

American Goddess: A Modern Apotheosis

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Since the 1970s America has inherited Britain's place as the world center of modern paganism.¹ One of America's significant contributions to neopaganism is the transformation of Wicca into a feminist spiritual practice. Some American feminist witches have suggested that the roots of witchcraft may be found in goddess polytheism. American goddess worship seems to differ, however, from other named-goddess worship elsewhere in the world, in that the goddess of much American paganism has no single name or identity. She is, as Starhawk wrote, "the cycle of birth, growth, death, and regeneration."² Marion Green wrote of contemporary paganism, "What you accept in terms of deity will be entirely your business."³ Exploring the development of goddess worship in the United States since 1970 will show how this nonhierarchical, nondogmatic, spiritual practice has developed into very personal and community spiritual practices that celebrate the goddess.

Why Paganism, Why the Goddess?

From a long line of British neo-pagan writings that stretches back to the middle of the 19th century, American neo-paganism was constructed upon a rich heritage. There are a wide variety of reasons neo-paganism has taken root in America since the 1960s. For some adherents, neo-paganism represents a break with traditional Judeo-Christian traditions.

Neo-paganism offers a spiritual practice that fits with their personal point of view. Some take inspiration from an introduction to American Indian (First Nations in Canada) earth-based spiritual traditions that revere mother earth. For still others, like Margot Adler, it is the realization of lost traditions and a search for roots.⁴ There are yet other reasons, because there are as many types of neo-pagan practices as there are practitioners. The antihierarchical nature of many neo-pagan beliefs means that there is little in the way of central organization and therefore little dogma that defines Wicca. If there is a dogma at all in neo-paganism it could be described as the witches creed or Wiccan Rede, "If it harms none, do what you will." It is precisely the lack of a solid description that is the best description.

In America a connection between Wicca and feminism has developed. Second-wave feminist Wicca practitioners see the witch as a misunderstood yet powerful traditional female practitioner made ugly by popular Christian and monotheistic culture as part of a centuries-long oppression of women. Margot Adler explains this connection vividly:

Consciousness-raising provided an opportunity for women (some of them for the first time) to talk about their lives, make decisions and act upon them, without the presence of men. Women used such groups to explore their relations with women, men, work, motherhood and children, their own sexuality, lesbianism, their past youth, and the coming of old age. Many women began to explore their dreams and fantasies; sometimes they tentatively began individual and collective psychic experiments.⁵

Others, like Macha NightMare, had already been active in consciousness raising community work and brought those skills to newly forming spiritual communities.⁶ Starhawk wrote that the symbol of the goddess has "given us a deep sense of pride in women's ability to create and sustain culture."⁷ In a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s women and women's groups both overtly political and singularly spiritual embraced Wicca.

Connecting Witchcraft with the Past

Some Wiccans sought to connect witchcraft with an even earlier spiritual practice. Merlin Stone spent a decade researching traditional women's beliefs and made the claim that Hebrews suppressed goddess-based

traditions and women clergy (see Daniel Cohen's chapter in volume 2).⁸ She argued that goddess-worshipping societies had been overthrown by god-worshipping societies, a female spiritual order violently replaced by a male spiritual order.⁹ Archeologist Marija Gimbutas wrote, "We are still living under the sway of that aggressive male invasion and only beginning to discover our long alienation from our authentic European Heritage—gylanic, nonviolent, earth-centered culture."¹⁰

Some practitioners of witchcraft see themselves as priestesses of a goddess whose image was perverted by Judeo-Christian propaganda. In keeping with the diversity inherent in paganism, some practitioners use "witch" and "priestess" interchangeably. Some writers have argued that Wicca has been a continuous traditional practice that has focused its attention on the worship of the goddess. In a few cases authors have claimed goddess worship is a recent creation based upon a feminine spiritual archetype. But in all cases, goddess worship has been described as a direct political protest against a misogynistic, mainstream, environmentally destructive, god-worshipping society. In short, modern American feminists have created a domestic and politically charged spiritual practice called goddess worship.

Paths to the Goddess

The diversity witnessed in contemporary goddess spirituality could be understood as networks of paths upon which one can make her way across geographical, conceptual, and spiritual territories. Choosing one path or another will lead the traveler to different experiences. At the end of the journey, though, some experiences of "journeying" may be shared but do not have to be shared. So it is with a journey to the goddess.

A journey to contemporary goddess spirituality takes on many forms and has many stories. There is no official way to become a pagan and no official face of the goddess. But some paths are well worn and others are brightly marked. Some books, like travel maps, help to lead the uninitiated along "a way." Other practitioners choose personal experience and gut instinct as the basis for their journey. No choice is the correct choice. The following are a few well-marked paths to the goddess.

Folklore, Mythology, and Archeology

Joseph Campbell popularized the notion that mythology springs from a very basic experience and that the hero has "a thousand faces." Campbell

suggested that world mythology should be understood comparatively, meaning that all of the stories found in the mythologies of the world tell more or less the same stories. When these stories are appreciated side by side, he noted, the reader will come to understand the richness of the human experience and human similarity.¹¹ Campbell influentially asserted the notion of the first goddess or earth goddess as philosophically, psychoanalytically, or structurally obvious. He wrote that the goddess was associated with agricultural societies in the ancient world, including Mesopotamia and the Egyptian Nile, and that the goddess was the “personification of the energy that gives birth to forms and nourishes forms.”¹² He built upon Carl Jung’s notion of the archetype and suggested that the goddess, as archetypal woman, represented creator and destroyer, womb and tomb, and thus united good and bad and was understood as both the personal giver of life (one’s own mother) and the universal giver of life (the earth).

Marija Gimbutas’s groundbreaking and controversial studies of the goddess would become the scientific foundation for something more concrete than Campbell’s thesis. Gimbutas argued, with archeological evidence to support her, that ancient civilizations worshiped the goddess. Her research provided a connection to ancient tradition. Gimbutas suggested that in Neolithic Europe and Anatolia—in the era between 7000 and 3000 BCE—religion focused on the wheel of life and its cyclical turning. She argued that this spirituality saw birth, nurturing, growth, death, and regeneration, as well as crop cultivation and the raising of animals as the foundation of its religious practice, not the blood sacrifice and individual worship that “religions of the book” would later venerate.¹³ The people of this era pondered untamed natural forces, as well as wild plant and animal cycles, and they worshiped goddesses, or a goddess, in many forms.¹⁴ Gimbutas’s ideas, which fit directly the Wiccan mythology of the ancient goddess, were immediately and enthusiastically accepted as proof of the preeminence of the goddess.

Gimbutas and Campbell discuss the wide variety of goddess figurines that have been found in gravesites, arguing that these figures are representations of the goddess used as a personal divinity. This connection between archeology and mythology is an important path for contemporary feminists. Proof from archeology and mythology that a polytheistic goddess-worshipping society existed, and was geographically diverse, peaceful, and sexually egalitarian, would prove that contemporary misogyny and hierarchy are not a natural form of social organization. If the contemporary social order is not natural, then it is also changeable.

Dianic Tradition

Zsuzsanna Budapest is important in the early development of goddess worship in America. After fleeing the Hungarian revolution of 1956 Budapest, a descendant of a Hungarian people with their own folkloric witch tradition, arrived in America.¹⁵ Budapest founded the Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1 on the Winter Solstice of 1971.¹⁶ By spring equinox of 1972 Budapest had written the manifesto for the group that outlined goddess worship for the coven. In it she wrote,

We believe that feminist witches are women who search within themselves for the female principle of the universe and who relate as daughters to the Creatrix. We believe that, just as it is time to fight for the right to control our bodies, it is also time to fight for our sweet woman souls. . . . We believe that the Goddess-consciousness gave humanity a workable, long-lasting, peaceful period during which Earth was treated as Mother and women were treated as Her priestesses. We believe that women lost supremacy through the aggressions of males who were exiled from the matriarchies and formed the patriarchal hordes responsible for the invention of rape and the subjugation of women. . . . Our immediate goal is to congregate with each other according to our *ancient woman-made laws* and to remember our past, renew our powers, and affirm our Goddess of the Ten Thousand Names.”¹⁷

The central themes of goddess worship outlined for the first time in manifesto form informed some of the goddess worship that followed.

The Dianic tradition is a women-only spiritual practice that looked to a number of sources for its inspiration (see Denise Saint Arnault’s chapter in this volume). Members of the Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1 brought different experiences and histories and helped shape the character and practice of not only the coven but goddess worship in general. These members brought spiritual practice learned from Native American, astrology, academic theology, and engaged feminist politics, and interest and experience with neo-pagan witchcraft. Budapest articulated the relationship between contemporary witchcraft and the historic relations “theological” practices had with theology organizations: “Before white people were Christianized, before Europe was taken by the sword of the Byzantine Empire, before Rome extended its imperial grasp around Western Europe, white people followed a native European nature religion.”¹⁸

Eco-feminism and Reclaiming

Starhawk, an important theologian¹⁹ and writer, helped found the San Francisco–based Reclaiming tradition. The Reclaiming Collective began after publication of Starhawk’s highly influential *The Spiral Dance* in 1979; subsequent editions have become the most important Wiccan publications of the late 20th century and a guide for the 21st century. Starhawk emphasized the environmental and political aspects of goddess worship, as expressed by Reclaiming’s Principles of Unity:

The values of the Reclaiming tradition stem from our understanding that the earth is alive and all of life is sacred and interconnected. We see the Goddess as immanent in the earth’s cycles of birth, growth, death, decay, and regeneration. Our practice arises from a deep, spiritual commitment to the earth, to healing, and to the linking of magic with political action.²⁰

Starhawk provided links among ecology, feminism, and paganism, connections that are vital in the Reclaiming tradition. This connection has remained one of the primary characteristics of Reclaiming and much American witchcraft in general. Reclaiming differs from the Dianic tradition in a number of ways, but two of the most important are that it was open to men and women early on, and that Reclaiming has a strong ecological politics.

One of the hallmarks of Reclaiming is that there is no central organization. Many groups use rituals that Reclaiming has created without necessarily identifying themselves with the Reclaiming tradition. Many goddess-celebrating communities use Starhawk’s *Spiral Dance* and Budapest’s *Book of Women’s Mysteries* to inform their theology but do not call themselves Dianic or Reclaiming. What does bind most pagans together is the use of ritual and magic.

Ritual and Magic

Ritual and magic are central to goddess worship. A predominant belief in goddess worship is that magic is the transformation of consciousness. For an eco-feminist pagan, the transformation (magic) that is needed can be created through the practice of rituals²¹ designed to transform the world into a “sensuous and living world.”²² This transformation is designed to “re-enchant” the world.²³ The ritual process for the community is designed to transform the world for those who enact the ritual. The Californian countercultural writer Theodore Roszak suggested that “the way forward is

inevitably the way inward,” and American Wicca have been working with ritual and magic to chart this path.²⁴

The Mists of Avalon

The first four paths to the contemporary American goddess have impacted a great many people, but arguably the fourth path has done more to pique the interest of people and draw them to one or more of the other paths. The American novelist Marion Zimmer Bradley’s celebrated novel *The Mists of Avalon*, and the subsequent *Avalon* series by Bradley and Diana L. Paxson, created a goddess-centered universe. Bradley retold the Arthurian legend from the point of view of the story’s female characters. Her approach gave the women in the story a voice for the sake of contemporary women. She wrote, “Restoring Morgan and the Lady of the Lake to real, integral movers in the drama is, I think, of supreme importance in the religious and psychological development of women in our day.”²⁵ The *Avalon* series plumbs the stories of the Roman conquest of Europe and tells the tales of this period from the point of view of important and often-silenced historical female characters.

The *Avalon* series continues to play an important role in introducing the idea of goddess worship to new generations. In much the same way Campbell and Gimbutas make claims for prehistory, Bradley and Paxson make claims against a male-dominated European history. Their stories are a spiritually sensitive, feminist retelling of history with the contemporary female reader in mind. The *Avalon* series, though a work of fiction, is an important historical reclamation project that may lead people to “reach out for the gentler reign of Goddess-oriented paganism to lead them back to a true perception of the spiritual life of the Earth.”²⁶

Our Goddess of Washington State

What follows is a single local account and must be only one among many possible accounts of contemporary goddess worship in North America. Mela was the spiritual elder for a small goddess community that met for nearly three decades on the property in rural Washington State she called New Avalon.²⁷ The morning after summer solstice 2008 she passed away after a two-year battle with cancer. At a ritual circle for winter solstice in December 2008 her name was called, for the first time, as the community’s personal goddess. This is her story.

Mela, by her own account, accidentally discovered goddess worship while living in Santa Barbara, California, in the early 1980s. She had

worked as a model in Los Angeles during the late 1960s–1970s, and by the 1980s she had discovered the *Mists of Avalon*. In Guinevere she felt she discovered her archetypal personality. She felt that she knew Avalon and that somehow the story spoke to her in ways that she could not fully understand. She felt she was living the tragedy of Guinevere, forever torn between two men and two lives. She lived one life for the camera and another life for her spirit. But the magic of Guinevere and the Lady of Avalon touched her deeply and did not let go.

By the early 1980s she was introduced to goddess worship by an acquaintance who sang a single line, “We come from the goddess and to her we shall return, like a drop of rain, running to the ocean.”²⁸ The song astonished Mela and changed her life. She asked her friend where that song was from and her friend responded, “Goddess rituals . . . would you like to do a goddess ritual?” Within a week they had organized a number of women into a group in Santa Barbara and began regular rituals. Using a mixture of Starhawk’s process and self-designed goddess rituals, they set out to ritualize the beauty of being women and to discover the magic in their lives. This experience led Mela on a path of learning she would follow for over thirty years.

She and a number of friends relocated to Washington State a few years later to more fully experience the seasons they were celebrating. In this new space she became central to community ritual. When, by chance, the facilitator for a ritual circle that she had organized could not attend, Mela was forced for the first time to take the lead in a ritual. Nervously, she did what she had to do, and her experience was so positive that she felt that she should continue to organize and lead ritual circles.

Mela was able to continue her learning by attending workshops and circles organized by elder women. She attended a gathering in California that had a great impact on her. She was transformed into a feminist at a large circle organized by Starhawk and Reclaiming Tradition. She heard Marija Gimbutas speak and what she had been studying and thinking came together. She had heard a song about the Burning Times and saw a National Film Board of Canada documentary that detailed the history of women’s persecution.²⁹ Mela claimed that after the event she understood feminism for the first time and felt her devotion to the goddess deepen.

The Community Grows

For years Mela’s circles were only open to women, but later men were permitted to join. The circles grew larger year after year, and more people were brought to each of the summer and winter solstice ceremonies. The

rest of the ritual calendar, however, was celebrated by only a small group of local practitioners. By the late 1990s people were traveling from all over the United States and western Canada to be at New Avalon for the yearly summer and winter solstices. Mela and New Avalon had become the ritual center for a goddess community.

So it continued for years, until sickness made it impossible for Mela to continue. Throughout her sickness volunteers, messages, prayers, and money from the community helped sustain her and her husband. The community rallied around her and assisted her throughout her sickness. After her passing, many people gathered to celebrate Mela's life and rebirth into the mystery of the goddess. Mela had become for each member of the community a personal connection to the mystery of the goddess. She led the way upon a difficult path that the rest of the community would inevitably follow.

Today, New Avalon, like Bradley's Avalon, has disappeared into the mists. Mela's ritual space is no longer available for public gathering. Many have started smaller local groups closer to their homes. Mela's practice and teachings are being explained to new ritual participants. Mela's words and expressions are being distributed as the wisdom of the goddess; everyone is blessed with a "circle of love, light, and protection."³⁰ Mela, Our Goddess of Washington State, is one example of a personal manifestation of a feminist goddess in America.

"We are not the first, nor the last"

Z. Budapest wrote, "Come with me to the Temple, close your eyes, and then open them again. I will show you images of the Goddesses created before us by Goddess worshipping people. We are not the first, nor the last. And even if we are the first women to turn to worship themselves and *their own creativity in the Goddess*, then more glory to us."³¹ The act of creativity in the experience of the sacred is central to the contemporary worship of the goddess. Since the 1960s a growing number of North Americans have been turning toward a personalized relationship with goddess spirituality. This relationship has taken a variety of forms but what is central to all experiences of the spirit is the ritual. The experience of the ritual is an active and engaged relationship that transcends the perceived separation of outside and inside. The ritual act is the engagement with the experience of the sacred, of the intuition that the goddess is there. John Dewey wrote, "There is something mystical associated with the word intuition. . . . Although there is a bounding horizon, it moves as we move. We are never

wholly free from the sense of something that lies beyond.”³² The act of ritualizing a relationship with the goddess is an attempt to move beyond what is most physically obvious so that one may get closer to the mystery on the other side of perception; it is just out of reach.

The spiritual quest is as old as humanity. For millennia, humans have actively cultivated a relationship with the mystery of life and death. These mysteries have inspired spiritual practices and informed social order. Neo-paganism may represent a philosophical and spiritual return to a relationship with the natural world. Martin Heidegger claimed that religion is “a poetic experience of the world as something sacred and deserving of reverence.”³³ The worship of the goddess shows that the act of creation and regeneration, of birth, maturity, and death, is the natural order of life but one that must be rooted in the natural environment. In some way humanity may be, in this period of environmental and political uncertainty, feeling the necessity to find a way to a balanced spiritual, political, and natural world. It does not hurt to remember that “before the gods existed, the woods were sacred, and the gods came to dwell in these sacred woods.”³⁴

Notes

1. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 233–236; and Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17 and 341.

2. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989), 13, 16–17.

3. Marion Green, *Wild Witchcraft: A Guide to Natural, Herbal, and Earth Magic* (London: Collins Publishers, 2002), 103.

4. *Ibid.*, 27.

5. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 184.

6. Macha NightMare, telephone interview with author, Edmonton, AB, September 22, 2009.

7. Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 91.

8. Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (London: Virago Limited, 1976), 2.

9. A number of works deal with this issue. I feel that the following are the most succinct. Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), xx–xxi; see also Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 124. Also Shahrukh Husain, *The Goddess: Power, Sexuality, and the Feminine Divine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 6; Judith Ochshorn, “Goddesses and the Lives of Women,” in *Women*

and Goddess Traditions: In *Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L. Torjesen and Karen Jo King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 378; Juliette Wood, "The Concept of the Goddess," in *The Concept of the Goddess*, ed. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

10. Gimbutas, *Language of the Goddess*, xxi.

11. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 3.

12. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth: with Bill Moyers*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 209–210.

13. This is a name used to distinguish text-based religious practices like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam from non-text based and, in contemporary Western usage, usually pagan spiritual practices. A great deal could be made of this distinction through the lens of communications theory especially that of Harold Innis's *Empire and Communications* (1972) and the later work of Marshal McLuhan and Neil Postman.

14. Gimbutas, *Living Goddesses*, 3.

15. Zsuzsanna Budapest, *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* (San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2007), 291–311.

16. Susan B. Anthony was a prominent civil rights leader and an important 19th-century women's rights advocate.

17. Budapest, *Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, 1–2.

18. *Ibid.*, xv–xxii, 265.

19. "Theologian" is a word that many women, following Carol Christ, use in place of "theologian." Replacing the "o" with an "a" signals the difference between a male theology and a female thealogy, the study of goddesses. Thea is the Greek for Goddess.

20. Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 6.

21. For the sake of brevity I have used the work *rituals* to suggest a collection of approaches to life. Here I am thinking of Starhawk when she wrote, "Magic teaches us to be aware that we are viewing the world through a frame, warns us not to confuse it with ultimate reality or mistake the map for the territory. Moreover, part of our magical discipline is to make conscious choices about which frame we adopt." Starhawk, *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 30. This matrix of conscious choices I am referring to with the work *ritual*. All readers will not share this overly open definition and therefore one may choose to think of ritual as a special physically enacted set of protocols. However, I argue that this is already how we live our lives. The question is, therefore, whose rituals are we enacting?

22. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 17. Thanks to David Lertzman (David Adam) for this reference. David is a celebrated bard and scholar whom I am fortunate to call a brother.

23. Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
24. Theodore Roszak, *Unfinished Animal: The Aquarian Frontier and the Evolution of Consciousness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 239.
25. Marion Zimmer-Bradley, "Thoughts on Avalon," 1986, <http://www.mzbworks.com/thoughts.htm> (accessed July 13, 2010).
26. Ibid.
27. I have written more about the ritual practice at New Avalon in "Singing Me Into the Land," *Vis-à-Vis: Explorations in Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (2009): 58–69.
28. "We All Come from the Goddess" a Goddess chant by Z. Budapest. This is one of the most famous and widely sung chants.
29. *Burning Times*, National Film Board of Canada, dir. Donna Read, 1990, 56 min 10 sec. Part 2 of a three-part series: *Goddess Remembered*, *Burning Times*, and *Full Circle*.
30. A general blessing used at New Avalon.
31. Budapest, *Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, 313.
32. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), 193.
33. John D. Caputo, "Heidegger and Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 283.
34. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 186.

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