

“I am not Mundane, I am Divine.”:

A Historical Analysis of the Women’s Spirituality Movement

in the United States from the 1970s to the 2020s

By

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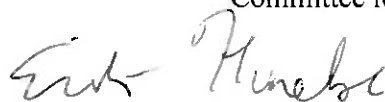
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Abstract

This thesis connects the Women's Spirituality Movements that began in the 1970s and continued to develop through to the 2000s to the popularization of alternative spirituality in the more recent age of social media. Specifically, I examine the Women's Spirituality movement that began in the 1970s which has maintained relevancy both academically and socially in varying degrees since its conception. My work will make relevant connections through a variety of different interdisciplinary methods such as historical analysis with primary source archival documents, an IRB approved survey, and oral history interviews. Throughout this thesis I illustrate the evolution of theories of religious development as feminist methodology and the ways in which this shift proved relevant to different social and political movements. The Women's Spirituality Movement marked an important arc of feminist and lesbian spiritual development and culture. Indeed, the Women's Spirituality Movement was able to establish legitimacy through the academic discoveries and theories of the women and the feminine divine as the spiritually significant. However, the Women's Spirituality Movement encountered issues due to divergent viewpoints on transgender inclusion, and today many of the perspectives have become confused with conservative and influencer wellness content and the concept of "conspirituality."

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Introduction

Being born in 1999, I was raised on peak girl power media, and I always gravitated towards the movies and television shows that focused on magic and young teenage witches. Disney movies and television shows like *Halloweentown* and *Wizards of Waverly Place* as well as characters like Raven from *Teen Titans* influenced my fascination with “witchy” girls and women. Once at the University of Central Oklahoma, I started to explore my own spiritual identity as well as began learning more in the realm of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Through working with Dr. Lindsey Churchill for research mentorship, I stumbled into the world of the Women’s Spirituality Movement.

Originally inspired by many of the trends on social media surrounding witchcraft, I decided to try and find historical threads. As many beginning WGSS students, I was fascinated with second wave feminism. The second wave felt and feels so incredibly dynamic and exciting. When I discovered that there was an entire movement focused on not only reinventing traditional patriarchal religious beliefs, but that focused on the Great Goddess or the Divine feminine I was hooked. Who were these women? What were their core beliefs? Why had I never heard about them before? This led to a deep dive that I never would have anticipated would become my master’s thesis. There were so many gaps in the study of the development of the intellectual and spirituality practice of the Women’s Spirituality Movement. I hope this work will fill in some of the gaps and lead us to a better understanding of how nuanced this field really is.

This thesis documents the different threads of the Women’s Spirituality Movement across their own scholarly works (many included their own mini memoirs or biographical information), periodicals, interviews and blog posts. This thesis demonstrates that whether the name of the

Women's Spirituality Movement might have changed or faded away, it continues to grow and has shifted into something very different from its original form. Utilizing a largely chronological approach, this thesis demonstrates the level of growth that happened in the movement in a short amount of time, and the ways in which the links to the past are sometimes being erased or misconstrued on social media. Academia and spirituality combined in a unique way through the Women's Spirituality Movement. These women utilized academic works to corroborate their spiritual belief, while actively furthering a subfield of Historical thought. The Women's Spirituality Movement marked an important arc of feminist and lesbian spiritual development and culture. Indeed, the Women's Spirituality Movement was able to establish legitimacy through the academic discoveries and theories of the women and the feminine divine as the spiritually significant. However, the Women's Spirituality Movement encountered issues due to divergent viewpoints on transgender inclusion, and today many of the perspectives have become confused with conservative and influencer wellness content and the concept of "conspirituality."

For many in the Western world, the word goddess conjures conceptions of a Roman or Greek pantheon of feminine deities who are the patrons of love, beauty or fertility. The conception of a goddess stops for many at this highly mythologized understanding of divine feminine energy that has been reduced or removed from the common Abrahamic religious structures. This conception has seen reimagination through feminist lenses, specifically within the Women's Spirituality Movement throughout the 1970s through to today. Although it is not often a primary focus when analyzing feminism, the Women's Spirituality Movement was an inherently feminist movement that placed women beyond patriarchal notions of biological essentialism and advocated for the rights of women. The Women's Spirituality movement has transformed not only religious studies but also influenced the development of new historical

theories by pushing us to look beyond the deepest roots of patriarchy, organized religion. The effect of feminist and gender studies in these typically patriarchal fields contributes to the deeper understanding of this academic and social movement.

As a feminist subculture movement itself that had, and continues to have, members from across the nation, there is a variety of names that feminist spirituality has been referred to by. Throughout my research Women's Spirituality Movement as a term exists as the larger umbrella, and terms like Goddess movement, neopaganism, the Craft, Wicca, all exist underneath this umbrella in a capacity. This is not entirely by design of the movement, many primary sources seemed to conflate the identities primarily due to general ignorance around the practice, and the fluidity of identity with practitioners. Therefore, throughout the thesis there will be specific mentions of the broader Women's Spirituality Movement or more specific mentions of Goddess spirituality and Wicca and this delineation, unless otherwise stated, is more than likely due to the language used by other historians, autobiographical pieces or the oral history interviewees. Furthermore, Goddess spirituality, neopaganism, the Craft, and Wicca exist under the umbrella, but are not the same thing, moreover they share similar values, specifically individuals whose practice is centered on core feminist values and/or women's experiences. This is widely seen in the general worship practice or mention of the triple aspect, which is representative of womanhood and femininity due to the representations of life stages (maiden, mother and crone), a reverence for the Earth, and some form of community engagement or ritual practice.¹ Similarly, feminist work done within organized religions like Christianity also falls under the feminist spirituality movement; those movements are more documented, and in turn navigate patriarchal source material and community space. Goddess spirituality is notable since it demonstrates the ways in which feminists were actively carving out their own spaces, even in

places that might be seen as untouchable, not just in politics or social spheres. Within this thesis, I connect the Women's Spirituality Movement chronologically to the present time. I explore the importance of the connection with academia, especially in the 1970s and 1980s as "validating" the Women's Spirituality Movement. In addition, these scholars and activists held their own personal beliefs and created unique communities. I demonstrate that as the movement started to raise women's voices, they would end up becoming exclusionary towards other members of the community (transgender and gender nonconforming people). This emphasis on exclusion would end up reflecting present conservative talking points about transgender individuals and would transform the radical Women's Spirituality Movement into close ideological alignment to the internet supported domain of "conspirituality."

Chapter One, "The Stars Are Aligning: A Historiography of Women's Spirituality," connects Religious Studies to the Women's Spirituality movement with feminist thought and a multidisciplinary source list. Going back to Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* published in 1861, this chapter connects social theories and hypothesis, archeological evidence of the late 19th and early 20th century to the more well-known scholars like Marija Gimbutas and Carol P. Christ. From this point, I include the works that were created in the 1960s through the 1980s, the golden age for Women's Spirituality. Authors like Merlin Stone and Starhawk set the foundation for the Women's Spirituality Movement and influenced entire generations of individuals. Finally, the last half of the timeframe focuses on the critiques coming from scholars at that time and is the beginning of where traditional academic sources begin to somewhat fall off.

In Chapter 2, "Sacred Rebellion: The Feminist Spiritual Awakening of the 1970s and the 1980s," I focused on the beginnings of the Women's Spirituality movement. I acknowledge and contextualize the rising growing Wicca movement moving into the United States, but this is

focused primarily on the women who were starting the Women's Spirituality Movement. Using a variety of oral history, periodical and radio sources, I demonstrate the way that Women's Spirituality was being created and further defined across the country. This chapter utilizes some biographical vignettes of women that are important in understanding the way their perspectives shaped the way Women's Spirituality was defined.

In Chapter 3, "The Rise of Y2K Witches," I cover the shifts of Women's Spirituality to the online spaces, the entertainment media that was being created that changed the view of witches, and the way that gender and queerness affects individuals. This chapter explores the ways that the Internet led to massive exposure to Women's Spirituality and a subsequent boom of solitary witchcraft. This is also where the fluidity of Women's Spirituality and identities like Wicca become synthesized through the umbrella of Neopagan. This leads to more acceptance, and projects like the Goddess 2000 project picking up major steam. This chapter uses many archived website and blogs, as many are becoming permanently lost to the Internet.

In Chapter 4, "Moon Phases and Misinformation: Exploring the Space of Women's Spirituality in the 2010s and 2020s," I look at the ways in which the internet culture of the 2010s and 2020s combined with the political battleground of the United States has led to many ideas that were present in Women's Spirituality being misused or altered to fit a culture of alt-right wellness. I examine the factors that led to popular conventions like PantheaCon being closed, as well as how cults like Love Has Won and wellness influences are purporting alt-right propaganda through ideas that could be linked to the Women's Spirituality movement. In this chapter I utilize a survey I conducted in 2022 to illustrate empirically what people think of when they hear terms associated with Neopaganism.

In the conclusion, I explore the state of the Women's Spirituality movement today. This final chapter exists as a reflection on the current state of social and political distrust, and how this directly affects Women's Spirituality. I mention that queer witches will be the ones to redefine this period of Women's Spirituality, especially as much of the Goddess focused ritual and practice are being reintroduced.

Chapter 1: The Stars Are Aligning: A Historiography of Women's Spirituality

Religious studies and theology as academic endeavors can only maintain with growth in perspective and methodology. The field of Feminist Religious Studies represents one of the many academic subfields that emerged from the social and political rebirth happening within academia that was caused by the civil rights and antiwar movements, as well as the beginning of the second wave of feminism.¹ Feminist religious studies and theology is a larger field within the school of Religious Studies that focuses on the importance of gender and specifically the experience of women when studying the nature of God and religious interpretation. Arguably, the advent and adoption of feminist and gender critique led to the vast growth and redefinition of the field today. The field of Feminist Religious Studies has always been directly influenced by the social, political, and cultural movements of the time, and has continued to influence the larger field of theology and religious studies in total. My work builds upon this field by providing the historical frameworks and methods that contextualize how these changes began and where they are heading. By closely examining the lives of the women who were actively redefining the way in which feminism and religion intersect, we better understand the totality of the field of study. I use Feminist Religious Studies in my work to better understand the religiosity of the Women's Spirituality movement I am covering, and to understand the unique interplay of spiritualism and feminism. This interplay of utilizing a radical, new spiritual practice to fight for liberal political change is not commonly seen today. This sets the Women's Spirituality Movement apart from Feminist Religious Studies because Feminist Religious Studies is focused on changing religious

¹ Supriya Mukherjee, Georg G. Iggers, and Q. Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Routledge, 2017).

institutions that already exist and steeped in patriarchy, whereas the Women's Spirituality Movement was focused on defining a spiritual identity away from the patriarchy totally.

The Women's Spirituality Movement is one of the offshoots of second-wave feminism movement. As the second wave contributed to the countercultural social and political movements, the reinvention of religious identity and perspective was being experimented with in feminist spaces. As a religious philosophy, Women's Spirituality is grounded in Goddess focused worship and uses matrifocal theories from the 19th and 20th centuries to ground their practice as having evidence and legitimacy since although these women claimed the religious component was ancient, as a movement they were still in their infancy. These perspectives and theories provided the fields of religious studies and theology with questions and challenges that simultaneously challenged and reinvigorated the study with new feminist voices.

Early Foundations- Late 19th Century and Early 20th Century Theories and Discoveries

Johann Jakob Bachofen was a Swiss antiquarian, jurist, philologist, anthropologist and professor of Roman Law at the University of Basel, and his work *Das Mutterrecht (Mother Right: A Study of the Religious and Juridical Aspects of Gynecocracy in the Ancient World)* published in 1861, provided a significant contribution to the development of modern social anthropology.² In this work, Bachofen presents the family as a social institution, suggesting that “mother right preceded father right, establishing a perspective that centers motherhood as the origin of human society, morality, and religion.”³ Furthermore, “right” is understood by

² “Johann Jakob Bachofen,” Lawyers, Judges & Jurists, Britannica, last modified December 18, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johann-Jakob-Bachofen>.

³ Jakob Bachofen Johann, *An English Translation of Bachofen's Mutterrecht (Mother Right) (1861): A Study of the Religious and Juridical Aspects of Gynecocracy in the Ancient World*, translated by David Partenheimer, (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), ii.

Bachofen not simply as correctness but as legal rights, birthrights, justice, laws, interests, authority, and privilege.⁴ Societies advance through three stages dictated by differences of the mother and father: the hetaeristic matriarchy, agrarian society, and conjugal matriarchy (a pre-evolution of patriarchy).⁵ Each stage is defined not only by women's roles and relationship with their children, but by their relationships with men and connection to the Earth.⁶ Bachofen utilizes ancient societies of Lycia, Crete, Ancient Greece, Egypt, India, Central Asia, Northern Africa, and Spain to explore his aspects of "mother right," and through his conclusion connects ancient mother right to Christianity.⁷ Bachofen's theory laid the necessary theoretical groundwork that made Women's Spirituality possible. By asserting that ancient women not only had a place in society but that they had been in positions of power, he provided many with the ties to a forgotten mythos that they had been seeking.

Sir Arthur Evans, a British anthropologist, was the first to successfully complete the excavation of Knossos on the island of Crete in Greece and would subsequently publish *The Palace of Minos: A Comparative Account of the Successive Stages of the Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated By the Discoveries at Knossos* in 1921.⁸ He began to excavate in 1900 and was the first to coin the archeological distinction of Minoan, denoting prehistoric Cretan civilization.⁹ Evans' discovery would not have been possible without the help of Minos

⁴ Bachofen, *An English Translation*, ii.

⁵ Bachofen, *An English Translation*, iv.

⁶ Bachofen, *An English Translation*, v.

⁷ Bachofen, *An English Translation*, 55.

⁸ Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos: A Comparative Account of the Successive Stages of the Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated by the Discoveries at Knossos*, (Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1921).

⁹ Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, v.

Kalokairinos, a Cretan businessman and scholar who was the first to find the excavation site.¹⁰ Evans' work, *The Palace of Minos*, would outline throughout the chapter's different goddesses like Aphrodite, Chapter 1 and 25 would introduce the reader to unique Minoan goddess figures: the Mother Goddess and the Snake Goddess¹¹. Evans' perspective of, "...forming these Mother idols, whether extended or seated, were the later scenes of the cult, under varying names and attributes, of a series of Great Goddesses who often combined the ideas of motherhood and virginity" is reminiscent of Bachofen's theory and the later Women's Spirituality perspective.¹² Evans' and Kalokairinos' shared



Figure 1: Minoan Snake Goddess, from Evan's work *The Palace of Minos*, 1921.

discovery gave Women's Spiritualists the locations for their mythos; establishing Crete as the last bastion for matriarchy. Evans' interpretation of artifacts like the Minoan Snake Goddess provides the Women's Spirituality movement with a form of evidence they felt was hard to dispute prehistoric archeological evidence of the Goddess. Evans' work is a foundational text because his work is the first to discover a "true" matrifocal society and set the precedence for Cretan Goddess studies.

Two works that are important but have the least amount of academic support are Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, published in 1921 and Robert Graves *The White Goddess of Poetic Myth* published in 1948. Murray's work popularized her unique

¹⁰ "Half-bull, half-truth... How English archaeologist claimed credit for discovering home of the minotaur," News, The Guardian, last modified February 4, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/04/knossos-palace-crete-minotaur-arthur-evans#:~:text=Sir%20Arthur%20Evans%2C%20the,first%20discovered%20the%20famous%20site.>

¹¹ Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, 52 & 495.

¹² Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, 52.

perspective on witch-cult hypothesis: the theory that the Early Modern witch trials were an attempt to eliminate pre-Christian Pagan religion.¹³ Murray's work offers detailed information on ceremonies, rituals, rites, organization, and the nature of magic as well as the many who were accused and killed due to witchcraft. Murray's work defines forms of witchcraft away from evil and harmful, and most importantly, through defining Ritual Witchcraft, she introduces the Dianic Cult.¹⁴ The Dianic Cult aspect of her theory is one of the inspirations of the Dianic Wicca movement, which is a subset of the Women's Spirituality movement. Robert Graves' *The White Goddess of Poetic Myth* is an essay that utilizes creative writing forms like poetry to study mythology theories. In this work, Graves' proposes the existence of the White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death, who is represented by the phases of the Moon, and is behind the other goddesses in European and pagan mythologies.¹⁵ Graves argues for the worship of a single goddess under many names, a perspective that would become verbatim a perspective of the Women's Spirituality movement.¹⁶ Graves deals with goddess worship as the prototypical religion. Although Murray and Graves' theories were generally not accepted by scholars, they were picked up by many who were entering Wicca or other Pagan practices.

Margaret Mead's book *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* published in 1949 is a comparative study of a group of men and women from 'tribal' societies from seven Pacific Islands, and a group of men and women in the United States.¹⁷ Although Mead's work contains a lot of the bias towards non-Western cultures, she does explore the connection of motherhood as a culturally universal factor that reinforces male and female gender

¹³ Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, (The Clarendon Press, 1921), 56.

¹⁴ Murray, *The Witch-Cult*, 12.

¹⁵ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, (Macmillan, 1948) 24-25.

¹⁶ Graves, *The White Goddess*, 72.

¹⁷ Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (New American Library, 1949).

roles in societies.¹⁸ This thematic connection will continue to be explored by the Women's Spirituality movement as a source of power for women when looking at women's roles in religious ideology. Mead's anthropological background lends itself to a more accessible use of this work and the theory by many scholars alike. Her general survey allows for scholars to use her work as a jumping off point, one good for developing their own hypothesis and challenging their fields. The implications of a cross comparison that held women in a light that was complementary in measure created serious changes in a variety of different fields, not just anthropology.¹⁹

Setting the Stage: The Beginnings of Feminist Spirituality

Valerie Saiving-Goldstein's article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" published in 1960 is considered by many to be the work in which feminist religious studies was created, or at least is one of the first works that utilizes gender as a point of analyses when looking at religion, specifically in the nature of difference in the experience's men and women.²⁰ In this article, Saiving-Goldstein criticizes the conception of the human condition from the perspective of the "feminine experience" and uses that perspective to demonstrate just how damaging theology that is solely written by men, or within that singular perspective.²¹ Saiving-Goldstein pulls from a variety of different fields to support her argument, most notably psychology and anthropology. Within her argument, Saiving-Goldstein explores the more abstract nature of sin, and the ways in which different experiences (both masculine lives and feminine lives) contribute

¹⁸ Mead, *Male and Female*.

¹⁹ Unfortunately, as the time passed on Bachofen, Evans, Murray, and Graves all have had their theories debunked either partially or totally. Although there are questions surrounding some of the ideas historical legitimacy, the ideas that these scholars shared planted the seed for others to continue to grow.

²⁰ Valerie Saiving-Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Apr. 1960): 100-112.

²¹ Saiving-Goldstein, "The Human Situation," 100.

to our understanding and articulation of is the concept of sin.²² The use of these abstract topics to create a deeper, more concrete meaning is not new for the field of religious studies, but this application directly focuses on the ways that gender is both abstract and concrete. The importance of this work is not only seen in its scholarly nature and methodological approach, but Saiving-Goldstein's emphasis on her personal experience as a female theologian and the somewhat plea she makes with the reader lends itself to a much more personal tone.²³ Although Saiving-Goldstein is primarily a Christian theologian, there is an overarching tone that this methodology is for all religions, especially those in which their schools of thought surrounding women has been dominated by patriarchy (which constitute the majority of world religions).

The cultural and political climate of the 1960s held inklings of the soon approaching second wave of feminism and the academic shift into a larger examination of women and gender.²⁴ Conceptual shifts in Saiving-Goldstein's work are her recollection of her own experience as a female theologian. It signifies the cultural importance to the reader and emphasizes her cross disciplinary approach to the subject. There is a conscious acknowledgement of self and place, and the ways in which gender contributes to our understanding of these beliefs, and to read this work holistically, there is a need to understand the space and time in which this was being written. The conception of the personal being political and a marginalized peoples being worthy category of academic analysis breathed new life into a field that was predominantly dictated by white cisgender heterosexual men in both the church and academia. These complex questions and subsequent academic curiosities lend themselves to

²² Saiving-Goldstein, "The Human Situation," 108.

²³ Saiving-Goldstein, "The Human Situation," 100.

²⁴ Iggers, Wang and Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*.

the second wave of feminism, which by the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s was catching on like wildfire within the United States.

In the 1970s, we start to see a shift toward Feminist Cultural Studies in tandem with Religious Studies. Some of the problems that arise during this period of overarching feminist thought is the focus on gender essentialism, the idea that men and women are born with distinct intrinsic traits, and the lack of the overall theory surrounding the social conception of gender.²⁵ This is reflected in the conception and scholarship of the Women's Spirituality Movement because the nature is reflective of a woman rather than just the divine feminine. The study of culture alleviated some of the issues that arose with the lack of rudimentary gender theory and philosophy, and as the 1970s progressed and more boundaries were being broken within the field of gender studies, the field of feminist religious studies ultimately strengthened.

With the growth of interest in using gender as a tool for analysis, religious studies saw a large offshoot in not only gender but race and non-Christian religions establishing the larger umbrella of feminist religious studies.²⁶ Although using feminist critique was new and still finding its footing, many subfields (i.e., Christian studies, Buddhist studies, Judaism studies) found themselves adopting this new approach. One of the most notable subfields to emerge from the growth in the field is the emergence of Goddess studies. Marija Gimbutas' work in *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* offers the tangible physical evidence for the importance of the field within her study of sculpture, vases, and other objects to identify ancient southern European culture.²⁷ Gimbutas' work is one of the first to center the Goddess as her thesis, rather than a footnote. Gimbutas' background as an archaeologist and anthropologist was able to add

²⁵ John. R. Hinnells, *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (Routledge, 2005), 248-249.

²⁶ Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (University of California Press, 1974).

artifact to theory and present the idea that the Goddess can be present in the mundane material artifacts left behind.²⁸ Gimbutas pushed the field to see the divine within the mundane, and this perspective was just what was needed to push others to ask these same questions.

Merlin Stone's work *When God Was a Woman* asserts a similar tone and relies on similar archeological evidence, but is much more theological in tone.²⁹ Merlin Stone's work took her around 10 years to research and complete, and specifically focused on the depictions of the Sacred Feminine across European and Middle Eastern civilizations.³⁰ Stone is one the most important scholars in Feminist Religious Studies and the Goddess movement of the 1970s. At this point in time, both ecofeminism, the intersection of environmentalism and feminism activism, and the larger second wave feminist movements are influencing the Feminist Religious Studies movements. The importance of environment and place are seen in both previously mentioned works, lending itself to this well-established conception that Goddess studies cannot be separate from eco-studies.³¹ The role of women and the position of nature within the religious context is prevalent within works produced at this time.

The Women's Spirituality movement was integral in the establishment of the cultural legitimacy of Goddess spirituality and Neo-Pagan identities within a religious standpoint. Many of the women who stood at the forefront of this movement were also scholars with their doctorates. The Goddess movement as a proponent for political change found its footing in the environmental movement that was rising in popularity at in the 1970s, and maintained this close relationship into the 1980s. The works of Foucault and the deeper implication of the formation of

²⁸ Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*.

²⁹ Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (Mariner Books, 1978).

³⁰ Stone, *When God Was a Woman*.

³¹ Stone, *When God Was a Woman*. Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*.

the political and social constructs of sex began to popularize in academic discourse.³² Looking at the ways in which women could have been the point of worship in a monotheistic context besides fertility, creates this direct disruption to our conception of patriarchy.

Archeology and the wider methodology of material studies helped solidify much of the physical evidence scholars used to prove their hypotheses. Within “Archaeology and the Study of Gender” by Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector published in 1984, they argue that archeology has been used not in an objective manner but rather has sustained national mythologies. Indeed, only through adopting a feminist critic scholars can create a framework that is rooted and implicit in contemporary experience.³³ This article continues in pushing forward the subversion of these gendered dichotomies, especially in the framework of the use of the terms ‘man and mankind’ are not general but exclusive terms used in the field.³⁴ Their work is similar in fashion to Gimbutas, but calls for a total change in the field of archeology as a whole. This article continues forward in acknowledging the challenges that this position presents to the male dominated fields of archeology, and largely history.³⁵ The trend of studying the goddess continued to grow and extended beyond the field of religious studies. Archaeology, history and geography intertwined with the conceptions of the goddess. The radical conception that one of the biggest social powers like religion subverts the dominant understandings of patriarchy spread into many fields that already welcomed the larger shift towards feminist methodology. The study of religion is not exclusive to one field. Religion impacts our experiences and conception of the

³² Iggers, Wang and Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*

³³ Margaret W. Conkey and Janet D. Spector, “Archaeology and the Study of Gender” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 7, (1984), 2.

³⁴ Conkey and Spector, “Archaeology and the Study of Gender,” 2.

³⁵ Conkey and Spector, “Archaeology and the Study of Gender,” 2.

world, so when a difference of ideology is developed it naturally blends into the other fields that are impacted by religion.

A good example of the cross-discipline impact of the new Goddess focused study is the documentary *Goddess Remembered*. *Goddess Remembered* (1989) is the first part of a documentary series directed by Donna Read that focuses on unearthing the ancient goddess-worshipping religions of the past, as well as features critical scholars within the field of both feminist religious studies and the goddess movement.³⁶ One of the larger themes of this documentary is the loss of these goddess-centric societies with the looming environmental crisis.³⁷ Charlene Spretnak, Merlin Stone, Carol P. Christ, and Jean Bolen represent only a few of the leading scholars at this time that also participated within this documentary.³⁸ This documentary shifts between the historical to the contemporary and is a good representation of the conception of the field at the time. The documentary demonstrates many of the core principles of feminist from the time: collaborative effort for collective change and the personal being political. This documentary demonstrates the social movement and access that this format provides, with more people from a variety of different backgrounds being able to access this information because it is not just in a journal article or within the confines of the university research space. Whether this is a conscious effort or not is unclear within the documentary itself, but what is clear is that this contributed to the popularization of the perspective. *Goddess Remembered* focuses on both the emergence of the goddess as well as the ongoing environmental movement, and there is a particular emphasis on the study of the two being connected.³⁹ This conception that

³⁶ “Goddess Remembered.” Directed by Donna Read. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1989.

³⁷ “Goddess Remembered.” Read.

³⁸ “Goddess Remembered.” Read.

³⁹ “Goddess Remembered.” Read.

pre-patriarchal society was more focused on sustainability and equity is a larger conception that is explored within the documentary, and that to essentially solve a lot of our issues surrounding the climate crisis we need to revert to our matrifocal ways.⁴⁰ This is largely one of the weaker points of the documentary, since the scholars making these points seem to not know exactly how to connect the two in a way that feels cohesive or that works within the nuances of academia. This is the perfect example of how academia and personal belief collided because it demonstrates that these women actively created and practiced Women's Spirituality as a form of praxis. Through utilizing their own spiritual beliefs and academic backgrounds they were able to become agents for positive change.

Critique and Reanalysis

The shift to the 90's saw new trends in the scholarship, as well as encountered much more criticism than previously experienced. We see fragments of these critical retrospectives that were common in the 90's in almost each part of the field, but especially within the Goddess study field.⁴¹ Works like *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory* by Cynthia Eller argue that these construction of the "feminist myth of matriarchal prehistory" harms the larger feminist movement, and that it is irrelevant to the larger conversation.⁴² Her critique is primary of this dominant concept of the "prehistoric feminist utopia that was toppled by patriarchal invaders" which is a larger oversimplification of the larger argument of the field, but is one of the points most critics latch onto. There is an effort by Eller to shift our perspective away from the distant past when looking at the social and cultural history of the time, and to look more to now.⁴³

⁴⁰ "Goddess Remembered." Read.

⁴¹ Iggers, Wang and Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*.

⁴² Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory*, (Beacon Press, 2000).

⁴³ Eller, *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory*.

Where Eller's methodology is impressive by how detail-oriented she is, her argument is harmed by her inability to see beyond her scope. She has moments where she might find a certain point of evidence credible, but these are too far and between to be considered beyond a critique.⁴⁴

Eller's work demonstrates that critique was coming from all sides of the field of religious studies, with perspectives and critiques coming from both feminist studies and the more conservative religious studies backgrounds, especially Christianity. This is largely inspired by the larger reorientation that defined the changing world of academia in the 1990s.

In support of her previous writings, Marija Gimbutas released two other works that are seminal works within the field, both *The Language of the Goddess* and *The Civilization of the Goddess*. Gimbutas' approach does not waver, but rather strengthens, and she uses a comparative methodology approach that uses mythology, early sources, linguistics, ethnography and folklore to support her thesis.⁴⁵ Similar to her work *The Goddess and Gods of Old Europe* she provides a large variety of archeological evidence to support her claims that the overall language of the goddess supports and our conception of Western culture.⁴⁶ This is a substantial claim that somewhat seems to work towards melding the scholarship of the goddess theologians to the larger Indo-European scholarship of the field. This shift from creating this separate space for the scholarship to grow and gain popularity seemed to seamlessly shift back to the mainstream expectations for the field.

At the end of *The Language of the Goddess*, Gimbutas addresses many of the larger critiques of her works like that she is trying to prove the existence of the Goddess or that she tried to prove the division of the Great Father and the Great Mother. Gimbutas asserts that she

⁴⁴ Eller, *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory*.

⁴⁵ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

⁴⁶ Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*.

only wanted to provide an alternative perspective and hypothesis on the existence of these materials, and with our understanding of the primary material that it is not an extraordinary thing to propose.⁴⁷ Gimbutas' work *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* is a similar work in that Gimbutas reconstructs the understand of the complexities of the neolithic culture, and her main thesis is to define specific matrilineal ties to the shift to agrarian societies.⁴⁸ This work demonstrates Gimbutas' mastery of archaeology, folklore and linguistics, and is a sourcebook for Old Europe and goddess worship.⁴⁹ Largely, she is consistent in her methodology, and this work is one her most largely praised works because of its interplay with both the stand Neolithic scholarship and the goddess centric scholarship.

Like Gimbutas, many authors were generating scholarship, and one of the more notable and first collections of that research was *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow published in 1992, both two important scholars within the field. This work demonstrates the ways in which the study of these matrifocal religious perspectives were being picked up and being thoroughly analyses by the scholars. This work targets many of the challenges that were being presented at the time; essentialism, the past, reconstruction, and what does this mean for the future.⁵⁰ This demonstrates that they were aware of many of the main challenges in pursuing this research, and a variety of scholars were dedicated to answering these very large questions that are still important today.

In the 2000s onward we see this larger reflection on the movements that made this field, as well as the deepening of the use of art and theory and shifts in ethics and philosophy. From the

⁴⁷ Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, 316.

⁴⁸ Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

⁴⁹ Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*.

⁵⁰ Carol P. Christ, and Judith Plaskow. *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, (HarperOne 1992).

2000s on we see the shift towards looking at the past of feminist religious studies and critically analyzing those parts that might fall under some scrutiny. Feminist and queer theory, as well as an overall queering of the study becomes much more prominent in the 2000s forward. This reorientation is largely reminiscent of the larger shifts within the field and is still seen today.

Work's like *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion* published in 2004, and *Foremother's of the Women's Spirituality Movement* published in 2015 are important recollections that these women are writing.⁵¹ Many of the women who were forefront in the Women's Spirituality Movement wrote their own histories, providing a unique perspective to their experiences. *Transforming the Faith of Our Fathers* and *Foremother's of the Women's Spirituality Movement* are both collections of memoirs from women across the larger Feminist Religious Studies movement. These works address the need to document the variety of voices in the larger Second Wave feminist narrative as many leaders have passed away.

One of the most recent works that has been revised by a prominent scholar in the field is *The Feminist Critique in Religious Studies* by Rosemary Radford Ruether in 2017. This works intends to introduce this perspective to a new generation of scholars, and to generate important research questions.⁵² This article was updated and reprinted from the 1981 edition, but the scholarship still withholds. It functions like a crash course to both feminist through and the foundations of religious study, and for many new scholars is seen as a foundational work. The importance of these questions and the relevance of this research topic has grown vastly in the

⁵¹ Anne Braude, *Transforming the Faith of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion*, (St. Martin's Press, 2004). Miriam Robbins Dexter and Vicki Nobles, *Foremothers of the Women's Spirituality Movement*, (Teneo Press, 2015).

⁵² Rosemary Radford Ruethers, "The Feminist Critique in Religious Studies." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 100, no. 2 (2017): 89-103.

years since its inception. The revisions of these foundational works symbolize the attempt to stay current, as well as the continued interest in these works.

Lastly, Emma White's *The Spirituality of Anorexia: A Goddess Feminist Thealogy* published in 2020 completes the Women's Spirituality cycle. White's use of Goddess imagery and spirituality to disrupt the cultural ideals that polarize women from their bodies and create eating disorders is a prime example of the legacy of the Women's Spirituality Movement. White's work involves using the Goddess figure as a foil to subvert patriarchal notions about women's bodies and puts forth a framework for healing through Goddess feminism.⁵³ This work invokes the spiritual, political, and academic ties that the Women's Spirituality Movement had at its core.

Overall, the Feminist Religious Studies movement and Women's Spirituality Movement led to deep changes within the field and to a deeper syncretization to the meaning of viewing religion through feminist lenses. These changes permeated beyond just one field and due to the continual interdisciplinary nature of the study of women and religion, countless fields have experienced some form of change or evolution since the popularization of this scholarship. The complexities of the shift in the conception of religion paired with the reactive social movements over the years have shifted and transformed the methodologies and academic process when looking at religion. Women's perspectives and their stories have been ignored for years, and to generate a deeper understanding of religion and the social connotations, you must be able to look how centering women in spirituality challenges our conception of patriarchy. My research aims to expand the historiography by providing a perspective from the mid 2020s and an exploration

⁵³ Emma White, *The Spirituality of Anorexia: A Goddess Feminist Thealogy*, (Routledge, 2020).

into the ways in which the social media and the current political culture of the United States has affected the Women's Spirituality Movement.

Chapter 2: Sacred Rebellion: The Feminist Spiritual Awakening of the 1970s and 1980s

The women's spirituality movement, sometimes known as the Goddess spirituality movement, saw significant growth during the 1970s through the 1980s. During this time women from a variety of backgrounds were generating works and creating a culture of spirituality that was not defined by patriarchal notions that are prevalent in Christianity and other Abrahamic religions and was indicative of the socio-political attitude of the 1970s. These women were influenced by the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s, some having been a part of it, as well as the beginnings of second wave feminist political and cultural theory, and the question of women's space within academia. This chapter will explore the ways in which feminist spirituality began and its subsequent popularization throughout the 1970s and 1980s; beginning through academic research and works, to creating flourishing communities, while simultaneously fighting for causes that they felt violated their core tenets and beliefs like environmentalism and human rights. Throughout this chapter I utilize a diverse range of primary source materials like oral history interviews I conducted in 2022, periodicals, autobiographical works, radio programs and documentary programs to convey the complex and culturally rich was in which this movement began and grew until the 1990s.⁵⁴

Wicca, Woodstock, and W.I.T.C.H.ES – The 1960s

⁵⁴ In 2022 I was able to join my peer Emma Stewart and our mentor Dr. Lindsey Churchill on a trip to Fayetteville, Arkansas to interview the local lesbian community on their experiences with the Back to the Land movement as well as the lesbian separatist movement. While we were back for reshoots, I was able to talk to two couples who were prominent in the earth focused spirituality movement and the goddess movement specifically. If you would like more information on the lesbian separatist movement, see my peer Emma Stewart's thesis, "Back to the Land of Exclusion: A History of Lesbian Separatism, Community, and Trans Marginalization in the United States, 1970s-2020s."

As the end of the 1960s crashed into the beginning of the 1970s, the United States was at a crucial point in the generational cultural divide. The political and cultural climate of the 1960s allowed for the vast spread of counter cultural movements across the United States. Woodstock took place in 1969, which led to an interesting precedent for the early 1970s: a focus for some on love, peace and unity. The dawning of the age of Aquarius exposed the public to New Age religious concepts and the hippie movement espousing concepts of free love and peaceful coexistence found popularity among the youth of the United States. These concepts juxtaposed the violent realities of the Vietnam War. These movements allowed for women, but primarily from white middle-class backgrounds, to push back against the confines of femininity and biological essentialism that dictated their daily lives.⁵⁵ This let women experience the world in a way that did not just center domesticity and gave them space to conceptualize a new identity. Through this exploration of the countercultural movements, with feminism developing and generating subcommunities within itself, hippie women challenged their perceptions of organized religions and became drawn to the veneration of a divine feminine made after themselves through music and art, creating new spiritual identities.⁵⁶ Simultaneously, as the hippies represented a shift in the social culture, female academics reflected on the tumultuous political climate and on their space within the academy. Although seemingly lofty goals to some, this was the generation levied with extreme exposure and questions over the US's war in Vietnam, as well as the many questions raised by the civil rights movement and Second Wave Feminism. The "woman question" was being posed by feminists in almost all fields as second-wave feminism permeated social and political thought. The "woman question" is fluid in the way

⁵⁵ Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture*, (University Press of Kansas, 2009), 42.

⁵⁶ Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius* 125.

that it is shaped depending on the field, and for religious studies and theology, there were not only questions on women's roles in spiritual settings but also deeper philosophical questions about women's experiences and how womanhood shapes religious interpretation. These ideas continued to coalesce, following US youth and young adults into the university and college setting. Subcultural communities blossomed across the United States, and one of the most interesting and oftentimes forgotten pieces of the feminist movement that began at this time was the feminist spirituality movement, more specifically the goddess spirituality movement. This movement was marked by a diverse range of women; from scholars radically pushing theology and religious studies, women creating community space around women-centered practice, and women mobilizing to fight for causes that aligned with their morals.

Valerie Saiving-Goldstein, a theologian, poses an integral question in 1960 through her article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," pushing for the consideration of women in the field of religious studies and theology. She poses the question to her peers in the field to have them consider the experiences of women, and where do they fit when interpreting religious texts and ideas.⁵⁷ This article is the start of the feminist dialogue and considering the experiences of women, branching throughout religious studies and theology.⁵⁸ The male perspective was the normative viewpoint for creating and evaluating religious text, and Saiving-Goldstein's article questions why women's experiences are not held to the same consideration, especially if its questions that directly pertain to them. Saiving-Goldstein's article is an example of the ways that feminist thought and theory began to shift the ways in which women conceptualized themselves as well as their fields through a feminist-focused lens. Placing Saiving-Goldstein's work in

⁵⁷ Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40, no.2 (April 1960): 100-112.

⁵⁸ Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation," 100-112.

conjunction with the coming second wave of feminism, she had planted the conceptual seeds for the continued questioning of historically patriarchal religious study, that would begin blossom in the 1970s.

Wicca found continued growth throughout the 1960s, and saw its jump across the pond from the UK to the United States. Raymond and Rosemary Buckland immigrated to the United States from London, and shortly after the move, Raymond found himself drawn to and studying Gerald Gardner's books on Wicca in Long Island, New York in 1962.⁵⁹ By 1963 both Raymond and Rosemary Buckland had been initiated into the Wiccan tradition by Monique Wilson and Gerald Gardner, officially bringing Wicca back upon their return to the United States.⁶⁰ Through this initiation, Raymond Buckland became close, long distance friends with one of the most important figure of Wicca.⁶¹ Buckland has mentioned that Gardner's preoccupation with their friendship was helping establish Wicca tradition in the United States, "Gerald was very keen to get the Craft established here in America and did rather push that. His greeting was never, 'How are you?' but rather right into, 'We have got to get you going over there.'"⁶² As occultism became more popular in the United States, by 1964 Buckland established the first coven in Long Island, the Church of Wicca was established in Missouri in 1965, and Buckland opened The Buckland Museum of Witchcraft in 1966.⁶³⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Heather Greene, "Raymond Buckland (1934-2017)," The Wild Hunt, September 29, 2017, <https://wildhunt.org/2017/09/raymond-buckland-1934-2017.html>.

⁶⁰ Stewart Kampel, "Ah Halloween! A Time to Take Off Clothes," New York Times, October 31, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/10/31/archives/ah-halloween-a-time-to-take-off-clothes-ah-halloween-a-time-to-take.html>.

⁶¹ Kampel, "Ah Halloween!"

⁶² Greene, "Raymond Buckland (1934-2017)."

⁶³ Wendy Griffen, "Goddess Spirituality and Wicca," in *Her Voice, Her Faith: Women Speak on World Religions*, ed. Katherine K. Young and Arvind Sharma (Routledge, 2003) 253.

⁶⁴ "About the Museum," The Buckland Museum of Witchcraft and Magick, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://bucklandmuseum.org/about-the-museum/>

On Halloween, 1968 in New York, a group of women decided to form a collective, or more accurately a coven, to protest the Stock Market, and inspired by I Samuel 15:23, “For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,” they named themselves W.I.T.C.H: Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell.⁶⁵ W.I.T.C.H. rebelled by hexing the stock market, and a day afterwards it’s reported that the stock market fell 13 points.⁶⁶ The idea and anger that W.I.T.C.H. was formed from gained immense popularity, with the acronym shifting and changing to fit the needs of the women using it. Some variations include Women Interested in Toppling Commercial Holidays, or Women Infuriated at of Taking Care of Hoodlums.⁶⁷ Within weeks of the formation of the group, W.I.T.C.H. covens were found across the United States in cities and states like Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Washington, D.C. North Carolina, Oregon, and Texas. As the original manifesto reads, “There is no joining W.I.T.C.H.. If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a witch.”⁶⁸ Although there was not a direct link to the women of W.I.T.C.H. and the ones involved in the creation of the Women’s Spirituality movement, W.I.T.C.H.’s central mission throughout the manifesto of subverting patriarchy through rebellion, resistance, creativity, and independence is almost parallel to the ideas present within the Women’s Spirituality movement. Cynthia Eller writes that, “the most significant aspect of W.I.T.C.H. was its choice of symbol, the witch, and that they were identifying themselves with everything women were taught not to be: ugly, aggressive, independent, and malicious.”⁶⁹ Although there might not be a direct connection to the larger Women’s Spirituality movement, the work that W.I.T.C.H. did in situating witches and witchcraft as being feminist symbols, the

⁶⁵ Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Beacon Press, 1995), 53. Griffin, “Goddess Spirituality and Wicca,” 254.

⁶⁶ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshipping, and Other Pagans in America* (Penguin Books, 2006), 255.

⁶⁷ Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 53.

⁶⁸ Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 54.

⁶⁹ Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 55.

push for those interested in learning more about what witchcraft was historically, and the level of publicity the group received planted the seed for many that would open the doors for Women's Spirituality. This is best said by Margot Adler in *Drawing Down the Moon*, "W.I.T.C.H.'s key assumptions about the nature of witchcraft and its connection to women's liberation continued as the "wellspring" of Dianic Wicca and other forms of feminist-oriented Paganism."⁷⁰

The environment created by the introductions of these groups and ideas led to the perfect variables for the Women's Spirituality movement of the 1970s. The hippie movement and Woodstock culture, occult and Pagan interest began to proliferate from the introduction of Wicca to the United States, and the feminist rebellion and reinvention of witch imagery from W.I.T.C.H. created multiple avenues for women, especially lesbian and feminist women, to become engaged with the Women's Spirituality movement that was brewing.

The 1970s



Figure 2: Zsuzsanna Budapest (right), Merlin Stone (center) and Starhawk (left). Courtesy of Zsuzsanna Budapest, circa 1973.

The Women's Spirituality movement does not have a specific marker of when it begins or have an event that perfectly marks its inception in time. As the 1970s began many of the different avenues the Women's Spirituality movement existed across began to move towards this understanding. Some women found connections through their college coursework, some developed connections through consciousness raising groups, and others were explored through the growing esoteric Wicca belief that was established in the 1960s. The closest the Women's Spirituality movement comes

⁷⁰ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 258.

to a true marker of establishment of concrete religious identity is the creation of Dianic Wicca in the United States.

Divergent Aspects Of Dianic Wicca

As ideas around women's spirituality began to circulate, the need for more organized spaces dedicated to shared knowledge and ritual practice were beginning to be needed. The most well-known form of organized women's spiritual practice is Dianic Wicca. It is considered by many as being created by Zsuzsanna Budapest in Los Angeles, California but a lesser documented, separate form of Dianic Wicca was simultaneously being created hundreds of miles away in Dallas, Texas. Two different forms of Dianic Wicca, Budapest's Dianic Wicca and McFarland Wicca, with divergent perspectives on what Dianic Wicca means. Each of these forms of Dianic tradition found themselves beginning across different regions, and Budapest's and McFarland's beginning around the same time each placing concrete roots in 1971. Two forms of Dianic Wicca shaped the way women viewed spiritual practice, and developing their own perspective on the ideology, across Los Angeles, California, and Dallas, Texas in the 1970s.

It is written by many scholars that Zsuzsanna "Z" Budapest founded the first feminist witch's coven in Los Angeles, California in 1971, named the Susan B. Anthony coven.⁷¹ At this point in time, Budapest called their practice Sisterhood of the Wicca, and wouldn't call it Dianic Wicca until later in the 1970s.⁷² The coven was formed by Budapest and few other women, with one of them, Barbara Chesser, saying that it was originally formed as a writing and study

⁷¹ Helen A. Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States*, (University of South Carolina Press: 2003), 13.

⁷² Wendy Griffin, "Goddess Spirituality and Wicca" in *Her Voice, Her Faith: Women Speak on World Religions*, e.d. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Westview Press, 2004.), 257.

group.⁷³ Budapest cites her own Hungarian background and her mother's teachings to be the reason she gravitated towards women's spirituality. Budapest's variation of Gardner's Wicca structure imbued it with feminist theory and altered the rituals and practice to center just women, fully excluding men, and is based on the cosmology of the Goddess as "She Who Is All and Whole Unto Herself."⁷⁴

This first coven is a prototype for the other Dianic covens, like the Amelia Earhart Coven in New York and the Elizabeth Gould Davis Coven in Florida. The unintentional popularization of Budapest's Dianic tradition comes from her arrest in 1975. On February 10th, 1975, an undercover police officer Rosalie Kimberlin visited Budapest's shop, The Feminist Wicca, and arrested Budapest for giving a tarot reading.⁷⁵ She was convicted on April 15th in Santa Monica Municipal Court of a misdemeanor, in violation of LAMC 43.30, and faced the possibility of six months in jail and a \$500.00 fine.⁷⁶ Budapest chocked the arrest up as "political harassment," and that her position as a radical feminist organizer made her target.⁷⁷ Budapest would end up losing her trial, being charged with the misdemeanor. Section 43.30 describes that, "No person shall advertise ... to tell fortunes... by means of occult or psychic powers... or magic."⁷⁸ This arrest was picked up by many news outlets exposing Budapest and in turn Women's Spirituality to an even larger demographic of feminists and non-feminists across the nation. Budapest is quoted in the police report as telling the arresting officer that, "I'm glad you're arresting me. You're going to make me famous and rich."⁷⁹ In 1979 Budapest's work *The Holy Book of*

⁷³ Griffen, "Goddess Spirituality," 255.

⁷⁴ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

⁷⁵ *In re Bartha*, 63 Cal.App. 3d 584, 134 Cal.Rptr 39 (Cal. Ct. app. Nov. 10, 1976).

⁷⁶ Jeanne Cordova, "Feminist Witch Convicted," *Los Angeles Free Press*, April 25 – May 1 1975, 2.

⁷⁷ Cordova, "Feminist Witch."

⁷⁸ Los Angeles, California, Municipal Code 43.30, (1983).

⁷⁹ *In re Bartha*.

Women's Mysteries made the coven's teachings and beliefs more available for women not just in the United States, but across the world.

In Dallas, Texas another tradition of Dianic Wicca was forming. This variation, much different from Budapest's, has been less documented outside of Pagan circles because of the solitary nature of the primary founder, Morgan McFarland. Morgan McFarland had already been trained by a Southern Coven before being introduced to the idea of Dianic Witchcraft from her partner at the time, Mark Roberts. He found the term in Margaret Alice Murray's work, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, and McDonald felt the description spoke to her belief, and adopted Dianic to describe her practice, and create the McFarland Dianic Covenstead.⁸⁰ In 1971, McFarland wrote down her oral traditions, teachings, rituals and mysteries, and these are used by the High Priestesses of the McFarland Dianic tradition.⁸¹ Although there is not a specific date when the first Texas Dianic coven began, by 1976 McFarland was the priestess of three separate covens: one dedicated solely to women, one mixed gender (men and women), and one focused on families.⁸² McFarland's tradition of Dianic Wicca is already drastically different in the regard that she was open to including men. There was still women's-only space, but she left the discretion to the individual high priestess of the covens.⁸³ McFarland's tradition sees the goddess as having three aspects: Maiden-Creatrix, Great Mother and Old Crone, and similar to traditional Wicca, "...there is a place for the God (male) but the female as Creatrix is primary."⁸⁴ The McFarland Coven reports that Budapest visited McFarland in Texas in the mid-1970s, and

⁸⁰ "The McFarland Dianics- A Chronology," McFarland Dianic Tradition, 2000, archived on July 27, 2011, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20110727074227/http://www.mcfarlanddianic.org/a-chronology.php>.

⁸¹ Terrance P. Howard, "Remembering Morgan McFarland, pioneer Dianic Witch," *The Wild Hunt*, January 21, 2016, <https://wildhunt.org/2016/01/remembering-morgan-mcfarland-pioneer-dianic-witch.html>.

⁸² Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

⁸³ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

⁸⁴ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

through this visit, Budapest began to call her tradition Dianic as well.⁸⁵ McFarland ended up retiring as the primary Dianic High Priestess by Summer Solstice of 1979, preferring solitary practice, but has continued to serve as an advisor to the McFarland Dianic Council.⁸⁶ Compared to Budapest, McFarland's tradition did not have the same level of publicity, and McFarland did not seem to seek the same avenues for that wider reach (i.e. publishing books, articles, periodicals, etc.). McFarland's tradition emphasizes locality and community, whereas after Budapest's arrest her tradition focused on reach and fame. Both women were integral in introducing many to a sect of Wicca that centered the Goddess, making them both prominent figures in the Women's Spirituality Movement.

Academic Experiences with The Goddess

Feminist academic pursuit allowed many women, especially within fields of study dealing with Religion and History, to use their feminist perspective to challenge traditional academic practice. Sometimes serendipitously it allowed scholars to get closer to the Women's Spirituality movement, although sometimes against the wishes of their universities and colleges. One such woman is Carol P. Christ, considered by many to be a founder of the Women's Spirituality movement, but whose original plans were not studying the Goddess.

Carol P. Christ found herself contending with the embroiled patriarchy of theology in the 1970s as she started her graduate work at Yale. As she continued to deal with blatant patriarchy within her department as well as learning more about the imbedded/ pervasive patriarchal tones

⁸⁵ "Tradition History," McFarland Dianic Tradition, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://mcfarlanddianic.org/tradition-history/>.

⁸⁶ "Tradition History."

present within her personal practice of Christianity / Catholicism and within her research focus on Judaism, she is quoted as having a moment of clarity after late night dissertation writing:

I began to berate God for letting himself “Be named in man’s image:, as the god of the fathers, as the man of war, as the king of the universe” how could a loving and powerful god let men beat and rape women? I asked. Let them kill each other and women and children in war? Why didn’t he send a prophet to save women? When my anger was spent, I lay quietly on my bed. In silence I hear a voice in my mind saying: “in God is a woman like yourself. She shares your suffering.” This experience has the force of revelation for me. I knew I would seek the God who was a woman like myself until I found Her.

Although she had this revelation, she did not describe identifying the Goddess she was seeking until the winter of 1975, when Christ, joined by some of her friends/colleagues, decided to take a workshop with an at the time unknown Starhawk.⁸⁷ Although this was incredibly important in not only shaping her personal spiritual practice but also shaping her future research and scholarship, her colleagues did not find the inclusion of the Goddess as valid. This was not just present in the rigid university that she was doing her dissertation at but was also not accepted by some of her fellow feminist theologians. She mentions meeting with the New York Feminist Scholars in Religion, a group she has cocreated with Anne Barstow, and after positing goddess religion in conversation, she was told that “goddess religion could have no ethics or sense of justice.”⁸⁸

Christian feminism was continually postured as being about ethics and social justice, although being as Christ called it, “uniformly uncomfortable with the proposal of alternative ethical and judicial routes,” meaning that although there was feminist thought being introduced

⁸⁷ By the 1980s, Starhawk’s impact in the movement was quickly growing, with her shamanism attracting many individuals for weeklong intensives she called, “witch camps,” some hosted in Vancouver as well as the Midwest.

⁸⁸ Carol P. Christ, “Carol P. Christ,” in *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion*, ed. Anne Braude, (St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 136-138.

into Christian scholarship, there was still existed rigidity when considering alternative modalities.⁸⁹ This was not an uncommon critique of the movement, as well as posturing the mythologized nature of Goddess worship. Christ describes common perception of Goddess feminism as “about the narcissistic navel-gazing of middle-class White women.”⁹⁰ This statement largely ignores many of the women who were active within the Goddess movement’s contribution to other social and political activists’ endeavors, many of them being ardent ecofeminist, proponents for lesbian/gay liberation, participating in the anti-war movement, as well as advocating for civil rights.⁹¹ Outside of the individuals who made up the movements other causes they would focus on, there is also a considerably amount of understanding between cultural appreciation versus appropriation happening at this time as well. It would be false to say that there were no women participating in cultural appropriation or theft, most sources whether they be periodicals, recordings or published works find themselves primarily focused just on the Goddesses of the near West.

Christ’s story has an interesting progression through to the 1980s, as she finished up her graduate work and began to teach, she notes being limited on work based on what her beliefs are, “When a graduate of the institution asked the female dean why I had not been rehired, she was told that the questions I raised about Christianity threatened the faith of some of the students.”⁹² As well as being mistrusted by her workplace, she was also teaching a full courseload of introductory gender studies courses that was emotionally taxing due to some of the student’s personal stories of incest and domestic violence. After Christ’s year at Harvard, she decided to

⁸⁹ Christ, “Carol P. Christ,” 138.

⁹⁰ Christ, “Carol P. Christ,” 143-145.

⁹¹ Many of these women can be found in works like Miriam Robbins Dexter and Vicki Noble, *Foremothers of the Women’s Spirituality Movement* (Teneo Press, 2015).

⁹² Christ, “Carol P. Christ,” 141.

resign her full professorship and move to Greece where she would offer tours of Crete and Lesbos, as well as still travel to the United States to speak at conferences and participate in the community.⁹³

Christ's story is not alone; many women found themselves navigating academics and sociopolitical spaces until they found themselves situated with the question of women's spirituality. Through understanding the types of developments that were being made within the academic field, we can see how and why these ideas are being reproduced within the social spheres. Through publishing periodicals and hosting talks, these women created a curiosity and subsequent community around the Goddess. These women provided a peer reviewed gospel, and the women of the 1970s and 1980s looked for ways to incorporate their feminist beliefs into each avenue of their lives.

Festival And Community Connections to The Goddess

As community on the coasts of the United States held festivals and events like the prolific Woodstock festival in 1969, many people from across America found themselves exposed to new ideas and experiences and this was not an uncommon way for women to find these connections to goddess spirituality. One woman I had the pleasure of interviewing, Chava Schecter from Fayetteville Arkansas states, "Well my first experiences was when we started visiting all these different places and in upstate New York around Woodstock, there was a group of women that were meeting regularly and when I heard their values and beliefs, I felt like I come home. It was new to me, and then I started reading everything I could get my hands on, and you know, When

⁹³ Christ, "Carol P. Christ," 141.

God Was a Woman.”⁹⁴ Although Chava does not define her practice as Goddess spirituality / religion, there are many elements of similarity to that movement that align with the larger feminist spirituality movement. She and her partner Bev would continue to explore groups and participate in neopagan practice. Chava notes that she was involved in the more formal organized groups from the late seventies up to 1995, but is still a practicing pagan, “Yeah I have a maypole.”⁹⁵ Another couple we interviewed from the Fayetteville Arkansas area expressed involvement and continued practice with the goddess spirituality movement. Paula Mariedaughter describes herself as being “introduced to the great goddess of 10,000 names in the late 70s and it was such a relief to understand that feminism isn't just about politics, and that religion is actually politics.”⁹⁶ Paula was already engaged in feminist and lesbian activism, but the goddess movement provided her with more meaning. Outside of my interview with Paula, her dedication to the movement is found through a variety of different newsletter and periodicals, from local publications like *Ozark Feminist Review* to national publications like *off our back* and *Heresies*.

Although the movement might seem like it was relegated to the East and West coasts, feminist spirituality and the goddess movement was making its way towards the heartland of the United States. This has been documented by the testimonies of multiple women throughout the movement based in the Southwest, as well as receiving coverage from a variety of authorities. Oklahoma newsletters like *Pagan Pages* based out of Norman, circulated information about local pagan events, gatherings, and holidays. In Northwest, Arkansas, many women were connected to

⁹⁴ Chava Schecter, “Bev & Chava Interview Reshoots,” interview by Alexis McKernan, November 11th, 2023, audio and video, 51:24.

⁹⁵ Schecter, interview.

⁹⁶ Paula Mariedaughter, “Paula and Jeanne Interview Reshoots,” interview by Alexis McKernan, November 11th, 2023, audio and video, 1:31:07.

the movement through *Ozark Feminist Review*. Diana Rivers from Fayetteville, Arkansas is a self-identified Goddess practitioner within the state, creating space for women's spirituality in the state through her writing fiction works like her *Hadra* series and organizing community focused specifically on spirituality.⁹⁷ Again, the mixture of activism, practice and intellectual discourse permeated the Women's Spirituality Movement.

In a 1974 edition of *Big Mama Rag*, a periodical from Denver, Colorado, ran a special double issue on women and spirituality. *Big Mama Rag* was a feminist and BGLTQ+ focused periodical that circulated both in and out of state and with stories on the news, editorials, special features and columns. Linda Fowler and Jacqueline St. Joan, both contributors to the periodical, are quoted as saying, "... the most significant aspect of the current women's revolution is its spiritual nature underlying all action."⁹⁸ Sandia, another contributor, pushes these ideas further by saying, "The names and the symbols may change, but the essence is the same... [this essence] is the richest source for our spiritual development."⁹⁹ *Lavender Woman*, a Chicago based lesbian feminist newspaper that featured an interview with Linda Sweeney, a woman who presented her slide show "Goddesses and Amazons" across the Chicago area.¹⁰⁰ She is quoted as saying, "Religion to me was women's in the first place because woman was the culture"¹⁰¹ There was active debate about the movement within these periodicals as well, with *Lesbian Tide* showcasing this in their article "Wicca is Rebellion, Not Mysticism."¹⁰² Cheri Lesh writes back

⁹⁷ Diana Rivers, "Diana Rivers: From Atheist to Pagan," interview by Debra L. Gish, Southern Lesbian Feminist Activist Herstory Project, October 17, 2019, written, <https://slfaherstoryproject.org/diana-rivers-from-atheist-to-pagan/>.

⁹⁸ Linda Fowler and Jacqueline St. Joan, "The Spiritual Revolution: Becoming Whole," *Big Mama Rag*, December/January 1975, 1.

⁹⁹ Sandia, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Great Mother Goddess," *Big Mama Rag*, December/January 1975 3.

¹⁰⁰ Cindy, "Linda Sweeny on Goddesses and Amazons," *Lavender Woman*, December 10, 1975, 10.

¹⁰¹ Cindy, "Linda Sweeny," 10.

¹⁰² Cherri Lesh, "Wicca is Rebellion, Not Mysticism," *Lesbian Tide*, March 1, 1974, 19.

about an author question if the Women's Movement would survive and argues that utilizing power that is connected to this spiritual practice of venerating the feminine divine is rebellion.¹⁰³ Other periodicals were focused solely on the women's spirituality movement, like *Womanspirit* based out of Oregon was focused on the poetry, personal experiences and articles based around women's spirituality and, "exploring the spiritual sides of their lives [to build] a new women's culture."¹⁰⁴ *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Arts & Politics* was a publication based out of New York that focused on representing a vast array of opinions from the women's spirituality movement from across the United States, and would include articles from key figures like Merlin Stone, but also art, reflections and conversations from women both well-known and anonymous.¹⁰⁵

December 20th, 1978, *The Velvet Sledgehammer*, a feminist radio program that considered itself "a women's magazine of the air," featured Merlin Stone reading two goddess stories, introducing listeners to goddesses from China and Africa.¹⁰⁶ Only a short time after on Sunday July 1st, 1979, KPFA 94.1 in Berkeley California, played the first part of Joanna Brouk's *Great Women Series* titled "In the Beginning . . . The Great Goddess," described as covering "we go back to a time when the Great Goddess was honored as the first principle, and we examine some of the facts and discoveries concerning the role of women in ancient times."¹⁰⁷ Both stations weren't the pinnacle of commercial success, but had large listener bases and demonstrated the

¹⁰³ Lesh, "Wicca is Rebellion, Not Mysticism," 19.

¹⁰⁴ "Why Womanspirit?," *Womanspirit*, Autumn Equinox 1974, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Heresies*, Spring 1978.

¹⁰⁶ Adrienne Gantt, "The Velvet Sledgehammer," December 20, 1978, WBAI, radio, 54 minutes.

<https://pacificradioarchives.org/recording/iz1489>.

¹⁰⁷ Joanna Brouk, "In the Beginning. . . The Great Goddess," July 2, 1979, KPFA, radio, 63 minutes.

<https://pacificradioarchives.org/recording/az047101?nns=the%2Bgreat%2Bgoddess>.

start of permeance into the larger cultural conversation. Brouk's episode was reran again in November, demonstrating the rising popularization of this information.¹⁰⁸

Community organization was key for women organizing both feminist spirituality groups and / or goddess spirituality groups because it creates space for discourse and strengthened community. Chava's spiritual identity was cemented through a ritual experience with her friend Serena, "We were, (me and my friend Serena), up on the top of a mountain doing a full moon ritual and we were way out in the country. And these wild dogs, you could hear them coming up the mountain, and they were coming closer and closer, and we were chanting. And they parted and went around us, and they kept on going down the mountain."¹⁰⁹

This community extended beyond the print world, with Goddess festivals starting to bring these women together to celebrate this new culture they were creating for themselves. Advertisements were featured in these lesbian and feminist periodicals inviting everyone to come and celebrate the Goddess. Goddess of the Midsummer: Festival of Litha was held by the Goddess community in southern California in Santa Monica in 1978 and featured music, communal circles led by Z. Budapest, and dancing, focused on the "magic of the revolution."¹¹⁰ There were also week-long retreats led by women to educated women who were interested in women's and feminist spirituality to come and learn how to build their community. Music, worships, and community building was thriving through these different events and they just continued to grow.

¹⁰⁸ Brouk, "In the Beginning ... The Great Goddess."

¹⁰⁹ Schechter, interview.

¹¹⁰ "Goddess of the Midsummer," *Lesbian Tide*, May/June 1978, 1

By the end of the 1970s, Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* marked the end of a fertile decade for women's spirituality. Starhawk's involvement in the Women's Spirituality movement was integral to the promoting public reception and growth, as well as acquainting many of the other prominent figures with the idea of Goddess centered spirituality. She notes that she became acquainted with the movement through the Wiccan pagan occult movement of the late sixties. "At age fifteen, I was reading tarot cards at the Renaissance fair, and there was a booth full of witches next to us. . . we were intrigued by them, but a little scared!"¹¹¹ Starhawk recounts these witches telling her that Wicca was a real spiritual tradition, that focused on the Goddess and existed before Christianity. As she entered her first year of college at UCLA, she was able to teach a course on witchcraft with a friend through the experimental college, and although they had no background or information on the topic, that didn't stop them from developing their own 'coven.' "Although we had no idea what a coven was, we decided to start one, getting together, smoking marijuana, banging on sticks, drinking wine and generally having a good time."¹¹² The concept of a Goddess was exciting to Starhawk, who has grown up Jewish, and hadn't even considered the centering of a feminine divine. Through meeting Zsuzsanna Budapest at her store Feminist Wicca, she found a larger, more interconnected Pagan community and started her work researching and working towards writing about Goddess Spirituality and Paganism.¹¹³

Starhawk had attempted to write, and publish a nonfiction work about the Goddess religion, but was not able to find a publisher for her work, sending chapters and proposal and receiving multiple rejections. One rejection she mentions in the foreword of *The Spiral Dance*,

¹¹¹ Starhawk, "Earth Healing, Earth Action: Starhawk's Journey," in *Foremothers of the Women's Spirituality Movement*, e.d. Miriam Robbins Dexter and Vicki Noble, (Teneo Press, 2015), 147.

¹¹² Starhawk, "Earth Healing," 147.

¹¹³ Starhawk, "Earth Healing," 149.

“One that I’ll never forget said: “I don’t think this author knows what she’s trying to say and I doubt that she has the intelligence to say it if she did.”¹¹⁴ After continued rejection, she finally found publishing success through *WomanSpirit* an anthology coedited by Carol P. Christ, where she wrote about Witchcraft and Goddess religion, Christ ended up inviting her to present her work at the American Academy of Religion. At the conference, Christ introduced Starhawk to her Marie Cantlon, her publisher at Harper & Row San Francisco.¹¹⁵ Cantlon showed interested in her work, and after months of waiting she received the good news: they wanted to publish her work.¹¹⁶ As Starhawk’s work was widely and fervently received by the mainstream audiences. Originally meant to commemorate the publication of the book but would ultimately summarize the decade that was and signaled what was to come: Starhawk’s large public ritual for the celebration of *The Spiral Dance*. On Halloween, or Samhain, of 1979 Starhawk and some friends organized a large public ritual at Fort Mason, a large public space in San Francisco that they aptly titled “The Spiral Dance Ritual.”¹¹⁷¹¹⁸ This ritual would lead to the formation of the Reclaiming Collective, and the Spiral Dance Ritual continued from there on.¹¹⁹

The 1980s

The 1980s marked full steam ahead for the Women’s Spirituality movement as many of these foundational women found themselves faced with an increasingly growing community with multiple modes of information dissemination. From being able to print books, periodicals, radio shows, covens, rituals, conferences, and festivals exploded onto the scene, offering a

¹¹⁴ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, (HarperOne: 1999), 17.

¹¹⁵ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 17.

¹¹⁶ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 17.

¹¹⁷ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 5.

¹¹⁸ Starhawk, “Earth Healing,” 150.

¹¹⁹ “The Dance’s History...” Reclaiming Spiral Dance, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.reclaimingspiraldance.org/history>.

variety of ways for women to be introduced to the Women's Spirituality Movement. In 1981, Minnesota State University held a small on campus event titled "Women and Worship, Women and Spirituality," and from there the event morphed into a conference that gave some of the biggest names in the women's spirituality movement the opportunity to speak about their work.¹²⁰ Starhawk spoke at the conference in 1986 about community building through the resistance.¹²¹ This marks the 1980s as being about continued resistance, and the cementing of even more ties with issues outside of the "expected" scope of the Women's Spirituality movement.

As the 1980s began, one of the largest, international presences of Dianic Wicca began. The Reformed Congregation of the Goddess, International (RCG-I) began in 1982, and was founded by Jade River in Madison, Wisconsin.¹²² Jade River was already a disciple of the Budapest variation of Dianic Wicca, she felt that she was being called to do more, to organize for the Goddess after attending the "Witches and Amazons" conference in Columbus, Ohio in 1978.

"When we crawled back into the van, I announced to the women on their beanbags I thought I knew how to organize for the Goddess. They scoffed because I was always organizing something. I told them I was serious and that if I just had a little money, I thought I knew what needed to be done."¹²³

Right after River came home from the conference, she found out that she had come into money through an inheritance, and so she packed her bags, and moved to Wisconsin to find those

¹²⁰ Edie Schmierbach, "Annual spirituality conference began as small gathering in 1981," Women and Spirituality Conference Archive, October 22, 2016, <https://womenandspirituality.org/archive-conference-programs/>.

¹²¹ Starhawk, "Building Communities of Resistance and Renewal," in *A Conference on Women and Spirituality Building Community*, October 18, 1986, Mankato State University, <https://womenandspirituality.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/WSC-1986-Starhawk.pdf>.

¹²² Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America*, (Penguin Books: 1979, 1986), 181.

¹²³ Jade River, "Yule 2012 Interview with Jade River in ACTION), interviewed by Christopher Blackwell, *ACTION*, 2012, <https://www.rcgi.org/jades-action-magazine-interview>.

women who wanted to organize for the Goddess.¹²⁴ From there, Jade River met Linnie Levy, and they started *Of A Like Mind*, one of the first newspapers and networking resources for women in women's spirituality and the craft.¹²⁵ By 1984, RBG-I was still being operated out of Jade's home, but they continued to sell merchandise, host events and gatherings, and they even looking into buying land.¹²⁶ River and Levy's work marked the break of Budapest's tradition of Dianic Wicca outside of central California, and the rapid growth that followed across the United States. One of the most prolific and important events that Jade and Levy did with RBG-I was create the Defining Dianic Wicca Conference, later known as Developing Dianic Wicca conference.¹²⁷

“Wicca has never had a point of centrality... Most Dianics had only sporadic contact with each other at festivals and women's gatherings. We did not know each other. One evening, I curiously asked Linnie what she believed other Dianics thought. Without pause she answered, “Why don't we get them together and ask them?” In that moment, the Defining Dianic Wicca Conferences were born.”¹²⁸

The first Defining Dianic Wicca conferences were held in Fall 1986 and around seventy women attended the four-day conference, and covered topics like Dianic Wicca, healing, ritual, feminism, divination, the Goddess and other related topics.¹²⁹ One of the biggest surprises for Jade was the inclusion of heterosexual women. Jade considered Dianic Wicca as a strictly lesbian tradition, completely insular because Budapest was an out lesbian, as well the subject matter or interpretation of some practices and spells. “Probably the biggest surprise for us was the heterosexual women came. Up until this point, I had never known a heterosexual Dianic, but they were there at the first conference and have been and continue to be a part of the Dianic

¹²⁴ River, interview.

¹²⁵ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

¹²⁶ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

¹²⁷ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*. River, interview.

¹²⁸ River, interview.

¹²⁹ River, interview.

tradition.”¹³⁰ The conferences continued for seven years beyond then and featured many prolific women within the community as speakers and attendants. Jade’s surprise at the number of heterosexual women in attendance demonstrates that regardless of sexuality, Dianic Wicca and largely the Women’s Spirituality Movement was enticing to a variety of women. This insular lesbian only perspective would become one of the core problems for Dianic Wicca and the Women’s Spirituality Movement because just like heterosexual women, transgender and gender nonconforming people would become interested and would not be met with the same open arms.

Ecofeminism and Spiritual Practice

The ecofeminist movement emerged alongside the women’s spirituality movement. It is a fusion of the environmentalism and feminism movement, focused on utilizing feminist thought and action to work towards environmental protection and conservation. Women’s spirituality added a lens of viewing the earth as a manifestation of the divine feminine through the natural world, viewing it as Mother Earth. As ecofeminist view it, looking at the earth as a mother, in essence a woman, that the earth is being destroyed by men and the patriarchy. Through industry, development, and subsequent pollution, many of these women advocated for the preservation of the earth, and the conservation of divine energy. They see the loss of Goddess centric civilization as akin to the environmental crisis, and that patriarchy is the root of that loss.¹³¹

Ecofeminism directly grew out of the feminist spirituality movement because of the overlap of involvement of key figures, as well as what the value and ethical tenets of the Women’s Spirituality movement. Charlene Spretnak is the biggest figure from both movements, and is considered by many to have created the ecofeminist movement of the 1980s. Charlene

¹³⁰ River, interview.

¹³¹ *Goddess Remembered*, directed by Donna Read, (1989 Canada: National Film Board of Canada) documentary

Spretnak was introduced to the Women's Spirituality movement in 1975 while walking down Telegraph Avenue in Berkley and seeing a flier for a workshop on women's spirituality and mythology, and through going to that meeting and subsequent ones after that initial meeting, she met Carol P. Christ, and her journey into the women's spirituality movement began. The following year Spretnak met and befriended Merlin Stone. Spretnak became enamored in the grassroots movement and was asked to write for different publications like *Chrysalis* and *WomanSpirit*. Like Christ, Spretnak noticed that there were dissidents to the women's spirituality movement, and one that she faced were socialist, more specifically Marxist feminists. Spretnak states, "In articles, some of the opined that women's spirituality was counter-revolutionary, and a dead weight on the feminist movement." Spretnak chocks it up to the idea that it was, "luring women being self-absorbed, in an apolitical state of mind, taking them from the struggle."¹³² From this frustration, she went out of her way to compile and commission articles to create her book, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, which was published in 1982.¹³³

In 1982, Spretnak was invited to West Germany to teach on the Women's Spirituality movement, and there she was introduced to the European Green Party and was inspired to bring this political orientation to her fellow American environmental activists.¹³⁴ Spretnak worked with Fritjof Capra to write *Green Politics: The Global Promise*, considered to be a seminal text in the spread of green politics across the United States. Six months after the publication she co-organized and co-founded a Conference for Green Politics in the United States in St. Paul, MN, and through that they founded the Green Party of the United States.¹³⁵ From this point on her

¹³² Charlene Spretnak, "Our Quest for Spiritual Authenticity," in *Foremothers of the Women's Spirituality Movement*, e.d. Miriam Robbins Dexter and Vicki Noble, (Teneo Press, 2015).

¹³³ Charlene Spretnak, "Our Quest for Spiritual Authenticity."

¹³⁴ Charlene Spretnak, "Charlene Spretnak," Biographical Note, Charlene Spretnak Papers, Smith College, January 2021, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tbzSfzr6B9IF4yTBY43g1242o73YhonX/view>.

¹³⁵ Spretnak, "Charlene Spretnak."

environmental activism was informed by the spiritual background that she developed from being involved in the Women's Spirituality circles. Spretnak's work explores focused on the political intersections of both movements, looking at the ways in which we can move forward and protect the earth, as well as interrupt the capitalist patriarchy that is damaging the environment. She considered her major goal helping to shed light on the spiritual nature of green politics, and in turn advocate for both movements by utilizing the spiritual as a political tool.¹³⁶ She continued to speak and work towards her goals of furthering the ecofeminist movement, and she was invited to speak as the keynote speaker at the first conference on ecofeminism, *Ecofeminist Perspectives* at the University of South California in March 1987.¹³⁷ Spretnak was an active conduit for activist movement within both groups, educating women interested in women's spirituality to better understand its connections to environmentalism. She describes multiple paths that one might take to becoming an ecofeminist, and that women who were drawn to the Goddess movement in the 1970s would not have been as connected if not for the understanding that the Goddess was all around us, not detached and separate like the patriarchal god.¹³⁸

Goddesses on the TV

Outside of the collective and political spaces, Starr Goode's program *The Goddess in Art* started its run in 1986. The program was moderated and produced by Starr Goode and was a cable TV series that ran until 1991.¹³⁹ As Goode describes this program was dedicated to the Return of the Goddess and explored feminist spirituality both in art and the Women's Spirituality

¹³⁶ Spretnak, "Charlene Spretnak."

¹³⁷ Spretnak, "Charlene Spretnak."

¹³⁸ Charlene Spretnak, "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering," in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. by Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (Sierra Club Books, 1990), pg. 5. This work was used because it was based on a keynote address by Charlene Spretnak about ecofeminist perspectives that she presented in March 1987.

¹³⁹ Star Goode, "The Goddess in Art TV Series with Star Goode," *Woman and Myth*, accessed July 9, 2025, [https://womenandmyth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-Goddess-in-Art.desc .pdf](https://womenandmyth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-Goddess-in-Art.desc.pdf).

movement as it was.¹⁴⁰ She interviewed scholars and artists, that introduced viewers to some of the biggest voices in the feminist spirituality movement in digestible 30-minute episodes. One of the most important interviews that Goode conducted was a two-part (one hour) segment interviewing Marija Gimbutas, hearing both her scholarly insights that had been documented in her works like *Language of the Goddess*, etc. but also allowing Gimbutas to share her perspective on the current interpretation of goddesses through an academic lens.¹⁴¹ Goode also interviewed Starhawk to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of *The Spiral Dance*, arguably Starhawk's most prolific works. Through this interview we can catch a glimpse in how the cultural landscape of the 1980s was being changed with the end of the Cold War, fall of the Berlin Wall, and a mention of how the HIV/AIDS epidemic was affecting the San Francisco community.¹⁴² The show ran for a total of 23 episodes and one documentary about the premier of Marija Gimbutas' book *Civilization of the Goddess*, and the final episode aired in 1991. Goode's program demonstrates there was an interest in not only learning about the Goddess, but about the women who were creating these communities. Programs like this would establish some of these women into legends or celebrity status.

In the documentary *Goddess Remembered* directed by Donna Read and released in 1989, we continue to see the ways in these ideals were manifesting themselves within feminist communities. This documentary highlights many prolific scholars who contributed to building the Goddess movement, but instead of looking at the within the confines of a scholar, we get to see them as a multifaceted being. Many of these women were living in the same location, the San

¹⁴⁰ Goode, "The Goddess in Art."

¹⁴¹ Star Goode, "Interview with Marija Gimbutas Part 1 & 2" *The Goddess in Art*, republished on YouTube, August 29, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxei-vuf7U8&list=PLWR4EhSjmRAq-mFertgI3x06DD8_-aMiE&index=2.

¹⁴² Star Goode, "Interview with Starhawk" *The Goddess in Art*, republished on YouTube, March 7, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jzDRx9w7tU&list=PLWR4EhSjmRAq-mFertgI3x06DD8_-aMiE&index=5.

Francisco Bay area, actively establishing a women's spirituality focused community. Through this research they were finding ways to forge a community, as well as practicing alternative, feminist, and/or goddess spirituality.¹⁴³ A segment of the documentary that displays this is when the women are having a Goddess dinner party.¹⁴⁴ Each woman, with attendants like Carol P. Christ, Charlene Spretnak, Merlin Stone, and Starhawk, would bring a statue of their Goddess or items associated with them, and through this conventional dinner party would educate one another about them.¹⁴⁵ Then, they were able to enjoy a meal together, creating a safe space to muse about their passions and the empowerment they felt from their Goddess and their spiritual practice. Even though these women have created the academic texts that support scholarly research, they intertwine these lessons into something practical to their daily lives. Outside of the dinner parties, Spretnak mentions that they come together to celebrate the holidays with one another and have these community events centered around the earth and Goddess spirituality.¹⁴⁶ The documentary demonstrates the many intersections that the movement experienced, with topics like race, class and environmentalism being key talking points, and beyond that, there was enough of an audience to create a three part documentary series about the burgeoning movement.¹⁴⁷

Overall, as the 1970s and 1980s saw spectacular growth in not only the academic works enriching the fields of history as well as allowing more cementing of women's, gender, and

¹⁴³ I hesitate to brand their religious identity entirely as one term because I have not found concrete evidence from all these women asserting this. Rather, utilizing the elements in the documentary I am confident to say that they were practicing similar practices under the documentary.

¹⁴⁴ *Goddess Remembered*, directed by Donna Read, (1989 Canada: National Film Board of Canada) documentary.

¹⁴⁵ Other women apart of this documentary are Luisah Teish, Shekinah Mountainwater, Mary Tallmountain, Susan Griffin, Kim Chernin, Jean Bolen, and Elena Featherston. Read, *Goddess Remembered*.

¹⁴⁶ Holidays like the equinox and other Pagan season-based holidays. Read, *Goddess Remembered*.

¹⁴⁷ *Goddess Remembered* is one part of a trilogy focused on documenting the feminist spirituality movement and educating those on the different points of Wicca/Witchcraft.

sexuality studies, it saw the growth of an interconnected community across the nation. This community focused on the divine energy of women, and the ways in which they could use an institution of religion and spirituality to subvert notions of patriarchy. They both used their voices to advocate for political and social changes, as well as established a long-lasting interconnected community. These women utilized both their resources within the academic field to research and develop scholarly materials for their community, as well as periodicals to bridge the gap for those who did not have access to the institution. The 1990s onwards saw an emergence of media that dramatized and completely altered the public's perception of what it meant to be a witch, and sometimes unknowingly pulled from the work that these women were doing in the women's spirituality movement.

Chapter 3: Goddess.exe: The 1990s and 2000s and the Synthesis of Women's Spirituality to Neopaganism

The 1990s and 2000s reinvented and expanded the Women's Spirituality movement in ways that the last two decades would not have predicted. The rapidly growing accessibility to the Internet and the online communities that began to be cultivated connected individuals with communities and ideas that they might not have been able to access before. The broader Neopagan movement experienced a similar level of interest and subsequent growth and the term Neopagan became a term that could encompass a multitude of different alternative spiritual identities: The Women's Spirituality Movement's Goddess centered identity was one of them. The 1990s and 2000s represents a broadening from the very specific feminist and lesbian communities that were integral for the movement's growth, and rather began to include women of mainstream culture who were interested and might not have had the vernacular or resources to access the movement previously. From the explosion of teen witch media that was prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s, to the plethora of interconnected online Neopagan communities and blog spaces that connected these individuals in way that they were unable to before, it was easier than ever to get explore Neopaganism. However, the growth into the mainstream also caused growing pains and we start to see of the more modern day 'witch hunts': specifically political and social discrimination against individuals who identify within these communities.

Online Communities and Solitary Witchcraft Booms

The 1990s saw a drastic boom of Witch and Pagan internet culture. Women's Spirituality found its home in a lot of broad Neopagan website pages that were cropping up across the United States. One notable example is The Witches Voice, www.witchvox.com, which started in 1997

and was based out of Florida.¹⁴⁸ The site saw significant traffic over the course of being online, reaching over 145,000 hits after only 10 weeks of being online and 1,274,237 hits after a year.¹⁴⁹ The website held a variety of pages like “Contact a Witch in Your Town,” “Pagan Protection Tips from a Pro,” “Know YOUR Rights as a Witch,” “Gay Pagans,” and “Current Cases and HOT Issues.”¹⁵⁰ They would track more than just spells and circles; they would cover issues affecting religious freedom and specific instances of discrimination towards the Neopagan Community. Their domain held almost 600 pages within the first year, filling in diverse needs for individuals who might not be able to get those answers from their local circles. Their mission on the website was,

“The Witches' Voice is a proactive educational network dedicated to correcting misinformation about Witches and Witchcraft. Witchcraft IS a legally recognized religion in the United States, and it is our mission to protect that right through education and awareness. It is our belief that, simply stated, Witches are Givers and Healers. By keeping abreast of the latest news and updated information, as well as having ready access to critical resource tools, we, as Witches and Pagans, can not only empower ourselves, but develop programs to educate our local towns and cities on who we are and what we do. We offer Pagan Political Neutrality to all God/Goddess Earth-Based Traditions and Solitary Practitioners that follow the Rede, the Law of Three or a similar, compatible Code of Ethics.”¹⁵¹

The Witches Voice continued to operate on their original domain of www.witchvox.com until December 31st, 2019 after 22 years of helping the Witch and Pagan community.¹⁵² The

¹⁴⁸ The Witches Voice... History of the Witches' voice,” The Witches' Voice, archived February 9,1990 at <https://web.archive.org/web/19990209100709/http://www.witchvox.com/twv/twv1997.html>.

¹⁴⁹ “...History of the Witches Voice”

¹⁵⁰ “...History of the Witches Voice”

¹⁵¹ “The Witches Voice... Witches of the World,” The Witches' Voice, archived June 5,1997 at <https://web.archive.org/web/19970605010416/http://www.witchvox.com/wvoxhome.html>

¹⁵² “The Witches Voice Inc,” The Witches' Voice, archived May 15, 2025, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250515221350/https://witchvox.com/>.

Witches Voice still exists as a Facebook page, but with a discernable amount less than what they previously offered before, and their last post being around Halloween 2024.¹⁵³

By the end of the 1990s, the Goddess 2000 Project had been created by Abby Willowroot. Although originally started in 1998, it was widely announced on April 19th, 1999, at 9:00PM on Telepathic Radio, a show on WCEV 1540 AM Chicago.¹⁵⁴ The Goddess Project was started to fulfill Willowroot's mission to, "have a goddess on every block."¹⁵⁵ Willowroot oriented the project to be grassroots and individual, intending for witches across the globe to strengthen Goddess oriented community, regardless of their primary practice. The Goddess 2000 Project is estimated to have 20,000 participants in over 52 countries.¹⁵⁶ Willowroot worked on a variety of other digital community-oriented sites, one being Spiral Goddess Grove, which is still active and Willowroot dubs it as a "virtual goddess temple."¹⁵⁷ It is an incredible capsule of the time, with the funky and eclectic virtual space that is indicative of 1990s web design, and holds different virtual alters for different goddesses, prayers and rituals for different periods of life, and even a make your own altar tab.¹⁵⁸ Willowroot is cited as saying that from the beginning the response to her sites were great and that as more people visited the site and signed the virtual guestbook, she noticed there was a need for more connection to Goddess culture.¹⁵⁹ She initially created the site to "on ramp" Goddess culture to more folks, but also to create a culture focused on actively

¹⁵³ "Posts," The Witches' Voice, Inc., Facebook, accessed July 9, 2025, at <https://www.facebook.com/TheWitchesVoiceInc/>.

¹⁵⁴ "Abby, Selena, and Wren LIVE on the NET this Monday Night!," Also New This Week, The Witches' Voice, archived April 20 1999 at <https://web.archive.org/web/19990420041952/http://www.witchvox.com/wvoxhome.html>.

¹⁵⁵ "~Goddess 2000 Project~ Honors the Spirits of Nature," Press Releases, archived January 18 2000, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20000118152857/http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Thebes/3163/PressReleases.html>.

¹⁵⁶ "Birth of the ~Goddess 2000 Project~," Spiral Goddess, accessed July 9, 2025, at <https://www.spiralgoddess.com/G2000Birth.html>.

¹⁵⁷ "Spiral Goddess Grove: Site Map & New Pages," Spiral Goddess, accessed July 9, 2025, at <https://www.spiralgoddess.com/>.

¹⁵⁸ "Spiral Goddess Grove: Site Map & New Pages."

¹⁵⁹ "Interview with Abby Willowroot, Pagan artist and writer," Culture, The Wild Hunt, created March 15, 2017, at <https://wildhunt.org/2017/03/interview-with-abby-willowroot-pagan-artist-and-writer.html>

celebrating “racial diversity and harmony.”¹⁶⁰ The continued use and growth of the Spiral Goddess Grove is what gave Willowroot the initial idea for the Goddess 2000 project, wanted to celebrate paganism and goddess worship in a way that was, “focused on our ecstasy, not our oppression.”¹⁶¹ Willowroot was avid on celebrating and education on Goddess Spirituality and cited herself as being the “first woman in America to make goddesses as a contemporary religious icon.”¹⁶² Where she might not be the first, but rather a contributor among great company, she introduced countless individuals to goddess-oriented spirituality, and specifically Women’s Spirituality. She was able to push for more inclusive Neopagan spaces and ideas, adding to the Women’s Spirituality praxis by bringing into online spaces.

Media

American film and television media echoed this similar cultural shift in the way that it began to treat the archetype of the “witch.” The negative archetype of the witch has existed within media for many years. It has existed as a one note, conventional depiction of evil, sometimes satanic witchcraft and the witch was a monstrous crone.¹⁶³ These archetypes were amplified as the Satanic Panic gripped individuals in the mid 1980s to early 1990s, but it subsided and those amplified satanic stereotypes were slowly forgotten it gave space for the creation of a new type of witch.¹⁶⁴ This new witch was empowered, young (typically a teenager), and were most importantly the hero rather than the monster.¹⁶⁵ Movies like *The Craft* and in

¹⁶⁰ “Interview with Abby Willowroot”

¹⁶¹ “Interview with Abby Willowroot”

¹⁶² “Interview with Abby Willowroot”

¹⁶³ Heather Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* (McFarland, 2018), 451.

¹⁶⁴ Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 449-451. The ‘Satanic Panic’ is marked by the McMartin Case, a case marked by the accusations of ritual child abuse as well as animal sacrifice and other ‘satanic’ activities. This led to a moral fear mongering and increased bigotry towards witches. This eventually died down as the case began to close and public officials acknowledged the fear mongering that they had created.

¹⁶⁵ Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 452.

television shows like *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* continued to generate positive representation of witches and witchcraft and were connected to the female experience and identity.¹⁶⁶ Other examples of media like *Charmed*, *Practical Magic* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* subverted traditional ideas about witches and centered stories about young women finding their identity and the power in their struggles. Although we see these pieces of media as being incredible for supporting or pushing these ideas into more mainstream culture, most pieces of media misrepresented Goddess Spirituality and the larger Pagan community, therefore leading for some in the community to call out the creators and producers. One example of this is when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* first began airing in 1997. The third episode of the series, “Witch,” depicted Witches in a more ‘traditional’ sense, making the villain of the week one of the stereotypical witches of old.¹⁶⁷ Many did not agree with this representation of witchcraft and were quick to organize for better representation. This specific episode reached 3.4 million viewers.¹⁶⁸ Lhiannon Everseeking led the charge in changing the way that *Buffy* viewed witches. She organized online as well as in person, even showing up to an open forum that the creator of the show Josh Whedon was attending. She felt that the show depicted witchcraft as inaccurate bordering on dangerous.¹⁶⁹ She describes her interaction confronting Whedon at the forum with him reply saying, “Yes, we had a stereotypically scary witch. Yes, she was evil and had a cauldron and a black cat and all that stuff. Why? Because scary witches are part of our classical horror mythos.,” and Everseeking retorting back, “We are a religion, Mr. Whedon, not a mythos.”¹⁷⁰

Modern Day Witch Hunts

¹⁶⁶ Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 452.

¹⁶⁷ “Witch” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, IMDb, accessed July 9, 2025, at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0533527/>.

¹⁶⁸ “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” Texas Pagan Awareness Online, archived on June 16, 1997, at <https://web.archive.org/web/19970616145027/http://lonestar.texas.net/~lhiannon/buffy.html>.

¹⁶⁹ “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

¹⁷⁰ “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

Although the 1990s and 2000s saw significant growth in culture, connection and mainstream social perceptions of witchcraft, there were still issues with religious discrimination. Arrests like Budapest in 1975 would help start the conversation around legitimizing Wicca as a religion in the United States (which would end up officially being recognized in 1986), but there was still the lack of religious protection for individuals who practice Neopaganism broadly.¹⁷¹ One of the most notable modern witch hunts was when Georgia Senator Bob Barr campaigned against Ft. Hood for being inclusive of New Age religions. Fort Hood was one of the first military bases to be inclusive of Wicca/Paganism, and created the Fort Hood Open Circle, a way for service members who identified as Wicca/Pagan to be able to practice on base.¹⁷² *The Chicago Tribune* described the group as being just a few dozen off-duty soldiers gathering for different rituals and solstices and fulfilling their needs with “religious enrichment.”¹⁷³ The military’s policy concerning religion and spirituality at the time permitted open and free practices without the judgement based on their religion preferences, however this did not stop conservative political figures from speaking against it. Representative Barr ended up sending a letter to Lieutenant Leon S. Leopont, who was Ft. Hoods commander, calling Wiccan worship on based, “nonsense” and, “setting a dangerous precedence,” that should be ended immediately.¹⁷⁴ Bob Barr is quoted as saying, “What next? Will armored divisions be forced to travel with sacrificial animals for satanic rituals? Will Rastafarian demand the inclusion of ritualist marijuana cigarettes in their rations?”¹⁷⁵ Barr is said to having tried to amend a dense authorization bill but ultimately ended up failing at his attempts because the bill died on

¹⁷¹ Wicca would become recognized as a religion in 1986 due to the case of *Dettmer v. Landon*. For more information see, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/799/929/117777/>.

¹⁷² Clarence Page, “Bob Barr Isn’t Bewitched by Military Wiccans,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 1999, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/1999/06/16/bob-barr-isnt-bewitched-by-military-wiccans/>.

¹⁷³ Page, “Bob Barr Isn’t Bewitched.”

¹⁷⁴ John Ratliff, “Witch Hunt,” *Texas Monthly*, October 1999, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/witch-hunt/>.

¹⁷⁵ Ratliff, “Witch Hunt.”

procedural grounds.¹⁷⁶ Barr is quoted as saying, “I’m not talking about what people do with their private lives. . . . If they want to bay at the moon or whatever, that’s fine. But they ought to do it outside our military bases.”¹⁷⁷ Although there were objections to the practice of Wicca on base, this marks Wicca and the Women’s Spirituality Movement’s full entry to the mainstream.

The terminology seems to shift from 1999 to 2000, with the Goddess movement or Goddess spirituality falling under the New Age umbrella. In the long run this acts as a disservice to the movement and seemingly buries the importance of the study. The New Age movement is commonly misconstrued as the same as Neopaganism because both are focused on the conceptions of interconnectedness and imminence, but New Age practices are focused fully on the fulfillment of the participant, and not the building of community or group consciousness raising.¹⁷⁸ The Goddess movement aligns better with neopaganism because of the work to create community and to practice in an affirming space.¹⁷⁹ The term New Age also is commonly conflated as trendy, and this connotation to the Goddess movement harms this spiritual movement that has been around for years.

The 2000s - Queering the Narrative

Queerness and magic had existed since the 1960s, with groups like the Radical Faeries starting and creating space, but the age of the internet led to an exponential growth, especially for individuals who might be in conservative, small town America. Especially when considering their queer identities in tandem with their religious identities; leading to more risk and fear of some form of discrimination. While still recovering from the HIV/AIDS epidemic that rocked

¹⁷⁶ Page, “Bob Barr Isn’t Bewitched.”

¹⁷⁷ Page, “Bob Barr Isn’t Bewitched.”

¹⁷⁸ Stuart Rose, “New Age Women: Spearheading the Movement?” *Women’s Studies*, vol. 30 (2001): 333.

¹⁷⁹ Rose, “New Age Women,” 343.

the entire queer community, there were more conversations had in Women's Spirituality spaces as well as other Wicca/ Neopagan communities over the acceptance of the wider BGLTQ+ community, not just the LGB. Strides and space had been made for individuals with divergent identities surrounding their sexualities, but in the 1990s and 2000s we see a more concerted effort of individuals who identify as transgender and/or not cisgender working to create a space for themselves. Trail blazers like Holly Boswell and Sandy Stone utilized their identity and religious knowledge to create space for individuals struggling to do the same. Lesbian voices had been shaping Women's Spirituality since the beginning, but as the social understanding of gender starts to be pushed more in the 1990s, more transgender witches begin to emerge.

As Neitz mentions in her article chronicling the changes in Dragonfest, one of the many Neopagan and Goddess centered multi-day festivals, by the 1990s there were dialogues being created that directly subverted the inherent heteronormativity that was present in the practices and in these gatherings.¹⁸⁰ These gatherings are multi-day events that are comprised of a variety of different workshops and rituals, with sessions that are sometimes focused on the intersections of their spirituality with social issues. A workshop that was happening at the 1990s Dragonfest was "Gay and Lesbian Outreach," which had around ten attendants, with Neitz being one of them.¹⁸¹ Neitz expresses that while this workshop was intended to help participants let go of any fears or uncertainties about the BGLTQ+ participants, it found itself gridlocked with those who identified as BGTLQ+ and with those who did not and wanted separate spaces or practices for them.¹⁸² Neitz's article dives into the tie that Dragonfest had to heteronormativity and the essentialism debate, arguing that there was a direct, gendered order at this festival found in dress,

¹⁸⁰ Mary Jo Neitz, "Queering the Dragonfest: Changing Sexualities in a Post-Patriarchal Religion," *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 386.

¹⁸¹ Neitz, "Queering the Dragonfest" 386.

¹⁸² Neitz, "Queering the Dragonfest" 386.

practice, and organization.¹⁸³ Although it seems like there was little to no change that arose from that one session, the conversation around queer identities continued to happen at Dragonfest, and in 1996 there was conscious heteronormative subversion happening at the festival. Neitz documented seeing queer people, specifically those who subvert the gender binary through dress, being out at 1996's Dragonfest.¹⁸⁴

To talk about the strides that were created by trans people in Women's Spirituality and Wicca/Paganism as a whole, we must cover some of the earliest instances of transphobia within Women's Spirituality. Advertisements for circles and goddess events in feminist periodicals started to include specific transphobic language like Delta Phyre's Advertisement, "Delta Phyre/ Worship the Goddess at monthly Full Moon Circles. Open to wimmin (no transexuals please) bring musical instruments...."¹⁸⁵

DELTA PHYRE/Worship the Goddess at monthly Full Moon Circles. Open to wimmin (no transexuals, please). Bring musical instruments.

Figure 3: Delta Phyre Advertisement from / ...

Since much of the radical thought was centering the idea of women as God, many cisgender women practices could not accept the validity of transgender identities. Other subcultures and communities within feminist and LGB spaces were starting to demonstrate more transphobic rhetoric. For example, Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a prolific women's music festival, one that was a major hub for lesbians, had intense controversy because of their treatment and exclusive of transwomen, with counter protests like Camp Trans popping up outside of the festival itself.¹⁸⁶ The overlap between lesbian feminist trans exclusion, goddess spirituality, and transphobia is unfortunately incredibly common. Many of the practices developed by the

¹⁸³ Neitz, "Queering the Dragonfest" 380.

¹⁸⁴ Neitz, "Queering the Dragonfest" 378.

¹⁸⁵ Lady Alaina, "Delta Phyre Advertisement," *Apex: A Point of Departure*, August 1993, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/1g05fb86k>.

¹⁸⁶ "Camp Trans History; Trans Inclusion in Womyn's Music and MWMF," Camp Trans, archived February 1 2009 on <https://web.archive.org/web/20090201071942/http://camp-trans.org/pages/ct-history.html>.

Women's Spirituality movement were intended to be radical in that they focused on the things that cisgender women had either been shamed for or were expected to do, like menstruation and childbirth. The focus on the biological difference of woman, and the empowerment that ciswomen felt through the worshipping the goddess because she represented all those things, made many unable to grasp the connection that transgender women have with the Goddess.

This did not stop transwomen from carving their own path, with many making their own spaces for other transgender or gender nonconforming people. Individuals like Holly Boswell painted the way for trans participants to change the nature of paganism and create space for every to participate. Boswell had come out as a member of the transgender community in her thirties, detailing that during the 1970s-1980s when she was in college, "There was no language for it, there was virtually no cultural context in which to view it, it would have appeared to be totally freakish, it would probably have been seen as the freakish part of being gay, or twisted or something, to bend one's gender that radically. So yeah, it wasn't time...."¹⁸⁷ Around the time that she published *The Transgender Alternative*, she created Kindred Spirits. Kindred Spirits was the first yearly retreat for transgender and questioning individuals to explore not only what it meant to be transgender, but what did transgender spirituality look like.¹⁸⁸ The first Kind Spirits was held at the Sunnybank Inn in Hot Spring North Carolina and would continue to consistently meet annually until 2015.¹⁸⁹ As well as providing a physical meeting space, Kindred Spirits would collectively run *Gender Quest*, a print magazine focused on transgender spirituality

¹⁸⁷ Holly Boswell, "Holly Boswell (OC 72)," interview by Joey Plaster, People Life, Personal Stories, Oberlin College, August 12, 2004, transcript, <https://oberlinlgbt.org/holly-boswell-oc-72/>.

¹⁸⁸ "Biographical Information," Holly Boswell Kindred Spirits Collection – M2019.08, University of North Carolina Asheville Special Collections and University Archives, accessed July 9, 2025, at <https://specialcollections.unca.edu/holly-boswell-kindred-spirits-collection-m2019-08/>.

¹⁸⁹ "Biographical Information."

from 1998 through 2001.¹⁹⁰ Boswell was a pioneer in understanding contemporary transgender



Figure 4: Kindred Spirits retreat from *Transgender Tapestry* #89, Spring 2000 issue.

identity, but also worked incredible hard to bridge the gap for those transgender individuals who were questioning their own spiritual identity. By the end of the 2000s Boswell began to use all pronouns and is cited as saying, “I’m just a spiritual being having a human experience. When I asked Leslie Feinberg what pronoun ze

preferred, ze told me ‘Whichever one outs me as genderqueer.’ Same for me.’.”¹⁹¹ Holly Boswell passed away in August 2017 but her legacy as a trailblazer lives on.¹⁹²

Another transgender trailblazer in Sandy Stone, a figure who is integral in understanding the challenges of lesbian feminist spaces and their lack of transgender inclusion firsthand. Stone identifies as a transgender lesbian feminist and was the center of the most well-known “women’s only space” controversy when she was a recording engineer for Olivia Records.¹⁹³ Many cisgender women felt like Stone was a threat to their space, and did not view her as a ‘real’ woman. A militant lesbian group called the Gorgons even threatened to shoot Stone, but although Olivia Records stood in solidarity with Stone, she ended up leaving the record label in

¹⁹⁰ “Biographical Information.”

¹⁹¹ Jacob Anderson-Minshall, “TransNation: Kindred Spirits,” *Windy City Times*, January 10, 2007, <https://windycitytimes.com/2007/01/10/transnation-kindred-spirits/>.

¹⁹² “Holly Boswell,” LGBTQ Religious Archives Network, accessed July 9, 2025, at <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/profiles/holly-boswell>.

¹⁹³ Sandy Stone, “Interview with the Transsexual Vampire: Sandy Stone’s Dark Gift,” interview by Davina Anne Gabriel, *TransSisters: The Journal of Transsexual Feminism*, issue 8, Spring 1995, transcript, archived at https://archive.org/details/transsistersjou1995unse_0/page/15/mode/1up.

1978.¹⁹⁴ She cites her reason as leaving only being financial issues with the record label not the threats made to her wellbeing saying, “My job is to stand up to that. ... I mean, the alternative is what? You give in to hatred? Then what kind of a life do you have?”¹⁹⁵ Stone’s Neopagan identity and relationship with the Craft is tied to her proximity to her transition. She states that her consciousness as a Neopagan began when she started to live as a woman, and from the ideas from the Women’s Spirituality movement, but not necessarily the women who were present.¹⁹⁶ She recounts a time that she had experienced issues from specifically the Dianic tradition of Wicca, and that she “blundered in on Z Budapest and got chopped up for it.”¹⁹⁷

Stone is emblematic of the transgender people who were participating in the struggle on multiple sides. Where she might not have focused a majority of her activism on trans spirituality like Holly Boswell, she is a notable link that these practitioners were present, most were just not as visible as her or had the same type of platform. Throughout her interview her Neopagan identity is explored through the lenses of trans spirituality and by the end, she mentions a reason as to why transgender women being drawn to Neopaganism in the mid 1990s,

Neopaganism is one of the viable alternatives. Once you start examining those issues, it becomes clear that your identity might not be the only thing that’s problematic. ... So transies who first begin to investigate the women’s community — which I think a large proportion of male- to-female transies do -- sooner or later encounter Neopaganism as well.¹⁹⁸

Aside from Boswell and Stone, a variety of transgender periodicals talked about or focused on transgender spirituality and the connection between Neopaganism and Women’s Spirituality. *TransSisters*, *GenderQuest*, *Girl Talk*, and *Chrysalis* were all introducing

¹⁹⁴ Nastia Voynovskaya, “88-Year-Old Audio Engineer Sandy Stone Survived Transphobia Backlash and Made History,” June 16, 2025, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13977595/sandy-stone-olivia-records-jimi-hendrix-girl-island-documentary>.

¹⁹⁵ Voynovskaya, “88-Year-Old.”

¹⁹⁶ Stone, interview.

¹⁹⁷ Stone, interview.

¹⁹⁸ Stone, interview.

transpeople to the evolving sphere of Neopagan and Goddess spirituality. This is another example of the melding of academic discourse and periodicals, activism and religion in the Women's Spirituality Movement.

Critical Responses

Although the Goddess movement has a rightful place within feminism, critics within and outside of feminist thought levied continues critiques since the 1970s. Spretnak summarizes the largest critique of feminist spirituality as an "apolitical cop-out from feminist struggles," which this critique has found itself manifesting as the base for critique of many of the foundational philosophies.¹⁹⁹ From there, more specific criticism was launched, but two of the more incendiary ones were the debates around essentialism and the push for introspection.

The criticism around essentialism can be found within a myriad of sources from the late 1990s to the 2000s. Kathryn Rountree's work "The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate" encapsulates this criticism best. The central question of the debate centered on how a movement that claimed to be feminist also focused on the veneration of fertility, birth and the 'natural' quality of 'maternalism' within women.²⁰⁰ Women and men are also seen on this binary of emotion; that of women being more passive, nurturing and sensitive where men are aggressive, violent and dominating.²⁰¹ Feminists saw these women as misusing history as a way to rationalize a status quo that they should be busy fighting rather than constructing a role that still keeps them oppressed.²⁰² Many within the Goddess movement felt found value in imagining a past where women were more powerful, because it gave them the

¹⁹⁹ Spretnak, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, xxii.

²⁰⁰ Kathryn Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Culture Practice* 43, no. 2 (July 1999): 138.

²⁰¹ Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess," 147.

²⁰² Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess," 149.

space to envision a future where power relations could change. From them, rather than generating passivity, it was motivation to elicit change within the world.²⁰³ Rountree retorts that those within the Goddess movement see the Goddess as multifaceted and able to exist across cultures and not just considered idyllic matronly figures. The Goddess itself exists fluidly, and that different goddess across different pantheons can fulfill the multidimensional nature of this religious being. As Rountree eloquently puts it, “It is not Goddess Feminists who are locked into understanding women’s roles in patriarchal terms, but their accusers.”²⁰⁴

Another major aspect of the critical response to the Goddess movement was a push for internal introspection. In Carol P. Christ’s article “Theological and Political Implications of Re-Imagining the Divine as Female,” she argues that re-imagining the divine as feminine has both personal and political implications, and that there is space for this movement.²⁰⁵ As one of the foundational scholars, Christ recognizes the movement as it was, but points out some of the major criticism that was levied against it; that it was not inclusive and that it was solely a separatist ideology. In this article, Christ presents a holistic view of looking at this movement and considers the past as well as the contemporary efforts.²⁰⁶ One of the more important points that Christ makes is that the Goddess exists across cultures, and one of the unifying images is that of the old, white, male God.²⁰⁷ Furthermore this article makes it clear that this is not just a transfer of the imagery of the divine by acknowledging the subversion of power structures that patriarchy asserts. This article specifically speaks to the importance of understanding that this a

²⁰³ Rountree, “The Politics of the Goddess,” 150.

²⁰⁴ Rountree, “The Politics of the Goddess,” 151.

²⁰⁵ Carol P. Christ, “Theological and Political Implications of Re-Imagining the Divine as Female,” *Political Theology* 8, no. 2 (2007): 157-170.

²⁰⁶ Christ, “Theological and Political Implications of Re-Imagining the Divine as Female,” 158.

²⁰⁷ Christ, “Theological and Political Implications of Re-Imagining the Divine as Female,” 159.

multidisciplinary field, and that the implication of altering the image of the divine as feminine challenges a variety of different power structures within and outside of the academic setting.

One of the biggest critiques of specifically the Goddess movement is found in Cynthia Eller's body of work. Through the 1990s and 2000s she published two works: *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* published in 1993 and *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* in 2000. The former is a standard survey of the growth of feminist spirituality in the United States, but the latter argues that the theory of men and women living peacefully in a prehistoric matrilineal society slows the fight for equality for women.²⁰⁸ Eller represented a side of the feminist movement that claimed this focus on the past kept women from looking towards and improving the future.²⁰⁹ Max Dashú review and overall perspective on Eller's work is an important counter to Eller's argument because she looks at more than the academic pretense of the Women's Spirituality movement. Dashú relays that, "those enemies just love her book," and that on the internet it is "gleefully hailed by outright and covert anti-feminists alike."²¹⁰

Overall, the Women's Spirituality movement experienced a larger metamorphosis into the Wicca and Neopagan mainstream from the 1990s through the 2000s. The internet paved the way for easier access to Neopagan and Goddess ideas and rites for spirituality seekers across the United States. Individuals enriched traditions by just using their computers and message boards. Although entertainment media and political figures, whether directly or indirectly,

²⁰⁸ Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, (Crossroad: 1993). Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Pre-History: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women A Future*, (Beacon Press: 2000).

²⁰⁹ Charlene Spretnak, "Anatomy of a Backlash: Concerning the Work of Marija Gimbutas," *The Journal of Archaeomythology* 7 (2011): 47.

²¹⁰ Max Dashú, "Knocking Down Straw Dolls: A Critique of Cythia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*" review of *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, by Cynthia Eller, *Suppressed Histories Archives*, 2005, <https://www.suppressedhistories.net/articles/StrawDolls.pdf>.

misrepresented what Neopaganism was, the Neopagan community did not merely accept the misalignment. The rise of transgender civil rights and activism led to figures like Holly Boswell and Sandy Stone redefining the gendered perceptions of Goddess worship and Neopaganism as a whole. As old critiques addressed, new ones were continually developed, and at the end of 2009 we see the situating of the Goddess movement at a similar crossroads as before. The shift of media in the 1990s to provide a more positive view of what witchcraft meant lead to less inaccurate information and more interest in what feminist spirituality is, as well as Goddess worship. The 1990s and 2000s saw turbulence, growth and synthesis in all areas of the movement, but as the 2010s dawned and internet culture shifted, we see a reinvigoration in what it means to practice feminist spirituality and some unexpected developments involving the political right.

Chapter 4: Moon Phases and Misinformation: Exploring the Space of Women's Spirituality in the 2010s and 2020's

Before this chapter begins, I would like to preface that the information in this chapter is something that will continue to evolve and grow since it is still a developing area of human history. This is where my emphasis on traditional Historical methods and framing shifts towards utilizing primarily Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies as the mode of analysis. This era of Neopagan and Women's Spirituality must be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective because it sees conversations and questions emerge across the spectrum. To exclude this period, although smaller in comparison to the previous timeframes (15 years rather than 20 years), would be leaving out an incredibly important convergence of perspective that the conclusion simply adequately couldn't cover.

The 2010's and early 2020's saw dramatic social and cultural shifts in the United States, leading vast divides across the nation. Spirituality has become an increasingly important space that has seen continued division due to a variety of underlining factors like rampant social media usage, politics, and subsequent queer reinvention of those spaces. This chapter will cover Neopaganism's adaptation to a new era of social media and the latent influence of alt-right ideologies to Women's Spirituality spaces.

PantheaCon- Conventions and Controversy

PantheaCon was the largest indoor gathering of Pagans in North America and lasted for twenty-six years but ultimately retired in 2020.²¹¹ PantheaCon is an extension of the efforts to establish community from the 1990s through to the 2020s, and it cemented a broader Neopagan

²¹¹ Mark Green, "The Last Pantheacon, and What's Next," *Mark Green's Antheopaganism Blog*, February 18, 2020, <https://atheopaganism.org/2020/02/18/the-last-pantheacon-and-whats-next/>.

network across the United States, regardless of individual practice. The reasons for PantheaCon's retirement are varied with many feeling like it was due to continued controversies with others feeling like organizer Glenn Turner needed to retire.²¹² Conventions that used to unify the communities were starting to face criticism and backlash when looking at issues like racism, cultural appropriation and transphobia. PantheaCon was no exception to this shift in culture and was seen as setting the precedent to make these changes. Two of PantheaCon's most publicized controversies happened in 2012 and in 2019 embroiled in transphobia and cultural appropriation.

During 2012's PantheaCon, on February 18th, Z Budapest led the ritual, "Sacred Body of a Woman Ritual," and within the description of this ritual, she mentions that the ritual is for "genetic woman only."²¹³ This was the last straw for many PantheaCon attendants. This was not the first time that Budapest had hosted a ritual that explicitly excluded transgender individuals. In 2011, Budapest hosted a similar ritual emphasizing exclusion of trans bodies. This led to a larger dialogue about gender and paganism within PantheaCon. This felt like a learning moment, a positive change for the larger community... until the issues reappeared in 2012. T. Thorn Coyle, who felt that, "the only words attributed to Z as part of the conversation. . . felt ugly, hateful, and inflammatory to me,"²¹⁴ In response to Budapest's 2012 ritual, organized through Facebook a silent meditation protest, "After all the work so many put in last year, my heart could

²¹² Manny Moreno, "PantheaCon announced 2020 will be final year," *The Wild Hunt*, October 10, 2019, <https://wildhunt.org/2019/10/pantheacon-announces-2020-will-be-final-year.html#:~:text=By%20Manny%20Moreno%20%7C%20October%2010,coming%20together%20of%20the%20tribes>.

²¹³ Crystal Blanton, "PantheaCon 2012; Unity in Diversity and Controversy Recap," *Bay Area Pagan News Wire Collective*, February 21, 2012, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120426062944/http://bayarea.pagannewswirecollective.com/2012/02/21/pantheacon-2012-unity-in-diversity-and-controversy-recap/>

²¹⁴ T. Thorn Coyle, "Holding Beloved Community," February 19, 2012, <https://www.thorncoyle.com/post/holding-beloved-community>

not let this stand unmarked.”²¹⁵ The Bay Area Pagan News Wire Collective (BAPNWC) covered this protest and estimated that around 89 people were present and sitting in the hallway of the hotel for the duration of Budapest’s ritual.²¹⁶ Budapest would make a public statement and apologize to the crowd, but as mentioned in BAPNWC’s coverage, “Her flustered speech to the crowd deviated from the statement that was pre-prepared and therefore the statement was passed out afterwards by PantheaCon staff.” The crowd would end up staying in counterprotest for 30 minutes after the ritual doors closed.²¹⁷ These back-to-back incidents regarding transgender inclusion at Pantheon marked a rocky start for not only the convention in the 2010s but marked a decisive generational shift between Pagan elders and new witches.

Transphobia intensified as an issue for not just individuals who practice women’s spirituality, but also for the larger space of paganism. Ideas and negative encounters that could be kept within the circle are now open to the scrutiny of a new social media space; one where users stories could go viral, and face cancel culture. The most well-known espouser of transphobic beliefs in the Women’s Spirituality movement, Zsuzsanna Budapest, has been affected by this. This has not deterred her from continuing to spew her hateful rhetoric, with Facebook posts saying things like, “I am disturbed by the relentless hatred against women, feminists and Elders by the so-called Trans folk. Who finances them?” and “It is a lie that I am against transwomen. The reason they are mad at me is because I will not allow any males into the Dianic rituals where the ladies are naked. They never want to crash anything else. . .”²¹⁸ Budapest is the primary and

²¹⁵ Coyle, “Holding Beloved Community” and “Meet Thorn,” accessed July 9, 2025, at <https://www.thorncoyle.com/about>.

Coyle identifies as a queer and nonbinary, and as of writing this is their identity, however I am unsure if this is exactly how they identified at the time.

²¹⁶ Blanton, “PantheaCon 2012.”

²¹⁷ Blanton, “PantheaCon 2012.”

²¹⁸ Zsuzsanna Budapest, “It is a lie I am against transwomen,” Facebook, July 15, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/share/16qB6vMgUo/?mibextid=wwXIfr>.

oftentimes public example of dogma being spread against transgender individuals in these spaces.

The controversy with Budapest was not the last issue that PantheaCon faced in regards for marginalization of minority groups within their convention space. In 2019, the second to last convention, experienced a fair amount of backlash due to the admission of two speakers, Max Dashú and Witchdoctor Utu. Dashú was accused of creation an unsafe environment for transgender and gender nonconforming attendants of PantheaCon, whereas Utu was accused of cultural appropriation due to his book *Conjuring Harriet “Mama Moses” Tubman and the Spirits of the Underground Railroad*.²¹⁹ Many felt that the speakers did not represent the conference’s theme, “Unity, Respect for our Diversity, and Connecting Webs to Heal the Earth,” and after online outrage they were both removed from the program.²²⁰ Although PantheaCon seemed to respond properly in the moment, the repeated mistakes seemed to have led to the eventual end of one of the largest Neopagan gatherings in North America.

Social Media and Current Political Landscape

The 2010s saw the internet becoming a space that has grown considerable accessibility, with most Americans having access to the internet in some capacity. Pew Research Center estimates that from 2000 to 2010, American Adults who used the Internet grew from 52% to 76%, with dramatic increases across all demographic categories.²²¹ The 2010s to now has been

²¹⁹ Moreno, “PantheaCon announces.”

²²⁰ Amy R. Marsh, “Transphobia Not Welcome at Neo-Pagan Conference,” *Lady of the Lake*, November 18, 2018, <https://ladyofthelake.blog/2018/11/18/transphobia-not-welcome-at-neo-pagan-conference/#:~:text=A%20handful%20of%20activists%20have,disinvited%20as%20a%20PantheaCon%20presenter>.

²²¹ Olivia Sidoti and Wyatt Dawson, “Internet, Broadband Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>.

marked by a severe shift in the American political zeitgeist, and this is apparent across social, cultural, and even religious attitudes. When the United States 45th President, Donald J. Trump was elected in 2016, his campaign and presidency redefined the American political landscape. Unlike most of his predecessors, Trump's campaign and subsequent presidency ignored bipartisan work or political unity and rather stoked the flames of political division. Since the mid-2010's, the United States has been entrenched in a deep and oftentimes unwavering partisan division. Pew Research Center's 2019 survey titled "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal" reported that 73% of American could not agree on both political policies but also even basic facts.²²² Understanding the fragile American political system is imperative in understanding the state of the Neopagan community today.

Tumblr and TikTok are social media platforms responsible for many millennials and Gen Z internet user's exposure to Paganism and Women's Spirituality. Both platforms are unique in their content delivery system, but both utilize systems to optimize your feed, making things you're already interested in appearing more frequently, until they're the only thing you see.²²³ Tumblr's focus on images led to romanticization of a specific aesthetic imagery of witchcraft and spirituality, oftentimes misconstruing the reality of practice. Like the websites from the 1990s and 2000s, Tumblr allowed for young witches to connect, create their own sacred spaces through their blogs, and generate an online community that could be as vibrant as many in person.

²²² Michael Dimock and John Gramlich, "How America Changed During Donald Trump's Presidency," *Pew Research Center*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/01/29/how-america-changed-during-donald-trumps-presidency/>.

²²³ "How TikTok recommends content," How TikTok recommends content, TikTok, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/exploring-videos/how-tiktok-recommends-content>.
 "How Tumblr recommends content," How Tumblr recommends content, Tumblr, accessed July 9 2025, [https://help.tumblr.com/knowledge-base/how-tumblr-recommends-content/#:~:text=We%20aggregate%20the%20%E2%80%9Clikes%E2%80%9D%20activity,the%20higher%2C%20the%20better\)%3B](https://help.tumblr.com/knowledge-base/how-tumblr-recommends-content/#:~:text=We%20aggregate%20the%20%E2%80%9Clikes%E2%80%9D%20activity,the%20higher%2C%20the%20better)%3B).

Although it might've started as just beautiful aesthetic imagery to some, it would be unfair to invalidate the many that were drawn to something spiritually fulfilling from Tumblr's platform. TikTok was the unsuspecting successor for the many who had left Tumblr in the 2010s, and the content delivery system made it unlike other social media platforms.

TikTok is a social media platform created by the Chinese tech development company ByteDance as an international version, with Douyin being the home market version of the app in China. While the app was created in 2016, it fully permeated the Western market once the developers acquired Musical.ly in November 2017 for 1 billion dollars. This acquisition added 80 million users mainly from the US, which then was imported to the TikTok platform. TikTok has continued to grow over the last seven years, reaching 1 billion users in 2021, totaling around 1/8th of the global population.²²⁴ TikTok as an app was firstly a short form video platform to share lip-synching and dancing video within popular trends. However, it has evolved into a complete video sharing system, with user's interests and collected data shaping their dashboards in the app. Essentially, the app will collect data from the user and will continually suggest videos within that specific trend or format. This only shifts slightly when a user has friends on the app, where their friend's interest slightly changes their dashboard, with videos that are a blend of both party's interests are suggested. This app exists to curate entertainment for your specific tastes perfectly. Still, as TikTok has evolved, the platforms' focus on solely entertainment content has shifted to content focused on education and awareness. This ranges from relationship issues to global conflicts, which without proper fact checking, leads to the app being a breeding ground for misinformation and hate.

²²⁴ Griffin LaFleur, "What is TikTok," *TechTarget*, December 19, 2023, <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/TikTok#:~:text=TikTok's%20controversies%20extend%20beyond%20privacy,to%20its%20sovereignty%20and%20security>.

Cultural and entertainment phenomena are not the only things explored within subcommunities within TikTok. Religion and spirituality have found space on the platform, with prevalent religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism making their spaces on the platform. Aside from organized religions having space on the platform, nontraditional spiritual groups also have space on the platform. Individuals can be introduced to these different content blocks regardless of showing search interest previously, introducing creators to vast masses of content consumers. Specifically, a large community on the platform practices Neopagan and Women's Spirituality. Women and femme people have made space on the platform for 'witchy' spirituality, looking towards gods and mainly goddesses and spells and rituals to contextualize their lives rather than through script. Most unanimously known as 'witchtok,' the community has grown to embrace the stereotype of being witches and practicing the Craft.²²⁵ As undefined as this is, the online community has reflected the ambiguity and complexities as something that means the spiritual itself is not immutable but personal and individual. That does not mean that discourse or gatekeeping is not prevalent on the platform, but it also does not mean it clouds the community.

Survey Results

In 2022, I started work on my Research, Creative and Scholarly Activities Grant (RCSA) project titled, "Crystals, Tarot and TikTok: Exploring a Complex Identity in the 21st Century." The project's goals were to look at the identities that practice Neopaganism, and to circulate the IRB approved survey to gauge the impact of Neopaganism on the University of Central Oklahoma's campus community. The goals of the project were to better research the

²²⁵ "Find #witchtok on TikTok," TikTok Search, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.tiktok.com/search?q=%23witchtok&t=1752076951071>.

misconceptions surrounding Neopaganism, as well as looking the construction that social media and entertainment media had established in the cultural zeitgeist.

Respondents were tasked with answering whether they practiced something or engaged with activities and items, and then if they responded that they did not engage, what was their impression of that item or practice. The logic for this was if they responded with yes, that they already had a positive or somewhat positive opinion about the activities and items. Activities and items that were selected included astrology, crystals, tarot/oracle cards, incense, essential oils, reiki, moon water, herbal medicines/ alchemical remedies, rune stones, sage smudging/ herbal cleansing, meditation/yoga, manifestation, and pendulum. At the end of the survey respondents were asked to list a few words that define religion, list a few words that define spirituality, and to describe neopaganism.

The survey received 309 responses, which is around 2% of the 2022-2023 enrolled student population. The top religious demographic was Christian with 90, the largest gender identity being cisgender female with 181, race and ethnicity being white with 243 respondents and sexuality being straight with 156. After data collection, I wanted to compare the levels of tolerance to these practices between self-identified Christians and self-identified Neopagans. Neopagan was not listed as an option for the survey, however multiple specific Neopagan groups were listed such as Paganism, Wiccan, and Druidism. I used the 64 respondents that identified as non-religious spiritual to serve as the middle ground when comparing responses from both groups. I felt this was important to have a group that shared similar sentiments to be the anchor when evaluating the two. Christianity and Neopaganism are both placed on the opposite sides religiously and politically, so to have a religious center grounded the findings.

I selected items and practices to list on the survey that represented the highly commodified as well as the underrepresented on social media. Incense, yoga, and essential oils are commonly marketed as areligious or unspiritual items, largely ignoring their religious roots and continued use. Similarly, selecting tarot and oracle cards, reiki, and pendulum represented more obscure items associated with Neopagan identity. Items and practices that due to the commodification and separation from their original religious components, not always specifically associated with Neopaganism in nature, are used more widely by religious individuals like Christians. 70 Christians reported they do not use astrology, and 41 responded as viewing the practice as negative. Compared to the data for yoga/meditation, 45 Christian respondents identified as participating in yoga/meditation, and of those who did not, 21 reported positive impressions while only 12 reported negative impressions. The Christian respondents felt the most strongly about the use of tarot and/or oracle cards, with 54 finding them to be negative, and only 13 finding them somewhat positive. To compare, of the Neopagan respondents, only one found tarot/oracle cards to be somewhat negative, the same response as the non-religious spiritual respondent. The Neopagan respondents only found essential oils to be negative, with 8 responses total, followed by crystals and astrology with 2 responses each of somewhat negative.²²⁶

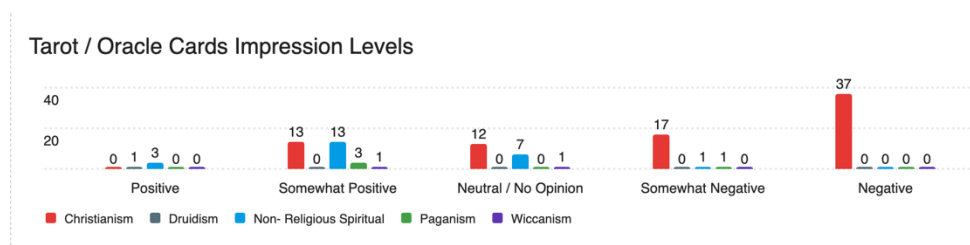


Figure 5: Impression levels of tarot / oracle cards across religious demographics from survey results, 2022.

²²⁶ Alexis McKernan, “Crystals Tarot and TikTok; The Neopaganism Movement During the Age of Social Media,” University of Central Oklahoma, 2022.

Items like essential oils and yoga have been become highly commodified outside of their original intent and have fueled the wellness industry. Some of the most well-know, and most stereotypical multi-level marketing schemes sell essential oils and yoga pants while typically not crediting the cultures or practices that these items derive from. Neopagans are not immune to not participating in the overconsumption of commodified cultural goods, but if intention holds any measure, most Neopagans are trying to create some form of connection for spiritual enlightenment, while many of these multi-level marketing schemes are churning out cheap products to make a quick buck.

New Age Spirituality: A Modern Conspiracy Theory

To better understand the divergent shift of spirituality in the United States, the hybrid belief system of “conspirituality” proposed by Charlotte Ward and David Voas is essential. “Conspirituality” is defined as a “hybrid belief of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality that has appeared on the internet.”²²⁷ The belief system can be further defined as a politico-spiritual philosophy, based in a conviction that a secret group controls or is trying to control political/social order (conspiracy) and that humanity is “undergoing a paradigm shift in consciousness” (New Age).²²⁸ Conspirituality appeals to individuals who might already have these beliefs, or are considering them, and it is estimated that 60% of Americans fall into these categories.²²⁹ Unlike how the Women’s Spirituality Movement’s ethos was grounded in academic inquiry, many individuals have grown to completely distrust experts. Instead of the grounding that academic research and inquiry provides, the United States public has begun to favor the

²²⁷ Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirituality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (2011): 103-121, 103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2011.539846>.

²²⁸ Ward and Voas, “Conspirituality,” 104.

²²⁹ Ward and Voas, “Conspirituality,” 114.

flippant social media “research.” This creates subsequent insecurity and confusion on what is fact and what is opinion.

With the combination of social media platforms like TikTok providing shortform content and easily accessible communities and a majority of Americans not agreeing on a baseline for basic facts, conspirituality has worked its way into these online spheres, utilized by those who are pushing a conservative and harmful agenda. Alt-right ideology has embedded itself into the popular alternative spirituality communities on the internet, oftentimes from cisgender male users. There has been an uptick in men advocating for better attention to their mental health, but instead of using their platforms to advocate for destigmatizing mental health resources (which some do), there has been an increase in utilizing defunct science or spirituality to explain away personal issues and interpersonal problems that a young man might be facing. This combined with the continued rise of male loneliness and isolation, we continued to see more and more men and women engaging with and reaffirming these views as factually correct and okay.

Amy Carlson (also known as Mother God) and the Love Has Won cult is the perfect example of the intersections between conspirituality alt right ideas all wrapped in a package that has remnants of the Women’s Spirituality movement. This cult faced a media explosion when the founder and leader of the cult, Amy Carlson, was found deceased at her Colorado compound in April 2021: carefully placed at an alter blue skinned, mummified and wrapped in Christmas lights.²³⁰ Carlson’s religious ideas centered her as “Mother God,” that she was a 19-billion-year-old being and a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, and that she could heal people of illnesses like

²³⁰ Noelle Phillips, “Mummified remains of Love Has Won cult leader found in group’s Colorado home,” *The Denver Post*, updated May 15th 2021, <https://www.denverpost.com/2021/05/03/love-has-won-cult-leader-dead/>.

cancer with her love.²³¹ Carlson was introduced to new age spirituality in the mid 2000s, using different websites like lightworkers.org, and through her relationship with Amerith WhiteEagle, he convinced her that she was divine in nature, and she would claim that she was experiencing paranormal phenomena. This would culminate by the end of 2007 in her leaving her husband and children, quitting her job and cutting off most of her family and then starting the “Galactic Federation of Light” with WhiteEagle.²³² The two would post their first YouTube video in 2009 and lead the group as Mother and Father God. Ultimately, she would end up leaving WhiteEagle around 5 years later after gaining her own follower Miguel Lamboy, and Carlson’s following started to steadily grow.²³³ The group began to market healing products to their audience in between their blend of spirituality and Q-Anon conspiracy theories. Carlson purported certain views like Adolf Hitler working for the light and that the group overwhelmingly supported Trump.²³⁴ Supplements like colloidal silver, a supplement the Food and Drug Administration declared unsafe to consume in 1999 and would preach that substances like marijuana and alcohol were “medicine.”²³⁵ All the while Carlson claimed to her audience that she was the reincarnation of a variety of historical figures (like Marilyn Monroe and Joan of Arc), and that the group was guided by the “Galactics,” a mix of celebrities both living and death like Robin Williams and

²³¹ Graig Graziosi, “Love Has Won: What we know about the cult whose leader was found mummified in Colorado,” *The Independent*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/love-has-won-cult-amy-carlson-b1969246.html>.

²³² Christopher Moyer, “From ‘Mother God’ to Mummified Corpse: Inside the Fringe Spiritual Sect ‘Love Has Won’,” *Culture, Rolling Stone*, November 26, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/love-has-won-amy-carlson-mother-god-1254916/>.

²³³ Moyer, “From ‘Mother God’,”.

²³⁴ Addie Morfoot, “‘Love Has Won: The Cult of Mother God’ Director Answers Burning Questions: Why She Didn’t Emphasize QAnon Propaganda – and How She Incorporated Amy Carlson’s Corpse,” *Variety*, December 8, 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/tv/news/love-has-won-the-cult-of-mother-god-director-qanon-amy-carlson-1235822987/>.

²³⁵ Meredith Blake, “HBO’s ‘Love Has Won’ shows how cult leader Amy Carlson went from McDonald’s manager to mummy,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2023-11-28/love-has-won-amy-carlson-hbo-director>.

Donald Trump.²³⁶ At their peak they would receive almost 20,000 followers on Facebook, 10,000 on YouTube and their videos would reach view counts of over 1.5 million.²³⁷ Carlson's life met an unfortunate end, with her slowly dying from alcohol abuse, anorexia, and chronic colloidal silver ingestion: she was only forty-five years old and she weighed seventy five pounds at her death.²³⁸ Her followers proceeded to transport her corpse across five state lines, and they positioned her body at an altar. This broke across news outlets like wildfire in the United States, acquainting the public with a new cult figure. Instead of the stereotypical image of a man who had utilized his charisma for sex and power, there was a woman at the center of the story who was to her followers a divine being. Carlson's story is a perfect example of the growth and danger of conspirituality, and the ways that aspects of Neopaganism, even the ideas and figures attached to Women's Spirituality, are being interpreted with the danger of conspiracy and not the grounding of spirituality.

Gender Essentialism; An Unfortunate Parallel

The continued conversation and 'men's' and 'women's' energies have stark, oftentimes diametric differences are directly based in gender essentialism. Gender essentialism is described as, "gender essentialists regard gender differences as natural, fixed, deep-seated, discrete, informative, and fundamental beliefs that often rest on a biogenetic understanding of the sources of gender differences."²³⁹ When using this understanding of gender essentialism to frame the social media accounts purporting the differences between men and women's energies, it is

²³⁶ Blake, "HBO's Love Has Won' ,".

²³⁷ Virginia Pelley, "Love Has Lost," *Marie Claire*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a37417778/love-has-won-cult-amy-carlson-stroud-death/>.

²³⁸ Emily Russel, *El Paso County Coroner and Toxicology Report*, El Paso Coroner, 2021, <https://www.docdroid.net/MkW2hne/carlson-amy-renee-pdf#page=2>.

²³⁹ Lea Skewes, Cordelia Fine, and Nick Haslam, "Beyond Mars and Venus: The role of gender essentialism in support for gender inequality and backlash," *PLoS ONE* 13, no 7 (2018): 1-17, 12. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0200921&type=printable>.

evident that they are practically the same thing. Drawing differences between cisgender men and cisgender women based off personality traits that are supposed to be tied to their gender is not a new event, but it is being redefined through a pseudo-spiritual fashion.

An example of this that is indicative of Women's Spirituality beliefs and theories is that there is a difference between "male" and "female" energies. Essentially, this claim is that being incorrectly in these energies can lead to issues in all aspects of one's life. While on the surface this feels like a tactic for introspection and understanding of oneself as an individual, it is rooted in sexist, misogynist, homophobic, and binary thinking. One example is a TikTok video titled "How Masculine Energy REPELS a Masculine Man" by Anabelle Ingleton. Ingleton utilizes pseudoscience to describe that "...and when a man is around a woman who's in her low-key stress response [masculine energy], it triggers it in him, it turns on his amygdala, and he very quickly has a bit of a defense."²⁴⁰ She furthers her point by saying that women will not be seen as a "potential companion or someone that's safe" and that "masculine energy women unfortunately, they make it very, very easy for a man to hang around," insinuating that they are both sexually "easy" and not compatible for partnership.²⁴¹ Ingleton is not alone, with the TikTok group The Primal Fathers also posting content about how to navigate women with masculine energy. Their video, "Dealing With a Woman in a Masculine Energy" doubles down on gender essentialist stereotypes saying, "meet them [woman with masculine energy] with feminine energy, show compassion, listen, be soft. . ." and, "If your woman is coming to you with a very strong masculine energy she's being decisive, she's taking charge, she wants to lead, she wants

²⁴⁰ Anabelle Ingleton, "Episode 115 "How Masculine Energy REPELS A Masculine Man," TikTok, November 29, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@anabell.ingleton/video/7306811646037462315?q=annabelle%20ingleton%20115&t=1752079366038>.

²⁴¹ Ingleton, "Episode 115."

the family to go in a direction.”²⁴² There are countless other examples of these videos, with current search results boasting 142.6 thousand videos with the #masculineenergy hashtag and over a billion views.²⁴³ Through the masculine and the feminine being positioned in this harsh binary, any expression or experiences that constitute outside of this are not considered valid and eliminate spaces for gender expansive individuals.

Through the reinstitution and repacking of these puritanical ideas, the lived experiences of women and queer people are inherently erased. The rapid dissemination of these soundbites that platforms like TikTok allows and the current extraordinary level of partisan distrust, leads to a dangerous space in which anyone can become an expert. This current era of Women’s Spirituality, or what is left, feels indicative of the larger issues facing our society today.

²⁴² The Primal Fathers, “Dealing With a Woman in a Masculine Energy,” TikTok, February 5, 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@theprimalfathers/video/7332056153309941025?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7523354990363035167.

²⁴³ “#masculineenergy | TikTok,” TikTok, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/masculineenergy?lang=en>.

Conclusion

The Women's Spirituality movement existed as a critical countercultural movement that redefined the way many women conceptualized themselves in society. Using threads from the ancient and prehistoric world to better understand their place in the world, they tried to make the world a better place (though some of their actions would not stand up to historical scrutiny today). The Women's Spirituality movement generated a vibrant and unique culture and community among feminists, but it is hardly recognized when looking at the larger second wave feminist movement. Did Noah really build an ark and survive a great flood, and did Moses part the Red Sea? For some these stories are real facts, but for others they exist as fables and myths to teach lessons. This same level of understanding should be afforded to the Goddess worshipping women of the Women's Spirituality movement. Many of these women were trying to make sense of their place in a society that not only politically saw them as second class, but religiously as well. Religion has and will continue to dictate human social and cultural norms, and many of these women were trying to understand themselves against the background of the status quo. They used academia and activism to spread the word about their spirituality and hoped to empower and enlighten others.

The Women's Spirituality movement was not perfect, and even through trying to radically shape religion by seeing it through the lens of the divine feminine and Goddess worship, some women created pockets that were radically exclusionary. It is not a coincidence that many of the women who were actively supporting lesbian separatism and trans-exclusive radical feminism also identify themselves as being a part of Women's Spirituality. The iconography and emphasis placed on sex and biologically female maturation like menstruation and pregnancy. The vitriol and disrespect that was levied against specifically transgender women for simply wanting to

learn more and participate disillusioned me for a period. Although I understand that these women felt that their space was sacred and that their uniquely cisgender world view would be incompatible and not understandable to transgender individuals, a vast amount of them identified themselves as lesbians and had experienced homophobia. Many of these opinions on transgender identities validity slide away from the radical left into the radical right, completing this binary and queer exclusive echo chamber.

The reclamation of queer space has been a theme throughout this thesis. From the very beginning of the Women's Spiritually movement, queer people went out of their own way and made their own space. Zsuzsanna Budapest and Holly Boswell are the two that stuck out to me because of how they let their identities inspire their practice. This theme has not diminished, and although the deft hand of the alt-right has made its way into the wellness and Neopagan social media circles, many queer witches and goddess worshipers are doing the work to subvert and correct these narratives. Queer witch influencers like Ysha, known as Activist Witch on all social media platforms, uses their perspective as a queer, non-binary, witch of color to challenge transphobia and uses their queerness to expand their understanding of spirituality.²⁴⁴

As much as the current state of the world feels hopeless and unfixable, like PantheaCon's retirement, maybe things need to crumble before something incredible can emerge. The queer witches working to not only create inclusive Neopagan spaces, but to revive the Goddess like the Women's Spirituality movement did before is exciting.

²⁴⁴ “@Activist Witch,” LinkTree, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://linktr.ee/activistwitch>.

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