CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN-
POST-CHURCH- AND POST-CHRISTIAN
FEMINIST RELIGION IN ENGLAND:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The first Chapter of this Thesis explores recent feminist
critical methods: polemical works, language and
linguistics, feminist literary criticism and
psychoanalytical works. The second Chapter offers a
critique of the androcentrism of Phenomenology of Religion
and an appreciation of the "new-style Phenomenology" of
Jacques Waardenburg, which stresses the need for constant
methodological self-awareness by the scholar and the
importance of the explicit and underlying religious
intentions of the subject of research. In both Chapters,
the author stresses the expediency of her own pluralistic
and "wholistic" method which is controlled by her
understanding that feminism brings an inevitable and
enriching paradigm shift to the Study of Religion.

The rest of this Thesis is an application of the methodology
discussed in Chapters I and II. The third Chapter includes
a description of the three groups of women who were the
subjects of this research. The fourth and fifth Chapters
discuss their cosmology and relationship to the Object of
Religion. The sixth Chapter discusses the dynamics
underlying their religious expression, including the
following: dynamics of sexuality, gender and religious
tension, the religious legitimation of sex and gender
stereotyping, and current changes in the religious
legitimation of sex and gender stereotyping.

The final Chapter is a discussion of the world of religious
phenomena of the three groups of women outlined in Chapter
III. These are discussed under the headings of Sacred
Space, Time, Community, Persons, Word and Action.
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INTRODUCTION

The present work represents the results of nearly six years practical involvement with various groups of explicitly feminist women in England who were born into the Christian tradition and lay claim to a religious orientation in their lives. It is a study of living religion. Its impetus has been the result of the interaction of emotional and intellectual factors. I am fortunate to have had a formal education at a time when some of the most exciting developments are being made in Women’s Studies. Indeed, that I should take for granted the existence of Women’s Studies at all is due mainly to the struggles which past and present generations of women have made on my behalf. They have uncovered so much of what was previously invisible: women’s thoughts, ideas and actions. Much has been written in the last few decades about the invisibility of women as religious human beings.\(^1\) This reflects not simply an interest in women as religious subjects, but it implies the quiet, steady rumbling of an immanent iconoclasm, a paradigm shift in the symbolic order of religious forms. It will become apparent in the course of this study to what degree this iconoclasm has affected the cosmology and practices of explicitly religious feminist women in England today. Such women often suffer a dual discrimination by representatives of religious institutions who do not share the consciousness of the feminist critique, and also from some misguided feminists who have tended to confuse spirituality with patriarchal religious forms. There has been a great backlash against this tendency within the international Women’s Movement in recent years, marked by a burgeoning interest in spirituality in its many forms. The Women’s Movement is beginning to move beyond its critique of traditional religious forms to the recognition of forms of women’s spirituality in the past and present.

The choice of subject - women who are both feminist and spiritual - arose because to date no in-depth study has been undertaken in the Study of Religion on the subject of spiritual feminists in England. My practical involvement in the Study of Religion and the Women’s Movement has made me aware of the need for a critical study of the spirituality of explicit English spiritual feminists and, more importantly, the need for an investigation of the religious intentions which underlie this. It represents an attempt to demonstrate the integration of feminist perspectives and spirituality in a phenomenological study.

The study of the explicit and implicit dimensions of people’s most personal beliefs demands a sensitive method and approach. The application of the new-style phenomenological method of Jacques Waardenburg was found to be the most useful way to arrive at an understanding of often complex layers of religious meanings. This method has proved very successful in the study of living religions where it has been possible to question the religious human being about the specifically religious meanings and intentions of their beliefs and actions. It is also useful in the exploration of religions which are marginal to dominant institutions.

This particular study focuses on three explicitly religious groups of women that I have termed Christian feminists, post-church feminists and post-christian feminists. In short, Christian feminists are those women who still retain membership in Christian institutions, but who believe that the churches are in need of reform which must come with the application of a feminist critique. Post-church feminists are a more difficult group to study because of their apparent invisibility and marginalisation. These women are explicitly Christian, but differ from the first group because they view the unremitting patriarchal bias of the churches as irredeemable. Such women often leave the churches after great struggles and continue to try to live the Christian life without the support of the ritual and leadership of the churches. Some come to understand religious faith as a human creation. Many find religious expression and comfort in the meetings of small groups of like-minded individuals, but most post-church feminists continue in their struggle as Christians and feminists as isolated individuals. Post-christian feminists presented themselves as a natural third group in the search for English spiritual feminists from Christian backgrounds. These are women who have rejected the theology, dogma and leadership of the churches because their experience of the Supreme Being as the Great Goddess is so total that they do not find Christianity relevant to their experience, considering it to have obstructed the "natural progress" of matriarchal religion. It was feared that the title "post-christian" would confuse readers who were familiar with the works of Mary Daly, who was the first writer to use this term in a feminist context. In my research I came across apparently Christian- and post-church feminists who called themselves "post-Christian" [sic]. This is discussed in chapter III in more detail. This can be a problematic term which is given a variety of meanings by different individuals. In the present work the use of "post-christian" for members of the Matriarchy Network was suggested and approved by nearly all the women who were interviewed from this group in depth, a fact which surprised me greatly, as I had expected that they would have preferred the title of "Matriarchists" or "Witches". The religious intention and meaning underlying this is that post-christians wish to extend solidarity with other spiritual women. They wish to point out that matriarchy lies at the root of and beyond the tenets of Christianity. A further detailed discussion of the nature of these three categories is given in chapter III, "Methodological Applications in this Study".
The task of describing the implicit intentions and focus of a work which seeks to combine an accepted academic method (the Phenomenology of Religion) and the burgeoning methods of the feminist critique is problematic. I argue in favour of a relationship which endures and is indeed strengthened and matured by the creative tension which must exist between the two in order for a growing understanding of religious phenomena to develop.

Forms of the feminist critique of religion are widely recognised in the West, but perhaps what is less well-known is that women are beginning to identify or formulate their own religious traditions. This is of enormous interest to the phenomenologist of religion who studies contemporary religious expressions, and whose focus of interest is religious human beings. The strength of "new-style" Phenomenology, it is argued, is the emphasis upon the relationship between the author and the subject of her/his research. It implies a constant inner dialogue by the researcher which leads to a constant (often creative, healthy!) tension with the subject. The unfolding and evolving intentions of the author and subjects in a given research task must lead to the recognition of the impossibility of total "objectivity" in studying living religions. What were my underlying intentions in this study?

My spiritual and academic interest in the Women's Movement and the feminist critique of religion coincided with a painful and necessary move from the Church of England to the Society of Friends as an Attender. The awakening to the concerns of the Women's Movement did not come from other women, but curiously by way of a lecture given in 1983 by my present Supervisor, Dr. Peter McKenzie. The significance of my baptism into feminism by a man has, I hope, remained with me: I have never seriously negated the importance of men in the Women's Movement. Since 1983 I have been closely associated with Christian Women's Information and Resources, based in Oxford. I have taught several courses at the Department of Adult Education at the University of Leicester and have been invited to speak to women's groups as wide apart as Plymouth, Edinburgh and Dublin on historical, theological and phenomenological topics. I have tried at all times to be aware that the understanding of my own religious iconoclasm may not reflect other women's, but I have often fallen short of this goal.

This work concentrates upon those explicitly religious women who show a commitment to a particular religious tradition. The diversity of the three traditions explored here make Phenomenology of Religion the most fruitful method of critically evaluating their religious meanings and intentions. It is a way of giving expression and volume to women's interpretations of religion which are, women feel, not clearly reflected in ministry, dogma and theology. So an underlying

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2 The feminist critique of religion has been approached from theological, sociological, psychological, linguistic and polemical perspectives, to name a few.
intention in this work is the promotion of feminist mores in the same way that the method of Phenomenology of Religion, by its very nature, allies itself to the principles of the Women's Movement. This includes the ethical obligation to identify and explore areas where women feel that their experiences have not been recognised.

As this is a phenomenological study which does not claim to make value judgements about the subjects of research based upon comparative evaluations, nor discusses the issue of ordination, except where the issue is of explicit importance to the women interviewed, and it does not discuss the issues raised in ecumenical, cross-cultural or global contexts, and in this way it differs from many recent studies. The present work does not offer a discussion of women in theology or philosophy, nor does it discuss an aspect of "professional" religious women. It does not propose to detail a history of women's discontent with the way they have been represented by Christianity, except where this is mentioned by the women themselves. Nor does it discuss in detail the relationships of Christian feminists and post-church feminists within religious institutions. Rather, it focuses upon the self-images of explicitly religious women in the hope that by allowing women the time to define their religious beliefs and actions, deeper insight might be gained into the meanings and intentions behind them. In short, this study is not representative of the type of feminist scholarship which introduces a feminist critique to a given subject, such as theology or philosophy. This is a study of living religious human beings who, having encountered the symbolic shift of the Women's Movement, are attempting to make some sense of their altering cosmologies. It cannot claim to ever be completely representative. Rather, the only claim that it can make is an attempt to capture moments of this fascinating process between the years 1984 and 1989.

The fieldwork for this study took place in various parts of England. More details about this aspect of the work are given in chapter III, "Methodological Applications in this Study". A Questionnaire was formulated in order to try to effect a typology. This dealt with personal and family details, their formal worship, religious feminist groups, personal spirituality and the nature of "post-christianity". From over three hundred responses to the five hundred sent to women all over England, ten women from all three groups were approached with a view to being interviewed in depth for two to three hours for every respondent. These women were chosen with two criteria in mind: firstly, that they were not professional writers, theologians, academics or media personalities, and secondly, that they were able to articulate religious ideas clearly. I purposely avoided interviewing professional writers, theologians, academics and media personalities (such as Sara Maitland, Margaret Hebblethwaite, Jo Garcia and Monica Sjöö) because I suspected that they did not always accurately represent the implicit and explicit religious beliefs of spiritual feminists. This suspicion was well-founded as there

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3See Appendix A.
was a tendency for many women who lacked the theoretical and theological depth of understanding of professional writers not to be so explicitly radical in their criticism of religious institutions or in their personal beliefs and actions.

The present work begins an exploration of the varieties of feminist critical methods in chapter I, "Feminist Critical Method". It describes and critically evaluates feminist polemical, linguistic, literary and psychoanalytical methods. By demonstrating the pluralism of feminist critical method it draws some conclusions about the most appropriate method of feminist orientation for this study. Chapter II, "Phenomenological Method" incepts a discussion of the Phenomenology of Religion, which is a method used to evaluate the meaning of religious phenomena described by the subjects during fieldwork. It stresses the centrality of the religious intentions and underlying meanings of the statements of the religious subject, the necessity of methodological self-awareness by the scholar herself, and makes a call for a broader understanding and definition of "religion". It offers a critique of the androcentrism of the Phenomenology of Religion, and an appreciation of the "new-style" Phenomenology of Jacques Waardenburg, which stresses the need for constant methodological self-awareness for the scholar and the importance of the explicit and underlying religious intentions of the subject of research. In both chapters the author stresses the expediency of her own pluralistic and "wholistic" method which is governed by her understanding that feminism brings an inevitable and enriching paradigm shift to the Study of Religion.

Chapter III, "Methodological Applications in this Study", demonstrates how the above methodology was applied in this work. It describes the nature of the fieldwork, which included the formulation of a Questionnaire to which there were over three hundred responses. From the results of this questionnaire a number of women were approached and interviewed in considerable depth about their religious experience and orientation. The method of approach to subjects in the interviews is described in this chapter. A typology is discussed which differentiates three principal groups of women responding to the 1986 Questionnaire. Material collated from both the questionnaire and the interviews are used in the present work.

Chapters IV and V "Object of Religion" and "Subject of Religion", utilise the above typology to discuss the object and subjects of religion respectively. Chapter IV develops a descriptive and critical evaluation of the Supreme Being according to the three groups of women discussed in the previous chapter. Chapter V develops an anthropology, a study of religious human beings as defined by themselves, but including a critical examination of the underlying religious meaning of their statements, where this is appropriate.

Chapter VI, "Dynamics of Religion", discusses the dynamics underlying the religious expressions
of the subjects of religion in terms of their tension with the world and the religious forms which they
take. This serves as an introduction to chapter VII, "The World of Christian-, post-church- and
post-christian feminist Phenomena", which is a phenomenological description and critical discussion
of the world of religious phenomena. These are discussed under the sub-headings of sacred space,
time, community, persons, word and action.

The above summary of the methodology, fieldwork and research undertaken is critically discussed in
greater detail in the following chapters.
CHAPTER I

FEMINIST CRITICAL METHOD

Introduction

This study focuses on one particular mode of inquiry in the Study of Religion, the phenomenological method. Yet the study is unique in that it attempts to elicit the religious meaning and nature of the religious phenomena under scrutiny by the application of a formal controlling interest, the critique of the Women's Movement. Clearly, such an effort requires a highly sensitive and watertight methodology, because the feminist critique is still regarded as suspect or marginal to what is considered by its opponents to be more "appropriate" academic concerns. A precise declaration of the intentions in this study must therefore be clarified at the very beginning. The most pressing question is that of the relationship between the Women's Movement and the Study of Religion: does feminist criticism transform and enrich knowledge of religious phenomena: or does it form a synthesis and adapt to established methodologies, thus working very much within the discipline: or does it reject method itself as a hindrance to the concerns of the Women's Movement? Mary Daly has no doubts about "the tyranny of methodolatry". Its failure, she claims, deprives women of the potential to interpret their own experiences by formulating their own questions.1

One of the false gods of theologians, philosophers and other academics is called Method. It commonly happens that the choice of a problem is determined by method, instead of method being determined by the problem. This means that thought is subject to an invisible tyranny.2

Daly suggests an exercise in Methodicide, which is a method in itself! She calls it a form of "deicide", an idea which she pursues in Beyond God the Father, and in which she attempts to raise "nonquestions" and "nondata" to the attention of her readers. She claims that social and cultural institutions have survived in their current forms because of their androcentric bias which has failed

1Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 11-12.
2Ibid., 11.
to take into account the experiences and questions of women. Daly's assessment of the status quo is characteristically radical:

...it should be noted that the God method is, in fact, a subordinate deity serving Higher Powers. These are social and cultural institutions whose survival depends on the classification of disruptive and disturbing information as nondata. Under patriarchy, Method has wiped out women's questions so totally that even women have not been able to hear and formulate our own questions to meet our own experiences. So rather than insisting that method becomes a servant to the ends of the Women's Movement, Daly insists upon its abolition because the very nature of its findings are representative only of a one-sided (male) area of experience.

Annette Kolodny has argued for method in the feminist critique. It is important, she feels, that method should be pluralist, for this is "the only critical stance consistent with the current status of the larger Women's Movement". She espouses the ideal that feminist criticism should not seek a single methodology, but should select and formulate methodologies and approaches that can serve its own needs. Feminist literary theory is important to the method of this work. Literary theory has undergone a great transformation during the last fifty years, in which women have recognised that they have been estranged from the literary world of Western culture. Sandra Gilbert insists that from this realisation a "revisionary imperative" is generated which extends feminist criticism beyond literature by women by the important realisation that every text can be appraised by a variety of aesthetic and political assumptions about gender. Annette Kolodny argues that these strategies for interpretation are "learned, historically determined and thereby necessarily gender-inflicted". So feminist literary critics are agreed that in interpreting literary works there are often hidden connections between "textuality, sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority." Kolodny critically speculates about the reasons why the critical enterprise itself is influenced by gender, and shows that in the case of women's writing some "élite" male readers do not fully understand the specific systems of meaning which are formulated by women within the context of their own traditions and experiences; women are writing from the perspective of their own

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3 Ibid., 11.
unique experiences. They are formulating their own traditions which challenge the established norms of androcentric critical traditions. The feminist challenge to literary criticism has been well established in the area of literary studies for some twenty years. It has, regrettably, been perceived as an attempt to completely deconstruct all that literary criticism has sought to establish over the centuries. Yet it is a valid critique nonetheless as it endeavours to expose the roots of irregular reasoning which results in an irregular interpretation of text. The Women's Movement cannot overlook the damage that many hundreds of years of androcentric literature and criticism does to women's image of themselves. It cannot change that fact but it can challenge it and seek to include and develop its own perspective.

A feminist revision of method in the Study of Religion owes much to the critical insight of feminist literary critics. So a feminist critical method is valued in this work. Indeed, it needs to be fostered, developed and challenged if a feminist critique in the Study of Religion is to advance at all. Method and (importantly) methodological self-criticism are central to the revision and diversification of praxis in the Study of Religion. The historian Gerda Lerner elaborates on this point:

Women have been left out of history not because of evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centred terms. We have missed women and their activities because we have asked questions of our history which are appropriate to men. To rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness, we must, for a time, focus on a woman-centred inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of female culture within the general culture shared by women. History must, therefore include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past. The central question that it raises is this: What would history be like if seen through the eyes of women and ordered by the values they define?

The intention of feminist critical method in the Study of Religion is that it will move away from a marginal position in the academy to become accepted and valued in all types of research therein.

The way in which this critique is carried out is important. Women's Studies should not be undertaken wholly divorced from "androcentric" scholarship. If the Women's Movement is to achieve any qualitative advance in the academy it must seek to change the prevailing ethos which is dominated by androcentric method and insist that women's experiences and questions are taken into consideration. Feminist criticism demonstrates a variety of approaches to the question of method. Annette Kolodny has insisted that the feminist critique should be pluralist because of its enormous diversification over the last few decades.

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Elaine Showalter has made a useful distinction between two phases of feminist criticism. Although she is commenting on literature, her words are applicable to all feminist criticism. Showalter distinguishes between two forms of feminist criticism; woman as reader (which she calls "feminist critique", and woman as writer (which she calls "gynocritics"). The former is specifically concerned with the criticism of ideological assumptions made by men. The latter, gynocritics, concerns "the history, themes, genres and structure of literature by women", and the "psychodynamics of female activity". The implication is not only that the feminist critic should turn to "gynocritics" to learn about what women have felt and experienced, but also that this experience is directly available in texts written by women. Showalter is saying that women's writing occupies a different status from men's writing:

One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited role women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be.

So Showalter is saying that gynocritics does not subserve to masculine values; rather it "strives to focus on the newly visible world of female culture" and effectively names women as the authors of their own spirituality.

There is currently a third phase in feminist critical theory in which demands are being made by some women for a thorough revision of the theoretical assumptions made in the academy which have before now been based almost entirely upon the experiences of men. It is from this third phase that this work draws its impetus. A great strength of the feminist critical tradition is its insight into and critical appreciation of its own traditions, biases and strengths. Annette Kolodny claims that, "If feminist criticism calls anything into question, it must be that dog-eared myth of intellectual neutrality". She claims that

it does not mean, however, that we cease to disagree; it means that we entertain the possibility that different readings, even of the same text, may be differently useful, even illuminating, within different contexts of inquiry.

Mindful of this statement, the following pages of this chapter will attempt to clarify the diverse sources which have greatly influenced the methodology and spirit of the whole work. By clarifying

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8 Annette Kolodny, "Some notes on defining a feminist literary criticism", Critical Inquiry (1975) 2,1, 75-92.
10 Ibid., 27.
11 Ibid., 28.
them it is hoped that the reader will come to understand and respect their meaning and function in the context of the rest of this thesis. They are as follows: feminist polemical works, feminist scholarship in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, language and linguistics, feminist literary criticism and myth criticism, psychoanalytical works and new-style phenomenological research.

"Feminism", says Marilyn French, "is the only serious, coherent and universal philosophy that offers an alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures." A great deal has been written about the apparent supersedence of patriarchy over alleged matriarchal societies from as early as the late nineteenth century. The Women's Movement has become deeply divided about the veracity of claims about the existence of matriarchal societies before patriarchy. One of the most incisive discussions about this debate is by Joan Bamberger who rejects matriarchal theories in the strictest sense of the word, although she does claim that myth is the medium of revelation about how certain institutions came to possess meaning:

Composed of a vast and complex series of actions, myth may become through repeated recitation a moral history of action [my emphasis]. While not in itself a detailed chronology of events, myth may be part of culture history in providing an invented "historical" explanation of how this reality was created.

In the context of this work "patriarchy" is taken to refer to those societies whose cultures exclude women by their attempts to control what they produce (which can include offspring to labour produce). Such androcentric societies often elicit a great fear of women's bodies, for example, as in childbirth, menstruation or even nakedness; and they attempt to control this through the jealous guarding of chastity or virginity or by forcing sex upon them in the form of rape. Of course, few men would recognise themselves as rapists or tyrants; yet "élite" men would accept far more subtle means of female control and subjugation as "natural" or preordained in some religious societies. These more subtle means are achieved by the institutionalisation of gender into hierarchical structures. Reduced to its crudest form, a stratification occurs in which women are perceived to be


16 Ibid., 267.
"of the flesh" and therefore "closer to nature"; "elite" men who are in control perceive themselves to be less connected to the flesh and nature and therefore closer to God.

Feminists argue that such distinctions are invidious and have a negative effect upon women's images of themselves. But they can also be harmful to men as well as women because they force inaccurate perceptions upon them. In the face of this the Women's Movement is not asking women to coalesce with the status quo; it asks that they change it. So the Women's Movement is a movement of transformation which attempts to use political power in the widest sense of the term to transform society. In a word, it seeks to "feminise" it. The Women's Movement is a non-violent movement which is directed at the critique and reconstruction of ideology in a way which takes into account the way women see the world and their relation to it. "Ideology", says Maggie Humm, "is our way of coping with the contradictions of experience". "By necessity the ideology of women critics must encompass more contradictions because women are provided with many more confusing images of themselves than men are". The Women's Movement learns from its encounter with the contradictions that patriarchal or androcentric values force upon them and make untenable and factitious demands on women's lives. Of course, traditionally "feminine" values have been assimilated into patriarchal value structures: nurturing, compassion, indeed all values associated with "motherhood" are exalted as long as they remain dissociated from being expressed assertively and as long as they renounce the demand for recognition in the public sphere.

Feminist polemical method

Let us now turn to the feminist polemical works which have influenced the method in this study. Mary Wollstonecraft's insight into the victimisation and powerlessness of women is a remarkable achievement for its time. She moves beyond the assertion of the moral autonomy of women to make a clear political statement about the position of women and "feminine" values in society. Fundamental to Wollstonecraft's message in Vindication is her unshakable religious conviction that the creator God had given to both men and women the gift of reason which enabled them to strive for virtue. This gift in women, she asserted, had been distorted and neglected, so women were being denied access to "full humanity", a state which God had not invented. For Wollstonecraft there were no virtues purely assigned to either sex. The counterpoising of courage in men with insipidity in women was therefore insidious and damaging to both sexes. In Vindication Wollstonecraft

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18 Ibid.
19 Mary Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Women (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).
outlines the great contradictions of experience that the Rousseauist view of education imposes upon women. The Rousseauists viewed women as the instrument of pleasure for men, through sensibility and passivity, domesticity and obedience. Wollstonecraft protested that women had been trained during their formative years not to use their reason and judgement. They had been taught that their province was that of emotion and the heart, and therefore the power of reason eluded them:

Women are everywhere in this deplorable state; for, in order to preserve their innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed, they are made to assume an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison.

Mary Wollstonecraft will be remembered for her contribution to feminist polemics for her remarkable transcendence of the eighteenth century milieu in which she lived and wrote; and for her simple but forthright conviction that both men and women have the right to enjoy a life of moral fulfillment as a full citizen.

A few words must be said about the contribution of a more recent feminist polemicist. Although Mary Daly will be discussed in greater detail in the section about the feminist critique of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, her influence has been felt in most areas of feminist scholarship. She has written about a wide range of subjects, including theology, philosophy, linguistics and anthropology. She holds to a firm understanding of the relationship between the symbolic order (as evident in language and official religion) and the power structures within society. Daly creates a highly original and idiosyncratic language of her own, full of capitalisations, neologisms and hyphenations. In one section of Gyn/Ecology Daly affirms her case by the use of polemics:

Women continue to be intimidated by the label anti-male. Some feel a false need to draw distinctions, for example, "I am anti-patriarchy but not anti-male". The courage to be logical - the courage to name - would require that we admit to ourselves that males and males only are the originators, planners and legitimators of patriarchy.

in the same book, Daly writes:

As a creative crystallizing of the movement beyond the State of Patriarchal Paralysis, this book is an act of Dis-possession; and hence in a sense beyond the limitations of the label anti-male, it is absolutely Anti-autocrat, Amazingly Anti-male, Furiously and Finally Female.

20 Ibid., 10
21 Ibid., 131
22 Ibid., 28.
23 Ibid., 29.
Daly’s “method” is to confront and deconstruct familiar concepts of what she sees as a patriarchal culture, and to recreate their meaning to be relevant to a woman-centred system. She perceives the power of symbolic systems of meaning (which is her great strength) but her solution is presented from the point of view of a lesbian separatist who regards men as unredeemably socialised (at times even biologically ordered) to behave aggressively and competitively. Women, on the other hand, she contends, are genetically inclined to associative forms of thought, and are cooperative and emotional. In their struggle to survive in the world, separatists assert that woman’s values weaken and they lose their capacity to act on these values. Thus sexism, war, exploitation, racism and competition are perceived as the logical outcome of a masculinist cosmology. Separatists view female participation in this world as collusion with "the enemy" and draw the line at any intimate dealings with men where this can be avoided. Daly herself refuses to speak with certain men (including colleagues at Boston College) because she has no wish to "dialog with the oppressor".

Separatists rarely impose their own views on others, but Daly is the exception in that she would like to reverse the world of patriarchy. Central to Daly’s cosmology is the tenet that lesbianism is quintessential feminism. It is a matter of choice, not necessarily a matter of natural sexual orientation. Many of the women interviewed found Daly difficult to accept. They were insistent that the feminist critique is essentially a human movement which is dependent upon a paradigm shift in consciousness by both men and women. Almost all of them agreed that the Women’s Movement is a political movement which was striving for a recognition and not a denial of sex differences: it was the infliction of gender stereotypes upon the sexes that most women objected to, particularly where these became enshrined in dogma. Most women were concerned that their roles in employment, motherhood and feminism should achieve full public recognition and that they should be admitted to positions of influence in the public sphere. Most women did not want to coalesce with the status quo but they did want to change it. The enduring strength of Daly’s critique is not her separatism, but that she has a clear vision of the powerful symbolic structure that undergirds the language, social and religious stratifications of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. She makes apparent the absence of emphasis upon the “feminine” both in terms of women’s experience, women’s traditions and in terms of the symbolic order which underlies all human activities.

Where the feminist critique has been used polemically to discuss religion, the results have been evident in two stages. Firstly, women have exposed the fruits of patriarchy in religion by historical research with the feminist critique as its controlling formal interest. There has been much written in recent years about the denial of sacramental and sacerdotal responsibility to women in this area. A rich tradition of theological works by feminists has grown during the last twenty years, reflecting a wide range of understanding about the relationship between human beings and God. More recently a new stage of women’s writing has come to the fore: a number of women do not feel
that patriarchal or "androcentric" religion adequately reflects their own experiences of God, and so they are articulating their own constructions which are based on their own unique experiences. Some of these women have rejected the religion based on the idea of a father-God in favour of a Supreme Being who reflects both traditionally male and female attributes. Others experience the Supreme Being in all-female terms: these are post-christian feminists, the matriarchate, or "Goddess worshippers". In the United States the feminist critique has made significant developments since the inception of the Women in Religion Working Group in 1971. Yet even in the late 1980's, few scholars have accepted that women have never been studied adequately in the Study of Religion and that the study of religious human beings is really the study of religious males. So if a complete statement about religious human beings is to be made, then religious females must be studied too. The feminist critique in the study of religion has, broadly, followed the direction of other forms of feminist critical method in that its first stage has mapped out the process of androcentrism that has characterised the study of women in religion; secondly, it has begun to reformulate method in the discipline to incorporate those questions that have been left out because women's experiences have not been taken into consideration. More recently feminist scholars have begun to explore the meaning of Goddess symbolism in terms of their prehistoric and contemporary meaning. This has meant venturing outside the traditional areas of feminist scholarship on religion (Western Christian studies) and into the world of "unofficial" religion. It is a challenge to value judgements that are made by some scholars about "marginal" religious groups. This is not just a challenge to the classification and terminology of the Study of Religion; it is a call for a paradigm shift in the way scholars look at the lives of religious human beings themselves.

In the United States the main institutions within the Study of Religion have responded to this in a way that is not so apparent in the United Kingdom. The Women's Caucus has urged the American Academy of Religion to recognise the importance of feminist research in the Study of Religion.

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24 See Appendix B.
25 See Appendix C.
26 See Appendix D.

28 The following works exemplify this line of research:


They responded by establishing a Women and Religion section and by publishing articles by significant scholars including Carol Christ, Rita Gross, Elaine Pagels and Phyllis Trible. However, none of the major publishing affiliates to major study groups in the Study of Religion have published a significant number of volumes on the subject of women and religion either in the U.S.A. or Europe. Neither the distinguished Studies in Religion series, sponsored by the American Academy of Religion, or the more radical Religion and Reason series, sponsored by the Groningen Working Party on Religion has published such a work. Feminists engaged in research in religion approach it from many standpoints. Firstly, there are those women who effect a feminist critique as participants in a given religious tradition. Certain features of the tradition do not reflect or convey their experiences of the world or of God and thus may be regarded as sexist. Some of these women may leave their traditional religions. On the other hand there are professional students of religion. They may have affiliation to religious groups. Both groups of women have one factor in common: the symbolic order of an androcentric world is a source of direct challenge and confrontation to them. The challenge is dealt with in various ways according to the individual methodologies.

Mary Daly read philosophy at Freiburg and now teaches theology at Boston College, Massachusetts. In Beyond God the Father she states, "If God is male then male is God". Her argument is that the image of God as a patriarchal figure has become so entrenched in the human imagination that it has upheld the status quo of patriarchal societies. In Gyn/Ecology the symbol of the Goddess is for Daly the confirmation of the life-loving being of women and nature. Further, Daly is absolutely convinced in Gyn/Ecology that the first problem to be resolved where women's image of themselves is concerned, is the image of God, not the problem of patriarchy. Unless the image of God is tackled first, Daly sees no hope for women's liberation. Rosemary Radford Ruether's strategy for change in the symbolic order (and consequently in formal religious structures such as the Church) is to work for a paradigm shift in consciousness from within the Church. Unlike Daly, Ruether still experiences salvation within the Roman Catholic Church but is critically aware of the need for change regarding the view of womanhood and the feminine that it has historically engendered. Ruether sees the family as a valuable factor in the development of integrated human beings, although

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she is highly critical of the stereotyped roles that the denominations perpetuate about the family unit, and women's role in that unit in particular. Ruether, a theologian and historian, is interested in the relationship between images of God and actual power in the world. She claims that the emphasis on transcendence in the Judaeo-Christian traditions results in the neglect of the temporal life: the transcendent world functions on a "masculine" paradigm and is reflected in human interaction because males hold the majority of powerful and influential positions in society through an implicit policy of supremacy and subjection.

Ruether is especially interesting because she does not only consider the status of women under patriarchy but also those who do not belong to the "dominant system" - the poor and oppressed of the third world, the victims of racial discrimination and religious persecution. Ruether makes an incisive evaluation of patriarchy in the Bible and makes a connection between its appearance in relation to different levels of sacralisation in it. For example, women in the Old Testament are regarded as the property of men by divine law. In the New Testament male leadership often manifests itself as the "natural" outcome of divine dispensation. Ruether extends her Biblical analysis to a rationalisation of the power structure in the Roman Catholic Church. The symbolic order of man as powerful and woman as subject becomes experienced as an immutable divine revelation in the Church, she says, and thus women are denied the opportunity to define and give meaning to their spiritual, emotional, and sexual beings: this prevention operates ultimately by denying women official sacramental positions.

Naomi Goldenberg is a psychologist of religion trained at the Jung Institute at Zurich, now teaching Comparative Religion and the Psychology of Religion at the University of Ottowa. She is Jewish, but expresses objections to all forms of religion that negate women at the fundamental level of imagery and symbolism. Her methodology owes much to the "discovery" of the unconscious by Freud and Jung, although at times she is highly critical of their androcentric stance. "When fathers die we all turn inward", is Freud's phrase which Goldenberg adopts in her book, Changing of the Gods, as a plea for a dissociation from the patriarchal father-image so that human beings may be free to search for a variety of images to symbolise the divine. She predicts that once women assume the places that are legitimately theirs in society, society will change. Her approach differs from Daly's for she sees change in the symbolic order only after women take pragmatic action in their lives to directly confront and change societal and religious structures. In Changing of the Gods, Goldenberg speaks of her support of the witch movement because she is convinced that for women to experience authentic images of themselves and of the Goddess, then the dominant images of Father

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31 See Appendix E.  
and Son must be eliminated. To her, the most radical expressions of feminist culture and religion are the twentieth century witch movements. It is a way of bringing to individual and group the divine element of supernatural powers. Goldenberg also sees the psychological benefits of the witch movement for "secular" feminists in that witches create several levels of diverse meaning in imagery for their cognitive and conceptual theories. Goldenberg, like Daly and Ruether, stresses the necessity of challenging and changing the symbolic value systems which pervade patriarchal philosophy and culture. She directly confronts the problem which many of the women in this study have experienced: the conflict between religion and spirituality.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is a theologian who explores the vital dialectic between theology and feminism. She argues that all theology to date is androcentric and functions to justify the discriminatory praxis of the churches towards women. So she is highly critical of the theological establishment. She has great confidence in the direction of the contemporary Women's Movement's critique of culture. The suffrage movement, she says, did not so much attempt to change society as to integrate women into it. Yet the new Women's Movement "radically criticises the myth and structures of a society and culture which keeps women down." In the face of a society which denigrates, infantalises women and then puts them on a pedestal, Fiorenza finds a lucid consistency in feminism, which first maintains that women are human persons, and therefore demands free development of full personhood for all, women and men. Secondly, feminism maintains that all human rights and weaknesses are not limited by sex.

Fiorenza points to the role played by Christianity in the formation of sexist ideology within Western culture. This ethos has perpetuated women's sense of inferiority through institutional inequalities and fatuous theological justifications of women's innate difference from men. Further,
Christian ethics has intensified the internalisation of the feminine passive attitudes, for example, meekness, humility, submission, self-sacrifice, self-denying love, which impede the development of self-assertion and autonomy by women.

Fiorenza is no stranger to the reactions of unsympathetic Christians and theologians to the feminist critique of theology. They often attempt to neutralise it so that the social and ecclesial order remains unchanged. She names three methods of disablement used by the establishment. Firstly, they deny the accuracy and validity of the feminist analysis and critique. Secondly, they co-opt it by acknowledging some minor points of analysis. And finally, where co-optation of the feminist critique is not possible, outright objection and condemnation takes place. Fiorenza perceives the manifold response of women to this "systematic violence". She says that women do not differ among themselves so much in their analysis and critique of cultural and ecclesial establishments and their ideologies, as in their policies and strategies for dealing with their conclusions. For example, many women opt for an exodus and a separation from institutional religion, while others affirm what they see as their own prophetic roles within the bounds of organised Christianity. Fiorenza sees herself in the latter category. She perceives that both Christian institutions and theology operate within a sexist framework and language: her task, as she sees it, is to reconceptualise and to transform Christian theology from a feminist Christian perspective. Fiorenza's theology is a critical theology of liberation, which arises from her perception of theology as a culturally and historically conditioned pursuit:

...historical-critical studies and hermeneutical-theological reflection have known that not only theology but the revelation of God in Scripture is expressed in human language and shares culturally conditioned problems and concepts. Revelation and theology are so intertwined that they can no longer be adequately distinguished. This hermeneutical insight is far-reaching when we consider that Scripture as well as theology is rooted in a patriarchal-sexist culture and shares its biases and prejudices. Scripture and theology express truth in sexist language and images and participate in the myth of their patriarchal-sexist society and culture.

So hermeneutics and exegesis are central to Fiorenza's theology. The former reveals the factious nature of so-called value-free, objectivistic historiography. Fiorenza understands that Christian tradition has usually been understood from an androcentric perspective: "his-story". If women want to get in touch with their own roots and tradition, Fiorenza insists that they will have to rewrite the Christian tradition and theology in such a way that it becomes not only his-story but her-story as well.

39 Ibid., 608.
40 Ibid., 610.
41 Ibid., 611.
42 Ibid.
And yet Fiorenza sees this hermeneutic as only a partial solution to the problem. It is not only necessary to understand the Christian tradition which perpetuates violence, alienation and oppression towards women; theology must liberate symbols and institutions. So central to Fiorenza's argument is the fact that the Christian community is in constant need of renewal through prophetic criticism in order not to lose sight of its vision of a liberating ecclesial and theological praxis. Liberation is at the core of Fiorenza's theological praxis, a factor which identifies it with the Liberation Theology Movement in South America. "Theology as a discipline is the domain of white clerics and academicians and thus excludes, because of its constituency, many different theological problems and styles within the Christian communities." Fiorenza notes that while theology appeals to rational faculties and intellectual understanding, myths give meaning and structure to human life, for they are models to be imitated. They possess an inherent stabilising function for as they sanction the existing status quo and justify power structures. So she suggests that feminist theologians who value myths and symbols must first "demythologize" the myths of sexist society and patriarchal religion in order to liberate them.

The strength of the critique of Daly, Ruether, Goldenberg and Fiorenza rests in their recognition and emphasis of the symbolic order of androcentric religion, the myths and symbols which undergird the way women are perceived both on an actual and metaphysical level. Under an androcentric system women are deemed to occupy a marginalised position within the symbolic order: as venerated and powerless (as a "good" wife and mother,) or on the borderlands between the masculine and chaos (assertive, chaotic, e.g. Lilith, Adam's first wife before Eve). Perceiving this inequality, feminist scholars working in "religion" (as theologians, historians of religion, comparativists, phenomenologists, anthropologists, sociologists and so forth) are now attempting to redress the balance by making themselves both the subject and the creators of method in the discipline.

**Linguistic method**

A debt is owed in this study to women who have contributed to feminist critical method in the field of linguistic studies, especially to Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Mary Daly and Monique Wittig. Julia Kristeva outlines some of the issues raised by feminist linguistics in a provocative and disturbing essay, Séméiotiké in which she declares that women are estranged from language: "To work on

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43 Ibid., 613.
44 Ibid., 620.
language, to labour in the materiality of that which society regards as a means of contact and understanding, isn't that at one stroke to declare oneself a stranger (étranger) to language? She perceives the ideological and philosophical praxis of modern linguistics as fundamentally oppressive and authoritarian and argues that its salvation lies in a paradigm shift away from the Saussurian concept of langue towards a reestablishment of the speaking subject as an object for linguistics, thus relieving it from its fascination with language as a monolithic, homogenous structure, towards an interest in language as a heterogenous process. This concern is shared by Cixous, Daly and Wittig. These women offer a lyrical and metaphorical style in their critique. Although these women claim to resist theory and analysis they practise both: Cixous in Prénoms de Personne (1974), Daly in Gyn/Ecology, and Wittig in Lesbian People's Material for a Dictionary. All three formulate their own methodologies for the analysis of texts, and create a new corpus of ideas and imagery, hailing the advent of a new "feminine" language.

Cixous' La Jeune Née is a vigorous and enterprising attempt to subvert what she sees as "patriarchal binary thought", a system of heavily imbricated masculine/feminine oppositions of a predominantly patriarchal system:

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<td>Nature</td>
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<td>Action</td>
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Cixous argues that in a system of binary oppositions the duality cannot remain intact: a battle must ensue. Under patriarchy, victory is equated with activity: passivity is defeated. Cixous purports that this equation of woman with passivity leaves no room for a positive space for a woman: "Either a woman is passive or she doesn't exist". So Cixous is engaged in ridding the binary opposition between masculine and feminine by usurping the dominant "phallogocentric" logic of patriarchal binary thought. Yet she is suspicious of the term, écriture feminine because she

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46 Ibid., 1.
49 Ibid., 118.
believes that this binary logic does not allow for the fact that a "decipherable libidinal femininity...can be read in writing produced by a male or female". She attacks the classic conception of bisexuality which is "squashed under the emblem of castration fear along with the fantasy of a "total" being (though composed of two halves)" and which would "do away with difference". Cixous proposes another methodology that does not annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases them. But she does not perceive the possibility of defining a feminist practice of writing.

For this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system: it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination.

In her book, La Venue a l'écriture, published a year later Cixous makes the claim that in writing women are taking part in the creative process which is ongoing and eternal. "Writing or God. God the Writing. The Writing God". This is a similar paradigm to that used by feminist theologians. Cixous creates a dense web of biblical and mythological allusion. In myth she creates a world in which disunity and discord can be satisfactorily resolved. For her the nature of the closed mythical world contains the comforting security of the womb. Within this place the speaking/writing subject is free to move. Central to Cixous' vision is the idea that feminine or female writing establishes a spontaneous relationship to the physical différence [sic] of the female body. Yet at times Cixous appears to have forgotten that she is dealing with real women and not mythic archetypes. She has a utopian vision which is struggling to remove itself from the grip of patriarchal ideology. Utopias and the language of utopian thought, according to Cixous, challenge us on the levels of poetry and politics:

I would lie if I said that I am a political woman, not at all. In fact, I have to assemble the two words, political and poetic. Not to lie to you, I must confess that I put the account on the poetic. I do so that the political does not repress, because the political is sometimes cruel and hard and so vigorously real that sometimes I feel like consoling myself by crying and shedding poetic tears.

Cixous appears to take refuge in mythology from the contradictions of the real world: she envisions writing by women as ecstatic expression, the very enactment of liberation, in union with a primeval

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50 Quoted in V.A. Conley, Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 129.
52 Ibid., 53.
54 V.A. Conley, op. cit., 139-40.
mother. Yet Cixous represents an exciting field of departure. She opens up an awareness of sexuality and the creative process in texts written by women and men. She points to the articulation of desire in language: writing, for Cixous, is always a libidinal act.

Mary Daly’s emphasis on the importance of language for the Women’s Movement has developed from her deduction in Beyond God the Father that “women have had the power of naming stolen from us”, and so we do not have the power to control ideas about ourselves, the world and even of God. What she now claims is happening is that “women are hearing ourselves and each other, and out of this supporting hearing emerge new words ... words which, materially speaking, are identical with the old [but] which become new in a semantic context that arises from qualitatively new experience”. Daly elaborates on the liberation of language: liberation can only take place by the castration of language. “It castrates precisely in the sense of cutting away the phallocentric value system imposed by patriarchy in its subtle as well as more manifest expressions”.

The cutting away of this phallocentric value system in its various incarnations amounts to a kind of exorcism that essentially must be done by women, who are in a position to experience the demonic destructiveness of the super-phallic society in our own being.

So Daly’s method of castration-liberation-exorcism involves the dislodging of the instruments of language (including myths, images, symbols, gender) that reflect the social arrangement under patriarchy. In Gyn/Ecology Daly highlights the importance of linguistics for feminist critical method. She says that feminists are tolerated for attacking social crimes but are pilloried for attacking the more insidious social crimes of sexist language. Daly urges women to think about certain words (particularly about those words that are supposed to describe women) which do not only fail to express what women are, but also destroy our identity: “feminine”, “unfeminine”, “womanly”. Women, she says, “must learn to speak in our Mother’s Tongue”.

Women struggling for words feel haunted by false feelings of personal inadequacy, by anger, frustration, and a kind of sadness/bereavement. For it is, after all, our “mother’s tongue” that has been turned against us by the tongue-twisters. Learning to speak our Mothers’ Tongue is exorcising the male “mothers”.

In a later work, Pure Lust, there is more evidence of the “Mother’s Tongue” at work. Pure Lust moves away from androcentric binary logic into a newly-constructed female syntax. Daly

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55 Daly, op. cit., 8.
56 Ibid., 8.
57 Ibid., 9.
58 Ibid., 10.
59 Ibid., 8.
60 Ibid., 330.
revolutionises not only what she sees as "male" vocabulary, but the whole process of language, or syntax. Her technique involves the fragmentation of standard discourse by the politicisation of etymology. She extends the practice begun in *Beyond God the Father* of changing nouns into verbs (God to Daly is Be-ing, a dynamic verb), and this becomes more than just a linguistic game: it underlines the dynamic nature of language which reflects reality. Daly recognises that the potential of prefixes can be to intensify nouns: so by dividing prefixes from what she perceives as "patriarchal" nouns, she claims to have castrated male discourse while creating new possibilities for feminist readings. Further, Daly creates a woman's syntax by using hyphens to add emphasis to the function of the prefix: "Crone-logical". "amazing", "Gyn/Ecology". So Daly's critique is an attack on the possession of meaning (by men) which is bound up in gender politics. Daly tries to make linguistic judgements about sexual politics: "Exorcism requires naming this environment of spirit/mind rape, refusing to be receptacles for semantic semen". The great strength of Daly's critique is the way that she shows how a language based on women's mental and bodily experiences serves women's interests while remaining an act of creativity.

Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* was written during the Parisian student revolt of 1968. It describes the possibilities of a new language for women which reflects their world-view. But it is in *Lesbian People's Material for a Dictionary* that she makes apparent her new language for women by encouraging women to rethink the relationship between language and gender identity. Like Daly and Cixous, Wittig attacks patriarchy by attacking patriarchal language. Experimenting with nouns and pronouns, she rejects the name "woman" because it means "one who belongs to another".

Kristeva, Cixous, Daly and Wittig chart the emotional power of feminism and interpret the feminine as rooted in language and subjectivity. In this sense they have been called "psychoanalytic feminists" and indeed, this is Cixous' and Wittig's profession. Their contribution towards the critical method in this study is enormous. They describe the ways in which verbal minutiae are used by patriarchy to create and maintain cultural values. They suggest ways that the feminist critique of language can apply to our lives. Through myth and allegory these women suggest a fresh semantics in which static patriarchal archetypes become living "Archimages" (to rhyme with "rages"), fluid, subjective and directly linked with the spiritual experience of individuals: they are asking for no less than a new feminist mode of discourse shaped by the female imagination.

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61 Ibid., 324.
Feminist literary criticism has advanced more than any other feminist method operating in the University sector. Elaine Showalter points to two forms of feminist literary criticism which might equally apply to any form of feminist endeavour. The first type is “feminist critique”, and is concerned with women reading works by male authors. The second, “gynocritics”, deals with woman as the creative agent of a text, which is very different from the first category which has an “historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena”.

In “gynocritics” we find “the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women...the psychodynamics of female creativity...and studies of particular writers and works.”

In the Study of Religion these two stages are evident too. Firstly, the woman is the consumer of male produced texts and a critic of androcentric textuality: secondly, the woman becomes the producer of her own textual meaning where structure, theme, history and genre are claimed as her own. It is “gynocritics” that will be the main focus of attention in this work: it enables women to name themselves as the authors of their own spirituality. The phenomenological method tries to elicit the subjective meaning of that authorship, and so the idea of “gynocritics” and Phenomenology are complementary methods.

A little-known genre of feminist literary criticism is myth criticism, which has been used most obviously in literature and poetry to defy the traditional portrayal of “the feminine”. Quite simply, Myth Criticism defies the traditional praxis which studies women in myth from a male-perspective, and which fails to take into account that women as mythological beings arise out of totally androcentric and even misogynistic cultures. Cathy Davidson and E.M. Broner, the editors of The Lost Tradition have recognised the problematic nature of myth criticism with regard to the verbal.


Other works include:


66Ibid., 25.
visual and ritual expressions women have held (or hold) in myths which have been constructed by men. Traditionally, myth critics have spoken of myths arising spontaneously out of the cultural milieu of individual groups as a form of collective expression of fundamental hopes, dreams and fears. What traditional mythographers have failed to recognise about their critique is that what they call "a spontaneous cultural expression" is, in fact, a signification of an androcentric value system which reflects the ontogenesis and phylogenesis of androcentric societal structures. The efforts of feminist Myth Criticism in literature have been directed towards the assertion that myths ought not to be presented as representing an immutable portrait of absolute meaning and reality. Feminist myth critics insist that myths cannot be hermetically sealed from history: and it is precisely because men have been the principle mythographers during the last one hundred years that they have consistently failed to recognise the possibility that one dimension of myth may reflect a tension in the social order between men and women. Feminist myth criticism insists also that some myths encompass tantalising strands of genuine mythologies of which women were the actual authors. Some women have gone as far as to suggest that mythology was originally female and that every patriarchal myth has its precedent in a matriarchal one. This is difficult to prove: for the purpose of this study what is of interest are the reasons behind the beliefs of these women: their cosmology and anthropology, that drive them to make claims of this nature. The validity of their claims is not the concern of method in this study. Most feminist myth critics are concerned with the powerful "culture heroines" of myth such as vegetation goddesses ("the feminine" equated with nature) or subjects that are depicted as destructive monsters in myth (reflecting, perhaps, the excessive gynophobia of patriarchal culture through history). In Gyn/Ecology Mary Daly claims to have collected "psycholinguistic" evidence of women's mythical superiority. The book is "a vow of derision" against male myths and the language that encodes them. Daly's method is to replace or reverse male myths in order to elicit new cultural insights which will enrich women's understanding of themselves. Daly believes that every male myth is a reversal of a female tale (for example, Christianity incorporated Goddess religion by transforming its symbols into a new mythology stripped of female power): or that patriarchy shapes myth (e.g. the Athena corpus) in order to create an emblematic woman closely identified with male aims. Gyn/Ecology presents an apparent

67 The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980).
68 See Appendix F.
69 In an article published in Spare Rib (January, 1982) entitled "Paradise Revisited", Jen Green demonstrates how the cosmogony of Genesis 1-2 appears to suggest a mythical account of the advent of male power over women and nature, and also suggests that the account suggests that this development is something to be regretted as a regression from the ideal original order of male-female equality.
70 Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, The Great Cosmic Mother (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).
women's "pre-history" projected and hypothesised as women's future. She calls this a journey into "Hag-ocracy". This is a moral rather than a social or historical critique.

How does feminist myth criticism support the feminist critical method of this particular study? Firstly, it is a primary tool in the critique of the way in which all forms of symbolism are traditionally studied in myth and sacred action. It facilitates an understanding of the way in which a dominant ethos shapes myth and shows that as such myth is bound to history. Secondly, myth criticism shows that myth is not a static phenomenon, and that it can be studied in contemporary manifestations, such as in the Women's Movement. Thirdly, and most importantly, feminist myth criticism shows that it is not possible to speak about "collective unconscious" of traditional mythographers, unless the experiences of both men and women are taken into account.

**Feminist psychoanalytical method**

Closely linked to the use of language and linguistics in this work is the use of feminist psychoanalytic criticism in its various manifestations. Its influence will be felt widely in later chapters, and so its sources must be acknowledged. The psychoanalytic criticism of Mary Daly, Hélène Cixous, Luce Iringaray and Julia Kristeva have shown how "the feminine" is cognitively produced and organised in language. They oppose the phallic symbols which structure Western writing and thought by asking the fundamental question, "Can a woman's body be the source of her language?" Cultural criteria determine the answers to this question. All psychoanalytical writers agree that androcentric symbolic structures that are apparent in mainstream psychoanalytic thought are not adequate to convey women's experiences. They submit that women must decode the "phallocentric" structure of symbolism by listening to women's body experiences: this is feminist psychoanalytic thought, for it offers women a way to talk about their feelings without recourse to androcentric, institutionalised thought.

It is important at the outset of any psychoanalytic venture into "femininity" to acknowledge the very real problems which arise within psychoanalytic constructions. "Femininity" is not a static construct, and the problem faced by using such a term is that there is the possibility of overlooking the potential for change in contemporary culture. Feminist psychoanalytical thought recognises that women have a gender difference from men's which men have composed about women through their

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71 Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Iringaray form the French School: Mary Daly, Carolyn Heilbrun, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Charlene Spivak, Ellen Moers, the North American: Rosalind Coward and Juliet Mitchell, the British.
bodies, culture and language. In turn, psychoanalytic critics have interpreted language as an effect of the social construction of sexuality and as a mechanism for reevaluation and change.

The value of psychoanalytic criticism in this study has been to facilitate the equation of private and individual feelings with trends in society. It offers a reevaluation of "the feminine" which is not completely entrenched in the social construction of femininity, nor entirely in biology. Rather, it offers an important evaluation of the feminine through language and subjectivity. Yet it avoids the temptation to equate individual, private experiences of individual women with archetypes which are eternal and unchanging. Certainly, women share collective images and symbols of their experiences: and psychoanalysis actually invites the portrayal of subjectivity and desire which gives the public side of feminism a powerful emotional base from which to ask questions and from which to effect a mechanism for change. Both psychoanalysis and feminism make use of a model of repression in that both are aware that often women's sexuality and experience are repressed. The French school of feminist psychoanalysis led by Kristeva and Cixous speaks of semiotics (the organisation of instincts by rhythm and intonation) which has been repressed by the imposition of the symbolic (a patriarchal system of meaning created in language). They beg the question, "In what ways do women speak differently from men about their fantasies and desires?"

In her essay, "Woman's Time," Julia Kristeva posits the idea that feminist psychoanalysis is concerned with the formulation of new spaces in a new time. She proclaims that there is an undeniable association between women's bodies and language. "Woman" and "the feminine" are to her metaphors, and Kristeva suggests feminist alternatives to their patriarchal meaning. For example, she speaks of the representation of motherhood in Western culture, alluding to the tension between the semiotic and the symbolic. She says that the subject's special relationship to the mother manifests itself in art, literature and spirituality through this tension. Such manifestations are marginal to the symbolic order. Kristeva has been criticised for her linguistic displacement of political and social concerns in her writing in favour of the semiotic. This she sees as a revolutionary gesture in itself: it is exactly within this "eruption of the semiotic" that women can challenge and even deny patriarchy. Juliet Mitchell challenges Kristeva's ideas about semiotics and alludes to a "new" symbolism which women must establish. The problem, she says, is that women use masculine language in order to talk about female experience. Inevitably, under this order, women's symbolic order will always be "hysterical". The idea of the hysterical is central to Mitchell's critique because she can at once embody the acceptance of the refusal of stereotyped women's sexuality in culture. So the term "hysterical" takes on a new meaning, having shed its

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72 Desire in Language.
73 Ibid.
pejorative meaning and now gaining a liberating potential for women. Psychoanalytical works have facilitated both the method and content of this study. They show how traditional ideas about femininity have shaped women's self-image, and, more importantly, that women have the method and the ability to reverse the ways in which they have been portrayed by defining their own understanding of themselves.

Feminist critical method in this study

Having established the forms of feminist critical method which have influenced the methodology in this work, an introduction is necessary to the author's discussion of her own methodology. One of the most incisive feminist critiques of methodology is given by Mary Daly:

One of the false Gods of theologians, philosophers and other academics is called Method. It commonly happens that the choice of a problem is determined by method instead of method being determined by the problem. This means that thought is subject to an invisible tyranny...the tyranny of methodolatry hinders new discoveries. It prevents us from raising questions never asked before and from being illumined by ideas that do not fit into preestablished boxes and forms. The worshippers of Method have an effective way of handling data that does not fit into the Respectable Categories of Questions and Answers. They simply classify it as nondata, therefore rendering it invisible.

Daly's solution to the "problem" of "methodolatry" is characteristically radical. The servants of method must unacknowledge its nonexistence (a technique in which they are highly skilled."

Daly's critique of method is expedient insofar as it allows for the illumination of specifically feminist questions and concerns. Yet Daly does not envision the possibility that methodology displays the potential to assist the feminist critique of culture and religion. A very small number of women are engaged in the area display an interesting spectrum of perspectives and methodologies. Clearly, the feminist critique of the Study of Religion has to gain momentum to keep abreast with the quantum leaps in consciousness made by feminist theologians and literary critics. However, a good start has been made in the area of the academic Study of Religion, most notably by North Americans and scholars of German origin who are concerned to preserve the particularly scientific (i.e. historical and phenomenological) nature of the research.

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74 See Appendix G.
75 Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 11.
76 Ibid., 12.
The title of Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson's book gives an interesting insight into the initial thrust of the feminist critique in the Study of Religion. The subtitle to Women and Religion is A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian [sic] Thought, which is an appropriate illustration of the tendency of feminist works about religion to restrict their studies to Western Christianity. It is also a reflection of the sectarianism of American universities. This practice is changing in the 1980's where the critique is being extended outside the Christian tradition and, importantly, where the phenomenological method is being applied. With the development of feminist critical method in the Study of Religion, women are gaining the confidence to write about themselves as women in modes that are conscious of a revised understanding of sex and gender.

The following pages represent an attempt to effect a dialogue between feminist critical method and the Study of Religion. This is not a plea for a single methodological procedure. Rather it will show that just as the Study of Religion consists of a variety of methodological perspectives, feminist critical method is similarly pluralist: what is required, it argues, is an heuristic principle (which should be the governing principle over method in all areas of scholarship). It will show also that feminist critical method is a necessary integral part of the Study of Religion if that discipline is going to continue to grow and continue to try to elicit as accurately and as honestly as possible the meaning of the phenomena studied.

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77 See Appendix H.
CHAPTER II

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD
IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND THIS THESIS.

The necessity of methodological self-awareness
in the Study of Religion

The methodological debate in the Study of Religion after the Second World War is the focus here because 1950 marks the formation of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR). Since then the Study of Religion has begun to critically reflect on the methods best suited to the subject of research. In her contribution to Frank Whaling's Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, Ursula King presents a concise summary of the concerns of the present generation of scholars of religion since 1950, and makes an informed speculation as to the future of the discipline (although she is careful to point out the limitations of her discussion, making no claims to have given an exhaustive treatment of the subject given the internationalist nature of the debate). Discussing the historical and phenomenological approaches, she says that

the plea for greater methodological awareness does not in itself answer the question whether the classification, analysis and interpretation of religious data on as comprehensive scale as possible represents one single discipline, a wide field of related but different studies, or whether it is a science or a craft or possibly even an art, only to be mastered by a few extraordinarily endowed and creative scholars.

The importance of method in feminist scholarship was discussed in chapter I. This method must include an explicit statement of the position of the writer in relationship to the subject of her or his research. The following sources have contributed significantly towards the method, insights and

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2 Ibid., 31-3.
3 Ibid., 34.
self-understanding and presentation in the present study. The Religion and Reason series embraces a variety of methodologies in the Study of Religion. In this series the Dutch scholar, Jacques Waardenburg, a specialist in Islamic Studies and the Phenomenology of Religion, discusses the way in which scholars in the Study of Religion have not been sufficiently aware and self-critical about their methods and the assumptions about the world that lie behind them.\(^4\) In Reflections on the Study of Religion, Waardenburg confronts the way this problem arises in the Phenomenology of Religions and postulates a solution. This is Waardenburg's "new-style phenomenological research" which has been of great value to the method used in this study. This method, he says, "may be called a psychoanalysis of cultural and religious expressions in terms of man's intentionality".\(^5\) Waardenburg's concern with intentionality and religious meaning is powerful when it becomes applied to feminist scholarship (although Waardenburg makes no allusion to the Women's Movement at any point!). He points out that the study of subjective meaning in religion consists of the analysis of the intentions of religious expressions and phenomena.\(^6\)

Just as culture implies some surplus value of art and religion, play and inter-subjectivity which reveal intentions within and beyond the sheer need for organic survival, religion gives some absolute justification, foundation, or at least validity to certain aspects of that culture.

The intellectual position of the scholar is important in this process because s/he requires deep analytical sensitivity towards the "intended objects" to which the intentions implicit in the material available to the scholar refer. Important in such an analysis is the distinction between "the different layers of significance", in which the religious expression is embedded.\(^8\) It is precisely in this area that the feminist critique has the potential to engender growth in the understanding of religious phenomena. But Waardenburg gives a warning to scholars of religion, and his words have a particular significance to feminist scholars.

If, in the case of a religious phenomenon, one of these layers is what may be called that of its religious significance or meaning, a rigorous methodological distinction has to be made between the religious significance it has to given people in a given culture, and the religious or other meaning which the student himself [sic], on the basis of his experience, might be inclined to attribute to it.\(^9\)


\(^6\)Ibid., 1978, 107.

\(^7\)Ibid., 106.

\(^8\)Ibid., 106.

\(^9\)Ibid., 107.
Waardenburg sees this as a possible danger leading to the confusion in the portrayal of religious intention by a student who investigates religious phenomena from the standpoint of an insider in a religious tradition. However, he does acknowledge that certain benefits can arise from this standpoint where different "shades of significance" can be elicited from the same religious phenomenon. Where the methodology of this study is concerned, the spirituality of the student cannot be disregarded because the student her- or himself does not subscribe to the idea of so-called "value neutrality" in scholarship because s/he is a human being with a complex range of tastes, emotions and socialisation processes that are all active at any given time. Important in this area too is the idea that a student does not "perform" Phenomenology on a religious subject: a student does Phenomenology in the same way that s/he goes about everyday tasks. Phenomenology is essentially a thoroughly pragmatic activity. It should not be obscured by lofty terms and methods. Yet, in spite of this, phenomenology yields the most extraordinary results and dimensions of perception because at its root is the controlling concern with "intentionality": the intentions of the object of research and the intentions of the researcher.

How is this achieved? Firstly it can be achieved by the declaration of allegiances and involvement in areas which may or may not be of direct significance to the object of research, and secondly, by being able to distinguish between these involvements methodically in order to elicit the meaning of given phenomena from different angles. The three significant allegiances (for there are many lesser ones!) which are contained in this work are firstly that I am a postgraduate in a Department of Religion with a principal interest in the Phenomenology of Religion. Secondly, that I have been deeply affected by the critiques of the Women’s Movement which has led me to radically question the very real contradictions of experience that I encounter as a woman in a world governed by largely unchallenged patriarchal principles; more of this in the following chapter. This experience is also shared by groups whose world-view is marginalised or negated by a dominant ethos. The Women’s Movement offers an excellent perspective from which to study the transmutation of the symbolic order. The third allegiance to be admitted is my tentative support of the Christian Feminist Movement as an attender at the Society of Friends, but more importantly, as somebody who has left the Church of England, having struggled with it for many years. I have grown in the sense that I do not meet God solely in terms of Christian cosmology. I know that I am one member of a much larger unofficial spiritual movement which is not manifest in an institutionalised form.

Central to the methodology in this study is the attitude of the student who is aware that s/he is always open to the influence of the religious intentions implicit in the subject of research. Equally, the religious phenomenon under scrutiny is equally open to receiving the religious intentions of the researcher. There is the danger here that religious realia are being subsumed with the experiential world of the scholar, and that perhaps this might obfuscate the reality that the student is trying to
uncover. And yet there is the possibility that exactly within this dialectic that the researcher can find the key to an enriched phenomenology of meaning: this is the research into religious "intentions" and "significations". This is a method that takes full account of the methodological and spiritual relationship between the student and her/his research. Underlying this consideration is the important principle of a dynamic "transference" of experience between the subject and student. In phenomenological research it is important to distinguish between the varying intentions of individual students and the cultures studied. In this way the particular subjective insight of the scholar can be taken into account in a way that does not impede an understanding of the total factual context in which meanings occur for the subject of the research.

Let us look more closely at the position of the phenomenologist in relation to the subject of her/his research. Jacques Waardenburg refers to "objective facts and subjective meanings", which reveal themselves in "a biographical approach" in a student's work. Feminists have been quick to point out that male scholars are insufficiently self-critical to acknowledge their androcentric assumptions. The feminist challenge demands a realisation that "as there are "levels" in the scholar's existence, so there are "levels" in the object of inquiry insofar as this is human too". Curiously, Waardenburg fails to perceive the intense levels of subjectivity implicit in the androcentric assumptions of so much research in the Study of Religion. Of course, a great degree of subjectivity is implicit in feminist scholarship, but it is precisely this subjectivity that is challenging to methodological awareness in the Study of Religion. Waardenburg stresses that it is exactly the recognition of subjectivities that is the "heart of fruitful research". So the "communication with the subjectivity" coupled with "communication with other scholars" becomes the driving force of the opening up of knowledge in the Study of Religion.

Further, Waardenburg claims that the phenomenologist is in a unique position in that s/he is able to "recognise in religious meanings their ambiguity, both a conferring of absolute meaning and imposing of absolute terror". Here, Waardenburg is alluding to the fact that the phenomenologist undertakes research on phenomena which have absolute meanings conferred upon them by the object of research. This absolute meaning has a dual nature which is experienced by religious human beings. Firstly, there is an awareness of the absolute worth and potency of the sacred. Secondly, there is a great fear of its complete otherness or "ultimacy". Claiming that the student wants neither to idealise religion nor to schematise it, he says that the modern

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10 Ibid., 37.
11 Ibid., 14.
12 Ibid., 14.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Ibid., 15.
15 Ibid., 43.
phenomenological movement is an attempt to understand the human content of religion. This permits the understanding that different people confer very different meanings and validities upon the same objective facts, the only objective fact is reality itself! Waardenburg extends his analysis to the position of the professional student of religion in a later chapter in relation to the way the faith of the researcher functions in a given research task. He believes that "a given religiosity, a-religiosity or anti-religiosity on the part of the student may be a handicap as well as a help to accomplishing a given research task".  

This is entirely dependent upon how this is fixed in the mind of the researcher.

In this profession we are not concerned whether a student believes or not, has faith or not, but whether his [sic] particular (ir)religion or (un)faith generates presuppositions which are favourable to accomplishing his research or strip it from the very start of its positive meaning and may even be an obvious barrier to an adequate interpretation and explanation. For this reason it is not a specific faith that matters but the way in which a possible faith functions within a given research task.

It is exactly these propositions within the Study of Religion that do not allow for the questions that women want to ask about themselves to come into fruition. The Study of Religion was at its inception and still is a discipline largely dominated by men whose world-view derives from the Judaeo-Christian tradition which, feminists have argued, reinforces the idea that only men are in imago dei and women are derivative from them and therefore not in possession of full human status. In the Christian tradition this assumption has been used as the justification of the denial of women's admission to sacramental responsibility in many Churches, and for the institutionalisation of women within the domestic sphere. Under this scheme, men are viewed as the norm and women as a deviation from this ideal. That is why it is possible to open almost any textbook in the Study of Religion and find a number of references in the index under "women", but no sign of any entries under "men" or "male": male is the almost universally accepted paradigm by which all things are measured. This unquestioned statement is blindingly obvious to feminist scholars in the Study of Religion and evokes such "non-questions" as, "how accurately have the observations and experiences of real women been taken into account both as religious human beings and as students of religion?"

Women working in the Study of Religion have been encouraged by the quantum leaps made by feminist theologians. The theological approach differs greatly from the phenomenological approach which holds to an "objective" (read: "object-directed") stance. In the latter, the student must assume the stance of an "outside" observer who details the ground to be studied, elicits facts and

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15 Ibid., 46.
16 Ibid., 46. [Waardenburg's emphasis].
then proceeds to analyse them. The traditional phenomenologist's position differs from that of the theologian who functions as an insider in relation to a given religious tradition. Waardenburg stresses the importance of the attitude of the outside observer in phenomenological research in the Study of Religion.

In this he [sic] must be detached from its fate whether it rises or falls, externalises or interiorises itself, lives or dies. It is his task to analyze the data and ascertain what is happening to the people in a given society as far as the role of a given religion in it is concerned, especially where the meaning of their existence is at stake. He must make his diagnosis; and if his loyalty should lie anywhere, it is with the people he gets to know and understand through his work, rather than with their particular religion, philosophy or ideology. It is only in the actual carrying out of his research that the student may realize that he has become partly an insider too.

Waardenburg's words represent an expedient ideal for the student of religion, but he makes no allusion to the fact that the study of certain phenomena can have a profoundly altering effect upon the student's spirituality. Being (i) engaged in research and (ii) holding a particular faith does not make the student automatically disposed to making assumptions or statements with reference to closed systems of interpretations because they are religiously motivated. The student, however, must be aware of this possibility at all times in relation to his or her research. Against this danger of the implicit subjectivity of the student in research is the possibility that this position allows for the student to be especially sensitive to the interests and religious motivations of the subject of his or her research. Ideally, research into religious phenomena should be carried out by a variety of highly specialised and methodologically self-critical students of differing specialisations in order to gain the broadest perspective about religious intentions which should never be isolated from the total situations in which these expressions occur.

Inevitably, changes have occurred in the directions and meaning of the Study of Religion since its inception as an autonomous academic discipline, and in the area of Phenomenology in particular. Phenomenology has moved away from its "classical" manifestation in which research was limited to the essential evaluation of the meaning and classification of phenomena outside the context in which they function, towards a more empirical perspective in which the meaning of phenomena are perceived as precisely residing within their context. Latterly, the Phenomenology of Religion has taken a far wider account of the data available to it and has been particularly receptive to "non-religious" data which illuminates material which has a "religious" quality. So what has happened is that Phenomenology has moved further away from the investigation of the characteristics of similar religious realia in different cultures now to consider the nature and manifestation of religious realia in terms of individual human and group consciousness. This entails the

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17 Ibid., 47.
consideration and knowledge of historical, anthropological, social and psychological factors in order to elicit an accurate picture of the context of a given religious phenomenon. The phenomenologist should then take into account not simply the religious material but any data which sheds light upon the human quality of religious expression.

Waardenburg claims that the Phenomenology of Religions today departs radically from classical Phenomenology of Religion. Classical Phenomenology of Religion, he says, presents "an interpretation of religion instead of researching into it", and so "finds its place beside other existing schemes and models for the interpretation of the fact of religion". He decries the "clearly apologetic overtones" of classical Phenomenology and its "theological inspiration or impulse", in spite of its approach, which is not linked to any specific religious dogma or ideology. Classical Phenomenology of Religion with its concept of epoche permits "unreflected presuppositions and norms to be glimpsed through its categories and idealisations" and "plays an ideological role in the Study of Religion, through being a kind of anti-theology or mirror-theology in the service of a given theology, or, precisely through the "epoche", a kind of apologetic if not of a particular historical religion, then at least of an idealised religion or the fact of religion as such".

So classical Phenomenology of Religion's insistence on a resistance to positivistic reduction of religion in fact reduces religion to pure religious experience or to a purely religious idea. Waardenburg claims that this takes place in three different ways: firstly by the neglect of relationships between religious and non-religious factors, thus causing religion to be treated as an "alien 'manifestation'"; secondly, by neglecting behavioural and institutional aspects of religion by overstressing the "ideal" content of religion; and finally by "dissolving" or even "isolating" religious expressions from their socio-historical milieu. Further, Waardenburg criticises the "generalisations and "hypotheses" of classical Phenomenology of Religion which fail to apply the concrete facts of specific religions and thus do not explain religious data or make them intelligible. The Phenomenology of Religion has not been sufficiently reflective about itself, so Waardenburg claims, and has adopted an "ostrich mentality" insofar as it alienates itself "too much from philosophical Phenomenology while retaining its name".

So Phenomenology of Religion has become a more naive enterprise, losing not only its scholarly, but also its intellectual status. If, in fact, judgement is suspended (epoche) with regard to reality and truth, and if it is desired that only the phenomena themselves speak, we have to do, after all, with an inauthentic philosophy that

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18 Ibid., 128.
19 Ibid., 128.
20 Ibid., 128.
21 Ibid., 128.
22 Ibid., 128-9.
occupies itself with an inauthentic reality and truth. The serious consequence of this is that meaning and significance in the interpretations of classical Phenomenology of Religion have been outside of truth, no less. Moreover, the total neglect of the "other" and of "otherness", and of its essential relevance to phenomenological research, has led this classical Phenomenology of Religion outside human communication and into a kind of solopism [sic]. If viewed philosophically, classical Phenomenology has lacked a self-critical foundation and has neglected or wrongly put the question of the intentions which ought to be its real subject of inquiry and investigation.

Before new-style phenomenological research is discussed, a few words need to be said about the condition of the Study of Religion as a whole today. Since 1950 the Study of Religion has been able to recognise itself as influenced by a collection of continually developing disciplines which have necessitated its constant renewal. Of course, this is not to deny that the Study of Religion itself is not composed of many different disciplines. But an enormous impact has been made by cultural anthropology, the Sociology of Religion, Psychology of Religion, Archaeology, iconography, structuralism, analytical philosophy, linguistics: and now the feminist critique. Where the Phenomenology of Religion is concerned this has given rise to an enormous critical revision. 24

The unprecedented growth of critical self-consciousness in the Study of Religion and in the Phenomenology of Religion in particular has facilitated new orientations in the discipline. Most importantly it has enabled new advances to be made in the understanding of the meaning and nature of "religion" itself as a specifically human activity. So "religion" is extended into a larger area of enquiry. But there is a qualitative as well as a quantitative development here in the sense that focusing upon the more "human" content of religious expression allows for greater assiduity to be given to the area of spirituality which has, extraordinarily, been largely neglected other than by a few sympathetic scholars. Phenomenology as a form of scholarship has been culpable in the past in that it has neglected a large area of the study of spirituality (i.e. the implicit relationship between human beings and the Ultimate Reality) because its scholars have perpetuated the method of researching religious realia independently of their historical-social milieu. In this way they have justified the wrenching of religious manifestations out of their social and historical context to compare them with each other to elicit their most probable meaning.

In short, feminist enquiry in the Phenomenology of Religion must be prepared not just to effect a criticism of the limitations of "classical" Phenomenology of Religion (for example, by taking into account the very great problems of trying to effect a feminist critique with the classical notion of époche implying a disjuncture of the phenomenon from its social and historical environment. It

23 Ibid., 130.
24 See Appendix I.
must show how the symbolic order which undergirds institutions such as the church, family, education and work, is challenged by marginalised factions within them, such as those who face prejudice on the grounds of sex, race or economic status. It must show how institutional and non-institutional religion exist side-by-side and foster religious development. The task that now lies ahead for feminist phenomenologists is a reevaluation of the scope and purpose of Phenomenology as an academic discipline. A Phenomenology which takes into consideration a feminist critique offers, by definition, a rich and unique perspective of the purpose of religious phenomena: their significance within a grid of religious intentions, intentions which are determined by a multitude of factors, but which in this case are focused upon an evaluation based upon the experiences and perceptions of women who are largely marginalised in the world, where questions of equality of opportunity and worth are apparent.

One of the ways in which the Study of Religion has greatly expanded the understanding of "religion" in recent years has been through a growing awareness of the existence and manifestation of religion in non-institutionalised as well as institutionalised forms. Jacques Waardenburg contends that, in principle, "living religion can be interpreted within the field of tension between intentions and institutionalizations of institutions respectively". What is needed, therefore, in the Study of Religion is a constant awareness of the experience of religion other than that which is explicitly available to study in institutionalised religions. Continuing development takes place as a direct result of tension within a given religious tradition rather than from without. "Institutionalised" here means that certain structures exist in societies which permit the channeling of certain "ultimate", "transcendent" or "fundamental" meanings, and does not imply that new meanings can come into effect or that institutions remain static. Of course, the source of tension may be secular: but in order for institutionalised religion to change itself (i.e. temporarily deinstitutionalise, then reinstitutionalise), then the intention must come from a decision made within its own ranks.

There is no better example of this than the example of the Women's Movement and Christianity, in which the Women's Movement, a movement of consciousness, has significantly affected a number of men and women within the institutionalised churches. Institutionalised religion possesses an extraordinary effective and complex resistance to change and development both within and outside its ranks. With a few notable exceptions such as the Unitarian Church and the Church of Sweden, few Christian institutions have given much attention at all to the critique of feminists within the churches and outside. This has been documented voluminously by feminists and cannot be repeated here. Rather, it is proposed to demonstrate the structure and process by which women have dealt with the consequences of their struggle for a voice and for recognition of their world view, and to discuss

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25 Ibid., 132.
exactly what is meant by "feminist spirituality".

The classical Study of Religion and the Phenomenology of Religion in particular face the criticism that they may have overestimated the relative value of religious phenomena compared to phenomena in everyday life. This is hardly surprising since religious data itself tends to assume an enormous importance. Phenomenologists, as well as other scholars of religion, have tended to exaggerate the role that religion has played in world events, whilst neglecting the probability that religious factors play a part along with other social and cultural phenomena. The method in this study chooses to regard the phenomenological method as one way of perceiving the available data, but it also recognises that other disciplines and methods draw on an equally valid perspective using the same data. The methodology in this introduction is, therefore, a plea for a more "wholistic" approach to the Study of Religion: the Sociology of Religion, the History of Religion, the Geography of Religion, the Biology of Religion, the Phenomenology of Religion, Interpretation of Religion, theology, anthropology and the Comparative Study of Religion could not possibly be undertaken by a single student. However, an individual engaged in one area of the Study of Religion, for example, the Phenomenology of Religion, will be able to elicit a particular dimension of a given subject, namely the investigation of religious meanings. Therefore this Phenomenology is human-centred, the study of human behaviour in response to ultimate human concerns. So Phenomenology is only part of a wider discipline within the Study of Religion. Yet it is one which affords investigation into religious meanings in a unique way: by its system of classification through the "bracketing out" of religious phenomena (epoche) and the comparison of similarities in order to elicit collective features, even to give a basic structure of religion by its understanding of human beings as containing the potential for religiosity and spirituality: and lastly by Phenomenology's more contemporary self-understanding as "the history and development of religious consciousness in the course of time". This last definition is most important for this study because it allows for the possibility of the study of change and development both within a given religious tradition and also in the Study of Religion itself. It allows for a whole range of problematics to be discussed. Classical phenomenologists have understood religion in terms of essence and manifestation, but more recent developments permit the student to study behaviour in terms of religious motivations and intentions. This has been the case, particularly in the case of the social sciences which have identified religious intentions or "implicit" religion in such apparently secular gatherings as the adulatory fervour of football matches and the mass hysteria of the political rallies of fascist dictators in the 1940's, where the foci are not so much religious objects as such, but are those which possess a "transcendent" but not "absolute" quality.

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26 Ibid., 120.
The problem of what formulates "religion" increases when the student takes into consideration the idealisation of what religion is for the scholar, both ideologically and emotionally. In this century individuals apprehend religion without transcendence and simply as an aspect of their culture. This is the challenge that meets Phenomenology today, and it becomes most illuminating when studied in terms of the feminist critique which raises fascinating questions about the relationship between the symbolic order in religious expression (ecclesiastical structure, myth, sacred action) and the realia of everyday life (division of labour on the grounds of gender, racism and power struggle). "Classical" Phenomenology would not permit the comparison because it tends to classify religion as an autonomous value category which cannot be reduced to anything other than "religion", completely distinguishable from "non-religious" facts. The new orientations of Phenomenology do not demean or deny the spiritual significance of religious phenomena, but they do insist that the duty of phenomenologists is to elicit the (often hidden) meaning of religious realia. In Western Christianity in particular the meaning of the word "religion" has metamorphosed from its old meaning as an implicit dimension of life to its current status as almost a "variable option" that gives life meaning and which would appear to suggest that in certain cultures human beings have a free choice between either institutionalised systems of religion, a subjective faith, or spirituality directed towards an Ultimate Being or an order (symbolic or otherwise) which gives meaning to life (such as dialectical materialism). In varying situations it is possible to study people without a religion (humanists) or people for whom religion is a part of their culture (secular Jews). In the case of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminist spirituality in the United Kingdom, these observations have a special relevance because much of the meaning of so many manifestations of spirituality in these cases are concealed or require careful analysis because in the past (where they have been studied at all) they have been approached from the point of view of male students who have undertaken their scholarship as men in a world governed by male-established and male-run institutions.

To sum up, what is "religion" understood as in this phenomenological study? Firstly, religion should be regarded as a phenomenon existing within (or perhaps in spite of) a given cultural tradition, and which endures through a process of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation, which serves as a system of communication between humans and the symbolic order of the Ultimate Reality. So religion is a relationship between humans and an Ultimate Reality where

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27 Ibid., 121.
28 These three groups will be explained in chapter III.
communication takes place by means of symbols and symbolic action. In certain instances religion is a social phenomenon which prescribes a certain symbolic meaning and value on life: but the object of religion here is not an ultimate, transcendent Being. Rather, the symbolic value is the object of religion: it is a means of coming to terms with a collective identity by affirming cultural experiences by the ritual and symbolic re-enactment and performance of myth and meaningful religious phenomena. Effectively, a form of secularisation of religious phenomena has taken place, and it is a phenomenon which deserves careful scrutiny. It is widespread: it is apparent in such forms as secular Judaism, Marxism, humanism, the spirituality of some of the women studied in the present work, and even in mainstream religion where the supernatural element of religion has become redundant. This aspect of religion shall be discussed in following chapters. The reduction of religion in terms of its understanding as an aspect of culture should never replace the study of religious realia which, to religious human beings, are explicitly conceived as possessing an autonomous value category in themselves.\footnote{Ibid., 121.} Phenomenologists study religion as Sinnwirklichkeit ("a reality of meaning"), but it should not be supposed that religious expressions are irreducible phenomena divorced from the everyday life of human beings. It is precisely this relationship between human beings and the symbolic order that is the province of the phenomenologist. So "religion" in this study should not be interpreted as an irreducible autonomous value category, but rather as a human expression of intent towards a higher system of meaning, a "subjective" meaning. As such, the religious expressions and facts of believers are to them symbolic expressions of transcendent realities, conveying absolute meaning, so phenomenologists should try to effect a method by which they are able to draw forth and reveal what these expressions mean to the people who convey them. This is the primary function of the phenomenological method in this work. Of course, in order to elicit this meaning, it is necessary to probe some of the intentions and motivating phenomena behind religious expression which may or may not be religiously motivated: this may have an historical or political basis and may be "unacknowledged" (read: "not believed") by religious people. This is the secondary function of Phenomenology in this work: to investigate religious expression as the expression of religious meaning in terms of what concerns lie beneath religion.

In this study, the phenomenological method is chosen because it permits human beings themselves to be the focus of the question of meaning in religious expressions and phenomena. This is particularly applicable and important to this feminist study which emphasises the fact that women’s religious expression has not been made the focus of study in the Study of Religion to any great degree to date. So much evidence about women’s spirituality lies uncovered so that a sound method is required to excavate its meaning in terms of the experience of women themselves, which takes into
account the personal, parochial, social, psychological and historical factors which motivate religious expression.

One of the most interesting developments in the Study of Religion has been the distinction that has been made between so-called "official" and "popular" religion, particularly the work edited by Jacques Waardenburg and P.H. Vrijhof, *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*. The distinction has greatly facilitated the presentation of the research undertaken for this work, for it has greatly clarified the existence of forms of religion other than those which are institutionalised or codified. This, of course, applies to religions past and present, although P.H. Vrijhof in his essay, "Official and Popular Religion in Twentieth Century Western Christianity" makes the point that whereas in the past "official" Christianity was the normative religion, strongly institutionalised, and "popular" Christianity was the province of the illiterate and irrepressible masses, in the West today, popular religion is not subjugated, at least not by official channels. Vrijhof tackles statements on official and popular religion made by Jean Paul Audet, Michel Meslin, Robert Towler and Harvey Cox. Audet sees popular religion as the origin and source of all religion. Towler sees religion as the first layer of a symbolic universe whereby people give meaning to life. Meslin speaks of an immediate and spontaneous relationship of man's existence to the divine when speaking of popular religion. Cox views people's religion as the root of all religion and even claims that some forms of official religion "alienate the religious feelings of men" [sic].

Vrijhof asserts that until modern times, "popular" religion was regarded as the remainder of the old folk religions. Deemed "popular piety", it was only tolerated if it was under the Church's jurisdiction. But what of today? Vrijhof claims that it asserts itself as a phenomenon which appears to be fundamentally rooted in the life of religious human beings. He then goes on to claim that this "popular" manifestation of religion is the authentic religion before "official" religion (understood as intellectual, cognitive expression). Vrijhof's argument does not stand up to scrutiny. He does not consider the possibility that far from being a forerunner of "official" religion, "popular" religion may be a forward looking, revisionist movement either within ecclesiastical boundaries or outside them.

Perhaps a more fitting way to describe "popular" religion would be as a series of movements of a
religious nature which in some way pose a threat or a challenge to the prevailing "official" order. They may exist as a result of or independently of "official" codified religion: they may arise in response to dissatisfaction with the prevailing social, moral and theological ethos (in this sense they may be said to possess a "prophetic quality"). They may even be, in a few instances, the last vestiges of folk religion. "Popular" religion might well be studied more successfully too if it were not immediately equated as the polarisation of "official" religion. Both forms suffer as a result of a too-eager desire to classify religious expression.

"Official" institutionalised religion, [says Vrijhof] is "an inevitable risk for the survival of religion ... The more a religion has been articulated, the more there will be a chance that it does not correspond to people's religious experience any more." He observes that at times, official, operative Christianity undergoes a process of de-codification and de-institutionalisation while at the same time re-codification and re-institutionalisation processes continue. Yet Vrijhof's analysis of popular religion seems to perceive it as acquiring meaning only in relation to "official" religion which sometimes incorporates its practices. It would be far more productive, however, in the spirit of current phenomenological research, to try to elicit the particularly human content of religious expression implicit in so-called "popular" religion in order to fully understand its nature. For this purpose, it would be necessary to temporarily suspend its association with "official" religion in order to be able to show it as an autonomous form of spirituality, and not merely as the unrealised potential for officialisation. Finally, Vrijhof mentions the process of "symbolic proliferation" which is a way of "looking for ultimate meanings ... for signs and symbols which possibly indicate and usher in appropriate meaning systems." "Symbolic proliferation" involves "the rise of a religious elite which represents and indicates religious symbols ... the production of various rituals and eventually the tentative formulation of some beliefs and practices. Some of these beliefs and practices will be authorised as official and others will not".

What Vrijhof describes as "symbolic proliferation" needs to be studied in great depth. Vrijhof claims that this "religious élite" "represents and indicates religious symbols". Perhaps a more accurate description of the activities of this "religious élite" would be that they indicate and challenge the prevailing symbolic order of codified, institutionalised religion insofar as it does not adequately reflect for them their experience of ultimate meanings. The word "religious" here is also slightly inappropriate because the challenge to any given symbolic order that does not reflect the experiences and perceptions of any individual is an intensely personal encounter with the symbolic order or

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31 Ibid., 238.
32 Ibid., 240.
33 Ibid., 240.
34 Ibid., 240.
Ultimate Reality. Would it therefore be more appropriate to refer to those who challenge the prevailing social order as a "spiritual élite" which more accurately describes their relationship to ultimate concerns?

Similarly, C.J.M. Donders in his essay, "Some Psychological Remarks on Official and Popular Religion" makes a plea for an understanding of these two forms as two styles of explicit religiosity. "Official" religion, he notes, is often related to the religious attitude of the authoritarian personality, whereas "popular" religion has a broader definition which can contain popular religious movements, the religion of the people, even "popular" minority movements of the spirit such as are found when women challenge the prevailing symbolic order of Christianity. Donders claims that depth psychological theory gives an interesting perspective to the existence of official and popular religion because there is always a congruency between personality and culture. And yet Donders notes that in the West it is difficult to point to a "popular" form of religious expression which is clearly distinguishable from "official" religion because "popular" religion in the West only becomes visible (read: tolerated) when it contains elements of "official" religion. Donders perceives the heuristic relevance of the terms "official" and "popular" insofar as they convey the fact that two forms of explicit religiosity can exist contiguously in the same culture. About the latter he says that this religiosity may arise out of an individual or collective sadness about life's insecurities and disappointments, but he does not pursue this.

The second area of improved understanding in the Study of Religion in recent years has been the growing understanding about secular religion (which partially corresponds to popular religion). This is spirituality or religious experience which is outside official, codified religion. Kurt Goldammer suggests that individuals can be "encountered by divinity", that is to say, equally moved by aesthetic values such as poetry, music and philosophy, and therefore he is not surprised that some individuals might wish to free themselves from the form and content of explicit religion. Goldammer's emphasis is upon the individual's response to the experience of certain values and perceptions of nature and art: significantly, Goldammer says that the individual "draws from these conclusions, and usually he does not order his conclusions in a strictly ordered system. He also does not refer them to the experiences of a group." Importantly, Goldammer believes that this "modern individual religiosity" has developed out of what he calls "national culture" religions and "universal religions". Effectively, Goldammer suggests that human energy that might have been channeled into an official religion may now be directed towards human pursuits which are experienced and appreciated at an intense individual level. "Occasionally" says Goldammer,

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he [sic] discusses his experiences with congenial persons and joins them in a freely-chosen and non-obligatory fellowship. Such groups arise more out of coincidence than anything else. In the main, the individual religious person lives in solitude, and, in that, he is similar to the mystic and contemplator of older stages of religious development.

In his appreciation of so-called secular religious forms, Goldammer fails to consider the fact that this may have as many varied forms as "traditional" religion, and in this sense he does not distinguish between the religious sentiments of the individual's experience of the mysterium and mass cultural secular movements. Goldammer is treading dangerously here because by failing to distinguish between the two, their qualitative difference is not recognised. As Georg Schmid points out, secular-religious mass movements differ from individual world piety in that they are concerned with the official teachings of a mass movement, with allegiances, leaders, predecessors, martyrs and with the struggle against heresies: this is in stark contrast to the content of what he calls "individual world piety in which an individual only happens coincidentally to join a group of other like-minded people." 36

It is impossible to resist the temptation to compare Goldammer's analysis with an examination of what is happening in the so-called "secular" women's movement. Certainly, the Women's Movement bears many traits of a secular-religious mass movement: it is preoccupied with a broad ideology and with raising consciousness about women's identity, with recovering an awareness of women's past and with establishing what is absolutely valid to every woman, and with the attempt to order life as women know it in terms of the Women's Movement's secular cosmology, eschatology, creeds and dogmas. Yet the Women's Movement is like no other mass secular-religious movement. It does not, for example, exist as a visible, formal organisation with women as card-carrying members. There is no apparent hierarchy. Its attraction would appear to transcend the bounds of race and creed.

Paul Tillich's assessment of the religious character of secular-religious mass movements (which he calls "quasi-religions") is fused with his idea that the twentieth century witnesses a great struggle between traditional- (dogmatic) and quasi-religion (ideological or pseudo-religion) such as fascism and communism which he perceives as having a "potential" religious character. 37 Commonly, such movements do not classify themselves as "religions", and yet they betray elements of religions in that there is usually the concept of eschatology and salvation, a belief in salvation from the current unsatisfactory world order and the acceptance of claims of unconditional truth. Tillich notes

that secular religion is often "modern individual religiosity", which may go unnoticed until such a
time as the phenomenon is noted by the student of religion, or until there is a "coincidence" in
which communication is effected between individuals. There has been an unhappy tendency in the
Study of Religion to overlook the religious manifestation of individual world-piety because by its very
nature it is personal and exclusive, but also perhaps because individuals who do not belong to
clearly-defined religious traditions are seen to be problematic: they defy the student's natural
predisposition towards classifying spirituality into preconceived compartments, and thus studying the
data may be regarded as untenable. Often, this has been the object of study of students outside the
Study of Religion such as historians, psychologists and sociologists.

Much has been made by Tillich and Goldammer about Ersatzreligion ("pseudo-religion"). Perhaps
the reason why it is not the focus of research by students of religion is because implicit religion
relates to a finite reality (human life), whereas explicit religion relates to an Ultimate Reality.
Refusal to study secular forms of religion deals a particularly hard blow to the Women’s Movement
because it further marginalises the already hardly visible phenomenon of feminist spirituality outside
the churches. This study shall attempt a phenomenological analysis of the study of the religious
beliefs and behaviour of women who explicitly call themselves "feminist" and either "Christian" or
"post-christian" (to be clarified later). Let us explore further the precise meaning of
"phenomenological study" in order to elicit exactly what this work proposes to discover from the data
that it has available to it.

**New-style Phenomenology of Religion**

Jacques Waardenburg describes the "heuristic principle" as "the way in which an answer is given to
the question, how can we best know a given subject matter, and in what way this optimal knowledge
should be defined...The greater the heuristic value turns out to be, the more important the method
concerned". Waardenburg emphasises the importance of methodology in the interpretation of
religious realia which facilitates the establishment and ordering of the interpretive angle which will
best draw out its meaning. These are various disciplines of varying methods, but all are directed
towards the study of religious facts. The reason why the phenomenological approach is favoured in
this study (as, for example, against the purely historical, anthropological, sociological or
psychological methods) is because it transcends purely comparative approaches by giving emphasis

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38 Ibid., 52-3.
to and exploring the explicit and implicit signification of realia, and also by widening the method to allow for further insights.

Phenomenological research in the past has been characterised by three approaches: the "experiential" approach in which intuition and "eidetic vision" are emphasised over rational judgement; the "descriptive" approach which analyses and classifies raw data, explaining facts but not claiming to understand them and the "philosophical" approach that claims that no religious phenomena can be meaningfully studied without first accepting certain notions about human beings, the world and the notion of transcendence. The question that phenomenologists ought to ask is: by what method is it possible to unravel the two-fold meaning of a religious expression? How is it possible to elicit the meaning that this phenomenon has for religious people, while also investigating the dynamics of a social and political nature behind it?

"New-style phenomenological research", a phrase invented by Jacques Waardenburg is a wholly appropriate method for an investigation into Christian-, post-church- and post-christian spirituality in the United Kingdom in the 1980's, because it focuses on the subjective meanings of phenomena in religion. Thus, the focus of the research is the religious human being. Why does a particular human being in a particular situation act in a particular religious mode at all? This is the task of the phenomenologist. Secondly, the religious mode of expression must be explored by looking at what the religious expression consists of in terms of what the votary is trying to convey about the subject of religion. New-style phenomenological research investigates the religious meaning of "signification systems" which are non-empirical signs or symbols which are believed in as reality. This prompts the important consideration about the subjective attitude of the phenomenologist towards her/his study: what attitude does s/he take towards the veracity of a religion's claims? The concern of this work is to explore meaning which lies behind religious expression, the meaning that is experienced by religious persons. This permits investigation to be made into the meaning of religious and non-religious phenomena of people who are very different from the researcher. The phenomena studied may possess an absolute meaning for people, and so the phenomenologist has the task of identifying and researching this delicate area.

In this way, new-style Phenomenology reveals itself as being neither something absolute nor an ideal nor an ideology, but rather a way of carrying out research on human absolutes in order to know human reality better. We want neither to idealize religion nor to schematize it.

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39 Ibid., 107.
40 Ibid., 42.
41 Ibid., 43.
Waardenburg’s words have an especial relevance here for those scholars who are concerned to show that women’s unique experiences as human beings results in different perceptions of the symbolic order from men’s.

Central to the method of new-style phenomenological research is the question of the "intentions" implicit in religious phenomena and expressions. Approaching religious realia from the angle of religious intentions is a fascinating and most fruitful line of research, not least because it demands of the student an ability to develop a highly sensitive and reflective stance towards data, and "an elaborate knowledge of the total factual context in which such meanings occur". Waardenburg does not elaborate on this argument or analyse it sufficiently to understand that the knowledge of the total factual context of any religious expression is subject to widely divergent interpretations which arise directly from the individual student’s knowledge, experiences and prejudices which may, unknowingly, alter her/his perceptions. This must, therefore, be taken into consideration by the student at every point of her/his research and her/his allegiances declared. The assertion that Waardenburg is making about religious intentions is summed up by this statement:

Just as culture implies some surplus value of art and religion, play and inter-subjectivity, which reveal intentions within and beyond the need for sheer organic survival, religion gives some absolute justification, foundation or at least validity to certain aspects of that culture.

Waardenburg insists that this can only take place in a methodology which is fundamentally distinct from "classical" Phenomenology of religion. Waardenburg calls new-style phenomenological research "a psychoanalysis of cultural and religious expressions in terms of man’s [sic.] intentionality", a phrase which is highly charged and challenging to the Phenomenology of Religion. Waardenburg’s parallel of the phenomenologist and psychoanalyst is interesting from the point of view of this methodology because of its implications to the feminist scholar:

In order to be able to arrive at any valid interpretation of intentions, the phenomenological analyst, parallel to the psychoanalyst in his particular field, will himself [sic.] have to go through a process of catharsis in order to arrive at a level of intentionality.

The analogy here is both appropriate and highly relevant. The process of abreaction which occurs in the phenomenologist’s relationship to his or her data is absolutely vital to his or her research in which s/he witnesses the bifurcation and circuitous intentions of religions whilst being made aware

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42 Ibid., 106.
43 Ibid., 106.
44 Ibid., 107.
of those which are generally admitted as intentions by religious people. This abreaction enables the phenomenologist to identify more readily the many "layers of significance" at work in any given religious expression, of which religion may be one layer. But it also permits the distinction to be made between the meaning a student of religion might attribute to it and the way the expression acquires significance in a given culture. This factor has a tremendous significance for Women's Studies and the Study of Religion. It permits questions to be asked that have not been raised previously. It permits, for example, the question, "What does a feminist critique of methods employed in the Study of Religion tell us about the religious meaning of certain phenomena to individual scholars?" and "What does a feminist critique of a phenomenon in a given culture tell us about the religious intentions and significances implicit in it?"

By asking these questions new-style phenomenological research liberates both the student and the subject of research since it allows for the differentiation between forms of intentions, including the student's own subjective interpretation which was previously superceded by a drive towards empirical verification and rational reflection. Waardenburg emphasises two important factors about research into intentions. "The suspension of the student's natural world", or "époque" is the experience of the student when s/he becomes open to the specific object of investigation. This is a very human form of openness in which the student permits her- or himself to open up to the hopes, dreams and fears implicit in the religious expressions and intentions of religious people: s/he is, in fact, moved by what functions as subjective meaning to religious people, and as such will be in a position to distinguish between the significance of religious expression and what has given rise to such expressions: the social, historical and psychological factors. The second factor is the concept of different layers of significance in religious expressions. The expediency of the investigation into intentions and significances in the Study of Religion is that it is possible to utilise this method when studying religion of popular and official manifestations. Naturally, systems of significations in religion are more prominent where that religion undergoes a process of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation which "goes on parallel to and in an inner tension with the emerging or weakening intentions of persons or groups, and it is this tension which provides for continuing development".

Waardenburg refers to the religious intentions of a given phenomenon as implicit in its "surplus value" that is, the qualification that facts have through meanings which transcend the world of daily life. These facts perform a symbolic function. Waardenburg cites three problems for the

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46 Ibid., 107.
47 Ibid., 106.
48 Ibid., 108.
49 Ibid., 115.
student of religion.

1) How to find out to what extent certain facts have a religious meaning for the people concerned besides their everyday meaning;

2) how do those facts that are religiously qualified relate among themselves and with other "non-religious" data;

3) what is the content of that particular religious meaning for the people concerned, both explicitly and implicitly.

Underlying the question of the meaning of religious intentions lurks, once again, the consideration of "the life and the worldview of the scholar himself [sic]." Rather than suggesting that the student makes an effort to transcend the personality, Waardenburg suggests, metaphorically, that the student should use the device of

a question mark, a divining rod, not itself bound to the world in which a scholar lives, but able to distinguish certain meanings in a way that can be studied with regard to their own content in their own context, at least approximately.

Once again, the emphasis is upon the meaning of phenomena for religious human beings. Exposing this is the core function of Phenomenology.

With religious "intentions" as the principle focus of inquiry in this new-style Phenomenology, it is possible to understand religious development by sensitive research into the tensions and intentions which change constantly in living religion. Religion is constantly changing in relation to emerging and weakening intentions. It constantly undergoes institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation as different intentions clash with each other and, significantly, with the world (i.e. where religion is perceived as a factor of culture). New-style phenomenological research attempts to study religion's explicit and implicit intentions as far as this is possible. Where Women's Studies enters the arena of the Study of Religion there occurs a paradigm shift in the content and direction of the discipline. Women have appropriated the Study of Religion in two main ways: they have become the students of religion and the subject of research. It is important to distinguish between the two, although clearly, both students and subjects are consciously attempting to show firstly that their contribution and experiences have been denied or obfuscated by patriarchy (read: "elite men") and secondly, that women, for a number of reasons (to be discussed in later chapter) have different perceptions and experiences than men do concerning almost every aspect of life.

50 Ibid., 115.
51 Ibid., 115.
52 Ibid., 115.
Feminist Phenomenology: a paradigm shift in the Study of Religion

The task of a feminist Phenomenology, therefore, is to critically observe the religious subject and object, and look for religious explicit and implicit meanings and intentions. It should not be overlooked that at this time there is little evidence of the acceptance of the feminist critique of the Study of Religion by its prominent male scholars. Women have had to make the enormous psychological paradigm shift of appropriating the Study of Religion for themselves in the face of those men and women who deny its academic, moral and social validity and who feel that the feminist critique is an aberration of the aims and principles of the discipline.

In this study, equal attention shall be given to the spirituality and sacred action manifested in unofficial as well as official religion. The former is rarely the object of study, often because it does not manifest itself in an institutionalised form, and as such may render itself invisible to the world at large. This is the case with so many forms of spirituality today. Strangely, secularised forms of spirituality have been the object of study in recent years, along with such "minority" religions as "new-age" religion, witchcraft, North American Indian Religion and cults such as the Unification Church; yet the study of feminist spirituality in its "unofficial" form has not been in evidence outside that work which has been done by feminists themselves. It is simplistic to suggest that there is a "conspiracy" taking place among "elite" males in the Study of Religion. The absence of research in this area arises from fear and ignorance rather than from deliberate omission. Methodological revision in the Study of Religion is undertaken by scholars who are usually males, and even the presence of a few women does not change the course of the Study of Religion until individuals become familiar with the feminist critique which challenges scholarship to its core when many scholars fail to perceive its relevance for the field as a whole.

Yet feminist scholars in the Study of Religion have insisted that women continue to press for the recognition of its various critiques within the boundaries of traditionally "male" scholarship, by critical method, revision and by increasing the bounds of knowledge. In her essay, "Remapping Development - The Power of Divergent Data", Carol Gilligan stresses the importance of men and women discussing controversial material. She calls it "interdependence", and describes the very real and distressing problems that arise when women are not included in the planning of human development, although she does not discuss the problems that arise when occasionally women's

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studies effects a self-imposed "purdah" upon itself by refusing to have a dialogue with men. By limiting scholarship to the realm of Women's Studies, the Women's Movement risks denying "mainstream" (read: patriarchal) scholarship the opportunity to even recognise is activities and significance and to commence change. Women scholars must recognise the need not begin to think of themselves as "ghettoised" within Women's Studies: the first Women's Studies programme established at San Diego State University, U.S.A. in 1970 was undertaken in order to define women's positive response to anxieties that their perspectives on history, literature, politics, religion and so forth, were not being recognised by mainstream "patriarchal" scholarship. At its best, Women's Studies exists as a means of the definition of Women's concerns. In order to highlight these concerns and to bring light to new data, there must be a means to demonstrate the issues and to illustrate the inadequacies of "mainstream" scholarship for dealing with them. This should be the task of Women's Studies. It is precisely because feminists have been left out of academic enterprise that they can see his point clearly. Margaret Mead challenged traditional androcentric anthropology with the statement that "Men will never understand themselves merely by looking at themselves within their own culture".54

Earlier it was noted that women are now established both as students and the subject of research. Inevitably, the question arises as to whether the asking of "different" (read: feminist) questions will result in a female-oriented scholarship? The answer is, clearly, that it may; but it may also lead to new answers to questions posed by traditional areas of scholarship and shed new light upon it. Moreover, the Women's Movement is not just a Western phenomenon, but a worldwide one. Carol Christ claims that an implicit androcentric perspective has served to legitimate patriarchal society, and that a feminist paradigm shift is inevitable.

In order to see through the androcentric veil, we must shift to another paradigm, a paradigm that begins with the assumption that all women (and non-elite men) are as intelligent and valuable as elite men, and that all our contributions to history have been as significant as those of elite men.55

Christ claims that it seems foolish to make a qualitative judgement about the past which is made in spite of overwhelming evidence about the powerlessness of women in the making of political decisions in a male hierarchy. However, Christ's allusion to a "paradigm shift" is significant here. She claims that it applies to both the "content" and "form" of the disciplines and that it uses "non-method", a phrase of Daly's which will be seriously questioned in the next chapter. But most

54 Margaret Mead, "The Relationship between research by women and women's experimental roles" Psychology of Women Quarterly 2, 363-5.
55 Carol Christ, "Toward a Paradigm Shift in the Academy and in Religious Studies", in Christie Farnham, op. cit., 53-76.
of all, Christ says, "We question the most unquestioned scholarly assumption of all, namely, the assumption that feminist scholarship is objective". Once this assumption is questioned, there must take place a paradigm shift. And now that the Study of Religion has lost its denominational context, it is possible to separate the teaching "about" religion from the teaching "of" religion, she argues. She recognises that "feminist scholarship in religion is as diverse as the field itself." It tries to reconstruct theology on the basis of women’s experience; it looks at history and prehistory; it looks at the symbolic order which has been perpetuated by men and analyses its effect on culture. Most importantly, it concludes that in religions where God is portrayed through the symbol of God the Father, sexism becomes, "not peripheral but central".

It has been argued earlier in this chapter that the Study of Religion is built on the very solid foundation of implicitly androcentric presuppositions. Gradually, it is being perceived by some women and non-élite men that there is a vast necessity to learn about women’s religious experience both inside and outside traditional religions. Some women are no longer content to accept the sex-role stereotyping which defines their roles as submissive beings as "divinely ordained" or "natural" both within traditional religions and within the Study of Religion itself: they recognise that such a distinction is a purely social phenomenon, not a natural one.

All this activity is happening in the face of often great, even implicit opposition to women’s sacerdotal, symbolic and lay-leadership activity. In calling for a paradigm shift in the Study of Religion, in order to take into account women’s experiences as students and as the subjects of research, a qualitative and quantitate recognition must be made. Firstly, the quality of research must change: its content must be transformed to include the various unique perspectives that women as researchers and subjects can bring to it. It must challenge the notion of objectivity in scholarship to reflect self-critically upon how truthful this statement really is; and develop the meaning of the word to mean "object-directed". Secondly, the quantity of research and researchers engaged in the feminist critique must increase dramatically. When women hold positions of influence in the academic world only then will these qualitative changes be facilitated.

Carol Christ’s model of "eros and "empathy" presents a unique methodology which, it is hoped, will be reflected in the present work.

The ethos of eros and empathy reminds us that the root of our scholarship and research is eros, a passion to connect, the desire to understand the experience of another, the desire to deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world, the passion to transform or preserve the world as we understand it more deeply. At its

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56 Ibid., 62.
57 Ibid., 63.
best, scholarship becomes a way of loving ourselves, others and our world more deeply...empathy [is] a form of understanding that reaches out to the otherness of the other, rooted in a desire to understand the world from a different point of view. Empathy is the ability to put ourselves in the other's place, to feel, to know, to experience the world from a standpoint other than our own.  

Christ's model is influenced by the works of Michael Novak, Martin Buber and Audre Lorde: a Catholic, a Jew and a Black lesbian mother respectively. Interestingly, all three writers are outside the predominantly Protestant world of the academy and, importantly, seek to communicate and define themselves from their life-situation whilst acknowledging its particular limitations. Carol Christ claims that at the first moment the student conveys the desire to understand, eros occurs. But, she insists, this does not simply imply that the work is solipsistic or self-indulgent. Often, students who are outside mainstream scholarship are accused of being anti-academic or neglectful of the academic enterprise under the guise of the ethos of objectivity. What this often means is that the student has carefully prepared and named the inspiration behind the work. Christ alludes to "empathy" as "the second movement of scholarship". This idea owes much to Novak's concept of "passing over" to the experiences of another. Buber's "bodily experience" of the "other side" and Lorde's erotic connection through difference.

Empathy derives from eros. Imagination enables connection between the experience of the student and that of the subject, the "other". The model for eros and empathy is in contrast to the model for scholarship that students of religion (and especially Phenomenologists and Historians of Religion) have been accustomed to: the ethos of objectivity. It is not a model for subjectivity in scholarship: rather, the model ensures that there are limits to objectivity in scholarship. This is crucial to the function of new-style phenomenological research where there is a great desire and drive for an understanding of the intentions and meaning of a given phenomenon. This, ideally, is best achieved when the researcher is able to distinguish between his or her self and the "otherness" of the subject, thus being able to portray intentions and meanings without losing sight of the autonomy of the subject. Christ refers to a "third moment of scholarship, or 'judgement'" where the student reverts to her or his now extended point of understanding. S/he understands that her or his conclusions are limited by, "the body, history, life experiences, values and judgements of their author". Again, this does not mean that judgements are simply polemical or highly personalised because with empathy the student is always attempting to understand the way in which others see the world.

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58 Carol Christ, Ibid., 58.
59 Ibid., 60.
60 Ibid., 60.
61 Ibid., 60.
I have been at pains in the first two chapters to show that the issue of methodology is not a marginal but a central concern of the Study of Religion, and also of the Women's Movement, which is undergoing a strong feminist phase in the academy at the present time. It is hoped that I have highlighted issues which have not been sufficiently attended to in both disciplines, and furthermore I hope that I have revealed issues which are deserving of further research. In the following chapter I demonstrate how the philosophical and theoretical issues discussed in the present chapter have been applied in a study of explicitly religious feminists in England. It represents a transition from the plea for the necessity of methodological self-criticism in the first two chapters, to the findings of an empirical study which are critically discussed in chapters IV to VII.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS IN THIS STUDY

Understanding the scope of "religion" in this work

The present chapter clarifies the scope of "religion" discussed in the present work and gives an account of the nature of the fieldwork undertaken, which included a Questionnaire sent to five hundred English women from as far away as Newcastle and Truro. It critically analyses the data which arises from it, pointing out that the intention of the Questionnaire was not specifically to collate statistical data about the numbers of religious feminists in England, but rather to assess the implicit and explicit religious forms of the respondents' beliefs and actions. It shows how, from the analysis of the information supplied to me in the responses to the Questionnaire, I was able to construct and justify a typology of three distinctive groups of English spiritual feminists who were from a Christian background. This typology is used to discuss the religious beliefs and actions of these three groups in chapters IV to VII. Finally, I show how I selected ten individuals from each of these three groups of women who were interviewed at great length about the explicit and implicit dimensions of their religious beliefs and actions. I outline the method of my approach in these interviews and discuss some of the problematic issues which arise out of interviewing women who are already very sensitive about and mindful of the way in which their religious beliefs and actions are interpreted in religious organisations and the media. Finally, I justify the non-directive method used in the interviews. But first it is necessary to clarify some of the terms which are used in the present chapter, and to define precisely what is meant by "religion".

In chapter I it was emphasised that the focus of this work was to be the implicit and explicit spirituality of feminists in England who were born into Christian backgrounds. The term "spirituality" is preferred to "religiosity" because it more adequately conveys the spiritual orientation towards life as a whole (that is, life's "secular" and "religious" aspects) which is central consideration of contemporary feminism in the United States of America and Europe.

The 1986 Questionnaire facilitated a typology of women who answered it into three distinct groups.
The Questionnaire was then used to classify religious phenomena and to enable me to contact individual women personally to invite them to be interviewed. Thirty out of 323 respondents to the Questionnaire were interviewed for approximately 2-3 hours each in Leicester, Plymouth, Frenchbeer (Devon), Birmingham and Bristol.

Some words need to be said about the scope of our understanding of "religion" in this work. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge explore this question in their book, The Future of Religion. They refute the understanding of "religion" fostered by Durkheim, Frazer, Tylor, Berger and others which involves some conception of a supernatural being which influences events and conditions in the world, and expand on this definition. They prefer to define religion as "human organisations primarily engaged in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions". The use of the word "compensators" here is not pejorative, but intends to convey "the belief that a reward will be obtained in the distant future or in some other context which cannot be immediately verified". What is of special interest to the student of feminist spiritual movements is Stark and Bainbridge’s observation that

Movements lacking supernatural assumptions cannot successfully compete, over the long-run, in generating mass commitment when confronted by movements that accept the supernatural. To be more specific: So long as humans persist in desires not directly satisfiable, the eventual fate of "demythologized" religious organisations is sealed.

This idea becomes even more pertinent when it is considered that central to feminist spiritual movements is the ebb and flow of demythologisation and remythologisation. So what does the future hold for feminist spiritual movements? Speculations about the future may arise out of a careful phenomenological examination of the current state of English feminist spirituality.

Stark and Bainbridge’s expansion of the definition of religion includes the insistence that it should not only be equated with institutionalised forms. They turn their attention to the often marginalised sects and cults which are often neglected in the study of religion and utilise a model of "high" and "low" tension to describe religious organisations and their environments. For instance, they describe how religious organisations tend to move into "low tension" with their environments and are thus unable to provide the degree of "compensation" offered by "high tension" movements. The authors call schismatic groups that leave a lower tension group in order to form one in a higher tension "sects". Regrettably, the taxonomy created by Stark and Bainbridge is insufficient to convey

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1. See Appendix A and also chapter I.
3. Ibid., 6.
the complexity of what is happening both within and outside the churches in relation to the Women's Movement. In fact, such a system of classification is restrictive and inadequate for the purposes of this study, since it assumes that "high tension" movements are at least visible and at best organised, when the reality of feminist spiritual movements is that they are often not visible to public and academic examination, or that their organisation is loose and vague.

The problem faced by the student of feminist spirituality in England is the fact that the subjects of research are often hidden or obscured by the very fact that they are defined or even labelled by the institutions which they criticise. On the other hand, women who had left the Churches proved difficult to trace except through organisations (non-liturgical, non-denominational) such as Christian Women's Information and Resources, based in Oxford.

One thing we may assert with confidence: The norms of traditional religious institutions - as congealed in an "official" or formerly "official" mode of religion - cannot serve as a yardstick for assessing religion in contemporary society.

[Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, 91.]

Robert Towler agrees with Luckmann that it is necessary to use the word "religion" to connote something wider than church religion ("official religion") and to include popular religion ("folk religion"). Towler's analysis is sound, but it is not adequate to convey the nature of feminist spirituality in this study because it presupposes that popular movements embrace a degree of nostalgia for a former social order. For many women this model of a pristine social order is not a reality either on the mythical or the historical levels.

In order to avoid a preoccupation with what constitutes or does not constitute "religion", this study proposes to utilise its own model which draws heavily upon new-style Phenomenology of Religion. In this model the religious subject is the focus of research, and what is considered relevant here is what is explicitly deemed by the subject to have religious meaning. In this way, and by the method explained in chapter I, it is hoped that this new angle of the understanding of religious phenomena will go a small way to an enriched understanding of religious phenomena.

The argument in this chapter follows Stark and Bainbridge's, which contends that secularisation does not hail the end of religion. Moreover, Stark and Bainbridge argue that, in fact, secularisation is not a modern development at all, but is found in all societies at all times. The pace of secularisation may vary, but in dominant religious economies where the religious trend

\[^4\text{Ibid., 1-2.}\]
progressively becomes more secularised (read: worldly) it often occurs that these become supplanted by more vigorous and less worldly religions.

This effect is interesting from the point of view of the student of feminist spirituality, because one of the accusations levelled at it by dominant religious organisations is that feminism represents an erosion of traditional praxis. They do not take into account the points raised by Stark and Bainbridge that the effects of secularisation generate two countervailing processes: revival and religious innovation. Revival groups are those which are traditionally born out of the secularisation process as protest groups in order to restore "vigorous otherworldliness" to dominant religious organisations. Where feminist spirituality is concerned, this pattern is becoming visible in those churches where reactions against the questions raised by feminists and other "liberals", such as proponents of liberation theology, are virulent and hostile. The question of the ordination of women to the Anglican priesthood, for example, has been mooted by both Anglican and Catholic clergy as the possible cause of destruction of the Ecumenical Movement, but already certain countries of the Anglican Communion have women priests.

Such a challenge to the homogeneity of dominant religious organisations overlooks the fact that secularisation brings with it the possibility of religious innovation. Secularisation can herald new religious traditions, as we shall see in the beliefs and actions of post-church feminists many of whom understand religious faith as a human creation. Often, the survival of new religious traditions depends on the efficacy of dominant religious traditions. So much of what is discussed about the spirituality of women in this work is bound up with the expectations and prerequisites of dominant religious traditions so that often many women interviewed confessed to having found it difficult or even impossible to imagine themselves effecting a serious critique of their tradition that would not involve eventually finding that remaining with that tradition was untenable. Some women spoke of their fear that to leave their tradition, even though they believed that tradition did not accord them full status as human beings and would result in the collapse of the order upon which their lives and mental health rested. Most of these women claimed to be attempting to change their traditions from within its organisation, but few envisaged any real development towards the organisation embracing a feminist paradigm while men retained positions of authority and decision-making in practice. Let us now turn our attention to the nature of the fieldwork which was undertaken between 1983 and 1989.

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5 Ibid., 2.
The fieldwork

The fieldwork which led to the present study was undertaken through personal contact with and reading the writings of feminist spiritual women. This contact was broadened by sending out five hundred questionnaires which encouraged women to write about their own spirituality in their own words. From the responses to these questionnaires a typology of spiritual feminists from Christian backgrounds was produced, and ten women from each of the three groups were approached who had agreed to be interviewed in greater depth about the implicit and explicit dimensions of their religious beliefs and actions. The 1986 Questionnaire, typology and interviews are discussed further on.

Let us look more closely at the personal contacts which gave the impetus to the fieldwork in this study and which were outlined briefly in the Introduction to it. This includes accounts of my association with religious feminist groups, my teaching experience at Leicester University, my association with secular feminist groups and meetings with individuals engaged in promoting the concerns of the Women's Movement in Christianity. My awakening to the concerns of religious feminists came in the way of an undergraduate introductory lecture entitled "Christianity and the Women's Movement", given by Dr. Peter McKenzie in 1983. The iconoclastic effect of this address on me cannot be overestimated as this was a time in which I was beginning to strongly affected by the concerns of the feminist critique in every aspect of my life. Shortly after hearing Peter McKenzie's lecture I joined Christian Women's Information and Resources (CWIRES) and coincidentally met one of its founder members working in the University library. My interest in the Women's Movement and Christianity developed so that I began to travel widely around the United Kingdom in order to meet other Christian women and to discuss our interpretations of and contributions to Christianity. At this time I was 21 years of age, new to the Women's Movement and realising that my religious needs and discoveries were not always understood or valued by my Christian feminist friends. By this time I had left the Anglican church which I had struggled with for many years and was exhausted with the effort I had expended in order to be heard. I had failed in this, but in doing so I had found some solid (although often bemused) support in the local meeting of the Society of Friends. It is here that I remain an Attender. I cannot become a Member because I feel impelled to eschew initiation in all its forms into institutionalised Christianity because my knowledge of God, or enosis suffices; I do not need, I strongly believe, a rite of passage, for my relationship with God takes place on a long road upon which I expect to encounter the unexpected as well as the expected signs and symbols which guide my life. In addition I experience women's marginality to almost every human institution in every waking moment and have experienced a resistance to "joining clubs" from an early age! It therefore seems totally natural for me to be committed to the causes of the Christian feminist movement without actually belonging to a specific
At around this time I began subscriptions to the Christian Feminist Newsletter. Within a few years it was to be produced by the Plymouth Women's Theology Group with whom I was soon to have much contact. I must confess to having found great tolerance of perspectives and personal need in this group among individual members. Their understanding of "feminist" is broad, as indeed is their understanding as to what makes a Christian. I liked this group immensely and soon made firm friendships with some of its members. The Plymouth Women in Theology group stood out against a great number of theologically orientated local feminist Christian organisations who did not have tolerance towards more unorthodox or dissenting members.

By 1984 I had begun my postgraduate work intent on the study of the concept of androgyny in religious feminism. This ideas was to be short-lived because my time was being increasingly taken over by Christian feminist activities. My time was being taken up by Christian Women's Information and Resources who were rapidly expanding their acquisitions. I wrote papers and gave talks throughout the country in the hope of meeting women in my situation. I began to feel at this time that I clearly did not fit the "mainstream" Christian feminist definition, and, more precisely, that I did not feel totally comfortable with Christian feminists. Such statements are absolutely subjective and as such demand careful definition. I began to feel that I had more in common with "secular" feminists, especially those who had begun to recognise that the Women's Movement had a strong spiritual motivation. Indeed, I valued the way in which apparent secular feminists became the authors of their own spirituality and did not feel the need to belong to or reform religious institutions or practices. This freed them to show how women's unique experiences and beliefs have shaped their understanding of God and human beings. For me, the experience of exodus from the Church of England was both traumatic and liberating, although overwhelmingly liberating. I must confess to not sharing some of the agony which my post-church sisters revealed in the 1986 Questionnaire and interviews. This was due in part, I feel, to the fact that from a very early age I am told that I pestered my elders and betters by questioning the status quo at home and at school. I felt constrained in a way that I cannot explain both in Sunday worship and Sunday school. Never having felt really "at home" in the Anglican communion, and having struggled with this pervasive feeling for many years, I made my exodus. Looking back, the leap I made then seems much more immense than it actually seemed at the time. I have spoken about this with many other women who were in my position and who made their protests known. Looking back, our main source of dis-ease with the churches is that nobody appeared to take much notice of us. This, in fact, is untrue, since many of us did stir up interest in our parishes but were quashed by people in authority, not least by the clergy. We can see today that in fact our message was attracting much interest, but with this interest came the greatest obstacle which many human institutions encounter by listening to women - their
fear of the unknown.

In the following chapters I write about the religious beliefs and actions not only of women who have left churches, but also of those women who have remained within them and those women who have rejected all forms of communion with a masculine-identified God. It is important for the reader to have some knowledge about my subjective reactions to the women studied, and the following account of my experiences of teaching women at the University of Leicester Vaughan College of Adult Education illustrates this appropriately. I have taught at Vaughan College since 1984 at the age of 22. Courses at Vaughan College usually have a strong socialist-feminist bias. Its bias and good creche facilities tends to attract socialists and feminists educated to degree level and repels those who are not. Forearmed with this knowledge, the titles of my first two courses were "Made in the Image of God?" and subtitled respectively, "Woman in Christian Tradition" and "Women's Spirituality Rediscovered".

The strength of teaching these courses was that it gave me the opportunity to meet and to talk to women regularly about their religious beliefs and actions. But there were problems associated with this too. Nearly all the women who enrolled in the first two courses were church members; few were explicit feminists! There was a great deal of tension between this faction and one woman who had left the Roman Catholic church and had become an explicit Christian feminist Marxist. At the beginning there was little pleasure in facilitating a group of twenty four squabbling middle-class women who overwhelmingly wanted to reform the churches in favour of a higher status for women. I was disappointed with the group initially as I had hoped that the discussions arising out of my talks would lead to us defining our own spirituality. My failing was my inexperience in facilitating a powerful group such as this, and that I was disappointed that I was not meeting women in a similar position to myself. A breakthrough came in the sixth week of the first course when a woman announced to the class that she was leaving the Church of England after 56 years of membership. This provoked the most interesting, vital discussion which opened my eyes to the plight of those remaining with the churches. Sitting among women who were older and more articulate than I, it came to me that often those women who chose to remain in churches in order to reform them from within were not taking the easier path that I had assumed they were. I had often assumed that the apparent arrogance of Christian feminists which, manifested itself in arraigning those women who had left the churches, was born of a feeling of self-satisfied superiority over those women who had taken the easier path of exodus from the churches. I felt that their position was untenable, that it could not last. I must now confess to being wrong about this. I now understand feminist church members to exist in a symbiotic union with all spiritual feminists, whether explicitly Christian or otherwise. If the present work shows anything at all it is that the spiritual aspect of the Women's Movement is universal and can be found in many religious forms. My disappointment in the narrow
Anglican Christian element of attendance at the Vaughan College classes was vindicated in time by the class members' gradual opening-up about their personal spirituality. This could only happen in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance and it taught me the hard lesson of the importance of giving individuals time to express their religious beliefs which may have many levels of meaning. One of the women attenders of the first Vaughan College course wrote to me last year telling me that

the room was a real "power-house" while our group was there. It gave a lot of us strength and a feeling of togetherness, and these feelings enabled us to be brave, to go forth.

even though you wrote about Anglicans in your last letter being the majority [members in Vaughan College classes], did you know that "A" [name withheld] and "B" [name withheld] have both left the communion? This may surprise you as both were stanch [sic] members, "B" being a member of the Diocesan Board of Social Responsibility.

What do you think about the fact that so many of our original [Vaughan College] group have first of all left our husbands and then the Church? Is there some connection, do you think?! I myself am sure that I would have left my husband anyway, but I could not have left the Church [of England] without people like you to make the pain hurt less...I think that without the sort of friendships we made in those days we would not have been able to create our own rituals [writer is referring to her own personal rituals which help her to understand God as mother].

The fact that to my knowledge eight out of twenty-four women in the original Vaughan College group have formed an exodus from the Anglican and Roman Catholic denominations is indeed proof of the efficacy of my typology which is explored in detail in a later section. The Vaughan College experience taught me the value of patience, but also of the need to approach every woman in the course of fieldwork as an individual with her own value system who is as worthy as the next woman. Moreover, experience taught me not to be intimidated by highly educated and articulate middle class women and that education is often a weapon used by such women to avoid talking about highly personal issues, especially spiritual ones. I know this method of evasion only too well: it is one that I have employed frequently when I have felt threatened when encountering men and women whom I feel have achieved a richer spirituality than my own!

I had not intended my experiences at Vaughan College to be explicit fieldwork, but in fact it was by 1986 that this experience determined a new direction in my postgraduate work. It was my apparent discovery of the richness and apparent similarities of the religious beliefs and actions among those women who had decided to leave the churches that prompted me to begin the present study. It should be stressed that the reasons for beginning this particular study were motivated as much by personal curiosity as a wish to expand the boundaries of knowledge about religious feminists.

In 1986 I was becoming fascinated by the richness of Goddess-worship in the United Kingdom and
was travelling widely in order to find out more about this phenomenon, especially where the
discoveries of feminism had led women towards Her worship. By this time I was also teaching
tutorials in the Department of Religion at the University of Leicester and found that among my
students I was known as "the woman who is doing research on feminism and religion". This
label was to be in my interest as I found that I was approached by several "secular" feminists in the
University who wanted me to talk to groups on the subjects of feminism and religion or spirituality.
It was this experience which confirmed to me that within the so-called "secular" Women's
Movement there is a core of highly creative women who understand the spiritual foundations of the
Women's Movement. By this I mean that they understand the concept of "symbolic order" upon
which rest all human institutions. I regret to say that I do not write about this impressive struggling
group in the present study because I have concentrated my energies upon explicitly religious women
rather than those women whose beliefs and actions have implicitly religious aspects.

By June 1986 I had spent much time visiting libraries, making friends and contacts in the Women's
Movement, teaching, giving talks. Earlier that year I had a mental breakdown. I later learned that
this was in fact a "break-through" as it helped me eventually to shape my own symbolic order, to
meet like-minded people, to know that I was not alone in my understanding of God and the world. I
felt at the time that I wanted to abandon my postgraduate research, but did not do so because I did
not have anywhere else to go. Faced with the need to bide time in order to recover energy and the
need to justify to myself that I was doing something constructively related to my postgraduate work, I
compiled the 1986 Questionnaire, sent out five hundred copies, mainly in batches, to explicitly
spiritual women's groups. The addresses of these groups were acquired mainly through personal
contacts and information supplied by Christian Women's Information and Resources, the
Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network and readers of Arachne. I then sat back for three
months and waited for the replies to come back to me.

A critical analysis of the responses to the 1986 Questionnaire is given in the following section. The
unexpectedly large response (323 women clearly spent much time and energy working on their
answers which often ran into several added sheets of A4 paper!) was a source of great
encouragement to me. Most women were pleased that an empirical study was being done with
English women as the subject and a few agreed with the woman quoted below that they were pleased
that

at last somebody has recognised that English Christian feminism is very different from
what's going on in the States. We are certainly more conservative here on the
whole, but that doesn't make us less worthy of study! Good luck to you in your
work.
By August 1987 I was continuing to meet more and more women whose interest was, in the broadest possible sense, feminism and spirituality. It was these grass-roots personal contacts and my own personal involvement on the margins of the Christian feminist movement which enabled me to formulate a three-fold typology of explicitly feminist spiritual women in England. In a further section which discusses the typology of the women in this study I provide a justification and defence for the three titles, Christian feminist, post-church feminist and post-christian feminist which I feel prove to be the best way to make explicit feminist spirituality visible.

The next stage in the fieldwork was the period of formal interviews which took place from June 1987 and have continued even during this period of "writing up"! I use the term "formal" interviews to indicate that interviews with spiritual feminists about their explicit and implicit religious beliefs and actions had been continuing for as long as I had been interested in the Women’s Movement. I indicate the form of interview and the method used with respondents in the last section of this chapter. The following section discussed the form, data and analysis of the 1986 Questionnaire. What follows is an account of the typology arising both from the Questionnaire and a series of interviews with a selection of respondents.

**The 1986 Questionnaire: form, data and analysis**

The details of the distribution of the 1986 Questionnaire have been discussed in the previous section. The present section discusses its form, presents the data arising from it, and provides a critical analysis of these responses. A copy of the actual format of the Questionnaire sent out to five hundred women is given in Appendix A. I had felt that its length - five sides of A4 in all - would deter women from discussing points made in the spaces (often up to six lines) provided for them, but I was extremely pleased that most of the 323 who responded sent me up to ten sides of A4 in addition to the answers written on the 1986 Questionnaire. It showed, as many women stated, that there was a need for women to voice and discuss their religious beliefs and actions with other women. The Questionnaire’s title, "English Feminist Spirituality" was formulated in this simple form in order to encourage a wide spectrum of women and not to deter smaller pockets of women (such as Goddess-worshippers) who may have been put off by the inclusion of words such as "religious" or "Christian". It is clear on the first page that the respondents' names were not to be given in the thesis. This may have encouraged women to write more frankly and freely about their religious experiences, beliefs and actions than they would have done if their names had been quoted. Women were given the opportunity to say if they did not want me to use quotations from their responses: all requests were scrupulously observed.
In the previous section I have outlined the typology which I formulated directly as a result of the Questionnaire. The main drawback of the Questionnaire is that it was intended for the consumption of Christian feminists who remained with the churches, rather than for women who have left the churches but who still call themselves feminists, or for women from Christian backgrounds who experience the Goddess in their lives. It should be stressed however that it would not have been possible to classify such women confidently into 3 groups without the support of the data from the Questionnaire. What it was not possible to find out from the questionnaire was statistics relating to exact numbers of practising feminist religious women in England. The numbers set out below represent the 300 responses picked at random from the 323 Questionnaire returned to me. 300 was chosen as the nearest round figure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>182</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Questionnaire is divided into five sections. The first, entitled "You" asks some confidential questions about the respondent's age, occupation, sexual orientation and relationship status. The data from all the sections are set out and discussed below in order for the reader to avoid referring constantly to an appendix. The first question of the first section is about age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>21-30</th>
<th>21-30</th>
<th>21-30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>post-church</td>
<td>post-christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What meaning can be drawn out of these figures? What do they actually say? The important fact to remember is that the Questionnaire was sent out to approximately thirty feminist spiritual groups of an explicit Christian or Goddess orientation. Only a few isolated individuals were contacted regarding the Questionnaire and these were personal contacts. I have no way of confirming the fact that I suspect that many young women in their mid-twenties hover on the fringes of women's groups whose orientation is spiritual. It may be simply that I know such women because they are of my own age group. But I am aware through talking to other women in their twenties that there is a reluctance to join women's groups because a gulf is perceived between the experiences of feminists in their forties (who became feminists in the 1960's) and those who came to feminism in the 1980's. I must admit that this has never entered into my mind, but its apparence in discourse with other young women requires further analysis. This is not possible in the present work, but the fact remains that two out of 182 Christian feminist respondents were in their twenties whilst 138 were in their forties! 22 women in their thirties and 20 in their fifties answered the Questionnaire, but a staggering number of 138 women between the ages of 41 and 50, demands careful scrutiny. The
same proportion of women in their forties is evident in post-church and post-Christian feminists. The key to the reason behind this number became evident in discussions with groups and in later interviews. Many women now in their forties had arrived at their current feminist spiritual orientation through their encounter with the Women's Movement's great shift of consciousness in the 1960's. They were then in their twenties. I believe that if the Christian feminist movement is not to be regarded as a passing phenomenon then these figures suggest that it needs to encourage younger women to join its ranks. Internal schism in Christian feminist groups may be a factor in this, and is discussed in a later section. The phenomenon of few women affiliates in their twenties is reflected in the post-church milieu, where there were only five respondents in their twenties whilst 47 in their thirties, 45 in their forties and one woman in her fifties. Proportionally, as many women in their thirties as well as their forties seemed to be attracted to post-church beliefs and experience. The argument which I shall put forward as to why this should be is supported by evidence given by women in conversations with them. The 1960's were a time of great change and flux, not least for the churches and for women who were discovering new ways of looking at themselves and challenging the way they had been defined by men previously. Many women who were young adults in the sixties have largely remained aware of their feminist identity, their sisterhood. This is why such a large number of women in their forties are to be found in Christian feminist enclaves. Post-church feminists according to the results of this study are aged typically in their thirties and forties. The possible reasons for this are more problematic. One Christian feminist in her forties suggested the possibility that since women who were not young adults in the 1960's did not experience the thrust of feminism which encouraged women to wrestle and challenge the status quo; they did not have the "staying power" to remain within the churches in order to change them. There may be some truth in this statement, but other - perhaps more positive - factors prevail, such as women's developing sense of spiritual autonomy which effects a critique of the androcentrism of the churches. In the same way that in the last thirty years women in the West have found domestic violence wholly intolerable and unacceptable, so they have pointed to those beliefs and actions in the sphere of the churches which they believe have violated their image of themselves. Certainly post-church feminists interviewed in the present work regretted the loss of the solidity and catholicism of church worship, but they also recognised the need for a voice for the new burgeoning spirituality of women. The Women's Movement itself, more widely known for its criticism of religion, has of late acknowledged the fact of the appearance of women's spiritual movements implicit in feminism. Moreover, it is beginning to accept the fact of a spiritual dimension within the movement itself with its identification, critique and reformulation of the dominant androcentric symbolic order which does not serve the interests of women as well as men. The attraction of younger women to non-institutionalised Christianity through their encounter with feminism rather than through the churches themselves is supported by conversations with women in later interviews. This suggests that feminism itself is a dynamic and integral drive for Christian women who leave the
churches. This is certainly supported by the theology and spiritual world-views which were revealed by the women interviewed.

182 Christian feminists and 98 post-church feminists provide sufficiently large data about ages to be able to critically speculate about their meaning. The 20 respondents to the Questionnaire whom I classified as post-christian feminists were the result of insufficient contacts with the matriarchy network at that time. Of these women my data reveals that 15 were aged between 41 and 50, but that, interestingly, 5 were aged between 21 and 30. I have since made a more detailed investigation of the possibility that one quarter of all post-christian feminists are under 30 years of age in 6 national groups, and this phenomenon persists. It is significant that 25 per cent of matriarchy membership is under 30, whereas this is less than two per cent among Christian feminists, according to this study.

What does this signal for the future of the three groups? This remains conjecture, but a personal view is given in the thesis' conclusion. We can see from the data about age that some important considerations arise concerning the origin, typology and destinies of the three groups. Some of these considerations are approached in the responses to further questions posed in the 1986 Questionnaire. Let us continue to examine further data.

Women were asked to state their occupations. I wanted to find out whether I could support my prejudice that Christian feminists and post-church feminists were or had been in predominantly middle-class "professional" employment. I was correct! The data is set out below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sch. teacher</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. artist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE/FE lect'r</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. writer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ord'd min'er</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaconess</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery nse.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soc. worker</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health wrkr</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports wrkr.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop assist.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretarial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claimant</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coop. worker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Let us look at some of these figures more closely. Almost 15 per cent of Christian feminists who responded to the Questionnaire did not specify an occupation. In later conversations and interviews it became apparent that many married women with children who work in the home do not feel comfortable with the title "housewife". It is not possible to say whether this title is applicable to all the women who left this space blank. 41 out of 182 Christian feminists used the word "housewife" to describe their work in the home. None of these women referred to past or present employment, and indeed, it was unclear whether those women who specified employment referred to a previous career and were now housewives. This was clearly a fault in the formulation of the Questionnaire.

A sizable proportion of Christian feminists were school-teachers. This was not surprising to me: it supported my observation that Christian feminists tended to come from the "caring" and educational professions such as higher- and further education (4), church ministry (1 minister, 12 deaconesses), nursery nursing (1), social work (8), public sector health (6), student (7) and voluntary work (7). There was evidence of Christian feminist involvement in the creative professions with the responses of 3 professional artists and 3 professional writers. I went on to interview one of the artists who had given me much valuable creative material with which to work from the response to her Questionnaire alone. Around 30 out of the 182 Christian feminist respondents were employed in miscellaneous fields (such as sports work (1) secretarial work (6) and administration (7). 19 were unemployed, but none of these women specified whether they also worked in the home!

Teaching was a profession strongly favoured by post-church feminists. Out of 98 women 15 were teachers in schools and 4 in further-or higher education. One third of post-church feminists responding to the Questionnaire called themselves "housewives", which is a figure proportionally higher than Christian feminists. A notable 16 post-church feminists were social workers. This may reflect an interest in spirituality and the Women's Movement by women in the caring professions, although only two health workers responded to the Questionnaire. The response by 9 professional artists and 4 writers reflects a diverse creativity which is evident in the post-church milieu. Visual theology is a burgeoning area at the present time and women have always used the creative activity of writing as a tool to expose and redress the harmful effects of androcentrism. Other occupations which were stated, but which do not reveal any interesting information about the nature of post-church feminists were shop work (3), voluntary work (1), unemployment (4) and co-operative worker (1).

More than a quarter of post-christian feminists worked as professional artist or writers. I do not believe this to be unusual or freak statistics because I have met extraordinarily creative and talented
women in the matriarchy network wherever I have travelled. 9 women were co-operative members who provided goods or services for people, usually vegetarian food, hand-made or hand-dyed products. It was fortunate that I received 3 responses from members of a Devon coven whose beliefs and actions are studied in further chapters. The remaining 5 women described themselves as "unemployed" or as "claimants". This fact was compounded by further research: many women in the matriarchy network are unemployed. I am able to state that the explicit reason for this; it is quite simply that such women do not find work which is suited to them as they find the workplace exploitative, manipulative and male-dominated!

Women were asked "Which of the following categories best describes you?" and were asked to describe themselves from seven given categories: single, married, separated, divorced, living with partner, engaged, widow. The responses to this question did not help me greatly in the formulation of the typology, although it can be demonstrated by the data below that women who belong to dominant religious institutions tend to remain married, whereas women who have left the churches are more likely to divorce or separate, or may already be so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living/prtnr</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It will be clear from the above table that women occasionally classified themselves under two categories. For example all post-christian women (all lesbians) were living with their partners. Four of these were divorced, nine were separated, and two women called themselves single! It is important to remember that in the evaluation of the data and the construction of the typology I concentrated primarily on the information given to me in sections II-V of the 1986 Questionnaire on formal worship, religious feminist groups, spirituality and post-christianity. The evaluation of the data of section I is useful insofar as it upholds my arguments for the existence of qualitative differences, not simply in religious actions, but in religious and ethical beliefs and worldviews between the three groups of women.

The data suggests a phenomenon that I cannot support in my experience. It suggests that few Christian feminists are divorced, whereas I have several Christian feminist friends who have been so. 7 divorcees, 3 separations and no women living with their partners out of 182 respondents seem to be excessively low figures, but the data must speak for itself. It does suggest that at the grassroots
level women who belong to dominant religious institutions and also to Christian feminist groups tend to marry and stay married. It is not possible to say why, but it suggests a conservatism within local Christian feminist groups which is not so evident in the public face of English Christian feminism, namely writers, poets, artists and media personalities such as Sara Maitland, Jo Garcia, Wendy Periam and Margaret Hebblethwaite, all liberal feminists and Christians. In "grassroots" local feminist groups there appears to be a strong attachment to the traditional "family" centred values which are associated with Christian churches. This became very apparent during the interviews and is of special interest to this study because one of the driving forces of this work is its recognition of the often great differences between the implicit and explicit dimensions of religious beliefs and actions of Christian feminist writers and those women in localised groups. This will become apparent in the following chapters, but suffice it to say at the present time that the religious actions of Christian feminists in church worship are indistinguishable from their fellow communicants. Where Christian feminists do differ significantly from their fellow communicants is in their beliefs and attitudes in relation to theology, liturgy and the professional ministry.

Post-church feminists differ greatly from Christian feminists in their marital status. Post-church feminists showed a significantly higher proportion of divorced and separated respondents. Only 23 out of 98 women were married which is proportionally lower than Christian feminists. 155 out of 182 Christian feminists were married. The figures suggest that post-church feminists, although explicitly Christian, do not wholeheartedly share the traditional value system of the denominations in which the sacrality of marriage is upheld by married couples remaining together whatever the circumstances of their relationship. Proportionally there were twice as many single post-church feminists to Christian feminists, but this does not seem to be determined by age alone because only 5 out of 98 women were aged under 30. 12 women called themselves single, but of these 9 were also divorced or separated. More than one quarter of post-church and post-christian feminists were divorced, a figure which suggests that such women tend to eschew traditional androcentric Christian values about marriage in the light of understanding their needs. The question of women's needs is central in order to critically evaluate the data about women's status. The needs of post-christian feminists declare the inception of a gynocentric worldview and separate communities of women in which women only have relations with other women. It was surprising to see that all the women who responded to the Questionnaire lived with their partners, but I was surprised to discover that of these 9 were separated and 4 were divorced, suggesting that over half of the respondents most probably had sexual relations with men at some time during their lifetimes.

The second to the fifth sections of the 1986 Questionnaire were the sections used to form the typology which will be discussed in the next section. Let us look at the data which led to its inception. I asked women to state whether they worshipped in a Christian denomination, even if it
was only occasionally. For those women for whom the answer was "no" I asked to ignore the rest of the section and proceed to the next section about religious feminist groups. All the Christian feminists answered "yes". Of the women whom I classified as post-church feminists 18 answered yes, but qualified this in the next question. All of the post-christian feminists answered "no". The next question "Which is it/what are they?" enabled me to gain some information about the denominations which women belonged to. I shall explain further on how I distinguished Christian feminists from post-church feminists. As post-church feminists and post-christian feminists do not worship in churches, the figures below represent Christian feminist response to the questionnaire with reference to membership of denominations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of England</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society of Friends</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to remember that the Questionnaires were sent out to specific denominational groups of women. It would be improper to make the suggestion that the data here reflects an accurate statistical reality about Christian feminist belief. The data is also incomplete because I am unable to show the denominations in which post-church feminists previously worshipped. The question "Do you worship in a Christian denomination..." would have been more appropriately phrased "Do you worship or have you ever worshipped...?". This unfortunate omission was the result of not having realised the prevalence of post-church feminists at the time of writing the Questionnaire.

I was only able to distinguish 18 post-church feminists who answered "yes" to the first question from Christian feminists by their responses to the third question of this section, "approximately how often do you attend meetings for worship on one year?" because these women qualified their responses (which were between 1 and 3 times a year) by stating that they attended friends' weddings, funerals and the christening of children, although 8 women said that they attended Midnight Mass. Nearly all the women commented on their attendance with statements like "I only went for a friend's wedding", "I attended my sister's wedding in a church and was felt I didn't belong" and "I went to the christening although I had previously refused to be a godparent. I could not bring myself to be party to watching my nephew grow up in the Church of England". One of the 8 women who attended Midnight Mass wrote movingly:

I had made the conscious decision to leave the [Roman Catholic] church in 1982
[because of its conservative attitude towards women] and had not been since. It was a wrench for me, I can't say how much. But I missed the congregational worship terribly. On Christmas Eve last year [1985] I felt suddenly terribly alone and depressed. My husband and children still went [to church] so last year I went with them. I have not gone since and I don't feel the need to especially. But there are times when I feel the need to express my inward faith publicly.

Although only 18 women who were identified as post-church feminists filled in section II, it was possible to categorise them as such because of their very low attendance per year of 1-3 occasions which were typically family occasions. The table below represents the approximate attendance of Christian feminists at church in one year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>150+</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100+</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It seems probable that most Christian feminists (162 out of 182) attend weekly services on a Sunday. This was overwhelmingly the case of the women interviewed. Only 2 women attended church less than 25 times a year (approximately fortnightly) but these were Quaker women in a rural area where fortnightly Meetings are not unusual. 7 women attended church more than 150 times a year. These women were coincidentally Roman Catholics and teachers whose occupations most probably necessitate frequent church attendance. (It is possible that this assumption is quite unfair, and that these women are very spiritual and devout!)

The next question, "Please give details of any discrimination you feel has been made against you in terms of your sex and/or sexual orientation" prompted one woman to respond curtly, "I would tell you but an Amazonian rain forest perishes every time a question like this is asked!" This is a sombre question which tells us little about the implicit and explicit dimensions of women's religious beliefs and actions. In retrospect its inclusion was unnecessary, although at the time I had been anxious to learn whether women in localised groups experienced discrimination against them in a qualitatively different way to established writers on spirituality. I was surprised at the responses.

Christian feminists in England who responded to the Questionnaire had no difficulty in expressing themselves as spiritual women. In fact when they were asked to write about their own spirituality and role models from the Bible I was astonished at the breadth of talent, spiritual imagination and resources which women had within them. However, when women were asked to write about discrimination against them the results were somewhat disappointing, even derivative, reminiscent of works by feminist critics of Christianity such as Sara Maitland, Rosemary Ruether, Phyllis Trible. The points raised in the responses have been included in chapter V in which I attempt to show how women regard themselves as the subject of religion. It is not proposed to include a discussion of
them at this point as it is more appropriate to show how women have faced up to discrimination with the inception of new cognitions, beliefs and actions.

Lesbian and bisexual women were asked to say whether they revealed their sexuality to fellow communicants or the clergy. The problem with this question is that it was included in a section which was answered only by all the Christian feminists, no post-christian feminists and by 18 out of 98 post-church feminists. As none of the Christian feminists who responded to the Questionnaire were lesbians, this question was inappropriate. Of the 18 post-church feminist respondents only 4 of these were lesbians. 3 of these answered in the affirmative, one adding the comment, "which led to being ignored by everybody, but I would have left anyway". It is unfortunate that no lesbian Christian feminists responded to the Questionnaire and that I was unable to interview any in depth, but such women do exist as individuals and in groups and who have made a great contribution to feminist theology and spiritual self-awareness which cannot be ignored. I know of women who have suffered greatly through outward hostility, neglect or pity and those who have received almost universal support from their churches.

The question "does your church welcome feminist activities by financing or publicising them?" was only answered by Christian feminists and by 2 of the 18 post-church feminists who responded to this section. Both post-church feminists wrote about their past experiences as church members and as such were grossly intolerant of its actions, typified by the statement that they "didn't know, didn't care, didn't want to know and didn't want to care". Of the Christian feminists 61 claimed that their church did finance and publicise Christian feminist activities. This suggests a marked tolerance, if not encouragement, of such exercises. This is the experience of one third of Christian feminists. The other two thirds (121) who answered "no" to this question reflect upon their experience of the churches' conservatism and resistance to new developments. This response was predictable, and most women felt that a change in attitude would come as long as women maintained a protest against the status of women in churches. Interestingly, women tended to comment that the churches' attitude did not arise out of a deep-rooted hatred of women but rather from unfamiliarity with women's beliefs and experiences.

The question of the ordination of women was tackled by asking women how important it was to the aims of the Christian feminist Movement. All of the 18 post-church feminists felt that it was "wholly irrelevant", "irrelevant", "meaningless" or "nothing to do with me!", and this factor alone helped to distinguish them from Christian feminists. The table below refers to the attitude of Christian feminists only:

---

6 The Catholic Lesbian Sisterhood has been in existence for nearly 15 years.
How far do you feel that the question of the ordination of women is important to the aims of the Christian feminist movement in England?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christian feminists only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main aim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vital importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the average response is that the ordination of women is important. But it is interesting that only 36 find the question to be not very important. The figures above state plainly that the question of the ordination of women is of very real importance to 146 out of 182 women. We shall see how women articulate their concerns in chapter V which gives an anthropology of Christian feminists, and also in the section about sacred personhood in chapter VII. I asked this question because I was concerned about the saturation of the question of women's ministry by the media. I felt that it was possible that the concern did not feature so centrally in the minds of Christian feminists, but this concern was obviously misguided!

The final question in this section asked women to give additional information which they felt was relevant about their relationship to their churches. Only about 30 women responded to this, although those who did did so in detail. Much of this information was personal and as such would be too lengthy to repeat here, but have been extensively used in the following chapters. Indeed, many of the women asked me not to use quotations from their responses to this question as the information related to the attitudes of clergy and fellow-communicants towards the women concerned. Women sent testimonies of their discovery of feminism and the reaction of the community. This was compelling and often moving reading. It has been a privilege to have women's experiences and beliefs shared with me.

The third section of the 1986 Questionnaire, "Your religious feminist group" was intended to explore the nature, composition, beliefs and actions of religious feminist groups. It was not intended at any stage to be a numerical evaluation of such groups in England, and even at the time of writing I am uncertain that any data or studies of this nature are in existence. It is an interesting area of research which requires further analysis, but it cannot be the concern of the present work. What were the primary intentions behind the questions in the third section? By the time I came to write the Questionnaire I had already had much valuable grass-roots experience of Christian feminist groups having visited many since 1983. The Questionnaire was compiled with these particular groups in mind because at the time my knowledge of the existence and nature of matriarchal groups was sparse. The Questionnaire does not therefore adequately render the sort of questions which
might more satisfactorily draw out the religious meanings of intentions of post-church and matriarchal groups. However, the responses to the Questionnaire did actually reveal the unexpected surprise of these three natural divisions of groups of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminists. This was the great value of the Questionnaire. My impression of Christian feminist groups (which includes those with post-church membership) was that there was enormous variety between groups in their orientation and emphasis, and that such groups were often subject of internal schism. The intention of the questions in the third section was to uncover the explicit nature and underlying intentions of such groups by examining statements made by members and by trying to reveal implicit dimensions of beliefs and actions.

The section began with the question, "have you ever been a member of a feminist religious group?". The responses to this question are set out below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is apparent that all Christian- and post-christian feminists belong to feminist groups with a spiritual or religious orientation, and that this is the case with the exception of a few post-church feminists. However, what these figures do not tell us about is those groups which women have belonged to and have left because of internal dissension. I wanted to discover whether my observations about this phenomenon were correct and why so many women I had met through the Christian feminist movement had left women's groups in order to form another one. This will be explored in the following paragraph. What the figures above do tell us is that most spiritual feminists in England, whether Christians or from the matriarchate, feel the need to meet with other women with similar needs and outlook. Such women need the bonds of sisterhood in order to find the energy to continue their struggle for their arguments to be heard.

I asked women to give details as to why the group no longer met, if that was the case. From the information supplied to me I was able to show differences between those women who had only belonged to one group and those women who had previously belonged to a group and who had left it to join another. Interestingly, all the post-church and post-christian feminists had only ever belonged to one group. This included those 9 post-church feminists who no longer belonged to such groups. These women had not joined another group at the time of answering the Questionnaire. Christian feminists tended to always belong to groups, but 30% of them indicated on the Questionnaire that they had belonged to 2 or more groups in their lifetime! This confirmed my observation that the Christian feminist movement is subject to constant internal schisms and unrest. We shall examine some of the possible reasons for this later on, but let us examine the reasons given for Christian- and
post-church feminist groups no longer meeting by using the figures below representing percentages.

If the group no longer meets, please give details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christian feminist</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denominational differences between members</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members’ family/personal commitments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banned by church</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal difference of opinion over…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…the group’s radicalism</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…Biblical/theological interpretation</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…personality clash among members</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reason given</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-church feminist</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group too theologically conservative</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt uncomfortable having left church</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordination of women was group’s focus</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that Christian feminist groups often split and re-form into separate groups is a fact which demands closer analysis. In response to further questions on the Questionnaire, post-church feminists revealed that they usually tended to meet with Christian feminists in women’s groups to discuss Christianity and feminism, but that they only met with other post-church feminists for worship and fellowship. Post-christian feminists did not meet with either of the other two groups for discussions or fellowship, but from the interviews at a later date it is clear that they recognised such women as part of a vast network of feminist religious movements.

Let us examine the reasons why Christian- and post-church feminists left previous groups. 2% of the Christian feminists referred to their group as having being banned by their local churches. Interestingly, these women all had belonged to the same Christian feminist high Anglican group. So the figures from the Questionnaire pertain to only one group of women which was banned. I know of no other instance where a group’s meeting has been forbidden by any the leadership of any institution at any level. On the whole I found that churches tend to ignore feminist activities rather than explicitly regard them as a threat. 3% referred to personality clashes between members of
Christian feminist groups as their reason for leaving. This appears to be a small number but it demands analysis as it throws light on some of the reasons for leaving Christian feminist groups. In the interviews I discovered that personality clashes in Christian feminist groups often arise where there is an internal difference of opinion concerning policy, whether that policy concerns biblical interpretation or an individual’s commitment to the group. The women who referred to personality clashes as a reason for leaving a group qualified this by adding that underlying the clash were profound differences about theological orientation and the purpose of the group.

I am able to say a few words with some authority about this outcome where the purpose of the group is uncertain or disputed. I have seen many, many Christian feminist groups fragment as a result of internal friction which leads to personality conflicts among members. However, personality clashes are a symptom rather than a cause of dissent. The primary underlying causes of dissent present themselves in the data. Theological interpretation and the degree of the group’s radicalism are the two central factors which split Christian feminist groups. Why is it, then, that post-church feminists seem content to remain with one group, whereas 30% of Christian feminists had belonged to more than 2 groups? 12% of Christian feminists referred to a denominational difference between members and indicated that it was difficult for the group to combine members from different denominations, especially where some members belonged to churches in which women were ordained. This seems paradoxical, but the fact was confirmed by talking to women from the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. The underlying intentions for this are highly complex, but the appearance of such conservatism raises the question about what Christian feminists do actually want! The following chapters in the present work bring out the nature of this conservatism. What has struck me about English Christian feminism is its stark contrast to Christian feminism in the United States of America which appears to be more pluralist in its biblical interpretation. From the information supplied in the data on the Questionnaire I was able to indicate a pattern which occurs where there is disagreement in an English Christian feminist group. Let us look at the three major reasons that Christian feminists gave for leaving Christian feminist groups. 19% of women gave no reason for leaving, so this group cannot be analysed. 27% Gave the group’s (excess or lack of) radicalism as their reason for leaving, and in the third 31% cited the cause as their disagreement with the group’s prevailing biblical or theological interpretation.

These two percentages combined make up 58% of all the responses - nearly two thirds - and demand careful analysis. The figures confirmed what I had suspected about Christian feminists, namely that while such groups thrived on tension with dominant religious institutions, they responded to internal challenge and dissent by forming new groups with a more radical social and theological praxis rather than by expanding to include new people and ideas. It is possible to illustrate this by using the example of a Christian feminist group in Leicester. Following my first course at the Department of
Adult Education at Vaughan College, a core of Anglican women, all of whom attended the same church and were friends, set up a women's Bible study group which met monthly and which had an explicitly feminist orientation. The purpose of the group was to meet to discuss the exegetical and hermeneutical meaning of biblical texts. The meetings proceeded well for about six months until one member of the group of five women announced that she was intending to leave her husband. She had been unhappy with her marriage for some years and said that she wanted to have the love and support of other women in order to be able to carry through her decision. The woman who organised the group told this woman that the group had originally convened with the intention of discussing biblical texts, not to provide a support network to its members! The woman who had asked for help from the group was shattered by her reply because as she said in a later interview

I had thought that biblical interpretation and social action were one and the same thing. It isn't possible to separate the two. Anyway, whenever women come together it's their sense of togetherness that impresses people as much as what they have met together to discuss. I feel I have a sense of duty and obligation towards other women. You can't just draw a line and say "well we mustn't discuss this as it's uncomfortable".

I left the group feeling upset and let-down and later on appalled that my needs should be rejected by other women.

[Interview, n.d.]

This woman formed another group which met in her house fortnightly until she left her husband and the city to make a new life for herself. This "alternative" group encouraged women from different denominational groups to meet to discuss social and religious issues which concerned women. It gained a following of 12 women at one time and its emphasis was on friendship and fellowship (read: sisterhood) among women. Among the subjects for discussion at meetings were green issues, feminism, mysticism and medieval women and religion. Clearly the break with a "core" group whose intentions and methods are close to dominant religious institutions is necessary where the group's defined intentions and methods are not shared by a minority of members. This can work either way when the group displays what its members perceive to be either inadequate or excessive radicalism. Either way the aggrieved party feels the need to break away to form another group which fulfils her needs and those who share her convictions. 27% of Christian feminists who had left groups did so on account of its radicalism. Of this percentage 21% left groups because they experienced them as "too radical", or that there was "not enough Bible study", or the group was "dismissive of family values". The remaining 6% felt that groups were insufficiently radical in their critique of the institutionalised churches. 31% Of those who had left groups had done so because of a difference in biblical or theological interpretation. This is a large figure which illustrates the centrality of biblical analysis by Christian feminists. One third of women who left groups did so on account of biblical interpretation, and this fact demands attention. The question of the inerrancy of
Scripture is not one which can be addressed here in depth, but the fact of its centrality to Christian feminist praxis is undeniable. The above figures suggest that there is, contrary to the orientation of C.W.I.R.E.S. and Christian Feminist Newsletter, a hard core of women for whom the inerrancy of Scripture is central to their faith. It seems that they look to the Bible for role models of women which can benefit women today. The way in which Jesus behaved towards women is central to their public argument for the consideration of the position of women in their private and public relationships. This is not a fair or accurate description of all Christian feminists worldwide, but it is a fair description of many who are English! A strength of the present work arises out of its insistence on the study of the grass roots membership of religious feminist groups because their orientations differ greatly from those of well-known writers in the same field. Much of the data arising from the 1986 Questionnaire, and also from the interviews, reveals Christian feminist cosmology to be reactionary, anti-Semitic, homophobic and middle-class in its orientation: the purpose of the present work is to reveal explicit and implicit dimensions of meaning behind such beliefs and actions.

Only 9 post-church feminists out of 98 had left religious feminist groups. None of these women had joined other groups at the time of responding to the Questionnaire. None of the remaining 89 respondents declared that they had previously belonged to any other religious feminist group. Some interesting observations can be made about the fact that post-church feminists tend to stay with the same group, whereas 30% of Christian feminists had belonged to 2 or more groups at the time of research. One of the characteristics of post-church feminists was their marked tolerance of different theological outlooks and interpretations and the way in which they are happy to discuss them. Christian feminists who were later interviewed showed overwhelmingly a marked intolerance to radical theologies in which an immediate or even violent upsetting of the status quo was deemed necessary as, for example, in the liberation theologies of South America. This is a position which is not shared by many English Christian feminist writers.

Let us look at the reasons why 9 post-church feminists left Christian feminist groups. The table indicates that the major reason that post-church feminists left religious feminist groups was because of their theological conservatism (78%). Those women who enlarged on this said that they did not share with church-attending Christian feminists a belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, and that this had led to difficult relations with the group. This confirms my personal observations of Christian feminist groups. The more women hold to ideas about the inerrancy of Scripture, the more likely the group is to remain together. The formation of new, breakaway groups generally occurs by a radical element from the more conservative core group. I have no evidence to suggest that conservative groups break away from radical core groups. Only one woman (representing 11% of the 9 post-church feminists who left feminist religious groups) spoke of having "felt uncomfortable
about belonging to the group after I left the Church” and another woman spoke of “the ordination of woman was the group’s focus...the idea was alien to me”. Here are further examples of dissension from the conservative core group. These two women felt unable to remain within religious feminist groups because they felt that they no longer shared in its outlook and direction. Yet these women are in a minority because overwhelmingly 89 out of 98 post-church feminists belonged to Christian feminist groups. Clearly, post-church feminists see themselves as Christian feminists but in a qualitatively different situation to them: Christian feminists seeks to occasion change within the structure of the churches in order to redress the balance of an androcentric cosmology. Post-church feminists believe that the structures of the churches are irredeemably androcentric and that they must regrettably leave them as they no longer feel that they can properly remain in the churches. Post-church feminists feel that they can actively keep in touch with their Christian feminist friends for fellowship and action by joining in Christian feminist groups. It is in the Christian feminist group that we find dialogue between Christian feminists and post-church feminists. They seem to function by spurring each other on, the differences between them at best encouraging vital and lively dialogue. Yet Christian feminists often disagree with this, as they perceive post-church feminists as having betrayed the Christian feminist movement, for whom remaining within and changing the churches is the most important objective.

All the post-christian feminists who responded to the Questionnaire belonged to a local matriarchy group. Personal contacts and knowledge of the matriarchy network support the interpretation of the data from the Questionnaire that post-christian feminists tended to retain a constant membership of one group. This says a great deal for the consistency of the larger matriarchy network and for the relationships between women in individual groups. Why do such groups have a tendency to hold on to their membership? The answer lies in part in the nature and the structure of the groups which are essentially gynocentric and ritualistic. Christian- and post-church groups do not possess such strong bonds of uniquely feminist ritual which hold women together. Post-christian groups tend to be very introspective in the sense that the needs of the individual are considered to be important to the harmony and well-being of the whole group. This is why a woman may be appointed in ritual to observe the dynamics of the group. Post-christian feminists are very aware of their marginality in the community on the account of their lesbianism. This awareness facilitates a common bond among groups which is impossible to ignore.

The frequency of meetings of the groups which women belonged to is shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approx.</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortnightly</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Irregularly 23 5

This tells us how often and how regularly feminist religious groups meet in England. Let us begin with Christian feminists. Most Christian feminists meet monthly, although some meet more often. However, all Christian feminists are committed to a particular group which they attend regularly. Most post-church feminists meet on a monthly basis. It should be remembered that often post-church and Christian feminists do meet together in the same group. Yet a significantly higher proportion of post-church feminists (28 out of 98) met at fortnightly intervals. A further 11 met weekly (mostly with only post-church feminists) which testifies to the fact that post-church feminists are beginning to respond to their own needs for a common bond and to define their aims and objectives to the larger community to whom they remain invisible.

Post-christian feminists all claimed to meet monthly, but this is misleading as they tend to meet for monthly ritual worship. Other meetings do take place which do not contain a strong ritual content. Such meetings are for the discussion of policy, environmental issues, the nature of the Goddess or some current affairs issue, for example, and these are held either in conjunction with the Sabbat or on a separate date. Following the "closing of the cone of power" at a Sabbat (see the section about sacred action in chapter VII) there is always a period of fellowship in which several issues of importance to the community are discussed. More of this in a later chapter in a section about the form and content of meetings.

I tried to determine the sizes of groups by asking women "how many women were/are in the group". The responses are set out below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is notable that the majority of Christian feminists (135 out of 182) meet in small groups of 4-10 women. The probable reason for this is that most groups of this nature consist of women from the same denominations and have a biblical theme and small groups facilitate intimate discussions. This view was confirmed by the Christian feminists who were interviewed at a later date. The 44 women who belonged to larger groups of 11-15 members revealed that these were largely interdenominational groups whose focus was the position of women in contemporary Christianity. Post-christian feminists all belonged to groups of 11-15 members. This is hardly surprising as all of the women who were contacted with regard to responding to the Questionnaire were known to me as coven members! Covens traditionally have a membership of 13, but the figures given here must be regarded with some scepticism since I know of several matriarchy groups with only 4-10 members.
who meet for ritual worship on the Sabbat. From the three sets of data relating to the membership of groups, only the data relating to Christian- and post-church feminists can be regarded strictly as representative of national practices.

In the following question women were asked to "give an outline of the form and content of the meetings" from which I was able to construct a pattern of what took place. It was possible to broadly distinguish differences between groups of different sizes and orientations, and indeed the data relating to this question was important in formulating the typology.

Let us look at how Christian feminists meet together. Over two-thirds of Christian feminists meet monthly in small groups of 4-10 persons which may contain a post-church element. Such groups are usually composed not only of women of the same denomination, but usually from the same church too. The meetings are usually only publicised in that church and may take place, usually in the evening, at a member's home or in a church annexe. The meeting will generally commence with a short period of silence for one minute or so in which the group directs its attention inwardly to the task of the evening. In such Christian feminist groups the schedule for the evening is always decided upon in advance. A title is chosen which reflects the concern of a biblical text which is the focus of the group for that evening. Usually one woman has prepared a talk about the text which is followed by a discussion by the group. The practice with biblical texts in such groups is to perform an exegetical analysis in the talk and then to follow this up with a hermeneutical discussion in the group in which the text's apparent contemporary meaning is sought. This presupposes a belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. So the focus of this type of meeting is Bible study, and in particular the life of Jesus as the exemplary behavioural role model. The women who come to such groups tend to worship together, but the group is seen as a fellowship, not a support network, or a forum for radical protest and action against the churches.

This is in contrast to the second type of larger Christian feminist group to which less than one quarter Christian feminists belong (and a few post-church feminists). This is usually a group which is formed to meet the needs of a community (a town or a city) rather than a church. This type of group is always interdenominational, which explains why it has a larger membership. Such groups thrive on the diversity of its members' experiences, and this is reflected in the content of meetings which are generally monthly but occasionally fortnightly. The form of meetings is usually constant: there is a silence for prayer or meditation beforehand, a talk, discussion and then a time for sharing thoughts as well as food and drink. Such groups were found to be popular because they provide women with an informal support network and the chance to share different experiences of being Christians both inside and outside the churches. The subject of talks is very diverse and can range from biblical texts to mysticism, Islam and women or the matriarchy network's commitment to green
issues! The qualitative difference between this and the first group is in the latter group's commitment to wider spiritual issues. The first group is committed to the exploration of the Bible in order to find paradigms for contemporary human behaviour, whereas the second group attends to a wider spiritual quest in which every individual plays a unique part in which differences are valued.

Turning to post-church feminists, it should be noted that 89 out of 98 such women belong to small groups of 4-10 members. Of these I discovered that 7 were members of Christian feminist groups whose focus was Bible study. 82 women met in groups which were not affiliated to any denomination, nor were they interdenominational. Post-church feminists overwhelmingly tend to seek out each other's company in small groups, and it was this fact coupled with the fact that these women had left the churches that enabled me to construct the post-church typology. Post-church feminists tend to congregate in small groups of 4-10 members. There is usually a core of 3-6 women who all left the churches at the same time. Meetings are usually monthly or fortnightly and are advertised widely in bookshops, Christian Feminist Newsletter, churches and by word of mouth. Meetings invariably take place in a member's house and begin in silence. The main function of such groups is, undeniably, to provide support for women who have felt it necessary to leave the church, but as the individual members of groups have changed through the years they have begun to define their own spirituality in a way that might not have been possible within the churches. This is explored widely in later chapters, but suffice it to say here that understanding spirituality, the individual alone with her God, is the force behind the meetings. There is an explicit emphasis on the respect of other people's religious beliefs and actions so that pluralism is actively encouraged. The study of other faiths is therefore central to such groups. Only 9 out of 98 post-church feminists belonged to the second type of interdenominational Christian feminist group. This reflects a marked sense of solidarity and self-recognition among post-church feminists that they are qualitatively different to Christian feminists who remain within the churches.

The form and content of a post-christian feminist Sabbat is described in the final chapter, and it is not intended to describe it here, in order to avoid unnecessary repetition. Post-christian feminists do meet together for business and policy meetings as well as for study and fellowship.

I asked women "is/was the group sufficiently 'radical' for you and does/did it satisfy your needs as a feminist?" I put the data into three categories: yes, no and unspecified.

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<th>Christian</th>
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<th>post-christian</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>87</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall women were happy with the degree of radicalism in their groups. I had suspected a larger response from dissatisfied women because I seemed to have met so many myself on my travels around England. However, most women were clearly satisfied with the group's general orientation concerning important issues, and I had to concede to the evidence!

The final question of this section concerned the individual's sense of her group being part of a national network. I asked whether women felt that they were because I had spoken to many who felt quite isolated from the mainstream of Christian feminist praxis. This was an important factor in formulating the typology because I classified most of these women as post-church feminists. They felt that their unique contribution and worldview was not being appreciated or understood except possibly by other women in the same situation. This can be argued from the figures set out below.

Do you feel your group to be part of a national network?

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<th>Christian</th>
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<th>post-christian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I had asked this question because I had sensed that many women I had spoken to felt that they did not receive the support they felt they needed from other women, and as such did not feel themselves to have much in common with other Christian feminists. I now realise with the benefit of hindsight that I had been experiencing the needs and disappointments of these women clearly because I shared in those needs and disappointments with other women who had felt the need to leave the churches! Most Christian feminists felt that they belonged to a national network, but 14 felt that they did not. Many of these same women also expressed the fact that they were in the process of leaving the church. Almost two-thirds of post-church feminists felt satisfied that they were part of a national network. I was able to confirm this in the interviews where I established that post-church feminists firstly felt themselves to be part of the Christian feminist network which included women who remained in the churches; and secondly that they recognised themselves as an autonomous movement of Christian women who felt they must leave the churches in order to remain true to the Christian gospel. One third of post-church feminists did not feel that they were part of a national network, but many of these women had left the churches recently. It was confirmed in interviews with such women later on that women felt abandoned and very alone in the period immediately after having left the church. The feeling of inconsolation which accompanies this is very similar to the desolation experienced in a depressive illness, and indeed many post-church feminists experience breakdown before and after leaving the church. I suspect from some of the writings by this portion of post-church feminists that the majority of women were experiencing the pain and desolation of
having left the churches.

All post-christian feminists felt themselves to be part of a national network of like-minded women. The bonds of matriarchy in England are very strong indeed! Not only are women united by matriarchal magazines such as Arachne and Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Newsletter, but they are also drawn together by a strong gynocentric, separatist sense of women's ethical and moral superiority through their sense of the all-pervasive Goddess. The diffuse aspects of the Goddess enable matriarchists to experience Her in a plurality of ways, and matriarchy is tolerant of the Goddess being expressed in diffuse forms. Christian- and post-church feminists are concerned with the reform of Christian symbols as well as the inclusion of new ones based on women's experience, but mainly women in England tend to spend most of their time and energy reforming old ones! Post-christian feminists have a national, even international sense of self largely because of the flexibility of Goddess symbolism and the fact that the Goddess is seen to be manifest in all forms of life.

The fourth section of the 1986 Questionnaire, "Spirituality" was designed not so much to discover women's personal orientation towards a Supreme Being, but to trace the spiritual phenomena which characterise certain explicitly feminist religious groups. In retrospect I realise that the fourth section did not cater for the needs of the group which I ultimately called post-christian feminists because the Questionnaire was originally intended to be mainly for explicitly Christian women. However, all the women whom I called post-christian feminists responded to the fourth section, and as a result I was able to achieve my objective which was to construct a typology from the available data. From the start I understood that there were to be some problems in the presentation of such data. The Questionnaires had been sent out to established groups of explicitly feminist women. In retrospect I wish that at the time I had been more aware of post-church feminists who now meet under the umbrella of the Sea of Faith organisation which is based in Loughborough, Leicestershire, but these constituted but a handful at the time. Many of these women reject the supernaturalism of Christianity and understand religious faith as a human creation; but they insist on calling themselves "Christians" even though they have left the institutionalised churches. Such women would have been worthy of study and would have enriched the typology enormously. This point is discussed further on and in the present work's conclusion. Let us examine the fourth section which facilitated the three-fold typology of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminists.

The first question in section IV asks whether women had left any Christian denomination as a result of their feminist convictions. I knew from my contacts throughout the country that many women had taken this step and I wanted to find out how this had affected such women's image of themselves and their relationship to the world around them. I decided that it would be inappropriate to attempt to
collate such data by asking women to write a detailed account of their spirituality in their response to the Questionnaire. Yet it was from responses to this section and conversations in further interviews that it became very clear that there was a qualitative difference between the spiritual orientations of women who remained in the churches and women who left them. This will be explained more clearly in the following section which defines the typology and explains the method of approach I used in the interviews.

Have you left any Christian denomination as a direct result of your feminist convictions?

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<th>Christian</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In process</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Most post-christian feminists qualified this by saying that this was inappropriate to them because although they had been born into Christian homes they had never followed the faith.

I decided that it was necessary to classify church attenders from women who had consciously decided to leave the churches, so those who responded "no" became "Christian feminists". From those who responded "yes" I distinguished two distinct groups: "post-church feminists" who were explicitly Christian but an "exodus" community who felt that the churches were irredeemably patriarchal and as such felt compelled to express their call for reform by quitting them. The group I called "post-christian feminists" were explicit proponents for a religion for women based on the feminine nature of the Supreme Being. These were Goddess worshippers whose fascinating religious beliefs and actions are set out in detail in the following chapters. The suitability of the term "post-christian" is discussed in the next section and cannot be discussed in detail at this stage, except to say that it was chosen to reflect the subjective mood of Goddess worshippers who understand their world-view to go beyond the limitations of the patriarchal bias of Christianity. Indeed, that post-christian feminists claim that their beliefs and actions can be dated to pre-Christian times suggests that they should indeed call themselves "pre-christian"! In the next section I explain that the title "post-christian" was the name favoured by the majority of women who responded to the Questionnaire, and of those who were interviewed later.

I found that the typology which presented itself to me at that early stage contributed enormously to the originality of the subject of the thesis because at that time there was no explicit recognition of the distinctiveness of post-church beliefs and actions. It was also interesting to see that post-christian feminists understood themselves to be part of a larger spiritual feminist movement which included Christian women. My intention was to study the religious beliefs and actions of explicitly feminist and spiritual women, so I was extremely excited that the data from the Questionnaire was so diverse.
and yet revealed the existence of groups of women that had not yet been the subject of academic research in terms of a detailed phenomenological analysis of their beliefs and actions.

I was interested to note that although all the women had claimed to have left the churches, 18 out of 20 post-christian feminists felt that they had never really belonged to them in the first instance! Indeed, of the 10 women later interviewed, none had ever been to church of their own free will. Only two women responded to the question which asked when this exodus had come about. They both said that their decision had been made in their pre-teenage years. This data strongly suggests that post-christian feminists do not come to the matriarchy network from a forceful Christian background, a suggestion which was proven correct in the interviews.

Post-church feminist data shows that there has been an exodus from the churches which has taken place since 1979. It is interesting that, of 98 post-church feminists of a wide age range, their exodus should take place (at the time of collecting data for the Questionnaire) in a short period between 1979 and 1987. I feel that this factor should be regarded not simply as an exodus arising out of a vote of no-confidence in the churches, but also as a symptom of a burgeoning spirituality which was occurring among some women and non-elite men. It is no coincidence that at this time interested parties were beginning to organise themselves into groups on a local and national level, notably Christian Women's Information and Resources, based in Oxford. This was instrumental in giving substance to the movement's identity on personal, local, national and even international level. My conjecture about the burgeoning of post-church feminists at this time is that such women were able to find a forum through the network of Christian Women's Information and Resources and the new Christian Feminist Newsletter. This theory was supported in the interviews at a later date, in which all of the women I spoke to made reference to the support they experienced by belonging to a national network of women who were leaving the churches. Interestingly, there was no attempt to form a breakaway national network of women by post-church feminists, reflecting the fact that as Christians they understand themselves to be working along with Christian feminists to reform the churches. The difference between the two, according to post-church feminists, is that Christian feminists work within religious institutions and post-church feminists work from without. Yet the present study shows that this is not the only difference between the two groups, and that qualitative differences exist in their religious beliefs and actions.

I asked those women who had left the churches the following question: "If YES, was your decision based on a consideration of that denomination's attitude to women?". The results are set out in the table below. Note that the data does not refer to Christian feminists.
As only two post-christian feminists claimed to have been practising Christians at any time in their lives the question was not strictly applicable to them. But the data revealed that one half of post-church feminists left the churches as a direct result of their attitude towards women. The other half claimed that this was either mostly or partly the reason, and none thought it irrelevant. I felt that this was an extremely interesting point to research further. Many post-church feminists had included an account of their answer, and I was able to follow up these points from their clear responses during the interviews at a later date. It was apparent that the issue of women in the churches was not their only concern. Rather, this question was used as an opportunity by some women to enlarge upon the major issues which made them leave the churches. The main issues were the questions of leadership, which included the questioning of the need for any priesthood at all, the nature of ritual, the churches' "impotent" lead in pressing social issues and theological interpretation which leads to the oppression of a minority group in society. Underlying all these concerns was the desire for a paradigm shift in the symbolic order of Christianity, and by extension all the secular institutions which have arisen from it. This is discussed in detail in the following chapters.

When travelling around the country visiting women's groups I had encountered a variety of different approaches to biblical literature, and so in analysing the data which arose out of the question, "How do you approach biblical literature which has been called misogynistic?" I was particularly interested to discover whether there existed approaches which were common to each of the three groups I had distinguished. The responses to this question were important in defining a typology because overall, they revealed three distinct worldviews. Importantly, I was able to distinguish a marked difference in attitude towards biblical literature between women who had left the churches and women who remained in them. This is discussed in detail under the sub-heading "sacred word" in the final chapter. The length of women's responses to the question varied considerably, ranging from one sentence to two sides of A4, and so it is not possible to provide data in the form of a chart. Rather, I will discuss the data and will state my conclusions about it.

I looked first of all at the data which arose out of the question at the beginning of the present section. This asked "Have you left any Christian denomination as a direct result of your feminist convictions?" The arising typology has been discussed in previous paragraphs. I then looked at
these groups and then at the data arising from the question presently being discussed, "How do you approach biblical literature which has been called misogynistic?" The results vindicated the use of the typology, yielding interesting and even unexpected data.

Post-christian feminists felt overwhelmingly (18 our of 20) that this question was irrelevant, and many elaborated on this point by stating that as the Bible was a product of a masculinist or androcentric society and "did not reflect the experiences of real women, whatever pronouncements were made about women could not be taken seriously". For another woman "the notion of texte [sic] is abhorrent [to her]...but some snippets get through the tough masculinist web of horror stories...Mary in her creator aspect, for instance, seems to have slipped through". Many women wrote the comment "I ignore it!" in addition to other more aggressive ones. "I would like to castrate those bastards in the early church for stunting the growth of a religion which, in its earliest formulation, had the potential for including women". The correlative feature of post-christian feminists' attitude towards biblical literature is its general irrelevance to their perceived needs of women. Post-church feminists recognise the historical interpretations which have been placed upon the Bible, but unlike Christian- and post-church feminists they do not formulate their own theological orientation of it. Rather, the Bible apparently has no significance in post-church cosmology, except as a "symbol of the control that men have exercised over women and the universe for thousands of years".

I had expected varied forms of approached to biblical literature from Christian feminists because of the very different theological interpretations of different writers on feminism and spirituality, but overwhelmingly the responses to this question took either of two forms. About one third said that they would regard texts which denigrated women as interpolation, and as such did not belong in work which was the work of God through human beings. A further third left this question blank, a sure testimony to the complex and problematic nature of theology. It was unclear from the rest of the responses whether these women understood the Bible to be the revealed work of God, but such women took a philosophical approach to the problem and adopted a situational approach. Such women showed a concern for the patriarchal bias of Christianity in a way which was not manifest by the first group who were explicit about their understanding of God’s role in the Bible, and were anxious to air and explore its source and nature.

Conversely, post-church feminists appeared to reject out of hand apparently misogynistic literature in the Bible. A fact which was later uncovered in the interviews is that most post-church feminists understand the Bible to be the product of human creation, a phenomenon which demonstrates the great differences between this group and Christian feminists. Women included comments like, "Oh, not this one again! Haven’t we learned anything from the past?" and "The answer is simple:
we say NO! we won’t take this any more”. In later interviews post-church feminists revealed that they wanted to get away from the Women’s Movement’s obsession with analysing the symptoms of the effects of androcentrism. They recognised the onset of a new stage in which women were the authors of their own spirituality, and as such they recognised that women should be creating their own symbolic order, which includes the possibility of new myths, symbols and role models.

The next question concerned just this. I asked, “Do you regard any biblical women as role models? Who are they?” The responses, set out for clarity on the following page, demonstrate the interesting concerns and differences between the three groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>*Group I</th>
<th>*Group II</th>
<th>*Group III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jael</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Magdalene</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrophoenecian woman</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary as creator</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary as Jesus’ mother</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women at the tomb</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in Paul’s letters</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susannah and Joanna</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canaanite woman</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman with haemorrhage</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary who anointed Jesus</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Group I = Christian feminists  Group II = post-church feminists  Group III = post-christian feminists.
The objective of this question was initially to try to discover the relevance of female biblical models for contemporary women. Yet it is possible to use the data to show the existence of qualitative differences between Christian and post-church feminists in their choice of role models. It is intended in the following paragraphs to interpret only the data which demonstrate significant differences in orientation between the groups.

It is evident from the data that post-christian feminists do not regard the Bible as a fruitful source for positive images of womanhood. And yet 14 out of 20 women specifically mentioned Mary the mother of Jesus in her aspect as creator. 12 women mentioned Eve, and it was apparent from the responses (and confirmed in later interviews) that post-christian feminists understand the Bible to contain fragmented evidence of matriarchal religion. As one woman stated:

> The Bible reveals fragments of the Goddess religion which could not be entirely suppressed. This can be seen in a few sections which are recorded myths. Where there are no positive images of living women, there is evidence of the feminine principles (ruach, elohim)...the feminine spirit is a screaming wind rushing through the pages of the Old and New Testaments.

It is interesting that post-christian feminists did not show an interest in the existence of actual women, either living or dead, as role models. They were spurred on by their understanding of a cosmic Feminine Principle which was understood to be evident in all things. This is discussed in the following chapter in detail.

Let us turn to a comparison of Christian and post-church biblical role models. It was an interesting fact that Christian feminists tended to choose women from the Old and New Testaments, because the interviews I was struck by the anti-Semitism of many Christian feminists. I understand that this arises from the fact that many Christians see the life of Jesus as the fulfilment of God’s plan for humanity, and as such they view the Jews as deviants from this plan. Further, it is common for Christians to view the Jews as responsible for the execution of Jesus. I noted from conversations at a later date that many Christians do not understand themselves to share a religious heritage with Jewish people. Anti-Semitism does play a part in Christian feminist cosmology, but it is not universal. I explored this in interviews with post-church feminists whom I found to be infinitely more critically aware of this tendency.

It is clear from the data presented above that biblical women feature more in Christian feminist than in post-church imagination. Christian feminists attend more Bible study classes than post-church feminists, but it is not possible to say from the data whether Christian feminists find role models in
the Bible because they have a deeper interest in and knowledge of Scripture. I know, however, that
during the period of interviews, post-church feminists experienced no problems in rejecting biblical
passages which showed a marked tendency towards the negative portrayal of women.

Eve was referred to by 39 Christian feminists, but also by a proportionally higher number of 45
post-church feminists. Why should this be? Eve occurs in post-church cosmology as a character
who thinks for herself, disobeys the prevailing symbolic order, and as such becomes a victim of
patriarchy. Post-church feminists regard the account of the creation of man and woman and their
expulsion from the Garden of Eden as a mythic or paradigmatic account of the advent of patriarchy
and its negative effects upon men and women. From the interviews with Christian feminists at a
later stage in the fieldwork there appeared to be confusion about the exegetical and hermeneutical
meaning of the story, and furthermore, little comprehension about the nature of myth in the Bible.

Mary Magdalene was named by 115 Christian and 31 post-church feminists as a significant role
model. Both groups often commented that historical interpretations of her had been unfavourable,
but that there was never any evidence that she was the reformed "fallen woman" of Luke 7. I think
that this accounts for her popularity, for her story is a paradigm of the misogyny of hermeneutical
interpretation through history!

There was much post-church sympathy with Martha, (Luke 10, John 11), for Jesus claimed that her
sister Mary had "chosen the better portion" by sitting at his feet while Martha busied herself in the
kitchen. The post-church consensus was summed up by the following statement:

I've always felt sorry for Martha as she slaves away doing her bit. It's like
having your in-laws for Sunday lunch: you're slaving away in the kitchen so
that everything's on time and nobody moans at you, and your husband's sitting
on his backside in the sitting room shouting for you to come in and relax! You
can't win either way!

On the whole, Christian feminists tend not to support views which go against the words of Jesus in
Scripture. They tended to support those women who are portrayed as showing great faith, service or
loyalty such as Esther, Hannah (1 Samuel 2), the Syrophoenecian woman of Mark 7, Naomi, Lydia
(Acts 19), Phoebe (Romans 16), Susannah and Joanna (Luke 8), the Canaanite woman of Matthew
15, the haemorrhaging woman of Matthew 9 and Mary who anointed Jesus (John 12). Post-church
women referred most often to women who did working service, notably in Paul's epistles, but also to
those women who had shown great faith and were healed by Jesus, or who had asked him to heal a
relative.
Only two Christian feminists mentioned Mary the mother of Jesus in her aspect as creator (some referred to "creatrix") whereas a significantly higher portion of 10 post-church feminists and 14 post-christian feminists made reference to this. It would seem that the creatrix plays an important part in post-church cosmology, and indeed the Supreme Being contains both male and female divine principles. This is discussed in detail in the following chapter. 19 Christian feminists and no post-church feminists said that the mother of Jesus was a significant role model for them. One Christian feminist commented that there was little mentioned in Scripture to form "other than a cursory sketch of this elusive woman".

Once again, a proportionally higher number of post-church feminists considered the fact that women were the first to witness the resurrection of Jesus as important. 17 Christian feminists and 19 post-church feminists referred to the women at the tomb as recorded in Mark 16. I believe that post-church feminists value this passage because it shows that women have played a significant role in the historical facts which undergird Christianity.

How is it possible to sum up the three groups' responses to the present question? Clearly post-christian feminists look to the Bible with the intention of recovering evidence of a pre-patriarchal religion and not for strong images of real women! From the interviews and at a later stage it became apparent to me that Christian feminists look very carefully to the Bible as Scripture in order to discern images of women which are appropriate for them today. Implicit in this search is the understanding that Scripture bears hermeneutical relevance which somehow conveys its meaning to the reader. In contrast, post-church feminists, who regard the contents of the Bible as either subject to historical, contextual whim, or even merely as the creation of human beings, will look to the Bible for positive images of women, but they will not, unlike many Christian feminists, try to find a positive meaning for passages which they perceive to be misogynistic. The difference between this group of women and Christian feminists is that Christian feminists tend to look to women in Scripture as instructive and didactic, and as such they must examine the meaning of passages which appear to denigrate women. Post-church feminists, by rejecting the notion of "Scripture", have more freedom to be selective and critical about biblical passages.

The final section of the Questionnaire was intended to investigate the nature of "post-Christianity", a concept that was occurring with increasing frequency in feminist magazines and newsletters. In the Spring issue of Christian Feminist Newsletter 1985 an article was published that asked women to write to give their ideas about the nature of post-Christianity. A selection of letters but no article was ever published, so I took it upon myself to discover women's interpretations of this phenomenon. I had first encountered this phrase in the 1975 edition of Mary Daly's book The Church and the Second Sex and New Postchristian Introduction (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).
Daly uses the phrase to apply to women who have rejected Christianity so totally because it does not have any relevance for them. But I was aware that originally the term had, for Daly, a much wider application than this narrow interpretation!

What is a creative effort to develop a theological anthropology which will study the dynamics of human personality and social relations from a radically evolutionary point of view? Within this context there needs to be developed a theology of the man-woman religion which rejects as alienating to both sexes the idea of a sexual hierarchy founded upon "nature" and defined once and for all. This much-needed theology will recognize that the relationship between the sexes evolves, that its forms must change accordingly to the conditions of diverse historical epochs, and accordingly to individual differences...Within the Church itself, the exclusion of women from the hierarchy, and until very recent years, from access to theological education has perpetuated an atmosphere in which theologians - all male - felt no pressure to give serious attention to the other sex. [pp.189-90]

Daly, as many know, eventually came to reject Christianity so totally, and no longer sees relevance in the Judaico-Christian tradition for women. Yet Daly, to date, has not claimed a wholehearted allegiance to the Matriarchy Network in the same way as some of her sisters in the United Kingdom who are proud to call themselves "post-christian feminists".

Broadly, English feminists interpret the term to mean "going beyond Christianity" in a more positive sense than Daly's because this does not mean that aspects of the Judaico-Christian experience are irrelevant for women! In the present study I use the term "post-christian" [sic] to refer to women who have come to the matriarchy network in England mainly through their feminist experience. Of the ten women interviewed after interpreting the data supplied to me in the Questionnaire nine suggested that they would like to be referred to as post-christian feminists because that showed their relatedness to the other two groups of women. I felt that this expression of solidarity with other groups showed a generous spirit. In retrospect I feel that I should have called these women "pre-christian" feminists because they make the explicit claim that they are following a tradition which was interrupted by the Judaico-Christian tradition! Let us now look at how I came to define the term "post christian" as it is used in the present work.

In the first question of the section I asked, "Have you encountered the term 'Post-Christian' in your association with feminist religious groups?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>53</th>
<th>post-church</th>
<th>86</th>
<th>post-christian</th>
<th>17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NO (or unspecified)</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting that Christian feminists were largely unaware of the term post-Christian, whereas
only 12 post-church feminists had not heard it! The reasons for this are apparent in the responses to
the second question, "Please elaborate on the context/s in which you understand it". It was
interesting that the term is understood in different contexts by some women, as is shown by the data
below. It is the popular use of the word in this country to mean a rejection of Christianity and
espousal of matriarchy, which I shall use to justify the use of the term in the present work. This
usage is a radical departure from its narrow use by Daly which calls for the rejection of religious
forms themselves.

Please elaborate on the context/s in which you understand it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group I</th>
<th>Group II</th>
<th>Group III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Mary Daly</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection of Christianity</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rej. of Xity for matriarchy</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilment of Christianity</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving church but staying a Christian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group I = Christian feminists Group II = post-church feminists Group III = post-christian feminists.

Clearly all three groups of women understand differing contextual meanings, but what is interesting
is that most women agree that quintessential post-christianity is the denial or rejection of Christianity
and the embracing of matriarchal values. I have used these figures to justify the name of the third
group of women studied. I have read the works of Mary Daly which are cited in the Bibliography
and find her prognosis for the future of spirituality very dismal, for she does not envisage a place for
men in her view of the world. So I took much pleasure in taking her advice by reappropriating (as
she herself suggests!) the term "post-christian" for myself and other feminists in England who
recognise its other creative contexts! The reasons for the choice of "post-christian" as a name for
the third group studied was explained in an earlier section. It came from the women themselves
because they wanted to show their relationship to other spiritual feminist groups.

Next, I asked "Would you call yourself 'post-Christian'? None of the 182 women who had
remained within the churches said that they would, and neither would 4 out of 98 women who had
left the churches. But 16 out of the 20 members of the matriarchy network said yes, they would say
that this described them very well. And so it is in this way that post-christian feminists acquired
their title. In the conclusion of the present work I discuss the efficacy of the term, and some of the
possible alternatives that I might have used to call them had the focus of this work not included two
other groups. I felt that what was needed were three terms which showed the common root of all
groups.
109

In the final question of the 1986 Questionnaire I asked the respondents to “Please name the feminist writers on spirituality which you have found to be the most inspiring?” Once again I was trying to establish the existence of tangible differences between the three groups by comparing their choices of reading. There exist clear differences in the choice and orientation of reading matter between the three groups, as can be seen from the tables below:

**Christian feminists’ choice**

*Linda Badham  
Leonie Caldecott  
Denise Carmody  
Sheila Collins  
Mary Daly  
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza  
*Monica Furlong  
*Daphne Hampson  
*Margaret Hebblethwaite  
*Pat Holden  
Marianne Katoppo  
*Sara Maitland  
*Janet Morley  
Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel  
*Julia Neuberger  
Rosemary Radford Ruether  
Mary Jo Weaver  
*Angela West

It is encouraging to see that one half of the writers who are regarded as inspiring are English, indicating that Christian feminists have begun to form their own traditions which are qualitatively different from those of their sisters in the United States who are widely regarded as leaders in the Christian feminist movement. English writers are indicated thus*. I have included Sara Maitland in this list because she has lived in England for most of her adult life: but she claims her Scottish nationality fervently! Christian feminists clearly read books by fellow feminists who remain in the churches, (with the notable exception of Mary Daly, a former Catholic) even though such writers can be scathing about the institutions (such as Angela West and Sara Maitland)! Daly, Ruether and Mary Jo Weaver have visited the United Kingdom in the last decade, and have achieved popularity here. Christian feminists favour literature which is firmly rooted in the traditions of the Bible or theology. Most of this literature comes from the United States and German scholars such as Carmody, Fiorenza and Ruether.

**post-church feminists’ choice**

Sally Binford  
Elizabeth Cady Stanton  
Leonie Caldecott
Although only 98 post-church feminists compared to 182 Christian feminists responded to this question, the list from post-church feminists was much longer and showed a broader interest in issues such as ecology (Charlene Spretnak), psychology (Carol Christ, Naomi Goldenberg), the Women's Movement in a cross-cultural perspective (Marianne Katoppo), matriarchy (Carol Ochs, Christine Downing, Monica Sjöö), the study of women in history and religion (Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Rita Gross, Ursula King, Elaine Pagels, Judith Plaskow), women's spiritual experience (Mary Giles, Linda Hurcombe), the nature of God (Naomi Goldenberg, Carol Ochs) and lastly, theology (Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel).

I feel that the literature here is a very accurate sample of the concerns of post-church feminists. But it seems to indicate that Christian feminists are not so concerned with issues such as ecology or the Women's Movement in a cross-cultural perspective, and this is, in my experience, simply not true. Perhaps it is the fact that post-church feminists are in closer contact with the concerns of the mainstream Women's Movement which makes more explicit about such issues?

post-church feminists' choices

Asphodel [Pauline Long]
J.J. Bachofen
Joan Bamberger
Sally Binford
Robert Briffault
The choice of literature favoured by post-christian feminists is clearly works which are gynocentric and matriarchal, works in which the object of worship is a feminine principle and the subject is feminine too. Reflected here is the wish to recover the knowledge of the existence of matriarchal religion (Bachofen, Davis, Sjöö, Binford, Downing, Gimbutas), a woman’s history (English, Ehrenreich) and the inception of new and recovered religious actions (Kolbenschlag, Hall, Stein, Starhawk). Unlike Christian feminists, post-christian feminists utilise the literature of the United States and do not have a strong home-grown tradition of writers. Monica Sjöö lives in Wales and is Swedish, yet she is the nearest the matriarchy network has in this country to a spokeswoman. Post-christian religious beliefs and actions thrive through the Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Newsletter and the Arachne journal, which provide a forum for British post-christian feminists, most notably Pauline Long (pseudonym: Asphodel). It is in these publications that we find a wealth of evidence about matriarchal beliefs and actions found in the United Kingdom. It is a curious fact that although English post-christian feminist spirituality differs greatly in essence and manifestation from its counterpart in the United States, there exist so few accounts and investigations of it.

**Typology and scope of the respondents**

*and the method of interviews*

Having established a plenary three-fold typology of the women who responded to the 1986 Questionnaire I pursued the next objective, which was to establish a series of interviews with a selection of ten women from the three groups in order to enlarge and develop the typology further. This was achieved firstly by selecting the names of those women who had, in addition to filling in the Questionnaire, supplied additional information about themselves on separate pieces of paper. This was not a difficult task because many women had in fact done this. From these I selected ten women from each of the three groups who lived either close to Leicester or who were on the train route to
my home town of Plymouth. The reason for this was because at that time I was very short of money and could not afford to travel to the north of England! I interviewed women in Coventry, Birmingham, Bristol, Plymouth and Frenchbeer, a small hamlet near Chagford, on Dartmoor. I asked few questions, preferring the non-directive method of interviewing which enabled the interviewees themselves to reveal the explicit and implicit dimensions of the meanings behind their religious beliefs and actions. I felt that this method was in keeping with what I felt to be the finest methodological sophistication of new-style Phenomenology of Religion. It also helped to encourage women to speak freely about subjects which I might not have otherwise found out about if my interviews had been more formal and directive. This was an especially fruitful method when it came to researching the nature of the Supreme Being and the world of phenomena of the three groups of women studied. My underlying intention was to discover the relationship between the subject and object of religious beliefs and actions, the dynamics behind them, and finally, to document and analyse each group’s religious understanding of sacred space, time, community, persons, images and symbols, word and actions. This is contained in chapters IV to VII of the present work. But first it is necessary to give a clear definition of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminists which is based on the data discussed at length in the previous section. The typology set out below comes from the data supplied both in the 1986 Questionnaire and in the interviews with a selection of women which followed.

The title Christian feminist as used in the present work refers to those women who define themselves in the 1986 Questionnaire as Christians and feminists. They are members of institutionalised communions of believers where they appear to place themselves in a prophetic role as reformers. Importantly, such women feel that they must remain within the churches in order to fulfil their objectives. The objectives of Christian feminist groups were to be made explicit in the interviews which were to be conducted at a later date, but they can be summed up here as the need to create a space for women to voice a critique of the churches and to formulate their own unique experiences of God; the desire to reform the leadership of the churches which they perceive as androcentric and which exclude women; the need to reform the language of Christianity which they feel at the present time is androcentric; and the need to reform the many negative ways in which women are portrayed in Scripture. This last point refers to theology, which is an important activity to Christian feminists. In the findings of the 1986 Questionnaire I have shown that a great majority of Christian feminists believe that the Bible is a creation of God through human hands, and as such, Christian feminists go to great lengths to show how it is possible to extract a positive hermeneutical meaning from a given text, for it is understood that the Bible is constantly revealing further meanings through history. It was explained earlier that Christian feminists usually meet in groups which have a strong theological orientation, but that this did always not meet the needs of some individuals who wanted the group to take on discussions about personal issues. Furthermore, Christian feminists tend to meet in groups
of the same denomination.

I have used the title Christian feminist as an umbrella term for all those women who answered the Questionnaire and have not left a Christian church. Of course, this includes many different women such as those who take the radical step of attending the yearly Women's Mass at Blackfriar's, Oxford, in which women now hold communion, and who are vocal at a parish or even national level about women's exclusion from important Christian concerns. There are also women who do not want their voices to be heard, even in their own parish, because they explicitly do not want to divide the churches further: yet one woman believed that it was possible to effect change "by a quiet example...the still small voice". Yet these two types of women are united in a worldview in which they strive to change the churches from within. What unites them are the concerns which were described in the previous paragraph.

Christian feminists feel excluded from traditional theology and the language of faith which is used to describe human's relationship to God. They understand the core symbolism of Christianity to be androcentric and in need of more "feminine" symbols which more adequately reflect their experience of this aspect of God. Christian feminists believe that it is possible to find tangible evidence of God's femininity, and especially as mother, in parts of the Bible (such as in Revelation 12). In the interviews I pursued another understanding by Christian feminists that God is found not only in the Bible but in the unique or traditional experiences of women, most notably in motherhood. So the correlative features of the Christian feminist experience of God are found in the Bible and the life experiences of women. Christian feminists all share an understanding that God reveals her/his nature through the process of history. They feel that the churches must accept and embrace the revelations which have been made to God through women and non-elite Christian men, and in doing so, reflect this new understanding of God in the language and institutions of faith.

I wanted to discover how Christian feminists viewed themselves as religious human beings in relation to the object of religion. Christian feminists differ from other groups in that they feel able to encounter God not simply in private worship but publicly in institutionalised churches. Yet they insist that such institutions perpetuate a negative male-female dualism with a patriarchal bias which often negate the value of women's valuable insights and experiences. It was clear from the interviews that Christian feminists shared a common conviction that the churches should reflect God's intended holy order for human beings. This included an understanding that humans have been created in the image of God, a God who has both male and female aspects. If this is the case, then the churches should recognise that a fuller symbolic order should be incepted to more adequately reflect this new understanding, which includes a restructuring of the leadership of the churches and the liturgy. Christian feminists want to heal the harmful images which they feel have
been placed upon them. This does not mean the rejection of all images and symbols of womanhood (as with post-christian feminists), but demands a fresh reappraisal of their nature, function and relevance for all human beings.

To sum up, Christian feminists choose to remain within the institutionalised churches in order to reform them from within through a critique of their dualism, religious language and the leadership structures which they understand to have marginalised and discriminated against actual women throughout history. Sexism for Christian feminists is effectively a sin against God. A predominant dynamic of Christian feminism is feminist theology in which the life of the founder of Christianity forms the central paradigmatic model of the Christian attitude towards women. In the following chapters the three typologies given in the present chapter shall be discussed in further detail.

Post-church feminists have left the churches either wholly or mainly because of the churches' perceived misogyny. Here too, sexism is experienced as a sin against God, or as one woman eloquently claimed in an interview, "a transgression against and a tension with a new gnosis" [interview, n.d.]. She was referring to the post-church feminist experience of the conflicting "symbolic orders" of institutionalised Christianity and the new experiences of women and non-elite men of the symbols of a broad spiritual movement which are not expressed in public in the churches. Importantly, post-church feminists refer to the hatred of women which they understand to be implicit in the symbolic order of institutionalised Christianity, which differs from Christian feminists, who tend to refer more often to the male-centredness of Christian institutions. This distinction should be made at the outset because women who are no longer members of churches almost always hold to principles and objectives which differ greatly from women who remain in them. I learned from the interviews which I undertook at a later date that these women understand themselves to be very much a part of the secular women's movement, and as such I learned that post-church feminists tended to ally themselves with issues which Christian feminists tended not to concern themselves, for instance, the issue of pre-school nurseries for working mothers, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, women's education in Nicaragua, to name a few. Where post-church feminists disagreed with Christian feminists was in their interpretation of where they stood in the Christian feminists movement. In the interviews it became apparent that post-church feminists, who called themselves "Christian" regarded themselves in revolutionary role in relation to the churches. Post-church feminists believe that they can influence the churches from outside their walls by their radical departure. Yet many Christian feminists believed that it was not possible to effect change except from within. Indeed, many Christian feminists scorn the departure of post-church feminists (but 16 out of 182 themselves claimed that they were in the process of leaving the churches themselves!) but post-church feminists insist that their decision was a painful one, and that theirs is a lonely position. The question remains, do post-church feminists ever intend to return to the
churches? I think that my personal experience reflects the experiences of the women interviewed. None of us envisage a day when the churches will adapt to include a feminist cosmology; it is just an impossible dream. With time, post-church feminists have come to accept the benefits of our position and the freedom it gives us to define our own religious beliefs and actions. In the following chapters I show how it is possible to chart a phenomenology of post-church cosmology, showing that it is a tangible movement of spiritual women who share common religious understanding of the nature of God, human beings and religious belief and actions.

From conversations with post-church feminists in the interviews it became clear that at least one half of them regarded religious faith (and as such the idea of a transcendent Supreme Being) as a human creation. This is discussed in the following chapter. Post-church feminists recognise the existence of symbolic order in all human institutions and as such find the masculine symbols of Christianity inadequate in expressing ultimate human concerns. So it is possible to talk about post-church feminist who recognise "God" as a transcendent Ultimate Reality, and those who understand "God" as an ultimate human value system. Either way, both types find no difficulty in calling themselves "Christians" and pursuing what they understand as a Christian life with Jesus as a living paradigm of humanity. Post-church feminists frequent groups which are dominated by Christian feminists, but according to the women I interviewed at a later date, they tended not to stay for very long! There is much tension between these two groups which has the potential for action if only Christian feminists would accept post-church feminists.

Where the idea of an object of religion, a Supreme Being or God is concerned, post-church feminists feel that they cannot adequately or comfortably express their experience within Christian denominations. No post-church feminists have ever claimed that the Bible was a direct revelation by God to human beings, but its importance as an historical and inspirational work must be judged carefully by rigorously studying it in its exegetical context. Only then can its hermeneutical meaning become relevant in the context of the late twentieth century. Interestingly, many post-church feminists understand not only the Bible but religious faith itself (and as such the language of faith and the nature of God) as a human creation. Yet the same women could claim that the evidence about the life of the historical Jesus as a living incarnation of God was central to their understanding of a Supreme Being. Jesus is for them a living symbol of a "cosmic man" [sic], and the Supreme Being (God) as a living symbol also.

Post-church feminists operate on a revolutionary paradigm, unlike Christian feminists who operate on a reformist paradigm. Yet they also want to enrich Christianity through images of God which arise from human experience. They recognise the revolutionary nature of God, or God as liberator, as in the Liberation Theology, as the source of the justification for their actions. Essentially
anti-liturgical and anti-Scripture, they suspect the inflexibility of the written word. Their tradition is based on an appreciation of the medium of myth, the flexibility of symbols, born out by the fact that they revealed an impressive understanding about the strength of women’s oral traditions.

How do post-church feminists understand themselves in relation to language about God? Such women understand feminism as bringing about the transformation of personal and collective values: this allows for the inception of liberating and revolutionary ideas which effect a transformation of traditional religious and spiritual values, such as the rejection of the belief in the literal existence of God. This idea sets many post-church feminists apart from Christian feminists because such a cognition permits the inception of the idea that the source of religious and cultural values is human beings themselves. Overwhelmingly, post-church feminists do not accept the idea that a soul or a spirit or other non-physical entity can survive after the death of a body, or that communication is possible with an actual Supreme Being through prayer or any other means. Yet post-church feminists still pray and worship together, and they are explicitly Christian as the figure of Christ is for them the source of a very powerful manifestation about the truth of their existence. As one woman put it, “the modern Christian feminist has been given the potential to be mythical, and so we live in myth as we strive towards truth”. Post-church feminists accept no explanation for the universe in its present state, of for human existence, other than by rational explanation or in the language of myth which is understood in symbolic terms. They are at once explicitly revolutionaries and visionaries, holding out the greatest challenge for Christianity to meet: its understanding of the actual and symbolic position of women. The dynamic which separates post-church feminists from their Christian feminist sisters is that their actions must take place outside the walls of the institutionalised churches. One of the most interesting observations I made during the course of the interview was that post-church feminists tended more than Christian feminists to have a closer and more explicit relationship with the "secular" women’s movement, and indeed were leading the latter towards a clearer recognition of its strong spiritual impetus and roots. The critique of Christian denominations was, at all levels of post-church utterances, more critical and uncompromising than Christian feminist expression. Post-church feminists recognised themselves as an exodus community and distinct from those women who remained within the churches; yet more than Christian feminists, they perceived themselves to be in an alliance with the latter as one side of the same coin. I believe that the post-church fascination with depth psychology and the psychology of religion arises not only out of the individual’s experiences within the churches, but also out of their experience of "aloneness with God" [interview, n.d.] by virtue of not having had space to share this solitude with like-minded people. I show in the course of the thesis how the post-church experience is changing as individuals have begun to meet in groups to share their unique understanding of God and the world, and have begun to explore the similarities in their experience which have permitted me to study post-church feminists as a movement.
Post-Christian feminists no longer or have never found salvation or spiritual satisfaction in institutionalised or any other manifest forms of Christianity. In the context of this work I have reappropriated Mary Daly's term in order to give it a specific meaning which was suggested and approved by the majority of the women who were interviewed and many of those who had said in the questionnaire that they were themselves "post-Christian". As with Daly's meaning, post-Christian feminists in England find all historical manifestations of Christianity implicitly misogynistic and therefore bearing no meaning for their lives. They therefore look to another source to find their own symbols and myths. This is the living Great Goddess, the cosmic Mother of All, the female principle which is the governing principle of the universe. For such women the existence of a period of matriarchy is a reality which was overcome by the incursion of patriarchal values and a masculine-identified God which superseded the worship and values of a matrifocal deity. Post-Christian feminism is at once a reaction against patriarchal values and its masculinist ideology and an attempt to recall the spiritual values of the Great Goddess. What is interesting about the women studied in the present work is that they come to worship the Goddess through their experience of the spiritual power of feminism rather than through New Age cults or Wicca, which usually characterises Goddess worshippers in England.

Post-Christian feminists claim to recover the scarlet thread of knowledge about the Goddess through the medium of myth, whose meanings they understand to have been obscured with patriarchal processes, but through this process they are also inventing new myths which are relevant to their experience of the Goddess. Other ways in which they encounter the nature of the Goddess are through personal experience, ritual worship and the study of anthropology and archaeology. The Supreme Being is experienced as a wholly feminine principle who is found in all aspects of the living universe. She is encountered symbolically in her many "aspects" which are discussed in detail in chapter IV. Approached religiously in ritual and reverently in everyday life, post-Christian feminists understand Her to be immanent in all forms of life. From this comes a strong gynocentric ethics in which individual women's experience of feminism is central. Ecology and reverence for the earth is central to post-Christian cosmology. The Goddess is explicitly a Goddess of women and for women and as such commands an image of direct challenge and confrontation to the God of the Judaean-Christian tradition. Indeed, it often seems that post-Christian feminists present their gynofocal or gynocentric cosmology in terms of an inversion of patriarchal values in which the biological superiority of the female is used to justify the necessity of the supremacy of female values over masculine ones! It was this preoccupation with biology against the expected mythical explanations which struck me as a peculiar feature during the course of the interviews. It made it clear to me the importance of a belief in the existence of a matriarchal period for these women. They mourn the loss of apparent "matriarchal" skills which were lost with the advent of patriarchy and their attempts to recover them are a striking feature of their cosmology. These are dealt with in
The dynamics of post-christian feminist experience are characterised, as with Christian- and post-church feminists, by their response to the dualism which is perceived to have negative effects on the image of women. Where post-christian feminists differ in their ideological response to dualism (which they believe to have arisen with the advent of a male Godhead) is in their insistence upon the existence of a pre-patriarchal matriarchal period which they are trying to recreate. So the underlying dynamics of post-christian feminism are a tension with patriarchy and a nostalgia for a return to gynofocal values. Here there is no room for a consideration of the relevance of the tiniest aspect of patriarchal religion for women. The only alternative is a female-identified deity.

In the chapters which follow the summary definitions of the three groups of women given above are developed in greater contextual detail. Chapters IV and V explore the object and subject of religion, and chapter VI charts the dynamics which underlie the public and private experience of the three groups. All the following chapters are based upon the period of intensive fieldwork and interviews. The final chapter provides an account of the world of Christian-, post-church and post-christian feminist phenomena by charting the three groups' explicit meanings attached to their understanding of sacred time, space, word, persons, community and actions, and including a phenomenological investigation into some of the implicit meanings behind them.
CHAPTER IV

OBJECT OF RELIGION

Prolegomena

The challenge of incorporating a feminist Phenomenology into the Study of Religion requires, as it has been shown in the previous chapter, a very personal reappraisal of the way in which individual scholars understand women's unique experiences and perceptions of their religious beliefs and actions. The present chapter and those following attempt to show that "feminist" Phenomenology is possible, by using the example of three groups of women in England, and that its continuation and growth is vital to new-style Phenomenology of Religion's development through self-awareness and rigorous attention to the scholar's implicit and explicit intentions. The present chapter explores concepts relating to the individual's relationship with the object of religion ("God" or the "Great Goddess"), and draws out the different ways in which the Supreme Being is understood by the groups who were studied. It will show how the author's feminist orientation draws out hidden religious meanings, definitions and understandings about the Supreme Being which are held by these groups. I describe the realms in which the Supreme Being (or the object of religion) is understood by such women to inhabit, and list, where appropriate, distinctive aspects of women's religious understanding. The central emphasis of the present work is on the religious beliefs and actions of religious human beings, and so the present chapter is an attempt to meet the challenge of charting women's individual and collective understandings about the nature of the Supreme Being.

Paul Tillich regards a "sacred" phenomenon as one which "is a bearer of unconditional meaning" and a "secular" one as "one that does not give expression to the unconditional meaning". This "unconditional meaning" is, characteristically, ineffable, and so it defies analysis. Further, he regards the tension between the secular and the sacred spheres as pervations into "reality". The question that requires urgent consideration here is, "whose reality" is this? The method in this work

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challenges "unconditional meaning" by claiming that women have been denied the means to express their understanding of it. So "unconditional meaning" remains tied to cultural, androcentric forms.

The Holy breaks through the immediate form of the existent; it possesses ecstatic qualities. Every holy reality (sein) is an ecstatic reality, that is, one that bursts through its immediately given formation; it has an inner transcendence reaching beyond its formal, cultural givenness...It holds in the objective sphere of every symbol of the divine, whether it be the personal God abiding upon his depths, or the horrifying figures of the Gods of India.

Deities in the classical sense cannot be born of tales whose significance is personal, because the setting of such tales is necessarily a genre picture, a local, temporal, human environment, no matter how distorted and disguised. 3

One of the greatest problems facing the feminist student of religion whose interests are contemporary feminist religious phenomena is that there is a great temptation to follow a reductionist mode which suggests that the understanding of feminist religious expression is dependent upon an understanding of the nature of patriarchal religion. This statement may contain some truth, but it is more realistic to approach phenomena with the broader understanding that the sacred is portrayed through a variety of symbols, images and concepts. It is not the intention of this study to effect a reduction of religion to an exploration of origins. This method has already been sufficiently exploited by the "matriarchal" school. Suffice it to say that others have shown that patriarchal religion has given the social legitimation of the domination of men over women in all areas of life.

In the Introduction to Arvind Sharma's book Women in World Religions, 4 it is argued that "patriarchal religions are predicated on a stress syndrome" in which "there is a correlation of [interrelated] stress points: historical, psychological, sociological and biological". The stress, it is argued, arises from "the asymmetry created by women's biology in itself [and] creates a situation of stress for men [which in turn] makes men want to redress this balance, which leads to an insistence on symbolic male dominance". This remains conjecture, but what is irrefutable are the enormous changes that are taking place in society that directly affect the relationships between the sexes in religious, political and personal dimensions of life. There is the added complication of the secularisation of contemporary life which creates complex religious developments. One of the ways in which it is possible to retain a methodological sophistication in a phenomenological study of

2Ibid., 82-3.
feminist religious expression, and particularly where the object of religion is concerned, is by the application of the controlling formal interests which recognises that the sacred is best understood as being manifest in two dimensions: the personal-subcultural and the institutional. These forms can occur simultaneously, as in the case of Christian Feminists who experience the sacred through symbolic action on an institutional level and also through the revelation of images which were not institutionally acceptable; and yet such images and symbols of the sacred were often shared by other women in the same group, and so it became possible to speak of a common religious experience in terms of the subcultural milieu.

A feminist phenomenology must maintain its interdependence with other methods in the Study of Religion, including the Sociology, Philosophy and Psychology of Religions and Anthropology. Interdependence is essential in order to establish the broadest research into religious phenomena: it is not the task of the phenomenologist to explain the causes of religious phenomena, but rather to interpret their meaning, although paradoxically the phenomenologist is an historian par excellence for s/he works with historical facts whose interpretation conveys much more than these facts alone. In its phenomenological approach, the following pages of this work will attempt to take the images and symbols used by the subjects themselves to convey the object of religion. By phenomenological analysis it is hoped that this study will arrive at a new perspective of phenomena that have until now been regarded as marginal to academic concerns. Thirty respondents, or ten from each of the groups outlined in chapter III, were interviewed about their understanding of the Supreme Being. One notable fact was the diversity of the symbolic content of the images and symbols which were used to convey women’s experiences. But these symbols occurred again and again within all of the three groups, as we shall see in the following studies.

**Christian feminists**

Christian feminists, or those feminist women who have chosen to remain within the dominant religious institutions of Christianity, do so because they believe that they have a task to reform those institutions by pursuing a theological method which arises from the understanding that Christian institutions do not support the liberation of women. There is a sense of exclusion in three main areas which was very marked in the interviews in which women were engaged in conversation about their understanding of Supreme Being. Women felt excluded primarily by much traditional theology. They felt that underlining all traditional theology was a dualism of the Supreme Being and humans which was based on a traditional understanding of Christian marriage where a woman is subject to her husband. Secondly, there was a feeling of exclusion arising from an uncomfortable
feeling about the language of faith; interestingly, women interviewed tended to evade references about the language associated with the Supreme Being. Finally, there was a marked sense of women's exclusion from the sacerdotal ministries expressed by all the women interviewed. It was only by approaching the idea of the Supreme Being through these three channels in the interviews that it was possible to extract the religious idea and meaning of God for these women.

A possible reason for the difficulty of Christian Feminists to talk about God's nature is that it embraces so much of the core symbolism of Christian institutions which have gone unchallenged for centuries. In conversation during the interviews, Christian Feminists often expressed bewilderment or irritation that they were being asked to talk about a God which they felt could be recognised by any Christian.

KJOR How does your understanding of "God" differ from a non-feminist Christian's?

REPLY It's the same God.

KJOR I am trying to discover whether you as a feminist and a Christian feel that your particular understanding of God actually increases traditional understanding of Him?

REPLY Him! You call God Him?! ... Of course feminist theology increases understanding of God. It exposes the error that you have just made - the error of assuming that God is male. I understand God not just to be my Father but my Mother.

KJOR So you would use the language of androgyny to describe God.

REPLY Yes.

[23/3/88]

Essentially, post-christian and post-church feminists operate upon a revolutionary paradigm because they utilise their experience as the basis for the establishing of new traditions: Christian feminists, being reformist, tend to use their understanding as a basis for explaining tradition and experience, although often the women interviewed were ambivalent about this! This accounts for the plethora of theological practice in Christian Feminist groups throughout England. This is very Scripture oriented. In the groups observed there was little or no questioning about the divine origin of these works; it was accepted as Divine Origin. Women in these groups tended not to agree about the efficacy of language in understanding God. Some felt that until God could be addressed as "she", the dominant institutions could not hope to recognise the full personhood of women. Others felt the question of language in feminist theology to be immaterial, even a hindrance to the theological enterprise. All the women in this group were united in their opposition to the "radical", "pagan",
paradigm models for the object of religion purported by post-christian feminists and some post-church feminists. In a heated exchange in one Bristol group one (post-church) feminist accused a Christian feminist of

    crass theological imperialism...Who are you to talk about the superiority of your God over secular or religious cultures?! If you women in the churches could see the connection between your acceptance of the traditional symbols of your faith and the violence of the superiority which characterises Christianity, you would be better placed to judge the violation which some of us have had to endure at the hands of your Biblical God.

[28/4/88]

It is clear from this last statement that there is often much tension between the Christian feminist and post-church feminist sectors. And yet by looking at the way in which the object of religion is experienced in both groups, many similarities may be remarked upon. A phenomenological evaluation of the beliefs of one Christian feminist, Sara Maitland, demonstrates this clearly. It is possible to speak about three aspects of the Supreme Being: Its "feminine" aspect, its "creatrix" aspect, and its "wisdom" aspect.

In her book, *A Map of the New Country*, Sara Maitland asks

    So what, when it comes right down to it, is all this clamour, chaos, disruption and fuss really about? The answer is immense and simple:

So for Maitland, part of the problem is the image of God. Yet she shies away, as did most Christian Feminist women interviewed, from speaking directly about God.

    It is not easy to talk about God; it is both too enormous and too private. Moreover, I personally do not feel myself so well acquainted with God that I can speak with authority.

Maitland reflects the feeling of other women interviewed that experience of Supreme Being is intimate. Other women stressed that God is reflected in the community of believers, but that this was not mirrored in the present institutions.

In the interviews, Christian feminists spoke with enthusiasm about the Holy Spirit aspect of the Trinity, which many of them identified with Wisdom/Sophia. Others made the connection between Wisdom and the Semitic Shekinah ("divine Presence"); but all stressed that traditionally, this has been a feminine image or aspect of God. Maitland argues that this is the only sustained feminine image of God in the Christian Bible. Writing to a Christian feminist friend in Plymouth in July
1988 about the three sustained images of God mentioned by Christian feminists (feminine, creatrix and Wisdom) which have been correlated in this work, she replied, excitedly, that she had found a passage in the Bible where the creatrix and Wisdom aspects of God were united, and which showed that God had a "playful side to Her [sic] nature".

Then I was at his side each day
His darling and delight;
Playing in his presence continually,
Playing on the earth when it was made.

Proverbs 8:30-31, R.S.V.

Maitland also uses the image of play to talk about God:

it is worth remembering, as those with a good relationship with children know, that it is not always that God plays (as adult) with us (as children). God can reverse the game and be a child to our adult...or an equal, a lover - as the moves and rhythms of the game demand...This playfulness...women seem ready both to explore it and offer it to the world.

Christian feminists, like post-church and post-christian feminists, seem to be trying to establish the recognition of the feminine in the Supreme Being. Acutely aware of the precariousness of their position in terms of their relationships with institutionalised Churches, they have become so preoccupied with the way in which their original appropriation of language has been used in charges against them, namely that they are trying to replace God with a matriarchal Supreme Being. This was reflected very much by a great hesitancy for women to be interviewed because, as a few women said, they were concerned that the language they used about God would be used to represent them as Goddess-worshippers by adversaries within the Christian denominations. There was another problem associated with talking to many (and not just Christian feminist) women. This was the problem about talking about "God" at all, which was for many women an intensely personal experience. For many women this was further hindered by "not being able to find the right words" or "not having any theological experience or training". Often, Christian feminists understood their lack of theological sophistication to be a hindrance to me in the course of my research. They felt that they ought to be able to present their cosmology to me as a neatly wrapped package, hermetically sealed and complete in itself. It was difficult for me to explain to many Christian feminists that it was precisely this sort of "homogenous" portrayal of beliefs and actions that I wanted to avoid. I wanted to explore the inherent contradictions and apparent conflicts in world-view between individuals and

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6 Ibid., 185.
7 Ibid., 187.
groups! I felt constrained by the attitude which was often manifest to me by Christian feminists in which they would often try to disguise the many conflicts of ideas and ideology which made the Christian feminist movement rich and diverse, in the interests of preserving unity among members. This was coupled with the fact that many Christian feminists were genuinely disinterested in talking about the nature of "god"; they were infinitely more preoccupied with more immediate questions such as the nature of the role of women in Christianity rather than with the nature of the deity!

Post-church feminists

The correlative feature of post-church feminists is that they are unable to find an adequate expression of their experience of the Supreme Being in institutionalised Christianity. These women have therefore abandoned the churches and have seen their role as "prophetic": theirs is a message of reform to the institutions. They do not, on the whole, form themselves into fellowship or communicant groups, but rather view themselves as part of the larger "secular" Women's Movement. The group's apparent "invisibility" makes studying it problematic. Most of the women interviewed for this study were already close personal contacts: an informed speculation would suggest that in fact this group was the largest of all, since these contacts have communicated with other women who have in turn expressed their joy that at last some research was being done about what one woman termed "our silent majority". [Interview, 12/6/86]

I have been careful in the present work to avoid giving way to the temptation to present groups of women's religious beliefs and actions as homogenous. In the case of the nature of the Supreme Being in post-church cosmology, so many similarities exist between this group that it is impossible to avoid presenting them as uniform. Yet the post-church community, which one woman summed up as "not so much a movement as a network of individuals whose common bond is their exodus from the churches", consists broadly of two camps of members holding two very different ideas about the origin and metamorphosis of a Supreme Being. This requires some analysis and a deeper investigation into post-church beliefs. In the following paragraphs, I have used the words of individual post-church feminists and my own words (indicated by no speech marks) where they are able to more lucidly convey the meanings of the women interviewed.

The difference between the two groups of women's religious beliefs about the object of religion can be summed up in their belief in the existence of or nonexistence of a non-physical being which exists outside anything in the known world. Both groups still speak about "God", but for the latter group (known as group [b] , this entails an understanding of the very idea of God as a symbolic construct
and not as a Being who acts independently of the empirical world. There is much uncertainty in the former group \([a]\) as to the precise actions and involvement of the Supreme Being in the world, but what is interesting is their belief in the possibility of a supernatural being which involves itself in the world in which we find ourselves. Women whom I classified as belonging to group \([a]\) showed a tendency to concern themselves with questions about the origin of the universe by a deity. Group \([b]\) tended not to look for explanations for the creation of the universe other than by reputable scientific laws and processes. For \([b]\) God is a human construct and does not exist in a realist way as either a personal being or as the ground of being. This is in conflict with \([a]\), who understand parts of the Bible to have been inspired directly by a Supreme Being who exists independently of the known universe, and for whom God is both personal and the ground of being. For such women there is a literal meaning in the phrase "the divinity of Jesus". For \([b]\) the statement refers, as one woman put it, to "be the body of Christ, to promote a sense of community in love".

In neither group is there entertained any notion of heaven or hell or divine reward or punishment. Although there is a degree of uncertainty among some women in group \([a]\), for most post-church feminists the Bible is overwhelmingly understood as the work of human beings and in parts, extraordinarily inspired. Both groups agree that there can be no physical survival in any form outside the body. Lastly, and importantly, both groups agree that all forms of religion are created by human beings. This is the freedom of humankind being exercised fully and creatively.

Post-church feminists claimed to find the Supreme Being in the Bible, in other religious traditions and in personal experience (e.g. motherhood, oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, relations with the environment). All the women interviewed were unsure or uncertain that they could claim the Bible to be the direct source of God's revelation to human beings because of its "implicit misogyny and gynophobia" [Interview, 15/5/87]. However, all claimed that they experienced the historical person of Jesus as "cosmic humanness", "the Ultimate Human" or "divinity in human form". The difference in perception of Jesus between the two groups is summed up in their understanding of the reality of the Supreme Being as a non-physical entity who can be communicated with via prayer or any other means. Jesus' "androgyny", and especially his apparent "feminine" qualities were stressed by all the women interviewed as an aspect of his Ultimate (symbolic or actual) Being: so therefore God is understood to consist of male and female aspects. One woman said,

The churches have had a big problem where the image of God and the role of women are concerned. The ecclesia is always talked about in feminine terms in a loving union with God, but this is tempered by the fact that male-female relationships in this world are seen as a partnership where the woman is subject to the man. The churches make things even more difficult for themselves...when they talk about the feminine aspect at work in creation: Wisdom. Femininity is problematic to them. You can almost smell the fear when you eventually pin them down to a dialogue about Jesus' androgynous nature. Any sane person who has an interest in theology
cannot fail to see the human hand in the Bible. Tradition has proved this. Just look at the mess the churches are in. Those of us who realise the androgyny of God are heretical in this age, but let’s look to the future when we will be heralded as prophets! We are not just talking about changing language, as we have been accused of doing. We want to change the very fabric of this ghastly, dehumanising institution. Even so, this isn’t enough for me. I want to see change now otherwise I can never return to it.

[Interview, 27/2/86]

Another theme of relating to God was not so much by recognising the Supreme Being’s androgynous qualities as by responding to God as mother. One woman said,

I used to relate to God mostly as Father, but gradually when I learned for myself what it meant to be a woman, when I learned to nurture myself and deal with my feelings of dependence and the “child” within me, I found the title of Father inappropriate. Relating to God as Mother certainly casts new light on the quality and nature of the relationship. It takes me away from the patriarchal pyramid with the father at the top, then the priests, then the laity with women at the bottom. That’s not true! Right at the bottom there are those people outside the churches. They are nowhere!

[Interview, 16/4/88]

The vehicle of God as mother was, interestingly, deemed inappropriate for one woman, and she referred to what for her were more appropriate symbolic expressions of her relationship with God:

I have some difficulties with God as mother. I know that it is a powerful political way of giving value to the feminine, but I still feel that it leaves me projecting an Almighty human-shaped Being! How can I tell you about the words which more usefully convey my relationship to God and the nature of God? [pause] I think about God in terms of process, flow and truth. This isn’t unusual, even in the churches, but for my money it brings a greater meaning to my life when it takes place in the context of outside the churches because it demands a real commitment and a shift of the models by which we live.

Within the universe everything is change. Life is change. All thoughts and feelings come and go, things are born and things inevitably die. This flow of creative energy is God. The quest for me now, outside the churches, is how to take my place in this process, how to allow this flow, because our usual reaction is to stop change and hold on to things how they are. Growth and change for so many people are so painful.

[Interview, 13/5/87]

Very few post-church women expressed a desire to return to a reformed church: but none saw any chance of tangible change in the institutions because the image of God in the institutions was implicitly androcentric. The question therefore arises; how do post-church feminists acquire knowledge of the object of religion in the Bible? The answer is to be found in the knotty area of
hermeneutics. Post-church feminists often stressed in the interviews their understanding of the revelation of God in history. This implies that knowledge of the nature of God is gradually revealed through time, and that in the twentieth century, Christians have the experience of two millennia of divine revelation. Some women also spoke of there being two strands (or "threads") of revelation of God's nature emanating from the Bible. The first, "priestly" tradition is that which resulted in institutionalised forms of Christianity where "the original cultic acts are preserved, where the essence of beliefs become preserved, sometimes beyond recognition" [Interview, 28/2/87]. The second strand is the "prophetic" tradition, which spans the Old and New Testaments.

Given that post-church feminists understand the revelation of the nature of the Supreme Being partly (although not completely) through institutionalised churches, their critique of this understanding reveals the prophetic zeal of their own exegetical interpretation. Such women view themselves in a "special" relationship with God because they understand that they are in a privileged position of revelation with the Supreme Being. It was apparent throughout the interviews that this "special" relationship is not understood by the women as a notion of "election" or favour. One woman said,

It seems ironic for me to tell you now, after all the criticism of images of femininity in Christianity, that I see myself as a vessel to God! By this I mean that I am in a true partnership with God; I don't say Him or Her because so much of this bloody dialogue with the institutions has been reduced to the simple renaming of God. So many people who don't understand the true issues here perceive it in this simplistic way. They are blind to the fact that the God of the churches has simply abandoned women unless they actually choose to be pliant, accepting images of divine womanhood.

[12/8/88]

Behind this statement there is the tacit understanding that what is revealed about the nature of the Supreme Being in given societies is determined by the dominant social ethos rather than being directly subject to divine revelation: thus post-church feminists are quick to stress their associations with the prophetic tradition of Christianity. But post-church feminists are equally keen to refer to the Bible for examples of Jesus' behaviour towards women. There is much emphasis upon the historical Christ in post-church theology and spirituality. Also referred to as a source of revelation about the nature of the Supreme Being are Wisdom and the creation accounts of Genesis. Women interviewed stressed that it was not sufficient to study the Bible itself to form an idea about the
revelation of a Supreme Being, but that attention should be given to archaeology, linguistics and hermeneutics to form a gradual picture of its nature and relationship to human beings.

There was a striking difference in the way in which post-church and Christian feminist women approached the section of the interviews about the object of religion. Post-church women tended overwhelmingly to speak about the Biblical revelation of the Supreme Being in terms of a gradual historical manifestation: their attention in the interviews was directed towards this process and its relevance for women today. It was apparent in the interviews with Christian feminists that their interest was not so much in the process of God's manifestation as in a text, or how the Bible, as a product of a patriarchal milieu, affected the position and sphere of influence of women in relation to the power structure of institutionalised women. An explanation for this may lie in the fact that all of the post-church women interviewed had previously been Christian feminists and members of dominant institutions. One woman spoke to me of

a tremendous, inexplicable feeling of peace and dread when I left the Church. There was dread for the security and the pattern of active belief that I had left behind as a participant, and peace for the wonderful feeling that I had when I realised that the only way that I could find a complete expression for the God who was my Sister, Mother, Brother, Father, was outside the [Roman Catholic] Church. I began to read the New Testament about a year after I left and realised that here was a wholly new dimension to the Jesus that I had known from childhood.

[2/3/88]

Many post-church feminists concurred that the God of the Bible evades Christians today because human beings have lost the creativity and spontaneity of theological imagination because they are bound by unconscious patriarchal assumptions. One woman referred to the work of theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel who views theology as a divine process: the theological imagination to her is "the power of the Holy Spirit to bring new life to whatever has become fossilized". So like post-christian women, some post-church feminists perceive their theological praxis as a form of sacred action. They see themselves participating in the Divine Nature where God, whose nature is eternal, is constantly unveiled through history (Bible and tradition).

Women interviewed spoke enthusiastically about the relationship between human beings and the environment. They were concerned that human beings had a specific "caretaker" role in relation to the world which had been created for them by God in order to work with it, not to exploit it. Environmental concern was therefore a great issue among this group of women. One woman spoke of

a duty to try to sustain a mirror image with God. Exploitation of the world's resources on the level that is being sustained at this time is disastrous. We need to

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be far more in tune with the wishes of our Creator. It is not enough that we try to do this as human beings. We need the help of a Divine Plan.

The difficulty in drawing any solid phenomenological conclusions about the object of religion for post-church women arises from the facts that experience of a Supreme Being takes place for these women on an intensely private level, the level of absolute subjectivity; and this arises from a profound sense of injury as a result of experiences within androcentric denominations.

Post-christian feminists

Ten of the post-christian (or Goddess-worshipper) respondents to the Questionnaire who were interviewed understood symbolic representations of the Supreme Being to arise from a number of diverse sources, primarily from the mythological traditions of mainly ancient religions, but also from artistic forms, the female body itself, literature and poetry and the experience of the environment. Most of the women interviewed for this study were in agreement with the statement that the worship of female divinities or goddesses was in fact the worship of aspects of the Great Goddess (or Mother of All). It was possible to distinguish seven primary aspects of diffusion:

- Creatrix-wisdom aspect
- Nature aspect
- Caring-nurture aspect
- Planetary aspect
- Personification of phenomena aspect
- Resistance to status quo aspect
- Hag-form aspect

A policy statement in the first Arachne journal about the Matriarchy Network in the United Kingdom speaks about the nature of the Great Goddess:

We have no "creed". All women are free to interpret their feelings and experiences in a way that is personal and meaningful to them as individuals.

We feel intuitively that male-centred creation is a nonsense: that the creative principle or energy is female rather than male and can be symbolised as the Great Mother or Great Goddess.

[Arachne I, (May Eve, 1983) 3].

A gynocentric deity is the pivot of the matriarchal conception of the Supreme Being, but all women
interviewed were in agreement with the statement in the same article that

The Goddess or Great Mother is NOT a female but otherwise mirror image of the male god; we do not think of a "big Mummy Out There" as the patriarchs think of a "Big Daddy". Neither were matriarchal societies mirror images of our own but where women dominated men. The Goddess is not separate but is in everything. We are she and she is us. Her energy is our energy: it in all of us at a deep personal level as a source of power...The Goddess is a symbol for our energy, for our being.

It would be correct to call post-Christian belief in a Supreme Being "pantheistic". The Goddess, all agreed was in all things tangible in human existence. Matriarchy, the human mirror of the post-Christian divine order,

is the means by which we as women recover the historical religion and society which was taken away from us. Matriarchal societies have existed...we lost all this when men took over the rule of the world from women...I believe in the existence of what you, Karen, rather patronisingly call a Supreme Being...But I do. The Goddess is alive in me and in you, but you can only understand Her from what your stuffy professors taught you! Just listen to what I am saying ... forget [what] you have been taught about "transcendence", "immanence" and all that.

[Interview, 21st January, 1988].

But not all women agreed with the abandonment of terminology which was associated with "patriarchal" scholarship. Indeed, the words "transcendent" and "immanent" were found to be most helpful for one woman writing in Arachne III (1985), 32:

Immanence: indwelling, inherent, actually present or abiding within: remaining within. My quest is to seek the Goddess who dwells within, in myself and in everyone I meet, in the trees and rocks and rivers, in earth and sky, in everyday life.

But turning to transcendence, I found it meaning to climb over, to pass over and go beyond. The dictionary went on to say that it was only in the late 19th century that the meaning of transcendence came to be that of a god [sic.] who was above and independent of the universe. I see here that patriarchy has taken two ideas which exist as fruitful paradox, and forces them apart, so that they are in conflict...The male 20th century god is above, and independent of this earth, and therefore men master it and use it. This is a god of rape and plunder. What dwells with in creation, in this polarity, must presumably be female, and certainly inferior.

Mary Lewis' words are a good illustration as to how the Matriarchy Network in the United Kingdom
has reappropriated concepts about the Supreme Being for itself. She goes on to provide a solution to the problem of the "corruption" of the male image of God by its replacement with "ancient goddess images". For her, a relationship with a Supreme Being is about "working with Her, not just worshipping Her". She holds to the idea that for every individual woman, the image of the transcendent-immanent Goddess is a unique one. For her, the Supreme Being is both "intimate and holy". It is interesting that none of the women interviewed spoke of contemporary Goddesses arising out of their experiences of life in the twentieth century. The emphasis was consistently upon the "recovery" of the Goddesses of the "ancient Matriarchate" (which is perceived of as an historical reality in the matriarchal milieu).

When the women interviewed were questioned in detail it became apparent that Goddess worship was undertaken in terms of diffused monotheism. All women agreed with the statement that "the worship of the Goddess takes place in a plurality of forms or in a single Supreme Being". Most of the women agreed that symbolic expressions of the Goddess indicated expressions of unconditional meaning which reflected the reality of the denial of "sacred" and "secular" spheres as they are traditionally understood in "patriarchal" religions. Actual societal change towards the re-institutionalisation of Goddess-worship could only come about through "the denial of patriarchal forms at all levels of life" [interview, 21/1/88] by men and their acceptance of a gynocentric paradigm model of the Great Goddess. The Goddess is diffused in everything temporal and eternal, but her worship and the knowledge of her existence has been suppressed. Let us now turn to look at the way in which post-christian women perceive the manifestation and nature of the Great Goddess, beginning with the creatrix-wisdom aspect. One woman claimed that in all manifestations, wisdom enables us to take part in the life of the universe...by understanding the world and working in harmony with it...it's important to us that She's linked with creation. Remember that Wisdom even in patriarchal tradition is always female!

The same woman alluded to the aretalogy of Isis in which the Goddess lists her own qualities:
I am Isis, I am she who is called goddess by women.
I gave forth and ordained laws for humans which no-one is able to change,
I divided the earth and the heavens
I ordered the course of the sun and the moon
I appointed to women to bring their infants to birth in the tenth month.
I made the beautiful and the shameful to be distinguished by nature.
I established punishment for those who practice injustice...

On being asked what this aretalogy told the woman who quoted it about the Goddess, she answered, after some thought,

She sustains me in my life and my hopes for the future of the world. I despair about the way in which God is perceived in the world of patriarchy, a world which I am forced to live. To me, the Goddess, through Isis, is the ultimate lawgiver which I recognise as an absolute. She is both loving and just. For me she is the truth which has been lost where male God prevails. She is a healer, a restorer of harmony. I can't say any more about her. I can tell you more about what she means to me by remaining silent.

[Interview, 21/1/88].

In "Goddesses of Wisdom" in Arachne VI, Asphodel has written an article in which she alludes to the Judaic and Gnostic traditions where the personification of Wisdom in Hochmah and Sophia have been demoted by mainstream Christianity. She stresses the aspects of creation and harmonisation inherent in this group of Goddesses. In Judaism, she says, Wisdom is seen as part of the human spirit, its spark of divinity. She alludes to the work of Elaine Pagels\(^9\) perceiving that it is possible to reclaim the meaning of Wisdom through the study of Gnostic texts. For her, Gnosticism was the absolute acceptance and belief in female divine power, for She created Herself. Yet women, she claims, have been cut off from this power: Wisdom in some traditions had become "harlot". Important in the understanding of a post-Christian concept of the Creatrix-Wisdom aspect of the Great Goddess is that wisdom transcends mundane human capabilities. Yet the Goddess is also immanent, inviting human beings to share in this divine wisdom: to share in the divine nature. The same applies to the Creatrix aspect, where human beings are faced with the apparent mysteries of birth, life and death. For matriarchal women, there is the significant fact that through their

bodies, women are given the unique opportunity to partake in the divine life: a partnership in creation.

A number of goddesses of nature and fertility were mentioned, which testifies to the popularity of these particular manifestations of the Goddess’s immanence. The women interviewed spoke of how essential natural phenomena were to survival in ancient times; but that now their significance had taken on a new meaning in terms of their importance to the recovery of pre-industrial forms of survival in the face of a "nuclear" and "synthetic" age. Taking place simultaneously are an attempt to recover an exegetical meaning to this form of the Great Goddess and an attempt to give her a relevant hermeneutical meaning for the twentieth century. Earth is the very hypostasis of the divine, so everything that comes from nature must represent the divine Being too. In nature, there is also the reminder that there are other forms of life outside human life.

The women interviewed consistently stressed the idea that ancient matriarchal religion did not share the ideas about nature which are in evidence in post-industrial societies: so there is more stress in matriarchy upon the harmony between what is often distinguished as divine essence and nature. Often, the divine essence is ambivalent: as a creatrix and a destroyer. This is most apparent where water is given to represent the nature of the Goddess: restful, restless, potent and stagnant, violent and calm. In water, a unity of differences are reconciled in their ambivalence: symbolic of the very struggle of life itself. So nature goddesses do not simply represent phenomena: they are pervasive within the phenomena themselves. Here are represented phenomena essential to the continuance of human life: the earth itself, fertility, rain, food and fire.

Allied to the Nature-aspect of the Great Goddess is her Nurture aspect where she is seen as the sustainer of the universe. Her roles include caring during illness and disease (Kipu Tytto), protection during childbirth and nursing (Gvenn Teir Bronn, Meskhent), sustainance for the sexual act (Freyja) and the provider of food and drink (Mayauel, Uke-Moche-No-Kami). The deities here have been included in a separate category from the "Nature" group because of their
anthropomorphism. As with the nature aspect of the Great Goddess, here there is emphasis again on her arbitrary nature. "Often she gives and takes without discrimination. We have to accept her nature. She is empowered with the ability to nurture or to destroy life". [Interview: 22/1/88].

Solar and lunar (planetary) aspects of the Great Goddess featured widely during interviews and in poetry published in Arachne. The women interviewed rejected the idea of a solar (male) - lunar (female) polarity, claiming that both were essentially "feminine" in character:

There is no patriarchal idea about the sun as "redemptor" in matriarchy. She doesn't rise to deliver me from the grip of darkness. Sun and moon; these are two halves of the same coin.

[Interview: 22/1/88].

Significantly, there is no goddess representing both of these aspects in matriarchy. In the post-christian milieu, what was stressed by the women interviewed was not the chaotic power of darkness of the moon, but rather its associations with wisdom and growth and development. One of the points stressed by Arachne and the women interviewed was that menstrual rites and rituals were observed in all woman-led societies...from the Moon temples of Diana in Ancient Greece to the rites of Artemis in Ephesus and Brigit in Ireland. Women synchronised their cycles, ovulating at full moon, menstruating at the dark of the moon or the new moon...

[Arachne 7 (1987) 23].

There were many other examples of the moon’s associations with the cycles of women’s bodies:

The moon is known for its ability to draw liquid: it beckons the tides and controls the flow of our own menstrual blood.

[Interview 22/1/88]

Since Tanit (Phoenician moon goddess) became my symbol, I have begun to menstruate with the waxing of the moon.

[Interview 22/1/88]
Like the sun, the moon is always continually rising. Working together, sun and moon are the lawgivers. They are the perfect semblance of order. They are the essential will of the Great Goddess.

[Interview, 21/1/88].

So the sun and the moon in the post-christian milieu are seen as essentially a duality representing order and development, the very will of the creative force.

Similarly, the sky (or heavenly) aspect of the Great Goddess represents creative force. Natural phenomena are perceived in their divine aspect: lightning, winds, clouds, stars, storms, rainbows, air and rain are all phenomena which are apparently beyond the control of humans and which may be seen to represent part of the capricious nature of the Supreme Being.

Where facets of the Great Goddess are portrayed as being abilities which transcend human capabilities, these have been categorised as "personifications of the Great Goddess". Such abilities are understood as self-contained, self-subsistent beings. For example, the Gnostic Ennoia is the personification of thought: she is not the representative of it but its very personification. Similarly, the Chinese Kuan-Yin personifies mercy and the Semitic Shekinah, the Divine Presence. In the post-christian milieu, where personification of a Goddess attribute takes place, to encounter these attributes is to encounter the nature of the Divine Being Herself.

In an article in Arachne 6 entitled, "Yoruba Goddesses - the Spirit of Resistance", Samaia [sic] explains that the purpose of her article is to show women who have lost touch with their own traditions that it is indeed possible to "make contact with manifestations of female divinities which have been separated from us by history and by racism, rather than by culture" [(1987), 11].

Samaia alludes to strong resistance and unity aspects which are implicit, particularly in local deities. Such deities must become deities of resistance; they must therefore originally manifest themselves in a different context. Samaia speaks of Yemaia, the adoptive mother of the god Sango (god of
manhood, thunder and martial arts) who was forbidden to divine because she was better at this task that her husband!

Very few have seen my hag-form.
Hidden, I am, from view.
We present different aspects
With each turn of the moon.
"A nice girl", "mature woman"
But what about Hag?
Hag, shout I, blasting you
This is just as much me.

Reclaim our Hag forms.
Let them show.
Let us now number ourselves
One or other no more.
But be all our selves
When it takes our fancy.

A footloose Hag is freer
Than a tamed one.

Nozama [Arachne 3 (1985), 12]

It was in the Hag-form aspect of the Goddess that most women found the most evocative image of what they viewed as the contradictions of the experiences of living in an androcentric world. Like the Resistance form of the Great Goddess, the Hag-form aspect presents an image of defiance against the images which are seen to crush women's self-image and thus prevent them from actualising any influence in the world. In her poem, Nozama gives an insight into the capricious side of the Hag: "be all ourselves/When it takes our fancy".

The post-Christian milieu has appropriated the Semitic Lilith as a Hag-form. Women mentioned the Celtic Morrigan and Cailleach and the Arabic Al-Lat as manifestations also, but Lilith holds a particular fascination. An article by Asphodel, in Arachne 2 (1985) 26-30, examines why Lilith, who is only mentioned once in the Pentateuch, is so feared and hated in the Hebrew tradition. Asphodel claims that there is philological evidence which suggests that Lilith is the original "breath

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10 Also called Umoja, Ymoja, Lemanza.
of life" which God breathed into Adam's nostrils. So Lilith is the living breath which gives life to us all. Alluding to her iconography, Asphodel concludes that Lilith is also an early Wisdom Goddess, responsible for creation and inner knowledge. The Mandaean Gnostics saw Lilith as knowing "the secrets of darkness and light, and unites heaven and hell".

Asphodel claims that under patriarchy, Lilith has assumed the role as Queen of Demons and killer of children. She becomes a destroyer rather than a creatrix. The matriarchal milieu has appropriated for itself the fear of Lilith and has embraced her apparently dual aspect as a wise creator and malevolent hag in order to neutralise the damage that has been done to her under patriarchy:

She represents our innermost herstory. In reclaiming Her, we throw off and pour away for ever the poison about ourselves, our so-called inferiority, our evil inner selves, our guilt. On reclaiming Lilith, we reclaim the breath of life, that emerges as we give birth to our children, to our works of all kind; we reclaim our Wisdom, our knowledge, our power, our autonomy.11

Other aspects of the Great Goddess were of importance to the women interviewed, but did not conform to the seven primary aspects listed above. Their significance is that they are construed to represent a reappropriation of their original meaning under matriarchal influence when traditional "feminine" pursuits such as spinning and weaving, joy, gratitude, love, healing and the household were valued by the dominant ethos in society.

11Ibid., 30.
CHAPTER V

SUBJECT OF RELIGION

Prolegomena

If the object of religion is the Supreme Being, the subject of religion coexists as its polarity. So the subjects of religion are those religious people who take part in a relationship with the object. In this chapter it will be demonstrated that human understanding of the nature of the object of religion often corresponds to the nature of the dominant social order in official religions. This has been widely documented in recent feminist theology. A feminist method which seeks to include women's experiences and understanding facilitates some fascinating insights into women's comprehension of the Supreme Being and also of themselves in relation to It.

Christian feminists

When questioned about how they understood the relationship between the Supreme Being and humans (the subject-object relationship), Christian feminists answered, invariably, that this took place in prayer and Holy Communion. It was a difficult process at all stages to try to persuade women that what was trying to be elucidated was the religious meaning behind religious acts and the meanings that this implied about the nature of the Supreme Being and religious human beings. Here was the challenge of phenomenology: to distil implicit religious meanings from statements which carried very potent, often unchallenged, beliefs. Such a challenge would require a continual critical awareness of one's own preconceptions and prejudices.

Christian feminists agree that both men and women are made in the image of God, but that "feminine" attributes and capacities which are envied, despised or punished should be embraced by the churches. Sara Maitland concludes that the root of the problem concerning the relationship
between object and subject of religion is the ancient Christian heresy of "dualism", which she terms, "the splitting of God's creation into divisions labelled 'good' and 'bad'". She argues that the Hellenistic model of Christian cosmology was deeply dualistic, that is that matter is inferior to spirit, whereas Judaism was non-dualistic and did not believe in a division of soul or body, or in an afterlife. So dualism for Maitland is the very "emotional and intellectual justification for elitism". Maitland was not the only Christian feminist to perceive dualistic divisions. In the 1986 Questionnaire, women spoke of dualism as the primary cause of class divisions in society and the churches and also of racism and sexism. Dualism, many pointed out, effectively prevents women "from experiencing real sisterhood because women cannot love themselves while they are being dictated to by projections of self-denial". [Interview, 30/4/88]

Both in the Questionnaire and in personal interviews, Christian feminists stressed their concern about the damage that dualism caused (by the churches' teaching about God and dualism in society) for men as well as women because dualism effectively estranges men from their potential being by forcing certain types of attitudes and behaviour upon them (i.e. by forcing themselves to think about themselves as providers, natural rulers). So Christian feminist ideas about human beings embrace a concern for the whole of humanity: although most Christian feminist groups are women-only groups, all the women interviewed agreed that it was entirely possible for a man to be a Christian feminist too, by sharing the same basic views.

So what is the nature of the relationship between human (Christian feminist) beings and the object of religion? Clearly, Christian feminists have had to encounter the fact that anthropomorphism in religious expression is indicative of theomorphic ideas, and that religious ideas and expressions that have been formulated by men will reflect a particularly one-sided area of human experience. This has been explored voluminously by feminist theologians. However, the consideration also demands attention by the phenomenologist in order to elucidate some of the similarities and differences between the nature of the deity and human beings. All the women interviewed agreed that in Christianity it was possible to share in the divine and infinite life: all human beings had a transcendent quality which was variously called "the soul" or "the spirit". Yet the same women were insistent that it was impossible to judge God's attributes by any human standard: but since human language is the only language available to speak about God, then this is the only means to do so. So the language must be changed to incorporate a more "human" understanding of God. Therefore, Sara Maitland can proclaim that

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The Body of Christ...is a pregnant body; pregnant with the new birth, the New Creation, pregnant with Salvation. Throughout the Church's history, group after group and individual after individual from within the Christian community have been called upon to be the midwives to this pregnancy. Now it is women who after centuries of repression (of talents, symbols, values and authority) are demanding their place in the body that sought to exclude them.

It is precisely the female area of experience which has been denied by patriarchal traditions, Maitland argues with other Christian feminists. So if the human and divine life are to coexist, religious institutions should reflect female experiences and concerns.

The concern about the absence of women's experiences and contributions in traditional theology is reflected in Christian feminist religious speculations about the origin of human beings. The consensus among the women interviewed was that most Christian people today no longer share the cosmology that gave rise to the biblical (read: mythical) accounts of the creation of human beings. Christian feminists differ widely among themselves about the divine origin of sacred texts in Christianity, but all concurred that creation accounts in sacred texts were attempts to give accounts of current institutions by references to their divine origin. This was seen as a theological and social problem to all the women interviewed. As one stated,

As a member of the Roman Catholic Church I can't escape the fact that I am a member of an institution which sees itself as the very epiphany of divine revelation, the reflection of God's holy order on earth.

[Interview, 20/4/88]

Yet the question receives a thorough theological scrutiny by Christian feminists. Some have argued that the Church's teaching about "man" being made in the image of God and the female as being derivative from him is based upon a series of mistranslations and misunderstandings of the original Hebrew. Most of the women interviewed understood the Bible to be at best the partial revelation of the Divine Will: how could it reflect the true nature of the Supreme Being when its interpretation has been in the hands of men only for centuries?

One of the ways in which Christian feminists spoke of experiencing God was through their own experiences of motherhood. In her moving, practical, theological and very personal book, Motherhood and God, Margaret Hebblethwaite speaks about how in her experience of motherhood she found God, and how in God she found motherhood. She has been criticised by post-church feminists for failing to recognise the insidious links made in English society between biological

functions and gender stereotypes, and for perpetuating the idea that a human mother’s love is "God-like", that is, unconditional and unfailing.\

Christian feminists argue that in Christianity there is an implicit belief that the ability and potential life of human beings are somehow an expression of God’s nature. This has two divergent manifestations where women are concerned: it has been used as the justification of the denial of sacerdotal ministry to women, but it also has a more positive aspect for Christian feminists. It allows for the expression of the continual revelation of God’s will and nature. It also permits women to express their particular understanding of God through their creativity. Christian feminist self-understanding greatly emphasised the freedom of expression between God and humans through prayer, art, poetry, litany and theological reflection.

It was in theological reflection that Christian feminists recognised their own strengths, and particularly in the New Testament theologies about the life and ministry of the historical Jesus. It was in the person of Jesus that the women interviewed perceived a model of full humanity as well as the hypostatisation of God on earth. Sara Maitland argues that the model of ministry that was provided by Jesus (and which has been perceived dangerously incorrectly by the Church Fathers) demands a new reappraisal. She argues that traditionally ministry is understood as something that is to be done "by one person to another" and that

\[\text{This division into subject/object, active/passive, or as the traditional imagery of Christianity expresses it male (God, Jesus, the priesthood) and female (the Church, ministered to by the priesthood) is a perfect example of how dualistic division works.}\]

Maitland argues that this conception of ministry is harmful: to the ministers who acquire "a sense of being indispensable...[who may be] less able to relate to people as people, rather than as objects for their activity."\(^7\) Other women elaborated on this point in the interviews, claiming that it was indeed healthy to be in a position to be able to accept the help of another human being, to be able to express neediness. This is reflected strongly in the Christian feminist movement where, at its best, it functions for women as an anti-hierarchical, anti-judgemental and anti-dualistic structure of activities which as yet are not dictated to by a formal tradition.

\(^6\) Ibid., 21.
\(^7\) Ibid.
For post-church feminists the crux of the subject-object relationship is women's changing experience of themselves. This arises from the world-view that feminism, as a set of cognitive and political values, brings a transformation of values on both the personal and the institutional levels. So "religion" for a number of post-church feminists, is "spirituality", for this suggests a personal inner awareness rather than a collective experience and creed through institutionalised forms of worship. It also allows for the possibility that religion does not presuppose belief in a Supreme Being. The subject-object relationship therefore manifests itself privately in prayers and in other forms of personal spirituality (for example, mysticism) and, more publicly, in theology. Theology is therefore central to this work. Post-church feminists argue that theology cannot escape the feminist critique because prevailing ideas about the meaning of "humanity" have been male constructs and androcentric and so harmful to women's images of themselves.

As the author of the present work, I am a post-church feminist. In a paper I have warned of the hazards of speaking about God and humans in terms of polarity and polarisation. I have argued that it is possible to approach the feminine dimension of God with the help of Jungian psychology, where that psychology has undergone a feminist critique. Humanity is created, like the animal kingdom, as a polarity. It is by no accident that the cosmogonies of different cultures worldwide have perceived the cosmos as originating through the polarities (in diverse cultural forms) of Yin and Yang. In the creation accounts of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the Spirit of God (ruach elohim) "broods" over chaos, a very potent feminine image. It seems unusual to feminists that humans rarely refer to God's "motherhood" and that traditionally, Christians construct that image in terms of the soul, ecclesia and the Virgin Mary. The analogy, the polarity of male-female imagery, has been used to evoke the highest stages of the spiritual life, from the author of the Song of Songs to St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich. The phenomenon of mysticism will be explored in the final chapter in more detail, but it serves as an interesting illustration here of the subject-object polarity as perceived by post-church feminists.

In the paper cited above, a distinction is made between "polarity" and "polarisation". Both are means by which two pairs of complementary opposites relate to each other. In polarity, these opposites are related to each other by attraction. In polarisation, the opposites pull away from each other: their individuality is destroyed. I warn of the danger that in some forms of feminist

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spirituality (particularly the post-christian variety) "polarity" becomes "polarisation", and the human relationship with God becomes obscured by semantic questions concerning the gender of God. So I do not argue from the traditional stance of a tradition of "divine femininity", but of a qualitative polarity: the relationship between God and humans. The historical Jesus is central to this polarity for in His Divinity He represents the very epiphany of this relationship. The ecclesia in this theology is the very soul of the world in a loving response to this epiphany, a love in which distinctions of sex, gender and human institutions are, paradoxically, manifest and overcome. So Sophia is not an aspect of God per se but a manifestation of Divine Love which can be participated in by human beings. Mystics have understood this union: just as Julian of Norwich was able to call Jesus "Our Mother", Angela di Foligno prayed to God, "My Son, my Son, do not abandon me, my Son".

I think that this paper draws attention to the characteristic post-church critique of duality (or polarisation) which is manifest in traditional understanding of the subject-object relationship, and consequently in the reality of male-female relationships which affects both men and women. Clearly, such a disparity between subjects will affect their relationships as agents of the soul-of-the-world. All post-church feminists agree that theological discourse about the nature of the subject-object relationship rests on the question of whether traditional theology and feminism have a future together. In their anxiety that "patriarchal" theology will banish feminist theology to its margins, post-church feminists raise their questions in a separate "space" where they encounter themselves outside the bounds of orthodoxy. In this way, post-church feminists have felt more able to encounter their own implicit pluralism and their relationships with the Supreme Being. This stance is similar to Christian feminists' stance which also strives to recognise the perspectives offered by African, Asian or Afro-American Christian feminists.

Post-church feminists recognise that through their position and diverse theological praxis, they effect a consciousness which invokes a transformation of personal and institutional paradigms. This diversity was reflected in the spirituality and religiosity of the women interviewed for this study. Some women spoke sympathetically of witchcraft as a form of separatist female spirituality: others rejected this as regressive pagan practice and as a withdrawal from the realities of dealing with sexism. Many women were interested in the contribution of Jungian psychology to religion and spirituality, especially where the discussion of dreams, symbols and archetypes brought women together in groups, a feature of great need (and traditionally lacking) in this group. But where post-church feminists differed significantly from Christian feminist women was in their practice of reclaiming or rejecting elements of sacred literature for their efficacy and accuracy in portraying the

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lives and experiences of real women. So for some post-church feminists there is no theological problem in accepting the Goddess as the representation of divine immanence. Anthropomorphism in the Supreme Being for some post-church feminists is the ultimate ability to demonstrate the worthiness of both men and women's lives on the level of the Divine Life.

At the core of post-church theology, and therefore of the subject-object relationship, is the quest for a recognition of a fuller anthropology, where androcentric claims to the definition of "humanity" are de-sacralised, de-legitimised. Post-church women support the quest for women's participation in defining themselves as agents of their own self-understanding. Post-church feminists are explicitly not agnostic, in spite of the fact that many of them do not understand God as a living Being and agent in their lives. They want to challenge the assumption that only theistic beliefs qualify as "religious". As one woman put it,

I could no longer accept using words like God, Heaven, and so on, and more, while I was in the Church [of England] I felt uneasy about putting my own interpretations on these words. My local priest dismissed me as a "humanist", but I think he was just trying to conveniently explain away my position to himself and the Church. I am in the minority [of women who have left the churches] in wanting a break-away new Church...I am told by some people that I am not a Christian at all, but I know that this is not the case. Radical Christianity is what I am about these days, and I can do without the Church if I have that!

[Interview, 5/7/88]

In a later interview another post-church feminist, who was from a Roman Catholic background, agreed with the stance of the former Anglican quoted above. She elaborated on the radical challenge which she understood that the post-church position offered:

I understand that the challenge which women who have left the churches are holding out, not just to Christianity but to the world, is to be found in its drive to exchange the theology of salvation for the vision of "the kingdom on earth". Let me explain this. This means that it is necessary for people to start to construct a moral and spiritual sense adequate to that vision. I personally believe that Christianity has no special claim to provide the universal language and framework to meet this challenge, and that other traditions and philosophies can provide a radical framework to meet the same ends.

It is not enough for post-church feminists to act as historians trying to reconstruct "herstory", or women's side of the story. Such women seek to portray their understanding of human conditions, not simply to try to redress patriarchal distortions. So these women view themselves as contemporary theologians hammering their message on the portals of the churches. Although their main allegiance as a group appears to be to the broader "secular" Women's Movement they function as a community in exodus from patriarchy itself rather than from the institutionalised churches.
Most often, post-church feminists expressed a deep sense of loss of the stability and continuity which mainstream religious organisations possess. Feminist theology brings post-church feminists face to face with religious experience itself, where there exists a faith in the divinity of revelation in which the subject of religion is perceived as being made in the image of its object.

It is through religious ideas and symbols that the subject-object relationship is explored. Post-church feminists are not in agreement about the practical effects of an understanding about religious ideas and symbols: some are seriously worried about the social and cultural profile which the post-church movement lacks because its members are not visible to mainstream society. Others are concerned about the possibility of the post-church movement becoming a schismatic sect of the Church in view of the enormity of the Christian feminist exodus into its ranks, and the latter's concern for the ordination of women. Andrew Mouldey, an authority on the philosophy of Jung and his followers, has suggested that it is precisely in the movement's apparent invisibility and its lack of institutionalisation and theological diversity that its strength lies. Rejection of institutionalisation, which inhibits women's spiritual creativity, permits women to create for themselves new images, patterns and religious ideas so that religion can actually become a powerful factor in women's lives without the need for institutionalised Christianity. As one woman affirmed:

Do I need another church, a new church? Hardly. I'm a word woman [my emphasis] and I don't want catholic candles or Salvationist brass bands or Quaker silence. And I don't want other people's word patterns either. I want and need the fellowship of other creative, exploring, committed people who, like myself, want to pursue the most worthwhile campaigns of modern Christian concern.

[Interview, 29/4/87]

I feel that the above statement sums up, in the simplest and most eloquent language, the way in which post-church feminists see themselves in relation to the world. Post-church feminists feel the benefits of the oral tradition which they understand women to have shared in through history.

Women have been denied, I've heard it repeated many times, the ability to be the authors of their own stories. Through history they have been denied, by and large, the power to write, to criticise, to change, male outlooks on the world...and yet women have, in many instances, a wonderful gift which, in my experience, is not shared by men. This is the power of the spoken word, and it is in this way that women are defining their version of things. "Truth" is a word we hear a lot of when a masculinist tradition writes about the Bible. Truth cannot be owned exclusively by anyone. Truth can only be lived according to your own, essentially autonomous, version of it.

[Interview, 29/4/87]

10 In conversation.
Theology, for post-church and Christian feminist women is an act of understanding both oppression and creativity in women. Characteristic of post-church theology is the process by which such women have chosen to (re)create the patterns of their lives, adding to, rejecting and adapting cultural (traditional) aspects of those patterns. The following is a discussion about the origin of human beings.

In a paper given at a meeting of the Leicester Women in Theology Group I have argued that in the same way that the authors of Genesis have selected and redacted myths from a number of differing cultural and temporal milieus to convey their experiences and expectations, so too must women effect the same process if their experiences are not to be denied or forgotten. I suggest that women's ability to narrate their own lives demonstrates their faith in their own capacity to construct proposals for restructuring religious belief, taking into account women's experiences and perceptions. This includes a revision of the accounts of the origin of human beings in myth form.

All of the post-church women interviewed in the course of this study were familiar with the account of the origin of human beings in Genesis and stressed the importance of exegesis and hermeneutics which reveal fascinating new perspectives upon traditional understandings of the myth upon which contemporary Christian views of the "natural" inferiority of women are based. Most post-church women reject the divine origin of Scripture because its content and form have been subject to the redactions of males of varying cultural and historical contexts. However, the interest of these sacred writings lies in the fact that they reveal the dominant social ethos of the times in which they were written. Post-church women have emphasised the importance of the revelation of the human content of sacred writings. But they stress that it is important also to look beyond the particular societal forms of women's oppression for evidence of women's creativity in the definition of their lives. This is hindered by the fact (according to post-church feminists) that women have never been the authors of their own cultures.

The way in which post-church feminists have appropriated the mythic account of the creation of the first two human beings serves to illustrate how such women view themselves as the subject of religion in relation to God: it also illustrates how exegesis and hermeneutics function as tools for women as they strive to shape and define the content of their lives outside the institutionalised churches. Post-church feminists have argued that dominant ecclesiastical institutions have based their understandings of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 and 2 upon a series of mistranslations and misunderstandings of the original Hebrew. They point out how Christian theologians have traditionally based their teachings about women on two aspects of the Genesis myth

11 "Genesis: Hope or Despair?" (December, 1985).
in particular: that woman was created from an insignificant part of the body of a male and that she was the protagonist in the fall of humanity into sin. Paul and Deuteropaul, for instance, saw only the male as created in the true image of God:

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\text{He is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man.}
\]

[I Corinthians 11:7-10]

Let a woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over men, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

[I Timothy 2: 11-15]

Let us see how exegesis can bring a new perspective to the meaning of this myth. Genesis is in fact, the result of the compilation of four documents from four different historical periods which are distinguishable through language and content. It is the accounts of the Jahwist and Priestly authors which concern us here. Two accounts of the creation of human beings are evident in Genesis. The older Jahwist (J) account is to be found in Genesis 2:4-25 and is almost child-like (but profoundly adult) in its reflective stance. The Priestly (P) account, written after the Exile, is more abstract and spiritual in orientation than the Jahwist version.

The Jahwist account recounts the creation of Adamah (Hebrew: literally "out of the dust"). There is no implication of a male here. There is a description of how God separated this original being into male and female by removing mi-zalo\text{-}\text{othaw}. The implications of this word are interesting. This word can mean "rib" (as understood in the Christian understanding of the myth), but in the context of the Jahwist account it is more likely to refer to one side of something. The Talmud has speculated on the nature of such a being: was it joined at the shoulders, or did it have two sets of genitals? Significantly, it is only after the removal of mi-zalo\text{-}\text{othaw} that the Jahwist refers to two sexed beings.

The Priestly account is more informative about God's relationship with the human race.

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12 Karen O’Rourke, “Genesis, Hope or Despair?” (December, 1985).

13 Jahwist c. 900 B.C.E.
Elohist c. 800 B.C.E.
Deuteronomic c. 700 B.C.E.
Priestly c. 500 B.C.E.

(Redacted c.400 B.C.E.).
And God said let us make adamah in our own image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air...so God created adamah in his own image, in the image of God created (it) male and female created he them.

[Literal translation from the Hebrew]

Here, the word for God is not Yahweh but elohim, a neutral word which is plural for el, or god.

The Priestly author/s recount God's blessing upon the humans by God. They are counselled to look after the earth, but no sex-role divisions are given. A contemporary feminist hermeneutic would suggest that this shows the pristine harmony and equality between human beings. The redacted version of the Genesis myth then returns to the Yahwist account for the account of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden of Eden. In this account of the Fall, Eve listens to the serpent, eats the forbidden fruit and then persuades her husband to do the same. They are punished: the woman by having pain in childbirth and by being subject to her husband and both by being forced to work the land to live. Both are expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Post-church women have resented the persistence of apparently misogynistic sacred writings since they effectively encourage a destructive view of women when they are subject to the hermeneutical interpretation of men who regard male dominance over women as desirable for their own ends. Eventually, such views of women become sacralised and institutionalised and therefore fixed in the minds of both men and women. One possible feminist hermeneutical interpretation of these accounts is to remember their mythic content. Myths contain humans' deepest hopes, dreams and fears about their relation to God and to each other. Jen Green has suggested that one of the more obscured aspects of the Genesis account has been the fact that it conveys an account of the advent of patriarchy upon society in the form of a myth. This is the meaning behind the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the punishment of Adam and Eve. She points out the desirability of the prelapsarian order, and that the postlapsarian state is something that is to be profoundly regretted.

The significance of a feminist hermeneutic is that is shows that feminism is a world view, a cosmology and a plane of reference through which all experience and action can be evaluated: it is a cognitive, political and spiritual stance as well as a psychological identity for women. At the present time post-church women exist without a framework of an organised network of rites and a priesthood. Most of the women interviewed felt that their greatest lasting influence was to be on the secular Women's Movement itself rather than upon the institutionalised Churches. The religious implications behind this are fascinating and will be discussed in the following chapter. But what

does this tell us about the subject-object relationship, the woman alone with her God? There have been no significant attempts to organise post-church feminists in England. The post-church milieu evinces itself at Christian feminist gatherings where the emphasis is upon spirituality and theological praxis rather than upon women's role in the Churches and priesthood. But post-church women are more likely to be active in the secular Women's Movement where their radical re-appropriation of women's choice in her self-definition, without the hindrance of ideas about the divine origin of scripture, their ideas about the importance of the personal subject-object relationship and revelation which is unique to every woman, and which is not dependent upon a bridge of priesthood and rites, receive a more sympathetic understanding.

It became very clear to me during the period of fieldwork that post-church feminists perceived themselves as women who have been denied the opportunity to express their "full personhood" through the denial to them of the sacerdotal ministries and the refusal of the institutions to listen to their religious experiences and beliefs. Post-church feminists see themselves in a prophetic role. They understand the possibility that the religious meaning implicit in their words may not be understood at the present time but may be understood and heeded at a future date. Included in the list of prophetic women are a number of deceased sisters whose foresight has enabled the present generation of women to make significant leaps in consciousness. The religious meaning underlying these leaps in consciousness can be best understood in terms of the experience of religious conversion. Post-church feminists undergo a radical change in their system of symbolic order, which in turn enables women to revise their cosmology and their relation as women to it. Since post-church feminists are in exile from the mainstream Churches, their symbolic order is not valued or even acknowledged by the institutions. Their symbolic order has wider implications and applications for the secular Women's Movement which is concerned with social order, authority and power at the level of individual human relationships and the larger social order of society.

So symbolic order for post-church feminists functions in two significant ways; on the level of the individual's value system and on the societal level. It is here that a great tension arises. Post-church feminists, unlike post-christian feminists, strive for the acceptance and integration of their cosmology at every level of human endeavour, which includes institutions which are deeply androcentric, even misogynistic. So post-church feminists have accepted their marginalisation while they have a deep religious conviction about the divine givenness of their symbolic order.
Post-Christian Feminists

On the question of the subject-object relationship, post-Christian feminists do not perceive the possibility of a relationship between women and a God who has been defined by males and who "has been used to support the denial, the condemnation, and the mutilation of female sexuality."¹⁵ Such women come to worship the Goddess through feminism rather than through New Age, hereditary or (pure) Wiccan cults. They look to the concept of a Great Cosmic Mother of All, or Goddess, who they believe was the original object of human devotional, psychological and human expression because they purport that the first thirty thousand years of homo sapiens' existence was dominated by the celebration of the female processes: the mysteries of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth and an acute awareness of human relativity to the earth, from whence they came and received sustenance. Post-Christian feminists argue that human beings have become alienated from the Goddess with the advent of patriarchy and the inception of a (perfect, free from matter) God who is divorced from (a flawed) creation.

In order to understand the relationship between post-Christian feminists and the Goddess it is necessary to understand the religious concept of Earth Spirit, which is best understood in terms of "soul". In terms of post-Christian cosmology all phenomena are manifestations of the divine hypostasis. So humans must recognise their part in divinity. This is apparent in a variety of religious expressions and in the language of the symbolic order in the matriarchate. Monica Sjöö speaks of an "earth spirit"¹⁶ by which she is referring to an energy network in which all forms of the manifest divine life are active. In post-Christian cosmology this force is traditionally portrayed as a spiral, for this is the form that divine energy takes. In interviews, five women mentioned the "invocation" or the "raising of the serpent force" which is a ritual activity performed widely in the matriarchal network. It is a means of reaffirming the divinely ordained relationship between the Goddess and humans and is believed to have also occurred in parts of West Africa (for example, as in python cults), Native North America and in Celtic Europe. This is a ritual journey which is made along so-called "serpentine paths" or currents of exceptional energy which are associated with

¹⁶Ibid., 124
"the steps of the gods" who have created the original divine landscape. Serpents and dragons have long since been associated with divine life-giving forces to human beings and are often portrayed as guardians of powerful points of meeting between the divine dwelling and the human.  

The Matriarchy network in England scorns the patriarchal-technological abuse of "earth force" which estranges human activity from the energy radiations of the earth. They believe that a paradigmatic subject-object relationship can be restored and effected through ritual means. Sjöö talks about the phenomenon of ecstasy as a manifestation of the subject-object relationship. To her, ecstasy is "the dance of the individual with the all". She suggests that its translation from the Greek (standing "outside oneself") suggests a cancelling out of the conditioned mind so that all life was experienced as partaking of a material-spiritual wholeness...In this, magic unity, ecstasy and responsibility (i.e. responsiveness) were one.

This has led Monica Sjöö to conclude that the earliest people to commune with the Goddess were shamans and seers, ecstatic women who "were responsible for keeping the energy channels open and flowing between each individual, the group, and the cosmic source". These were the keepers of balance between the human and the cosmic, healing and translating the life forces of the latter to the former.

In the beginning ...was a very female sea. For two-and-a-half billion years on earth, all life forms floated in the womb-like environment of the planetary ocean - nourished and protected by its fluid chemicals, rocked by the lunar-tidal rhythms.

These are the opening words of Monica Sjöö’s book, The Great Cosmic Mother, a work which claims to be an attempt to recreate the ancient Goddess religion and includes a gynocentric account of the origin of human beings. This is a work which attempts to show that the religion of the Goddess is the original religion of human beings, a religion which is firmly based upon the female processes, and so fused with the cycle of the female body. Sjöö draws upon archaeological, cultural and biological evidence to support her case and in consequence creates a fascinating hermeneutical mythology which differs from the Christian feminist and post-church feminist hermeneutics. It is deeply gynocentric.

18 Sjöö, op. cit. 52.
19 Ibid., 52.
20 Ibid., 52.
21 Monica Sjöö, op. cit., 2.
Sjoo does not purport that males are "an unnecessary sex," Post-christian feminists agreed with her that "life is a female environment in which the male appears, often periodically, and created by the female". As the leading theoretician of the Goddess religion, Sjoo's personal mythology about the origin of human beings is her own interpretation: other post-christian women in the matriarchy network refer to their own subjective interpretations for religious knowledge about the origin of human beings. Yet Sjoo's thought is widely recognised and respected in the network and remains the most specialised account of the origin of human beings.

So creation is a thoroughly female process. Sjoo mentions Charles Darwin's theory that the primordial principle of creation was female. This is because originally life forms reproduced parthenogenically. Before life could move onto land and reproduce it was necessary to transfer the protective amniotic fluids of the sea to the individual female body: and so the penis, "a mechanical device for land reproduction" evolved. Sjoo insists that sexual reproduction is superior to parthenogenesis because it "enhances the variety and health of the gene pool".

The matriarchy network insists that anthropologists have incorrectly viewed human evolution in terms of traditionally "male" activities: as the hunter, the tool-maker, and so forth. Women are seen as auxiliary to the process: "He evolves, she evolutionizes", in Sjoo's words. Yet post-christian feminists are quick to point out that women were central culture creators: they were the first domesticators of fire, the first potters, weavers, textile dyers and hide-tanners, the first to gather and study medicinal plants, and the first people to measure time in formal lunar-marking calendars.

Post-christian women's ideas about the origin of children stresses that children are not simply the products of human sex: they come from the "spirit of the earth", "earth soul". The matriarchate also stresses the importance of astrological influences at conception and at birth. In this way, a link is maintained between the biological (sexual), societal (human family) and spiritual (cosmic, earth-soul) relationship with divinity. The matriarchy network is highly critical of patriarchal definitions of women in reproductive, mechanical terms. They assert that patriarchy has divorced biology from spirit, where the two should not be separated into a duality. Dualism is the enemy of matriarchy because patriarchal science with its definition of the detached male mind acting upon passive nature has succeeded in suppressing Goddess religion and has therefore
subjugated real female beings.

What conclusions can be drawn about the origin and nature of women in terms of matriarchal cosmology? Most obviously, biology is seen to be a spiritual process and spirit is a biological process. This is a powerful pivotal statement about the matriarchy network. It is compounded by the fact that the matriarchy network in England believe that witchcraft, or wiccan is the original, divinely ordained nature and religion of all women. "True religion is the original umbilical cord that binds our individual selves back to our larger universal source", 28 says Monica Sjöö. In the final chapter of this work, the manifestations of this religion will be studied in detail. The present chapter is concerned with identifying the religious view that post-christian feminists have of themselves. The following section will illustrate the particular abilities and potential life that the matriarchate in England understands in its religious expressions.

The women interviewed spoke freely about the ability and potential of human life. In post-christian cosmology a number of human attributes are perceived to have been lost with the supersedence of patriarchy. The matriarchate asserts that it is possible to recover these latent skills (which are available to women and men) through matriarchal sacred action. In the interviews, women spoke about religious experiences of the divine presence, knowledge about the process of creation and the ability and potential of human life: of clairvoyance, extra-sensory perception, oracular abilities, knowledge of alchemy, spiritual rebirth, dreams, and the knowledge of divine mysteries (such as the mystery of the labyrinth). These phenomena will be discussed in the final chapter.

Earlier it was revealed that post-christian women perceive the course of human life as dominated by the female processes of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Let us elaborate on this further. In the course of the interviews it became apparent that matriarchal cosmology is more complex than this and is subject to individual subjective interpretations. Yet in spite of the many differences in the understanding and practice of matriarchy within the national Network of individuals and groups, it is actually possible to use the tools of "new-style" Phenomenology to give a clear picture and interpretation of the meaning behind post-christian religiosity.

All of the women interviewed claimed that the course of human life was best viewed on a cyclical model. In such a way it is not possible to refer to any point on the circle as a starting point in the process of creation. Two women referred to an aspect of the "earth spirit" as manifest in the souls of as yet unborn children dwelling in aspects of nature. 29 In childbirth, an analogy is made

28 Ibid., 51.
29 This phenomenon is found in parts of West Africa and the indigenous religion of North America.
between the role of the pregnant woman as the protector and nurturer of the foetus, as the powerful and mysterious forces of the process of actualising life, and the earth itself: a process of spontaneous, powerful life. In the matriarchate, blood symbolises the spiralling life force, both sustaining and nourishing human beings. Sjöö refers to religious communities in which "even under the punitive taboos of patriarchy" women withdrew from the community to menstrual huts, which gave women "a chance to get back in contact with their own nature for a few days each month." Sjöö laments the way in which menstruation is regarded as a "private affliction" today, with no positive function. She makes a call for the communion of other women, even though it is not possible for women today to completely withdraw from life temporarily. All the women interviewed stressed the importance of menarche celebrations so that young women can realise their collective power in a group, and so begin to avoid the pitfalls of women's ritual isolation under patriarchy.

The women interviewed did not reveal a complex theology of death: death is the return to the earth from whence life is given. Emphasis in the matriarchate is upon "the spiritual art of living, the art of being alive and in touch with the force that sustains this life". [interview, 29/4/88]

The course of life to post-christian feminists arises from a religious and reverential approach to life in which the life of the cosmos (birth, nurture, the bringing forth of life, death, birth, and so forth) is a model for the lives of individual and collective groups of women. The following and the final chapter will explore the way in which this is reflected in the daily and ritual lives of post-christian women.

Ritual enables the Matriarchy Network to foster a sense of belonging, a sense of togetherness, which is essential to the individual's religious understanding of life. It is a way of bringing a sense of cohesion to an existence which is lived far beyond the margins of what such women consider to be "patriarchal" values in which they represent the invisible world of "dispossessed daughters".

The Matriarchy Network in England consists of a number of groups totalling nearly three thousand women: and it has continued to increase in number by about twenty per cent every year in the last four years. All the women interviewed stressed an acute sense of discouragement about what they perceived as the wilful ecological destruction and mismanagement about the world in the hands of human beings who are estranged from "the integrity of the world's biological imagination" [respondent to Questionnaire]. So post-christian women perceive the religions which support such

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30 Ibid., 186.
31 Ibid., 186.
activities and attempt to "explain" human suffering, hunger and poverty as "God's will" as wholly iniquitous. Such religions, they claim, do not reveal God, but they do reveal patriarchy. The Matriarchy Network therefore makes a call for

a genuine spirituality that utterly refutes the moralistic, manipulative patriarchal systems, the mechanistic religions that seek to divide us...we need a spirituality that acknowledges our roots as evolutionary and sexual beings, just as we need an ontology that acknowledges earth as a conscious and spiritual being.

It is within such a cosmology that the "dispossessed daughters", those women who possess religious specialisations which have been denied to them in patriarchy, can reclaim their rightful position and roles in the sacred community. So wiccan ("wise") women can reclaim their highly specialised function as midwives and healers in the community, a role which has made them outcasts in society because of the "impurity" which has traditionally been associated with women in general and with birth specifically. Shamans, oracular priestesses and witches are believed to be the original mancies in post-christian cosmology. Women are purported to be the original shamans because they are believed to be in a particularly strong resonance with the "moon-mind". Sjöö asserts that shamanism is an ecstatic lunar technology that "relies on the natural psychic descent into body consciousness that menstruation brings each month to women". Male shamans are known occasionally to dress as women. Within the matriarchate, women have been trying to revive the techniques of shamanic possession because of the power, the suspension of physical law, which is associated with its states. In post-christian cosmology the shamanic state is a return to the womb: the woman as psychopomp is in touch with her true nature on the micro- and macrocosmic levels. The hysterical state of the psychopomp is womb-state (the Greek word for "womb" being hysteria): in the same way, the Delphic oracle was named after the womb, Delphine.

Post-christian women speak of Amazon women who lived in preliterate times in areas spreading from Greece to West Africa. Sjöö calls these women "warriors" who fought to defend their religion and matriarchal culture against the onslaught of the (male) Sun God. Sjöö does not comment that Amazons practise war: she deplores the taking of human life in the final section of her book. Rather, she applauds the women who did not want to give up the practice of their religion voluntarily and asserts that all the legends about Amazon women demonstrate their "gynandrous/androgynous nature of female and male relationships in Goddess cultures". Such "selective" use of information about Amazons by the Matriarchy Network was common during the interviews. I pointed out that often I felt that post-christian feminists ignore evidence which supports the view that the Amazons

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32 Ibid., 189.
33 Sjöö refers to the élite corps of 5,000 female warriors who, she claims, were instrumental in winning the independence of Malawi in 1964, ibid., 24.
were actually victims of patriarchy rather than heroic defenders of matriarchal religion! And further, I indicated my confusion about the fact that the same women applauded actions by women which were clearly in conflict with pacifist matriarchal values.

In the chapter which follows, "Dynamics of Religion", I show how the implicit and explicit dimensions of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminist cosmology can be understood in greater depth by looking at the factors (or "dynamics") which form the weft and the warp of their religious beliefs and actions.
In this chapter the underlying dynamics of religion will be studied according to the three groups of women defined in chapter II. "Dynamics" here include those tensions (religious, gender-inspired, political, etc.), experiences, allegiances, beliefs, doctrines, practices, developments, revivals, dissensions, transformations, conflicts and leadership, that arise out of a phenomenological inquiry.

The present chapter is a study of the dynamics of operative feminism in three forms of English spirituality. What relationships do these forms have with the "Women's Movement"? Such a question is relevant to this study because the history of the relationship between religious institutions and the amorphous Women's Movement in England differs from that in the United States of America. The history of the latter does not concern this study, but a brief comment needs to be made about England since the 1960's.

The 1960's will be remembered for a number of challenges to the supremacy of Western culture and their emanations from those people who understood themselves to have been oppressed by it: victims of racial, cultural, religious, economic and sexual oppression. At the same time, the churches, whose membership was declining significantly, were seriously forced to confront their own internal organisation and relationship to other traditions. Sara Maitland notes with surprise that it was the Roman Catholic Church, "that most unchanging of the major denominations", that took up the challenge to examine its role in the world both theologically and practically in the Second Vatican Council. Mary Daly explores the theme of the Second Vatican Council in her book, *The Church and The Second Sex*. Those Roman Catholic women interviewed concurred with her conclusions that Vatican II and the emergent Roman Catholic Feminist Network in the
United Kingdom and the United States of America were entirely incompatible in their aims and directives. Catholic (and other Christian) women were not simply demanding parity with men, but they were asking for a revisionary and revolutionary paradigm: they were making known their need, their demand, for parity of power in the government of all areas of life: on the level of the family, politically and in the churches. Significantly, neither the Christian renewal movements of the 1960's or the Women’s Movement bore much influence on or took much interest in each other. Sara Maitland concludes that the significance of the (often highly developed) petitions and theology of the time by women was that it was unrecognised but prophetic.

All of the Christian feminists interviewed for this study agreed that the efforts of the major denominations in England towards the recognition of women’s questions, in comparison with the United States, were regrettable. The major denominations of England, namely the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, had been established there longer than the equivalent institutions in the United States. Furthermore, Christian Feminism in the United States was widespread through many layers of social (class), intellectual and economic groupings. The English institutions were, it was felt, far more conservative and resistant to change than their American counterparts. It was felt that American women, whose religious tradition was less settled than in England, and who were able to reflect on their traditions self-critically, had more success in achieving significant gains for women. Sara Maitland feels that many English Christian feminists fear a take-over from "dangerous radicals" who follow the path of the secular Women’s Movement. But Maitland hails the way this has manifested itself in the United States (although confesses, at first, to having found it a curious experience), because the larger Women’s Movement there has deeply influenced many Christian women to take a highly radical stand for their concerns and interests:

It was strange for a British feminist like me to hear rich, middle-aged women with Scarlett O’Hara accents slam their Bishops as "male chauvinist pigs" and come out strongly for the ordination of gay women”.

So for English Christian feminists themselves, how do they experience their place in the Women’s Movement? All the women interviewed were explicit feminists, but about half saw their particular style of Christian feminism as having little in common with the larger "secular" women’s movement. They perceived the central dynamic of the Christian feminist movement as emanating from the life of Jesus himself: it was implicit in the Bible, and although not exclusive to Christianity

34 Sara Maitland, op. cit., 15.
as such, it was a forerunner to the Women’s Movement - Jesus was the archetypal feminist.

Other Christian feminists have taken what might be termed a more overtly party political stance and have espoused the corpus of theologies of liberation, particularly with a view to the liberation of women. Similarly, liberation theology strongly represents the stance of post-church feminists. These are women who have experienced the sex-and-gender tensions in the Churches so acutely that they have felt unable to remain Christians within the bounds of the Churches. They feel that the only way in which they can express their spirituality, which is Christian-based and eclectic, is by forming an exodus movement. Such women in England have not, to date, formed themselves into a visible movement such as in a schismatic Christian group. Rather, their organisation reflects a microcosm of the larger secular Women’s Movement: it is possible to speak of them as a large group, but difficult to define them in numbers!

Post-christian feminists in England might correctly be termed the spiritual arm of the secular Women’s Movement’s spiritual dimension. The 1980’s in England have witnessed a plethora of interest in spirituality, particularly in the Women’s Movement. Interest in the Goddess has arisen where women have witnessed the androcentrism (and consequent inadequacy) of some forms of institutionalised religion. This has been enforced where women believe that some aspects of religion which were previously practised by women, have been suppressed with the advent of “patriarchal religions”, for example, healing and magick. There is a strong interaction and reciprocity between post-church and post-christian feminists. It is appropriate at this point to turn to explore more closely what religious dynamics function in English feminist spirituality, and how these are manifest. The dynamics of sexuality, gender and religious tension will be the first to be examined.

The phenomenon of sexuality is explored widely by sociologists of religion, but a phenomenological study will complement the work of sociologists because phenomenological method attempts to explore the religious meanings implicit in religious expressions and belief. So where the Sociology of Religion has demonstrated how sexuality and gender affect social stratification, the phenomenologist asks questions about the implicit religious meaning of beliefs and practices on two levels: firstly, s/he inquires about meaning on the level of the group; secondly, s/he asks questions about how this is received by the individual. In a phenomenology which incorporates considerations about sexuality and gender definitions, the phenomenologist recognises sexuality and gender’s power in human life and, important to this study, in religion.

37 For example, as in Meredith B. McGuire, Religion: The Social Context (California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987) 96-111.
The word "gender" in this study indicates a given culture’s sex-role conceptualisation, or the societal appropriation of tasks to sexes based purely on their biological sex. The word "sexuality" is used in two contexts. Firstly, it is used to explain the sexual orientation or preference of an individual; secondly, and more important to this study, it is used to convey an individual’s personal orientation towards a symbolic order and meaning systems as understood by the individual. These include ideas, beliefs, symbols, moral paradigms, ritual expression and dogmas about the dominant institution’s concepts of gender and power.

The present chapter will explore how the women interviewed for this study perceive religion defining their gender roles and self-image. Underlying many of the statements made in the interviews are references to a strong corpus of religious symbols and imagery. These would appear to suggest that the dynamics of female religious experience are qualitatively different in both official and popular religion whose definition of the symbolic order has been the province of males who have held positions of religious authority which have enabled them to define religious beliefs and norms.

If gender definitions are culturally defined, then it is important to examine the contribution of religion which has legitimised the bifurcation of sex-roles. Feminists have argued that such distinctions have been internalised by women and men and in consequence have engendered a false consciousness within themselves. Where official religion is concerned, both men and women’s religious consciousness is largely defined by an institutionalised order whose religious expressions are controlled by males. Male authority bestows little power on women because women’s religious expression is shaped by male ideas of what a woman’s religious role and province should be. The feminist critique of religion holds that such a bifurcation effectively subordinates women; and it goes on to expose its roots. It then goes on to suggest that women’s experience of religion is qualitatively different from men’s and should be acknowledged as such by being the subject of reform on the level of religious expression and also of academic study.\(^{38}\)

What was marked during the course of the interviews, and particularly in the cases of Christian feminists, was that women were acutely aware of the existence of a "blueprint" of sex-roles whose language and symbolism deeply pervaded the central ritual and creedal aspects of religious expression. But what was significant here is that while Christian feminists recognised this as taking place on the institutional level, this aspect was regarded as insidious and meaningless on the level of individual subjectivity for some women. The apparent ease with which some Christian feminist women were able to accept this anomaly was a source of enormous irritation to the post-church feminists! The intentions behind Christian feminist praxis here are interesting. Christian feminist

\(^{38}\)This method is illustrated in chapter VII.
women displayed a finely-tuned and keen sense of history both in their sense of ecclesiastical development and in their exegetical-hermeneutical theological stance. So such women are keen to emphasise that the way in which women have been denied access to positions of power in the Churches has been the result of the continuation of a tradition of fear about women which was perpetuated in the formative years of the early Church, and which has continued ever since. Christian feminists emphasise the "heresy" of the present churches who fail to attend to their message: that implicit in Jesus' treatment of women is a model of an ideal Church, and that this model can only be recovered through a proper exegetical model and a new hermeneutical framework to understand sacred writings which takes into account a feminist perspective. Implicit in Christian feminist cosmology is the understanding that males and females experience a qualitatively different understanding of religious expression which arises not simply because they have different gender roles put upon them. Christian feminists understand this to arise out of their experience of suppression: by necessity some women will attempt to recover a language, imagery and ritual expression which will adequately reflect their experiences. This experience is by no means unique to women, but includes slaves, the poor and the oppressed such as is articulated in liberation theology and some aspects of nonconformist religion in nineteenth century industrialised cities.

What are the dynamics and intentions, religious and otherwise, behind women's exclusion? The women interviewed felt that religion has done much to legitimise women's inferior status. Most obviously this is manifest in the way in which male and female are depicted in the symbolic order, and especially in the image of the Supreme Being. Where the image of the Supreme Being is identified as masculine, this will significantly affect the way in which actual human beings come to be perceived. The language of sacred action and scripture perpetuates the idea of a male God, as, for example, in the mass and creed. In the potent symbolic language of myth, women are often labelled as the bringer of adversity to humankind and as the very epitome of stupidity, sexual provocation and gullibility. At the same time, Christianity perpetuates the idea that both women and men are equal before God, "while they cheerfully admit that on every other level of human interaction there cannot be equality". [Interview, 15/4/88]

On the level of religious expression (where there is a formal organisation that supports gender bifurcation) there exist taboos on symbolic and ritual positions of authority. This is most apparent in the church's professions, especially the professional ministries of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, where sacerdotal activities are denied to women except under the most remote circumstances where a male is not available to preside. The question underlying all considerations about ministry per se is the ability of females to represent Christ at the altar, and this question is of

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39 This was explored in chapter IV, Object of Religion.
central concern to Christian feminists who seek to reform present ecclesiastical structures to incorporate women's concerns as equally and as fully as men's concerns which, they assert, currently unbalance the Anglican and Roman Communions.

What are the dynamics that underlie all manifestations of denial to women of women's full access to sacerdotal ministry? And what are the dynamics of the Christian feminist movement which seek to reform this situation? The answer, many feminists claim, lies in the existence of a symbolic dualism which is a universal phenomenon of all religions. A dualism which affects sex and gender bifurcation will inevitably influence the ways in which actual men and women view themselves. Different cultures assign varying degrees of worth and status to men and women's biological and gender roles, and so it is necessary to approach each cultural example individually.

English Christian feminists interviewed continuously stressed the historical reality of a gender and sex dualism which has become integral to the very fabric of institutionalised Christianity.

This dualism, they feel, is unhealthy for both men and women because it assigns to them rigid attributes and roles which do not allow for individuality, development and a combination of apparently "male" and "female" attributes. For example, the following have become fixed in the minds of Christian communicants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christ</td>
<td>The Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Passivity (receptiveness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Evil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The list is incomplete, but the above examples are sufficient to convey an idea of a fixed dualism in the religious understanding of Christianity. Christian feminists have argued that apart from the harmful self-images which such a division operates, this has been the very core of the argument for the denial of the priesthood to women. The fact of the physical maleness of Christ prevents "the other" from obtaining equal sacramental responsibility. Christian feminists have argued that this cosmology (which arises out of Pauline teaching) would suggest that males are made in the image of God and that women, who derive from men, do not have the same exalted status by virtue of their sex. In this way, Christian feminists argue, gender divisions become apparent in all areas of life. One way in which dualism manifests itself is in the construct of hierarchy. In institutionalised Christianity this has become a divine order in which God appears at the top presiding over men, women, children, animals, vegetation, inanimate objects, and so forth. The phenomenon which
permeates this hierarchy is power. Power in the Roman and Anglican communions is a paradigm which is felt by Christian feminists to exclude "marginal" groups (including themselves) from self-actualisation. Indeed, the power structure of institutionalised Christianity perpetuates orthodoxy defensively. Christian feminists feel that the unity of the churches occurs at the expense of those who do not truly benefit from this unity, such as the poor and victims of sexual and racial prejudice, and which they feel includes themselves.

The question which is at the forefront of Christian feminist consciousness in the late 1980's is not so much the question of the ordination of women (as is asserted in the media) but the question of the very nature of the authoritative ministry itself. The problem arises where Christian feminists perceive ministerial function as essentially being in authority over the community. They perceive a division, a dualism, between ministry and laity. Many Christian feminists interviewed professed themselves extremely uncomfortable with this paradigm. The women who did not articulate this concern viewed themselves as potential candidates for the priesthood and expressed a strong "calling" or "vocation". But they did feel that the presence of women in positions of sacerdotal ministry in the churches would bring significant changes to them insofar as women would bring a "feminising" character to an androcentric institution.

The majority of Christian feminists interviewed shared the concern for the importance of women's admission to the sacerdotal ministry, but their emphasis was on a vision of unity, a Christian community based on a communal consensus rather than a doctrinal one. The Christian feminist world view here is similar to the received account of the first Christian communities where the central paradigm was the story of the life of Jesus himself, rather than doctrine or dogma. So Christian feminists, who may have apparently divergent ideas about the professional ministries, in fact share a critique and a vision of ministry which is based on their perspectives as people who have been marginalised because their cosmology does not reflect the dominant institutional cosmology. They share a similar perspective to those who have experienced racial, cultural and economic oppression and who have espoused the tenets of liberation theology as a challenge to the theological and governmental establishments: the paradigm of liberation is one which forms a dynamic in both the Christian feminist and post-church feminist experience and requires further analysis in a later section.

Post-church feminists have similarly regarded the phenomenon of dualism in institutionalised Christianity with a painful recognition of its effects upon actual men and women. This is not to suggest that post-church or Christian feminists reject the concept of dualism entirely: their objection rests in its praxis where this affects the actual status and image of human beings, and in consequence the entire symbolic order of Christianity, including that of the Supreme Being itself. A post-church
critique of duality and polarity in Christianity was explored in chapter V, the Subject of Religion, where the author of the present work, herself a post-church feminist, makes a call for a paradigm shift in the way in which dualities are cognitively received, to incorporate a paradigm in which apparent opposites are perceived as operating on a polarity where they form a mutual attraction, rather than as opposites which repulse attraction.

Post-christian feminists regard dualistic ontology as having arisen out of the supersedence of a "male" God over a the Goddess. Such a development required a "violent" change in the attitude towards God by human beings. Sjöö claims that with a male God there was no longer the same qualitative "I-Thou" vital "biological and magical" link between the child and the father as there exists between child and mother. She refers to a loss "between the human and the divine of direct, continuous physical-emotional-spiritual relationship". Effectively, unity between the divine and the human, which was once continuous, becomes bifurcated: the individual human being's relationship with the divine is now "I-Other" or "I-It". This critique is not dissimilar to the duality paradigm by the author of the present work in chapter III. But post-christian feminists claim that the supersedence of the Father over the Mother has shattered the experience of the cosmic unity of the self with the All (God):

The father is not of the same all-containing, all-infusing, shaping and nourishing substance, and so the relation between humans and the Father God becomes abstract and alienated, distant and moralistic.

Post-christian feminists perceive the Father God as having been enforced upon communities where the Mother had primacy. By necessity, its ideology had to be guilt-projecting, and this guilt was controlled by a male priesthood which could "redeem' us from the 'sin' of being born from the Mother". Sjöö claims that the idea of original sin was conceived in order to rationalise the "unnatural" new relation between the soul and the new God who was conceived as perfect and apart from his creation. This duality "lays the basis for all further alienated relationships - between people and God, between people and people, between people and the natural world". Sjöö claims that the figure of a father God is so remote from the world that he can only be spoken about in terms which are not equated with matter: Logos, perfect, good, disembodied Spirit. It becomes difficult to explain the existence of suffering and death where God is regarded as a spiritual generation. So matter becomes regarded as exceedingly corrupt; mother nature herself acquires a dual aspect under patriarchy which becomes regarded as anomalous - a producer and capricious

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40 Monica Sjöö, op. cit., 230.
41 Ibid., 231.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
One of the ways in which the dynamics of the tensions between gender, sexuality and religion find expression is in the liberation theology. Feminism offers a challenge to the symbolic order of the Christian tradition, but feminists differ between themselves on the question of authority to liberate the core symbolism of official religion from its androcentric bias. Post-christian feminists believe that there can be no appeal to the liberation traditions in the Bible because the God of the Bible is inextricably linked to a male divinity whose attributes and capacities derive from a warrior cult. They are not obliged to reform Christian tradition because their cosmology includes a return to pre-Christian times. Post-church feminists differ greatly between themselves about the divine authority of the Biblical tradition, but many of them are driven towards the analysis, reconstruction and creation of a new symbolic plane of reference based upon women's understanding of themselves. So these women may feel able to retell or reject Biblical stories with authority. Their answer to those critics (including Christian feminists) who have accused them of perpetrating a radical religion which is not "Christian" is that religious traditions are in a continual state of flux and transformation: they foresee the possibility of religious development whereby the traditional divinity represented by a male is superceded by an as yet unacceptable core symbolism reflecting women's religious experiences.

What is clear from talking to Christian- and post-church feminists is that they differ tremendously about the efficacy of dialogue between traditional androcentric theology and feminist theology. Some Christian- and most post-church feminists argue that patriarchal theology has already succeeded in retaining feminist theology at the margins of mainstream theology: it has failed to introduce feminist theology in a manner which affirms the full humanity and contribution of women. On the whole, Christian feminists are confident that feminist theology will gradually become a part of a "mainstream" theology, that is that it will deeply influence the direction of "patriarchal" focus.

The three groups of women studied recognise, in divergent ways, the religious legitimisation and sanction of forms of sex and gender stereotyping on the level of symbolism and practice. Both Christian feminists and post-church feminists recognise the possibility of an ethical transformation of the social and religious values which currently exploit women. This transformation is based on a model of liberation in which it is not possible to ignore the acute problems that sex and gender stereotyping effect by identifying with "the Mother" rather than with "the Father", which is a strategy adopted by post-christian feminists and cautiously evaluated by the other groups. The following will look briefly at how sex and gender stereotyping is sanctioned by Christianity in England in order to show the dynamics behind feminist protest about the lack of power in religious
The issue of the professional ministry and ritual inclusion is central to the consideration of women’s impotency in religious roles. The power redistribution associated with the symbolic importance of ordination presents an acute revision of gender roles and thus affects not only the structure of the clergy but also the laity. So the inclusion of women in positions of power in the ecclesiastical structure would mean far more than simply redressing their previous exclusion: it would mean a profound paradigm shift and review of women’s symbolic and actual status on every conceivable level of human existence. Officially, opposition to women’s sacerdotal ministry has been manifest on the theological level, and particularly with reference to the proclamations of Paul. Opposition to the ordination of women has been strongest where sacred word is understood to be of direct divine origin.\footnote{Romans 1:16, 2:6, 3:22, 6:1-11, 6:4, 8:2, 8:16c, 8:17, 8:21, 10:12, 12:2, 16:1-23. I Corinthians 1:16-30, 3:5-16, 4:8-21, 6:11-20, 7:1-39, 9:5, 10:11, 10:21, 11:2-16, 11:3, 11:16-25, 12:13, 14:4-40, 15:3-7, 16:3, 16:12-19. II Corinthians 3:1, 3:17, 5:17, 6:1-2, 6:14-7:1, 11-12.} In the Christian feminist and post-church milieu the main consensus is that such proclamations are the outcome of Paul’s particular culture rather than the objective correlative message of the tradition. This is the cause of a tension both within the churches themselves and from without. The women interviewed mostly agreed that the churches recognised the existence of both a secular and Christian feminist movement but have chosen to ignore or avoid the issues because they feared the necessity of a complete internal revolution, or that they have resisted the ordination with the shallow excuse that it is a threat to ecumenism. So the concern of proponents and opponents of women’s ordination centres around the issue of power: power on a symbolic and actual level which forms a challenge to the prevailing gender order currently operating in the churches in England.

The three groups of women interviewed stressed how religious norms have traditionally dictated moral or behavioral paradigms by legitimising or sacralising gender distinctions in labour, marital responsibilities, the nurture of children, education, sexuality, physical activities and societal status. Further, religion has sanctioned such gender distinctions because they often carry moral absolution where religion is institutionalised. They also stressed the importance of women gaining social as well as religious power in religious organisations, and especially ritual organisation and praxis: these are largely denied to women and form the symbolism of women’s powerlessness and unworthiness. So women recognise the importance of ritual and symbolic status outside as well as inside the home, where they have traditionally been given status as good wives and mothers. Women’s status in
public ritual has been and in some instances, still is, visibly subordinate to men’s, most apparently in women’s ritual marginality in churches, but also that until recently in the Roman and Anglican traditions women had to undergo a special purification after childbirth (“churching”) before they could participate in group and sacramental activities, although a small number of women have power to vote in decisions made in the Synods and Assemblies. Christian- and post-church feminists almost universally regard the presence of women in such positions as “tokenist”. Often, preclusive restraints on women in ritual organisation and praxis arise where beliefs are constructed upon Scripture or an older tradition. In the Christian tradition these restraints are manifold, and arise from the earliest Scripture of Paul through the admonitions of the Patristic era and beyond into the future.

All the literature produced by Christian feminists to date has explored the legitimation of women’s inferior status in religion in the symbolism of language and the cultus. In particular the works of North American writers Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, Carol Christ, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and the Jewish psychologist of religions, Naomi Goldenberg, have pioneered this field. Their radical stance has inspired women in the United Kingdom to publish works on spirituality, in particular Sara Maitland, Susan Dowell, Linda Hurcombe, Meinrad Craighead, the Rev Dr Una Kroll, Jo Garcia, Leonie Caldecott, Gail Chester, Janet Morley, Michele Roberts, Helen Sands, Angela West and Margaret Wright.

It is possible to speak of a common understanding of the religious legitimation of sexual caste in all three groups of women studied. All three understand dualism as the symbolic root of many regrettable states in the world: sexism, racism, ecological indifference and poverty. The Christian feminist Sara Maitland speaks of dualism as “splitting the wholeness of God’s creation into divisions labelled ‘good’ and ‘bad’” and as

a fundamental ground of oppression - the ability to assert that me and mine are better than that which is the Other, and justifying this by making God, the ultimate Other, over in one’s own image.

Further, she argues that women become protagonists and victims of dualism because they assimilate all its projections into “self-hatred, self-abnegation, self-assertion, the denial of sexuality, the safety and comfort of projections”. But she notes with confidence that some women are challenging this, particularly the “unhealthy” model of ministry.

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45 Sara Maitland, op. cit., 19.
46 Ibid., 20.
English feminists have met the challenge to the symbolic order of institutionalised Christianity in a qualitatively different way from sisters in the United States. The dynamics underlying this are significant, for English feminists lack the fluidity of tradition that has enabled North American feminists to make the quantitative spiritual and theological leaps forward. There is little opportunity for women in England to explore theology professionally because its theological institutions are few and highly reactionary. So progress in England is qualitatively and quantitatively different from developments in the United States. This is not to deny the extraordinary variety of ways in which English feminists have challenged the prevailing symbolic order. This challenge differs from the mainstream challenge of North American feminists whose demand not only for parity with men but for a total recognition of women's cosmology has been and is being granted - albeit reluctantly - by the institutions. The process in England is much slower. Post-church feminists do not envisage a qualitative change to the symbolic order of institutionalised Christianity either now or in the future: patriarchal cosmology is too diffuse in Christianity to self-critically revise its nature. The answer for women who understand themselves as Christians is to defect from the churches and try to reconstruct a meaning in the Christian message which is appropriate to them as women. While for these women there may be some solidarity with the secular Women's Movement, religious expression is problematic. So post-church feminists, who represent a new, largely mute religious movement, have appropriated aspects of other religious traditions (and, consequently, their symbolic orders), particularly those which include meditation practices, such as Buddhist. A spiritual paradigm shift is occurring in this sector where women are looking to themselves (inwardly) as women for images to represent God. This may account for the prolific output of writings by Christian- and post-church feminists which are deeply personal and autobiographical in tone.47

The post-christian rejection of the sex and gender stereotyping of women is even more radical: not only is there a rejection of "patriarchal" religions, but there is a complete denial of their relevance for women at all. Their call for a paradigm shift from the "Father" to the "Mother" on the level of Supreme Being has infuriated many Christian- and post-church feminists who have accused the proponents of Goddess worship of potentially committing the same crimes against the image of humanity as patriarchy has effected against women. They fear that this cosmology will form an inverted patriarchy where men's self-image is perverted so that they are unable to operate themselves as full human beings and God-imaged.

The growth of Christian- post-church- and post-christian feminist activity in England in the last two decades has bought an awareness that women's experience of religion is often qualitatively different

from men’s. This fact is of more interest to the phenomenologist than to many women of the first two groups whose aim was to try to present women’s understanding and religious experience in order to redress the balance of religious understanding which is implicit in religion which has been shaped and defined by men! Even the impressive tradition of female mystics is still subject to ecclesiastical authority. Clearly, feminist cosmology is in a tension with a dominant ethos. In order to illustrate how women envision the possibility of change away from the religious legitimation of sex and gender stereotyping, this section will focus on how they themselves perceive this tension with the world. It will then go on to show what specifically religious forms this takes.

**World tension**

Christian feminists have understood sexism in the world as an expression of sin against God. It is necessary for Christians to forego sin by rejecting sexism by a commitment to struggling against it and all its forms on all levels of human activity. Christians have a commitment to a community (church), but historically they have perpetuated sexism in creed and the cultus. The smallest concessions to change (such as in language and in gender roles) have caused deep divisions within the community which have often led the authorities to become even more entrenched in their rejection of religious development. But still they have made a call for feminism to be embraced as part of the churches’ understanding of community. This has been adopted, often very successfully, in only a few liberal churches. One of the ways in which feminists feel that the feminist model is not compatible with the churches is that the model of hierarchy in institutions is so intrinsic to the community spirit that it would be impossible for women to participate in ministry in the widest (and professional) sense of the word on anything more than a token level. So feminists in the churches form sub-communities and do not regard themselves as sectarian, heretical, apostate or schismatic. They may function as consciousness-raising groups or may appropriate for themselves ritual aspects of worship such as a woman celebrating the Eucharist.

Post-church feminists experience tension with the churches as an "exodus community", and as such their critique of its creed and ritual is vigorous. Largely, post-church feminists do not perceive the possibility of significant changes within the institutionalised churches now or at any time in the future. Further, they perceive that the patriarchal ethos of the churches is not an isolated phenomenon, but is reflected in all aspects of human life. So sexism is so pervasive that it is necessary for women to make a stand against its manifestations by choosing to leave them. One of the grievances of post-church feminists concerns institutionalised religion’s denial of the insights which have been available to Christians with the inception of psychology, and particularly of Jungian depth psychology and developmental psychology which has explored the historical, biological and cognitive
aspects of gender stereotyping. Further, post-church feminists have felt the enormous understanding of the subject of religion which has come about through the growth of anthropology. They want to incorporate both psychology and anthropology into the corpus of theology in order to represent a fuller understanding of human relationships with God and with each other.

For post-christian feminists, world tension is felt so totally that they have wholly rejected the dominant patriarchal ethos of the present world-order. They feel the loss of a physical, emotional and spiritual relationship with the divine in which the individual's being has been divided by a dualistic paradigm into "self" and "God". The corollary of this is that creation per se becomes seen as evil: there is alienation between the world and God. This has resulted in the human diseases of poverty, isolation, depression and physical illness as the spiritual needs of human beings are understood to be in great tension with the reality of technological patriarchy. Women who participate in Goddess worship acquire individual and collective powers which are not valued by patriarchy (see the following section).

**Religious forms**

In spite of the fact that the issue of feminism and spirituality is still in its early stages in England, it is possible to point to a number of religious forms which arise out of the tension between feminist cosmologies and the world which constitute new religious movements. The final chapter of this work will give a fuller account of the world of phenomena, but it is appropriate at this point to mention those salient forms which have arisen directly out of a feminist critique of the religious legitimation of gender stereotyping.

Many Christian feminists professed to be drawn to the tenets of liberation theology because of its identity with the oppressed. Christian feminists understand themselves to be oppressed by the patriarchal forms of the dominant religious institutions which they belong to. Liberation theology has evolved out of many different social situations and so it has many creeds. But broadly, it is the traditional understanding of the image of God and the historical Jesus which are challenged: liberation theologies assert "a gospel priority of justice and freedom over the more traditional images of a God of peace and gentleness". Maitland, quoted here, also argues that the theologies of the Incarnation as held by the Western churches are "seriously inadequate". She feels that traditional theology has reduced the significance of God's humanity. Maitland asserts that
The Incarnation put both the responsibility and the power to transform the world into the hands of human beings, who therefore have a responsibility to act in the most affirmative ways. She calls the passive endurance of oppression in the hope of a future reward after death "a sin itself."

Another religious form which arises out of the encounter of Christian feminist cosmology with the world is the reconstruction of the symbolic order, particularly in the area of theology. This arises out of the feminist tenet that maleness does not ordain a priority to represent the Supreme Being. Christian feminists feel that images of God can be drawn from all areas of human experience, not just from one gender. Margaret Hebblethwaite has written about her experience of finding God in motherhood and motherhood in God. Many Christian feminists interviewed were unhappy with the traditional imagery of "parenting" to describe the relationship between God and human beings because the assumption in such a relationship is that humans should relate to God on the level of dependency at all stages in their lives. Women interviewed expressed dissatisfaction that this image has not been balanced traditionally with those images which arise out of a fuller human experience, and particularly the experience of oppression.

So Christian feminists are calling for symbolism and language which represents God as a liberator. Such a shift in emphasis reflects a curiously Gnostic or Manichaean understanding which is rooted in the idea that God has rejected the material world, the world of nature, which becomes identified with evil. Feminist theology rejects this negative form of dualism and the symbolism which enables theology to be identified with particular dominant social systems. Some women expressed a desire for a paradigm shift in an understanding of God whereby God is understood as residing at the very root of human nature rather than wholly outside it, an understanding shared by Christian mystics.

Christian feminists were deeply divided about the issue of the professional ministry (or clericalism). Some women understood the hierarchy and its monopoly of the priesthood, creed and sacraments, as the sacralisation of the infantilisation of human beings. Others saw women's full participation in the priesthood as a pivotal role in the struggle for the rejection of the equation of femaleness with evil and the achievement of parity status with men. Christian feminists in England have taken heed of Rosemary Ruether's call for a "feminist liberation community" which purport the central tenet of

48 Sara Maitland, op. cit., 14.
49 Ibid., 14.
50 Ibid., 14.
51 Ibid., 15.
52 Margaret Hebblethwaite, Motherhood and God (London: SPCK, 1985).
redemption in Christianity and in particular, redemption from sexism. This entails a thorough revision of the symbols of Western Christianity and the inclusion of a new, more appropriate order in which women's rites of passage are included meaningfully, with emphasis upon redemption through symbols of nourishment and growth.

The invisibility of post-church feminists, who are not evident in a tangible organisation, would not seem to engender a great tension between these women and the world. Like Christian feminists, post-church feminists are ignored or tolerated on the margins of dominant institutions. It was never the intention of post-church feminists to form a rival, schismatic church in response to the religious forms of Western Christianity; nor have they seen themselves as revisionists or revivalists (like Christian feminists). It is only since 1984 that post-church feminists in England have begun to recognise themselves as a spiritual force and something more than a number of diffused and desperate individuals with a grudge against sex and gender stereotyping in the churches. Post-church cosmology is far more complex than this: the issue of gender stereotyping is regarded as one symptom of a greater dis-ease in the churches.

The religious forms of post-church spirituality are almost exclusively personal. At the present time it is not possible to point to any formal, visible rites, although post-church feminists did speak in the interviews about occasionally attending masses celebrated by women ministers. Sacred action (which is explored in more detail in the following chapter) has become a largely internal, personal matter for individual women. So post-church sacred action is most evident in private activity: prayer, meditation, mysticism, contemplation. If "sacred action" is taken to include "spirituality" then it is possible to speak of wider religious forms and dynamics. In the case of post-church spirituality the paradigm of "liberation" underlies its theological, religious and political dimensions.

Through a close identification with the "secular" Women's Movement, post-church feminists have understood the painful recognition of the parity of the symbolic, theological and religious dimensions of life with the social and political status quo. They assert that in recent years religion in some quarters has responded to the Marxist critique that religion acts as an opiate which subdues people to accept their lot in life passively and without complaint. This is most apparent in liberation theologies where its protagonists raise a new sense of individual consciousness and community by identifying the sources of oppression and dehumanisation in the human and divine

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order. Liberation theology attempts to broaden the jurisdiction of all sections of society which suffer under an oppressive system in which they are denied the power to make decisions about their lives.

Post-church feminism has espoused the methods of liberation theologies in its expose of the institutionalised forms of anti-feminism and also in its religious models which enable all men and women to repudiate the traditional ethic of passivity which does not enable Christians to challenge exploitation. Post-church feminists feel that it is not possible to remain in the churches while being aware of exploitation. This ethic has also been extended by some post-church feminists to include the complete rejection of the mentalities that enable rape, war and genocide to occur. 54

So post-church feminists perceive how the dominant social and religious realm dehumanises not only women but other sectors of society without power: on the levels of sex, culture and race.

For a long time now, I have held a deep conviction that spirituality is not just about our inner lives: it is about change from within forming the basis of changing society.

Post-christian religious forms arise in response to the underlying dynamic of the nostalgia to return to worship of the great Cosmic Mother of All, a form of religion which was usurped by the insurgence of a male-identified God. Jill Chadwick talks about spirituality as not being an alternative to political action, "but its core". 56 Implicit in this statement is the belief that religious ritual is capable of transforming world order. All the women interviewed believed that witchcraft (or wiccan) was the original nature of all women. Monica Sjöö suggests that witches cast spells "not to do evil but to promote changes of consciousness. Witches cast spells as acts of redefinition". 57 This ability is believed to be biologically engendered in women, although some men can be receptive to it. "Respelling the world" 58 is Sjöö's phrase for the feminist response to a growing recognition of the Goddess as the earth itself and her creation. This response takes many forms which will be studied in more depth in the following chapter. It is necessary only to name these religious forms here. The women interviewed recognised spirituality in the broadest sense in the individual creativity of every woman, but when asked to speak about spirituality in terms of specifically ritual-religious forms they spoke about witchcraft, Sabbats, healing, meditation, the Tarot, self-blessing, magick, menstruation, birth, death, dance, dreams, music, poetry, and creative visualisation.

54 Compare Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (London: The Women's Press, 1985).
56 Ibid.
57 Monica Sjöö, op. cit., 425.
58 Ibid.
CHAPTER VII

THE WORLD OF CHRISTIAN, POST-CHURCH-
AND POST-CHRISTIAN FEMINIST PHENOMENA

Sacred space

But what is it that makes a place "holy" or "sacred"?...this is the place where God dwells and where He reveals Himself.

The unfolding of God...involves the creation of new space, in which women are free to become who we are, in which there are real and significant alternatives to the prefabricated identities provided within the enclosed spaces of patriarchal institutions.2

We can change consciousness, we can transform our inner landscape, tell new stories, dream visions in new thought forms. But to change culture we need to bond in new ways, to change the structures of our organizations and communities...The structures of immanence are circular.3

Researching sacred space in Christian- and post-church feminist cosmology proved to be problematic in the first instance. Evidence of sacred space in post-christian feminism was abundant. Christian- and post-church women formed revisionist communities to existing religious structures.

It is possible to speak about a feminist religious understanding of sacred space which at once embraces and challenges traditionally androcentric Phenomenology of Religion. The women interviewed demonstrated an understanding of sacred space in terms of having "a share in the power, to hold communion with the sacredness".4 But they expressed a sense of estrangement from

2Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (London: The Women's Press, 1985). 
3Starhawk, Dreaming the Dark (Boston, U.S.A.: Beacon Press, 1982). 
the androcentric paradigm upon which they understood the construction of sacred space in mainstream patriarchal religion. The fact that none of the women interviewed for this study were familiar with phenomenological method was often the source of much frustration. The method employed in the interviews therefore resulted in an exercise in methodological humility and discovery, the greatest coming from the material itself, and being one which had not been presumed: that women themselves were discovering that their own bodies formed a model of sacred space. This fact in itself may not appear to be remarkable, but the challenge which it poses to traditional Phenomenology of Religion is this: it presents a direct challenge to its assumptions about world-view, which is almost universally androcentric, and by its emphasis upon the differences, both in sex and gender, between male and female, it encourages a new model of polarity (as opposed to polarisation) in which it is deemed appropriate to view the sexes.

The interviews associated with this section were conducted by asking the three groups of women similar questions. These questions were deliberately formulated to be as open-ended as possible:

Would you tell me, in your own words, the way in which you understand the universe to have religious meaning?

Do you have any ideas about the way in which you would like to see any changes or modifications made to places of worship which might reflect more adequately your particular religious understanding of the Ultimate Being and the world?

Tell me about your own understanding of any tangible meeting points between you and the Ultimate Being in this world.

The women interviewed were given a day to think about all the questions relating to the whole interview and were encouraged to illustrate examples. The results were very revealing and illustrated the very deep differences between the groups and similarities within them. It seems appropriate in this section to begin by describing, as briefly as possible, the objective correlative of the results and then to begin to effect a phenomenological exploration to uncover the specifically religious intentions implicit in their meanings.

Christian feminist understanding of sacred space manifested itself predominantly in two ways: firstly, there was an emphasis upon the historical Jesus as axis mundi and the very hypostasis of God on earth. The emphasis here was very much upon the "God-ness of Jesus in his relationship to actual women", even "his femininity" [interview, 15/11/87]. The second emphasis was the desire to design and construct a place of worship which would adequately reflect a "fully human" or "woman-inclusive" [15/1/88] perspective. The combination of these two factors invites some fascinating questions within the context of the Christian feminist paradigm: for instance, what is the relationship between sacred space and the Christian feminist understanding of the cosmic Christ, and
what are the implications of this understanding for the internal structures of mainstream, institutionalised Christianity?

In the interviews, post-church feminists revealed, consistently and individually, their understanding that women's experience (at least in the West) has been repressed and deeply wounded by patriarchal models. As with Christian feminists, this invites the interesting question about the existence or nonexistence of a "female nature". What was significant about all the women interviewed from this group was their understanding that although men and women's roles in reproduction are vastly different, these factors do not in themselves justify the highly complex gender roles that have been exploited by men and which justify their positions of authority in society. In fact, it will be shown in a following section that post-church feminists take a radical position in relation to gender-imposed roles insofar as they understand them as the means of achieving a dualism in human life in which the male is regarded as the norm and the female at the "other". Further, post-church feminists were quick to indicate the way in which symbolism can be used by a dominant group to assign a place to everything - including women - to objectify them in relation to a (superior) subject. It does not require a great leap of the imagination to apply this warning to the Phenomenology of Religion. It applies to the relationship of the phenomenologist and her/his object of study. Here there is a danger that the personal symbolic order of the scholar may encroach upon her/his academic judgement (this is most universally illustrated by the traditional view of the Study of Religion that masculine forms of religious expression are normative and the female's are derivative). A doctor-patient or clergy-congregation type of relationship...in it there is the implicit assumption by both parties that the first is actually doing the other a favour.

So how do post-church feminists begin to struggle against the potency of the institutions of language and symbolism (written and spoken speech, writing, myth, ritual)? They have formulated a rich and thorough historical understanding that women's sexuality has been repressed and limited to specific gender roles. Women have been prevented from voicing their perspective in almost every area of life: so the authentic expression of real women, by the fact of their marginalisation, has been prevented, and real women become symbolically and actually relegated to a passive and negative role in a dualism which encourages the polarisation of the sexes. The opposing concept of the polarity of the sexes is a fundamental and integral aspect of post-church cosmology. Christian feminist cosmology largely purports the idea of biological differences between the sexes which bestow different potential abilities upon both sexes, both physically and psychologically. Their desire is for this female side of human life to be recognised and accorded the equal status which is given to men's. This is not to say that Christian feminists wish to dictate which roles men and women

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5 This is discussed in a further section about sacred community.
should take upon themselves, but there is an overwhelming understanding that women are more suited to the caring and nurture of children, but that women should be admitted to the priesthood. The latter is asserted with the underlying intention that the particularly feminine attitude to life of women should be recognised and valued as part of a fully human orientation. So for most Christian feminists who are not professional academics and theologians, cosmology rests on the assumption of a biological-psychological difference between the sexes.

Further on in this section, it is intended to return to this point to illustrate how this cosmology determines Christian feminist orientation towards sacred space, an orientation which is a model of opposition and complement. This model is qualitatively different from the post-church model which is constructed on a paradigm of polarity of the sexes, but which does not perpetuate the idea of complementary gender roles. Post-church feminists were asked whether their understanding of polarity in the sexes indicated a form of "androgyne". This was universally denied by the women interviewed, all of whom demonstrated considerable hostility to this term. One woman claimed that

Androgyne is a word which, to my mind, evokes ideas about abolishing or denying the differences between men and women, whether they are genital, psychological, or determined by society...I have been able to see the humanity, the strength of my womanhood since I left the [Roman Catholic] Church, even in my apparently weak status as a woman! You see, even in the roles which have been forced on me as a result of my sex - silence, humility, receptiveness - I have gained spiritual strength because teamed with my feminism, I am in a position to be able to receive a heightened understanding about the nature of God.

[Interview, n.d.]

A clue which led to further questions resulting in some interesting evidence about sacred space lay in post-church understanding of themselves as former Christian feminists. Most of the post-church women interviewed had spoken of their "Exodus" from the institutionalised churches in deeply moving, often painful, but wholly positive terms. They spoke universally of their new situation in terms of

being more in touch with myself...being able to make sense of my sex, my gender, my self in a way that I wasn’t able to before because of the constraints of Christian

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6 Note that this phenomenon differs from the U.S.. There are exceptions to this in England too, for example, Sara Maitland, op. cit., a Christian feminist, has rejected the notion of biological-psychological sex differences as the legitimation of rigid gender roles. However, the assertions here are based upon extensive interviews with typical Christian feminists who are not professional writers or academics.

[Interview, n.d.]
dualism.

[Interview, 12/1/88]

understanding that the way the world went 'round, and the people in it, was subject to being determined by males...afterwards, I knew that I was a part of that world too, and I had every right to determine my world as a woman too.

[14/1/88]

and it came to me in a flash that if I was to be true to this new understanding of the world, I had to come to terms with all the things about being a woman that I had been unconsciously ashamed of - beginning with my body.

[12/1/88]

The great difference between Christian- and post-church feminist cosmology is in the way each perceive their sexual identity. Post-church feminists emphasise that the female body itself is the primary source of knowledge that women have about themselves in the world because the body exists before acculturation, before there are any symbolic systems imposed upon it by the nuclear family or society. Post-church feminists assert that men and women as people never develop in the context of physical maturation alone, but are subject to the Western nuclear family and the symbolic order of churches and societies which deeply stereotype their self-images as gender roles which many feel to be "unnatural". The post-church response to this is pragmatic. Their response to the existence of male-female difference, whether it is culturally, biologically or socially determined, is to effect a model of male-female polarity. The polarity model permits women and men to think about themselves in terms which do not assign values to either side, but which do not deny obvious genital differences. It is this last clue that gives the key to post-church understanding of sacred space. Post-church feminists have reappropriated the female body itself as a symbol which does justice to the cultural, racial, sexual and libidinal differences between women themselves. In this way, the symbolic value of the female body does not deny her obvious difference to men's, but celebrates it. As part of a polarity, it enables women and men to understand themselves in terms which do not assign either as a paradigmatic source of reference to the "other". This understanding is at once simple and profound. Later in this chapter we shall see how polarity as a model for post-church sacred space is manifest in post-church cosmology.

Finally we turn to post-christian feminists. The Matriarchy Network in England differs from Christian- and post-church feminist structure, for it has been the meeting point for a large number of post-christian women who have often organised themselves into tangible religious communities in which experiences and beliefs are shared in long-established ritual forms. Religious understandings of sacred space are inducive and arise out of post-christian pantheism in which the cosmos is perceived to be the hypostasis of the Goddess. The sacrality of the world is the crux of
post-Christian cosmology, and this is manifest in particular in certain forms such as the circle: Hence Starhawk's pronouncement that "The structures of immanence are circular". 7

The following section will explore the manifestation of sacred space in the three groups discussed above in terms of three criteria: religious belief, religious ritual and the meaning for the collective group and the individual.

Christian feminists interviewed were asked to explain how they understood the universe to have religious meaning. All the women made allusions to the centrality of Christ in their conception of the universe by references to the balanced and integrated oppositions of "masculine" and "feminine" aspects of the historical Jesus which they understand to have been dramatically misunderstood by Western Christianity in its institutionalised forms. For these women this understanding provided the basis for a mature basis of meaningful belief (and consequently of ritual) which is a form of revealed sacredness, for Christian feminists espouse the idea of God's revelation through time.

My understanding of the world only makes sense to me through the image of a cosmic Christ which is both at the same time an extension of a common body (I mean, both human and divine) and which captures universal truths about human lives (you would call them "myths").

[Interview, 29/4/88]

So space acquires a fully human and sacred quality when it embraces a continuation of male and female body symbols, and an intensification of cosmic and myth-related images. This statement eloquently typifies what many Christian feminists had difficulty in expressing. It expresses at once a common religious need and intention towards a symbolic centre which recognises the existence and needs of both males and females. It is a powerful expression of a troubled and impotent sector of a religious group: it is a cry for symmetry in a vast community which has lost its sense of space in relation to the cosmos and in relation to their own mythology, social and personal relationships.

What Christian feminists are suggesting in their concept of sacred space is a challenge to formal Christian beliefs which have been a powerful influence upon Christians, both cognitively and intellectually. They understand that human paradigms which become intellectually and historically ingrained face the danger of becoming irrelevant, stale and therefore lacking in meaning. Armed with the understanding of how some sexist Christian images have harmed the Christian community, Christian feminists are attempting to show how alternative metaphors can provide new structures for human action in a religious context. Let us see how this manifests itself in the Christian feminist

7 Starhawk, Dreaming the Dark (Boston, U.S.A.: Beacon Press, 1982).
understanding of religious ritual.

Christian feminists oppose gender segregation in religious ritual, and this is demonstrated in their understanding that sacred space reflects religious experience of individuals and the collective group. The women interviewed expressed a wish for "feminine" symbols to constitute an active part in places of worship. For instance, one woman felt that traditionally "feminine" areas of experience such as childbirth and the nurture of children should form a central part of the conceptualisation of sacred space and iconography in Christianity. Such an emphasis upon the "feminine" dimension of human experience would be given a tangible, public and cosmic form in its integration into a place of worship and lessen the traditional taboo and latent misogyny associated with it.

For post-church feminists there is much stress on the awareness of the potency of myth as paradigms for human life: it is this aspects of religious belief which assumes a greater role in post-church cosmology than religious ritual (which is almost nonexistent). When asked how they felt that the universe possessed a religious meaning, post-church women revealed a common understanding:

The most important religious fact to me is the fact of Jesus' humanity...that he is God in human form. This gives me the certainty that human beings should emulate Jesus' God-ness: God can never reduce to emulating human behaviour. What Jesus offered to human beings was a blueprint for a new human mode of behaviour.

The fact of the life of Jesus provides for me a rationale and structured meaning for events in my life. His orientation towards women is revealed in a constructive reading of the New Testament, but this has not been pursued by Christianity as a movement.

If men and women who share in the political concept of a body of human beings gathering together without the hierarchy associated with the established Churches, then they really are an ecclesia. And I use the word "body" because this really does express the fact that all human beings are equal in body as well as in spirit. They are an incarnation of a new religious community: but a community which is one in the symbol of the body of Christ. We feel that in order for a God which becomes human to be adequately symbolised, it is appropriate that the symbolism should not be disproportionately associated with a particular gender.

[Interviews, 3/4/88]

Let us look at some of the religious implications underlying these statements which illuminate the understanding of sacred space. We shall see how a post-church understanding of ecclesia expresses the religious wish for the reality of a future gathering of people in which no person is excluded from the ministry of the discipleship of equals on the basis of sex. God's hypostasis, the historical Christ, is understood as the very model of the experience of God's presence which can be repeated in a religious community through each other.
In their notions of religious belief, post-church feminists do not perceive sacred space as the integration and balance of opposites based on sex or gender, in the way that this is understood in Christian feminist praxis. There is more emphasis upon the understanding of the female body itself as being the source of revelation about God’s nature. For example, about a third of the women questioned spontaneously expressed a wish for sacred space in the form of a communal place of worship to be based upon the symbol in Revelation 12 of God giving birth to the world. The implications of the female body as a symbol of God can also be illustrated in religious ritual. Post-church feminists emphasise that the very fact of their exodus from the institutionalised churches is a religious affirmation of their beliefs that many forms of sacred action performed in the churches do not fully reflect their particular understanding of the Supreme Being. These women are attempting to generate an awareness of religious meaning to revalorate communal worship so that the group can collectively experience and share its understanding of God. Given its revolutionary stance and its emphasis upon a community based on a revisionist hermeneutical reading of the Bible, it seems anomalous that post-christian feminists are the least visible of the three groups studied in the present work. There appears to be an acute dearth of ritual which might otherwise provide the group with a shared identity. The post-church response to this is revealing.

It's only since '84 that some women in Britain have been able to recognise themselves as an "exodus community" from the churches. Some of us have been accused of having "sold out" by our Catholic sisters. There has apparently been no place for us until now...those of us who have left the churches are accused of having left behind all that is sacred: the ritual in particular. Perhaps what we are showing the world is that religion in modern times, for good or ill, is a development through a lot of factors that have obscured the meaning behind religious acts...

[Interview, 4/11/88]

and yes, I don't feel at all sentimental about leaving behind a lot of the ritual associated with the Roman church. Only the Mass itself holds meaning for me...I have felt the need to burst out of the Church and into a wider community of faith: the world itself. I am constrained by the narrow dogmatism of a religion catered for and run by men. My image of a Church is much wider: the human mirror image of a mothering father and a fathering mother!

[Interview, 15/11/88]

What is apparent in these statements is not the desire for the obliteration of religious ritual itself but the meaningful application of religious belief which can strengthen a group's unity. For instance, all post-church feminists stressed the importance of an increased pragmatic assistance between human beings based on religious understanding in such matters as diverse as sexism, racism and ecology.

Post-church feminists have professed themselves in varying ways to being, as one woman expressed
it, "shell-shocked" by the profusion of male-orientated ritual, and as needing respite from its manifestations. Many post-church feminists agreed that they experienced inner peace and religious satisfaction in the weekly Meeting of the Society of Friends, but the same number also expressed a desire for a more ceremonial ritual which outwardly expressed the fullness of post-church understanding of God.

Post-church feminists recognise the importance of sacred space in reflecting and actively promoting social change: all the women interviewed stressed that the needs of a community should be reflected in a place of worship; and that a place of worship should also reflect communal social action by confronting all forms of physical and mental poverty. Post-church feminists press for pragmatism in religious leadership, but stress that "leadership" should be only by appointment by the religious community. This form of leadership may be more readily understood by the phrase "Priesthood of believers": it is a leadership in which each individual member of the community retains equal access to the ministry of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The women interviewed stressed that this aspect should be reflected in sacred space where provision should be made for bringing the Eucharist table to the community, as in the centre, for instance. For them, sacred space should reflect the internal structures of religious meanings, especially tensions between personal and local understandings and the greater security which the organisation may have, in order for religious development to occur without schism.

The importance of reappropriating the apparent matriarchal or matrifocal meaning of sacred space is central to post-christian feminist religious belief. For post-christian feminists, this has the same meaning as reclaiming and celebrating evidence of the Goddess' manifestations in nature. For post-christian feminists, a religious understanding of sacred space is the experience of sacred energy.

The circle forms the basic structure in communal rituals, especially the Sabbat, when the women of a coven meet in a thirteen-pointed circle. It is the actual and symbolic configuration of the immanence of the Goddess, and is understood to encourage exposure to channels of divine power. The circle symbolically banishes hierarchy so that women become equally receptive to divine power. This energy is perceived symbolically as a cone, and indeed, the invocation at the beginning of a Sabbat is called "raising the cone of power" in most covens. The form of the circle derives from nature and is an imitation of the full moon, or the Goddess mirrored in nature.

The four directions and the elements play an important role in some forms of ritual, for example,

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8 For more detail, see the final section of this chapter about sacred action.
monthly Sabbats, menarche celebrations, menstrual rituals, healing and purification ceremonies. They are used to invoke the Goddess (in Sabbats), to thank her for being created female (in menstruation rituals, for example)

Face the North Saying:
I thank my Mother Earth that I was born a woman.
Blow out the North candle. Face the West saying:
I thank the waters of the world that I was born a woman.
Blow out the West candle. Face the South saying:
I thank the fire and flame of life that I was born a woman.
Blow out the South candle. Face the East saying:
I thank the winds that roam the skies that I was born a woman.
Blow out the East candle. Face the North saying:
Merry meet and merry part and merry meet again.
Blow out the altar candles.

The importance of directions and elements in ritual is that the ritual structure of a circle of (usually) thirteen points forms a locus of power for their energies. Thus channelled, these energies can be seized upon by individual or collective women to be used in a non-hierarchical, non-violent way.

Post-Christian feminists were anxious to reappropriate the original “matriarchal” meaning of sacred places. There is implicit here an understanding of a pre-patriarchal condition where human beings were aware of the immanence of the Goddess in their lives. The women of the Devon coven were especially keen to show some evidence of this in the surrounding area on the outskirts of Dartmoor. It is possible to separate two types of space into natural phenomena and human-made phenomena. Let us look at some examples.

Monica Sjöö mentions earth mounds as the primordial belly of the Goddess. She refers to Silbury Hill in Wiltshire as “the largest surviving image of the Goddess from Neolithic Europe ... a vision of cosmic unity lost to patriarchy.” Monica Sjöö’s claims that its mountain form was instrumental in generating forms of energy where prophecy, oracular and shamanic states could take place. This is corroborated by one woman from the Devon coven who spoke of Hey Tor on Dartmoor as the locus of energy which gave women the potential to heal in ritual. The earth mound, whether it is part of nature or constructed by human beings, represents the Goddess in her earth mother aspect. Mount Caburn near Lewes is another example of this, and a traditional Lammas site. What characterises all sacred space in post-Christian cosmology is that all phenomena are either pathways to or the locus of power of the Goddess.

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9 Menstrual Ritual created by Diane Sweet Pea. Private Circulation.
10 Monica Sjöö, op. cit., 104.
11 Matriarchal Research and Reclaim Newsletter (MRRN)50 (Lammas, 1988), 2.
In England, such phenomena have often been distinguished by a human-made feature such as at St. Non's Well in Pembrokeshire, a site associated with healing from the fifth century. This site is surrounded by the remains of a stone circle. Sacred springs are of particular interest to post-Christian feminists because of their healing aspect. Sacred springs are believed to be the locus of power of sacred energy pathways which form an underground grid of the Goddess' power. Sacred springs mark the spot where this power meets the human world, and so the water is understood to contain a special divine power. Post-Christian feminists speak of other phenomena which are either part of or which indicate the presence of sacred energy pathways. These are mounds, banks, ditches, dolmens, menhirs, stone crosses, stone circles, stone terraces and stone roads.

Sacred time

It will become apparent that between the three groups of women studied there is an enormous diversity in their religious understanding of sacred time. This is most apparent between post-church and post-Christian feminists, where the manifestation of sacred space in the latter is deeply embedded in sacred action and sacred community. The concept of sacred time in post-church cosmology is, conversely, more abstract and philosophical, but lacking in any tangible application in sacred action. Christian feminists' understanding of sacred time has a strong mythical and nostalgic quality, where there is a yearning for a time in illo tempore, or nostalgia for a return to the values concerning women of the time of the historical Jesus.

But first it is important to explore some of the ways in which contemporary feminist theory can enhance a phenomenological exploration of sacred time. It is appropriate to speak of two forms. Both are times in which the Supreme Being is revealed. The first is revelation in history, the other pertains to sacred action in the present. Julia Kristeva, French psychoanalyst and member of the Ecriture feminine school of thought, argues in an essay entitled "Women's Time" that women's experience of time is quantitatively and qualitatively different from men's, and that this arises from women's subjectivity:

On the one hand there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extrasubjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12} MRRN 56 (Summer Solstice, 1989)}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{13} Trans., Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, Signs 7,1 (1981)}\]
This is "cyclical time", but there is another form of time, "monumental time", which is not associated with linear time in which "there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape". She alludes to James Joyce's words, "Father's time, mother's species" in which she perceives a difference between the way men and women have been understood in the process of the forming of the human species. For women, she says "one thinks more of the space ... than of time, becoming, or history", and she lays claim to the discovery that this is evident in "an anterior or concomitant maternal cult", and that evidence of this exists in Christianity in which the body of the Virgin Mother does not die but moves from one spatiality to the other via dormition...or via assumption...

Kristeva claims that initially, the Women's Movement "aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history" and was therefore concerned with social and political demands. Since 1968 she has argued that the "younger women" who have come to feminism have brought with them a concern which is qualitatively different ... in its conception of its own identity and, consequently, of temporality as such. Essentially interested in the specificity of female psychology and its symbolic realizations, these women seek to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past. [My emphasis]

This important point is also explored by Ann Rosalind Jones who agrees with Kristeva that women function in a marginalised stance to male culture and therefore do not have access to the creation of myths. She points out that furthermore women "are no longer impressed by them!" Women are able to create an alternative with reference to a powerful alternative source: their own bodies and experience. Kristeva's analysis was reflected in the religious beliefs of many of the women interviewed. They expressed an often confident and mature understanding of the part that sacred time played in their cosmologies which greatly assisted phenomenological analysis because often the women themselves were able to recognise and identify religious meanings and intentions implicit in

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14 Ibid., 16.
15 Ibid., 16.
16Ibid., 16.
17 Source unspecified in text.
18 Ibid., 17.
19 Ibid., 18.
20Ibid., 19.
21 Ibid., 366.
their beliefs.

A few words need to be said about the modality of tenses which were used in the interviews by the women. This recognition was an enormous help to understanding the religious-ideological intentions underlying religious beliefs and actions. Christian feminists, without exception, used two main tenses: the past perfect (to refer to events in the life of Jesus) and the future conditional (to refer to the implementation of their revisionist mode in the institutionalised churches).²²

It was interesting to note that post-church feminists often, although not universally, spoke in the modality of the future perfect. A Practical English Grammar²³ defines the future perfect as

an action/event which at a given time in the future will be the past.

The post-church espousal of this modality is significant because its use suggests that women have potential as historical agents; but it does not imply a utopic future engineered by women. It reflects the deep pragmatism that is implicit in post-church cosmology which implies the construction of a future which functions on a paradigm which is anti-institutional, but in which it is recognised that there will be both progress and setbacks. When speaking of personal religious experiences, all women consistently used the present tense, for example, "I experience..." or "God acts...". Post-christian feminists refer to specific manifestations of the Goddess in history in the past tense, but this is qualified by their almost universal application of the present tense in all references to Her, which implies an inclusion of the past and the future, for the Great Goddess is all-pervasive. While noting individuals' diversity in women's religious understanding of sacred time, it was possible to conclude that there were distinct characteristics pertaining to the three groups of women studied which reflected their unique and divergent approach to it. The following sections will explore this in more detail.

In this chapter, the Christian feminist understanding of sacred space was described as being "mythical" and "nostalgic". This requires further analysis as it takes many different forms. Broadly, Christian feminists understand three areas of sacred time in which God is revealed. The first is in the reconstruction of early Christian history, and particularly the life of the Founder, whose temporal action functions as a paradigm model for human behaviour in Christian feminist cosmology. The second is the hierophany in ritual. The third is a more unfamiliar context, the

²² For example, "The [Roman Catholic] Church will have to completely restructure the priesthood if women are to be accepted as full human beings." [Interview, 13/6/88]
concept of time as an historical and political struggle in which God becomes revealed in temporality. It is appropriate to look at the last aspect firstly because this reveals the religious intentions of the group.

Angela West is a long-standing member of the Christian Feminist Movement and a Roman Catholic and Marxist. She has been active as one of the co-founders of Christian Women's Information and Resources (C.W.I.R.E.S.) at Blackfriars, Oxford, and as the author of several published papers. She has delivered several papers and talks to Christian feminist and women's groups. Her article in *New Blackfriars* (October, 1981), entitled "Women and the End-Time" provoked an interesting exchange with Tom Brown in *New Blackfriars*, January, 1982. She confronts the problem "that history has been a historically universal aspect of human society which is rooted in the constitution of the unconscious" but that a change is necessary from this "eternal" form for women. Angela West concludes that this change is only "eschatologically resolvable", a conclusion which Tom Brown calls "unduly pessimistic". Her analysis of the eschatological nature of Jesus' teaching is evident in her concern for the imminence of nuclear war. She claims that Jesus himself was only concerned with moral matters which were directly related to "survival, ultimate security...salvation", and so for her.

eschatology has very little to do with the moral law as the basis of sexually approved behaviour, and everything to do with the fate of the human race, the living, the dead and the unborn; and more especially to do with the resolution of the historically universal conflict between the just and the unjust...

In Jesus, Angela West sees the symbol of hope as the political victim "suffering, bleeding, dying by torture" who is also God. In the Cross she perceives "the crossing out, the cancellation of their phallocentric epistemology". She perceives the need for human beings to operate upon the dictums of Christ which acquire a deeper meaning in the context of this eschatology: "thy will be done on earth" and "give us this day our daily bread". This is an expression of the necessity for human action and responsibility in the world; as agents in history. Angela West insists that as the evils of patriarchy and class society had beginnings in human life as historical realities, so then must they have an end, and so must a new order be established. She is at pains to point out that this is "not a utopian model to which the present must be conformed" but a "glorious liberty" in which

24. Tom Brown, "A Response to Angela West".
25. Angela West, "A Response to Tom Brown".
26. Ibid., 33.
27. Ibid., 37.
28. Ibid., 38.
29. Ibid., 38, Angela West's emphasis.
30. Ibid., 39.
human beings are free to take decisions and act in temporality. She emphasises that this is only possible as a result of the incarnation: a divine model which heralds the arrival of a new symbolic order in which "we are set free for the future".  

Angela West's understanding of time as an historical and political struggle is shared by Sara Maitland. Her book, A Map of the New Country contains the image of cartography throughout because she understands the Women's Movement's explorations and discoveries as sharing in the idea of the spatial and temporal spiritual journeys so familiar to Judaeo-Christian life.

The story is always the same: the Holy people are in a place where they become aware of their oppression, alienation and loss of freedom...they set out for a new promised land...Pretty soon they find that they are not in the promised land but in the desert...

Sara Maitland recognises that this is a repetitive aspect of the Christian life and one in which "it is likely that only the victims, the oppressed, will actually recognise the true desperateness of the situation to act on that knowledge". She uses temporal and spatial images to describe a specific mode of Christian action. This is Process Theology in which "'We do not think ourselves into new ways of acting; we act ourselves into new ways of thinking.' We have to dare to set out."

The inception of Christian feminist exegetical and hermeneutical theological praxis in the United States of America has been a great inspiration to the theological activity of Christian feminists in the United Kingdom. In particular, the visit of Rosemary Radford Ruether in 1984 did much to inspire a sense of cohesion and unity among groups throughout the country. But it is the theoretical and historical work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, particularly her work on the reconstruction of the life of Jesus, which has enthused English Christian feminists so much that it has become the pivot of their theological dissension with the established churches. Fiorenza has exposed the androcentric paradigm of Western culture and is free to explore ideas about leadership, activities and issues which concern women.  

English Christian feminists who were interviewed suggested that they have faced a greater struggle than their American contemporaries because they are attempting to reform institutions which are

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30 Ibid., 39.
31 Ibid., 190.
32 Ibid., 191.
33 Ibid., 191.
34 Ibid.
35 "You are not to be called Father: Early Christian History in a Feminist Perspective", Cross Currents (Fall, 1979), 301-23.
deeply embedded in tradition that has been implicitly patriarchal for centuries. All of the women interviewed seemed to emphasise the necessity for Scriptural precedent for the inclusion of women in the leadership of the churches. They demonstrated a practice of continual referral towards a hierophanic time where God in human form, acted out a new, paradigmatic approach to women. This can be described as a mythic, nostalgic desire to actualise an order in illo tempore. More of this is to come in the following sections about sacred community and sacred word.

One of the ways in which Christian feminists experience the religious meaning of the life and death of the Founder is in ritual, particularly in the Mass (Eucharist). One of the great arguments within the Christian feminist movement in England has been the question of the almost universal limitation of the sacerdotal ministries to men. Some Christian feminists have not been content to wait for the ecclesiastical legitimation of the priesthood to women: they have appropriated the symbol of the Eucharist for themselves by performing sacerdotal functions. But it should be noted that "Women's Mass" is not a regular phenomenon in the Women's Movement; and most of the women interviewed expressed much dismay about the fact that it appeared to be a poor substitute for the full inclusion of women as ministers and priests in the mainstream churches.

It was noted earlier that the post-church feminist conception of time was more abstract and philosophical than either the Christian feminist or post-christian feminist cosmologies. Post-church feminists have recognised their estrangement from "patriarchal" time, which includes history per se and women's access to mythical or "hierophanic" time which they understand as being defined by male societies. Post-church feminists understand these phenomena to suppress history which reflects "feminine" qualities in the Supreme Being, and which, if permitted in mainstream religious expression, might meet some of the religious needs expressed by woman and express powerful values espoused by many of them. It is therefore with cautious interest that post-church feminists turn to the prehistoric Goddess. Carol Christ asserts that "The prehistory of the Goddesses provides one lens through which we may construct assumptions about God, time and text". Her argument is that most of our knowledge about the Goddess derives from "patriarchal" times ("If history begins with Sumer or with Israel, then history is patriarchal history"). This concern is shared by post-church feminists, including the author of the present work. Inclusion of the Goddess in post-church cosmology radically alters its understanding, not only of time but also the Christian obsession with written, scriptural evidence. All the women interviewed were in agreement that

36 Groups include Roman Catholic Network, Oxford Women In Theology Group.
37 "Toward a Paradigm Shift in the Academy and in Religious Studies", in Christie Farnham, op. cit., 68.
38 Ibid., 69.
39 "Genesis: Hope or Despair?", unpublished paper (December, 1985).
evidence of prehistoric Goddess manifestations (in ritual and domestic art) was sufficient evidence to suggest hierophany of the Supreme Being.

Post-church feminists referred to "the revelation of God in history" in terms of positive and negative aspects, particularly in relation to the "suppression" of the Goddess. In this respect, their concept of sacred time differs from Christian feminists', whose understanding is of a gradual and consistent unfolding of God's nature to humankind. Post-church cosmology includes the understanding that women have been very much outside male religion's time, and that recovery can only be effected by "political struggle which entails the denial of patriarchy's forms".

Post-christian feminists' religious understanding of sacred time is fused with its particular understanding of the rhythms of the cosmos. The determination of the appropriate time for religious ritual is central in its cosmology: for example, the hours of darkness, "Moon Time", are a source of energy in all forms of Goddess worship, from paganism to post-christian feminism. The female body is understood to be in a special harmony with the rhythms of the cosmos. For example, menstruation occurs on a twenty-eight day cycle which corresponds with the waxing and waning of the moon. All the post-christian feminists who belonged to groups recognised the cyclical division of the year into four solar periods:

Lammas (August-)
Samhain (November-)
Yule (February-)
Beltane (May-).

The Devon coven celebrated four Great Sabbats in accordance with these solar divisions, but women who belonged to the Warwickshire Dianic group (who did not recognise the god-consort or male principle in individual women) met at eight intervals. In addition, Sabbats (or Esbats) take place at full moon. When ritual is conducted indoors there is always a symbolic act of separation from profane time, or "purification": electric lights are switched off and candles are lit. The Sabbats are explored in more detail in a following section on sacred action. The aspect that is so striking about post-christian sacred time in comparison with the other two groups is that in post-christian cosmology time is bound in a intricate relationship with the Goddess, ritual, the cosmos and the psychology of the individual women within groups or covens. All three groups of women studied understand time to operate on a cyclical model, but it is only post-christian feminists who possess the understanding of the "circle of the year" which is bound to the eternal cycles of nature. Every

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40 See Appendix J.
Sabbat marks not only the manifestation of the Goddess in a particular aspect but also the wellspring of a new psychological direction of an individual as well as for the group. Such a cosmology serves to unify the individuals of a group, giving them a clear vision of their place in the world and their relationship to the Goddess.

**Sacred community**

The concern of this section is to reveal religious meanings implicit in members' understanding of their lives in a sacred community. This method yields fruitful results in the case of the women interviewed for this study because all of them understand themselves as marginal to patriarchal communities. The sense of estrangement which arises out of this position provides evidence of a unique perspective and interpretation of community life. William Brede Kristensen has written about the concept of "covenant" as "the basic principle of social life" which manifests itself in religious law and doctrine:

> It is then recognised as an irreducible factor and as a basic principle of human existence; it is self-subsistent and thus of divine nature.\(^1\)

An examination of the religious understanding of sacred community in the three groups of women interviewed for this study challenges this understanding. The idea of a covenant is dependent upon a complete human acceptance of the Supreme Being, or "the absolute validity and trustworthiness of the order, the order of life, which maintains itself under all circumstances".\(^2\) What is specifically interesting here is that the three groups have posed a challenge - a threat - to mainstream or institutionalised principles by revealing an often radical understanding of the relationship between the Supreme Being and the sacred community in which a previous symbolic order is challenged. Often this results not only in a radical revision (read: re-vision) of the dynamics of community life but in a radical redetermination of the Supreme Being itself!

In the case of Christian feminists this is evident in exegetical and hermeneutical praxis in Biblical theology. Christian feminists have largely elected to retain Scriptural material as their ultimate source of reference about God's revelation to human beings, but have found evidence within it which they understand to convey an understanding of God which not only reflects traditionally accepted aspects of male concerns and behaviour, but female ones too. Overwhelmingly, Christian

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\(^2\) Ibid., 343.
feminists understand feminism and socialism as the imperative ground in the attempt to liberate the human community from an oppressive "patriarchal" status quo which allows some groups to control and dominate other groups.

Post-church feminists have demonstrated their refusal to accept what they understand as a "deviation" of the covenant between God and sacred community in the institutionalised churches, and have elected to form "a loose but tangible association outside them". Their understanding of themselves in terms of an ecclesia is important. Their emphasis is upon the bonds of the community itself which is held together not so much by collective, ritualised sacred action, but by a new covenant based on the understanding that "God is engaged through the action of human beings in the world for the oppressed, which includes the poor, the sick, the elderly, women and children, those who are the victims" of a cosmology which is governed by and in the interests of males.

Post-christian feminists claim a covenant and authority which is based on the ancient worship of the Great Goddess, a form of worship which was forestalled by the advent of patriarchy and the Father God. So post-christian claims to a covenant are based on the reclamation of a covenant apparently more ancient than any patriarchal religion's! Moreover, this is a covenant which is based upon the centrality of women in human society because it is believed to have originated at a time of communal, matrifocal systems where women formed the guidelines and decisions through which human society functioned. Let us examine each of these groups in more detail.

As Christian feminists we have looked at a social and political system which has privatised gain, which has encouraged competition, and which has taken away the rights of individual human beings to secure a meaningful, productive and secure life. We have exposed the symbolic and mythical structures which have operated in the oppressor and the oppressed: and then we have turned to the life of Christ for a blueprint of new possibilities for a human community. My goodness, we did strike it rich!

[Interview, 16/7/88]

For Christian feminists, the transformation of communities is not possible without personal transformation. Personal transformation is the conscious appropriation and willingness to accept correction to a symbolic order which has become deeply institutionalised in the consciousness of the Christian community because its emphasis has been upon preserving the provinces of political and personal power in the hands of males. Christian feminists have insisted upon the life of the Founder as their ultimate claim to authority in the definition of a Christian community, and they have armed themselves with the tools of socialist ideals and "an interpretive model of the ministry of Jesus as a renewal movement" in their attempt to effect a recognition of the need to transform human society which is based on a hermeneutical understanding of the covenant of the Founder.
Angela West's excellent, unpublished article, "The Bishops and the Bourgeois Revolution" gives an interesting (but now dated!) perspective on sacred community from a Roman Catholic feminist. She is concerned about what she sees as the Roman Church's recent claim to "respectability" following the publication of the Bishops' document The Easter People which pronounced that "As a Church we have entered the mainstream of national life". Her concern is that Catholics are espousing "the virtues and values of bourgeois liberalism, so dear...to the hearts [sic] of the Establishment, and asks "what has all this to do with feminists - or rather, first of all, with women [who] have recently been emerging from the ghettos of their ancient existence, into the daylight of mainstream national life". Angela West insists that this has everything to do with feminists, and that they have a duty to analyse its effects on community life. She voices the concern of many Christian feminists that the idea of the Christian family unit is one which has achieved sacralisation based on stereotypes which oppress individuals in it.

A community based squarely on the ideal of bourgeois family life is exactly what the bishops have in mind for their distinctively national model of the church...what however, the bishops are rather less keen for us to realise about this "indispensable cradle of human relationships" is that...it is within the family that the worst violence is inflicted and suffered...

So for Angela West, family relationships do not necessarily reflect the ideal of reflecting human relationships with God, but rather the underlying structures of capitalist society. She bemoans women's duties "performed at the countless domestic altars of consumerism [by which] women earn the blessing of the state".

What is the alternative feminist understanding of sacred community? Some common characteristics emerged in the interviews. Christian feminists quite clearly wished to participate in the sacerdotal office and decision-making process of the churches, and stated that the fact that these powers were largely in the hands of men as a result of their unsubtle but skilful manipulation of Scripture and tradition. The issue was not simply to redress the balance of power to include women, but to change the basis of the power structure along socialist lines.

It was noticed in the previous section about sacred time that the Christian Feminist Movement has a strongly nostalgic impetus. This is also confirmed with reference to sacred community in which Jesus' close relations with marginalised groups, including women, have been scrutinised by a hermeneutical model which has been pioneered by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. English

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(C.W.I.R.E.S., Blackfriars, St. Giles, Oxford.)
44 Ibid., 1.
Christian feminist concern for Scriptural authority in their theology finds support in Fiorenza's work, and particularly in the analysis of the New Testament which suggests that at the time of the life of the Founder, no patriarchal traditions were evident; they suggest that in fact the opposite was true. Women were the primary witnesses for the kerygma: death, burial and resurrection, even though women in Judaic law women were not valid witnesses. By his actions, Jesus questioned "social and religious hierarchical and patriarchal relationships." Moreover, Fiorenza explores the fact that this ethos was extended even to the early Christian missionary movement in which the distinctions of race, religion, class and sex were abolished. This enabled women to play a central role as "missionaries, founders of Christian communities, apostles, prophets and leaders of churches." Christian feminists express a desire to return to the model of Christian community exercised in the Jesus and early Christian missionary movement. Beneath this desire is the wish to release a new impetus of equality and freedom into the institutionalised churches in order "to recapture the original spirit of the Jesus movement, to reform the destructive androcentrism of contemporary Western Christianity, and to point out the inauthenticity of a symbolic order which lays claim to a tradition that does not correspond to the actions and attitudes of its Founder".

Post-church feminists have voiced the same concerns of Christian feminists through the medium of liberation theology. But they differ from the latter in that they do not envision the possibility of reforming the institutionalised churches by introducing its concerns. This is because they consider the churches' hierarchical order to implicitly favour the interests of males; and so they are considered to be beyond redemption. Post-church feminists have spoken of ecclesia, which in this context is given to mean a community of Christians who no longer belong to, or recognise the authority of the institutionalised churches because they oppose its hierarchical structures and repressive praxis against theologically ordained "weaker" groups. They have called for a socialist-feminist theology which radically differs from Western liberal theology.

For those of us who have needed to leave the churches to create an Ecclesia of relevant social concerns, we have found that we have had to face the problem of creating a theology of transcendence. Liberal theology has tried to identify the spiritual conditions for transcendence without understanding just how they arise out of economic, cultural and political conditions.

46 "You are not to be called Father: Early Christian History in a Feminist Perspective", Cross Currents (Fall, 1979).
47 "You are not to be called Father", ibid., 317.
48 Ibid., 317.
Ibid., 318.
And furthermore,

it shouldn't be forgotten that the subordination of women isn't a natural but a social fact: that is why so many women in both inside and outside the churches won't or don't take full responsibility for their lives.

[Interview, 3/3/88]

This typifies post-church reluctance to wholly embrace feminist theology which evades evidence of patriarchy in Scripture. Patriarchalism in the early missionary movement was in evidence as early as Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, an ethos which has set the tone for the Christian community since the earliest times. A clue as to the difference between the Christian- and post-church feminist understanding of sacred community lies in their understanding of the nature of covenant and authority. Christian feminists' ultimate authority rests upon Scripture. Post-church authority is wider and might be called "situational" in its approach, for it can include many permutations in which the decision about authority rests with the individual. So post-church understanding of sacred community is implicitly concerned with the individual's responsibility in the world, arising out of their awareness of their covenant with God. This manifests itself in concrete terms where women and men have begun to attach importance to the idea of a visible community in the world and have begun to come together to define themselves in the context of a feminist based community. They have begun to share in social events, consciousness raising groups, political and environmental activities, and have even begun experiments in separate but interdependent households in which men and women, single people and families, participate in a conscious effort to share their lives with other like-minded individuals. Activities include the sharing of regular meals, psychological support and informal Eucharists. All activities take place in the context of a defined community. These groups are few in number, and only a small number of women interviewed were active participants in them. The male-female relationship is just one aspect of this "covenant of social responsibility", but it is an important one. Post-church understanding of the events surrounding the creation of the first human beings gives an interesting perspective on this. In the interviews the women strongly indicated that they accepted a revised hermeneutical and exegetical understanding of this "myth" which differs greatly from the conclusions drawn (and institutionalised) in the Christian churches. They understand that this myth is not a description of a paradigmatic, primordial order, but that it describes the advent of patriarchy in the world and so describes its present condition as a matter of shame.

It makes man's domination over woman a religious duty and reduces woman to terms of biology and sex. Patriarchal hermeneutics have emphasised this point, and that all this arose from God's punishment because of Eve's offence. This domination now becomes a religious paradigm which isn't subject to changing social situations.

[Interview, 5/7/88]

Post-church feminists stress the Priestly narrative in which "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them". They have interpreted this in a way that does not deny the differences between male and female but which demands that no partner shall dominate over another.

I think that this tells us something about the relationship between men and women which have meaning in a religious community. For instance, it is believed that women are inferior to men and that men have a religious duty to control them, but according to this understanding, sexual relationships become evil because they happen as a result of the Fall. I understand the meaning of this myth in terms of man and woman being equal partners in which it is understood that males and females can both express themselves in evil, but that sex and marriage are not the sources or the causes of evil.

[Interview, n.d.]

Post-church feminists have also emphasised that the account of the advent of patriarchy is also the account of the domination of males over nature, which happens after the Fall, thus replacing the pristine harmony between males and females. Post-church understanding of sacred community asserts the acceptance of the reality of patriarchy's manifestations in the world: the outrage about the imposed silence and submission of women to the domination of men, and the violence and violations which support it. It stresses the need to overcome patriarchy through the acceptance of the covenant which understands "both women and men to be made in the image of God". This is not simply a fact that has been learned from the sacred writings of the past; it is experienced here in the present. This is why some post-church feminists have criticised Christian Feminists' tendency towards using the fact of female leadership in the early Church as the legitimation of women's leadership roles today.

Whether or not women were leaders in the early churches is an interesting question, although it's not wholly relevant today...because...we know that here and now women have every justification and right to make decisions in the ecclesia.

[Interview, 15/3/88]

Earlier it was argued that post-christian feminists lay claim to a covenant which is more ancient than Christianity's. Monica Sjöö understands the latter as operating "the politics of death", which includes the "living deaths" of "all those millions of women forced by patriarchal religious systems
She speaks of the humiliation of women, and of the Hebrew women of Biblical times in particular—"who were the first to undergo a God-willed social, physical and spiritual oppression that has since become the experience of all women in the West, and in the East, under the same patriarchal misogynist worldview." As a sacred community, post-Christian feminists experience the humiliation of women under patriarchy in terms of the wish to destroy everything that is to do with the female:

the spiritual goal of the Hebrew prophets and kings was the separation and mutual hostility of the female and male energies; their ultimate political goal was the punishment of the female by the male (to the degradation of both).

Following the rejection of the Great Goddess by the Hebrew prophets, early Judaism retained its "purification techniques - but divorced them from magic or spirit arts". So, she concludes, they created "moralism" because they saw sexual intercourse as bad and immoral. For her, the Judeo-Christian tradition has "a psychological fetish for cleanliness, purity, etc." which reaches an almost pathological degree in the exclusion of ritual roles to women, other races and people with physical and mental handicaps. The fourth and final section of her book is dedicated to exposing the damage of patriarchal worldview on the religious community, and women in particular. But she concludes with her own understanding of a global spirituality which includes men, but which functions upon a wholly matrifocal covenant: here there is no place for the God of the Hebrew prophets, since it "refutes the moralistic, manipulative patriarchal systems, the mechanistic religions that seek to divide us". She demonstrates a new covenant which embraces "an organic spirituality that belongs innately to all of us, as the children of the earth".

The women who were interviewed in the course of fieldwork did not share in Sjöö's desire for the inclusion of male members of the sacred community on either a local (coven) or a "cosmic" (world community of covens) level. All the women agreed with this description of the matriarchy network:

We also feel that physical energies which are specifically female (such as menstruation, cyclic changes, birth and suckling) are a source of strength not weakness and that these and other experiences and feelings can be symbolised by the idea of the Great Goddess...essentially symbolic of the Creator of the Universe, the ultimate being, and the universal energy...We are she and she is us. Her energy is

51 Monica Sjöö, op. cit., 421.
52 Ibid., 273.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 272.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 421.
57 Ibid.
our energy: it is in all of us at a deep personal level as a source of power and we have many choices as to how we may wish to express this power.\textsuperscript{58}

But all the women interviewed went further than this and asserted that males could not possibly share in this power because real men had been the perpetrators of the "atrocities" and "humiliations" of patriarchy. Since the post-christian understanding of Supreme Being is pantheistic, it seemed appropriate to ask about the inclusion of males in communities, and the nature of their participation if any. It seemed even more appropriate since a few of the women had male children by previous relationships with men or by the A.I.D. method.\textsuperscript{59}

Male adults did not feature significantly on any level in the lives of coven members. Aside from its ritual function, the covens functioned as communities in different ways. The Devon coven was situated in the remote hamlet of Frenchbeer, just three miles from Chagford, on the outskirts of the eastern flanks of Dartmoor. The Devon coven espoused communal living, that is that all members shared housing in three adjacent buildings, and a common, pooled wealth. There were two male (and one female) children in addition to this community of thirteen women. Sabbats were held at the eight festivals and at every full moon. The women interviewed were asked whether boys who had been raised exclusively in a matrifocal milieu, and who had clearly internalised the values of the group, should be able to participate in the (wholly lesbian) community in ritual and the formal decisions which affected the running of the community, upon reaching maturity. No decisive conclusions were forthcoming from the women interviewed, although it was agreed that at this stage in the development of the boys it was important for their future relationships with women that they were raised in a loving environment which accepted them as worthy human beings.

The Warwickshire coven consisted of an urban membership of women who lived in separate but cooperative households. They were united in ritual by monthly Sabbats and by a cooperative workshop\textsuperscript{60} and by bi-weekly social activities. Although some of the women had adult children these did not participate in the group at any level. One of the women spoke of her awareness of community as arising from a sense of "estrangement" from mainstream life and her understanding of women as the leaders of the original human group.\textsuperscript{61} These were not communities based on the

\textsuperscript{58} "Who We Are", Arachne 1 (May Eve, 1983), 3.
\textsuperscript{59} Artificial Insemination by Donor.
\textsuperscript{60} Making natural hair and sponge products at weekends.
\textsuperscript{61} This is also argued by Sjöö, op. cit., 33-45, who claims that women were the original "culture creators": "cooking, food processing and storage, ceramics, weaving, textiles and design, tanning and dyeing, everything related to fire...the medicinal arts, language itself and the first scripts and glyphs, grain domestication, animal domestication, religious imagery and ritual, domestic and sacred architecture, the first calendars and the origins of astronomy".
restriction of sexuality and movement, but on the evidence of the mother as the creator and perpetuator of the human line. The Warwickshire coven is an attempt to recover this specific religious form in the context of twentieth century England. But one woman asserted that this ideology was not an attempt to retreat from the realities of "patriarchal oppression":

We are not free while we still feel the powerlessness in our political situation as women. For us the Goddess is reality: if we identify with her then our ritual and daily actions should mirror this reality.

[Interview, 6/1/89]

This understanding of covenant shows the centrality of sacred community for individual post-christian feminists. This is clearly demonstrated in the ritual of healing in which the ability ("power") to heal is understood as a power that transcends the individual to help the group. Underlying the expression of "power" in healing is the symbol of the immanent Goddess, a symbol upon which all post-christian groups function. As one woman pointed out:

This is not a symbol of the loss of our individuality and independence. On the contrary, it enables every one of us to increase our understanding of our individuality and also to respect and empathise with other women's perspectives.

Individual formal roles in ritual will be discussed in the following section about sacred persons.

Sacred persons

Sacred persons are those individuals who constitute a sacred community which is understood to have arisen as a result of a partnership between humans and the Supreme Being. This is a partnership, a "covenant", based on the understanding of revelation by divinity which becomes enshrined in the moral precepts and laws of a community. Previously it was shown how Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminists recognised their attempts to form or "re-form" communities using their understanding of covenant to establish communities which they feel can more adequately reflect a social and religious mandate ordained by the Supreme Being.

In a given situation where a special relationship between human beings in the world and the Supreme Being is understood to exist, the cosmos takes on an important meaning to human beings, for they understand themselves to be participating in the cosmic life, the very reflection of God's
order on earth. Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminists embrace divergent understandings about the social and religious role of the individual in this order. Two aspects of sacred personhood need to be clarified at this stage. The first is the individual member of a religious community: the person alone with the Supreme Being in the context of a sacred community which shares a common understanding about the nature of the Supreme Being. This was the subject of chapter V. The second is the specific or specialised roles undertaken by individuals in sacred community. It is this aspect which is the focus of interest in this section.

Christian feminists understand sacred personhood or membership of a religious community to be determined by initiation: usually by baptism and confirmation. But there is a further, "professional", understanding of sacred personhood for certain individuals and groups of women. These are nuns, sisters, deaconesses and missionaries. One woman who was interviewed complained that Christian feminist "obsession" with the question of the sacerdotal ministry had obscured consideration of the contribution which nuns and sisters had made to challenging the harmful structures of the institutionalised churches. In the following pages we shall see how this has been apparent.

The theological debate about the ordination of women to full sacramental responsibility is not proposed to be discussed here. Because no ordained women were interviewed, accounts of the experiences of ordained women were recorded from Christian feminists who knew them. One Methodist woman claimed that

Some of the older [Anglican and Roman Catholic] churches look at Methodists enviously and say, "We should follow their example, they have women ministers". But they only see the letter, not the spirit of the reality. You see, when a woman becomes ordained she has to look for a job. Most women want to go for a pastoral job in a congregation, but the only way she's likely to do this is by working as part of a team ministry with men. So she'll be nudged towards jobs in the social ministries.

[Interview, n.d.]

Other women confirmed this understanding that often women's admission to the ordained ministry is not in fact the admission of women to participation in cosmic life and the reflection of God's order on earth. A response to this can be found in the words of the former Baptist minister, Ruth Matthews, who does not welcome all the aims of the Christian feminist movement:

I believe that at least half or a third of all clergy should be women. Not because I come at it from any Women's Rights point of view, but because if you have only men you don't adequately represent the nature of God. 62

62 Sara Maitland, op. cit., 90.
So the image of God in humanity - and in the individual - is the crucial factor for her.

As we represent God to one another, as we allow the image of God to be seen in the world, so we must represent him in his fullness as male and female.

Sara Maitland confirms that "a surprisingly high proportion" of ordained women do not work in congregations. She feels that they must

either challenge the structure of ordained ministry radically from outside the privileged clerical caste, or they must be prepared to carry the image of God as female and male to the limits of pastoral understanding.

This was a heavy responsibility, according to the women interviewed. They felt that the question of the sacerdotal ministry was a deeply challenging one and one which took a great deal of emotional and intellectual energy from women as they considered the dualisms and contradictions inherent in the consideration of sexist ideology, clericalism, social and class divisions. Women from different traditions spoke of the persistence of clericalism as a route of deviation and corruption of the earliest concepts of Christian community and leadership. It was an effective and legalistic measure to prevent women from responding to God "wholistically" with their special gifts.

This is even more apparent in the Anglican church where the existence of a female diaconate has raised many questions about their role and function in the twentieth century.

One of the Anglican women interviewed spoke of her "feeling of embarrassment" in talking about this ministry because

the very existence of deaconesses in the Church, however aware they may be about the contradiction of their position as women in it, only serves to prevent the question of women’s call to full humanness being raised at the level of clergy...The Deaconess Order is a very convenient way of keeping the outdated image of woman as helpmate at the forefront of everyone’s minds - not least women’s! It makes the need for women to be able to perform the Eucharist even more remote.

[Interview, 2/12/88]

Interestingly, Anglican women interviewed often voiced sympathy for those deaconesses who wished to become priests but felt, overwhelmingly, that such women tended to marginalise the possibility of reform in the Anglican church to the Order. This was based on their understanding of a passage in Acts in which Deacons were elected in a response to a specific administrative need in the early

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63 Ibid., 90-1.
64 Ibid., 91.
They felt that the general administration and bureaucracy of the Anglican Communion was monopolised by the clergy and would benefit from the significant inclusion of both lay men and women in its administration, aims and directives and so reintroduce a wider Christian understanding of service and ministry.

Sara Maitland has pointed out that nuns and sisters are "the largest group of professional women Christians in the world". She alludes to the tradition in which nuns, who "do not belong - as daughters, wives or mothers - to any individual man are used as a projection of a misogyny which is far more general". Yet she also attaches a value to many women religious where they have in recent times shown great determination and courage in their struggle for liberation. What is of particular interest to this study is the growth of women religious who have felt bound by their duty to "bear witness to the Church of the Church's own failure". Women religious have been at the forefront of the exodus community of women who have left the churches: they form the most radical and skilled members of the post-church community. Often the institutionalised churches have accounted for this in terms of the encroachment of secularisation. But the women themselves claim that their actions have a specific religious motivation: they feel unable to pursue a deeper understanding of their relationship with God within the Churches.

But what of those women who remain within the churches? Sara Maitland speaks with enthusiasm about the radical, "prophetic" precedent in the United States, where women religious have looked critically at the issue of male authority, leadership, identity and "the full consequences of female sexuality" of women living together. But what is the present reality of women religious in England? This is a neglected area of research. Women religious did respond to the Questionnaire but none were interviewed for this study as it was hoped to study the spirituality of those women who were not professional Religious or ordained ministers. Only a handful subscribe to Christian Women's Information and Resources and the Christian Feminist Network Newsletter. It

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65 6:2-5.
66 Nun: a woman in a monastic order. Sister: a woman religious working in service in the world.
67 Ibid., 49.
68 Ibid., 51.
69 It is not possible here to give a history of their development within institutional structures. The subject is treated admirably in Sara Maitland, ibid., "Communities of Faith".
70 Ibid., 77.
71 Conversation with two ex-nuns (one Carmelite) in Leicester, February, 1986.
72 Sara Maitland notes a similar phenomenon in the United States of America, ibid.,
can only be surmised that the issues raised by Christian feminists in England are not openly shared at the present time by women religious, although some Roman Catholic women spoke with enthusiasm about the growing number of teaching sisters who had joined a Christian feminist consciousness raising group in Bristol.

Sacred personhood for post-church feminists does not include any formalised professional roles and as such offers a challenge to the phenomenologist to explore the individual before her or his God. The concept of the individual (sacred person) is inseparable from the context of sacred community. Here are human beings (which includes an increasing number of men!) who have been confused, angered, even enraged by evidence of what they see as the abuse and perversion of the human likeness to God in the institutionalised churches. They cannot imagine change or development from this stage within them and have formed a small but significant exodus community. Increasingly, the post-church community in England has begun to recognise an affinity with other human beings who have never actively belonged to the institutionalised churches but who nonetheless recognise themselves as spiritual beings: in these people too, they feel, there is a need to recognise and develop their spirituality as well as their aspirations for political and social equality.

One important feature of the individual person in post-church cosmology is the concept of healing. The recognition of the degree of need in every individual is central here because it enables communities to share and confront anger which does not destroy individuals. Women’s anger about the nature of patriarchal abuse and perversion of women’s image in reality is shared and confronted. “Naming” the atrocities of patriarchy is at once wounding and healing in this context. Healing can be offered, but only the individual can choose to receive it. Suffering here is shared, but it is understood as a suffering which "does not destroy individuals" [Interview, 26/1/87].

The visionary element is strong here: but it is not understood as a utopic vision, rather in terms of the realities of hopes and disappointments which always feature in human life. Always there is the understanding that post-church cosmology is not yet a full reality, even on a local level, but what is certain is the establishment of a new basis of relationships between women and men which gives rise in women in particular to a new source of courage and experience which leads towards a sound basis of theology: a theology which includes at its centre the experience of the individual before God.

From the interviews with post-christian feminists, ideas about three different forms of sacred persons emerged. There was the understanding that every individual member of the group became the Goddess in ritual and participated in a creative process which extended beyond it. In this sense, every woman, regardless of her individual skills, acquired sacred personhood. The second type of sacred person pertained to those women who were understood to have special powers which made
them able to communicate with the non-human. While these forms (such as shamanism) were not actively practised in post-Christian situations, they were understood to have been originated and practised by women in pre-patriarchal times. Thirdly, women spoke about the ascribed roles which they undertook in contemporary ritual and community. Let us look at these last two forms more closely.

Monica Sjöö has written about women's strong resonance with the "moon-mind", resulting from their menstrual cycles. She argues that women were therefore in possession of "special psychic powers". About one half of the women interviewed for this study had heard of the phenomenon. None expressed any knowledge of the phenomenon being practised at the time in England. Sjoo argues that

Shamanism, an ecstatic lunar technology, relies on the natural psychic descent into body consciousness that menstruation brings each month to women...hysterical states...during which "occult" or "transnatural" phenomena occur, the apparent suspension of physical laws.73

This is why, she says, shamans "almost always dress as women".74 Similarly, oracular 'priestesses' were appointed (or appointed themselves) for the special divinatory powers which they had at the time of menstruation. Thus, she argues, the Delphic oracle and her python were named after the womb, Delphine.75 Sjöö speaks of mantism as being the original province of women because it is

the natural art of prophesying, divining, receiving, and channelling psychic-biological energy from the earth and from the moon. The moon-fruit is the highest transformation form of the Earth-seed, the place of physical rebirth, sublimated seed, integrated power...Women were the first bearers of this technique, since it emanates from our own bodies and psychic processes. Women are tied directly to the mantic moon by both a mental and a blood cord.76

In the special studies made of two covens in Devon and Warwickshire all the roles undertaken by women were interchangeable among the coven members. They were not ascribed to individuals for their special powers to be able to communicate with the non-human. Within both groups there was the conscious effort to change hierarchical structures as well as to avoid them. At meetings for Sabbats, healings, community decisions and meals, women meet in circles to effect an equal distribution of the creative energy of the Goddess which is understood to extend beyond every individual member and the group. What was striking about both communities was the way in which

73 Monica Sjöö, op. cit., 189.
74 Ibid., 145.
75 Ibid., 190.
76 Ibid., 173.
the personalities and talents of individual members determined the emphasis, structure and formality of ritual. For example, the rural Devon community members included poets and artists. Ritual was therefore richly poetic, visual, low-key, moving and full of symbolism. This was in contrast to the (more urban) Warwickshire community whose individual members did not live communally, and who worked, often in professional positions. As individuals, these women were highly motivated by the "secular" Women's Movement. In community decision meetings, meals and social gatherings individuals spoke of the atrocities of patriarchalism in which women had been victims. The pervasion of rage extended to formal ritual, the Sabbats, in which hexing took place on two occasions during research. This will be explored in the further sections about sacred word and sacred action. Let us look more closely at formal roles in ritual.

All formal ritual roles in the Devon Community are rotated in ritual because by consensus the Community believes that power derives from the Goddess and should not be monopolised by one person: power in any form should be shared. The Priestess' most important role in a group is as facilitator. Her primary task is to facilitate the opening of "energy channels" (through her body) to allow the presence of the Goddess to reach individual members of the group. She also performs purificatory functions in the invocation of the pentacle. She declares the beginning and the end of ritual proper by "casting" and "sealing" the circle of the Coven to enable the "cone of power" to be raised and directed for a specific purpose. Where members of the groups are unfamiliar with certain aspects of ritual and magick, the Priestess' function is very practical. She must be aware of degrees of tension in the group and be prepared to step in and alleviate situations of high anxiety, which she may do by proposing that the group tries to reestablish equilibrium by meditative exercises. The Priestess may also undertake some or all of the roles discussed below. This is dependent upon the individual Sabbat. The Purifier's task is to prepare the Community for entry into the sacredness of ritual. She oversees the bonding of the group in preparation for ritual. To ensure this she lights a white candle for each woman and sprinkles each woman with salted water, a purifying substance which is a reminder of women's origins in the womb-sea. The Purifier's role is also shared by the Meditative Guide whose role is to change the state of women's usual consciousness (by relaxation and concentration) to prepare for the theme of the Sabbat. For example, the meditation before the Spring Equinox of 1987 was on the theme of the anticipation of spiritual growth and development, and also of regeneration and new life. Following the close of the meditation, the Guide's role is complete. The women are "psychically receptive" and are ready to begin the ritual proper by casting a circle. Only occasionally a Mediator is appointed at times of crisis in the group where a conflict has arisen which affects the "vibrations" of a group and prevents ritual activity. A Mediator's role is to try to get both sides to listen to each other's argument.

The Warwickshire Community spoke only of one formal ritual role, the Priestess. This role was
rotated at each Sabbat so that every woman had the opportunity to be the vehicle or receptacle of the Goddess’ power. The Priestess adopts the role of Purifier and Mediator in ritual and facilitates in Community meetings by selecting notetakers and timekeepers. She is responsible for “grounding” and “centering” the ritual: that is, she ritually establishes (by purification) the conditions under which the Goddess can be invoked. She creates the sacred space in which the ritual is to take place, invokes the Goddess by making herself the receptacle of Divine Power and “raises the cone of power” or divine energies of the group which is a creative power which may extend outside the group. This power may then be used in a number of ways (such as hexing), which the Priestess will facilitate. She then performs the “grounding” of the power; this is an important task because of the dangerously potent nature of the power. The importance of the ritual function of the Priestess diminishes at this point. A sacred meal is shared, she ritually breaks down the sacred space and “opens” the circle to symbolically illustrate the return to profane time and space.

Sacred images and symbols

Religious dualism, in which apparently opposing or polarised qualities are ascribed as male or female, has been accused of exercising rigid or false images on men and women. By using the reality of dualism as the controlling interest in the study of images and symbols, many dimensions of religious meanings and intentions can be elicited. The persistence of dualism in most religions is deeply reflected in religious communities and institutions at every level. Feminists writing about religion have claimed that dualism, in which women are clearly ascribed negative or inferior qualities (or idealised beyond their actual qualities) reflects male attempts to control women. So the place of women in this dualism becomes either negative or idealised. The feminist critique of the Study of Religion at the beginning of this work has shown that feminist critical method has corroborated the claims of spiritual feminists which insist that men have been in control of the symbolic order and have perpetuated the supremacy of so-called “masculine” images and symbols through a dualistic ontology which berates and reviles women, and which considers them to have inferior status to the masculine paradigm.

One of the ways in which an understanding of dualism can assist the study of images and symbols is found in the way in which they reflect both the reality of the subjection of women and, paradoxically, their creativity. Creativity is not simply in evidence where women have created new and more meaningful images for themselves to compensate for symbols from the male area of experience which hold no relevance for them. Women, mostly those remaining within religious
institutions, have delved deeply for more profound implicit meanings within existing images and symbols. This has often yielded a fascinating perspective on religious traditions, especially where specific religious images and symbols are perceived to reflect aspects of the nature of the Supreme Being. We shall explore examples of this further on; but first the meaning of symbol and image needs to be explored in brief in order to distinguish and elicit their specific meanings and intentions for the women studied in this work.

A feminist understanding of symbols recognises them as an integral part of human life: but it would also insist that they are studied by a method which explores their religious meaning in the context of the individual, society and institutions. The significance of such a method for women would be two-fold. Firstly they would be able to explore the possibility that symbols have further (or even alternative) meaning and relevance for women than is commonly understood. Secondly, they would be able to consider the evolution of new symbols which more adequately reflect women's religious understanding of the world. This poses a challenge to the traditional understanding of symbols as arising from a "collective experience" because it refutes the misunderstanding that all human beings respond in the same way to symbols.

The essence of the understanding of symbols is that they constantly embody the potential to spark a multiplicity of new insights and applications in human experience. Symbols do not appear to rise out of the faculty of the human imagination, but rather affect it powerfully because of the universality of their meaning and application. Students of symbols have been tempted to conclude that they "derive from a common experience and a common manner of responding to that experience", but that their ambivalence "is partly due to differences in geographical and cultural environments". The feminist argument with this is that although the multiplicity of cultural significations is taken into account, the possibilities of alternative sex and gender significations and interpretations are wholly overlooked. The symbolic order, which is reflected in the language and institutions of human beings, is the means by which human beings share in their understanding of the world. The danger here is that one side of human experience, women's experience, is wholly overlooked or marginalised. Symbols are potent because they are capable of immeasurable applications under different situations and have the ability to reveal aspects of what transcends them: the spiritual. They reflect the growth of understanding of the sacred by human beings, pointing to new ways and means of human orientation in life. This growth of understanding of the sacred (and consequently of the universe) through a new hermeneutical understanding of symbols is familiar territory to feminists who have an interest in spirituality. They apprehend that new understandings of symbols by women reflect the increasingly changing orientation towards life by human beings.

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77 Ibid., 28.
development occurs as human beings, through the historical process, come to perceive the power that symbols have to guide human beings towards a deeper receptivity of ideas about the Supreme Being (and life).

The poignancy of different feminist outlooks on religious symbolic language is that it is possible to observe differing understandings about the nature of the symbolic order, and of God in particular. In the case of the women interviewed for this study, the fixed symbolic order of "patriarchal" religion is insufficient to convey the understandings of the Supreme Being which these women have. The form of the symbol which has meaning for an individual or group of women may be the same as in "patriarchal" religions (for example, water, darkness, light, or personal symbols such as mother, father, teacher, healer). The determination of meaning is possible by the very power of the symbol itself to be engaged in a multiplicity of significations which reflect a continual revision of human experience. Feminists claim that their experience should be acknowledged too because their experience has contributed to the understanding both of the development of human beings and the Supreme Being too.

This consideration becomes even more poignant when it is understood that, in varying ways, feminists who refer to an object of religion perceive that the Supreme Being constitutes human beings' very ground of being without being bound to it. Symbolic language, which enables humans to make statements about the Supreme Being, ascends and declines in accordance with the degree of religious truth which it reveals. A feminist argument about the relevance of symbols is matched by Paul Tillich, who has argued that

the religious symbol can be a true symbol only if it participates in the power of the divine to which it points...A religious symbol can die only if the correlation of which it is an adequate expression dies.

Feminists have argued that it is the decline of meaning of "patriarchal" symbols which has given them the opportunity to explore a wider variety of symbols which illustrate the symbolic order of the Supreme Being and the world in which humans live. Feminism exists as a reminder to the enormous power of symbols, and insists that in order to possess religious meaning they must contain a meaning which bears a relationship with the Ultimate Reality and with the mundane, temporal human context. Where feminists have been subject to criticism from established churches for their radical revision of the symbolic order, they have argued that their understanding of symbols has

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78 See chapter IV, Object of Religion, and a later section in this chapter discussing sacred word.
arisen through subjectivity, their experience of the marginalisation of the "feminine" or its apparent "sublimation" by the removal or denial of human sexual or reproductive abilities. Feminists claim that this has been corroborated by human experience and history. This is particularly evident where personal symbols are concerned.

Personal symbols testify to the richness of the relationship between the subject and object of religion because a direct, human relationship is implied. Thomas Fawcett has spoken of problems which potentially arise here where "Symbols are not retained which finally turn out to diminish man". He is referring to instances where symbolic content becomes redundant, limiting or dehumanising. But, Fawcett fails to make a link between androcentric symbolism and the claims of the Women's Movement where women insist that such symbols have arisen out of gynophobic and misogynistic religious and cultural environments. Gynophobia and misogyny have persisted historically because such images and symbols have been sacralised and incorporated within an androcentric social order which is common to virtually every historical human society.

Similarly, images in patriarchal traditions which are intended to represent "the feminine" have undergone a similar process in the symbolic orders of religious traditions. Since images are understood to be human-made phenomena revealing an implicit spiritual content, qualities of the Supreme Being, it is hardly surprising that feminists have insisted that the qualities assigned to the "feminine" portion of dualism in Christianity are mirrored in negatively, whereas "maleness" is associated with all that it held to be Godlike: the mind, spiritual, Logos orientation. Even where female or feminine images are depicted "positively", feminists have insisted that such portrayals have been in the interests of the self-preservation of masculine values: so women are idealised as tacit, submissive and nurturing, and are always presented in a direct relationship to a (superior) man. The feminist response to the persistence of such images is to evaluate their current meaning and relevance critically, and to retain, adapt or abandon them accordingly. Similarly, new or previously obscured or discarded images, which bear appropriate continuing spiritual reality for religious communities, have emerged. The religious understanding of images and symbols for the three groups of women studied in this work is investigated in the rest of this section.

The fact that Christian feminists made more references to Scriptural symbols rather than images requires analysis. The underlying religious intention for this seems to be that images are fixed impressions which convey the particular spiritual nature of what is imaged: and for Christian feminists, this has more often than not seemed deeply negative. Symbols, on the other hand, possess a more versatile and ambivalent quality in which it is possible to acquire constantly changing

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insights. Christian feminists have acquired new perspectives and insights which they are offering to share with fellow communicants. Let us look at their new perspectives and insights on images and symbols.

Christian feminists have stressed, in a way which might well be interpreted as anti-Semitic, the revolutionary images of women which are used by Jesus in Scripture. They contrast this with what they see as the essentially negative, misogynistic and gynophobic imagery of Old Testament authors. Jesus’ imagery is perceived as the heralding of a new symbolic order which should be taken up by churches today. The parables of Jesus were understood as an especially rich source of status for women, especially where women appear in them. For instance, Jesus speaks of God caring for individual human beings in terms of a woman searching for a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). They contrast this with examples of imagery from the Old Testament: Jerusalem as a monstrous woman (Lamentations 1:17); the men of Babylon who eschew war are branded “as women” (Jeremiah 51:30); in Ezekiel, Philistine women are all branded as whores or harlots (16:30). Beneath Christian feminist distress about the profusion of such imagery in Old Testament Scripture lies the concern that the concepts of individuality, autonomy and personal relationships are not implicit in Old Testament images; they understand them to clearly reflect the “oppressive” social milieu in which they were formulated.

Christian feminists insist on the very great harm which this has done to women’s self image. They spoke of overcoming the harm of such images by heeding the values assigned to women in the directives and images of Jesus. But they feel that even the positive images of women perpetuated by the Founder have been twisted out of their actual context to make women appear ineffectual and marginal in the early years of Christianity. Christian feminists insist that a feminist theological exegesis of the New Testament can elicit new images and new interpretations which more adequately reflect the “feminine” dimension of the sacred, and, subsequently, real women too. So Christian feminist explorations of images and symbols have been theological explorations: they have relied upon Scriptural images exclusively, searching for the sanctioning of their personal and collective experiences. Occasionally, Christian feminist writers such as Sara Maitland have rejected images and symbols in Scripture which they believe to have been the product of androcentrism or misogyny, and have found other images and symbols more suited to their experiences as women. But the women who were interviewed for this study claimed that apparently androcentric or misogynistic passages were minimal, and possibly interpolations. All the women understood that a more positive meaning had to be elicited by theological activity which reflected a balanced human

81 The most frequently quoted examples were Genesis 3:16, I Timothy 2: 11-15, 4:11, I Corinthians 11: 5-10.
theological endeavour: a theology performed by men and women who experience life in very different ways.

Christian feminists tended to speak about a number of impressions of Biblical women rather than about female images per se: so they spoke about the activities and strengths of Biblical women who have become role models for contemporary Christian feminists: Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary, the woman who had hemorrhaged for ten years. From a phenomenological perspective it was interesting that although Christian feminist concern for a non-dualistic, critical theology was evident, the core imagery of Christianity remained unchallenged, and therefore unchanged. They have insisted that the (essentially masculine) core symbolism of Christianity does not legitimate the submission of women to men, but they have been unable to support this assertion with evidence of sacred images from the Christian tradition. An overwhelming amount of male imagery is implicit in Scripture. One Christian feminist accounts for this disparity:

The Early Church had a fantastic opportunity to create its own images and symbols of women and "the feminine" from images which abounded in the life of Christ: but this was usurped by the Fathers of the Church whose dualism claimed the "positive" spiritual side for males, which left women oppressed and the victims of negative male projection.

[Interview, 9/1/89]

She went on to say that the solution to oppressive images and symbols was their transformation through the prophetic vision of Jesus which functions for all the poor and the oppressed, which includes women. It was the symbolic role of women in the ritual and social order of the churches which concerned the majority of Christian feminists interviewed. This has been discussed elsewhere.82 They consistently revealed the desire to retain the core symbolism of ritual, but they did want to extend the representation of Jesus at the altar to include women. They have no argument with the symbolism of formal ritual as such (for example, the symbols of bread and wine), but with those symbols that promote a sexist dualism. The religious intention underlying the wish to abolish dualism from the Christian symbolic order includes the idea that the symbolic order itself is subject to human fallacy and is therefore subject to constant reform. The symbolic portrayal of divine power, even divinity itself, which in Christianity is portrayed as male, must be reformed, say Christian feminists. They should be reformed because the powerful effect that reverence of the Supreme Being through masculine core symbolism creates expectations that men are the legitimate bearers of symbolic and actual power in the world. In essence, Christian feminist reform of

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82See chapter V, Subject of Religion and chapter VI. Dynamics of Religion.
symbols attempts to reunite body and spirit in theology. One woman interviewed articulated the underlying intentions and concerns of all Christian feminists when she stated that Christian feminists had no authority to reject or add symbols. Theology is the means by which women and men can point to the danger and fallacy of the human misuse of symbols, such as had occurred in the patriarchal tradition of Christianity. Christian feminists perceive dualism as a harmful man-made deviation which was rejected by Jesus but which was once again compounded by the Fathers of the Church.

In the interviews Christian feminists referred only to the “reform” of personal symbols, by which is meant contemporary hermeneutical insights, into “female” symbols such as wife and mother. But this also included reform of the meaning of father, son, judge, king and ruler. Post-church feminists claimed that the Christian feminist critique of symbols did not allow for the possibility of exploring symbols from outside the Biblical tradition. So Christian feminists are concerned only with symbols from a patriarchal heritage, which even Christian feminists themselves concede, include personal symbols by which women were made visible by being defined in relationship to men; as mothers and wives, for instance.

It is the fact of theological orientation which does not permit many Christian feminists the power to accept or deny the inerrancy of Scriptural symbols. But Christian feminists consider themselves empowered to direct attention to the misuse of symbols where they marginalise women and other groups with little power. Interestingly, while Christian feminists claimed to have found much mother symbolism in the Bible, what they were actually referring to were clearly human behavioural and role models. The religious function of symbols is not found exclusively in their exemplary capacity, but in their capacity to contain and convey aspects of the “feminine aspect” of God. Post-church feminists have claimed that the Bible is bereft of female symbols precisely because the symbolic order of Christianity has been constructed by men in their interest. One woman spoke of Galatians 4:26 in which Jerusalem is symbolised as the mother. Four women spoke of the symbol of the woman as God giving birth in Revelation 12:1-6. Interestingly, all the women interviewed deftly evaded the questions about the images and symbols which might be deemed to endow the female with a poor symbolic value.

Post-church feminists spoke enthusiastically of the feminist critique of culture as the means of exposing and transcending the hierarchy and dualism implicit in Christianity. They criticise its core symbolism which at its human level places men as paradigmatic beings and women as derivative or

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polarised as "the other". Yet post-church feminists have also identified the roots of this dualism at the divine level. In interviews they spoke at length about the negative effects that some female imagery and symbolism engender in real women, and lay claim to an authority by which they have wholeheartedly rejected such religious imagery and symbolism. This authority arises out of women's experience of themselves, the Supreme Being and the arising symbolic order. Post-church feminists are equally divided as to whether or not the patriarchal nature of the Christian symbolic order is redeemable from its status quo. Most post-church feminists see themselves functioning in a symbiotic relationship with the established Churches: as "reformists in a revolutionary guise". But all agree that the core symbolism of the existing Churches functions largely to marginalise women. They want to replace this with a "wholistic, non-dualistic core symbolism" which is based upon the cosmologies and religious understandings of both males and females. It is in feminism that post-church women perceive the historical means to redress the unfortunate balance of power at the human and the divine level. Post-church feminists often gave the personal symbol of God the Father as an example. God is not only referred to through the gender "He", but his characteristics and qualities are understood to be "patriarchal" or "paternalistic" too. Post-church feminists argue that in this way God becomes a means of justifying not only power to males only, but the power of males over all the order of God's creation - upon which He is the pinnacle.

The post-church milieu suggests that neither gendered maleness or femaleness are appropriate symbols for divinity because gender roles are necessarily human constructs and conditioned. However, particular male and female reproductive functions and attributes, based on complementary differences are deemed to be suitable where they are not seen to the bearers of a dualism where one sex is deemed inferior or derivative. A given example of this might be the inclusion of womb symbolism into the symbolic order of the Christian tradition. The womb might possess a number of applications: as "a symbol of nurture and growth", for instance, or as "a symbol of the chaos out of which some form of order arises". Post-church feminists insist that symbols derived from sexual polarity are only capable of acquiring authentic meaning when it is understood that they bear a meaning which is inclusive and transcendent of their sexual and gender application. They insist that the core symbolism of Christianity (and, indeed, all religions), should bear a balance of apparently "masculine" and "feminine" symbols which do not obstruct the psychological development of either men or women.

The obstruction of women's psychological development by masculine core symbolism is well-documented by the American psychologist of religions, Naomi Goldenberg. Post-church feminists have shown a great interest in psychology, particularly in the area of developmental

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84 Goldenberg's publications are listed in the Bibliography.
psychology and the psychoanalysis of Carl Jung and Melanie Klein. They have insisted that
patriarchy has, ironically, stressed the more fearsome aspects of God throughout history, in order to
effect political ends. One woman interviewed was concerned that

a number of violent images of God have found their way into the Christian tradition
and become fixed in human minds. But on the other hand there are loads of
examples where God is not portrayed as a tin-pot despot, but we tend, as feminists, to
forget about these. We shouldn’t forget that violent imagery has on our
view of ourselves as women, on men and on God. But equally, we shouldn’t forget
the way in which theology shapes our perceptions about God and the world, because
otherwise we could miss some surprising revelations about God which the Bible
reveals.

[Interview, 7/6/88]

She (and others) went on to give a number of examples of violent images and symbols of God which
have become a part of the Christian tradition. These were also matched by a number of images
and symbols which portray God in less violent, judgmental and tyrannical ways.

All the post-church feminists interviewed were insistent that the radical transformation of images and
symbols in post-church terms should be governed by the understanding that transformation does not
only benefit women’s psychological well-being but men’s too. We have seen that the exposure of
potentially harmful images and symbols in Christianity is the first stage in redressing the balance
towards a wholistic core symbolism which benefits the psychological development of both men and
women. The second stage involves the removal of harmful binary opposites (dualism) from
Christianity’s core symbolism, and the implementation of a gender-linked imagery that should
include both men and women’s experiences. For post-church feminists there is no solution simply
by naming God "She" or "Mother" unless there is a universal recognition of the radical redress of

Nehemiah 4:20.
Joshua 23:10.
1 Kings 14:15.
86 Genesis 9:12-17.
Ephesians 5:2.
1 Thessalonians 3:12.
Matthew 18:2-5.
Luke 7:47.
Romans 12:4.
1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:20.
Christianity's core symbolism.

Can the resulting religion still be called "Christianity"? Post-church feminists are united in the understanding that the essential tenets of faith surrounding the life of the Founder remain the same: death and resurrection are fundamental to post-church cosmology. Post-church belief in the revelation of God in the historical process makes the process of religious development "a divine activity and enlightenment in which women are partaking as full human beings". Some aspects of the Biblical tradition support this, they feel, but they also assert that both Christian men and women must have the freedom to challenge or reject images and symbols which they understand to harm human development as males and females. In essence, post-church feminists claim that the Bible can support the liberation of human beings from the bondage that is gender stereotyping, but ultimately it is "the responsibility of human beings to determine their suitability".

The fundamental religious intention underlying post-church cosmology is the religious need to share images and symbols which arise out of the symbolic order of both male and female experience. Post-church feminists refute the argument that human beings today have outgrown the need for shared images and symbols. However, they also indicated that the complexity and diversity of human life today requires the expansion of the criteria to determine the meaning of personal, individual private symbols. Post-church feminists insist upon the emanation of new symbols, and more profound meanings for existing symbols which perpetuate the understanding of human growth. This is bound with the post-church critique of the effects of ecclesiastical institutionalisation. They arraign the Churches for having held to religious symbols and imagery in ritual with such tenacity that the multiplicity of their application is limited. Of the women interviewed, almost all gave the example of Jesus' instructions at the Last Supper as having been the legitimization of the denial of sacramental responsibility to women. This denial is based upon a dualism in which femaleness becomes equated with impurity and ungodliness. But post-church feminists consider that only the absolute eradication of dualism, with the realisation that femaleness can be an adequate expression of the image of God, can effect an equilibrium.

The Goddess is therefore reclaimed by post-church feminists as "a symbol of female experience". It is not understood, as in the post-christian milieu, to be an impression which legitimates women's "natural" superiority and legal authority over men. The Goddess is a pure "psychic" symbol which mediates between the human and the divine and simultaneously contains and transcends the human. And so the symbolic potentialities of the Goddess come alive with the understanding that She points to something that is even beyond herself, yet she reaches into the recesses of an often ignored or forgotten female experience. The symbolic value of the Goddess for post-christian feminists operates in a qualitatively different way to post-christian feminists. The Goddess as symbol
functions as a mediatrix between human beings and the Ultimate Reality of the Godhead. Unlike the Goddess of post-Christian cosmology, who is regarded as the Ultimate Reality Itself, She functions in a psychological capacity; as an instrument to human understanding of a Reality which transcends the purely sexual. One post-church feminist spoke of

a surprising paradox that our understanding of God should be heightened by a symbolism which abolishes sex and gender while making God subject to it!

[Interview, 15/4/89]

So the religious intention underlying symbolic language in post-church cosmology is the wish for the eradication of images and symbols which legitimate the power of one human group over another. This does not only apply to gender but to racial and economic factors too.

The image of Jesus as liberator thus establishes itself firmly in the post-church milieu. Jesus is not only regarded as a liberator in the post-church tradition, but as a healer too. This is an image which post-church feminists feel can be largely (although not exclusively) equated with women's life experiences, especially through motherhood and some "traditional" female professions such as nursing. The women interviewed often used the image of healing when speaking of the schism which has developed in religious symbols where these have been in the sole control of elite men. They have felt that a solution to the problem could be found in the development of a symbolic order that was wholly inclusive of women's experience as well as men's. They see women's own unique experiences as beginning this process: for instance, women's experience of menstruation, conception, pregnancy and birth, all life events which are not represented in Christianity in positive images or rites of passages which are valued by women. Post-church feminists recognise that their search for images of the Supreme Being in female human experience marginalises them still further from mainstream Christianity, and even the Christian feminist movement. Women spoke of their own "personal" symbols and images. These were drawn from a number of sources and were understood to be the bearers of religious meaning or symbols of the self. These included the unicorn, the bee, the cat, the sky, the moon, a particular flower (rose, daisy, iris), or even such apparent intangibles as a hammer, a domestic iron, a boiling pot [sic.], a sponge, a blade of grass, a leaf, a tree (very common) and granite. Other symbols were clearly influenced by the meditative practices of Asian religions and even included mantras. Individual personal symbols function to encourage a special "intimate relationship" with the Supreme Being. The individual is not encouraged to think of her or himself in a way which is fostered by the use of personal symbols for God such as father and mother. Rather, the women feel that they have a "symbiotic relationship"

87 This idea is explored by Joanna Field [Marion Milner] *A Life of One's Own* (London: Virago, 1988).
with the Supreme Being in which there occurs a resonance between the two in which a relationship is encouraged to develop through the mediation of the symbol, whether it comes from within or outside the symbolic order of the institutionalised Christian tradition.

The religious understanding of images and symbols in Post-christian feminist cosmology is facilitated by analysing them in four categories: images and symbols from nature, personal experience, localities and ritual. Earlier it was noted how Christian- and Post-church feminists have appropriated images and symbols from the Christian tradition and have engendered them with a new hermeneutical meaning. Post-christian feminists are related to these two groups in a manner by which they understand themselves to have purposively radicalised the tenets of Christianity. Such women are attempting to restore "radical" to its original meaning, "root". So Post-christian feminists claim that historically, Christianity has moved away from its Goddess roots which manifested itself in the figure of Mary, Mother of Jesus. Women from both the covens spoke of the religious imagery of medieval Europe in which Mary is portrayed holding the infant Christ on her knee. This was likened to the imagery of Goddess-worshippers in apparent pre-patriarchal cultures: the Goddess Kuan-Yin in China, the Egyptian Isis with Horus. They refer also to the culture heroes which were all born of virgins: Buddha, Osiris, Dionysos, Marduk, Gilgamesh and Genghis Khan!

Post-christian feminists lay claim to legitimately radicalise not only Christianity but other religious traditions too. Because they understand the original Goddess religion to have been practised universally in pre-patriarchal times, they now lay claim to a legitimate reappropriation of imagery and symbolism throughout the world. It is therefore possible to find English women worshipping the manifestations of the Goddess from Egypt, Nigeria, Greece and India. Because of the pantheistic nature of Goddess religion, religious imagery and symbolism are both rich and diverse in nature and manifestation. It has been necessary, therefore, to select but a small numbers of examples to illustrate their apparence.

Symbols are of particular interest to this study because they impose themselves upon human life. It is in this way that they become subject to human imagination. In this way, symbols open themselves to a variety of meanings, including, post-christian feminists assert, the value of male and female in a given culture. They claim that their response to symbols is a reclamation of a pre-patriarchal common experience of human beings. They thus wish to recover and reclaim the "original meaning" of symbols through a form of exegesis by use of the creative imagination! But post-christian feminists also recognise that their current hermeneutical perspective arises from their experiences under patriarchy. In this way they differ from Pagans and New Age cult members, whose worship of the Goddess does not come through their experience of feminism.
The moon is the most potent symbol of post-Christian cosmology. Its associations with the biological rhythms of the female make it a most appropriate symbol for feminist spirituality. Interviewees mentioned the Great Goddess in Her moon aspect is both creatrix and destroyer of human life: for example, Hecate is both the killer of newborn children, but she was also the bringer of rain for the nourishment of crops. Post-Christian feminists have asserted that only apparently "negative aspects of the Great Goddess have been preserved by patriarchy", as, for example, by making her chaotic and sexual aspect prominent and by removing emphasis from her creatrix and nurturing aspect. This inference is determined by a conjectured theory in which ancient beliefs and rites are said to have probably taken place in matriarchal times, but which are believed to have been obscured by patriarchy. The new moon is understood in post-Christian cosmology to symbolise "the recreation of the world" where people looked for the prevention of disease and sorrow in their lives. The moon's process of change - birth, aging, death and rebirth, is a constant and unfailing reminder of the cosmic process which affects all living beings. But to post-Christian feminists, the moon is the constant reaffirmation of the feminine as a wholly positive force in human life. The moon, which is often associated with darkness and the attraction of moisture (of tides and menstrual blood, for example) is viewed by post-Christian feminists as the very "life force of the universe". Monica Sjöö claims to be supported by scientific theory, and this is a common (if not ironic) aspect of post-Christian cosmology: always, post-Christian feminists are keen to support their assumptions about the cosmos with references to scientific proof. So in this case, the symbolic importance of a natural phenomenon is equalled by its actual function in the universe in which it supports human life.

Yet post-Christian feminists still speak of the dual aspect of the moon, and in particular with reference to associated images and symbols, the double spiral, the double axe (labrys), the lunar horns of cows, wombs, tombs, gates and doorways. Monica Sjöö insists that these symbols and images are not dualistic because they have two polar sides which are joined at the centre. This is understood to be the Mother Goddess herself "who stands in the centre and joins the opposites in her being...she mothers the opposites: good and evil".

The moon is understood as the very manifestation of the Goddess immanent and visible. One

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89 For example, see Monica Sjöö, op. cit., 251. "Probably the ancient moon rites were still celebrated...These days were sacred to the dark moon, full of oracular power, before the birth of the New Year's new moon. And these last days were described as 'precreation Chaos'..."
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 174.
woman from the Devon coven spoke of the processes of the moon in terms of female development:

She is the budding daughter when she waxes - Astarte and Gaia. When she is full moon she is the Queen of Heaven. Waning, she is the Crone, Hecate, Old Woman, Wise Woman.

This woman also claimed that women originally menstruated with the waning of the moon and ovulated at the full moon. Women's cerebral processes are also believed to be fused with its processes too: the new moon is said to be a time of embarking upon new ventures, the waning (premenstrual) moon for introspection and preparation. Lunar calendars offer women information about planning their lives according to the phases of the moon. This includes information about ritual which shall be discussed in a later section.

Water symbolism is closely linked to lunar symbolism, for the latter is understood to control the movement of the former. Sea water is understood to represent beginnings: the primordial creation and the fluid which protects the child in the womb. Interestingly, water in post-Christian cosmology does not have an ambivalent, destructive aspect but rather has a healing and protective meaning. All moisture is understood to come from the Great Mother, including morning dew, natural springs, rain, and also the great rivers and oceans. Sjöö suggests that the brain, which is the moistest part of the body, is influenced by the moon and thus words like “lunacy” and “moon-madness” survive. In ritual, water is used to purify and heal. Water may be taken from a source which has a particularly strong Goddess presence such as a sacred spring or stream, which may have assumed importance through a particular miraculous event having taken place there.

The symbol of the womb is associated with lunar and water symbolism, for women are believed to have menstruated with the moon cycle, and menstrual blood was “liquid flesh”, both sacred and biological. Many of the women interviewed for this study claimed to menstruate with the waning of the moon. Monica Sjöö claims that “the ancients painted their dead, and their womb-like underground burial chambers, with red ochre - the colour of rebirth within the mother”. The women interviewed spoke of the moon renewing herself in the way that a snake sheds her skin. In the same way, menstruation is an actual and symbolic occurrence of "renewal" and "self-actualisation".

Monica Sjöö has explored the etymology of the Greek word "hysteria" ("womb") and concludes that "hysteria is a hypersensitive state during which 'occult' or 'transnatural' phenomena occur, the
apparent suspension of physical laws". She is referring to ecstatic trances and shamanic states, which she calls "womb states", and claims that women are particularly receptive to them because the womb is both literally and symbolically powerful.\textsuperscript{95}

The symbolic importance of fire in post-Christian cosmology arises from the belief that women were the first procurers of fire to humankind, and this is supported by reference to modern tribal societies.\textsuperscript{96} Moreover, post-Christian feminists allude to women of myth and history who were entrusted with fire, for example, the Irish nuns of St. Brigid (or Bride) and the Roman Vestal Virgins.\textsuperscript{97} Fire is linked with the moon in a symbolic capacity in ritual, for it is a symbolic and literal aspect of the power of the Moon Goddess. It is reappropriated as a symbol of female power that has greatly facilitated human progression. Post-Christian feminists believe that women were the original discoverers of fire:

> Fire was the tool of tools; through its use foods could be dried and conserved for future use, and some poisonous plants and fruits made edible. It was women who developed all the early associated industries of cooking and ceramics in which fire was the critical tool.\textsuperscript{98}

Fire in collective and personal ritual has both a purificatory and illuminatory aspect.\textsuperscript{99} It was observed that women in the Devon and Warwick covens understood the flame of the candle to have a rich symbolic value. For instance, in personal meditation the flame of a candle is the focus of attention, symbolising personal enlightenment and illumination. But it is also the very manifestation of the Goddess as wisdom. The symbolic importance attached to the use of fire in ritual is linked with post-Christian understanding of the reappropriation of rituals apparently obscured by patriarchy; thus what is important to these women is fire's apparent pre-patriarchal meaning.

The egg, as with the moon and womb, is a symbol of creation, fertility and perpetual regeneration, carrying within itself the processes of generation and movement. In the iconography of many religions, the egg and the serpent are portrayed entwined. In post-Christian cosmology women have claimed that the Goddess gave birth to both the serpent and the egg and laid them on the waters of the primordial chaos. The snake then broke the egg by wrapping itself around it, thus giving birth to all life forms.\textsuperscript{100} One of the women interviewed spoke about another form of iconography which

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\textsuperscript{95}Ibid., 189.  
\textsuperscript{96}Ibid., 35.  
\textsuperscript{97}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{98}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{99}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{100}To be discussed in greater detail in a following section about sacred action.  
\textsuperscript{101}Interview. Monica Sjöö (op. cit.), 55, alludes to another creation myth: "The black-winged night laid a silver egg (the moon) in the womb of the darkness, the dark (Footnote continued)
contained the symbol of the snake. This is the snake vessel in which the snake is portrayed winding itself around a clay vessel. The woman's interpretation of this included the idea that the vessel symbolised the Goddess and the feminine, the creative force of the universe. The snake was, according to her, a symbol of time and the temporal limitation of human life.

Images are profuse and important to post-Christian feminists because they represent a spiritual reality or truth and participate in the actuality which they represent. Thus, the labrys is an important image because of its association with the Amazon warriors who are understood as an historical reality to many post-Christian feminists. They are believed to have existed in North Africa, Thrace and Macedonia. The crescent-shaped heads on the labrys axe are understood by Monica Sjöö to represent the waxing and waning of the moon, and are said to be used for war, sacrificial and agricultural purposes.

The labyrinth is associated with the symbols of the womb and cave. Its image portrays a likeness of the Goddess, and women must dance or walk the path through the entrance (representing birth and new beginnings) and through the exit (representing death). The labyrinth is a cosmic microcosm and an image of the power of female creation. Post-Christian feminists purport that labyrinths were used for mysteries, by which men could imitate the female processes of menstruation and childbirth. One of the women interviewed used the image of the labyrinth as a focus of meditation in times of abandonment and loneliness. This served as a reminder that she was never really alone as she was always part of the emergent cosmic process, participating in the life of the universe. Similarly, mazework and spirals are depicted universally in many forms, denoting emergence. Post-Christian feminists understand such images to represent the Goddess and female power which nourishes and sustains human beings and the universe. These shapes are understood to be images of the Goddess embracing or giving birth to a child (the universe). She is both alone by herself and containing the universe, a paradox which one woman explained as being akin to the isolation of birth which is also a process of generation and continuation. Monica Sjöö writes of the ascending spiral as

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\text{matter transforming into spiritual/psychic energy. Simultaneously, from the descending spiral, the materialization of the spirit, comes the differentiation of the whole manifest world.} \]

So the spiral effectively serves as an image of ceaseless, perpetual resonance in the universe in which

\[100\text{ (continued)}\]

\[101\text{ Monica Sjöö, ibid., 102.}\]

\[102\text{ Ibid., 63.}\]
the temporal and the spiritual are at one together for all time. Yin/Yang, the cosmic egg is an image of importance to post-Christian feminists. When questioned about it, women responded that this image contained a universal truth about the nature of the universe: it embraced the paradox of continuation and flux in the world. For post-Christian feminists Yin/Yang do not represent an opposed dualism. Rather, both halves represent a polarity in which there are no divisions: earth and moon, birth and death, beginnings and endings.

Whilst a cauldron was not used by any of the woman interviewed for this study, its image was familiar and important to most of them. The cauldron is an image of the female body or womb. Monica Sjöö suggests that the cauldron operates on a paradoxical model for it "ritually spilled the blood of death, but it also produced the drink of immortality". It is also an image of continuation and immortality because it is believed to be used to change matter into spirit and base metals into gold as the womb brings forth children to continue the human race. The Inverted triangle is an important image and is of interest because it is a familiar image of gay liberation in the late twentieth century. But for post-Christian feminists it has a more profound meaning because it represents women's sexuality, fecundity and her reproductive system.

The swastika is an image which is being resurrected by post-Christian feminists following its use in Nazi Germany. It is understood to represent the tree of life and is found in North Africa, Greece and North America. Its meaning is similar to that of the Celtic cross. Its shape suggests constant movement, and its association with the tree denotes growth.

Women of the Warwickshire coven have recently begun to adopt the forms of healing, directive and precognitive dreaming, self-protection, meditation and creative visualisation using gems and crystals which are used widely in North America. Their use in ritual will be discussed in more depth in a following section on sacred action. Post-Christian feminists contrast the uses of gems and crystals in patriarchal technology and weaponry and their "peaceful" uses in rediscovering matriarchal knowledge obscured by patriarchy. They are believed to contain energy that can be used to transmit and direct. This is best achieved by the individual woman "bonding" with her crystal. Ritual, crystals and gems can be used to "increase the power of the group by raising the cone of power".

The images of the Tarot were used by individuals of the Warwickshire coven. One woman claimed that although it was not possible to change the pain that patriarchy had brought to women, it was possible to transform that pain and loss of universal Goddess worship by reclaiming skills that have

103 Ibid., 174.
been lost to them. The Tarot is now available to women in a number of feminist iconographic forms. For example the Amazon Tarot, Book of Arcadia, Daughters of the Moon, Choice centred Tarot, A Feminist Tarot and Shekhina's Tarot. By far the most popular Tarot deck among the women interviewed is Vicki Noble's Motherpeace. The images on the cards are given a feminist interpretation. For example, The Fool represents starting out in life - the innocent child who makes mistakes in ignorance but who is aided and protected by the Goddess. The Empress is the Great Mother who is omnipotent and omniscient, healer and sustainer. The Emperor is patriarchy itself; women must choose whether to give it power. The Chariot is also Boudicca and stands for victory, choice and will. The Hermit becomes The Crone in Vicki Noble's Tarot and represents the need for women to temporarily withdraw into herself. She is guardian of women's mysteries. The Tower represents an often violent shattering of self-illusions, forcing an adjustment of ideas and values.

**Sacred word**

The exploration of sacred word in this feminist study revealed three clear contexts of operation in the lives of the women interviewed: at the (religious) institutional level; at the (religious) non-institutional level; and finally at the subjective, individual level. For all the women interviewed, words were understood to have a number of different levels of meaning, often simultaneously. This is because for them feminism entails the perception of new values which bring a new meaning or context to familiar words, and brings new ones. From the information obtained from women in interviews, an attempt was made to phenomenologically evaluate their understanding of the religious meaning of sacred word, and to identify and articulate some of the religious intentions underlying their expressions. The women were encouraged to talk very freely about their understanding of the role of language in their communication with God and the world. From the recorded material, an attempt was made to analyse the underlying religious intentions and meanings of individuals in terms of a phenomenological evaluation, firstly by establishing the intentions expressed in religious propositions, and secondly by developing the meaning of religious propositions in terms of their meaning which may be in tension with the dominant or institutionalised religious structure.

For the women interviewed, the meaning of religious language (or sacred word) was a complex phenomenon which expressed a number of simultaneous concerns, the most apparent of which was the religious tension between institutionalised, non-institutionalised and the individual, subjective sacred word. The underlying intentions of sacred word shall be discussed first. Secondly, the
explicit meaning of sacred word shall be developed in terms of its significance for women themselves and within the context of the tension of dominant religious structures.

For Christian feminists, sacred word is evident at institutional, non-institutional and individual, subjective levels. It contains and conveys the principles of belief in the existence of a Supreme Being who is understood to participate in human life at all times, but especially at times where humans attempt communication through the sacred actions of theology, the liturgy, public and personal prayer, preaching, teaching and song.

Christian feminist theology in England has been encouraged by the enormous Christian feminist theological activity in the United States of America and Germany, in particular that of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel. Only a handful of Christian Feminist women interviewed for this study had read any of Fiorenza's works. These were usually women who had previously had some form of theological training. Even these admitted to finding Fiorenza "weighty", "Teutonic", "pedantic", as well as "objective" and "challenging". Christian feminists tended to regard Fiorenza's feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation as suspect because she has cited not only theological interpretations of biblical texts as androcentric, but the Bible itself! All of the Christian feminists interviewed for this study insisted upon the revelatory authority of the Bible; but they also expressed the fear that interpolations may have infringed upon the sacred word of God thus obscuring the inerrancy of Scripture. This religious belief in the historical inerrancy and revelation of Scripture was of great interest, since the Christian feminists interviewed in this study did not reflect the dialogical and hermeneutical understandings of Scripture postulated by prominent or published English Christian feminists such as Sara Maitland, Jo Garcia, Janet Morley, Susan Dowell, Linda Hurcombe and Monica Furlong. The latter group attempts to put biblical writings into their historical context, while trying to actualise their meaning for a contemporary community.

This disparity of religious beliefs and actions between published writers and Christian feminists without theological training in localised groups, is a fact which is often ignored by the former, but it is one requiring attention, especially in a phenomenological study which attends to the underlying religious intentions of religious expressions. It would appear that the non-professional theologian Christian feminists interviewed for this study reflected a more institutionalised approach to a belief in the inerrancy of the word of the Bible. In contrast, the English Christian feminist writers reflect a belief in the human, historical hand in its composition.

Post-church feminist beliefs were articulated in more detail than Christian feminists' and concerned the sacred word of the New Testament, especially the tenets of liberation theology, from whence it
came. A striking feature of post-church comment on sacred word was the belief that God as liberator of oppressed peoples (the poor, the politically powerless, women under patriarchy) was sharing through them revelation of a divine plan in the world where the negative effects of patriarchy would be overcome. Here was an explicit concern and belief for a change in the order of human power which reflects the revelation of the divine nature. This is not a total rejection of the Bible, but a revolutionary critical hermeneutics of liberation in which the Word of God is understood to be found in the lives of all humans whose full polarity is not recognised under harmful aspects of patriarchy.

Post-church feminists believe the New Testament to be a determinant, but not a paradigm, for social action for all times and cultures. It serves as the basis for future shifts in liberatory ideals and visions. For example, the widespread understanding of the Bible as condoning violence, slavery, the subjugation of women is one which has arisen out of historical developments in which such occurrences are understood to be contrary to the will of God. So the Bible, as the product of many androcentric cultures, cannot be regarded as the conveyor of the whole of human history and divine action while it reflects only male values and observations.

Post-christian feminist understanding of sacred word in terms of religious belief centres upon their understanding of its communication in an oral tradition. This is a tradition which, they believe, has been obscured by patriarchy, which in the context of Western Christianity has assumed a strong logos orientation. Post-christian feminists understand institutionalised Christianity's preoccupation with dogma, orthodoxy, tenets, articles of faith and theology as having spelt the end of universal Goddess religion, although aspects of the latter persist in patriarchal religions, as, for example, in devotion to the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholicism.

Sacred word in post-christian cosmology is of special interest to the phenomenologist, because the use of words in ritual is believed to actualise the presence of the Goddess. This is most apparent when the Charge is spoken in ritual. A Charge is spoken by a participant in, for example, a Sabbat or a menstrual ritual (see Appendix K). It is an oral articulation which is spoken by the woman as the Goddess:

I am guardian and destroyer. I am the Night Hag flying by night. I am the protectress and guardian of the four directions...

[Beginning of the Charge of the Halloween Sabbat, Devon coven. See also the Charge used in Sweet Diane Sweet Pea's Menstrual Ritual, Appendix K].

\[104\] See in the next section about sacred action.
In the Charge, believers understand themselves to have the ability to actualise the divine presence of the Goddess. Similarly hexing in the Warwickshire coven was believed to potentialise the especially powerful channels of energy available to women to express the rage they felt about male crimes against women (such as rape and incest). Hexing will be discussed in more detail in the following section about sacred action. But it should be said here that hexing takes place in ritual where the crime and criminal is named. Naming is understood to invoke the wrath of the Goddess (who is also just) who will direct an appropriate punishment to a wrongdoer. Speaking the name of the crime also has a purificatory function. I was told that this was an important aspect of hexing, as much of it was carried out for women coven members who had been sexually abused as children by their fathers. Praise, prayer, song, charging and hexing are powerful communal activities which occur in a sacred space and time of especial power (since all time and space are sacred to post-christian feminists). In all of these activities word is understood to contain the ability to potentialise petitions. Post-christian cosmology encourages women to seek individual pathways to the Goddess, thus enabling women to develop the skills of religious language through individual forms of communication with the sacred.

Christian feminists have reclaimed a women's biblical heritage, and with it kindle a mistrust and challenge to traditional Christian theology. The increased popularity of feminist theological Bible study groups in England has become a tactic of success against those opponents of feminism in the churches. Christian feminist theological activity is unusual in that it has educated a myth of a pristine social order in illo tempore, where the life of Jesus and his relationships with the many women around him become the very paradigm of contemporary human relationships today. Christian feminists witness that the churches fall short of this ideal at almost every level. Commitment to the Christian feminist ideal is not expressed in an institutionalised creed (although non-sexist alternatives are proposed, even informally used privately and at meetings of some, but not all, groups). Post-church feminists, similarly, claim a new semantics arising from their feminist experience, and thus demand parity of opportunity for equality and power with men. Post-church feminists reject or transform language which reflects the legitimation of one human group over another, and plead for a new shared religious language which reflects the re-evaluation of male and female relationships following a revised understanding of God.

The institutional use of sacred word in ritual is explored in more detail in the section discussing sacred action. Christian feminists recognise private worship and prayer as well as communal expression of faith, or liturgy. But they are insisting that liturgical language is sexist because it does not reflect women as equal partners in humankind, and it does a grave injustice to the image of

\[105\] Sara Maitland, op. cit., 158.
God as received by them. Sara Maitland writes of some of the positive steps taken by the churches. She describes many people as "happy" with the new Trinitarian formula "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier" for "Father, Son and Holy Spirit". Many of the women interviewed for this study were worried about some feminist insistence that male images in liturgy and Scripture should be counterpoised by female ones. Largely, Christian feminists agreed that what was important was that sexist, martial and dominant imagery should be understood for what it is: the product of historical cultures which reflects such values. Maitland employs a fascinating image to evoke the approach to language which is taking place in Christian communities. She speaks of those people who bring back "shapes to the unnameable Other: map-makers of the interior country". This is an image which might equally apply to those women whose voluntary exile from the churches excludes them at the present time from participating in liturgies. Post-church feminists have experienced marginality within the churches by sacramental but also in liturgical language which, they feel, does not support the liberation of women. The informality and recent self-recognition of Post-church existence has not led to any tangible liturgy, except where Post-church feminists meet with Christian feminists for specifically feminist events, such as the 1982 Women’s Mass in Oxford.

A rich source of ritual sacred word was found in interviews and observations of post-Christian feminists. Where words were spoken in ritual, these were understood to be the very vehicle by which communication with the Goddess took place. So purification, invocation, raising and grounding the cone of power in Sabbats involved the use of sacred words which potentialised them by bringing women into the presence of the Goddess. Other ritual use of sacred word included prayer, praise, song, myth, poetry, hexing, healing and mysteries.

The religious intentions looked at in this section illustrate how the three groups of women stand in relation to the Churches from whence they derived their current position, and discusses each one’s unique feminist approach to doctrines, texts and ethics. In England, the first public example of a Christian feminist approach to doctrine, texts and ethics came with Janet Morley’s Sermon at the Women’s Mass at Blackfriars, Oxford on 15th January, 1982. Morley is critical of hierarchical leadership in the Churches and the effect which this has on family life. She makes a call for churches to examine their own internal power structures and for radical Christian groups to remain within rather than to quit, since it is impossible to reform institutions from outside.

Post-church feminists’ approach to the Bible is clearly situational and removed from the legalistic "logos" approach of many theologians. The Scripture, doctrines, creeds of established religious

106 Ibid., 174.
107 Ibid., 176.
institutions must not, they feel, be accepted as authentic and faithful illustrations of human
relationships with God. Rather, they must be understood not only as a resource for the revealed
word of God but also for evidence of harmful androcentric activities. Post-church feminists speak
of a new paradigm for Biblical interpretation which retains the historical continuity of divine
revelation to humankind while understanding written evidence of sexism and violence to be
historical by-products of it. Post-christian feminists reject the apparent authority of what they call
"patriarchal" ethics in favour of a woman-centred cosmology. They lay claim to no doctrines
except the simple one which states that the Goddess is present in all things. The doctrines, ethics
and texts of "patriarchy" do not reflect an adequate picture of humankind because they are the
product of a hierarchical cosmology in which males subjugate life beneath them.

I asked about the ways in which each group would wish to see their original Christian denomination
transformed. Christian Feminists are attempting to transform church institutions as Christians in
Christian denominations. One of the ways in which they are attempting to achieve this is by drawing
attention to the exclusivity of language within them. They wish to establish an inclusive syntax
which develops Christian feminist understandings of human and divine nature. In theology,
feminist exegesis and hermeneutics facilitate this understanding. Women also write about their
personal experiences of God which embrace female imagery and physiology; for example, Margaret
Hebblethwaite has written movingly about her experience of God as Mother. Post-church
feminists insist that they are reluctant exiles from institutions which, they regret, cannot be redeemed
or transformed because of their implicit patriarchal nature. There is an insistence upon the
establishment of new myths which reflect post-church experience, but at the time of research none
were in evidence. Post-christian feminists have no wish to associate themselves with dominant
religious institutions, although they would wish to transform them. To this end, they propose an
alternative semantics of language for women, and insist that patriarchy has disguised matriarchal
meanings. So for post-christian feminists there is an attempt at the recovery of an apparently oral,
pre-literate meaning. Alternatively, the convention and meaning of words are extended: "woman"
becomes womyn, womine, womb-win, womban or We-Moon thus trying to "decode" patriarchal
language.

Sacred action

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108 Margaret Hebblethwaite, Motherhood and God.
One of the most moving aspects of the research for this work was the sense of communal spirit among the women of the three groups, and particularly their abilities to share in their common religious understandings and needs. The most pressing need expressed was the desire to symbolically experience a human meeting point with the divine in a form of sacred action. In the following pages attention has been focused, for the purposes of clarity and brevity, upon selected rituals in each of the three groups.

Dr. Christine Healy, a Christian feminist in the Plymouth Women’s Theology Group has expressed the above sentiments in an moving article in the Christian Feminist Newsletter. She refers to a dialogue between the Plymouth Groups and some Quaker women from Exeter. One woman (of an unspecified denomination, probably of the Society of Friends) eschewed communal ritual but spoke of the evolution of some personal “traditions” such as making her daughter “a blanket decorated with all kinds of symbols of joyful and expanding life” to celebrate her passage into womanhood through the menarche. Christine Healy expresses most poignantly a common desire of both Christian- and post-church feminists:

If women’s experience was regularly drawn in from the obscure margins of life and given a social meaning and value in this way then a new store of life-enhancing rituals could evolve.

Among Christian- and post-church feminists there is a marked sense of a need to develop rituals based on women’s unique experiences, but which need not exclude men, for example, childbirth, menstruation, the menopause and divorce. The disparity between Christian feminist need to reform sacred action (to achieve an institutional balance through their understanding of the nature of God), and its actual implementation is a source of unrest within the movement because of the “seeming impossibility of the Church to recognise God as manifest in women’s lives as well as men’s” [Interview, 15/4/86]. But still an attempt is being made to reform churches from within.

It is difficult to speak of “universal” English Christian feminist sacred action. This is because the movement in England is without a truly ecumenical or even centralised base. Much criticism arose in interviews of Christian Women’s Information and Resources, based in Oxford, for its apparent Roman Catholic bias. Meetings where ritual action takes place are few and infrequent. Typically, Christian feminists have begun to form small, localised denominational groups for the purposes of sisterhood, Bible studies and theological discussion. Some of these groups have some form of meditational silence or a petitionary prayer asking for guidance for the group and for Church leaders. The little-publicised Women’s Mass at Blackfriars, Oxford on January 15th, 1982, was the

subject of much controversy among many of the women who were interviewed for this work. It is quite characteristic of the Christian Feminist Movement in England that this controversy was not aired in prose in any radical periodical of the time, or indeed in C.W.I.R.E.S. Newsletter. This perhaps reflects a period of insularity against external criticism by the churches who showed ridicule and hostility towards women's demands for admission to the priesthood and who felt themselves “called to full humanity” by God.

The Women’s Mass was organised by the predominantly Roman Catholic Oxford Women’s Theology Group and was intended to be an ecumenical affair. Among those interviewed for this work was a Methodist woman who expressed outrage at the fact that although women had organised the event, had read from the Scripture, led prayers and composed readings and songs for it, a Roman Catholic priest had been invited to administer the Mass!

What were we supposed to think?! It was as if all the women there were being asked to collude with something which went against all our understanding of human liberation ... Some of us left feeling that if, at a feminist event, a man was brought in to do the necromantic bit, what did that tell us about our image of ourselves as women?

One woman challenged the general sense of unease about the event by saying that much of the criticism about a man administering the sacrament in fact detracted from the profound spiritual nature of the contribution of the women to the meeting. This included the sermon by Janet Morley, an Anglican, in which she preached on the subject of Christian Unity Week, a “rather embarrassing week, when Christians are made aware of the ignorance of other people’s beliefs and practices”.^110 This was profound challenge to Christian denominations who want “ideally to be at peace with other groups, so long as it is on their own terms”.^111 Janet Morley’s indictment of the leadership and apparent internal unity of denominations which is based on the notion of the people (congregation) in a position of dependency (to a hierarchy) rather than on collective decision making which embraces the values and needs of those previously excluded from shaping the direction of the Christian community.

If the sacramental aspect of the event divided the women present, unity was perhaps achieved in prayer and sung praise. Aside from the standard liturgical Lord’s Prayer, women composed and led their own prayers within the community of women present at the event. The spiritual content of these prayers reflected a common spiritual understanding and purpose: that women possessed the

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^111 Ibid., 21.
divine gift of prayer to God and could recognise their being made in the divine image. This was manifest in the way in which God was given anthropomorphic titles such as "Mother", "Sister" and traditionally feminine attributes such as "nurturer" and "healer". The prayers also magnified the congregation's sense of unity when the Christian Feminist Movement was at its inception in England by the simple fact that individual women, from a variety of denominations, shared a common religious understanding about the nature of God and God's relation to all people. The petitionary element of prayer at the Women's Mass centred on the explicit lamentable state of "apartheid" evident in the denominations, where casualties of a hierarchical system have been marginalised. This includes women, blacks, the poor and gays. The petition made was that those in positions of authority in the churches should recognise that the time was ripe for a shift in the locus and administration of power so that the experiences of all human beings should be listened to. A second petition, expressed movingly by several women, was for strength for a now recognisable community of men and women to endure the disrepute, scorn and ridicule which continued to face them.

Father-Mother God
listen to your sons and daughters
in labour. Help us to see that
our heresies of today will become the canon of tomorrow.

[Petitionary prayer, the Women's Mass, source unspecified].

Two post-church feminists interviewed for this study had attended the Women's Mass in 1982 as Roman Catholics, but had since ceased all ritual and fellowship with the Roman Church. To date, the post-church Movement is in infancy and has only recently begun to recognise itself as an association of like-minded human beings. Although it was not possible to identify any innate public ritual at the time of research, the human need for it was expressed by all the women interviewed. Where there was little evidence of public ritual, informal and unpublicised gatherings of women and men have taken place frequently. These are occasions for discussions, meditation, prayer and the occasional sharing of bread and wine.

One such meeting took place in Primrose Hill, London in May, 1988 at a house where a small number of families had gathered in the dining room of a former Anglican deaconess. The only sacred objects in evidence were a Bible, pieces of bread in a wicker basket, a pottery goblet and a bottle of inexpensive red wine. A brief meditation started the meeting, and then the two young sons of one of the couples present (there were no girls!) offered bread to every one of us. As they did this, the boys' mother began to interpret their actions simply and clearly. She said that this was an act of remembrance which had been made every week by Christians since Jesus' death, in many ways and in many situations. The bread was eaten to remember the actions of Jesus as a living person. At this point she passed round a pottery goblet filled with red wine. The wine, she said,
was drunk to remember that Jesus' actions live forever in the lives of people who follow his teachings. The children then left the room. Then the woman asked people to pray. Prayers were made in silence for at least one half hour, after which the same woman shook hands with the people on either side of her. The other communicants followed, and the atmosphere broke into a relaxed and friendly one. The last part of this service in many ways resembled a Quaker Meeting, except that speech was not a feature of it. When asked about this, most agreed that the sum of individual private prayer reflected the "needs" (petitions) of the group, and that this was best achieved by silence, "a language that God understands best". The simplicity of sacred action at this meeting was striking. The attempt here was clearly to strip away ceremonial formality which might obscure the focus of ritual: the divine in the human person of Jesus. Many post-church feminists spoke of their admiration for the worship of the Society of Friends, and indeed many are Attenders (but not Members). Silence, as a form of sacred action, is understood to draw the individual closer to God. It is an experience of encounter with God which is ineffable. Similarly, it draws a community together in a common, unitary action.

The most striking feature about sacred action by post-christian feminists (except its staggering abundance) was the visible joy with which it was undertaken in almost every one of its manifestations. As it would be almost impossible to evaluate every form of sacred action, examples shall be given from the Devon and Warwickshire covens which were studied during the period of field work.112 Women in the Devon coven were asked whether prayer played a part in their personal worship. Prayer usually took place within the context of meditation, a daily activity among all the post-christian women questioned. Women's personal meditation differed between individuals, but some characteristics were apparent. The women chose a familiar spot in which to meditate. This was usually a quiet space such as in a wood or the woman's bedroom. Often, sacred objects were chosen, such as a flower, a leaf, or any object from nature. These objects are used as a means to aid or guide concentration in meditation. Meditation begins by a woman attempting to clear her mind of thoughts which may steer her away from the "Goddess Path", or the "Way of the Goddess", which is the aim of meditation. This may include controlled breathing and the focusing of attention upon an object from nature which contains the essence of the Goddess. The second stage of meditation, which occurs when women have made themselves receptive to the Goddess' presence, is one of openness towards the understanding of "Goddess Mysteries". The meaning of this phenomenon was not always made clear by the women, but it did appear to suggest that individual women were imparted a particular understanding of the universe which was integral to Goddess worship. For instance, one woman spoke of her "vision" of a matriarchal society in

112 Further examples have been selected from Arachne: A Journal of Matriarchal Studies and the Matriarchy Research and Reclain Network Newsletter, where these elicit insights into post-christian practice.
which subjugation, war and genocide were unknown. Another woman spoke of the understanding she had received in meditation. Interestingly, this woman had been a Roman Catholic:

suddenly it came to me. The meaning of the messages at Lourdes, Fatima and Knock. All of these were visitations with a message for the world. They were all messages from the Mother [Great Goddess] about the imminent dangers of patriarchy. These were messages to the world to radically change [from patriarchal dominance] to a matriarchal ethic. Chernobyl and Bhopal were warnings of this ... Time is running out.

[Interview, n.d.]

Other women spoke of "experiences", "visitations" and "visions", but stressed that these occurred infrequently but were "peak experiences". Mostly, these occurred in the form of conversations with anthropomorphic manifestations of the Great Goddess, but two women spoke of religious experiences which may be called "mystical". It was fortunate to have been able to meet two articulate women who were able to speak in great detail about such an ineffable experience as mysticism! Indeed, these women were aware of the phenomenological meaning of the word, and were able to speak about its political significance and meaning for the Matriarchy Network. These women had come to worship the Goddess from a Roman Catholic tradition in which feminist mystics feature notably. They stressed that it was through mysticism that human beings came to know the Goddess [Supreme Being] most fully as women through their spirits, minds and bodies: and also that it was the experience of mysticism that enables women to reclaim their prerogative as the image of the Goddess Herself, thereby counterpoising androcentric traditions. Mysticism, for these women, was the very divine legitimation of the validity of female world-view.

Underlying all post-christian cosmology is an awareness of the dominant symbolic order which underlies the institutions of church and community. This is the symbolic order of dualism, which has been the subject of a feminist critique in chapters I and VI. Post-christian feminists regard dualism as something that is to be profoundly regretted, because it estranges the corporeal from the spiritual, encouraging a division between all forms of complementary opposites which should be regarded in a wholistic (polarity) context, rather than in manner which promotes disunion, as, for example,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spirit</th>
<th>Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Sexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritually pure</td>
<td>Ritually impure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such a model is not to deny fundamental differences, but it must encourage the idea of the completeness of human beings, not to foster the marginalisation of one half of it. Curiously, this model did not include relations between males and females, since all the post-christian feminists
interviewed for this study were lesbians and encouraged the marginalisation of men because of the effects of patriarchy upon women!

However, there is much evidence to support a wholistic approach in other forms of private sacred action because post-Christian feminists understand themselves as bringing to light particular women's spirituality skills which have been obscured in a patriarchal tradition. Creative visualisation is a skill used in both private and communal worship. Visualisation (or imagination) is used ritually in order to evoke and channel the efficacy of those spirituality skills which have been buried in women's subconscious experiences under patriarchy. Creative visualisation appears to be a contemporary phenomenon which has come to England from the United States of America. Although practice is widespread amongst the Matriarchy Network in the United Kingdom, only the women of the Devon coven practised it. It is simultaneously a spiritual and political action since it attempts to convert and connect the symbolic images of Goddess worship and matriarchy into intellective ideas, a form of phantasy. In this way women's feelings can be articulated into ideas which can expand knowledge of the Goddess on an intellectual and emotional level.

One woman from the Devon coven gave a highly detailed account of how creative visualisation in personal ritual helped to bring the power of the Goddess into her physical presence. In this form of sacred action the woman was able to experience a profound sense of the presence of the Goddess, and also a sense of her value and place in the universe. The following account is based upon the narrative of this woman. While other women from the Devon coven practised creative visualisation, this woman's spiritual skills in this area were highly developed, for she was able to sense human auras.

Human auras are the cloudy or clear bands of colours (rainbow colours) which surround the human body, and which change with human emotions. The ability to see auras varies between individuals, as does the ability to see various levels ("bodies") of aura bands. The first level is the Mundane (earth or bodily, colour terracotta) level which represents health and well-being. The second is the Emotional band (colour ochre). This connects the first (physical) level to the second level of feeling. The third, Imagination (colour green) connects the first two. This is the source of cerebral activities: intelligence, inspiration, intuition. Finally there is the fourth and final level which connects all the other levels or bodies to itself. This is the Spiritual level (deep violet) by which individual women are connected to the Goddess Cosmos [sic] by turning their spirits, souls and psyches towards the Goddess in a loving gesture of desire for union. Creative visualisation is a skill undertaken by individuals or groups of women. It is one which needs to be developed, and indeed, it is beginning to be taught by post-Christian feminists. The woman from the Devon coven mentioned above taught creative visualisation to coven members and advertised weekend courses.
Her weekend course stressed how the use of visualisation in all ritual could empower women because making connections between the four levels enabled women in ritual to effect real union with the Goddess. Visualisation becomes sacred action at every level of post-Christian activity, where women care to use it. For instance, to visualise the story of a creation myth is first to experience it as a physical reality. The next stage is to visualise it at the emotional level, that is, to empower it with subjective meaning. The third stage is to "empower" it, that is, to make it real, by imagination by the use of the five senses. The final stage is the openness or receptiveness of the soul in its likeness to the Goddess.

The aim of creative visualisation, which can be developed as a ritual or for use within many forms of sacred action, is to reaffirm both to individuals and groups the link which yokes human beings to the Goddess. It is to develop metaphysical ideas about the Supreme Being and bring them into the present. Colours are used as images which evoke powerful manifestations of the Goddess. Colours are powerful tools in sacred action. They are used in Affirmation and Banishing Ceremonies, which are extra-ordinary group ritual which occurs between Sabbats when there has been disorder within the group, or where the groups has been threatened by forces outside.

One such Affirmation and Banishing occurred in 1983 at the Women's Peace Camp at the Green Gate at R.A.F. Greenham Common. The Devon coven had gone to "embrace the base", a national event in which women from all walks of life had come to Greenham Common to protest against nuclear weaponry by forming a human chain around the base. Several women had been arrested for apparently holding a peaceful demonstration which blocked the entry and exit of military vehicles. These included women from the coven who were released the following day after a night at a police station in Newbury. When the coven was reunited the next week, a Banishing Ceremony (sometimes called "Real Magick" [sic]) took place in which the women met to purify themselves of the ugliness of the patriarchal rituals that they had been subject to the previous weekend. They met together in the house sitting cross-legged, holding hands. Each of the women spoke in turn, naming whatever aspect of the previous weekend they wished to banish. Naming, like creative visualisation, is a means of actualising a phenomenon, even a negative one, so that it can be actualised or banished. Banishing acts effectively as the prelude to affirmation, since when the cause of unrest in a community is removed, its customary dynamics are returned to and reaffirmed. As the source of disquiet is powerful enough to disrupt a group, the banishing is marked with a symbolic purification of all the women present by each of them washing their hands in salt water. It is especially important here that power (even negative power) is grounded, that is, that it is channelled appropriately at the completion of a ritual so that women can be aware of the potency of the life force of the Goddess. This is Real Power, the object of every form of sacred action, to participate in the creative process with the Goddess. False Power is power which arises out of patriarchal means,
where the object is to achieve power over something, a qualitatively different phenomenon.

The post-Christian understanding of Real and False power is most evident in Hexing. Hexing is more powerful than banishing because it involves magick against an individual. The Warwickshire coven spoke enthusiastically about their impressive [sic] record of success in hexing individual men who had performed monstrous acts against women. Hexing takes place at monthly Sabbats when women are most receptive to the power of the Goddess visible (the moon). Hexing involves the use of words when women are empowered during ritual, which are directed in the form of a curse against, for instance, rapists, murderers of women and children, and men who have committed incest. During the period of fieldwork, the coven laid claim to have caused the death of two rapists in car accidents within one month of having hexed both of them. Such incidents were difficult to confirm, as the women would not be led into giving further details!

Self-blessing is a personal form of sacred action which takes place according to the phases of the moon. The understanding behind this is that the moon, as the visible Goddess, determines all phases of life. Women are especially attuned to this because their menstrual cycle is a correlation of this, which in turn influences their moods, creativity and even depression. So self-blessing is effectively the affirmation of women's collective connectedness to the moon. Many women in the Devon coven (where members lived together) spoke of the synchronisation of their menstrual cycles so that many of them who had not yet reached the menopause menstruated at the same time, that is to say on the dark moon so that they ovulated on the full moon. A few of the women claimed that at the time of ovulation they dream of phenomena associated with the generation: babies, breasts, eggs. No mention was made of post-menopausal women who no longer ovulated, in spite of the fact that one third of the Devon coven were over fifty years of age. Many women from both the Devon and Warwickshire coven spoke of their experience of an enormous surge of energy within themselves at the time of ovulation. They understand that this energy must be channelled as in creative visualisation. The energy which is manifest by the Goddess at the full moon can be shared with women and channelled into a materialised reality by creative visualisation.

I asked how pregnant and post-menopausal women were placed in this cosmology, and secondly how all the women adjusted to the full moon's manifest power during ovulation when they experienced dreams about babies within a lesbian separatist community. There were many objections to these questions. The women felt that I was implicitly critical of their lesbian separatism. But the question was a genuine attempt to understand how a single-sex community felt about female biological roles when, clearly, such roles could not be fulfilled in traditional ways, that is by sexual relations with men. Certainly a few women at the Devon coven had children, but these were the result of past relationships with men. As for post-menopausal women, I had wanted to know how post-Christian
feminists viewed them because so much of post-Christian cosmology fused lunar and female biological rhythms. I spoke to three post-menopausal woman, all of whom had come to worship the Goddess through feminism during the last decade. One woman spoke of a lifelong lesbian relationship which had ended with her partner’s death. The other two had married in their twenties, had a family and divorced in their forties. Around the onset of the menopause, they had begin a relationship with each other. So for these women the menopause marked the end of the menstrual cycle but the beginning of a new sexual identity. The menopause is regarded as a blessing upon women by the moon. As for women Who ovulate, they appear to be linked to a cycle which they consider to be a blessing upon them. They refer to the menstrual cycle as monthly rebirth and transformation of self which links body, soul and mind. This is apparent in moon rituals which are similar to self-blessing rituals and which can be undertaken alone or in groups. At ovulation (or full moon) the woman effectively becomes an altar to draw forth the power of the Goddess in her moon aspect. For one woman, this involves firstly bathing (as an act of purification), then meditating, casting a circle, invoking the four directions and then drawing forth the power from the moon. Post-christians understand the power of the moon in this context to be the power to initiate women’s actions. It is concerned with fertility in its broadest sense: the conception of creative endeavours at almost every level of human life. So women are at their most fertile in their bodies and in their minds at the time of ovulation.

Diane Sweet Pea is a post-Christian feminist who has composed a menstrual ritual which can be undertaken even by women whose cycles are not synchronised with the rhythms of the moon. The ritual is a prime example of post-Christian feminist sacred action with its characteristic quality of intricate imagery and symbolism fused with the joy in which it is undertaken. The ritual which is in two parts (the first at the onset of menstruation and the last at the completion) begins with (stage i) the human separation from profane space and an entry into sacred space, symbolised by the decoration of the "temple" (space in which the ritual is to be held) and the individual woman, who covers herself with symbols of the Goddess. These might include moons, labrys, snakes, spirals, labyrinths, and so forth. An altar is made and upon it is placed incense sticks, candles, water, a mirror and a hand bell. The second stage (ii) is a Charge to the four directions and elements to witness the fact of menstruation as a cosmic phenomenon which is bound to the rhythms of the universe. Next, (stage iii) the Invocation and Charge of the Goddess take place. In the Invocation women’s similarity to the Goddess is extolled as the life force which sustains the cycles of the universe. The Charge is then read. The Charge is presented as the words of the Goddess who is the eternal body and soul of the universe: its generatrix, sustainer and provider. In the fourth stage

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113 Monica Sjöö, The Great Cosmic Mother, 197.
114 See Appendix K.
the woman takes the scissors and cuts the red thread into four pieces, meditating upon her hopes for this time. She then knots them together and waves them over the incense candles as a symbol of cleansing, over the candle as a symbol of healing, over the cup as a symbol of regeneration. She then holds the thread so that it is reflected in the mirror as a symbol of a bond between the woman and Mother Earth. Next (stage v) the woman goes to the centre of the sacred space. Placing the thread over her left wrist, the woman states that although she bleeds, she is not wounded. This is a symbol of affirmation and solidarity with other women, of their likeness to the Goddess. It is a triumph for post-christian feminists that they can celebrate their womanhood and its Goddess-likeness in sacred action. In the final stage (stage vi) the woman goes to the altar and commences the grounding of the Goddess power so that it can be channelled appropriately to the woman and cannot be misused by one individual over another. The woman rings the hand bell and bids goodbye to each individual direction and element. Every time she thanks the appropriate element (an aspect of the Goddess) for having made her a woman. This is another example of self-blessing. As a final symbol of the grounding of power, the woman blows out the candles.

That women have the ability to celebrate specifically female biological experiences in sacred action is a source of joy to post-christian feminists who feel that the female principle has been marginalised by patriarchal religions. It was not possible to witness a birth rite during the period of fieldwork, but accounts were given of such a ritual, which occurs at the time of birth of a child.\textsuperscript{115} Labour is regarded as a very potent sacred time by post-christian feminists, for a woman giving birth is closest to the Goddess. She embodies the four stages mentioned in Creative Visualisation, and as such is the supreme manifest link between the divine and the human. The placenta is understood to embody Goddess power. Blood is subject to divine influences through the power of the moon which attracts it. The placenta is therefore buried on the night following the birth so that its power can be channelled correctly back to the Goddess. A few women mentioned an alternate use for the placenta. Apparently, this was regarded as the source of nutrition for the mother and was consumed for a number of days following the birth.

Menarche Celebrations are surprisingly widespread throughout the Matriarchy network. These are mostly arranged by the mothers of young women and occur in different forms. From discussions with women from the Devon and Warwickshire covens, and the text of "Spring Flowers" in Arachne 7 (1987), it has been possible to sketch a phenomenological outline of such rituals. Firstly, the menarche is seen as a reason for celebration. Indeed, many women recount the trauma of their own first menstruation and give this as a reason for wanting to introduce their daughters into womanhood.

\textsuperscript{115} The women who were interviewed claimed not to have taken part in any such ritual, but spoke of birth rites which have taken place among post-christian feminists in England.
without the sense of shame and ignorance which they encountered.

The account in Arachne takes place in Galloway, so it cannot strictly be included in a study about England, but it serves to confirm certain characteristics which pertain to the accounts given to me by the women interviewed for this study. Firstly, Menarche Celebrations do not readily classify as rituals as such because they do not follow a formal pattern of liturgy. They are rites of passage in which the bodily change in a young girl marks her passage into womanhood. Menarche celebrations often take place in the form of a feast or a picnic. Often, women come dressed in red; the food is eaten in a circle; candles are lit. These may be red. The candle is often used in ritual to represent the moon or the power of the Goddess visible. There is usually a time in which older women impart to the younger ones the apparent “wisdom” that was given to them at their menarche. This is a time for learning and healing. The young learn from the old and vice versa. Often the young women are presented with gifts which symbolise the passing into womanhood: silk scarves, earrings, crystals, which are usually red to symbolise blood.

Crystals and gemstones in the last decade have found several uses in post-christian sacred action. Their use is more traditionally associated with New Age and Wiccan cults, but from their use in the Goddess religions in the United States their application has become increasingly popular in England. The women of the Warwickshire coven were familiar with the uses of crystals and gemstones because these women had access to a number of New Age and Wiccan assemblies and tended to assimilate the religious practices of American Goddess religions more freely than the women of the Devon coven. These women wanted to recover ancient English Goddess religion and to develop new forms of sacred action based upon their own experiences of the Goddess. The uses of crystals and gemstones in pre-patriarchal religion were many, it was claimed by women of the Warwickshire coven. In Africa and North American traditional religion, they were used for healing, and it is this use which post-christian religion focuses today. Although some women claimed that crystals and gemstones were used for divination, no woman was able to say clearly where or how this was undertaken in present-day England. But almost all of the women in the Warwickshire coven possessed a crystal or a gemstone as a personal amulet. One interesting application of crystals and gemstones was their use in creative visualisation as the guide to concentration during the ascent of the four stages to union with the Goddess. Further, they were also used in dreamwork and precognitive dreaming (the attempt to acquire foreknowledge of events through dreams). For post-christian feminists, creative visualisation can be applied to dreams. Dreamwork is a skill that can be acquired through an attempt to channel the subconscious mind-set of dreams into a condition which remains with the individual during her waking hours. One example given was that often human problems magnify themselves and seem impossible to solve during waking hours; but following a night’s sleep the subconscious often resolves such issues. When crystals are used in any
form of sacred action it is important that women acquire the correct one for herself. This can be achieved by choosing a crystal which corresponds to the aura of an individual person. But in practice, all of the women interviewed chose those crystals they felt most comfortable with. This was referred to as "bonding". Crystals are believed to maintain and acquire energy and can thus be used to transmit power for human use. The most widespread use of crystals was in healing. This includes ridding oneself of unhappiness, depression, menstrual pain and other ailments as well as healing other people. The crystal is cupped in the hand and rubbed over the source of pain. All the women interviewed spoke of pain disappearing in most cases after one hour or so. Immediately following the use of a crystal in healing, it should be washed in cool running water while its user visualises the washing away of pain.

One feature of the athame was that its end was quartz because quartz is associated with blood and liquids which attract the moon. Crystals are associated with particular uses in healing as, for instance with Aquamarine and Topaz (depression, headaches), Garnet (insomnia, childbirth) and Ruby (exhaustion, bringing on menstruation).

Healing is a most important aspect of post-christian sacred action because it was considered to be the domain of women in pre-patriarchal times, but is believed to have been practised "underground". The post-christian concept of "healing" extends from simple nurturing to caring for the mentally ill, midwifery, contraception and abortion, acupressure and reflexology, although during fieldwork I witnessed only the first two. This involved a woman who was a member of the Devon coven. She had a history of severe reactive depression for twenty years and had been a patient at a local psychiatric hospital for five of those. For almost a year she had been living with the coven. Every week the women met informally for about two hours to meditate and share in a "healing" specifically for this individual. The emphasis was upon community, sisterhood and sharing to ease the pain that this woman felt. She claimed that these meetings had helped her enormously to acquire a sense of wholeness and belonging.

The Sabbat, or monthly ritual, is an integral aspect of Devon and Warwickshire sacred action. The account given below is of the Devon coven's May (Beltane) celebration, which was extraordinarily rich in visual action. This particular Sabbat is chosen because the Devon coven tried hard to express the traditional English festivities with which it is associated (although Beltane is a Celtic word!). The women explained that Beltane was the traditional May celebration of the Goddess in her young aspect. With the coming of the Romans, the Goddess became associated with Flora - flowers. The Roman influence led to May becoming synonymous with a profusion of sexual

116 Wand used to cast a circle in ritual.
activities and the "honey moon". In medieval times, the May Queen on a white horse and the Lord on a white horse, led the May revellers into the woods where their merrymaking continued for the length of the festival! Post-christians now attach a different emphasis to the Lord-lover; he becomes a woman!

On the first day of May, 1987 a number of friends had been invited to participate in the Sabbat (called Esbat by some of the women) as well as the celebration per se. Instead of the customary thirteen women, thirty one attended. During the day five women prepared a Sabbat feast (which included a rather profane and frantic last-minute rush to Tesco as the women realised that they had forgotten to provide drinks for themselves and their guests!) The other women dressed an apple tree which stood on its own in the orchard with ribbons, flowers and hawthorn ("the flower of May", associated with Hagg in Old English: now meaning "Wise Woman"). At about ten o'clock the host group and visitors were asked to congregate in the orchard as the Sabbat was about to begin. The visitors were bid welcome by the oldest coven member present. She began to explain the meaning of Beltane and the ritual Sabbat which celebrated it. Beltane is a fertility celebration. It is a time of planting (of plans and ideas as well as crops), of courtship, fun and sex. It is a time of celebration of the earth's fullness and fertility. The ritual began with a process called grounding the centre. The women were asked to stand in an approximate circle around the decorated apple tree. They were asked to hold hands, breathing deeply and rhythmically, paying attention to their neighbours' breathing rhythms and focusing their attention (meditation) on the tree as the centre (axis mundi) of the ritual. Grounding, or the defining of a sacred ritual space and the appropriate channelling of the Goddess energy for the ritual, occurred when all the women were breathing rhythmically. This took about twenty minutes, after which two coven members with bowls of salt water passed among the women present sprinkling them and the boundary of the sacred grounded circle with a hawthorn twig. This was a ritual purification of sacred space and community. The significance of the hawthorn in a Beltane ritual is that it is the "May flower" which was turned into the May Queen by the blackthorn (Black Knight) in traditional English folklore. The theme of partnership (or sacred marriage) is apparently sustained through all post-christian Beltane celebrations, for this represents the dynamics of polarity in either homosexual or heterosexual relationships. Next, the oldest member of the coven conducted the invocation of the four directions by standing underneath the tree and reciting a charge to the Goddess of each of them. Turning to every direction she pointed a willow athame or wand in a gesture which evoked the feeling of this small community being at this moment the very centre of the world. The circle is now properly charged. To mark this a candle is lit and is passed clockwise as if to seal the circle. A candle often represents the power of the Goddess in her moon aspect and is occasionally used in (usually personal) rituals which do not take place in moonlight.
The invocation of the Goddess occurs at every Sabbat, but in the case of Beltane, two Goddesses are charged and named. This may be unique to this coven. The apparence of two Goddesses at Beltane is significant. In traditional English May Eve celebrations, the Goddess was represented with her (male) consort in a loving polarity. This was deemed inappropriate by this lesbian group, and so Demeter and Persephone are invoked in their aspect as lovers. The women present were invited to build up a cone of power by holding hands and gazing up at the moon to receive power from the Goddess. Beltane is regarded by this coven as the most powerful time to put ideas, plans and wishes into action. It is at this point that women must begin to channel their ideas. In raising the cone of power the women understand themselves to be in direct communication with the Goddess who is at her most receptive to women's petitions and thanks. At this stage the coven members took turns to present their wishes and ideas for the coming months. Such wishes included the desire for the community to continue to provide much of their own food so that they might continue to experience a feeling of interconnectedness with nature. There were petitions to ask for good health for the coven and for financial survival. One woman asked for inspiration in her work as an artist. There were spontaneous prayers by an older woman for a unilateral abandonment of nuclear weapons. Beltane is traditionally the most propitious time for new schemes and strategies to be undertaken, and so it is at this time that the women of the Devon coven hold a formal Policy Meeting. From such petitions and prayers it was possible to understand the particular aspect of the Goddess being focused upon in this Beltane celebration. Beltane celebrations are a time for receiving the energy of the Goddess in her most beautiful, fertile, promising aspect. So the women understand themselves in the Sabbat to be receptive to many forms of creative inspiration in their lives. The raising of the cone of power is the most significant part of the Beltane Sabbat because the object of raising power (or Goddess energy) is to channel it to the group to be able to apply it for some purpose.

At the introductory speech given by the oldest coven member it was stressed that the kind of power or energy which was being raised in the Sabbat was not done so for the purposes of gaining power over a group or individual. Rather, it is a shared power, a power within women, which must be directed towards "healing the earth", which includes self-blessing, self-healing, the healing of other, sending out healing thoughts to world governments, and the creative visualisation and manifestation of something positive and good. Interestingly, there exists a simple ethical guideline which covers the use of power in the Devon coven. Power can only be used when it is directed at people with their permission. This differs greatly from the use of power in the Warwickshire coven where hexing is directed, without their knowledge, against men who have apparently committed crimes against women. The mood of a Sabbat depends very much upon the image or aspect of the Goddess upon whom energy is focused in it. The way in which this energy-power is perceived and channelled by the group is determined by its occurrence in the cyclical annual cycle of the community. So the essence of the Beltane Sabbat for the Devon coven was new beginnings,
restoring, joy, sexual freedom and creative endeavours.

Following the "grounding" of power, the oldest coven member explained for the benefit of the visitors that it was necessary for us all to withdraw from the power of "Goddess space and time". The withdrawal from ritual holy space and time back into temporal space and time was undertaken by this member as she pointed her athame (wand) to the four directions and bade farewell to them. Finally, she asked all the women present to pass a hug or a kiss around the circle, clockwise, and then to disband for the feast. This was the symbolic departure from sacred space. The Beltane celebration was continued with the sharing of a meal (feast) well into the early hours of the morning. The Summer Solstice (usually 21st June) celebrates the shortest night of the year. Here, the emphasis is upon beginnings and endings and also upon the linking of polarities: birth and death, summer and winter, land and water, and, indeed, the Devon coven ensures that this Sabbat takes place near a river. Lammas marks the end of summer but the promise of harvest which ensures the continuance of a community. In the Lammas Sabbat the Goddess has a dual aspect: as provider and reaper. Again, in the Devon coven the Demeter-Persephone duality is invoked. The mood of this Sabbat is to wait, understand, receive and to believe that the wheel of the year will turn to restore growth. Mabon is the Autumnal Equinox and a time for giving thanks to the Goddess for giving human beings enough to sustain themselves through the winter. The aspect of the Goddess which becomes most apparent in ritual is Healer. Samhain (Halloween in the Warwickshire coven) celebrates the dark moon and the passing into winter and darkness, understood symbolically as a labyrinth. Halloween, like Beltane, is a time of new beginnings. The cone of power is raised by a spiral dance ("Persephone's Dance"), moving anti-clockwise into the land of winter (death). Important "banishings" are made at Halloween. In the Warwickshire coven, "scrying" is the attempt of women to communicate with individual spirits who have a particular message for individual women in the coven. The women stare into a fire or crystal and invite the spirits within to guide them. It is impossible to assert any more conclusions about this phenomenon because of the reluctance of women in the Warwickshire coven to share their experience of it with me. However, the phenomenon does share some interesting similarities with the psychopomps of shamanism. The Winter Solstice marks the longest night of the year and the instant which determines the beginning of the regeneration of the world. There is a sense of certainty about the nature of things to come at this Sabbat. The aspect of the Goddess focused on here is the Goddess giving birth to herself. This may be the object of creative visualisation and meditation in the ritual. Meditation in post-church ritual is an aspect of every Sabbat, but it is often fused with creative visualisation when women enact the visualisation, as with the Goddess Labour of the Warwickshire coven's Winter Solstice. This practice was not named by the women interviewed but is called creative visual meditative enactment in this study.
The women of the Warwickshire coven claimed that the following visualisation practice was adapted from a ritual by Starhawk, the prominent American theorist of women's spirituality. The women raised the cone of power at the Winter Solstice Sabbat and began meditation upon the Goddess aspect as usual. But the adaptation of traditional meditation and visualisation involved the women assuming a womb-like state by coiling their bodies into a foetal state. Here there is no external object of meditation such as the moon or a candle. The focus is upon the darkness within that gives birth to life. The women participate in the greatest mystery of all: life. They become the Goddess giving birth to the world. Each woman in turn experiences self (Goddess) birth and the birth of the world. They are each a microcosm of the process of creation. As the women experience the mystery of the "resonance of nothingness" their passage into life begins. This may be a difficult journey for some women, as this is sometimes the case for the creative process. For such a powerful reception of Goddess power there is required a powerful grounding. The theme of this grounding is "life" in which the women experience their unique identity. The women share how they wish to perpetuate their experience of new life in their lives to come; for they understand that they have just created the universe and the potential of "life" awaits creation likewise.

Candlemas is celebrated with a feast by both the covens. This is an important Sabbat for it is the celebration of the moon in her three aspects as Mother, Maiden and Crone. This is a Sabbat of purification, for there is promise of new life following the "death" of winter. Traditionally, this is the time for the acceptance of new members into Matriarchy groups, although this practice is not strictly adhered to.

Initiation into covens or Matriarchy-Goddess groups differs between assemblies, but usually sponsorship is the norm in established forms. Initiation generally takes place at a Sabbat. The candidate may cite her dedication in her own words to the Goddess. Initiates tend to dress in white to symbolise her newness to the craft. All of the women interviewed for this study had invoked the four directions, charged the Goddess and raised and grounded the cone of power at their initiation. Finally, the Spring Equinox celebrates the healing and laughter aspects of the Goddess. This Sabbat should be undertaken with a great sense of joy, for this should be a time of dynamic fulfilment of the wishes and dreams creatively visualised at Samhain (Halloween).

I was unable to find the source, but suspect that this practice has its origins in an adaptation of creative visualisation in contemporary Goddess worship in the United States: no comparable form appears to take place in the United Kingdom.
CONCLUSION

The present work consists of two main sections in which current phenomenological and feminist methods are critically discussed, evaluated and revised, and then applied in the study of three particular religious feminist groups in England. It has been a serious attempt to at once reveal the androcentric bias of the study of religion which functions to obscure women's descriptions of their religious experiences; and it shows how the method arising from a feminist critique of some aspects of the Phenomenology of Religion can bring forth new and exciting challenges to the student of religion. The present work focuses upon one of the exciting new developments which are being facilitated by the burgeoning network of feminist research worldwide, and in the feminist critique of the Study of Religion in particular. It is a small offering in a potential plethora of themes which might be explored in future studies on women and religion. I understand the present work to have made two significant and original areas of contribution to the Study of Religion. The first is in its identification and critique of the androcentric bias of the Study of Religion and the Phenomenology of Religion in particular. Of course, the feminist critique of these disciplines is not new, but the present work is unique in that it has offered a long-overdue critical evaluation of phenomenological method in the light of recent developments in feminist theory. In particular, it has shown that where the phenomenologist remains unaware of her or his implicit assumptions about the subject of her or his research then s/he exercises an unself-critical methodology. This may be evident in the attitude of the researcher towards the subject's race or sex, for example, and may prevent an accurate and full picture of the subject's religious beliefs and actions from being revealed. In the present work I have shown, by presenting a blueprint for a feminist phenomenology, how the religious beliefs and actions of women have been obscured and can be approached by phenomenologists to extract the fullest possible meanings and underlying intentions from religious beliefs and actions.

The second significant and original contribution which has been made by this present study is its long-overdue focus upon the religious beliefs and actions of three groups of explicitly spiritual English women. This is the first study on this scale specifically about English women. I feel that it is important for such an empirical study to have been made at this time. The Christian feminist movement and the Matriarchy Network entered a period of increased self-consciousness in the 1980's in which both were anxious to define themselves not only as a visible network and movement to the world, but also to themselves. I feel strongly that the present empirical study has captured the spirit of both groups at a time in which they were demonstrating a great self-consciousness among themselves and to the world beyond. The present work was also instrumental in raising knowledge about the existence of a third group of spiritual women whose had hitherto not even been defined as a
group separate from Christian feminists. "Post-church feminist" is a term which I have invented to define those women who were explicitly Christians and feminists, but who had left the churches wholly or mainly as a result of that institution's treatment of women. The results of a Questionnaire sent to 500 women in 1986 revealed quite staggering differences between the religious beliefs and actions of women who remained in the churches and those who had left them. The problem was that Christian feminist groups could be studied with relative ease as they tended to meet in well-publicised groups of fellow churchgoers. The second group was more problematic to study as some of these women tended to belong to Christian feminist groups or relied upon an informal network of support from like-minded individuals. The fact is that before the inception of the present work, no formal or written recognition has been given by spiritual feminists themselves to the existence of this group of post-church women whose religious beliefs and actions are very deserving of study. It seems ironic that interest in the present study by women (which set out to be a phenomenological and empirical study) should have been the impetus behind the inception of a growing self-consciousness between women who have left the churches, which has led to the strengthening of bonds between them in a much stronger informal national network, a network which was nonexistent in the earlier part of the 1980's! So one of the more curious results of my research has been the inception of a post-church feminist national network, arising out of a growing self-consciousness about the uniqueness of their religious beliefs and actions, and the differences between themselves and other religious feminist groups. I have also noted during the course of writing the present work that many Christian feminists have effectively become post-church feminists by leaving the churches and adopting the characteristic world-view of the latter. Unfortunately I have been unable to pursue a study of this phenomenon, but it would make an interesting future subject of research.

I feel strongly that the choice of three groups as the focus of study was onerous at times, and certainly not a little trying on occasions on account of the breadth and weight of the study! From time to time I experienced frustration during the interviews, in which I had pledged myself to a "non-directive" approach. This often proved to be hard work as I had difficulty impressing upon women that I was obliged to keep the interviews to two to three hours duration for every woman! Also, the obvious problems of not sharing in the world-views of some individuals (and I stress only some individuals) was burdensome. For example, I am left cold by the widespread anti-Semitism of many Christian feminists who do not seem to realise that the implications of their implicit hatred of Jews as responsible for the death of Jesus is both historically misguided and stirs up much racial hatred. It also prevents women from finding often positive images of women in the pages of the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. I also found some of the inverted fascist-style biological accounts of male and female nature by post-christian feminists most distasteful! It may be very apparent to the reader of the present work that I feel at home, both intellectually and spiritually with post-church
feminists, and I am aware that there lies a deep-rooted wish that I had been able to make the religious beliefs and actions of this groups of women the main focus of the present work. I think that this task must now lie with women and men in the Study of Religion in future generations. The origin and metamorphosis of this movement (or network) needs to be approached from a more remote period in the future in which its relationship to institutionalised Christianity, and its growth as an autonomous spiritual movement arising out of the churches, can be charted with more sophisticated data than exists at the present time.

The first chapter, "Feminist Critical Method" attempted to outline and analyse the great diversity of feminist method in the academy. It exposed the falsehood of those critics of feminism who perceive feminist critical theory as a homogenous whole, and yet it also demonstrated the value of a pluralistic methodology, since this more accurately reflects the great diversity within the international Women's Movement. The focus of this work was the implicit and explicit dimensions of religious beliefs and actions among explicitly feminist and religious women in England, and so an adequate methodology was required to incept a study of such women. I have stressed in chapters I and II the value of an heuristic method in any given research task. The heuristic method of the present work consists of the combination of feminist critical method and new-style Phenomenology. Let us outline in more detail the formation of feminist critical method. Four feminist critical methods were examined in chapter I. These were feminist polemical works, feminist linguistic criticism, feminist literary criticism and feminist psychoanalytical works. All of these critical forms had one factor in common: they showed that because of the interpretation of women's essential nature (and women's consequent socialisation), women's thoughts and actions are not given the same attention and significance in all aspects of life as men's are. Moreover, women's thoughts and actions are not seen, understood or represented in the same way as men's. All this would seem to suggest the existence of symbolic orders which are qualitatively different to those perpetuated by dominant religious institutions.

Chapter II faced up to the challenge set by Jacques Waardenburg in his demand for the necessity of methodological self-awareness in the Study of Religion. It was seriously disputed, however, that he heeded his own suggestion that the declaration of the intellectual and spiritual position of the scholar were vital in the analysis of the religious intentions of people. I gave examples of how, in spite of his valuable new-style phenomenological method, Waardenburg did not in fact face up to his own challenge which insisted upon the scholar's declaration of intentions in his or her research. The most glaring example given was of Waardenburg's failure to understand the androcentrism of his own research. I made a call for an essentially pragmatic Phenomenology in which the intentions of the object of research (the religious human being) are seen to be considered along with the intentions of the researcher (who declares her or his allegiances or involvements and tries to
distinguish between these involvements methodologically). I declared my own allegiances and intentions (insofar as I am aware of them at all!) in this chapter. The spirit of research which was described here is implicit throughout the rest of the thesis. I can declare this because the methodology was discussed analytically in chapters I and II and proved to be expedient in eliciting women’s underlying intentions in discussions about their religious beliefs and actions. The critical awareness of “intentions” in this study proved to be most useful in the study of living religious expression: it enabled me to show where religion in its official and unofficial model constantly changes in relation to emerging or weakening intentions. Chapter II also gave some critical attention to the meaning of “religion” itself. It utilised the arguments of Vrijhof, Donders, Goldammer, Schmid and Tillich to sustain the call for the need to study marginal and apparently secular religious forms, for this often could be where human beings expressed their religious beliefs and actions. Finally, it showed how feminism has begun a paradigm shift in the Study of Religion by outlining a review of significant literature by Carol Christ, Mary Daly, Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson and Arvind Sharma. Carol Gilligan’s insistence upon the importance of men and women discussing controversial material in the academy was also examined. I argued that it is precisely because women have been left out of the “mainstream” of the academy that they have been able to criticise the inadequacies and insufficient self-analysis of “mainstream” scholarship, and this realisation makes it possible to begin a “female-orientated scholarship” based upon Carol Christ’s model of empathy and eros which greatly complemented new-style Phenomenology’s insistence upon the intentionality of the scholar, and the religious human being who is the focus of research.

Chapter III, which explored the “Methodological Applications in this Study” gave an account of the fieldwork, the form, data and analysis of the 1986 Questionnaire, a typology of the subjects of study and an account of the method of interviews with respondents. The fieldwork was facilitated by the formulation of a Questionnaire in 1986 which was used to develop a typology and to gain a broad idea about the nature of women’s religious beliefs and practices.

Responses to questions on the Questionnaire were used to formulate a typology of explicitly religious and feminist women who came from a Christian background. Analysis of the information supplied in the Questionnaire supported my intuitive understanding that there was a large group of explicitly Christian women who left institutionalised churches whose cosmology differed qualitatively from those Christian feminists who remained in them. I called these women “post-church feminists” in view of the revolutionary paradigm which made them leave the religious institutions which they feel they were not able to change them from within because they understand the character of the churches to be irredeemably patriarchal and wholly resistant to change by feminists and their critique of religion. Such a change would involve the acceptance and implementation of a symbolic order which reflects the religious beliefs and actions of women, for the present symbolic order which
governs dominant religious institutions reflects, they believe, the religious beliefs, actions and interests of men.

So post-church feminists have begun a revolutionary exodus from the churches, abandoning their hierarchy, creeds, dogma and many aspects of their theology. They do not deliberately form separate religious institutions. These women are characterised by a marked absence of institutionalised religious forms. However, it is possible to speak of post-church religious communities in the sense of interdependent households and informal Eucharists. The latter is explored in the final chapter. Christian feminists believe that the acceptance of a feminist paradigm in institutionalised Christianity will come from within dominant institutions. In this sense, Christian feminists are reformists as opposed to revolutionaries. It was necessary to distinguish between Christian feminists and post-church feminists as a result of information supplied in the Questionnaire because, almost universally, the former tended to believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, whereas the latter saw the Bible as a text which was subject to historical and cultural influences. As such, the Bible could not be regarded as an infallible source of God's revelation to post-church feminists.

Post-christian feminists, "Goddess worshippers" differed from Christian and post-church feminists in their rejection of Christianity in its institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms, and most apparently in their rejection of a Supreme Being who reflected so-called masculine and feminine qualities. The Supreme Being for these women carried only feminine attributes or qualities. Post-christian feminists allude to a matriarchal period in human history in which worship of the Great Goddess was universal. Her position was overturned with the advent of patriarchy when a masculine-identified God upset the ecological balance of the earth and the equality which had apparently existed between the sexes. The title "pre-christian" would appear to be more appropriate to these women than "post-christian". Yet the information given in both the Questionnaire and in the interviews strongly suggests that these women do not wish to alienate themselves from the broader feminist spiritual movement which they understand to be taking place in the western world. Most of the post-christian feminists who responded to the Questionnaire were familiar with the works of Mary Daly, the first feminist academic to use the term "post-christian". One of the notable characteristics of post-christian feminists was their tendency to re-appropriate language for their own use, and this was clearly the case with their own name. As one woman said,

It [post-christian] is not ideal [as a title] as it describes what we are not rather than what we are. But it does describe what most of us have left behind, i.e. Christianity. We are a radical network, and by that I mean "getting to the root of things" in the sense that Mary Daly intends us to understand. So really, we are "pre-Christian", but I don't feel that is good enough to describe us either. We have been pre-, con- and post-christian. The problem with names is that they can put women off. We don't want to put off Christian women who question patriarchy, so we need a name
that shows solidarity with other groups of women. I’ll happily settle for “post-christian”.

[Interview, n.d.]  

So the term “post-christian” in the present work refers to women who understand themselves to have gone beyond Christianity in the sense of having found a more spiritually completing religion for themselves. The title challenges the supremacy of Christianity since it suggests that it is something to be overcome or superseded.

The typology of Christian- post-church- and post-christian feminists proved to be very appropriate in the study and presentation of women’s religious beliefs and actions in the chapters which followed. The typology was especially useful in clarifying the very radical difference between the beliefs and actions of Christian feminists and those of post-church feminists. To date no comment or study has been made in any depth on the distinctions between these groups. The typology discussed in chapter III is applied in the following chapters and proved to be most expedient in distinguishing between implicit and explicit religious beliefs and actions among the three groups studied.

Chapter IV explored the differences in implicit religious meanings and intentions concerning the Supreme Being, especially in Christian- and post-church feminist cosmology. Most commonly, Christian feminists understood God (Supreme Being) to be revealed through Scripture (the Bible) continually. The majority of Christian feminists who were interviewed held an implicit belief in the value of exegesis and hermeneutics in the promotion not simply of feminist values, but in speaking about the very nature of God. For them, to get to the root of the original meaning of a text (exegesis) is to reveal something about the nature of God. The reader must then try to uncover the (hermeneutical) meaning which the text has for the present time of reading. Those Christian feminists interviewed stressed the inerrancy of the New Testament over the Old Testament, and claimed that the apparently misogynistic nature of some Old Testament texts were the direct result of Jewish failure to recognise certain aspects of God, such as femininity, creativity and wisdom, aspects which were revealed in full in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Post-church feminists spoke about the revelation of God (Supreme Being) in the Bible, but not one woman interviewed claimed that it was the direct source of God’s revelation, or that it was the sole inerrant source. They spoke often of the revelation of God through history, and as such the Supreme Being is constantly unfolding itself to human beings. Post-christian feminists spoke of the all-pervasiveness of the Great Goddess (Supreme Being), but I classified eight primary aspects of diffusion which reflected the deeply gynocentric beliefs of post-christians.

I have written so far about the chief ways in which I feel that the present work has effected a
contribution to knowledge in the Study of Religion. Some attention now needs to be given to how the present work has contributed to feminist research. Feminists are traditionally regarded as the critics of religion of every description rather than as champions of it! Yet a recognisable current of change has drifted through the secular Women's Movement in the 1980's: this is its recognition of "spirituality" as central to women's understanding of themselves and the world. The meanings of this word may be very complex, and have been discussed elsewhere, but broadly it is recognised by secular feminists as pertaining to an individual's orientation towards life, which may be based upon that individual's understanding of a set of either individual or collective symbols. What has been so healthy about this recognition is that it permits women to develop their own spirituality while recognising the legitimate existence of other women's, which may be equally valid. By discussing the existence of three very different groups of women, the present work has explored at once the great pluralism and diversity within the three groups. Yet it has gone further by exploring the relationships between the three groups. We have learned, for example, that post-christian feminists see themselves as existing in a symbiotic union with the other two groups, but that Christian feminists often find post-christian beliefs and actions intolerable! The focus of the present work has been upon the way in which explicitly religious women understand themselves. Because I did not interview professional writers, nuns, religious, deaconesses or priests, I was hoping to uncover patterns in religious beliefs and actions of "grassroots" spiritual feminists, that is those women who make up the mass of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminist membership. One of the significant but less explicit results of the present work has been to show the very great differences which lie between the religious beliefs and actions of the latter group and those of professional English writers, who tend, overwhelmingly to exercise tolerance about the future of the churches, homosexuality and divorce. It is important that an empirical study should have been undertaken which clearly documents the religious beliefs and actions of, as one Christian feminist stated plainly, "the needs of the majority of ordinary women". And by concentrating upon the religious beliefs and actions of these groups I have extended a phenomenology of women's spirituality which might well be pursued in future research by individuals working in an international framework. The combined research of such a venture would make a comprehensive and exciting contribution to the Study of Religion. As such, the present study reflects the first feminist critical study of operative feminist spiritual movements in England. It does not touch at all upon the spiritual movement within the "secular" Women's Movement, which might also have been the subject of much fruitful research! Indeed, research needs to be undertaken in this area, as the Women's Movement is currently undergoing an interesting "feminist" and "spiritually orientated" period.

2 I am referring to the works of Sara Maitland, Jo Garcia, Wendy Perriam, Margaret Hebblethwaite, Angela West.
In chapter V, I attempted to explore how religious human beings (the three groups in the typology) understood their relationship with the object of religion. The following chapter named and explored the tensions, experiences, allegiances, beliefs, doctrines, practices, developments, revivals, dissensions, conflicts and leaderships which were understood to act as religious dynamics behind each of the three groups studied. These four chapters precede the final chapter, whose importance lies in that it describes the world of phenomena of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminists.

Chapter VI explored the "Dynamics of Religion" of the three groups of women outlined in the typology in chapter III. This chapter named the tensions, experiences, allegiances, beliefs, doctrines, practices, developments, revivals, dissensions, transformations, conflicts and leadership, as were understood by the women interviewed, and which arose out of the nature of this phenomenological enquiry. The crux of Christian feminist concern was the admission of women to the sacerdotal ministry, a demand which was based upon their interpretation of the life of Jesus. Post-church feminists showed concern for the negative effects that dualism has had upon the self-image and status of actual women, and to femininity in the symbolic order. Their solution was the implementation of a paradigm shift in the way in which duality is cognitively received. This is a paradigm of polarity rather than polarisation, in which apparent opposites are perceived to operate on a polarity where they form a mutual attraction, rather than as opposites which repulse it. Post-christian feminists understand dualistic ontology to have arisen out of the supersedence of a "male" God over the Great Goddess, resulting in the "violent" change in attitude towards God by human beings. Their response is to insist upon the return to "matriarchal" values and the worship of the Supreme Being as the Great Goddess.

The value of chapter VII is that it gives an essentially descriptive phenomenological account of the religious beliefs and actions of the three groups of women described in chapter III. I do not feel, however, that this chapter was as successful as were chapters IV to VI in eliciting the underlying religious intentions and meanings of the three groups of women studied. Chapter VII gave a long overdue account of the world of Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminist phenomena in the traditionally descriptive style of phenomenology, whereas chapters IV to VI gave much deeper insights into the implicit and explicit dimensions of religious belief and actions of these women in discussing the object, subject and dynamics of religion. The reason for this, I believe, is that whereas the feminist critique of the Phenomenology of Religion can facilitate some fascinating and wide-reaching insights into some underlying religious meanings and intentions, it cannot, in some instances, either broaden or challenge the traditional or essential function of the Phenomenology of Religion, which is descriptive. In chapters IV to VI I was able to show in more detail how the women interviewed understood underlying meanings and intentions implicit in their religious beliefs.
and actions. This was partly because I had been fortunate to have access to 30 women to interview, each over a period of 2-3 hours. This one-to-one, face-to-face contact enabled me to arrive at many insights which might otherwise not have been made without the benefit of meeting women individually. The fieldwork which resulted in the final chapter was partly the result of listening to women's accounts of their beliefs and actions, but was largely undertaken by attending their meetings and by making my own observations about the phenomena I encountered. I now feel that the largely "descriptive" account of the meetings recounted in chapter VII could have been more fruitfully analysed in greater depth in the interviews with women. Unfortunately, almost all of the interviews had been concluded by the time I came to look at the six categories of sacred phenomena which were discussed in the final chapter. I feel that there are certain limits to which the feminist critique of phenomenology can elicit deeper meanings and insights about religious phenomena, but also that the example of the feminist critique demonstrates a need for increased face-to-face contact and improved listening skills with religious human beings. This has been made clear to me in chapter VII in which I presented the data without having discussed the implicit and explicit meanings and intentions behind the data in sufficient depth with the interviewees. I feel that this chapter would have presented a more in-depth account of the religious beliefs and actions of the women interviewed had I given more attention to analysing their religious meanings in the interviews and not simply by making my own observations from my attendance at their meetings. In spite of this, the final chapter has provided the first empirical study of the world of contemporary English Christian-, post-church- and post-christian feminist phenomena. This has not been achieved so far by any feminist writer or student of religion in any depth.

One possible fruitful area of research which might be undertaken in the future concerns the nature of the spiritual beliefs and actions of the so-called "secular" Women's Movement. I stated earlier that this movement is more widely known for its critique of traditional religion than as a champion of it, but since the mid-1980's there has been a paradigm shift in consciousness within the Women's Movement which has led not only to discussions about spirituality, but also to a wider tolerance of women remaining within religious institutions. This, I sense, is mainly due to the burgeoning of an interest in the study of symbols and "symbolic orders" in the Women's Movement as a whole, which has served to heighten awareness of the role of symbols and the importance of "symbolic order" in all human life. One of the ways in which an interest in symbols has manifest itself in the Women's Movement in the 1980's has been in the extraordinary growth in interest in Goddess symbolism. This is apparent at almost every feminist gathering, and is even beginning to find a place in the vocabulary of Christian feminists! It is not possible to explore this phenomenon in the present Conclusion. This phenomenon is just a part of a wider phenomenon which might be the topic of a wider inter-disciplinary research on the nature of "the feminine", and might embrace contributions from the History of Religion, Psychology of Religion and Biology of Religion. Clearly, the section
in chapter I concerning linguistic method would facilitate such a study. The value of studying the power of language as a system of symbols is that it permits the identification of the ways in which words are used to maintain the persistence of patriarchal values, and also charting the emotional power of feminism. In this way "the feminine" can be seen to be rooted in language and subjectivity, and so a "female imagination" can be laid claim to, along with a new semantics which arises out of it.

But the most pressing imperative which arises from the present work is, I feel, to incept an international study along the lines of the present work in which contributors would define a typology of spiritual and religious feminists in a particular country, and would then proceed to analyse their religious beliefs and actions by looking at the object of religion and then the subject of religion, dynamics and the world of phenomena. As such, comparative evaluations might be made between countries and it would enable fruitful research to be undertaken about the nature of feminist religious pluralism. Of course, such a study would need, at this stage, to take place in countries where Christianity was the dominant religious institution, but there exists the need and possibility of making women from traditions other than Christianity the focus of research. Such comparative studies would highlight the nature of pluralism between feminists, and as such would demonstrate to the Study of Religion the necessity of studying women as religious human beings in their own right.

Another valuable area of future study (although on a smaller scale) might concern how far feminist beliefs and actions affected men’s, and in what ways? Such a work (perhaps a short paper or monograph) might involve an empirical study of a sample of men who are partners of Christian-or post-church feminists. Certainly, more attention needs to be given to the clearly growing number of men who in the last five years have given great support towards Christian- and post-church feminists by joining C.W.I.R.E.S., writing to Christian Feminist Newsletter and who support their friends and wives in their activities. Men have a place in the network of interdependent households which characterise the now burgeoning post-church movement. Indeed, post-church feminists often insisted that men could be feminists as well as women, but it was apparent that men did not attend Christian feminist groups, yet there was a large post-church membership of these. I sensed that none of the groups studied in the present work had seriously looked at the question about the place of men in the Women’s Movement, and feel that this development has yet to unfold. It will be an important phenomenon and worthy of research.

How, then, can I possibly draw the present work to a close? I think that this is best achieved with a few personal words about the personal significance which undertaking the present work has had for me. It seems odd to me that I can look back at this stage and document with clarity most of the underlying intentions which were so unclear to me at the time of commencing the research. Many
of these underlying intentions are personal and reflect a personal need, which is common to many people, to explore in more depth the nature and quality of my "femininity". For many women and men this need not always be undertaken within the framework of the feminist critique, but at the time of commencing postgraduate work I was faced with the raw, emotional power of feminism which beckoned me. The present work is as much the result of scholarly interest an empirical research as an emotional and intellectual response to the awesome power of the Women's Movement's "call". I have been fortunate to have been able to combine my passion for and participation in the Study of Religion and the Women's Movement in a study which charts three spiritual movements (or networks) which have arisen out of their encounter with feminism rather than from within another particular religious tradition. "Religious" feminism's roots are strongly "secular", and it is this factor which has facilitated such a strong critique of the androcentric nature of Christian institutions. It is apparent in the present work that I am fascinated by the existence of "symbolic orders" in the lives of both religious and secular human beings. I have shown how three groups of contemporary spiritual English feminists have responded to paradigm shifts in those orders in their lives. In a very real sense this work can never be completed as it cannot hope to chart the evanescence which occurs at every level in the symbolic order of the lives of honest and intelligent men and women in their daily lives. It is here that I find a sound satisfaction both in my work and as a person who recognises and values the realm of the sacred and the spiritual in myself and others. I am moved by the truly human response of spiritual human beings to redress perceived inequalities and imbalances on the symbolic and actual level which affects every aspect of human life, for in seeing others respond to such challenges, I recognise myself as part of a truly "radical" (read: "getting to the root") movement towards change.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

A Questionnaire

English Feminist Spirituality:
A critical investigation into the religious and spiritual beliefs and practices of English women

[referred to in the text as "the 1986 Questionnaire"]
ENGLISH FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY:

A critical investigation into the religious and spiritual beliefs and practices of English women.

Your name............................................................

Your address.................................
........................................
........................................
Postcode..................

Telephone number.........................

This Questionnaire is intended to be used to illustrate forms of religious expression among English feminists born into Christian backgrounds. Please fill in the parts which you feel you can. If you wish to be contacted regarding further discussion of your responses, you are asked to write your name and address in the space provided above. The information supplied in this Questionnaire will be treated in strictest confidence. All quotations used will be given anonymously.

If you do not wish me to use quotations from your response, please tick here ...

Please continue your responses on additional sheets of paper if you wish.

Section I-You

Age ...

Occupation ..........................................................

How would you describe your sexual orientation?
..........................................................
..........................................................

Which of the following categories best describes you?
a) Single  b) Married  c) Separated  d) Divorced  e) Living with partner  f) engaged  g) widow.
Section II—Your Formal Worship

Do you worship in a Christian denomination, even if only very occasionally? ... If NO, please go on to Section III.

Which is it/what are they?

Approximately how often do you attend meetings for worship in one year?

Please give details of any discrimination you feel has been made against you in terms of your sex and/or sexual orientation

FOR LESBIANS and BISEXUAL WOMEN ONLY: Do you reveal your sexual orientation to clergy or fellow communicants?

Does your Church welcome Christian feminist activities by financing or publicising them?

How far do you feel that the question of the ordination of women is important to the aims of the Christian feminist movement in England? Please elaborate

Please give any additional information which you feel is relevant about your relationship to your Church
Section III-Your Religious Feminist Group

Have you ever been a member of a feminist religious group? ... If NO, go on to Section IV.

If the group no longer meets, please give details

How frequent are/were the meetings?

Do you feel your group to be part of a national network?

Section IV-Spirituality

Have you left any Christian denomination as a direct result of your feminist convictions?

If so, when?

If YES, was your decision based on a consideration of that denomination's attitude towards women?

How do you approach Biblical literature which has been called misogynistic?

Do you regard any biblical women as role models? Who are they?
Section V-Post-Christianity

Have you encountered the term "post-Christian" in your association with feminist religious groups? ..................

If so, please elaborate on the context in which you have come across it

........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................

Do you understand the term to have any other meaning?

........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................

Please name the feminist writers on spirituality which you have found to be the most inspiring?

........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................

Would you call yourself "post-Christian"?

........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................

Thankyou for filling in this Questionnaire. Please seal it in the envelope provided and place it in the large A4 manilla envelope stamped and addressed to me at the Department of Religion, University of Leicester.

Karen O'Rourke
Appendix B

The following authors have pursued this method:


... *The Church and the Second Sex* (London: Chapman 1968).


... *New Woman/New Earth* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

Appendix C


Appendix D


Appendix E


... *Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972).


... *New Woman/New Earth* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

... *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

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..."Time Makes Ancient God Uncouth", *The Christian Century* (no date given) 94, 3-10.


Appendix F


... Myth and Reality (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) [1957]).

... Myths, Dreams and Mysteries (London: Collins, 1968 [1957]).

... Patterns in Comparative Religion (London: Sheed and Ward, 1976 [1958]).


Appendix G


... "The Laugh of the Medusa" Signs 1,4 (1976).

... "Castration or Decapitation" Signs 7,1 (1981).


Luce Irigaray, Speculum de l'autre femme (Paris: Minuit, 1974).

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... "Woman's Time", Signs 7 (1981).


Appendix H


Rosemary Radford Ruether [See Appendix E].


Appendix I


R. Pummer, "Religionswissenschaft or Religiology?", Numen (1972) 91-127.


Appendix J

The Sacred Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WARWICKSHIRE</th>
<th>APPROXIMATE DATE</th>
<th>DEVON COVEN</th>
<th>COVEN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 22nd</td>
<td>Winter Solstice</td>
<td>Winter Solstice</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2nd</td>
<td>Imbolc</td>
<td>Candlemas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 22nd</td>
<td>Spring Equinox</td>
<td>Spring Equinox</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>May 1st</td>
<td>Beltane</td>
<td>Beltane</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 22nd</td>
<td>Summer Solstice</td>
<td>Summer Solstice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1st</td>
<td>Lammas</td>
<td>Lammas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 22nd</td>
<td>Mabon</td>
<td>Autumnal Equinox</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 31st</td>
<td>Samhain</td>
<td>Halloween</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix K

Menstrual Ritual

Part I

Decorate the temple with symbols of the moon, and place a quantity of red thread and a pair of scissors on the altar.
Decorate the body with symbols of the Goddess.

Part II

Create a sacred space.
Face the East. Beckon with the left hand saying:
I call upon the power of air to witness this the time of my bleeding.
Face the South. Beckon with the left hand saying:
I call upon the power of fire to witness this time of my bleeding.
Face the West. Beckon with the left hand saying:
I call upon the power of water to witness this time of my bleeding.
Face the North. Beckon with the left hand saying:
I call upon my Mother Earth to witness this time of my bleeding.

Part III

Invoke the Goddess and read the Charge:
Face the north with arms outstretched saying:

Invocation:

I call upon the Goddess whose body I see and feel reflected in my own body. I call upon the Goddess whose blood, like my blood, flows with the cycles of the universe. I call upon the Goddess whose circle is never broken, whose circle I am a part of wherever I go.

Charge:

I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed and unto me they must return. Let my worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold - all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals. Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And you who seek to know me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within you, you shall never find it without. For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and am that which is attained at the end of desire.

Part IV

Take the scissors and thread to the centre of the sacred space. Sit comfortably on the floor and
meditate on the implications, quality and hopes of this period. Meanwhile, cut 4 strands of thread approx. 35cm. long. Knot them together at each end. Holding the ends of the thread (one knot in each hand), face the East.

Wave the thread in and out of the incense smoke saying:

Let this be a symbol of cleansing.

Face the South. Wave the thread over and above the candle flame saying:

Let this be a symbol of healing.

Face the West. Wave the thread over and above the cup, dipping it momentarily in the water saying:

Let this be a symbol of regeneration.

Face the North. Hold the thread so that it can be seen reflected in the mirror saying:

Let this be a bond between herself and Mother Earth. As she bleeds, so do I. As she renews myself, so does my womb. And I am glad.

Part V

Move to the centre of the sacred space. Sit comfortably on the floor. Place the thread over the left wrist saying:

Let this be a sign to my sisters and the world, I bleed but am not wounded, I am strong.

Make a knot to secure the thread around the wrist. Meditate whilst knotting the ends in any desired manner.

Move to the altar and ring the bell.

Part VI

Face the North saying:

I thank my Mother Earth that I was born a woman.

Blow out the North candle. Face the West saying:

I thank the waters of the world that I was born a woman.

Blow out the West candle. Face the South saying:

I thank the fire and flame of life that I was born a woman.

Blow out the South candle. Face the East saying:

I thank the winds that roam the skies that I was born a woman.

Blow out the East candle. Face the North saying:

Merry meet and merry part and merry meet again.

Blow out the altar candles.
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