

Women and NRMs: Location and Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Many NRMs have often excluded women from leadership socially and spiritually. In *Women in New Religions*, Elizabeth Puttick says that most women are subordinated in both old and new religions. Femininity was suppressed for a long time, and the matriarchal Goddess culture was obscured by the patriarchal societies. With the repression of feminine ideals, women became mothers, wives, divorced and workers under a patriarchal culture. For a long time, women have been separated from each other, mothers from daughters, white from black, rich from poor, old from young; women have suffered in isolation.

However, since the 1960s, women have begun to listen to women, to see women, and care for women. Sisterhood has been recalled, and women have been able to connect with the feminine self in the eyes of other women. At present, also with the wave of global migration, women have been empowered, having an impact on the transformation

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of secular society; women may be more receptive to discussions related to ethical issues such as abandonment of careers, abortion, childlessness, violence, forced marriage, sexual abuse and poverty.

This study therefore takes a feminist philosophical standpoint which aims to understand how feminism works in order to liberate both sexes from traditional gender roles. A feminist approach to the theology/theology of women in NRMs is essential to understand the meaning of God or Goddess across diverse religious and cultural communities. It is important to know that female leaders in NRMs are integrative in several respects. Women in NRM movements do not separate theology/theology from real, concrete and existential social and cultural contexts. This chapter provides a sample of the rich diversity of female leaders' perspectives in NRMs that have developed in the last several decades in Asia, Latin America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

This section focuses on the significance of changes in gender roles in the West and examines the non-Western influence of NRMs. The aim of this study is to investigate the psychology of women and their impact on men, investigating how it is possible for a woman to live out her masculine side (the *animus*) and at the same time be her own feminine self (the *anima*). Firstly, this work examines the symbolic relations between women and men, which are often culturally and sexually divisive and whose barriers to communication are frequently unsolved, particularly in various religious groups. Secondly, it demonstrates the difficulty and even the inability to express thoughts and feelings between woman and man. Thirdly, it supports the thesis that women tend to follow the men whom they like, even changing their own political and religious ideas because it seems that women find it difficult to invent metaphysical and political discourses. Finally, we may explicitly wonder what has contributed to changing our secular society as well as our moral and religious civilisation.

BACKGROUND

There are several contradictions in gender ideology which are reflected in our beliefs and practices. Women should abandon the culture of silence which they have long embraced. An Ethiopian woman, quoted by Carl Jung and Carl (Karl) Kerényi in their *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, helps to understand how feminist ideology works, supporting female ideas and strong matrifocality:

How can a man know what a woman's life is? A woman's life is quite different from a man's. God has ordered it...A man is the same before he has sought out a woman for the first time, and afterwards. But when a woman enjoys her first love, it cuts her in two. She becomes another woman on that day. The man is the same after his first love as he was before...The man spends a night with a woman and goes away... (Jung and Kerenyi 1969, p. 101)

The social and religious role of women has changed considerably in different cultures and times. Men have held primary positions of authority in politics, religion, in the military and education. Women have clearly had differentiated status and roles from men. Even the religious veneration of the female has not implied an equal status for women in social and religious contexts. Historically, women were described by historians and sociologists as expressing ecstasy and mental illness. Unmarried women, the poor and artists have often paid the price for their social status, creativity and independence in a hegemonic and patriarchal society. Women have been often considered as subject to mental problems and described as susceptible, irrational, sexually unstable and economically marginal. Women have also been part of social and religious structures where sexual relationships are necessary for their intimate care in relation to a patriarchal and hegemonic God. Every woman from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and other places in the world has in common centuries of patriarchal oppression. A living metaphor for God, power, sex and struggle for women's liberation comes from the marginalised social movements of which the ideology and theology/theology imply self-awareness and social and economic inclusion.

Poverty, sex and exploitation, for instance, always originate in patriarchy. A patriarchal structure is based on hierarchy and submission. When woman is under-represented in society, the future of society will never follow female role models. Indeed, I am what I cannot become, thinking and acting as a man. I am what I am not or I cannot be what I cannot see. Thus, I am only a woman. Therefore, I am not entitled to have my independent way of thinking. Women's voices are always silenced, and the past has put us in silence.

Cultural stereotypes have provided a variety of images and labels for women and their polarity/dichotomy of rationality and irrationality, goodness and evil. The figure of woman, in many Abrahamic religions, as the Egyptian psychiatrist and writer Nawal El Saadawi says, has been

classified as a second being and as a voiceless creature, diminishing the myth of Goddesses, the divine nature and the creative diffidence (“the spirit of freedom”), and emphasising the aspect of darkness, lunatic nature and the incapacity of diplomacy. El Saadawi’s humanism/creative political activism, for instance, thanks to her leadership of the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (AWSA), is based on an understanding of women’s oppression in the sphere of hegemonic and patriarchal politics, economics and religions. El Saadawi believes women have suffered the most serious marginalisation in any patriarchal structure and they need to create their own dissident/revolutionary philosophy towards the class system which is still prevalent today. She (El Saadawi 1995, p. 2) asks: “Can we be creative if we submit to the rules forced upon us under different names: father, god, husband, family, nation, family planning, human rights, modernism or post-modernism?” According to El Saadawi, women are discriminated against by roles and traditions dominated by male elites and psychologies.

In this way, the psychological status of women has been split into two archetypes: the seductive witch, the demon (the bride of Satan) and the instinctual free spirited woman “Lilith” who moved from patriarchal marriage, and “Eve”, the weak and sinful woman, the wife of Adam and the mother of humankind, and the counterpart of man (made from Adam’s rib), the woman who was bound in a relationship.

The approach of many academics is common: to have tried to describe alternative rituals and beliefs of women in a mainstream patriarchal culture, which has often marginalised the intellectual perspective of women who are involved in alternative spiritualities. For example, in Northern Europe (Germany, Scotland, England and Sweden) in the early sixteenth century, the age of the Reformation, many women (mainly old) were involved in witchcraft and therefore were accused, persecuted, punished and even executed by the secular and the religious worlds. The phenomenon of witchcraft, in fact, was very common between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and was widely considered a deviant and abnormal spirituality. However, nowadays feminist scholars in a multiethnic culture have sensibly placed gender at the heart of their agenda/scholarship. Feminist works have gained independent recognition in the field of religion. Many reformist feminists see women in the Judeo-Christian tradition as Goddess: Lilith, a revolutionary and libertine woman who seduced men; the Virgin Mary, the spiritual mother of Christianity; Mary Magdalene, the bride of Christ. Even in the study of NRMs,

some modern researchers take a new look at alternative practices, studying issues of gender based on the subjectivity/psychology of women. Feminist discourse in NRMs can perhaps be appropriate to the social and religious reality of women, whose lives and experiences have been shaped and largely dominated by a world of men. According to Elizabeth Puttick:

Female leadership in secular life is still relatively rare and contentious, despite the advances of feminism. Women have barely been acknowledged as possessing souls and capacity for spiritual growth, let alone allowed to achieve rank and status in religion. (Puttick 1997, p. 175)

Puttick offers a critical study of NRMs, considering the status of women still unrecognised by many misogynist religions. In fact, many NRMs are shaped by ideas and practices of the main religions, and women have been occasionally charismatic and even leaders. However, many ambitious women rarely become leaders even if they are attracted to NRMs. But both Elizabeth Puttick and Susan Greenwood observe in their works that women through an alternative Goddess spirituality can develop feminist concepts, beliefs and rituals, removing sexism and making a theological and esoteric revolution within the patriarchal religious traditions.

GENDER DIFFERENCES AND ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES

For women, the process of becoming part of NRMs is a prerequisite to providing a feminine identity and equality within a divisive society which classifies people sexually, ethnically, and economically. Equality has developed through standardised values in Western cultures: the same opportunities, the same qualifications, the same rewards and the same rights. However, this ideology of equality and gender is based paradoxically on the principle that men and women are fundamentally different in nature (in traits, ethnicity, personality, values and skills).

Consequently, considering this paradox, many women historically, to obtain equality, have had to be the same as men. Objectively women have been subjected to male discrimination and have been excluded systematically from political, cultural and religious institutions. But in my opinion, women have lost their matriarchal identity, developing rapidly their masculine side. Men on the other hand have adopted the feminine side, but are less interested in the values of life and relationships. Men

are becoming more self-centred than altruistic. Accordingly, the British Jungian analyst and writer Irene Claremont De Castillejo (1885–1967) in her book *Knowing Woman* explores the psychology of men and women, saying that both men and women are less in touch with their own nature; women are more focused on their careers and thus neglect their role as mediator to man, a channel whereby his own creative inspirations can flow more easily (De Castillejo Claremont De Castillejo 1997, p. 55). Another Jungian psychotherapist, Barbara Black Koltuv, in her collection of essays *Weaving Woman* points to the feminine talents, values and psychology of all women, weaving together common aspects of their lives. Women, together, need to claim back their femininity and power.

Women who belong to NRMs seem to live a paradox between finding the self and losing the self. In recent discussions with some women in Birmingham, UK, who have decided to become members of the Women's Federation for World Peace movement (WFWP), I was told that they found the movement an advantage for their interpersonal and social relations. Women who take part in the movement have more connections and also a better capacity for empathy with each other. However, this organisation has a close connection to the Unification Church and some conservative Christian congregations. Therefore, women from poor backgrounds and with some linguistic barriers are not fully involved in the internal changes in their organisation.

In a climate of general social and economic crisis, women and poor people experience higher levels of stress as a result of unemployment. They may be more likely to be affected or disrupted. Women constitute a numerical majority in the world but are the objects of marginalisation (*subalternity*) in a society with its dominant systems. Proportionally more women than men are discriminated against. Women, in particular members of black and ethnic minority groups, older women and lesbians, face multiple disadvantages and negative social and economic consequences. However, in most societies, women receive less education, fewer employment opportunities and rights such as relationship bonds, inheritance, personal rights, marriage and divorce. Women live also with sexual discrimination or violence due to religious practices such as female genital mutilation, bride price and early marriage of young girls. Discrimination and negative attitudes towards women, for example inequalities in employment, violence and abuse towards women, can cause long-term frustration, tension and psychological problems. As a consequence, women who are particularly vulnerable spend more time in different social groups seeking their own spiritualities. Alongside such

self-searching (their *autocoscienza*), women consider NRMs a vehicle to establish independently new archetypes of liberty and self-identity/self-esteem overcoming any gender differences and discrimination. The term *autocoscienza* is not new and has developed in the specific context of Italian politics. It was introduced by the Italian feminist writer and activist Carla Lonzi (1931–1982) with the publication of her political manifesto at the birth of the group *Rivolta Femminile* (Female Revolt) in July 1970. In the Manifesto, Lonzi identified the group as part of the women’s liberation movement. Lonzi, the founder of *Rivolta Femminile*, was an exceptionally influential personality for women’s identity. Like *autocoscienza*, women in NRMs have been influenced by their social context; the form of women’s leadership in NRMs is expressed by women’s struggle for liberation/freedom in a situation of constant oppression. Indeed, women’s charismatic role in NRMs is a persuasive critique of the patriarchal notion of God. Women in NRMs offer a new definition of female emancipation and re-evaluation of the self. They have challenged the oppression of Western patriarchy which has been the cause of women’s humiliation, marginalisation and subordination.

Women, therefore, find in NRMs a search for their own community and sexual and spiritual power. NRMs are a new model of spiritual values which can break the chain of oppression and abuse of any authoritative system. It is incorrect to think of minority groups only in terms of numerical size, but of their overall impact.

SEARCHING FOR UNIVERSAL SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

The term liberation has been applied to postcolonial literature, black/womanist theology and also to NRM theories. This comes from the liberation theology which originated in the 1960s as a response to poverty and political exclusion in Latin America, but it quickly extended globally and had an enormous impact on marginalised cultures and religions. The basic belief of liberation is that religion/spirituality should not be separated from politics. They all have the same aim: they search for emancipatory awareness and independence from the dominant, the imperialist and the colonialist. “Third world” people and women, in particular, in every part of the world, have written theology for the oppressed. Women have also been classified into two categories: the middle-class women (the feminist/the white) and the subaltern/urban women (the womanist/the black). Since all women are by nature from the same genre, we should not label women with a conventional

division between feminist and womanist. However, women need to make a change to this patriarchal standardisation which separates individuals and contributes to conflict and competition. Differences in class, religion, economic status, race and political affiliation are the cause of social discrepancies and sexual disharmony. Women can overcome differences and can join together for a common cause: a political dissidence/a female solidarity. Before the patriarchy developed by means of patrilineal relations, of oppression of slaves and women, and of monotheistic religions, both women and men worshipped a pantheistic world of divinities. Therefore, women were included in their society and female deities ruled in many spheres. In ancient times, the role of women was so vital, while in the contemporary world women occupy a secondary/marginal position and they still fight/seek for their spiritual and cultural liberation. However, women in alternative spiritualities/NRMs are in search of their life; they look for their wholeness, self-transcendence and their connectedness with other. Thus, women consider NRMs as a necessary path which leads them to a complete awareness of the feminine Self.

FEMININE RESPONSES TO GOD: THE WICCA MOVEMENT

In Wicca (from the Anglo-Saxon *wicce*, it means a wise woman/witch), women are influential in their personal spiritual transformation. In this form of Paganism, women decide their pantheon of deities by performing acts through “natural magic” (through herbs and crystals) and “high magic” (*magick*) along with metaphysical rituals in order to have an impact on the physical world (the other) as a feminist expression of liberation. Indeed, women who become Wiccans are environmentalist and feminist; they are less influenced by patriarchal and monotheistic dogmas. Christopher Partridge and J. Gordon Melton in the *Encyclopaedia of New Religious Movements* offer analysis of diverse movements in our modern culture of the West. In particular, in the section of Wicca, Partridge gives an overview of female spiritualities. He said that women in Wicca practise their pagan rituals because they seek a radical feminist spirituality and many of them are attracted by the desire to perform magic (Partridge 2005, p. 295). For Wiccans, magic is not just a sign of spiritual power but also an arcane/esoteric symbol of cultural and social emancipation (*autocoscienza*). The pantheistic feature of Wicca is that nature and divine are inseparable. However, being feminine in the divine means that the Goddess is independent of nature and it is, in a way, the *Logos* of the world. The Goddess generates the natural world. It is omnipresent,

omnipotent, omniscient, which is unlimited and transcendent. This divine is what each woman is looking for: universal knowledge, infinite power and ubiquity/everywhere. At a basic biological level, we must say that this differentiation between the divine and nature is like that between women and men. We have a lunar cycle which affects our energy, emotions and relations with others. When women enter that esoteric sphere, their “Lady Moon” can guide them (Rossetti 1892). The English Pre-Raphaelite poet (1830–1893) Christina Rossetti wrote in her poem:

O Lady Moon, your horns point toward the east:
Shine, be increased;
O Lady Moon, your horns point toward the west:
Wane, be at rest. (Rossetti 1972, p. 123)

Women need to create their identity through symbolic and spiritual representations; indeed, the figurative “Lady Moon” does not only indicate the innermost level of the self (Kultuv 1990, p. 5), but is also a woman’s attempt to connect herself to the divine (unconditional freedom). Kultuv states:

In Old Testament times, when people were closer to their earlier matriarchal Goddesses-worshipping cultures, women still made cakes to the Queen of Heaven, the moon (Jeremiah 7:18). Women got in touch with their feminine creative power by veiling themselves. (Kultuv 1990, p. 9)

The above example can be seen as a particular form of traditional women’s spirituality which has many links with what the modern Wicca emphasises strongly: the worship of Goddesses and veneration for a Queen/Gaia. Moreover, Wicca revolutionises the Christian Trinity and the Hindu Trimurti with the Triple Moon/Goddess: “the Virgin”, “the Mother” and “the Crone”. This Triple Goddess is associated with all the phases of womanhood and its feminine autonomy/energy.

THE PRO-ANA/MIA ONLINE COMMUNITY

In the Wicca movement, as in many other pagan groups in the West including one recent pro-ana movement and pro-mia, women achieve a free status by invoking and offering to the ancestors and divinities food, chants and prayers. The pro-anorexia movement, a media/online community whose culture is based on the myth of unhealthy meagreness,

stresses a pantheon of skinny Goddesses. The name Ana originates from the mythological name of Ana or Anamadim (a Goddess) created by Underground Grotto [blog pro-ana accessed 23 November 2015]. Anamadim is invoked through spells and becomes part of pro-ana divinisation. The adherents of this cyber-group (with no organisational structure) discuss their ascetic life (“thinspiration”/thin ideal) finding their thin models and beauty images in the fashion world such as “Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Valentino, Chanel, Vivienne Westwood and others” with their skeleton collections promoting and depicting ideal thin women. An example is given from Dolce & Gabbana Fall 2013, inspired by the Venetian-Byzantine mosaics from the Cathedral of Santa Maria in Sicily. Their models seem heavenly *principesse* (the Queens/the Mighty Ones) wearing gold crowns, huge crosses, papal purple and red cardinal shoes. This unrealistic vision of female perfection in fashion is a form of cultural manipulation of women who want to look like women on TV or in magazines, encouraging eating behaviour problems. Women in the media promote an unrealistic expectation of thinness (Thompson and Heinberg 1999). It is also demonstrated that this rapid growth of the anorexic body form (the thin ideal) is not only a phenomenon of the last two decades but that there is some sign of it in the past. Rudolph M. Bell, in *Holy Anorexia*, investigates how some Italian Christian mystical women in the late Middle Ages, such as St. Catherine of Siena who martyred herself, St. Veronica Giuliani, St. Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi and others from urban areas like Umbria and Tuscany, were affected by eating disorders. Anorexia (from Greek *an* is loss/lack of and *orexis* is appetite), starvation and suppression of basic physical needs (including sex, hunger and fatigue) were a form of spiritual exercise towards the divine. Indeed, this abstinence from food gives a feeling of happiness and ecstasy. The “holy anorexia” is also a total liberation from the body. However, the anorexic behaviour is a reaction to patriarchal structures (Bell 1985, p. 13).

Similarly and controversially, the pro-ana and pro-mia movements encourage a religio-philosophical doctrine where food is sinful and impure, whereas fasting through the invocation of female divinities/Saints is a normative ethical approach to be observed during worship and as a sign of purity and liberation from any form of mental/spiritual and corporal suffering (SIRC 2015a). The online community in their blogs/websites Ana’s Temple and the Angels of Ana perform their ceremonies, worship and prayers with incense, candles, sacred numbers and

the sacrificing of inappropriate food. This online community of young women has discussions/forums with other members addressing eating issues and identifying themselves as “flying” and/or “having wings”. Generally speaking, there is a sense of belonging and common belief which evokes the personification of new femininity with its tall, slender figure, minute waist and delicate features. The fact of being light and thin looking like a Barbie doll body type is the *status quo basis* for these women, and it is also the spiritual response towards their transmigration of soul/the self which moves from a heavy body, cause of suffering, towards another being (immortal).

An example of a prayer is:

I believe in a wholly black and white world, the losing of weight, recrimination for sins, the abnegation of the body and a life ever fasting.
[‘Anorexic Nation blog’ accessed 22nd November 2015]

Dramatically, the anorexia and bulimia movements are indications of women’s vulnerability and weakness, advocating eating disorders where young women invent their own new forms of liberative theologies and of compulsive normative ethics (Thin Commandments). Such movements are serious pathologies for the young female generation in which the beauty myth is promoted by the media and portrays the “perfect/divine” images of top models. These become a status symbol for many young women, and as a result, these victims react as if representing a counter-culture to conventional families, friends and society. For the adherents of the pro-ana movement, there is only one escape; the sense of belonging is found in community through pro-ana/mia websites. The rise of these sites is gravely destructive and allow the anorexic to act as a dissident/rebel who walks alone wildly and harmfully rather than following what society believes is the best for her, holding that she is affected by a compulsive disorder which requires medical and psychological assistance. Each anorexic preaches that she receives help from pro-ana spirituality in order to break down what society wants for her health. We can read on the pro-ana sites: “Help me! My parents are forcing me to go to hospital and I’m scared I’ll get fat”. “Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away” [“pro-ana blog” accessed 22 November 2015]. It is clear that the pro-ana/mia movement is a controversial spirituality for young women, and the media/Internet are significantly making stereotypical norms that

depict the idea of women as a subspecies and docile/passive beings with nothing to offer other than their invisible body or sex. Women who become pro-ana/mia adherents have a considerably negative representation of the self and are doubly oppressed compared with other women in alternative spiritualities/NRMs. Assuming that the pro-ana is a form of manifestation for female oppression, however, it does not empower women in NRMs. The images of these suffering/unhealthy women are a demonstration of patriarchal attitude which uses media and affects young women with a sordid exploitation. Therefore, this bond between pro-ana and NRMs is a deconstructive reading of the consumerist “eroticism/leisure” based in the decadent West.

FEMINIST AND ECO-ESOTERIC SPIRITUALITIES

Conversely, there are other new feminist religious movements such as the art movement which developed in the 1960s/1970s and found their feminine ancestors and divinities in astonishing paintings done by Western feminists such as the Swede Monica Sjoo (1931–2005). She searched for materials and produced works on woman’s spirituality through topics such as beauty, love, sexuality, violence and death, tracing back the matriarchal lineage to ancient times. Her paintings sacralise women’s stories depicting them as mothers, teachers, Goddesses, priestesses and spiritual healers. Sjoo’s works express the esoteric power of the “Great Mother”, the Matrix of the cosmos, whose aim is to break the chain of any form of oppression. She expresses indignation against and defiance of the injustices women suffer, demanding an end at last to violence against women. Similarly, there is another contemporary artist from Latin America, Marsha Gómez (1951–1998), originally from Mexico, who explores in her art the more profound ways of understanding female divinities that the traditions of any indigenous population can offer us. In its broadest sense, such feminist spiritualities can be identified with the spiritual need and creativity of contemporary women from different cultural and religious traditions. These movements have also grown up from within feminist social movements and have emerged outside traditional religions and institutions. Feminist spiritualities have always stressed the idea of female power in the divine and their right to be active in women’s spirituality (woman spirit/metaphysical movement). Moreover, women’s spiritual movements have created alternative symbols, prayers, ceremonies and songs as recognition of the power of the

feminine/Goddess. Obviously, American female religious leaders such as Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, Ellen G. White with her Seven-Day of the Adventist Church or the Fox sisters were so influential in the religious world in the nineteenth century. All of these are typically cited in discussions of female NRM leaders. Also some female teachers in the Indian tradition, such as Nirmala Devi (Sahaja Yoga) and Mata Amritanandamaya Devi (Amma) with her charitable organisation the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM), are examples of humanitarian and spiritual female movements.

Alongside feminist spiritualities, we have peace, new environmental and esoteric movements run by women across the world demanding indigenous, green and women's rights. There is also a neo-eco movement which has found, in our era of ecological and sexual exploitation, a new window. These movements have a theological discourse on female sacredness from an ethical, ecological and social stance. Women in the eco-spiritual movements want environmental changes for all beings in order to live in peace and in human flourishing. Eco-theology movements developed with climate change in the twentieth century with the despoliation of the environment where our Western culture (industrial societies) has exploited and degraded the planet. Some women began to be responsive to this global degradation and advocated a global ascension and soul advancement. Inelia Benz is one of these eco-spiritual women, the founder of "ascension.100", and claims to be chosen/elected by Alien "Source" in order to give messages to people, considering herself as a messenger (a female prophet) of personal and global ascension. Benz sells courses, products, books online and also give talks on the Internet.

Stepping into our power, becoming strong in mind, body, spirit, and environment, requires self-work, determination and a willingness to achieve our personal sovereign independence. This is much easier done with others who are intent on the same result. (Benz, ascension.100 and Welcome to Walk with Me now, accessed on 2nd December 2015)

There are also other mystical and spiritual women such as Lucia René in her project "Academia Women" and Sera Beak, inspired by Jung's *Red Book*, who writes in her "rouge awakening" blog "*Redvolution*" through heretic red guidebooks "her divine spells or winks" and her divine modern spirituality and sexuality. She talks about how a modern

woman could use her chakras. This new spiritual leader employs an unorthodox and eccentric approach to nature, humanity, sex and divinity (“Goddess within”/“Solar Feminine”) whose attempt is, in some way, to break down the paradigm of patriarchy/authority (the Divine Masculine) in order to find a provocative way towards the healing powers of female imagination and consciousness. In addition, there is an American esoteric movement, the Solar Light Retreat, founded in 1965 by the Briton Francesca Aleuti is also known as a Doctor of Spiritual Science. This group is inspired by both the ideas of Theosophy and ufology. Dr. Aleuti believes, as a leader of this movement, to have contacts with Supreme/Space Beings receiving messages through Tele-Thought Contact (a conscious alpha wave state). In *The Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, George D. Chryssides says that “Francesca claims to have access to advanced Space Beings who have put an end to war, disease, poverty, famine, and even taxation” (Chryssides 2012, pp. 324–325). These spiritual brothers who have been in contact with Dr. Aleuti make possible a cosmic and spiritual transformation on earth and for all human beings. The adherents of this awakening movement are bound by social Internet networks (spiritual single dating, blogs and metaphysical books) with the aim of enabling conscious connections through prayers or spiritual messages. They believe in reincarnation and offer regression therapy in order to understand their karma and past.

AFRICAN MATRIARCHAL MOVEMENTS

In the West, there is an increase of African matriarchal movements or spirit possession cults in the West like Mama Lola’s Voodoo which focuses on traditional African societies where the pantheon of Goddesses expresses the importance of women in kinship and domestic arrangements and their central role in the economy as leaders and catalysts. The matriarchy-focus on Goddesses affirms some form of authority over other deities and spirits, including the ancestors. The leaders/devotees are often possessed by a particular divinity or supernatural entity/spirit. Therefore, the African matriarchal heritage is still evident among African Caribbean families and African Americans in the USA and in Europe. But also in Africa, the Bori and the Masai cults are dominated by women. Their spirits (*jinis*) are present everywhere. The cult of the Mami Wata is the spirit of the water who inhabits the rivers and lakes

in West Africa. This female spirit is depicted as white (with European features), and she has Western luxury adornments (Fanta bottles) or perfumed talcum powder. In a specific sense, this is the representation of the decadent West, a critique of Western consumerism. It is also considered by Africans as a focal point of a cult of sufferings and hindrances. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Mami Wata is a decorative art which symbolises female seduction. Although the RastafarI is a male-dominated movement, there are women in Rasta communities who are strongly involved in Jamaican women's organisations in response to women's cultural and social subordination and violence. This practical difference in women's life has given Rasta women legal and economic support (in education and employment). In language and culture, we see the love of daughters, and in the RastafarI movement the love of sisters, "sis or sistren". For African culture, the woman is the symbol of motherhood, with matriarchal rules combining power with autonomous organisations.

WOMANIST SPIRITUALITY IN THE WEST

The womanist movement and spirituality comes from social and economic changes in the 1980s in the African American Christian context and from feelings aroused by abuse, denigration, discrimination, exclusion, marginality and violence. Consequently, womanist theology is a Christian movement which began to be institutionalised in specific black Churches and black charismatic theologians in America and Britain with their black liberation theology which is influenced by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and others, as a result of black people's frustration and their rejection of the dominance of the white Churches worldwide. Womanists can also be African women in NRMs in the West. The term Womanism was created by the African American novelist Alice Walker (1944–) in *The Color Purple* (1982) where she seeks to rehabilitate women of "color"/black women. Her ideology/parody is "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender". Therefore, womanists are critical of the patriarchal structure of the black Church and the larger society, which relegate women of "color" to the margins. The womanist movement is the story of oppressed black women's struggle for their ethnicity and against racial/social discrimination. They believe in the spiritual and social creed "God made us all equal" that encourages a human and racial dignity as in the well-known biblical passage:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Womanist spirituality helps to find the self in a black community where women of colour are still invisible and seek holiness through social and cultural integration by transforming conservative, chauvinistic and supremacist attitudes to gender/sex, class and race. Womanists are in a struggle to end both white and male superiority and advocate total emancipation and self-consciousness. Indeed, Womanism has been in contrast to feminist movements because “Western feminists write rarely about black women and place themselves in the position of ‘authority’” (Hooks 1984, p. 13). The author and social activist Bell Hooks (1952–) in *Feminist Theory* argues that contemporary feminists must acknowledge the full complexity and diversity of women’s experience to create a mass movement to end women’s oppression. Ethnocentric/racial discrimination and oppression have created language, cultural and racial/social divisions. Women in poverty and “non-white-Westernised” are often silent, marginalised and oppressed, being treated as inferiors and unequal.

CONCLUSION

NRMs often mention the presence of male leadership rather than the charismatic women who made a strong contribution to the history of sacred and esoteric spiritualities such as Theosophy, Wicca and other pagan movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the past, Western women such as Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), Ellen G. White Helena (1827–1915), Blavatsky (1831–1891), Annie Besant (1847–1933), Katherine Tingley (1847–1929), Alice A. Bailey (1880–1949) and Dion Fortune (1890–1946) were women’s rights’ activists, political speakers, writers, orators, occultists and philosophers/psychologists. These women had an impact on patriarchy and were, in a way, initiators of the esoteric movements (the Theosophical Society with Blavatsky, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn with Fortune, the Society of Inner Light thanks to Fortune and the Arcane School thanks to Bailey) in the West. All of them encouraged women to be part of women’s suffrage, of alternative medicine/therapy, progressive education/freedom of expression (less scientific studies) and humanist movements. Nowadays, non-Western women such as the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi and the Indian philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak of the so-called Third World/

The Third Space have pointed out numerous difficulties: sexual problems, recent immigration and the political and economic oppression of women who are marginalised by dominant patriarchies. Moreover, the various new feminist religious movements are an expression of a subversive revolution towards the patriarchal narrative and a pro-active reaction and *liberative*/antinomian ethic (*autocoscienza*) to God/Man/Ego (the legalistic ethic/deontology). Womanhood is generally portrayed as of unequal status, and women are thus subjugated (as subservient, passive, timid and with low confidence) to the patriarchal system. Therefore, women should take their place as prominent religious and political leaders in NRMs and should give a creative, provocative and *liberative voice* to all the women in changing societies and religions.

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