

# *Goddess as Nature*

TOWARDS A  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
THEALOGY

PAUL REID-BOWEN

ROUTLEDGE



## GODDESS AS NATURE

*Goddess as Nature* makes a significant contribution to elucidating the meaning of a female and feminist deity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Bridging the gap between the emergent religious discourse of thealogy – discourse about the Goddess – and a range of analytical concerns in the philosophy of religion, the author argues that thealogy is not as incoherent as many of its critics claim. By developing a close reading of the reality-claims embedded within a range of thealogical texts, one can discern an ecological and pantheistic concept of deity and reality that is metaphysically novel and in need of constructive philosophical, thealogical and scholarly engagement. Philosophical thealogy is, in an age concerned with re-conceiving nature in terms of agency, chaos, complexity, ecological networks and organicism, both an active possibility and a remarkably valuable academic, feminist and religious endeavour.

*To Trevor and Enya, who never met*

# Goddess as Nature

## Towards a Philosophical Thealogy

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# Introduction

## Radical Beginnings

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

### Purpose

From among many developments and transformations in Western religious ideas and practices to have taken place during the late twentieth century, one of the most significant has been the growth of feminist religions and the re-emergence of a reverence for female deities. In the wake of a period of history in which the relations between the sexes have undergone an unprecedented re-assessment and re-organization, the intervention of feminist criticism and activism in religious thought and practice has had a profound impact upon the ways in which divinity and sacrality are conceived and related to in the West. Many established religions have found it necessary to begin to question their activities, concepts and narratives, with regard to the meaning and valuation of sexual difference. New religions have taken shape that directly address the dramatic shift in cultural, political and social understandings of sexual difference, often by placing women in a more central role. Many religious feminists, in agreement with theorists who have suggested that sexual difference may be the philosophical issue of our age, have pushed the issue of sexual difference towards what may be its ultimate conclusion: theorizing the meaning of sexual difference at the level of deity. This book is specifically concerned with those religious feminists who are both attentive to the politics of sexual difference and are also articulating an account of deity that is explicitly sexed as female; that is, it is concerned with the religion of Goddess feminism and the religio-political discourse of theology.

The overall purpose of this work is to contribute to a growing body of academic work that is concerned with explicating and interpreting the feminist account of female deity emerging in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Current academic approaches to feminist religions have, I note, so far focused primarily upon (1) the historical, psychological and sociological meaning and value of revering female deities, (2) phenomenological studies that provide a descriptive account/interpretation of the beliefs and practices of the members of those feminist religions, and (3) comparative works, wherein Goddess religions are contrasted with

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

the dominant religious tradition of the West: Christianity. Relatively little academic work has either emerged from within the feminist religions themselves, or else attempted to delineate the meaning of female deity in a philosophical and systematic manner.<sup>2</sup> There may be legitimate reasons to explain this academic neglect, perhaps most specifically a suspicion amongst many Goddess feminists of the patriarchal form and content of the academy and its disciplines, but a sustained account of the meaning of a female concept of deity, from a position of philosophical enquiry and theological advocacy, is of considerable value to the academic study of religions and also long overdue. My aim is to address these areas of academic and theological neglect.

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

In Chapter One the main features of Goddess feminist discourse are delineated and the relationship of Goddess feminism to philosophical and, specifically, metaphysical modes of thought is examined. This chapter encompasses a number of substantive arguments and develops the contention that the religious myths, metaphors and models deployed by Goddess feminists are, in a significant sense, reality-depicting. Although there are a number of reasons why Goddess feminists may be considered to be antimetaphysical in attitude, notably because they claim they are concerned with immanence and nature, rather than anything which transcends the natural, there are, I contend, no convincing reasons why metaphysics *per se* should be rejected. It is argued, rather, that metaphysical thinking may be of considerable value to Goddess feminists in articulating their account of the female generativity and transformative processes that they understand to be inherent within the natural/cosmic whole.

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2 The notable exceptions to this generalization are Carol Christ's *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1997) and *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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

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

In Chapter Four a theological understanding of time and becoming is delineated. First, the manner in which a theological concept of time coheres with the theology of nature outlined in the preceding chapter is assessed and certain significant differences between feminist theological and masculinist theological concepts of time are identified. Special reference is made to the concepts of history, teleology and eschatology, and this analysis of theological time is then expanded to encompass what may be termed a gynocentric account of time. It is argued that theological time is necessarily a gynocentric form of time and it is explained how this concept of time coheres and converges with theological reality-claims concerning the female generativity of nature. Second, it is argued that the new mathematics, sciences and metaphysics of chaos and complexity share many features in common with

Goddess feminist models of reality; and the theories of chaos and complexity can lend philosophical precision to a Goddess feminist metaphysic. Goddess feminist views of time, becoming and chaos systemic theories are correlated in this chapter, demonstrating significant elements of convergence.

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

I conclude by providing some recommendations for future theological reflection. This book is, I contend, a foray into a new discipline of philosophical theology and, hopefully, may also serve to provide some useful conceptual resources for feminist metaphysical theorizing. No claims as to theoretical completeness are made on my part, and I readily acknowledge that the concerns of this work are rather broad. This book is an initial attempt to draw feminist theological reality-claims towards a point of philosophical coherence. I certainly do not claim to speak for all Goddess feminists. But this work does claim to be *a* feminist theology, the originality and significance of which lies in its development of a metaphysical account of the Goddess as nature – Goddess/Nature – that has largely been assumed rather than articulated by most Goddess feminists.

## **Methodology**

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

### *Feminist disciplines and discourses*

That the methods and tasks of academic disciplines have been constituted within a framework of androcentric and masculinist concerns and biases is not a point that I wish to belabour in this section. There are, it has been comprehensively argued by feminist scholars working within many different fields of enquiry, radically different ways of conceiving academic disciplines and discourses, and these alternatives should be actively pursued if the many errors and injustices of the patriarchal academy are to be corrected. Within the academic study of religions feminist theologians have

been working at this task in a sustained manner for more than thirty years, feminist anthropologists, historians, psychologists and sociologists have made important contributions during the last twenty years, and, more recently, feminists philosophers such as Pamela Sue Anderson and Grace Jantzen, have laid down much needed groundwork for the philosophy of religion.<sup>3</sup> This work occupies the academic and conceptual terrain that has been reshaped by recent feminist interventions in the study of religions, and the insights of many feminist theorists and scholars of religion are a guiding methodological element of this research. Somewhat problematically, however, this work also straddles two academic and religious discourses that arguably may be incompatible with one another, and some commentary is required to elucidate and justify the mixed methodological approach that follows.

### *Towards a philosophical thealogy*

Initially, this book may be defined as philosophical in character and method. I affirm from the outset that conceptual analysis, the clarification of truth-claims, issues of coherence and consistency, and specifically the construction of a metaphysical theory, are core concerns of this work, and these concerns are perennially philosophical. Problems arise, however, when it is also acknowledged that this research is contributing to a form of feminist religious discourse, namely thealogy, which has been and remains deeply suspicious and critical of philosophical concerns, methods and values. Although philosophy has worked in the service of religion at various points throughout history, the degree of methodological compatibility between philosophy and feminist thealogy requires careful evaluation.

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

Significantly, however, thealogy has emerged within a non-traditional religious context; it is a religious discourse that often identifies itself as methodologically opposed to theology; and it is remarkably difficult to link thealogy with a specific religious institution or belief-system. That is, thealogy is a form of discourse or discipline that has taken shape in a grass-roots fashion from a diverse array of religious/cultural resources evident throughout North America, Western Europe and Australasia during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the contextual and substantive

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

factors that define thealogy are explicated more thoroughly later in this Introduction and in Chapter One, it is necessary to affirm that thealogy is a form of radical feminist religious discourse that identifies itself as opposed to many of the male-identified discursive and methodological practices that have preceded it. Notably, thealogy is highly suspicious of philosophical enquiry (because philosophy is identified with the patriarchal academy) and has not as yet chosen to engage with philosophical concerns directly. Indeed, as Cynthia Eller observes,

spiritual feminists are iconoclasts: they love to flout the rules of the theological discipline, to challenge the categories usually used to think about the sacred. They don't think most of the categories apply to what they experience anyway. Or rather, they think all of them apply indiscriminately, even those categories that were originally set up to be mutually exclusive.<sup>4</sup>

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

The theological commentator Emily Culpepper claimed in the 1980s that theological discourse was fundamentally opposed to conceptual precision and philosophical enquiry. She noted that '[i]nherent in its grassroots manner of creativity is the instinct to elude attempts at logical systematizing. Goddess logic includes, but is not limited by the rational; it is primarily created through a wide-ranging spiritual free thinking.'<sup>5</sup> This, I would claim, is a fair description of the discursive terrain that constituted the beginnings of thealogy. But it does not provide any reason to believe that thealogy currently is, or will always be, restricted to grassroots creativity and resistant to logical systematization. Despite the diversity of ideas that have been expressed through thealogy in the last thirty years, an overview of contemporary Goddess feminist and theological literature reveals considerable uniformity of thought and many areas of conceptual agreement and convergence.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 130.

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

6 See Melissa Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacralty* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) and *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000).

Moreover, the suggestion that theology includes but is not limited to the rational does not necessitate a rejection of philosophical thought *per se*. Many philosophies, particularly of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, have conceived rationality in a wide variety of ways, and in many respects have not denied bodily, emotional, linguistic, political and unconscious forces play a role in the formation of philosophical and rational discourse. Feminist philosophy in particular has been concerned to reconceive the nature of rationality and to reclaim human desire, embodiment and the passions as vitally important components of philosophical enquiry.<sup>7</sup> Theology cannot, therefore, reject philosophy simply on the grounds that it is in some sense limited by or restricted to the rational.

This book proceeds with the view that theology can reap benefits from an increased degree of conceptual precision in the articulation of its ideas, narratives and reality-claims. Many of the critiques that are currently directed towards Goddess-centred worldviews focus upon an apparent lack of coherence and intelligibility. This is a lack that can, I contend, be corrected by recourse to the application of a certain amount of philosophical rigour. This endeavour need not entail the denial or rejection of theological principles; and a feminist philosophical theology need not be a methodological contradiction in terms. Philosophical concerns relating to coherence, consistency and conceptual analysis are applied to theology in this book, and what I hope is a plausible reading of the central reality-claims and metaphysical commitments of Goddess feminism is developed systematically. That is, theology and philosophy are drawn into a close working relationship and applied to a Goddess feminist worldview in a constructive manner. Methodologically this work is a first step towards addressing issues that will confront any Goddess feminist who seeks to provide a coherent account of their ideas and values in the future; it may be characterized as a prolegomena to future philosophical theologies and also a contribution to feminist metaphysical theorizing.

Problematically, though, the methodological principles I have outlined above are rendered more complex because of my own status as a feminist and a theologian. That is, as a male academic, my relations to feminist philosophy and particularly feminist theology are at best vexed, and at worst, impossible. It is to a consideration of these methodological difficulties that I turn next.

### **Reflexivity: situating the self**

In this section I provide methodological commentary on the placement of men, and specifically myself, within relationship to both feminist research and a feminist religious discourse about a female deity. That is, I address the problematic nature of men working with, or within, the feminist academic study of religions. This may seem to be a marginal methodological issue at present. However, the issue is a

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



particularly acute and pressing one for myself, and will, I hope, also need to be faced by other men in the future.

For the past ten years now I have been academically and emotionally engaged with the critical and constructive projects of feminism, and this commitment to feminism has most recently cohered around this book. It is this research, however, that has promoted a number of methodological, theoretical and also very personal ambivalences and difficulties, with regard to my status as a male academic working with feminist disciplines/discourses. I have found myself having to question what exactly it is that I am doing; and, more importantly, I have had to carefully evaluate whether I can or rather *ought* (morally, politically and academically) to be doing it.

Many of my methodological concerns have, admittedly, been confronted by men working within a broad range of academic disciplines and fields of enquiry in recent years; and the contentious issues raised by 'men in feminism' and 'men doing feminism' have been addressed in several books and collected volumes of papers during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>8</sup> However, the issues and questions that I continue to struggle with flow directly from my engagement with the radical feminist religious discourse of theology, and there is a virtual silence with regard to men working within this subject area.

### *Feminist discourses: new horizons and impossible relations*

Clearly serious difficulties confront any man who wishes to engage with a religious discourse/discipline that identifies itself as grounded within a feminist and/or female consciousness. On the most basic level of analysis there is the pervasive cultural perception that feminism and men are necessarily locked into an adversarial relationship with one another; while on other levels there are epistemological questions pertaining to the horizons and nature of sexed/gendered knowledge to be considered, and complex ethical questions relating to men's beneficial participation within a patriarchal framework of systemic gender oppression. For myself, the question of what it means for a male academic to take feminism seriously is undoubtedly at the root of my research dilemma, although issues of religious commitment and the limits of a man's ability to engage with the theological imagination are also particularly relevant. To state the problem as explicitly as I am able, I have had to consider whether I can, in any meaningful way, write about a radical feminist religion, largely by means of feminist academic disciplines, from a position of advocacy and commitment, as a man?

Admittedly, from a social constructionist perspective my gender in the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo's words, only 'forms one axis of a complex heterogeneous construction, [a construction that is] constantly interpenetrating in historically

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8 See Tom Digby (ed.), *Men Doing Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998); John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (Portland, OR: Breitenbush Books, 1989); Michael Kaufman (ed.), *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

specific ways with multiple other axes of identity'.<sup>9</sup> That is, variables such as age, class, ethnicity, health, race and sexual orientation may play a more significant role in the formation of my identity than gender alone. Moreover, my relationship to feminism need not be unduly problematic in this respect in so far as I am not readily reducible to a single category or essence called 'man'. I am a composite identity who, in principle at least, may construe and construct myself as feminist. However, this position arguably surrenders far too much to constructionism. Without engaging directly with the ongoing and increasingly nuanced debates between constructionist and what are commonly identified as essentialist schools of thought, one may reasonably point out that sexual difference is real (even if not merely or purely dichotomous) and arguably makes an immense difference to one's identity-formation and life-prospects within nearly any imaginable cultural/historical situation. The problem is knowing the difference that sexual difference makes.

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

For myself, it is my very engagement with the feminist religion that I am researching that may be the most challenging issue of all. As Richard Roberts has cogently noted, '[t]he borderline between empathetic understanding and the psychological vortex of identity-transformation is often hard to discern and even more difficult to control'.<sup>10</sup> In my own case, I have been intellectually and spiritually attracted to Goddess feminism and theology for a number of years, and my research has only served to intensify that level of engagement. My positioning along the old, and perhaps somewhat outdated, neutrality-commitment and insider-outsider (*emic-etic*) continua of religious studies has shifted dramatically in the past few years, and I am now faced with the possibility that I may be doing or writing feminist theology.

As a man who takes feminist concerns seriously, I am preoccupied with the degree to which I am taking masculinist methodological concerns and imposing them upon a feminist religion that is actively opposed to them. In this research the elucidation

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

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

and systematization of theological reality-claims is a methodological concern; and it is a concern that runs problematically against the claims of many interpreters and practitioners of Goddess feminism. As Emily Culpepper has claimed: 'I do not believe that theology can be adequately conveyed or developed in the forms used by traditional theological discourse. Inherent in its grassroots manner of creativity is the instinct to elude attempts at logical systematizing.'<sup>11</sup> Or, to expand upon Culpepper's point, Goddess feminism is primarily concerned with mythopoetics, ritual activity and the affective dimensions of religion; it is a religious movement that encompasses a wide range of religious perspectives and practices but is not overly concerned with the elucidation and/or coherence of those perspectives and practices. Goddess feminists share many values, notably feminist and ecological values that are on the side of life, but any discussion of belief-systems, conceptual coherence and systematization is usually rejected as inherently patriarchal and oppressive. That is, in their efforts to subvert and transform patriarchy, Goddess feminists often exclude issues and fields of enquiry that, arguably, require more careful consideration and critical evaluation.

Feminist theologians and philosophers are, I reiterate, attempting to think the nature and tasks of their disciplines differently from the patriarchal norm, without completely giving up on issues of coherence, elucidation and systematization, and I want to suggest that feminist theologians ought to do the same. But, I hesitate, do they need to? And, more importantly, what exactly is it that I am projecting upon the theological imagination as a man? How exactly is it possible to traverse these feminist religious concerns, in a serious and sympathetic manner, as a male academic, without being reduced to a state of research paralysis?

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

### *Discursive colonization and violence*

First, it is important to consider issues of colonization and violence. For a male academic to think seriously about his relationship to feminist religious disciplines and discourses he must carefully reflect upon a number of boundary issues. In what respects are his relations to those disciplines/discourses analogous to those of a colonizer? In what sense is the discursive terrain of a feminist discipline/discourse an environment that should not be entered, and what damage is his male presence likely to do to the ecology/integrity of that discipline or discourse? Reflection on the long history of patriarchal colonization around the world is not only relevant when applied to discursive environments, it is also remarkably illuminating. Consider, for

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11 Culpepper, 'Contemporary Goddess Theology', p. 55.

example, the fact that indigenous populations have been harmed, emergent ways of life have been distorted and exploited, and fragile ecosystems have been disrupted and stripped of their essential resources by the forces of colonization. For a man to enter into a relationship with a feminist religious discipline or discourse is for him to potentially cross a boundary that should be passed only with great care; the environment may be exotic, stimulating and also rewarding, but his male presence within that environment may also be damaging and wholly unwanted. If one can speak of discursive ecologies, the environs of feminist religious discourses are not a natural home to men and should be approached accordingly; that is, with something akin to an ecological consciousness and attitude of respect. Entering with confidence may be a mistake, entering without due sensitivity to one's foreign and possibly toxic status may be catastrophic. As has been cogently noted by Cary Nelson, 'unresolvable pain can be the result of men's interrelations with feminism [and] this throws discourse into a material domain that most academics are generally wholly unprepared for'.<sup>12</sup> Feminist discourses are admittedly not unique in this respect; painful disagreements may arise in countless discursive environments and spheres of life. But given the dynamics and history of patriarchal power, and the relations of feminist discourses to that power, one must endeavour as a male academic to proceed carefully. All conversations are power-charged, and careful attention needs to be given, therefore, to the flow and balance of that power. To not do so is to possibly duplicate a logic of colonization, a colonizing identity, and to do violence to something with which one may fundamentally agree.

### *Men's desires and interests*

My second main methodological concern relates to men's desires and interests; or what exactly it is that men want from feminism? A recurrent question that I am confronted with commonly takes the form of, 'why the interest in feminism?' or 'why did you become a feminist?' Occasionally I feel as if I should be able to recount something akin to a conversion experience in answer to this question, but unfortunately there is nothing quite so experientially ready to hand. It is relatively easy to cite rational arguments why one ought to be a feminist, but the question seemingly addresses something far deeper than this: i.e. what were the psychological and social conditions, drives, events and processes that caused me to become a feminist? If one takes seriously any of the various depth psychologies, accounts of the unconscious, and significantly feminist problematizations of the self, one cannot avoid giving some serious thought to one's feminist motives and desires as a man.

Roland Barthes once commented that we study what we desire or fear, a suggestion that I think points toward one of the core problems that men, and specifically heterosexual men, must navigate in relation to their interest in feminism.<sup>13</sup> There may, I contend, be a fear of the feminist/female 'other' at work in any man's interest

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

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

in feminism (and perhaps also a corresponding desire to control the dangerous feminist other), or, more plausibly, a desire to relate more closely to the female other. In my own case, I would probably have to admit that an element of desire is and always has been at work in my feminist commitments. The subject of feminism is primarily women and, for a heterosexual man, feminist discourses and theories can undoubtedly be based upon a desire that, in the broadest sense of the term, may be identified as erotic. What one does with this insight, I'm not sure. What it does point towards, however, is the fact that men's desires are always already active in their feminist commitments; and while men may also find feminist discourses attractive because they are areas of vital intellectual activity within their professions, or else perhaps routes to their own personal growth, this only serves to further emphasize that it is their desires and interests that are being served.<sup>14</sup> A heterosexual man's commitment to feminism can rarely be said to be entirely in women's interests, and this is a reality that men need to reflect upon.

Similarly, in a powerful and sweeping analysis of why male feminism may be an oxymoron, David Kahane examines the probable limits of men's feminist knowledge and emphasizes that men with feminist commitments may inevitably engage in various forms of self-deception and bad-faith.<sup>15</sup> Kahane's central point is that, when men fight patriarchy, they are, to a significant degree, also fighting themselves (and this necessarily includes their male desires and interests). If women are suspicious of men's feminist commitments, it is for this obvious but far from trivial reason. And it is arguable that it is for this, and perhaps no other reason, that the status of men within relation to feminism must remain marginalized, at least in the present society. The degree to which men can transform themselves, and reconfigure their desires and interests in a manner that no longer contributes to women's oppression, is an open question.

### *Reflexive transformations*

In short, any man who takes the concerns of feminism seriously ought to be prepared to accept entry into a state of what the social theorist Anthony Giddens has referred to as chronic reflexivity.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, if any man is comfortable with his feminism, I would suggest that there is something seriously amiss. As David Kahane observes, '[t]o the extent that a man understands feminism in more than a shallow way, he faces epistemological uncertainty, ethical discomfort, emotional turmoil, and extensive political demands. It can be difficult to figure out where to start, how to proceed, or when to allow oneself to rest.'<sup>17</sup> Men need to realize that feminism is not a tool or strategy that they can pick up, use and then put down. Feminism, as I understand

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

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

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

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