INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE RECOVERY OF MEANING

by

Barbara Jane Davy, B.A.(Hons)

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Religion

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

April 14, 1997

© 1997, Barbara Jane Davy

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-22071-0

Thesis Acceptance Form
M.A. Candidate

The undersigned recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research acceptance of the thesis

The Death of God and The Recovery of Meaning

submitted by Barbara Davy, B.A..
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Joseph G. Ramisch, Thesis Supervisor

Chair, Department of Religion

Carleton University

APR 23 1997

date

Abstract

While some people seem content simply not to believe in God, meaninglessness has become a great concern for others. The death of God usually causes nihilism, a common phenomenon in contemporary mainstream “Western” culture, but is experienced differently depending on what sort of faith is lost. There has been an exodus of people from mainstream Judaism and Christianity through nihilism and into Neopagan traditions. How and why is it that these people recover meaning through Neopaganism? The answer lies in why they left mainstream religion. Some people, particularly feminists, who were raised in the mainstream traditions of Judaism and Christianity have rejected their childhood faiths partially due to these traditions’ treatment of the environment and those perceived as “other.” In addition, these traditions have been found lacking in the experiential dimension of religion. The problems they had with mainstream Judaism and Christianity are solved in the context of Neopaganism.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jon Davy, Tammy McCausland, Paula Shmayda, and D'Thea Webster, for reading and commenting on my work. Also, thanks to Leslie MacDonald-Hicks for so much useful advice.

I would especially like to thank Mark Bason, whose care, support, and perceptive questions, have helped me overcome many obstacles along the way.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1. The Death of God	8
1.1 The Problem of Suffering	8
1.2 Ethical Problems	14
1.2.1 Valuation and Treatment of This World	15
1.2.2 Valuation and Treatment of "Other" People	20
Missions	20
Valuation and Treatment of Women	23
1.3 The Question of "Religious Experience"	34
Chapter 2. Between The Worlds: Nihilism	39
Chapter 3. The Rebirth of Meaning: Immanent Polytheism	48
3.1 Logical Problems	50
Coherent Relativism	50
The Problem of Suffering	53
3.2 Ethics	56
3.2.1 Valuing the Earth	58
Religion Without Transcendence: Immanent Polytheism	60

Anthropomorphism: The Persistence and Pragmatism of Images	64
3.2.2 Valuing Everyone: Immanent Polytheism and Inclusivity	68
Valuing Women	73
3.3 The Experiential Dimension	76
Epilogue	79
Bibliography	82

Introduction

More than a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the “death of God.” Contrary to popular belief, this did not herald the end of religion, nor was it intended as such. For many people God is still quite alive. Moreover, the death of God about which Nietzsche writes is not simply a matter of atheism. While the death of God is a Western¹ phenomenon, it does not refer to the decline of Christianity and other monotheistic religions into secularism. The death of God is about the loss of worldview and religion, but specifically concerns the loss of the possibility of maintaining a worldview which includes reference to a suprasensory realm.

A suprasensory realm is a reality which is thought to transcend this world, the here-and-now. Usually worldviews which support belief in a suprasensory realm envision it as being more real than this world, and more perfect. It is the Absolute which is used to measure or judge this world. Plato’s conception of this world being the shadows of the ideal forms is a representative example of the sort of worldview which includes a suprasensory realm. Ideas such as the metaphysical notion of Being as distinct from existent beings in this world,

¹ I use the term “Western” despite its vagueness and Orientalist undertones because it remains in common usage to indicate the mainstream cultures of Europe and its former colonies, as well as other areas which have been substantially influenced by “Western” ways of perceiving and thinking about the world.

Ultimate Reality, and other traditional conceptions of God are suprasensory.

When God is understood as the Absolute, who is not dependent on this world for existence, the idea is a suprasensory notion.

The death of God incurs the loss of the possibility of believing in a suprasensory realm, or that there is any such thing as Ultimate Reality. The collapse of this type of worldview causes acute nihilism. Once faith in God is found lacking, those who formerly believed are without a centre about which to orient themselves in the universe. Because God was seen as the absolute around which the universe is ordered, when God is no longer believed to exist, it appears as though the universe has no order.

In this nihilistic state, it appears as though there is no meaning to life or the universe. How is meaning possible after the death of God? The manner in which people find their way out of nihilism depends on what faith was lost, and why. While the primary feature of the death of God is that belief in a suprasensory realm of absolutes or ultimate reality is no longer possible, there are other reasons why people reject specific worldviews and religions.

It is common for the death of God in monotheists to be caused by finding a logical inconsistency in belief in God, such as the problem of suffering creates. The existence of suffering seems incommensurate with belief in God, if one defines God as being wholly good and omnipotent. If logical problems like the existence of evil and suffering were the only reasons for people to reject mainstream religion, perhaps faith could be restored simply by recognizing limits to God's power.

However, this would not address the ethical issues of the treatment of the Earth, and people considered “other,” which have caused many people to leave mainstream Christianity and Judaism, nor would it redress the lack of an experiential dimension of religion in synagogues and churches. Some people continue to work for change within mainstream traditions. Others have rejected these traditions not only because they found belief to be logically impossible, but also due to ethical and experiential concerns. Some of them have become Neopagans.

“Neopaganism” is an umbrella term which includes a variety of contemporary nature or Earth-based religions, including Wicca, some Women’s Spirituality,² and Druidism, among others. Neopagans are new Pagans, meaning they revive pre-Christian Pagan traditions, but transform them in a contemporary context. They revive an old way of understanding the Earth, the holy, and the relations between humanity and these others, but do not simply imitate pre-Christian religion. They create new rituals, and new stories, to add to the partial records they use to reconstruct the religions their ancestors practised. They see themselves in continuity with Earth-based religions not only of the past, but also the shamanistic traditions of contemporary Native Americans and other indigenous peoples. Most of them can be described as immanent polytheists.

While not all Neopagans emerge out of mainstream Jewish and Christian

² Women’s Spirituality is also an umbrella term, under which some of the same subgroups can be classified (for example, Wicca). There is extensive overlap between these groups, but some identify themselves as part of Women’s Spirituality but not Neopaganism, and vice versa.

backgrounds, and increasingly people are born into Neopagan traditions, many adherents to these traditions have experienced a death of God. There is not much quantitative data about the reasons these people left mainstream traditions in connection with why they became Neopagans. The available information is primarily anecdotal. Margot Adler and Cynthia Eller provide some data. In addition, there is some published material by individuals known to have made the transition from mainstream Judaism or Christianity into Neopaganism, such as Starhawk, Carol Christ, and Mary Daly³. Adler fits into this category as well. The information found in these sources corresponds with my own experiences in moving out of the United Church of Canada into a Neopagan faith, and with what I have learned from my interactions with other people in Neopagan groups.

In this study I analyze the phenomena of the exodus of people out of mainstream Christianity and Judaism into Neopagan traditions, and develop an explanation of how and why they are able to find meaning in Neopaganism after the death of God. Chapter one examines some of the reasons why people experience the death of God in Christian or Jewish contexts. The problem of suffering presents a challenge to faith for many people believing in God. Some people reform the concept of God and remain within their mainstream faiths. For others, ethical issues compound logical obstacles to belief, creating a desire not to want to believe. These ethical issues prevent many people from wanting to

³ Daly's identity as Neopagan is debatable. She is critical of "'New Age' style 'Goddess Spirituality'" (Daly 1992 208), but does not object to the "pagan" label (Daly 1992 181). Even if she does not explicitly present herself as a Neopagan, she uses much Neopagan imagery, and recounts many experiences which bear much resemblance to those of self-described Neopagans.

accept logical arguments for the existence of God. While some people work to reform mainstream traditions, others leave them entirely because they do not find the spiritual sustenance they need in the religious experiences sanctioned by those traditions. There are some significant differences between the experiences of the death of God in the various denominations of Judaism and Christianity, but there are also commonalities, and people from all these traditions have moved into Neopaganism.

Chapter two discusses the meaning of the death of God, nihilism. The death of God entails the death of meaning, but Nietzsche's writings reveal that this initial death of meaning is only the first part of nihilism, passive or incomplete nihilism. Active nihilism can follow, creating new meaning, and making religion again possible⁴.

Chapter three examines a new worldview which is possible on the other side of a nihilism which was caused by the rejection of mainstream Christianity or Judaism. This new worldview is conditioned by the specifics of the worldview which was rejected (and thus is somewhat in continuity with it, due to continued influence) and also contingent on the reasons why the first worldview was rejected. Hence for the new worldview to be tenable, it must not create the same problems as the first one, and perhaps must facilitate the remedy of some of them. It must be logically coherent, ethically supportable, and experientially satisfying. Neopaganism satisfies these conditions for many people.

⁴ I am indebted to Prof. Deborah Knight's 1995 course "Philosophy and Postmodernism," given at Queen's University, for this understanding of Nietzsche's writings in terms of passive and active nihilism.

This study primarily concerns people who have experienced a personal death of God, but may be relevant to those who experience it only as part of a cultural trend. Some people will never individually experience a "death of God." For example, if one has never believed in life after death, God, or absolute truth, such as many people of Generation X, who were raised without religious faith and with an implicit acceptance of relativism, one will not have a death of God experience. Those raised without belief in a suprasensory realm are probably content with simply seeking the most pleasure and diversity possible in this existence. As pollster Michael Adams suggests, such people who do not believe in God are unwilling to defer gratification to another realm in favour of fully experiencing this world (Adams 37). Some people who have rejected the religions in which they were raised may similarly become materialists, since even some people raised in mainstream faiths never believed in God, and simply discarded their religion as of no great loss. However, while some reject the religion of their childhood, seemingly painlessly, and may survive for decades simply not thinking about religious issues, it may be that they have been repressing religious questions. These questions may re-emerge with a vengeance when these people are confronted with aging and a growing awareness of their mortality.

Even people who do not personally undergo the death of God may still experience meaninglessness as an absence, despite the fact that they have not personally lost faith. Such people do not experience the dissolution of faith as I describe it here, but they might criticize mainstream religions for the same

reasons. Additionally, even people who are not raised in a specifically religious family context are still influenced by mainstream biblical traditions in “Western” culture. Consequently, a similar route out of nihilism may be available to them.

1

The Death of God

People lose their faith for a variety of reasons. Perhaps a tragedy seems incompatible with one's beliefs, science is found to be more reasonable, or other faiths more alluring. There is no single reason why people reject the mainstream traditions of Christianity and Judaism. One of the most common challenges to belief in God is the logical problem of evil, or suffering. In addition, ethical problems with the actions of the followers of mainstream traditions, particularly Christians, some of which are supportable by Christian writings, cause people not to want to believe.

1.1 The Problem of Suffering

The existence of suffering is a serious threat to belief in God. There is a whole area of theology devoted to answering this challenge: theodicy. Prominent theologian John Hick admits that "this question probably presents the biggest difficulty there is in the way of a Christian belief in God....the challenge goes to the heart of the Christian faith" (Hick 1970 82). Constructive postmodernist theologian David Griffin similarly recognizes that "Probably the most powerful reason for rejecting the existence of God has been the problem of evil" (Griffin 1989 52).

The problem of evil or suffering is "constituted by the apparent

contradiction between the alleged goodness and power of God, on the one hand, and the experienced fact of evil, on the other" (Griffin 1989 52). According to Griffin, the problem of evil became "a source of widespread atheism only in the modern world" because "while premodern thinkers had accepted the existence of omnipotent goodness, in spite of appearances to the contrary, on the basis of authority, moderns were committed to testing all beliefs against experience and reason. Before that tribunal, the God of the tradition appeared to be guilty of nonexistence" (Griffin 1989 53).

Many people cite the Holocaust as a specific instance of evil which problematizes belief in God. Hick suggests that "A whole generation" inevitably thinks of evil "in terms of the demonic pitilessness and malevolence that was incarnate in the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews from Europe" (Hick 1970 82-83). Feminist theologian⁵ Carol Christ also refers to this as a challenge to belief. She "came to agree with [Jewish theologian Elie] Wiesel that either God is not just or he is not powerful" (Christ 1987 6), because "if God had the power to act in history, then he should have acted during the holocaust" (Christ 1987 6). Christ adds that she "began to realize that if God were both powerful and just, then he also needed to be questioned about his role in the oppression of women throughout patriarchal history" (Christ 1987 6-7).

Griffin's response to the conflict between the existence of God and suffering is to change the concept of God. He suggests that "*God does not have*

⁵ A theologian is one who studies thealogy, as opposed to theology (see Goldenberg 1979 96).

and could not have a monopoly on power and therefore cannot unilaterally determine events in the world" (Griffin 1989 65). This change makes belief in God reconcilable with the existence of suffering, but does not address the actual existence of evil. Suffering thus remains a problem.

Another traditional approach of theodicy is to suggest that suffering is a necessary correlate to people having free will. This line of argument similarly places limits on God's power. If God really were omnipotent, God could have created the universe to allow free will without evil. If God really makes all the rules, God should have been able to change the structure of logic so that this conflict would not arise.

Hick's theodicy recognizes that evil has a real existence and is a real problem. Evil is not simply the privation of good: "evil really *is* evil – something to be feared, abhorred, resisted and ultimately overcome" (Hick 1970 82). Once this is admitted, the existence of evil must be somehow rationalized in theology. Hick identifies two ways theologians do this. The majority use an Augustinian type of theodicy, while a minority use an Irenaean type. "Augustinian theodicy," he says, "seeks its clue to the meaning of evil in the past, in a supposed Fall of man at the beginning of history; and so from our standpoint is a mythological theodicy. The Irenaean view on the other hand looks to the future. It is eschatological, centring on the belief that in the end good will be triumphantly brought out of evil" (Hick 1970 84).

Hick finds several problems with the Augustinian approach. First, "the idea of a perfect creation going wrong entirely on its own is self-contradictory"

(Hick 1970 85). Secondly, the idea that humanity literally descended from Adam and Eve is not believable. Thirdly, “the idea that God would punish the whole subsequent human race for the disobedience of its first two members attributes to God what in our human understanding can only be called a monstrous injustice” (Hick 1970 86). Lastly, “the principle that proportionate punishment can rectify the evil of sin and leave the moral perfection of the universe unspoiled” is irreconcilable with the traditional concept of God (Hick 1970 86).

Hick prefers the Irenaean approach. He argues that the existence of suffering and evil in this world “is not the result of a primal calamity but represents a stage in God’s creative plan” (Hick 1970 87). Suffering is a teaching tool in this view. “This world is not intended to be a paradise but a place of soul-making, and the hard demands that it makes upon us are integral to this function” (Hick 1970 87) since “in a world without the possibility of real setbacks, frustrations, failures and even disasters our present moral categories would have no meaning” (Hick 1970 88). However, Hick recognizes that this soul-making is not always an effective teaching method: “Sometimes indeed obstacles breed strength of character, dangers evoke courage and unselfishness, and calamities produce patience and moral steadfastness. But sometimes they lead instead to resentment, fear, grasping selfishness and tragic disintegration of character. Life can be soul-destroying as well as soul-making” (Hick 1970 90).

Moreover, it is unclear how it would be any less evil that God would require that we learn goodness through suffering, and that suffering be part of

our creation. Why should this extended time for a progression toward perfection be required? If God is omnipotent why could God not create us perfect without requiring this suffering in the process? Hick's argument implies that God was not in fact capable of creating the world any better than it is. His statement, "God, by whose design our way to final good lies through evil, and to final happiness through suffering, has himself in the person of Jesus the Christ shared fully our human suffering and our struggle against evil" (Hick 1970 92) merely undermines God's omnipotence. In addition, this is just as much a mythological explanation as is the Fall. Why is it more plausible to believe that Jesus' death has any universal significance than it would be to believe that the Fall could be responsible for the existence of evil?

Somewhat inconsistently, Hick asserts that "suffering is not sent or planned by God" (Hick 1970 89), after having already acknowledged that suffering is "a stage in God's creative plan" (Hick 1970 88). He then tries to explain that it is not suffering which is important, but one's attitude toward it which matters. He suggests that when evil situations arise, "and the practical question is how to react to it, there are always two different ways open to us. We can close ourselves up in bitterness and resentment so that our suffering becomes an ever thickening wall between ourselves and God. Or we can trust in the God who was present in Christ in the midst of human evil, suffering with and for mankind. Then although we cannot turn the evil to good by our own power we may nevertheless so react as to allow good to be brought out of it in the end" (Hick 1970 89-90). Hick thus encourages people to bear suffering as Jesus,

rather than working against suffering. This functions to legitimate the status quo, and ignores the fact that women are generally encouraged to take on the suffering aspect of Jesus while it is men who usually personify the redemptive aspect as clergy (Daly 1985b 77).

Hick concludes that “this type of theodicy, which finds its clue to the meaning of evil in God’s eventual decisive bringing of good out of it, is driven to look beyond this world and to take seriously the Christian hope of eternal life” (Hick 1970 90). No theodicy is possible without such a transcendent claim, as Hick says, since “if human personality becomes extinct at the moment of bodily death then a great part of the evil in this world must remain for ever unjustified” (Hick 1970 90-91). There are several problems with this. First, Hick clings to belief in a suprasensory world, because he cannot conceive that there could be meaning without it. Secondly, belief in such transcendence can function to absolve people from creating justice in this world.

Additionally, the notion of eternal life raises the question of the nature of the afterlife. Hick recognizes that a theodicy which points “to the ultimate fulfilment of God’s good purpose for his creatures, is only consistent if it affirms the eventual salvation of all men” (Hick 1970 91), and thus the existence of Hell as a place of eternal torment is inconsistent with the existence of God. It would be wrong for people to be damned to eternal torment, especially in view of the power of socialization. People tend to do bad things as a result of their life experience, such as stealing because they cannot make enough money to live without doing so, or being violent because their home life was violent. Given

these constraints on people for choosing good over evil, and Hick's admission that for the universe to be just all people must eventually go to heaven, it is difficult to see what purpose the possibility of choosing evil could serve in soul-making. Hick's scenario presents this life of soul-making as following a pre-set course through suffering where choosing evil cannot have any final consequences. In such a universe why should evil then be a choice at all?

Hick's explanation of the existence of suffering rests on a future-oriented eschatological hope of eventual progress toward perfection. This theodicy is finally inadequate because there is little evidence that the world is getting better, and much that it is getting worse, particularly in regard to our ever-greater capacity for destruction through war, and the damage we are doing to our environment. Arguments for the existence of God as being wholly good and omnipotent which contradict lived experience and are not logically coherent only serve to erode faith.

1.2 Ethical Problems

The ethical implications of Biblical writings, and mainstream interpretations of them in theology, for relations amongst people, and between people and the rest of the Earth, do not logically complicate belief in God, but ethical concerns can estrange people from their childhood faiths. If too many ethical problems are found with one's faith, eventually one will no longer wish to support it.

1.2.1 Valuation and Treatment of This World

In particular, the Biblical commandment to dominate and subdue the Earth is problematic. While Christianity is not solely responsible for the ecological crisis, the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation outlined in Genesis seems more oriented toward human mastery over, rather than solidarity with, the rest of the planet. Genesis states:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth....And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:26, 28)⁶

Lynn White Jr. indicates that the attitude expressed in this passage is responsible for our environmental crisis. He argues, in his famous essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," that Christianity "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (White 20). James A. Nash, a contemporary theologian, criticizes White, but especially his followers, for being facile in their analyses. He writes:

The single cause theory for the emergence of our ecological crisis is pathetically simplistic. Lynn White generally recognized that fact, but he too succumbed finally to oversimplification. And most other complainants have been undeterred by fears of reductionism. They often have structured their complaint on a single, flimsy biblical passage (Gen. 1:28) dealing with 'dominion,' and have ignored the fact that the Christian faith and its cultural influences have been far more complicated and ambiguous than that. Theirs is proof-texting of the worst sort. (Nash 74-75)

⁶ This is taken from the King James version.

According to Carolyn Merchant, Nash says, "The major factors in the emergence of antiecolological attitudes and actions were not Christian axioms, but rather population pressures, the development of expansionistic capitalism in the forms of commercialism and industrialization (particularly ship-building, glassworks, iron and copper smelting), the triumph of Cartesian mechanism in science (which meant the 'death' of nature, since it represented the defeat of organic assumptions, and the victory of the view that nature is 'dead,' inert particles moved by external forces), and the triumph of Francis Bacon's notions of dominion as mastery over nature" (Nash 75).

However, it is appropriate to consider whence these phenomena originate. Population growth is often linked to the Roman Catholic prohibition on birth control. Max Weber's illustration of the connection between the growth of capitalism and Protestantism⁷ is well known. Christian attitudes and ideas are not distinct from the social and economic factors which have the more direct impact on our ecology. This is the basis of White's argument, rather than simplistic proof-texting. The problem with Christianity is not merely the passage in the Bible; it is the attitude implicit in it. White explains: "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects....The spirits *in* natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled" (White

⁷ Weber, Max. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.

21).⁸ The same attitude that was expressed in Genesis 1:26, and 28 lies behind the actions of Christian missionaries who “For nearly two millennia...have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature” (White 24).

The belief that the holy is not present in nature, but is instead located in some suprasensory realm creates a basic ethical problem for belief in God, because belief in a suprasensory reality which metaphysically transcends this world, perceived as somehow better or more perfect than this world, necessarily devalues this world. To truly value this world we must not suppose that we can have access to another, better world or reality, or that some transcendent force controls this world. As Naomi Goldenberg states, “We have lived through at least twenty-five hundred years of theory based on illusions of transcendent entities controlling our destinies. Whether they are called Platonic forms, Jungian archetypes, or religious deities, theories based on their existence have colluded with the denigration of physical life and of the physical environment” (Goldenberg 1990 94). When a transcendent entity or realm is seen as more real than this world, with this world being its lesser reflection, it is seen as something not to be valued.

Possibly, as Goldenberg argues, “At other times of history, when people lived lives which required more social contact, notions about transcendent entities directing human life were perhaps rather harmless. Perhaps such ways

⁸ Belief in spirits did not “evaporate” in Europe any more than it did in the lands European nations colonized; it was eliminated through violence.

of thinking even provided some inspiration to explore what was behind facades of material and social reality.” However, “now, because our lives have become so socially dissociated, ideas such as Platonic forms and a God-out-there carry a different valence. They lead us further out of this world and support our tendencies to turn away from each other. Any notion of a superior, absent, bodiless power who is all-seeing yet unseen can only support the stupefying idealization of that which is not alive” (Goldenberg 1990 17).

The attitude that the holy is not found in nature is tied to modern science, which White believes is “an extrapolation of natural theology” (White 23). Also, he argues, “modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology—hitherto quite separate activities—joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecological effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” (White 23). Christianity is thus still partly responsible when the direct damage done to the environment is due to modern science and technology.

Nash maintains that “in historical reality, many complex and interwoven causes were involved—and Christian thought was probably not the most prominent one” (Nash 75). He asserts that “The ecological complaint against Christianity is an exaggeration of religious influences on culture” (Nash 77), blaming the “distortion of religious values for social goals” (Nash 79). However, if the religion can be manipulated to support environmental destruction, is that not

still a problem?⁹

Even though White was so critical of Christianity's role in the destruction of the environment, he did not advocate rejecting the Christian faith in general.¹⁰ While Christian culpability in this area is not enough to engender disbelief in God, it can further estrange people from a desire to be part of a tradition which includes commandments which might be interpreted to prescribe human mastery over the Earth, and in fact has been interpreted that way for centuries. As Nash admits, "Ecological concerns have rarely been a prominent, let alone a dominant, feature in Christian theory and practice" (Nash 72).

Nash's assertion that "for much of Christian history and for many Christians, dominion seems to have been a relatively dormant and often beneficial concept ecologically" (Nash 103) is unconvincing. It is damning enough that "Christianity has done too little to discourage and too much to encourage the exploitation of nature" (Nash 74), even if some feel this is an overgeneralization.

⁹ As Mary Daly remarks, with regard to arguments about the masculinity of Jesus and patriarchy in Christianity, so too with apologetics over the biblical commandment of human dominion: "Defenders of this method argue that the symbol 'can be used oppressively' or that it 'has been used oppressively' but insist that it need not function in this way. This kind of defense is understandable but it leaves a basic question unanswered: If the symbol *can* be 'used' that way and in fact has a long history of being 'used' that way, isn't this an indication of some inherent deficiency in the symbol itself?" (Daly 1985b 72).

¹⁰ White suggests renewal through a reconsideration of Saint Francis of Assisi (White 24).

1.2.2 Valuation and Treatment of “Other” People

Missions

The idea that there is only one true faith is increasingly unpopular. As Goldenberg argues, “Monotheism becomes increasingly untenable as we recognize the rights of people to live out a variety of life styles under a variety of rules” (Goldenberg 1979 129). Monotheism seems to be typically accompanied by intolerance of other ways of life. The idea that the Christian religion is the only correct one, and that it is a Christian duty to bring the good news to all people, and convert them, is difficult to accept in contemporary pluralistic culture. However, this idea is a logically necessary part of much Christian theology. Stephen Neill, Professor of Missions and Ecumenical Theology, explains: “If the God of Israel really is the Creator of the whole universe, if he carries all the nations in his hand, then the unity of the world of nature and of men is guaranteed, and it seems to follow, as part of the divine purpose, that sooner or later all men should find their way to the God who has made them. Unity in religion is the natural corollary of the doctrine that all men are already one under God” (Neill 18). Paul believed, Neill says, that “the grand consummation...cannot take place until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in” (Neill 23), that is, Jesus will not return until all people become Christian.

The basic problem with missions to convert people is simply that proselytism is unethical. People ought to be free to practise the religion of their choice. Missions tend to destroy the cultures of the people toward whom the missions are being directed. This was not a concern for missionaries for a long

time, the Eurocentric assumption being that Christian culture is better than all others, and ought to be dominant. Over time, it has become obvious that missions were used, often with violence, to destroy whole cultures in aid of colonization and/or extraction of natural resources. This is now generally recognized, and condemned, as imperialism.

Neill admits that some historical missions are indefensible, but supports missions in general, and in fact was a missionary. He recognizes that during the Crusades, "to the majority of the Christian warriors Muslims were simply unbelievers, who had no right to existence, with whom no faith need be kept, and who might be slaughtered without ruth or pity to the glory of the Christian God" (Neill 113). In fact, "Most of the Crusaders seem to have held the view that nothing could be done with the infidels except to exterminate them, or to reduce them to permanent slavery. As unbelievers they were destined for hell anyway; and, if they were allowed to live, this could only be because of the services that they might be able to render to faithful Christians" (Neill 115-116).

Neill's apologetics acknowledge some of the negative effects of past missionary activity, but the same attitudes are present in his own work which he identifies in past missions. The problem is that the people being proselytized are regarded as "other" and something less than the missionaries. Neill suggests that "The principal obstacle to the evangelization of the western peoples was the cruelty with which they were treated by the Spanish colonists" (Neill 170). This cruelty was probably a direct result of such attitudes as are expressed by historian Gonzalo de Oviedo y Valdés: "They are naturally lazy and vicious,

melancholic, cowardly, and in general a lying, shiftless people. Their marriages are not a sacrament but a sacrilege. They are idolatrous, libidinous, and commit sodomy. Their chief desire is to drink, worship heathen idols, and commit bestial obscenities" (quoted in Neill 171). There were, of course, people who did not support these views, as Neill notes, but their views were not those which had the most influence.

Neill's own attitude about missions to Africa and the Americas seems to differ only in the extent of his regard of indigenous peoples as "other". He does not demonize them, but certainly still perceives them as immature. Regarding the failure of the missions in Africa, he writes: "No serious attempt seems anywhere to have been made to face all that is involved in a mission to quite primitive peoples--the need for a deep and accurate knowledge of the language, understanding of their customs and mentality, the long and patient instruction that must precede baptism, the endlessly patient pastoral care that must follow it" (Neill 200). He seems to consider these people to be like children. He also denigrates Canada's Native Peoples, saying that there were not that many of them, only three groups totaling "probably not more than 150,000" and they were "all constantly at war with one another" (Neill 200), apparently an excuse for what was done to them.

With no sense of irony, Neill says of the Jesuit missions in South America: "The weakness of all this great enterprise was that the Jesuits did so little to develop a sense of initiative and independence among their flock. They seemed to wish rather to have around them docile children than to train adults for self-

government” (Neill 203). In fact, the colonial powers destroyed the self-government the Native peoples had, because they saw them as being less than adults, that is, as immature savages who had not reached the supposed pinnacle of civilization which the Europeans felt they themselves had.

Although the missions were intended to be done without violence, they resulted in genocide, partially through ignorance of the devastating potential of diseases imported from Europe, but also in large measure due to the violence which erupted when Native Peoples refused to submit to European dominance. Neill acknowledges that “The inhuman cynicism with which the white man engaged the Indian in his own quarrels, setting Indian against Indian and Indian against European, makes one of the most shameful passages of colonial history” (Neill 202). I would add that this is also one of the most shameful passages of the history of Christian missions, and of white history. When I learned of this history, I became ashamed of my heritage as white and Christian. While I cannot help the colour of my skin, I can, and did stop being Christian.

Valuation and Treatment of Women

The status of women in mainstream Jewish and Christian traditions has caused many people to reject those traditions. People, especially women, criticize the role of women presented in the Bible, the attitude toward women displayed in theology, the masculinized concept of God, and the status of women at the congregational level. While women cite differing reasons for rejecting the religions of their childhood, their basic demand is the same, whether Jewish or Christian, Orthodox, Reformed, Catholic, or Protestant: equality.

However, some groups have demonstrated a greater capacity for accommodating this demand than others. Systemic sexism may yet be eradicable within Christianity and Judaism, but it has been the primary reason for many defections, and is a powerful force causing continued alienation.

Some women have found a positive female image in Lilith, the Talmudic first wife of Adam, whom God banished from Eden when Adam complained that she would not lie below him during sex. While Lilith is part of Jewish mythology, it is rather disaffecting that she has been demonized into a killer of babies. Such portrayals of women contribute to women's alienation evident in much "Recent feminist criticism of the Jewish and Christian traditions" which Goldenberg suggests is "always centrally marked by an experience of iconographic impoverishment—a lack of meaningful religious symbols" (Goldenberg 1982 ix).

The Bible generally presents women as inconsequential, or evil. This has led Phyllis Bird to assert that "the Old Testament is a man's 'book' where women appear for the most part simply as adjuncts of men, significant only in the context of men's activities" (quoted in Clark 26). While the extent and implications of particular characterizations are much debated, the sexist portrayal of women in the Bible is well documented. For example, in the ten commandments women are listed among the property which men should not covet from their neighbors, between the neighbor's house, and slaves (Exodus 20:14)¹¹. The prophets, when referring to how bad the Israelites have become, often use female imagery, identifying femaleness with wickedness, especially harlotry (Ezekiel 16, Hosea 1-

¹¹ The citations in this paragraph are from the Tanakh.

3). Perhaps the most widely known portrayal of a woman as evil in the Bible is that of Eve. Duped by the serpent, she gives Adam the forbidden fruit, which causes God to cast the couple out of the garden of Eden (Genesis 3). God then further punishes Eve, and decrees that “your urge shall be for your husband, / And he shall rule over you,” (Genesis 3:16) justifying the subordination of women.

It is not only in the Hebrew Bible that the subordination of women is presented as divinely ordained. The Pauline texts command: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (I Corinthians 14:34-35)¹². The Pauline texts contain many references sanctioning the subordination of women under men. I Corinthians 11:3 states: “the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman *is* the man; and the head of Christ *is* God.” In the same chapter, the reader is reminded that “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 11:8-9), referring to Genesis 2:21-23 where God creates Eve out of Adam’s rib.

These are just a few of the more obvious examples. Biblical passages can be interpreted various ways, so there is little point in pursuing such proof-texting. What matters is not “the objective truth” of what these passages say

¹² The citations in this paragraph are from the King James version of the Bible.

about women's place and role in society. Rather, what is important is that many women find these representations of women in the Bible degrading and offensive, which makes them want to cease being part of traditions that include the Bible. More significant still is the manner in which certain passages have traditionally been interpreted and used in theology.

The role of women presented in the Bible is possibly a bigger problem for Protestant Christians than Catholics, due to the central role of the text in Protestantism. In Catholicism, the interpretation of the text through church doctrine has had more authority than the words of the Bible. Theology has a long tradition of blaming women for all the evils of the world. Tertullian provides an extreme example of this. Addressing women, he writes:

You are the one who opened the door to the Devil, you are the one who first plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree, you are the first who deserted the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not strong enough to attack. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, man. Because of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die. (Tertullian 118)

Women, through Eve, have "the odium of being the cause of the fall of the human race" (Tertullian 117).

Such writings demonstrate such grotesque misogyny that they are almost laughable. However, it is theology which still prevents women from being ordained in the Catholic church. "The Declaration On the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," approved by Pope Paul VI in 1976, and again upheld in 1997, suggests that women cannot be priests because if it was God's will that women serve in this role Jesus would have called women to be his disciples (Swidler 43), but "Jesus did not call any woman

to become part of the Twelve” (Swidler 39). Secondly, the Declaration argues that women cannot represent Christ in serving the Eucharist because there would not be the “natural resemblance’ which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man. In such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. Christ himself was and remains a man” (Swidler 44). Finally, this document says that ordination is not a matter of equal rights: “the priesthood does not form part of the rights of the individual, but stems from the economy of the mystery of Christ and the Church. The priestly office cannot become the goal of social advancement; no merely human progress of society or of the individual can of itself give access to it: it is of another order” (Swidler 47).

The Declaration is easy to critique, yet it remains a problem for Catholics. Female ordination is not as much of an issue in Protestant denominations, where it is at least doctrinally possible, even if some individual congregations do not accept female clergy.

All Biblical traditions share the problem of the masculinity of God. This is probably the most significant obstacle to women remaining Jewish or Christian. As Goldenberg says, “the issue of alienation, or estrangement, is tied most frequently to the problem of the gender of God and ‘His’ representatives in the mundane realm” (Goldenberg 1982 ix). This is a fundamental problem for Carol Christ. She remarks that “The pervasive use of male genderized language for God is not the only objection I have to the biblical traditions, but it alone might warrant rejection of them. As I see it, specific instances of sexist opposition to

women's full participation in religious and social roles found in the Bible, tradition, and contemporary politics are a logical (according to the logic of symbols) outcome of the core symbolism of God/He....I do not believe the patriarchal attitudes of the vast majority of those whose religious faith is based on the Bible will be changed until the image of God is changed" (Christ 1987 61).

The gender of God is not simply a conceptual problem. It goes beyond a difficulty in relating to God as male, because, "This sexual typing of the godhead encourages men to adopt a particular relation to the religious order—largely one of identification; while women tend to see themselves as other—separate from the masculine godhead. The feminine mode of relation to images of masculine 'powers' has largely been a negative one; and women become identified with the evil side of the universe which, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, is also associated with the terms 'material,' 'dark,' and 'bodily.' A more direct connection with most religious imagery for things 'good,' 'godlike' and 'light,' becomes impossible because of the supposed masculinity of these qualities" (Goldenberg 1982 ix). Mary Daly similarly argues, in her "feminist postchristian introduction" to The Church and the Second Sex, that "*sexist* conceptualizations, images, and attitudes concerning God, spawned in a patriarchal society, tend to breed *more* sexist ideas and attitudes, and together these function to legitimate and perpetuate sexist institutions and behavior. Briefly, if God is male, then the male is God" (Daly 1985a 38).

It is not good enough to assert that God is not really masculine, but beyond gender, because people are not beyond gender in their

conceptualizations of God. As Daly points out,

Many intelligent people are not aware of the depth and far-reaching consequences of this problem. It appears to such persons that an image of God as 'an old man with a beard' who lives 'up in heaven' is too childish to be taken seriously by any adult. They feel certain their own belief is on a level far above these notions, and that the same is true of every educated adult. In actuality their confidence in themselves and in others like them is groundless. They fail to realize what a powerful grip such images have upon the imagination even after they have been consciously rejected as primitive and inadequate. Indeed, shades of 'the old man with a beard'—his various metaphysical equivalents—continue to appear even in the most learned speculations of theologians. They appear even more obviously and frequently in the watered-down, popularized versions of these speculations, for example, in text books, religion classes, and sermons. (Daly 1985a 180)

She acknowledges that "Sophisticated thinkers, of course, have never intellectually identified god with a Superfather in heaven," but insists that "Nevertheless it is important to recognize that even when very abstract conceptualizations of God are formulated in the mind, images survive in the imagination in such a way that a person can function on two different and even apparently contradictory levels at the same time. Thus one can speak of God as spirit and at the same time imagine 'him' as belonging to the male sex" (Daly 1985b 17-18).

Moreover, denying the masculinity of the symbol only masks the fundamental problem. This becomes obvious in Daly's analysis of Tillich's Christology. Focusing on Christ as a symbol for humanity rather than as a male image of the holy is somewhat less alienating for women. "However," as Daly argues, "as in the case of his analysis of the Fall, Tillich abstracts from the specific content of the symbol, which in fact functions to justify oppressive

societal structures. Once again there is no notice taken of the fact that the medium is the message. Defenders of this method argue that the symbol 'can be used oppressively' or that it 'has been used oppressively' but insist that it need not function in this way. This kind of defense is understandable but it leaves a basic question unanswered: If the symbol *can* be 'used' that way and in fact has a long history of being 'used' that way, isn't this an indication of some inherent deficiency in the symbol itself?" (Daly 1985b 72). Interpreting Christ as an abstract symbol for all humanity only distracts from the concrete reality of oppression that women experience.

There are other problems which arise even when God is seriously considered as a non-personified deity. Daly argues, in Beyond God the Father, that God should be understood as Verb, or Be-ing. In that work she attempts to change "the conception/ perception of god from 'the supreme being' to Be-ing" (Daly 1985b xvii). She explains: "The Naming of Be-ing as Verb—as intransitive Verb that does not require an 'object'—expresses an Other way of understanding ultimate/intimate reality" (Daly 1985b xvii).

Later, regarding her use of "God" to refer to Be-ing, Daly says "It was an Overwhelming Oversight, engendered by a great desire to save *God*" (Daly 1992 161). She explains that her retention of the masculine designation in the development of her understanding of divinity

was probably "necessary" for me because I was unconsciously afraid of losing my true Self and/or forgetting my intuition of Be-ing, in which I and all Others participate. In traditional language, *God* represented this, although inadequately. The grip of the word *God* was strong: its tentacles were tenacious. After a short time, however, when I did make the 'Qualitative Leap' and dispense with

'him,' I found that Be-ing the Verb was very much alive and well, and so was I. (Daly 1992 161)

Despite Daly's shedding of the masculinity of God, her concept of divinity as Verb remains problematic. There is something compelling in the dynamism of Daly's description of the Verb as the Be-ing of ultimate/intimate reality, and on the level of ultimate reality this might be an acceptable description. However, the Verb is too abstract and metaphysical. Her desire to convey the idea of movement and changeability in the holy is well intended, but the Verb does not clearly convey life and its diversity. In addition, this understanding of divinity disallows the feeling of relationship to a deity who has some sort of personality. If God cannot be imaged as a person then how can one believe that communication with God is possible?

Just as de-personifying God or Jesus simply distracts from the concrete experience of women, so too does imaging God as an androgynous deity. Goldenberg's words, "In many intellectual circles at present, men can succeed and androgynes can succeed – but women still cannot" (Goldenberg 1979 78) are unfortunately just as true now as when she penned them. In addition, this imaging of God is unhelpful for revaluing women because

in much contemporary androgyny theorizing, the figure still retains an unrealistic, otherworldly quality. It is this quality that makes the symbol a risky one for feminists probing their present experience to find theological roots. Androgyny distracts from concentration on present experience if we continue to see it as *the* one goal or god to be reached. However, if androgyny can be considered as only *one* image of future time within the present, it need not be encountered as a megalith that blocks access to other images....If we perceive androgyny as a beginning, it calls for an imaginative philosophy that allows for plurality. However, as an end-point, androgyny appears insubstantial – veiled in heavenly fluff – a

rather impotent label for two sexes alive in this world. (Goldenberg 1979 81)

In addition, as Christ argues "Given almost two thousand years of patriarchal imagery...many who hear gender neutral inclusive language continue to think of God as abstractly male. Unless affirmatively female language of God/She, God the Mother, and Goddess is used...female power will not be unequivocally affirmed as being equally valuable as male power" (Christ 1987 113).

Imaging God as hermaphrodite has some of the same problems as imaging God as androgynous does. Firstly, an unambiguously female image is needed to affirm female power. In addition, it is difficult to come up with a picture of what this sort of God would look like. A being of two genders could be imaged as a dual-gendered monster. This image would be difficult for both genders to relate to, since neither could actually identify with it. Alternatively, it might be imaged as male and female in coitus. However, this image elevates heterosexual relations to divine status, and tacitly de-legitimizes homosexuality.

Imaging God as an androgynous or an hermaphrodite deity is unsatisfactory, and Daly's concept of "God" as Verb fits poorly into Christian tradition. It could just as easily fit into another tradition, since there is no reason to remain Christian if one understands God in this manner. After cutting out Jesus as the Son of God, and most of the Bible, what would make the religion Christian? Women might be content to be Christian if the faith were reformed enough, but it seems that so much reform is required that there would be nothing left in it to distinguish it as Christian. Judaism faces similar problems. As Goldenberg argues, the necessary reforms would make the religions so different

that it would not really make sense to consider them to be in continuity with their histories. She disavows that

improving the position of women is a minor alteration in Judaeo-Christian doctrine. The reforms that Christian and Jewish women are proposing are major departures from tradition. When feminists succeed in changing the position of women in Christianity and Judaism, they will shake these religions at their roots. The nature of a religion lies in the nature of the symbols and images it exalts in ritual and doctrine.... Feminists change the major psychological impact of Judaism and Christianity when they recognize women as religious leaders and as images of divinity. (Goldenberg 1979 4-5)

Yet, Christianity and Judaism are living religions. They do change, and although patriarchy is currently embedded in the fundamentals of the faiths, it is possible that they will evolve. Goldenberg recognizes this, but maintains that “a merely semantic veneer of tradition ought not to hide the fact that very nontraditional faiths will be practiced” (Goldenberg 1979 9).

At this juncture, women have gained doctrinal equality in some mainstream Christian and Jewish groups. However, once women are considered equal according to policy, there is still the matter of the lived experience of women. Even in the most liberal groups, policies of egalitarianism have not filtered down to the level of individual congregations or communities. As Christ relates, “Though feminists continue to experiment with changing the language of the Bible and liturgy, the worship of God the Father and King still continues even in the most liberal congregations. Feminist ministers, rabbis, and theologians say that radical changes in language for God simply are not possible in most churches and synagogues, and that to insist upon this issue would alienate them from their congregations. Even the *Inclusive Language*

Lectionary, which uses gender neutral and optional female language has met with a great deal of resistance, demonstrating that for many Christians, male-genderized symbols of God as Father, Lord, and King are intrinsic to their faith" (Christ 1987 15).

In addition, even in such a liberal group as the United Church of Canada, women tend to have subservient or trivial roles. The primary female role model encountered there remains that of "church ladies," for whom many Generation X-ers reserve an unmitigated hatred due to their hypocrisy (hence the popularity of Dana Carvey's character "The Church Lady" on Saturday Night Live). Church, for them, seems to be mostly about being seen to be doing good things, and gossiping about people who have been seen to do bad things. These women in fact do most of the work of running the churches, but their work in raising money, and spirits, through activities like church suppers, is not valued.

That God can be imaged as female within a Christian or Jewish context is meaningless when women still experience sexism in churches and synagogues. Women's experiences of sexism in synagogues and churches ultimately have more weight than theology does with individuals. Female ordination has been won in most Christian groups, and in many Jewish groups women can now be rabbis, but in most cases the person or people at the front of the church or synagogue are male, as are most of the governing authorities.

1.3 The Question of "Religious Experience"

All other concerns aside, people leave mainstream traditions when they find them experientially dissatisfying. For some people the decision to leave is

based on the question "Can I as an individual find more spiritual sustenance within or outside the church or synagogue?" (Christ 1987 59). Some people find their experiences in synagogues and churches insufficient, and have significant religious experiences outside these institutions which are not officially sanctioned.

In the experiences of Neopagans emerging out of mainstream churches and synagogues there was generally no encouragement of religious experience, or legitimization of it in their previous traditions. As Griffin says, "One of the major theoretical reasons for the modern loss of belief in God in intellectual circles is that the modern worldview simply has no natural place in it for God" (Griffin 1989 54). Ritual is not done with the intent to experience God, Jesus, or any form of the numinous. For example, communion is something to be done, not experienced. If someone shows emotion during church, especially during communion, people would be more likely to think they were mentally ill than actually experiencing the religious significance of the Eucharist. Indeed, "the modern worldview denies the possibility of an experience of God. Modernity's materialistic ontology has as its epistemological correlate the doctrine that all perceptual experience of the world must come through one's (material) sensory organs" (Griffin 1989 55). Other rituals, the few that remain, such as baptism, marriage, and funeral, frequently seem equally hollow.

People who have become Neopagans since leaving Judaism and Christianity frequently report that they did have religious experiences while they were part of those communities, but these occurred outside the context of church

and synagogue. As Eller says of “spiritual feminists,” a group that overlaps with Neopaganism, if they “struggled as children to fit into the religious forms of their society, the fact remains that most of the spiritual experiences they regarded as deeply significant happened outside traditional religions altogether” (Eller 29). They had early spiritual experiences which “mainstream religions did not credit to a valid spiritual source” (Eller 29-30).

My experiences in the United Church support this. When religious experiences happened, their importance was ignored if not denied outright, with the assumption that miracles and revelations belong to the time of the Bible. A friend told my Mother that she had been so moved by my Father’s singing in church one day, that she wanted to clap. The idea of clapping being appropriate for an experience of the holy, as though it were on par with a good play, is amusing if not depressing, but of course even something so demonstrative as clapping is simply not done in many churches such as the rural, and somewhat conservative, United Church which my parents attend. Many times I also have been quite moved by my Father’s singing in church, and other music there. In fact, that is the only thing which has inspired any sort of religious experience for me in a church. More frequently, I have felt the presence of the numinous outside in the bush (untamed swamp and forest lands of the Canadian Shield), the garden, and while reading (novels, political writings, philosophical and religious works). In the United Church, in my experience, while such experiences were not denigrated, neither were they given any special importance.

Eller reports that the prominent feminist and Witch Starhawk had a similar experience in Judaism. "Starhawk says that as a teenager, she had powerful experiences in nature that seemed to her mystical and spiritual, but that 'didn't seem to fall in the framework of Judaism—or at least not what [she] had been taught about it, or had learned about it'" (Eller 30).

Thus some people have found mainstream Christianity and Judaism to be experientially dissatisfying, as well as ethically insupportable and logically untenable. Some people continue to work for change within mainstream traditions, reforming them to address their concerns and needs. Others have moved within mainstream groups, for example, Catholics moving to Protestant groups, seeing them as a more liberal alternative. In her "New Archaic Afterwords" to The Church and the Second Sex, Daly describes the division of Catholic and Protestant within Christianity as a two-pronged pitchfork which keeps women penned into these traditions. She suggests that "liberal protestant women can see the blatant oppression of catholic women as a source of encouragement, making their own situation appear better than it really is" and "The other side of the pitchfork jabs/pricks catholic women, for seeing the apparently better protestant situation stirs hope that they too may one day reach such heights" (Daly 1985a xv). Divisions exist within non-Catholic Christianity as well. For example, Anglicans have the option of moving to the United Church. However, those in the United Church are already in one of the most liberal denominations, so there is nowhere to go but outside Christianity. People do move directly from more conservative denominations into Neopaganism, but

Shelly Rabinovitch, in her study of Neopaganism in Canada, reports that Neopaganism does draw a greater percentage of its adherents from the United Church than any other denomination (Rabinovitch 31).

However, that movement is not so direct as it is generally presented. People do not generally simply convert from mainstream faiths to Neopaganism. After they experience the death of God, they usually spend a period of time believing in nothing, and being part of no religious community. This in-between time might be characterized as an "exodus community" such as Daly invited people to join in her 1971 sermon at the Harvard Memorial Church.

2

Between The Worlds: Nihilism

Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?...God is dead. (Nietzsche 1974 n125 p181)

In her call to an exodus community, Daly said: "The sisterhood of man cannot happen without a real exodus. We have to go out from the land of our fathers into an unknown place. We can this morning demonstrate our exodus from sexist religion—a break which for many of us has already taken place spiritually. We can give physical expression to our exodus community, to the fact that we must go away" (Clark 1977 270). She describes the women's movement as an exodus community, saying:

Sisterhood is also functioning as church, proclaiming dimensions of truth which organized religion fails to proclaim. It is a space set apart, in which we can be ourselves, free of the mendacious contortions of mind, will, and feeling demanded of us 'out there.' It is a charismatic community, in which we experience prophecy and healing. It is a community with a mission to challenge the distortions in sexually unbalanced society, to be a counter-force to the prevailing sense of reality by building up a new sense of reality. Finally, sisterhood is an *exodus community* that goes away from the land of our fathers—leaving that behind because of the promise in women that is still unfulfilled (Clark 1977 270)

Her words "away," and "out of the land of our fathers into an unknown place" describe nihilism, the state of dissolution following disillusion with the previous

worldview. In 1973 Daly re-named this experience as the Fall into Freedom, but it is not perceived as such during the in-between time of meaninglessness.

“Wandering in the wilderness” is another metaphor for nihilism. Eller documents women’s experiences of this in their movements toward feminist spirituality,¹³ referring to that time as “The ‘Wandering Years’” (Eller 31-33). She reports that “Those who spent some years in a state of irreligion talked about feeling that there was a hole in their lives where their religion used to be, and those who experimented with many religions still felt a lack, still felt that their deepest religious instincts had found no adequate home” (Eller 33).

Nihilism is felt as a lack, and is characterized by angst. The loss of the religion which constituted one’s worldview, through which one made sense of the world, causes one to suspect that life might actually be meaningless. As Nietzsche teaches, the meaning of the death of God is nihilism. The loss of belief in God, or Truth, or any other such absolute, is followed by the belief that there is no meaning, because one cannot see how there could be meaning without the existence of such an absolute. The loss of faith engenders nihilism because,

Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind. Thus the belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim- and meaninglessness, is the psychologically necessary affect [sic] once the belief in God and an essentially moral order becomes untenable. Nihilism appears at that point, not that the displeasure at existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any ‘meaning’ in suffering, indeed in existence. One interpretation has collapsed;

¹³ “Feminist spirituality” is another expression for “Women’s Spirituality.” The latter term is possibly more inclusive, because some women who participate in this type of spirituality do not like to identify themselves as feminist.

but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain. (Nietzsche 1967 n55 p35)

The loss of belief in God usually causes a loss of belief not only in all religion, but in the possibility of meaning itself.

Nietzsche's writings on the death of God are not simply about the loss of belief in Christianity which he experienced, but about the loss of a particular way of understanding the world. As Heidegger explains, "In the word 'God is dead' the name 'God,' thought essentially, stands for the suprasensory world of those ideals which contain the goal that exists beyond earthly life for that life and that, accordingly, determines life from above, and also in a certain way, from without" (Heidegger 1977 64). It is not the loss of belief in God, specifically, that is important, but the belief that there can be no meaning without belief in God, or some other absolute. As Heidegger points out, "The speech of the madman says specifically that the word 'God is dead' has nothing in common with the opinions of those who are merely standing about and talking confusedly, who 'do not believe in God'" (Heidegger 1977 63).

The nihilism experienced after the death of God, or some other absolute, is particularly acute because the previously possessed transcendent worldview supported belief in a suprasensory realm. The problem begins with locating meaning in a suprasensory realm, which may be only a fictional projection. When this is found to be hollow, one assumes that there is no meaning, forgetting about the fact that the real world is still here.

Nietzsche describes the process of the creation of such a worldview,

through to its dissolution. First, experiencing dissatisfaction with this world “Man seeks ‘the truth’: a world that is not self-contradictory, not deceptive, does not change, a *true* world—a world in which one does not suffer; contradiction, deception, change—causes of suffering! He does not doubt that a world as it ought to be exists; he would like to see the road to it” (Nietzsche 1967 n585 p316). One then feels “Contempt, hatred for all that perishes, changes, varies....The senses deceive, reason corrects the errors” and concludes that “reason is the road to the constant; the least sensual ideas must be closest to the ‘true world.’—It is from the senses that most misfortunes come—they are deceivers, deluders, destroyers—” (Nietzsche 1967 n585 p317).

People create a fictional world “that corresponds to our desires: psychological trick and interpretation with the aim of associating everything we honor and find pleasant with this true world” (Nietzsche 1967 n585 p317). Eventually, “This same species of man, grown one stage poorer, no longer possessing the strength to interpret, to create fictions, produces *nihilists*” (Nietzsche 1967 n585 p317-318). Nietzsche explains, “A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning” (Nietzsche 1967 n585 p318).

Nietzsche describes this movement of positing a suprasensory “true world” to make sense of this imperfect “apparent world” through to the nihilism of the inevitable rejection of the reality of the “true world” as an historical process, but it happens on the level of individual lives as well. The radical nihilism which

follows the dissolution of a worldview based on transcendence renders one passive. "The mistrust of our previous valuations grows until it becomes the question: 'Are not all 'values' lures that draw out the comedy without bringing it closer to a solution?' Duration 'in vain,' without end or aim, is the most paralyzing idea, particularly when one understands that one is being fooled and yet lacks the power not to be fooled" (Nietzsche 1967 n55 p35).

It is paralyzing, but this passive nihilism is also somewhat pacifying; it can be almost a relief to stop trying to rationalize this world. "A philosopher recuperates differently and with different means: he recuperates, e.g., with nihilism. Belief that there is no truth at all, the nihilistic belief, is a great relaxation for one who, as a warrior of knowledge, is ceaselessly fighting ugly truths. For truth is ugly" (Nietzsche 1967 n598 p325). The "ugly truth" is that life is filled with suffering. As Geertz recounts in his discussion of the problem of suffering:

The rain falls on the just
And on the unjust fella;
But mainly upon the just,
Because the unjust has the just's umbrella. (Geertz 21)

In the absence of a worldview which rationalizes suffering, it is much easier to make the argument that the world is unjust and full of suffering than to convince someone that despite the suffering we all experience the universe is not generally characterized by suffering.

However, the passive nihilism which Nietzsche discusses "represents a pathological transitional stage (what is pathological is the tremendous generalization, the inference that there is no meaning at all)" (Nietzsche 1967

n13 p14). Nietzsche also describes another kind of nihilism, active nihilism, through which one can accomplish the transvaluation of values. He explains:

Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this—to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection—it wants the eternal circulation:—the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements....It is part of this state to perceive not merely the necessity of those sides of existence hitherto denied, but their desirability; and not their desirability merely in relation to the sides hitherto affirmed (perhaps as their complement or precondition), but for their own sake. (Nietzsche 1967 n1041 p536-537)

An affirmation of this world is necessary, but not simply as it is, given the “ugly truth” of it. Active nihilism ought to involve a tearing down not only of belief in God as a being who transcends this world, but also a tearing away of the systems people have created which intensify suffering. As Nietzsche says in another passage, “The belief that the world as it ought to be *is*, really exists, is a belief of the unproductive who do *not desire to create a world* as it ought to be. They posit it as already available, they seek ways and means of reaching it. ‘Will to truth’—as *the impotence of the will to create*” (Nietzsche 1967 n584 p317). Perhaps this is not the meaning Nietzsche intended, but these words seem to imply that meaning can be derived from working toward the world which we perceive ought to exist. We can create meaning by making the world meaningful.

Starhawk presents this idea in her writings on ethics. She suggests that people have a role in creating justice, because the holy is immanent in the world and acts through people to create justice. “No external God, Goddess, angel, or

convoy of visitors from another planet will do this for us: We must create justice and ecological and social balance; this is the prime concern, the bottom line, the nitty gritty of the ethics of immanence" (Starhawk 1990 42-43). We create meaning by working toward easing suffering, creating a more just world. Meaning comes through the creation of embodied meaning in this world.

It is more the fear of really believing that there is absolutely no meaning in life, and that no meaning is possible, which is paralyzing, rather than the belief that there is no God. Once one falls into the abyss of unmeaning, and is "straying through an infinite nothing," then one finds freedom. The infinite nothing is also *potentia*, which has the potential to become or be transformed into anything. The loss of an old worldview gives the freedom to create a new one.

The fall into freedom which Daly describes in Beyond God the Father is a form of active nihilism. Daly consciously performs a Nietzschean transvaluation of the biblical myth of the Fall when she suggests that "one could see the myth as prophetic of the real Fall that was yet on its way, dimly glimpsed. In that dreaded event, women reach for knowledge and, finding it, share it with men, so that together we can leave the delusory paradise of false consciousness and alienation. In ripping the image of the Fall from its old context we are also transvaluating it. That is, its meaning is divested of its negativity and becomes positive and healing" (Daly 1985b 67). She explains: "This movement beyond patriarchy's good and evil can be seen mythically as 'the Fall'--the dreaded Fall which is now finally beginning to occur, in which women are bringing ourselves

and then the other half of the species to eat of the forbidden fruit—the knowledge refused by patriarchal society. This will be a Fall from false innocence into a new kind of adulthood. Unlike the old adulthood that required the arresting of growth, this demands a growing that is ever continuing, never completed” (Daly 1985b 67).¹⁴

Falling into the nihilistic abyss of unmeaning only initially appears to negate the possibility of meaning. Meaninglessness becomes meaningful once one sees the fall as a fall into freedom. Clinging to the edge of the abyss, from the perspective of a conventional God-oriented worldview, it appears devoid of meaning. However, once one has fallen into the abyss, one finds freedom from the once limiting structures of thought to create new meaning. Falling into the abyss of meaninglessness is falling into the freedom to work towards creating the world which ought to be, instead of hoping to find it as a gift of God, or hoping to transcend this world.

Daly regards the death of God as a very positive event for women, and an opportunity for new growth in humanity. The death of God the Father frees up dynamic energy to allow movement out of old structures and into something better. “If, as Nietzsche said, God is dead, ‘Is there any up or down left?’ Correction: To the degree that God the Father is dead, swept under by the Living Final Cause, our movement is in all directions: backward, inward, sideward, forward, as is the case with life itself” (Daly 1985b 193). The “Living Final Cause” to which Daly refers is women’s liberation, the liberation of all being

¹⁴ Of course, completion of a sort is necessarily imposed by death.

to creative, unfolding Be-ing (Daly 1985b 190).

Daly's active nihilism is much easier to accept than Nietzsche's. While he insists on an affirmation of this world as it is, with all its faults and ambiguities, there is greater potential in Daly's affirmation that the death of God reveals the possibility for people to create something better within this world. She does not even stop at active nihilism, but suggests that we need to go beyond even the exodus community and her idea of Antichurch:

To call this reality Antichurch is good, but we should not stop with this name alone. To say this word and to stop here is to be caught in a mode of expression that leaves us with an 'opposition of opposites'....'Opposites' are open to seduction not because they are perceived as radical, but because they are perceived as similar to, in the same category with, the 'opponent.' To recognize this is not to renounce our identity as Antichurch, nor, on the pragmatic level, does it mean that we must always renounce...[token] offers of a forum. It does mean that we have to be wary and that we have to reach toward something *beyond* opposition. (Daly 1985b 154)

Beyond the necessarily oppositional and adversarial nature of active nihilism is new meaning, through a new worldview and new religion.

3

The Rebirth of Meaning: Immanent Polytheism

The Christian moral God is not tenable: hence 'atheism'—as if there could be no other kinds of god. (Nietzsche 1967 n151 p 95)

Atheism is not the only alternative when belief in God is lost. The death of God is followed by nihilism, but active nihilism can be followed by the construction of new meaning through a new sort of religion. Just as the nihilism which follows the death of God is contingent on the beliefs which were rejected and the reasons for their rejection, so too is the new construction of belief which is possible after nihilism. If belief in God and allegiance to mainstream Judaism or Christianity were rejected because they were found to be logically incoherent, ethically insupportable, and experientially dissatisfying, for a religion following the death of such faith to be tenable it must be logically coherent, ethically supportable, and provide opportunity for meaningful religious experience.

Some people have been able to find new meaning in Neopaganism, because it does not create the logical, ethical and experiential problems which caused these people to reject mainstream faiths. Neopagan traditions accept that truth is multiple, and thus do not make absolutist claims. This creates the logical problem of coherent relativism, which can be solved by recognizing that we have no foundation but the Earth. This brings on a further logical problem, that of suffering, because the suffering of this world seems incommensurate with

meaning. However, Neopagan traditions recognize suffering as a real problem to be overcome, and thus it is not a problem for thealogy/theology. We create meaning by working to lessen suffering.

Neopaganism does not create the same ethical problems as mainstream Judaism and Christianity. It does not posit a suprasensory realm or external deity, and values the Earth and all people through what might be termed "immanent polytheism."¹⁵ In addition, people do not find the same experiential problems in Neopagan traditions; Neopaganism validates the previous religious experiences of these people.

Neopaganism is not the only faith possible after the death of God, but it is one of the few in which Earth-based values are part of a majority, rather than a minority, tradition. It seems that the choice is between being on the margins of a mainstream faith or in the mainstream of a marginalized faith. Earth-based worldviews, similar to Neopaganism in many ways, are possible in all the "world religions," at least as minority traditions, as Charlene Spretnak details in States of Grace. She argues that the core values of all major religious traditions are sustainable. She may be right that religions seem to begin with the same core values, although these may not seem to be fundamental to later adherents. Some people may use minority traditions to rejoin Christianity or Judaism. However, it is questionable that mainstream traditions can reform to the extent

¹⁵ Immanent polytheism describes the perspective that the holy can be imaged through a variety of goddesses and gods, but that these deities are more properly understood as metaphors than ontological beings. In this view the holy is understood to be immanent in the world rather than transcendent of it.

that people who have joined Neopaganism would accept them again. For example, Creation Spirituality largely satisfies the requirements people have for a worldview to be tenable after nihilism, but it has been denounced as heretical by the Catholic Church hierarchy.¹⁶

3.1 Logical Problems

Coherent Relativism

Acknowledging that others can be satisfied in other religious traditions need not sacrifice meaning or coherency, as people often assume relativist perspectives must. Meaning is possible without absolutes. Indeed, the acknowledgment that a variety of faiths are valid is a valued aspect of many Neopagan worldviews. Neopagans “devote themselves to one of a number of gods and goddesses or one of a number of traditions, without denying the validity of other gods or traditions” (Adler 30), because they tend to “see polytheism not as competitive factions but as facets of a jewel, harmonious but differing” (Adler 31). Priestess and systems analyst, Alison Harlow explains:

To some people, it seems like a contradiction to say that I have a certain subjective truth; I have experienced the Goddess, and this is my total reality. And yet I do not believe that I have the one, true, right and only way....But for me, this in no way is a contradiction, because I am aware that my reality and my conclusions are a result of my unique genetic structure, my life experience and my subjective feelings....This recognition that everyone has different experiences is a fundamental keystone to Paganism; it's the fundamental premise that whatever is going on out there is infinitely more complex than I can ever understand. (quoted in Adler 36)

Many people find it difficult to accept that there is no Truth, but only truths. They think that meaning needs some sort of an absolute or centre around which

¹⁶ Matthew Fox, one of its major proponents, has been defrocked.

to be oriented. In mainstream Judaism and Christianity, God is the centre about which people order their understanding of the universe. The idea of God as the centre which establishes the horizon of understanding is an old idea. The definition of God as “an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” has been variously attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, and Nicholas of Cusa, among others (Miller 10).

Charles Taylor adopts the same imagery in his discussion of relativism. “Things take on importance against a background of intelligibility,” He says. “Let us call this a horizon. It follows that one of the things we can’t do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us” (Taylor 1991 37). He argues that a horizon, a circle, which implicitly has a centre point by which to orient oneself, is necessary for meaning. Relativism, he asserts, “implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all, quite anterior to choice. But then the choice...loses any special significance” (Taylor 1991 38).

Taylor insists that there must be some sort of absolute, a centre, and a horizon of significance, for choices to be coherent. He insists that we need a foundation, but does not tell us what it is or why we should accept it as a foundation. He merely says that a foundation is necessary for there to be any significance of choice, that is, meaning. He clings to the edge of the abyss, and cannot allow himself to seriously consider that there actually is no absolute foundation, philosophically speaking.

This is the threat of nihilism which Nietzsche describes metaphorically in the speech of the madman:

'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I....Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? (Nietzsche 1974 n125 p181)

Initially, we do appear to be "straying as through an infinite nothing," as Nietzsche describes. However, this is only passive or incomplete nihilism.

The consequences of relativism are too frightening for Taylor. He sees the lack of meaning with the first onset of incomplete nihilism, but relativism need not erase the horizon. It can expand it. As David Miller says, "We have suffered a death of God. But we discover a new opportunity after the passing of the first shadow of despair that comes from the loss of a single center holding things together" (Miller 1974 3).

Miller recognizes that "everywhere one stands is a center, a new center, and the universe of meaning is not limited to a tight little horizon, a vicious circle of a single mind and lifetime. Today we have a real sense of the hermetic meaning of the horizonless circle without boundaries and limits... when the center is everywhere it is in fact multiple. Everywhere a person stands is a social and psychological center" (Miller 11). Returning the metaphor to flesh, or understanding it in a new way by returning it to its physical meaning, the horizon is the actual circumstances which cause a person to value one choice over another. Every person perceives him- or herself at the centre point which the

horizon circumscribes around him- or herself. The literal horizon is not only unique to each person, but moves with each person as she or he changes position. The circumference, the horizon, is not constant or absolute. This is why there are multiple centres.

Concretizing the metaphors of another of Nietzsche's passages concerning nihilism reveals the only real absolute available to us in this world. In *The horizon of the infinite*, he writes "We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us--indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us. Now little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean" (Nietzsche 1974 n124 p180-181). The land has not literally been destroyed. Only the metaphorical "true world" which we created in preference to this world is destroyed in the death of God. We still have one foundation available to us, the Earth. While there are multiple centres of meaning and points of view, and the horizon is constantly shifting, not the same for any two people, there is firm ground under our feet.

This concretization shows a way out of the problems created by philosophical abstraction, and draws our attention back to our primary existential problems. Returning words to flesh reminds us that this is the only world we have, which brings on another challenge to meaning: the problem of suffering.

The Problem of Suffering

Clifford Geertz discusses this problem in his work on religion as a cultural system. He writes: "The strange opacity of certain empirical events, the dumb senselessness of intense or inexorable pain, and the enigmatic unaccountability

of gross iniquity all raise the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world, and hence [humanity's] life in the world, has no genuine order at all – no empirical regularity, no emotional form, no moral coherence" (Geertz 23). He suggests that "the religious response to this suspicion is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience" (Geertz 23). According to Geertz, cosmologies create meaning despite suffering; a worldview gives a context in which suffering becomes meaningful.

In his view, religion does not help people avoid suffering, but rationalizes it. "As a religious problem," he says, "the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable—something, as we say, sufferable" (Geertz 19). Alternatively, religion rationalizes suffering by "affirming, or at least recognizing, the inescapability of ignorance, pain, and injustice on the human plane while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole. And it is in terms of religious symbolism, a symbolism relating man's sphere of existence to a wider sphere within which it is conceived to rest, that both the affirmation and the denial are made" (Geertz 24).

While not all worldviews deny that suffering is characteristic of the world as a whole, many seem to deny that it is characteristic of ultimate reality. They refer to a suprasensory realm which makes this life bearable in the larger context

of nirvana, or some sort of afterlife, as Hick does in his theodicy. Without reference to a larger context of ultimate reality to make the suffering of this world meaningful, we are left with just the world as it is, in its ugly truth. However, while Geertz's theory recognizes the role of worldviews in creating meaning through explaining the place of suffering in the context of a cultural system, the relations between suffering and worldviews are more complex than his theory suggests. Worldviews can intensify suffering, such as the damage done to the Earth by cultures with Christian worldviews. In addition, in some worldviews, such as in Neopaganism, action to minimize suffering may be necessary to create meaning.

Meaning can be found in the belief that while the world is full of suffering it could be better, without reference to any metaphysical concepts such as an absolute like God, or a suprasensory realm. Admittedly, some suffering is inevitable. The suffering associated with death is an inherent part of life in this world (to deny death is to believe in a suprasensory realm). Illness and death are unavoidable, but much suffering could be lessened. A more equitable distribution of wealth, and education against the prejudices of racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism, would be a good start. Suffering cannot be eliminated in this world, and we cannot take recourse in a teleological progression to some fictional utopia without reference to a suprasensory realm. However, we can try to improve the conditions of life on Earth for as many of us, including other species, as possible.

When one believes that there are no absolutes, and there is no

suprasensory realm the problem of suffering can be answered by working toward lessening suffering. A commitment to work for social change is common amongst Neopagans. Starhawk, for example, suggests that “given the conditions of our society, a commitment to the Goddess carries with it an inherent demand to work for social change” (Spretnak 1982 418). Neopagans who work for social change find meaning in their lives through such work. Mary Daly discusses finding meaning through the women's movement, in which the death of God the Father frees up dynamic energy to allow movement out of old structures and into something better (Daly 1985b 190-193).

We can make the world meaningful by making it more ethical. In this manner, we can make meaning logically possible without reference to an absolute or suprasensory realm, despite the suffering in this world. To remain coherent while espousing relativism, in the implementation of ethics to create meaning, we cannot understand these as *the* right ethics. However, given a set of ethical positions one wishes to support, one can identify a worldview that supports those ethics. Some people have found that Neopaganism does not create the ethical problems which caused them to reject Christianity and Judaism.

3.2 Ethics

Being logically coherent is not sufficient reason, in itself, to adopt a particular worldview. One must also want to believe in it, which requires that one find it ethical. Adler relates that she searched “for an ecological-religious framework compatible with [her] own politics and commitment to the world”

(Adler 19). Not only the explicit ethics of doctrines need to be acceptable, but also the ethics implicit in the imagery and symbolism of the myth and ritual must be acceptable in their implications about the nature of the universe.

This is because mythos creates ethos. As Geertz says, ritual “involves this fusion of ethos and world-view...which shape the spiritual consciousness of a people” (Geertz 28). In rituals, “By inducing a set of moods and motivations—an ethos—and defining an image of cosmic order—a world-view—by means of a single set of symbols, the performance makes the model *for* and model *of* aspects of religious belief mere transpositions of one another” (Geertz 34). Peter Berger adds that, “Again and again,” religious ritual “‘makes present’ to those who participate in it the fundamental reality-definitions and their appropriate legitimations....Both religious acts and religious legitimations, ritual and mythology, *dromena* and *legouma*, together serve to ‘recall’ the traditional meanings embodied in the culture and its major institutions. They restore ever again the continuity between the present moment and the societal tradition, placing the experiences of the individual and the various groups of the society in the context of a history (fictitious or not) that transcends them all” (Berger 40, 41). The symbolic and metaphorical content of myth and ritual determines how people perceive the world, that is, it constitutes their worldview.

Because of the legitimating function of myth and ritual in sustaining a particular view of the world, we should be very concerned about what sort of images myth and ritual contain. To want to believe in a new worldview following the death of God, we need a mythos which does not sustain the ethical problems

found with mainstream Judaism and Christianity. The mythos of Neopaganism does not create these ethical problems; it values the Earth and all people through immanent polytheism. It does not posit a suprasensory realm; the holy is immanent in this world. All members of all species, as well as the Earth, are recognized as holy, or, expressed in nonreligious (or at least not traditionally religious) terminology, all living beings are seen as subjects rather than objects. Seeing all beings as holy does not remove the significance of the holy. Rather, this perception recognizes the unique value of each and every being required to complete the whole ecosystem of the Earth.

3.2.1 Valuing the Earth

It is more ethical to believe only in this world, rather than believing in some form of a suprasensory realm or ultimate reality which transcends this world. Neopaganism embraces a “this-worldly” religious perspective. It is often defined as an Earth-based religion. Instead of referring to ultimate reality, a suprasensory realm, or any other sort of absolute, its focus is a poetic perception of the Earth and bodily existence, with recognition of all the pleasures available to us in this world.

Most male theologians, “When they look at this world...tend to find it insufficient, disappointing, and even threatening. It is the cross to which they are nailed. Because daily life is so unsatisfying, another world is required—the transcendent world of God. Often many male theologians focus on life after death. Note how such issues do not fascinate feminist theologians who are more concerned with hopes for life before death. Life after death is an issue that

is symptomatic of structures of thought which reject the richness and depth of the physical, social universe in which we live" (Goldenberg 1990 211). This world is seen as inadequate because it has been so devalued through transcendent worldviews.

The belief that there is no hope of escaping suffering without a possible escape to Heaven, or by divine intervention, or some other reference to ultimate reality parallels the devaluation of the body in favour of the spirit or the mind. Neo-Freudian psychology is criticized for reducing human experience to the body, but the mind and the body are coincident. This is seen as reductionist only because the body has been devalued and perceived as less real than the mind or spirit.

The male theologians to whom Goldenberg refers are right in sensing the ugly truth that the world is full of suffering, but this is only one truth, not the Truth. It is also true that the world is full of beauty and joy. Experiences such as the birth of a child, sex, and laughter, exist alongside pain and suffering. The suffering is there, but it does not negate the pleasures. We do not need to transcend this world in order to escape suffering.

Incidentally, insisting that this is the only world does not necessitate a denial of anything which does not agree with a strict empirical modern scientific worldview. Empiricism accounts only for things verifiable with the senses, but the inability of the average human to sense something does not conclusively prove that such a thing or occurrence is impossible.

Religion Without Transcendence: Immanent Polytheism

Neopagans do not generally believe in any sort of transcendence of this world or a suprasensory realm of any kind. However, goddesses and gods are part of their religious traditions. This does not mean that Neopagans support belief in supernatural beings. As Goldenberg says, "One can be polytheistic without believing in gods per se" (Goldenberg 1979 129). Neopagans tend to see gods and goddesses as constituting a symbol system rather than having any ontological existence. This might be termed "immanent polytheism." Some people, particularly mainstream theologians, find this logically incoherent.

Admittedly, some individual Neopagans retain a sense of transcendence of this world and may believe in divinities as real personified beings, but this is neither a necessary nor a common component of Neopagan worldviews. Neopagans are diverse in their descriptions of the nature of divinity. As Adler relates, "you will encounter priests and priestesses who say that they are philosophical agnostics and that this has never inhibited their participation in or leadership of Neo-Pagan and Craft groups. Others will tell you that the gods and goddesses are 'ethereal beings.' Still others have called them symbols, powers, archetypes, or 'something deep and strong within the self to be contacted,' or even, 'something akin to the force of poetry and art" (Adler 20).

However, they agree that polytheism is one their most important principles (Adler 24), and most of them are immanent polytheists. They believe that the holy is immanent in all things and beings, in an animistic manner, and also usually support pantheistic beliefs (Adler 25). Usually, the only divinity

Neopagans conceive as having an ontological existence is the Earth, or the universe, as the body of divinity. However, this is not as a person. The Earth might be personified as female or male, but never an ontological being outside this world or in any sense independent of it. Generally, the gods and goddesses are understood to be images or symbols in the stories through which Neopagans understand and make sense of the world.

The Goddess, one of the most important symbols in Neopagan traditions, illustrates the difficulties Neopagans have in conveying to traditionally educated academics how a god or goddess can be understood as a divinity and at the same time immanent in this world rather than transcendent of it. Catherine Albanese, for example, in her study Nature Religion in America, understands that “the Goddess is no doubt among the most self-conscious of deities who have inhabited the minds and worlds of human beings. She is pervasively understood as a symbol even as she bestows life and receives praise. In a society that values religious literalness, she champions religious metaphor” (Albanese 179). However, Albanese thinks that Neopagans’ belief in magic requires belief in the supernatural, that is, something suprasensory. Thus she concludes that while the Goddess is perceived as being “of the earth, immanent in all that exists, consciously recognized there as symbol... in the end, she is as transcendental as Emersonian idealism has been” (Albanese 179).

Albanese misinterprets Neopagans’ beliefs about magic. She suggests that Starhawk’s understanding of the operation of magic in the world requires “a world that is unreal, a world that has the capacity to be molded and changed by

the capacity of mind" (Albanese 183). She takes Starhawk's reference to an "underlying reality" to indicate a belief in transcendence of the mundane. However, Starhawk obviously does not understand it in this manner. As Albanese quotes Starhawk, "'Magic functions within natural law,' she writes. "But natural law may be broader and more complex than we realize.' It is a complexity, moreover, that demands attention. 'It is through study and observation of nature, of the visible, physical reality, that we can learn to understand the workings of the underlying reality'" (Albanese 183). The "underlying reality" is not suprasensory in the manner of transcending this world. As Albanese notes in her next paragraph, the "underlying reality" refers to "the principle of interconnectedness and to the spiral dance of all matter" (Albanese 183). This "underlying reality" is not necessarily immediately perceptible without the aid of technology (or our current technology), but it is not a reality which transcends this world.

Neopagans do not believe in the Goddess in the way that mainstream Jewish and Christian people believe in God. As Starhawk explains, "In the Craft, we do not *believe* in the Goddess—we connect with Her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the earth, through trees, animals, through other human beings, through ourselves. She is here. She is within us all" (Starhawk 1989 91-92). Starhawk envisions "the Goddess as psychological symbol and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists, *and* we create Her....We know the Goddess is not the moon—but we still thrill to its light glinting through branches. We know the Goddess is not a woman, but we respond with love as if She were, and so

connect emotionally with all the abstract qualities behind the symbol" (Starhawk 1989 95).

The Goddess can be said to have an ontological existence only in so far as she is understood to be "the living body of a living cosmos, the awareness that infuses matter and the energy that produces change" (Starhawk 1989 228). In Starhawk's understanding, the holy is embodied in the world, and "Matter itself is sacred" (Starhawk 1989 229). Carol Christ presents a similar understanding of the Goddess as embodied in the Earth. Stated simply, "The earth is the body of the Goddess" (Christ 1995 Preface).

However, Christ and Starhawk both understand the Goddess as being multiple as well as unified in one whole. Starhawk says that "there are also Goddesses, specific ways to imagine and experience that whole, different roads to the center. They are each real, in the sense that they are powerful forces and distinct paths...Some of those aspects may also be male images, Gods" (Starhawk 1989 229). Christ agrees that there are "differentiated Goddesses" (Christ 1987 110) and that male images are also appropriate (Christ 1995 147).

Neopagans are still in the process of developing a theo- or theological definition reconcilable with traditional academic classifications. In Laughter of Aphrodite Christ relates that "Though my theological training tells me I must know whether Goddess is one or many, personal or impersonal, whether she is nature or more than nature, I am not certain that these questions can be answered. The answers do not seem to be required for participation in ritual" (Christ 1987 110). Her forthcoming Goddess Emerging: A Thealogy presents a

more systematic understanding of the symbol of the Goddess as being multiple, the body of the earth and “the power of intelligent embodied love that is the ground of all being” (Christ 1995 Preface).

The Neopagan tendency to understand gods and goddesses primarily as symbols, or metaphors is, admittedly, not unique to Neopaganism, nor is it characteristic of every Neopagan. However, it is the majority view among Neopagans, and not in mainstream Judaism and Christianity, which accounts for some of the popularity of Neopagan worldviews after the death of God in mainstream traditions.

Anthropomorphism: The Persistence and Pragmatism of Images

Given the ethical problems involved with belief in goddesses and gods transcendent of this world/reality, one might wonder why Neopagan traditions include personified deities at all. As Christ asks, “If the simplest meaning of the Goddess symbol is an affirmation of the legitimacy and beneficence of female power, then a question immediately arises, ‘Is the Goddess simply female power writ large, and if so, why bother with the symbol of Goddess at all? Or does the symbol refer to a Goddess ‘out there’ who is not reducible to human potential?’” (Christ 1987 122).

She suggests that “The many women who have rediscovered the power of Goddess would give three answers to this question: (1) The Goddess is divine female, a personification who can be invoked in ritual; (2) the Goddess is symbol of the life, death, and rebirth energy in nature and culture, in personal and communal life, and (3) the Goddess is symbol of the affirmation of the legitimacy

and beauty of female power (made possible by the new becoming of women in the women's liberation movement)" (Christ 1987 122). It seems that the creation of images is inevitable. Humans tend to understand things more easily in anthropomorphic than abstract terms. In addition, imaging can be pragmatic.

Images are easier to relate to than abstract principles, and abstract principles are more readily understood through the use of metaphors. As Starhawk notes, "We know the Goddess is not a woman, but we respond with love as if She were, and so connect emotionally with all the abstract qualities behind the symbol" (Starhawk 1989 95). Because people seem to naturally or inevitably try to relate to things as persons (anthropomorphize), we should pay attention to the images people create, rather than just say they should not have them.

In Beyond God the Father, Daly argues that "it is not necessary to anthropomorphize or to reify transcendence in order to relate to this personally" (Daly 1985b 33). She asks, "isn't the Verb infinitely more personal than a mere static noun? The anthropomorphic symbols for God may be intended to convey personality, but they fail to convey that God is Be-ing" (Daly 1985b 33-34). It is unclear how the problem of abstraction is overcome by replacing the abstraction "God" with the verb "Be-ing." The concept remains abstract. Relating to God as something not anthropomorphized is quite different from the feeling of having a personal relationship with an anthropomorphized deity.

Additionally, Daly's concept of divinity as Verb involves a form of belief in a suprasensory realm. Daly explicitly identifies the Verb as ultimate reality:

“Ultimate Reality is a Verb, and an intransitive Verb...*Be-ing*” (Daly 1992 158).

An abstract idea like *Be-ing*, noun or verb, is necessarily located in a suprasensory realm, because something is abstracted from direct perception. It is a description of ultimate reality, and thus is irrelevant to this reality. It is unreachable, and ineffable; people cannot communicate with it. People inevitably construct mediator images when concepts of the divine become so abstract or remote in character.

Daly argues, in Beyond God the Father, that anthropomorphism is not required to understand *Be-ing*. She suggests that “One of the insights characteristic of the rising woman consciousness is that this kind of dichotomizing between cosmic power and the personal need not be” (Daly 1985b 33). In elaboration, she says, “Women now who are experiencing the shock of nonbeing and the surge of self-affirmation against this are inclined to perceive transcendence as the Verb in which we participate—live, move, and have our being” (Daly 1985b 34). However, it is questionable that women can so easily intuit God (or God/dess, or even Goddess) as Verb.

In Outercourse, Daly confides that she has always loved abstract thought. She explains that while she is “aware that there is also a kind of empty abstraction which permits verbal maneuvers that are not grounded in experience” (Daly 1992 60), she intends “abstract thought” to refer to “philosophical concepts which have a solid basis in reality and which enable one to perceive similarities and to make distinctions” (Daly 1992 60). She explains that she distrusted symbols because they arose in patriarchal culture, and were

thus tools of patriarchy. Later she was able to affirm the power of metaphor (Daly 1992 60), and names various goddesses and aspects of the Goddess in her more recent works.

These multiple female images of the holy are much better than any single image of the holy, noun or verb. In The Church and the Second Sex, Daly suggests that the “eternal feminine” myth can be countered by “women who have a consciousness of the problem, and who have the required creative vigor and independence...changing the image of woman by raising up their own image, giving an example to others, and especially to the young” (Daly 1985a 177). This process can be advanced by using myth and ritual. By creating multiple and diverse images women and men can counter all stereotypes. It is important to recognize divinity immanent in the Earth, but also in all the constituent people and parts of the Earth. This is part of how anthropomorphization can be pragmatic. It works in another way as well. Seeing another thing or person as a subject, rather than just an object, may require anthropomorphization. It encourages empathy, because it leads people to see others as being like themselves.

The projection of human attributes onto the Earth could similarly be beneficial, because it would encourage people to think of the Earth as a subject, and thus not for instrumental use only. However, caution must be exercised in claiming one particular image for the Earth. Seeing the Earth as Gaia is popular in many environmental and Neopagan groups, but we should beware of thinking of the Earth as our mother who will protect and nurture us. Perhaps we can think

of the Earth as our mother as long as we remember that we humans are not her only children, and in the “eyes” of the Earth we have been very bad to our “brother” and “sister” species.¹⁷ There is also a problem with having a primary deity imaged with only one gender.

3.2.2 Valuing Everyone: Immanent Polytheism and Inclusivity

Polytheism encourages people to value everyone, because it is not limited to imaging the holy in a particular way. It is inclusive, because it recognizes divinity as multiple and diverse, and recognizes the holy as being immanent in all people. The common greeting among Neopagans “Thou art Goddess” or “Thou art God” illustrates the ideal of seeing the holy in everyone, regardless of race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, or any other category used to exclude people.

Multiple images or symbols of divinity are more inclusive than having only one symbol, such as God, because the whole of the holy cannot be adequately imaged in one symbol if that symbol is understood to have any particular qualities or characteristics. The symbol God, for example, cannot represent the whole because it is a masculine designation. The Taoist symbol of the uncarved block illustrates this point. When uncarved, it can represent everything, but as soon as one shaving is removed, or one characteristic attributed to it, it no longer represents the whole. The symbol of the uncarved block might adequately represent the holy in an inclusive way, but it is too abstract for people to have

¹⁷ For a current detailing of the destruction of other species' habitats and the extinction of other species caused by human-created pollution see the annual publication State of the World, edited by Linda Starke.

any relationship to it.

Miller makes a similar point when he asserts that “No story is the whole story. It takes many stories to tell the whole story, yet the whole is known always and only through the many” (Miller 1974 78). Further, all the versions of the stories, and new stories must also be included. The more images of the holy, and stories about deities, there are, the closer we are to representing the whole, including everyone’s experience.

Miller posits that “*A polytheistic theology will attempt to recover the whole pantheon residing in our so-called monotheistic theological tradition*” (Miller 1974 72). To be truly polytheistic the “pantheon” must be unlimited. However, Miller favours the use of the discreet pantheon of classical Greek mythology, suggesting that, “*The Gods and Goddesses of Greece are our heritage*” (Miller 1974 11), and “Greece is the locus of our polytheism simply because, *willy-nilly*, we are Occidental men and women” (Miller 1974 81).

There are several reasons for Miller’s focus on the Greek pantheon. In it he finds some stability, a sense of security, that compensates for his discomfort with the lack of an absolute centre in polytheism. He finds comfort in a defined pantheon because the stories of the Goddesses and Gods “are the paradigms and symbols that allow us to account for, to express, and to celebrate those multiple aspects of our reality that otherwise would seem fragmented and anarchic” (Miller 1974 7). The discreet and codified pantheon allows him to feel secure, having each of the multiple centres of polytheism well-defined, taken singly.

Additionally, Miller focuses on the Greek pantheon because he wants to acknowledge that Christian heritage derives not only from Hebrew culture, but also from Greek. He argues that "The stories that must be told are not the ones of Judaism and Christianity. These stories are a part of our history and our biography. They account for social and psychological reality in some real, but surface, way. The stories of the Greek Gods and Goddesses, precisely because they are not a part of our remembered history or our dim biography, are playing a more radical role in our lives" (Miller 1974 82). However, the Greek pantheon is in fact very much part of our remembered history. It is the histories of the "common people" and the histories of women that are missing. History is written not only by the winning culture, but by the educated elite ruling class of the winning culture. Thus the histories of the working classes and women have not been formally recorded and can only be reconstructed from unpublished sources such as diaries and non-literary evidence.

Finally, Miller favours the Greek pantheon because he, apparently, is unaware of any other polytheistic traditions. He finds that "polytheistic symbol-systems are not now available to a society or a self which is rediscovering its radical plurality" (Miller 1974 8). As Adler notes, Miller was then, if not now, unaware of Neopaganism and its polytheism (Adler 1986 28).

Underlying his argument supporting the use of the Greek pantheon is the assumption that his audience shares his ethnicity and that "all Western thinking" has "its root in Greek religion" (Miller 1974 39). He argues against "Westerners" use of mythology from "other" cultures such as "Hindu India and Buddhist Japan,

in multidaemoned China, in sorcery, in new forms of multiple family life, in communes, in the 'new religions,' and many other alternative life-styles and meaning-systems which have been hitherto foreign," suggesting that they "could have the effect of leading us unrealistically into symbol-systems which are not effective in Western consciousness and behavior situations" (Miller 1974 11).

He admits that "polytheistic systems from Hindu Asia, Buddhist and Shinto Japan, primitive Africa and the Americas" are "part of the new cultural polytheism," but insists that "only modes of meaning indigenous to our own ways of thinking and feeling will suffice to help us *understand* the new polytheism of which much beyond Greece will be a part" (Miller 1974 12). It is true that Greece is part of our intellectual heritage, and much of "our" language is derived from these sources, but this is not the entirety of "our" heritage. Firstly, cultural influences can be traced back indefinitely. The culture of Greece developed from a combination of invaders from the north, and people derivative of Crete. Crete in turn developed from Egyptian culture, which can be traced in-land further into Africa. All of these are part of "our" heritage.

Furthermore, it is problematic to speak of "our" cultural heritage. North America, as well as Australia (if not all nations) are multicultural societies, with multiple sources of heritage. We are linguistically, ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse. It does not make sense to speak of "our" heritage as Greek in Canada. Even my background, which might be described as very WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), includes a heritage of multiple sources. In religion, my heritage is Christian (which includes Greek, and Hebrew culture).

Ethnically I am Scottish, Irish, English, and German. However, I am influenced by North American Native cultures by virtue of being born and raised in Canada. In addition, I have the heritage involved in being from the working class of rural Ontario.

Miller is right to have some trepidation about using “foreign” polytheistic systems. However, the reason for this caution should not be because they will not work in “our” culture. Caution should be exercised due to issues of cultural appropriation. This applies especially to ritual activities, but also to mythology. Diverse images should be included, but there is a problem when images or traditions are taken out of context, or used in a superficial manner. People should be true to sources when using these things in new ways. Ironically, using the Greek pantheon would feel like cultural appropriation to me. Celtic sources feel more a part of my heritage.

Miller is correct in his suggestion that “*A polytheistic theology will be a phenomenology of all religions*” (Miller 1974 72). Unfortunately, the theology of religions tends to be a one-sided dialogue, as is evidenced in Miller’s unawareness of the Neopagan movement. Still, his point is correct. To be truly inclusive, polytheism must allow all the images, even mainstream Jewish and Christian images. There is nothing wrong with these images when they are not understood monotheistically. As Goldenberg predicts, “Whatever images do live in the new order of gods, a father-god is sure to be among them. As we develop our psycho-religious awareness to allow all that we are to surface in the form of images, we must expect father-gods to appear” (Goldenberg 1979 81). “When

we have stopped hating the father, we will find that he lives in other ways. We can expect him to seduce us from time to time. Many of us will be drawn to speculating about the life of Jesus, to reading the history of the Jewish people, or to studying the mystical traditions of these religions. We must be free (and strong) enough to allow this interest to live within us" (Goldenberg 1979 83).

While Neopagans have rejected allegiance to mainstream Judaism and Christianity, many remain in continuity with their previous traditions. As Christel Manning records, in a study on conversion and syncretism, one of the people she interviewed stated "I am a pagan—but I also believe in the truth of the gospels" (Lewis 299). Even some of those who left mainstream traditions in bitterness can later return to some of the images, symbols, and ideas of those traditions.

Valuing Women

Another reason to reject a polytheism limited to the Greek pantheon is that the stories of these gods and goddesses have been recorded in a patriarchal form. This is illustrated in Miller's description of the "*variousness of our sensuality*" where he discusses male love in terms of Pan, Hermes and Eros, but presents the female only as Aphrodite, "the love object." He says that "her love is characterized by a compulsion from the side of the lover," and she is like "the Playmate of the Month" (Miller 1974 69). This does not recognize that the modes of women's sexuality are also multiple. It does not include a consideration of love and sexuality from the point of view of women. While Miller acknowledges that a "monotheistically chauvinistic view of the feminine" must be

avoided (Miller 1974 74), he does not accomplish this in The New Polytheism.

To be inclusive we must not be limited to these versions of these stories, or to this pantheon. Women who have adopted Neopagan traditions cannot be satisfied with the Greek pantheon as Miller presents it. As Eller says, “having become highly sensitized to any hint of sexism, it would not do to simply ignore gender; nothing would suffice but to glory in femaleness, to proclaim the spiritual potential inherent in womanhood, to take the ‘weak vessel’ of Christianity and make her the holy chalice of the great goddess. This is what these women found in feminist spirituality” (Eller 33). Not all Neopagans go so far as those in women’s spirituality, but Neopaganism includes many female positive images, and the Goddess is often primary.

The moon symbolism widespread in Neopaganism sacralizes women’s bodies and experiences. Women and women’s bodies are very much valued in Neopaganism as the givers of life. We see ourselves in connection with the cycles of the moon, and perceive our experiences of our bodies in menarche and menstruation, childbirth, and menopause, as holy. As Christ says, “The symbol of Goddess aids the process of naming and reclaiming the female body and its cycles and processes. In the ancient world and among modern women, the Goddess symbol represents the birth, death, and rebirth processes of the natural and human worlds. The female body is viewed as the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death cycles in the universe” (Christ 1987 125).

Focusing on the symbol of the Goddess as the primary image for the holy is helpful for women in the context of systemic cultural sexism. Goldenberg

suggests that “By worshipping a female image of God, women might, on a psychological level, be acknowledging a deep acceptance and pride in their own position in the world” (Goldenberg 1982 75). As Christ states, “The simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of Goddess is the acknowledgment of female power as beneficent and independent power” (Christ 1987 121).

However, Daly cautions that “Serious and unacknowledged difficulties can arise when those who speak and/or write of *The Goddess* or *goddesses* avoid the giant step/leap of Realizing ultimate/intimate reality as movement, as Verb.” (Daly 1985b xvii). Indeed, “The noun-goddess, then, is a simple off-shoot of the noun-god” (Daly 1985 xviii). The “noun-goddess” is not a good thing. Some people in the Neopagan community do understand the Goddess in this manner, typically envisioning the Goddess as Mother. As Goldenberg suggests, “Simply exchanging worship of the Father for worship of the Mother could merely be exchanging one parental figure for another. The relationship to ‘God’ might still remain infantile. This is one psychological possibility which a plurality of images for ‘God’ – some male, some female, some paternal, some with peer status – might preclude” (Goldenberg 1982 76n).

To be mature and inclusive, the imaging of the Goddess cannot be limited to a single Goddess figure or concept of the holy. Male monotheism should not be replaced by female monotheism, because “No single image of woman can reflect all the important values of all females” (Goldenberg 1979 77), nor can it reflect the experience of all women. Most people in Neopagan traditions recognize this, and those who use the symbol of the Goddess do not understand

her as “God in a skirt.” The Goddess is understood as a symbol which cannot be imaged through only one metaphor.

The primacy of the Goddess could become a problem for Neopagans in the future, if it is not complemented by equally powerful male images. Currently, the importance of the Goddess in Neopagan traditions acts as a counterbalance to the prevalence of male imagery in mainstream traditions (see Christ 1995 146). In addition, the focus on the Goddess seems more pronounced in Neopagan writings than in practice. Most Neopagans, even if they focus primarily on one deity acknowledge that the holy can, and should be imaged in a variety of forms.

3.3 The Experiential Dimension

In Neopaganism, some people who have undergone the death of God find meaningful religious experience possible, valued, encouraged, and supported. Neopagan traditions frequently validate people's previous experiences which were not supported by mainstream Christianity and Judaism. The entry into Neopaganism is thus often felt as a sort of “homecoming.” Adler relates that “the most common feeling of those who have named themselves Pagans is something like ‘I finally found a group that has the same religious perceptions I always had.’ A common phrase you hear is ‘I’ve come home,’ or, as one woman told me excitedly after a lecture, ‘I always knew I had a religion, I just never knew it had a name’” (Adler 14). Eller confirms that “A prominent theme in spiritual feminist conversion stories is the way that feminist spirituality provides a link to childhood religious experiences. What spiritual feminists come home to is a

spirituality they knew as children, one which was disparaged by traditional religions and then stripped away by years in the adult world" (Eller 25). She recognizes that "Spiritual feminists are very like mainstream neopagans in this regard. Not only do many women report that feminist spirituality echoes and affirms their older beliefs, but this sense of returning to things previously known is the accepted model for conversion in the feminist spirituality movement" (Eller 24).

Neopagan groups appreciate a sense of the holy in the natural world as a valid religious experience. They also encourage direct religious experience through participation in ritual. This experience can be mystical or not, just as the more often solitary experiences with nature can be. There are exercises directed toward a mystical perception of, or encounter with a deity or deities. More frequently, religious experience in Neopagan groups seems not to be directed toward experiencing some form of deity, but experiencing interconnectivity and interdependence with the subjectivity, and hence holiness, of "other" beings (including humans, other species, and the Earth). The rites seem to be about bonding with each other, other species, and the Earth, reviving an understanding of religion as *re-ligio*, "re-linking." Religious experience in Neopaganism is about being able to see connections, for example, finding a meaningful connection between the cycles of the moon and of women's bodies. Being able to see the connections among things through metaphor in this manner expands our perception of the world, and re-endows it with meaning.

To recover one's ability to sense the holy the way Neopagans do, one

must give oneself permission to believe again. Adler relates her experience of this in listening to a recording of the Charge of the Goddess from the “Drawing Down the Moon” ritual: “The contents of the tape had simply given me *permission* to accept a part of my own psyche that I had denied for years—and then extend it” (Adler 20). Many people need to get over the sense of having been fooled by their previous religious traditions, and allow themselves to take the risk of faith again, in something new. To emerge from nihilism, one needs to let oneself believe again.

Once they allow themselves to believe, Neopagans may find it difficult at times to maintain worldviews that are not supported by mainstream culture. Immersion in a context that supports belief helps maintain it. This makes it difficult to maintain a religious perception of the world in a pervasively secularized culture, but is useful in that if one desires to create belief in Neopaganism, it can be accomplished largely through participation. People who have left mainstream Judaism and Christianity and found new meaning in Neopaganism find it more plausible than the religions they left, largely due to the values it supports, and their experience of those values.

Epilogue

The fact that the Neopagans discussed in this study have found meaning demonstrates that religion is still possible after the death of God, at least for some people. They have found Neopaganism to be consistent, coherent, ethical, and pragmatic, which collectively make it believable.

In Neopaganism these people have found a religion without transcendence. They have a sense of meaning, and might be able to posit values without reference to a suprasensory realm. Instead, they could base their ethical positions on what is pragmatic for the survival of the Earth and all its constituents, within the contexts of our mutable horizons.

Their eschewal of belief in a suprasensory realm and acceptance of relativism situates these Neopagans in a postmodern perspective. There are several types of philosophical postmodernism. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction is the most commonly known type. It has its merits, but seems pointless after a time, since it can only criticize, lacking the tools to build something to replace what it tears down. Deconstruction can be an amusing distraction from the state of nihilism, but it cannot lead to any sense of meaning.

Neopaganism might be seen as part of the constructive postmodernist movement. However, Neopaganism is not coincident with the type of constructive postmodernism of David Griffin and the SUNY series on

constructive postmodern thought. As Griffin is aware, his constructive postmodernism is more revisionary than it is constructive. He writes:

From the point of view of deconstructive postmodernists, this constructive postmodernism is still hopelessly wedded to outdated concepts, because it wishes to salvage a positive meaning not only for the notions of the human self, historical meaning, and truth as correspondence, which were central to modernity, but also for premodern notions of a divine reality, cosmic meaning, and an enchanted nature. From the point of view of its advocates, however, this revisionary postmodernism is not only more adequate to our experience but also more genuinely postmodern. It does not simply carry the premises of modernity through to their conclusions, but criticizes and revises those premises. Through its return to organicism and its acceptance of nonsensory perception, it opens itself to the recovery of truths and values from various forms of premodern thought and practice that had been dogmatically rejected by modernity. This constructive, revisionary postmodernism involves a creative synthesis of modern and premodern truths and values. (Griffin 1989 xi)

Whereas Griffin's postmodernism is primarily revisionary, the postmodernism of the Neopagans I discuss is principally constructive. They proceed from the starting point of a denial of the concepts of truth as correspondence and divine reality, with an implicit acceptance of relativism. Griffin's postmodernism, however, proceeds from Dostoyevsky's premise that "If there is no God, then everything is permitted," and that the death of God means the "relativism of all norms and values" (Griffin 1989 56). This nihilism is bad, he concludes, and therefore belief in God must be preserved, even if that belief can only be maintained in a qualified form (by limiting God's power, for example).

Griffin assumes that meaning is incompatible with relativism. However, it is possible to rebuild after nihilism, without denying relativism. The Neopagans I discuss have seen the death of God through to the end and become fully

immersed in nihilism, and yet have passed through to a new sense of meaning,
without transcendence.

Bibliography

- Adams, Michael. Sex in the snow: Canadian Social Values at the End of the Millennium. Toronto: Viking (Penguin), 1997.
- Adler, Margot. Drawing Down Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today, revised and expanded edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.
- Albanese, Catherine L. Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Berger, Peter L. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. New York: Anchor Books (Doubleday), 1967.
- Christ, Carol P. "Goddess Emerging: A Theology." Unpublished manuscript, 1995.
- Christ, Carol P. Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.
- Clark, Elizabeth and Herbert Richardson. Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Daly, Mary. Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation, new paperback edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985b (1973).

- Daly, Mary. The Church and the Second Sex. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985a (1968).
- Daly, Mary. Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage. New York: Harper San Francisco (Harper Collins), 1992.
- Eller, Cynthia. Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spiritual Movement in America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System" in Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion. Michael Banton, editor. (delivered at the Conference on New Approaches in Social Anthropology, Jesus College, Cambridge England, 1963). New York: Frederick A Praeger Publishers, 1966.
- Goldenberg, Naomi Ruth. Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.
- Goldenberg, Naomi Ruth. The End of God: Important Directions for a Feminist Critique of Religion in the Works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982.
- Goldenberg, Naomi R. Returning Words to Flesh: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Resurrection of the Body. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.
- Griffin, David Ray. God & Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology. Albany: SUNY, 1989.
- Heidegger, Martin. The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Hick, John. Christianity at the Centre. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.

The Holy Bible, King James Version. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
no date.

Lewis, James R., editor. Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft. Albany:
SUNY, 1996.

Miller, David. The New Polytheism: Rebirth of the Gods and Goddesses. New
York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Nash, James A. Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian
Responsibility. Nashville: Abington Press, 1991.

Neill, Stephen. Christian Missions. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Will To Power. trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J.
Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books (Random House), 1967.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Gay Science. trans. Walter Kaufmann. 2nd edition.
New York: Random House, 1974.

Rabinovitch, Shelly. "An' Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will": Neo-Pagans and
Witches in Canada. M.A. Thesis. Ottawa: Carleton University,
1992.

Spretnak, Charlene, ed. The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the
Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement. New York:
Anchor/Doubleday, 1982.

Spretnak, Charlene. States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the
Postmodern Age. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.

Starhawk. Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics, new edition. Mandala
(Unwin Paperbacks): London, 1990 (1982).

- Starhawk. The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess, 10th anniversary edition. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989.
- Starke, Linda. State of the World 1996: A Worldwatch Institute Report of Progress Toward a Sustainable Society. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.
- Swidler, Leonard and Arlene Swidler, editors. "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" in Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration. New York: Paulist Press, 1977. pp. 37-49.
- Taylor, Charles. The Malaise of Modernity. Concord Ontario: Anansi, 1991.
- Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.
- Tertullian. "On the Apparel of Women" in Fathers of the Church. Volume 40. New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959. pp. 117-149.
- Weber, Max. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.
- White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in The Environmental Handbook. Garrett De Bell, editor. New York: Ballantine, 1970. pp. 12-26.