchal religions, most especially in Christianity,” which demonstrates how little attention has been given to Goddess history when discussing Creatresses and the “origins” of the “world religions.”<sup>25</sup> Her observation is highly relevant because it raises an interesting question: is the “rebirth of the goddess” a response to how gendered bodies are reflected in the political sphere?

To answer her own question, she shows how many Christian traditions that are rooted in Greek history make use of ancient representations of “Goddess mothers” where modern Greeks made pilgrimages to “beautiful places not much different from their ancient ancestors, who brought offerings to Goddess mother.”<sup>26</sup> Christ uses examples of motherhood in modern Wiccan practices to show how the female body is worshiped and celebrated. Although Christ asks why neopagan communities in the West often celebrate motherhood as a prototypical embodiment of the female body, she also tries to draw out some of the consequences of using mothers as the only celebrated form of the divine feminine. She further questions if the symbol of the Goddess reveals an affirmation of the authenticity and legitimacy of female empowerment. As mentioned by Christ, one answer might be that:

Because religion has such a compelling hold on the deep psyches of so many people, feminists cannot afford to leave it in the hands of the fathers...religions centered on the worship of a male God creates ‘moods’ and ‘motivations’ that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same time legitimizing the *political* and *social* authority

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<sup>24</sup> Christ, Carol P. *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. Philadelphia: Routledge, 2012, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 42.

of fathers and sons in the institutions of society.<sup>27</sup>

This passage shows that religion and feminism are linked and that leaving religion in the “hands of the fathers” makes for religion that does not support the needs of women and their bodies. Still, Christ makes a point of recognizing that it would be problematic to assume that *all* female bodies represent *all* women or one version of woman is prominent in the neopagan communities she studies as a goddess scholar. She observes that the motivations of many goddess scholars are to overcome taboos set by male monotheism. For example, these motivations could be to overcome menstrual taboos, change cultural attitudes about death and rebirth, or overthrow mind-body dualisms based on gendered assumptions about the body, suggests Christ.<sup>28</sup> And yet, nostalgia for past goddesses, that is, historical images of women which usually depict the female body as large breasted with hefty childbearing hips, no hands, feet and sometimes headless were celebrated in the 1970s and continue to be of interest to practitioners of goddess religion because of a profound magnetism to religious issues that concern the body – both male bodies and female bodies in religious groups.

Notably, Christ’s work has often raised questions about how goddesses and the Goddess are present in Christianity and Judaism.

A re-occurring theme in her more recent works (2012, 2005, 2016) makes a point of mentioning how Biblical images of God and “the Christian and Jewish interpretations are an integral part of western culture...and that it is difficult to speak of the Goddess without comparing her positively or negatively to the images of God.”<sup>29</sup> She is well-aware, that painted

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<sup>27</sup> Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections,” 365.

<sup>28</sup> Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections,” 370.

<sup>29</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 46.

images, sculptures and artworks that depict Christian and Jewish male versions of God in ancient texts depict ‘him’ regularly as an old white man, a king, or lord with male features such as a beard (which ironically resembles phallic imagery). By contrast, goddesses are often relegated by scholars of religion to subservient positions of saint (Mary, mother of Jesus), sinner (Eve, the first woman), and slut (e.g. concubines, such as Tamar). This pattern, where women’s bodies are contrasted to their male God counterparts, she argues are commonly commemorated in world religions ranging from the Christian world, to goddesses found in Greco-Roman Antiquity, to Asian and Abrahamic religions.

### *Topics of Embodiment, Expression & Differential Experience*

Christ questions if it is easier to accept god-based-theology as opposed to goddess-based-theology. If so, why and how is it recognized? Her answer is that some women believe that they are embracing their “inner goddesses” because it challenges the current power structure within religious structures. Goddess-based theology, according to Christ, challenges the current power structure of monotheistic patriarchal religions (e.g., Christianity where language such as “Father” is used to describe God). Here, it is important to note that the word *theos* rooted in Greek means male God, whereas, *thea* means “Goddess.”<sup>30</sup> It is significant because a shift from “theology” to “thealogy” indicates that greater attention is being given to female anatomy, female perspectives, and female life. Because thealogy provides a sturdy framework for feminist critique to occur, it has allowed for a more complete study of the Goddess.

Christ’s work is well-regarded, as foundational to goddess studies. When discussing the theme of embodiment, I would draw attention to how she understands the Goddess as a religious

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<sup>30</sup> Starhawk et al., *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions*, 6.

symbol with Clifford Geertz in mind. Along these lines, Christ expresses her views on “embodiment” in the following where she writes:

In thinking about the meaning of the Goddess in an embodied way, we must remember that religious symbols shape the way we see ourselves and the world. Those attracted to goddess religion make this connection intuitively, rejecting exclusively masculine images of God as serving the interests of male dominance and control. Many are also drawn to the images of goddesses because they provide an orientation that can help us save the planet from ecological destruction.<sup>31</sup>

This passage is relevant to the concept of religion as personal choice because it recognizes that there are people (although non-specific as to who they are in this context) who are finding intuitive ways of using goddess imagery to orient themselves in a seemingly religious way.

While it remains important to recognize that Christ’s goal is not exclusively to call attention to how these people “find meaning” by using goddess religion in their daily lives, her writing does in fact frame embodiment as a positive force that serves female interests as opposed to male interest and dominance. Furthermore, she specifically highlights how the rejection of masculine images in goddess religion gives women power – or empowerment – to fight for social causes that concern the well-being of their bodies.

She also writes extensively on Geertz’s view of religious symbols. It is here where she suggests that the Goddess is the ultimate religious symbol for some women. She suggests that goddess religion fulfills a basic human need - the psychic need – to create symbols, enact rituals, and create systems of logic which enable people to grapple with death, mortality, and the unknown.<sup>32</sup> Christ’s application of Geertz, which tells us that “women’s unique position as

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<sup>31</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 48.

<sup>32</sup> Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections,” 72.

menstruants, birth givers, and those who have traditionally cared for the young and the dying,” demonstrates how the glorification of the female body is pertinent to the study of religion.<sup>33</sup>

In her reflection on “Why Women, Men and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later,” she responds to the earlier article mentioned in this paper, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” and she expands on criticisms of her work surrounding the female body. Such criticisms, made by some Christian feminist theologians, as she puts it, are usually quick to target, for example the Goddess movement as a group of privileged women who meet in private, which she promptly asserts is a caricature that is wrong on several counts. She underscores how the distortion of goddess feminists as “privileged white women erases the participation of non-white and non-privileged women...seems to assume (wrongly!) that non-white and non-privileged women are unaffected.”<sup>34</sup> These bodies, these non-white, non-privileged bodies she refers to here, she claims have often been ignored and undervalued. The erasure of these bodies, or the neglect of non-female bodies, however, is rectified in the title of her 2012 response where she includes “women”, “men” and “other living things,” which she suggests should have been her title all along! Moreover, she writes that another meaning for the symbol of the Goddess is its common representation of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in both the natural and human worlds. The female body, for Christ is thus viewed as a *direct* incarnation of life, death, and cycles of the universe. She even uses the potent example seen in Christian interpretations of naked female bodies and female sexuality in the story of the sin of Eve where female sexuality is the root of all evil.<sup>35</sup> The female body, in

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<sup>33</sup> Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections,” 77.

<sup>34</sup> Christ, Carol P. “Why Women, Men and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later.” *Feminist Theology* 20, no. 3, 2012, 247.

<sup>35</sup> Christ, “Why Women, Men and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later,” 247.



this interpretation is therefore associated with religious taboos as opposed to positive imagery of the female body.

*God's Body & Goddess Bodies as an Instrument of Power*

It is in this same reflection that she reiterates how “God’s body” is culturally constructed as a male father figure who rules over humankind. And, while “His” body is displayed as distinctly masculine, according to Christ, “the Goddess is female; the earth the body, and nature are her image...we must question dualistic and hierarchical assumptions about God’s relation to the changing world that arose in the wake of the slaying of the Goddesses of earth.”<sup>36</sup> This powerful statement equalizes God’s body with Goddesses whose female bodies have been historically devalued. By placing goddesses on the same level of importance as gods within the study of religion, Christ therefore acknowledges the importance of studying goddesses alongside traditional gods studied within the contexts of religion, anthropology, gender studies, and many other disciplines.

A “reverse valuation”, as Christ writes, of these opposite bodies – god vs. goddess – within the study of religion is occurring, she argues, so as to reflect on the limitations of “the God we have known” and to stop thinking of bodies, specifically goddess bodies, as a dualistic pairing (i.e., as polar opposites) meant to complement male divinity.<sup>37</sup> Christ comes full circle by questioning the need to ask questions about the gender of God. She asks: “are we now at the point where we can say that we – women, men, and all living things – no longer need the Goddess?”,<sup>38</sup> a question that underpins her entire research premise! Needless to say, Christ

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<sup>36</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. 89.

<sup>38</sup> Christ, “Why Women, Men and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later.” 14.

does in fact answer her own question by calling attention to a variety of feminist issues in America where female bodies are the center of attention. The way in which she measures the sliding-scale of *need*, that is – if women, men, all living things – do indeed need the Goddess is by aptly measuring “women’s continuing lack of acceptance of their bodies” through several examples which include: the increase in cosmetic surgery, the draining and unequal responsibilities of gendered housework (e.g., the double day of work), and refused job promotions, later known as the glass ceiling, where many Americans, she suggests seek to deny women the right to control their own bodies. All of these examples suggest that “we do not yet live in a post-feminist world,” says Christ, leading her to assert that the Goddess is still needed as a symbol of female power to challenge dualism in the male-God religious system.

Put simply, female bodies continue to be a symbol of controversy as “very little headway has been made,” in regards to the advancement of politics surrounding the female body.<sup>39</sup> In this context, using terminology such as the word “Goddess” as opposed to always using the word “God” to define a higher power can be used to mobilize people into participating in social action and “feel the presence” of the Goddess. Along these lines, the study of goddesses, according to Christ, is *not* an simply invention of “one group of women,” but suggests that the female body and how it is either revered or dismissed is at the crux of social change. She proposes that goddess culture is created by a social need to make the political personal.

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<sup>39</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 89.

### Chapter 3: Cynthia Eller: The Divine World Reflects Human World

#### *The Problematization of Pornographic Bodies in Popular Culture*

Cynthia Eller stands in stark contrast to Christ, as her work, namely, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, and her publication, "Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality," offers another way into the study of Goddess religion. That is, she wishes to identify where female bodies appear in the everyday and how they are perhaps a reaction to eroticised bodies in the media and culture. This kind of question asked by Eller about where bodies appear explicitly questions where the *promotion* and veneration of goddess bodies can be found.

In her article "Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality," Eller proposes that female goddess iconography (e.g., images of historic goddesses such as Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ishtar; Athena, or Hindu goddesses Lakshmi or Saravati among many others who are iconic figures is now found on billboards, sprawled across television dramas, and found in popular movies which depict women as heroines. She goes so far as to suggest that "one hardly needs to browse an 'adult' bookstore to find women's bodies on display," making the keen observation that iconographic representations of women (and of "everyday goddesses") appear in mainstream art and advertising as well.<sup>40</sup> According to Eller, a large pantheon of goddesses, is presently used in cultural references around the world. The focal point, and key catch-phrase used in this article is *divine objectification*, or more

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<sup>40</sup> Eller, Cynthia. "Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1, 23-34. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, 23.

specifically, resistance against objectifying female bodies as mere works of modern art to be ogled.

Eller goes on to explain how “spiritual feminists” place emphasis on “female bodiliness” and she makes note of feminine qualities including, “nurturance, intuition, compassion, a comfortableness with sexuality, and a strong connection to nature,” which is not unlike the characteristics denoted by Christ by comparison.<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that Eller approves that all of these characteristics are biologically necessary personality traits of those who wish to take part in goddess rituals, but they do reveal some of the stereotypical imagery that is associated with goddesses. Still, Eller’s work is distinct in that it acknowledges how images of the Goddess can have a damaging effect on the female body if it is only there to be ogled by “curious and controlling” gazes. As commodified objects found in modern films to suggestive carvings of goddesses etched in ancient stone, the problem, she suggests, lies with a “distorting gaze” rather than the art itself where bodies with over-sexualized female characteristics (e.g., naked bodies) are put on display. She calls for a re-evaluation of all female iconography, both old and new, and Eller writes about bodies in art on several occasions where she attempts to tackle the problem of idealizing pornographic images of the female body. This problematization of pornographic bodies is particularly noticeable in the following few quotations.

She first articulates that goddesses appear in modern art as a subject of study:

If the artist is a self-conscious feminist, the message the spectator receives will be to see women, their bodies, sex, and nature in a new and liberating light.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Eller, “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality,” 29.

<sup>42</sup> Eller, “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality,” 33.

Next, she provides an example of how “nudes” in traditional art have been classically re-envisioned on several occasions throughout history as either tasteful or taboo:

a defiant act of exorcism...to free women from the bonds of male-defined pornography, to give women back their own bodies...she [Carolee Schneemann, a performance artist active in the 1960s and 1970s – my gloss] was challenging the traditional use of the female nude in western art.<sup>43</sup>

And yet again, to provide a third example, she refers to an even more explicit and specific example of how an American visual artist Carole Schneemann perceives the female body in western art as an object:

Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as the material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.<sup>44</sup>

This last example is notably different from the rest, and is perhaps the most important because it refers to a real artist’s experience rather than simply commenting on “how” art can be manipulated and serve a political function, an empowering reclaiming of the female body. Eller uses this vivid example of how modern art depicts the female body (and bodies that look like goddesses) as the center of attraction in order to support her argument that the eroticization of those bodies is a culturally constructed concept to either be *read* as self-expression or objectification. What do all these examples have in common and what do they reveal about how Eller views the female body as a goddess scholar? They all question what it might be like for women to concentrate the female gaze on to themselves and their bodies to be “looked at” by other women and by men. Goddess bodies found in western art – which are also gazed at by men

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<sup>43</sup> Eller, “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality,” 32-33.

<sup>44</sup> Eller, “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality,” 33.

and women as a source of empowerment – serve to re-cast the gaze back onto the female body by turning it into a source of power as opposed to a subject of mere objectification.

Likewise, in her book, *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, Eller remarks that associations between women and the body can be traced back through Western history for millennia. To dig deeper, she astutely mentions that when looking at evidence of historical goddesses we must consider the *historicity* of myth. In that, we must consider *who* is creating knowledge and *what* political or personal motivations underpin their research. She observes that “a myth does not need to be true – or even necessarily be *believed* to be true – to be powerful...what matters is *why* the story is told...Feminists [or feminist bodies – my emphasis] of the latter half of the twentieth century are not the first to find the myth of the matriarchal pre-history a manifesto for feminist social change,” which serves a potent reminder that goddess scholarship has its own set of biases and problematics.<sup>45</sup> For example, Eller characterizes goddess bodies as having many non-female characteristics and being associated with nature, animals, and even geometric shapes where she writes that:

If religions can be characterized as either iconoclastic (abhorring images of the divine) or *iconophilic* (relishing images of the divine), feminist spirituality is a clear example of the latter...this ongoing hunger for female symbology [reflects] other sorts of images, including non-human animal images, trees, stars, and geometric shapes.<sup>46</sup>

Eller then raises another question about bodies by questioning if goddess symbols can now be found in non-religious venues and mainstream culture, what then *differentiates* goddess-studies from the study of women in culture?<sup>47</sup> What is more, what then stops goddess scholars from using *any* and *all* iconographic representations of women – willy-nilly – to justify their claims in

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<sup>45</sup> Eller, Cynthia. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000, 57-58.

<sup>46</sup> Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, 138.

respect to the current feminist discourse. She makes the argument that goddess spirituality “travels globally,” and is incredibly hard to define.<sup>48</sup> Goddess symbolism, spirituality, and imagery is inseparable from culture.

Because goddesses can be found everywhere, proposes Eller, goddess religion has the potential to empower many women and men. This shift in perspective observed by Eller and other goddess scholars before her, is now inclusive of female bodies, male bodies, and all “other” bodies as participants which is not surprising, nor is it unexpected because as the definition of feminism has changed drastically over the last fifty years. It has changed in the sense that the word “feminism” has grown to be more inclusive of all kinds of bodies – men, women, children and all those who do not fall into any particular category can now label themselves as feminist. How is feminism linked to goddess religion? The ever-changing definition of feminism, is closely related to the way people have worshipped goddesses as well, because goddess religion is meant to empower those in the margins of society, argues Eller. Goddesses are eroticized and depicted as fashionable, artistic, grotesque, or beautiful bodies to suit the needs of popular demand in a culture that, for the most part, tries to advocate for the rights of women and of feminist causes in the West.

#### *Selling the Celebration of the Female Form*

One example of how the female form is celebrated by society, for instance, is how Hollywood celebrities are, in a way, our era's gods and goddesses. They build empires, live out-of-this-world lifestyles, and captivate us with tales of their exploits. And sometimes, they look like them, too (e.g., a pregnant Beyoncé Knowles performing at the Grammy Awards in 2017,

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<sup>48</sup> Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, 57-58.

toting a headdress that looks like a halo).<sup>49</sup> As such, religion is “completely entangled in culture,” allowing for a re-examination of historical goddess figures through a modern perspective.<sup>50</sup> Markedly, this spiritual shift includes “cultural goddess” images which continue to re-shape the Goddess movement where the goddesses of the past are now joined by a plethora of modern goddess representations found in everyday iconography where women could have god-like superpowers (e.g., female heroines such as Wonder Woman, Medusa, Black Widow) who are considered “the Mother Goddess of all” as they serve to fill a role as a divine “protector” of the human world.

Not only is there a shifting image of the Goddess in the media, but there is a push to incorporate a more complex understanding of goddesses beside their male god counterparts. Any female figure (e.g., modern-day superheroine), if revered by the public can be sacred and thus both spiritual and secular. That is, goddess spirituality is a reflexive, ever-changing phenomenon which is perhaps what makes this form of spirituality flexible and resilient. This resiliency explains why goddess scholars might be interested in studying the female body because the religious studies scholar’s view of the female body changes in parallel with the perception of the female body in culture and media, it is no wonder that scholars such as Eller are noticing how the female body is of deep fascination to people in the West seeking spiritual comfort, community, and daily ritual that reflects their everyday needs.

*The Globalization of the Goddess: Commodification of the Female Body for Profit*

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<sup>49</sup> Naughton, Julia. “Beyoncé Was An Actual Goddess During Her Grammys Performance,” 2017. Retrieved on March 3, 2017 at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/02/12/beyonce-was-an-actual-goddess-during-her-grammys-performance/>.

<sup>50</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 183.



Moreover, if the selling of “goddess products” such as goddess bumper stickers, goddess stone figurines, goddess games, jewelry, and tarot decks, as well as admittance to goddess themed festivals, for example, is any indication of how the Goddess movement is able to cross national boundaries, then one might surmise that the sheer volume of goddesses and empowered female iconography used in artwork, in advertisements and even on television could mean that goddess spirituality is popular cross-culturally. According to Eller, these examples are indicative of a larger culture which supports empowered images of the female body. She returns to the idea that images of goddesses can provide spiritual comfort for women because of a long-standing history of devaluing the female form within the study of the divine feminine.

Like the commodification of goddess merchandise which uses the glorification of the female form to sell product, Eller insists that it is essential to ask what the importance of globalization is in the modern world. As a result of the growing popularity of goddesses, many people<sup>51</sup> are choosing to “build their own” goddess altars with products that promote certain images of the female body to meet their spiritual needs. Be that as it may, where globalization and goddess spirituality meet exists at the intersections of *religious pluralism*, where there are many goddess spiritualities created by each individual interested in incorporating goddess imagery into their personalized “lifeworlds” – where individual choice prevails.

Perhaps, a more effective way to approach “religion”, or “goddess religion” as it is often expressed by Eller in “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality,” is to consider how “politics is also a struggle over people’s imaginations, a competition over the meanings of symbols.”<sup>52</sup> As aforementioned there have been shifts of

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<sup>52</sup> Lawrence, Bruce B., “From Fundamentalism to Fundamentalisms: A Religious Ideology in Multiple Forms,” In *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, edited by Paul Heelas, 1999, 123.

spirituality where goddess scholarship is concerned that have caused scholars of religion to rethink how they understand goddesses and female bodies). I therefore suggest that it is possible that these spiritual shifts are *political reactions* to ‘othered’ bodies (usually bodies that are not gender normative such as trans bodies) being *left out of the system*, the system being the institutionalized conventional religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Buddhism).

I once again draw attention to the core argument of this paper which suggests that the history of goddess scholarship is deeply connected to how society views the body. The rejection of rigid “religion” is a response to the view that some bodies are in dire need of empowering.

## Chapter 4: Concluding Thoughts: Drawing on Diana Coole and Conversations

### About the Body

#### *Questions, Criticisms, & Critical Reflections*

I refer to Diana Coole's chapter "Theorizing the Body: Enduring Questions, Distinctive Approaches," in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* to bring the works of Starhawk, Christ and Eller together where matters of the body and goddess scholarship are connected. For Coole, "the point of analyzing the body is to discern the power relationships that regulate, denigrate, define, or produce it as well as to identify the ways different bodies are located and constructed."<sup>53</sup> These power relationships, too, are present in the issues posed by these three scholars. Starhawk notes how women are taught to suppress their bodies and sexuality. Christ talks about how male bodies have been used in myths as instruments of power that shape the female identity. And Eller astutely notes the problematization of pornographic female bodies found in popular culture. What do all of these topics of embodiment raised by these goddess scholars have in common? Each view the body as a site for discussion while individually referring to goddess religion in their unique styles.

Using Coole's six concepts about "the body", I wish to review how these three scholars view the body as 1) an *index* of differential experience, 2) a *marker* of identity, 3) a *vehicle* for long-standing myths and rituals, 4) a *means* of expression, pleasure and agency, 5) a *target* for and instrument of power, and last but not least 6) a *site* for desire and vulnerability where romanticization of female bodies occurs in goddess scholarship. The six words I have chosen to highlight: index, marker, vehicle, means, target and site are worth examining because they reveal how female bodies are presented in goddess scholarship.

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<sup>53</sup> Coole, "Theorizing the Body: Enduring Questions, Distinctive Approaches," 166.

Starhawk suggests that the body is a *means* of sexual expression that can be seen in feminist spirituality when she describes how many groups of women in the West form consciousness-raising groups that celebrate goddesses. She also expresses vivid accounts of what goddess religion looks like to witches (persecuted, celebrated female bodies) in the western world where she mentions the kinds of bodies that are central to goddess religion: female bodies as maiden, mother, and crone. She further discusses how gendered pronouns such as “She”, “Mother” and “Her” are not mentioned as frequently as “He”, “Father” and “Him” in biblical texts which demonstrates how literary devices in religious writing have prioritized certain male bodies.

Starhawk also reflects Coole’s concept of the body as a *marker* of identity in her writing about the eco-feminist movement. She broaches the subject of social action and environmental concerns that were happening at the same time as the 1970s feminist movement as having an influential effect on how people viewed the female body--and therefore, goddess culture too. The concept of the earth and what the ideal so called peaceful female body looks like became newly popular to many modern goddess-worshippers in neopagan communities, argued Starhawk. She argued that “healing the female body” is symbolic of the healing of large bodies of water, forests and all living things. The environmental well-being of the earth’s body are markers for how well the female body is being treated by male bodies in the western world.

Additionally, she mulls over how goddess religion considers the body (both male and female bodies) as a *vehicle* for storytelling from ancient civilizations to the present and adds that these bodies are a *site* for desire, pleasure and agency to occur. She calls the female body a place where “we take pleasure,” that mimics “the internal landscape in which we live.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>54</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 70.

she mentions the body, bodies, and other related themes of embodiment nearly a hundred times in a selection of her writings from 1979-2000.

Christ too reflects Coole's approaches to "the body" in describing goddess religion. She shows how alternative feminist spiritualities function as an *index* of experience and expression for women. By contrast to Starhawk, Christ posits that since the beginning of goddess-studies in western scholarship, there is a tendency to overemphasize historical images of goddesses from past traditions which usually depict the female body as large breasted with hefty childbearing hips, no hands, feet or heads. These bodily characteristics, raised questions about how goddesses are represented in Christianity and Judaism. She makes a point of noting that "it is difficult to speak of the Goddess without comparing her positively or negatively to the images of God,"<sup>55</sup> where she clarifies how celebrated images of the male body are dominant within these religions. As written about in the section of this paper entitled *God's Body & Goddess Bodies as an Instrument of Power*, the purpose of alternative feminist spirituality is to celebrate images of female bodies (and goddess bodies), argues Christ.

Similarly, Christ underscores where *sites* for the romanticization of certain female bodies exist in many goddess communities in the West. She writes about how it is assumed by many scholars of theology that members of neopagan communities (where goddess religion is prominent) are assumed to be completely made up of "privileged white women" who are erasing the participation of non-white and non-privileged women. The romanticization of certain bodies (or 'sites' to use Coole's terminology) over others indicates that the female body is a potential site for discord. She also observes how images of "motherhood" have become taboo as noted in her later works where she recognizes that there has been a shift in what the Goddess resembles.

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<sup>55</sup> Christ, "Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality," 46.

That is, images of goddesses found in goddess religion(s) are no longer limited by biological determinants like maidenhood, motherhood, or cronehood.<sup>56</sup>

Lastly, Eller takes a slightly different stand on how female bodies are *targeted* as either sacred or profane images to be objectified in popular culture. She approaches topics of embodiment with “divine objectification” of female bodies in mind in her article “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality.” She comments on the image of naked women as a totem for feminist spirituality in the modern art movement and prompts her readers to reconsider using the naked body as an emblem for selling spirituality. Women, she suggests, have been “targets” of the male gaze. To refer back to Coole’s concept of “targeting bodies,” I would therefore propose that Eller is perhaps suggesting that the female body is a target for and an instrument of power. Examples of women’s bodies being used as instruments of power are shown in Eller’s writing where she refers to instances of how “nudes” in traditional art have been classically re-envisioned on several occasions throughout history as either tasteful or taboo (e.g., Carole Schneemann establishing her body as “visual territory” where she claims she is an “image marker” because of her status as a visual artist). Correspondingly, Eller mentions other forms of art such as television and Hollywood that describe how female celebrity bodies are, in some ways, our era’s gods and goddesses. She also writes of female superheroines being idealized and targeted as goddesses as a reaction to modern views of the female body. As suggested by Eller, these “super” celebrities, “super” heroines, and “super” bodies are given sensationalized status as modern goddesses. The female body remains a subject of fascination to the public because pornographic images of women have always been popular in media and popular culture. Keeping women’s bodies in the spotlight has provided

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<sup>56</sup> Christ, “Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality.” 46-47.

women with an opportunity to create, shape, mold an image of the female body that empowers women within patriarchal traditions of religion.

I would like to add to the investigation by suggesting that religious patterns and trends are important to track when studying goddess religion. It becomes even more important to consider how feminist spirituality might offer a new map to the critical study of religion. But, just as women's experiences with their bodies are multifaceted and intersectional experiences, many approaches are needed to untangle goddess scholarship to date. What is more, if traditional religions have "ignored half of the human experience and denied the full humanity of women,"<sup>57</sup> then it is important to consider feminist questions in conversations about religion where topics of gendered bodies are at the forefront. Questions about "the body" are embedded in religious traditions because female bodies and male bodies have often been polarized and brutally pitted against one another in stories and myths that serve to support male religious ideology. As demonstrated throughout this paper, speaking about gods and goddesses demands that discussions about the gendered bodies are had. Using new approaches in which to analyze goddess religions, such as Coole's examination of embodiment, opens up new windows for goddess-studies where the female body is of paramount importance. Moreover, the inclusion of goddess studies as a new spiritual phenomenon in the realm of religious studies suggests that goddess scholarship, by extension, is worth examining as it offers one more explanation into the human condition. "The body" as a category of analysis offers an opportunity to examine how experiences with the female body are embedded and embodied in feminist theology.

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<sup>57</sup> Christ, Carol., and Judith Plaskow, *Goddesses and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology*, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2016, 131.

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