

Asherah in full bloom:
an ecofeminist overview of the Sacred Tree Tradition

by

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INTRODUCTION

Feminists have written extensively concerning the exclusive male deity image in the classical monotheistic religions as justification for sexism, domination and misogyny. It makes a difference whether the ultimate point of reference is imaged as a father sky god or as an earth tree goddess. From the standpoint of a middle-aged student who discovered the goddess late in life, I understand that how deity is imaged matters. In *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson argues that “the symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world.”¹ Mary Daly says it best. “Since ‘God’ is male, the male is God.”² Whatever way deity is to be imagined, it should not be limited to this.

Prior to the god the father deity model prevalent in the classical Western traditions, history reveals there were other ways of understanding deity. In this thesis, I explore one of these alternative models of deity, the Sacred Tree. The Sacred Tree Tradition is an ancient one, an artifact of an earth-based spirituality that continues into the present time. The practice of acknowledging trees as manifestations of deity recognizes nature as an aspect or an expression of the divine rather than a product or creation of it. The sacred tree as divine revelation discloses an immanent goddess who promotes the flourishing of her inclusive earth family. My exploration of the Sacred Tree Tradition emphasizes the analyses of feminist theologians, in particular Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Grace M. Jantzen, Carol Christ, and Starhawk, and feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins.

Women and Trees

While attempting to decide on a topic for my interdisciplinary thesis, I attended the Mankato Women’s Spirituality Conference of 2001. Early in the graduate studies process, I

became aware that women were historically identified with nature; a pairing that, since the arrival of the classical monotheistic traditions, had not proved helpful. Nevertheless, while this historical assignment had been created by patriarchy, during the conference I found that women self-identified not only with nature, but with trees in particular. During each of the four sessions that I attended, regardless of the topic, the facilitator would connect women and trees. For example, a chemist whose topic was intuition suggested befriending trees to enhance intuitive abilities. She pointed out that historic insights have occurred to people while meditating under trees, referring to the Nobel winning scientist Barbara McClintock, who meditated beneath a eucalyptus tree.³

During this same time, in an English Literature class on Southern women writers, I read Alice Walker's *Meridian*, where an unforgettable episode describes the severing of a slave woman's tongue. It is buried beneath a magnolia tree, transforming the tree into a magical talking Tree of Life. This was reminiscent of another unforgettable Walker novel, *The Color Purple*. The character Shug in *The Color Purple* is able to discard the patriarchal deity and find a god that is empowering when she identifies with a tree.

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house.⁴

A more vivid description of a bond between women and trees would be difficult to envision. My exploration of the Sacred Tree Tradition is an attempt to make sense of this bond.

Chapter one contains a thematic literature review. In order to better understand the significance of the Sacred Tree Tradition, I describe the impact of trees on the human psyche in chapter two. This description includes an analysis of the historical Sacred Tree Tradition

depicted in three ancient myths: “Inanna and the *Huluppu*-Tree,” “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” and “The Garden of Eden” myth found in Genesis of the Hebrew Bible. Chapter three presents an overview of feminist analysis of the women/nature dyad, deity symbols as privileged and or subjugated knowledge, and the impact of both on historical critical consciousness. Chapter four explores the gendering of deity constructs while chapter five investigates sacred space. Chapter six discusses the impact of rooting the deity in the here and now and is followed by the conclusion of my research findings.

Definition of Terms

Before I begin, I believe it is critical to recognize that several terms in this thesis are multifaceted. The term “religion,” for example, has many definitions in common usage. *Methods of Religion* surveyed numerous possibilities, all of which have application to the present subject. Rita Gross stresses function as she explores the role of religion in defining people’s “ultimate concern.”⁵ Mircea Eliade prefers a phenomenological approach that focuses on the emotional experience of the practitioner and on sacred space identified as “axis mundi.”⁶ Clifford Geertz presents an intellectualist interpretation that regards religion as a system of models that establishes “powerful moods and motivations.”⁷ Elizabeth Johnson emphasizes substance and context concerning belief in deity symbols.⁸

These various perspectives make several insights evident. First of all, religion is based on experience. Therefore, the meaning of religion is dependent on human judgment and interpretation. Secondly, religion frames life and death by attempting to interpret what is essential to living and dying well. Because this is so, central to any particular religion is its worldview, its concepts concerning the nature of reality. Worldview determines content: beliefs, biases and a limited imagination impact the interpretation of reality. It is important

to note that the authors I have chosen for this project, for the most part, are from a cultural environment that has been formed by Euro-Western Jewish and Christian worldviews. They have critiqued the concept of god that is dependent upon this piety. I understand that they, and I, cannot fully escape from the culture and the grammar that these worldviews provide.

The term feminism also describes a worldwide phenomenon that is many-sided. It is an ideology concerned with the social construction of gender and patriarchal dualisms. It is an academic method that “recognizes the need to study women as thoroughly, as critically, and as empathically as men.”⁹ According to Anne M. Clifford:

Feminism is a social vision, rooted in women’s experience of sexually based discrimination and oppression, a movement seeking the liberation of women from all forms of sexism, and an academic method of analysis being used in virtually every discipline. Feminism is all of these things and more because it is a perspective on life that colors all of a person’s hopes, commitment, and actions.¹⁰

It is a term that identifies an ideology that is in the process of adaptation and continual development.

Sandra Schneider adds another element to feminism as it “embraces an alternative vision for humanity and *the earth*, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization.”¹¹

Feminist concern for the health of the planet is known as ecofeminism. According to Clifford,

Ecofeminism, by definition, refers to a connection between patriarchy’s domination of women and of nonhuman nature. Ecofeminists argue that in the drive to dominate, patriarchy forgets that humans, including those in power positions, have a natural biological connectedness with all of earth’s life forms.¹²

An ecofeminist understanding of the women/nature dyad does not translate into agreement concerning the interpretation of the reality of the connectedness. While some feminists view

the dyad as essentialist and unredeemable, those who embrace the Sacred Tree Tradition reinterpret the dyad as a model for flourishing.

The relationship between feminism and nature suggests a third definition in need of clarification. “Nature” has many implications. “For a general audience in the Western and English-speaking world, probably the first reference that comes to mind is land-based and environmental. Nature means grass and trees, panorama and vistas, mountains and lakes and oceans.”¹³ Beyond the obvious, however, Adrian V. Ivakhiv identifies “...four primary representational discourses: nature as Object, as Resource, as Home, and as Spirit or Numinous Other.”¹⁴ While the Sacred Tree Tradition contains all four discourses, it stresses the latter, tree as Spirit or Numinous Other. Tree as spirit is “...characterized by life, sentience, and agency or will, an Other which interacts with humans, teaches us and places demands on us, and with which we can come into closer sympathy or harmony (or from which we can distance ourselves).”¹⁵ Ivakhiv’s explanation of the various components of nature implies that nature can be understood as purely profane or it can also be understood as sacred. The term “sacred” refers to objects or spaces that have been set apart by religious practitioners as being holy models of deity. The Sacred Tree Tradition ensouls the tree: humans understand something about deity through a relationship with a tree.

Nature and religion also combine in “nature religion,” which is another umbrella term for an assortment of movements. The term nature religion is problematic in that most religions have a relationship to nature, as do their deities. The classic world religions all have creation myths that provide an account of the creation of the world and of humanity. The question, therefore, concerns the type of relationship to nature each religion professes. While the classical Western tradition portrays a deity that has a rather distant relationship to

nature, nature religions either see nature as an end-in-itself, or nature as a means to a higher end, to some kind of transcendence. Catherine L. Albanese hints at this variety within nature religions in her definition of nature religion.

Nature religion means beliefs and practices that involve turning to God in nature or to a nature that is God. For a smaller, largely self-identified group in the same Western and English-speaking world, nature religion signals Goddess more than God, and nature is the principal trope for a religiosity that calls itself pagan or, alternately, neopagan.¹⁶

The Sacred Tree Tradition is a manifestation of the nature religion that signals the goddess.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Three subjects run parallel when discussing the Sacred Tree Tradition: the tree in religion, feminist analysis of the women and nature dyad, and deity model construction. This chapter presents background research concerning these foundational themes.

The Tree in Religion

The literature regarding the role of trees in religion covers the topics of tree physiology, the history of sacred trees, and the goddess/tree connection.

Tree physiology is explained by Fred Hageneder in *The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbiosis, and Inspiration* (2000). Hageneder explores the ability of trees to inspire and sustain humanity as possible reasons for sacred designation. He explores the tree's significance in human survival, providing scientific explanations for the tree's role in clean air, water cycles, and development of minerals, to name a few.

Robert Pogue Harrison, author of *Forests: the Shadow of Civilization* (1992), provides a wide-ranging analysis of the cultural history of forests. Harrison analyzes the human place in nature as he explores the role of the forest in the Western imagination as it is depicted in language, especially as a metaphor for marginality, chaos and the goddess.

There is an extensive body of literature that discusses nature religions. Catherine L. Albanese in *Nature Religion in America* (1990) and *Reconsidering Nature Religion* (2002), examines the role and impact of nature religion in a wide range of movements, from environmentalism to New Age practices. Donald A. Crosby, author of *A Religion of Nature* (2002), argues the case for nature as the focus of religion. Crosby shares his personal journey from fundamentalist Christian theist to nature religion disciple. The significance of this journey is the author's defense of nature as the source of deity model.

Adrian J. Ivakhiv provides another perspective in *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona* (2001). While Ivakhiv does not discuss trees as sacred, he does address the role of specific sites in nature that have been proclaimed as sacred space. He also analyzes the category of nature in a manner useful to this project. His identification of nature as “spirit” applies to the Sacred Tree Tradition.

Mrs. J. H. Philpot, author of *The Sacred Tree or the Tree in Religion and Myth* (1897), presents a historical overview of the worship of trees. Philpot’s book carefully catalogues tree deities, rituals and traditions. Philpot is a particularly intriguing source, both as a resource for the Sacred Tree Tradition, and as a reflection of the nineteenth century. Philpot never reveals her first name and she denigrates the religious ideas of ancient civilizations as “primitive,” “semi-civilized” and “barbaric.” Scholars nevertheless frequently reference Philpot today.

Construction of the Categories Women and Nature

This literature review concerns the basic sources I studied to examine feminist concepts concerning the social construction of categories in general, and of woman and nature in particular.

Implicit in the construction of the classical dyad of women and nature, is the idea that knowledge itself is a social construction. How does anyone know what she knows? Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1999), attempts to answer that question. While Collins’ subject is African American women, her general analysis of knowledge construction as privileged and subjugated, and her identification of ‘intersecting oppressions’ are being used by feminist philosophers of religion like Grace M. Jantzen.

Denise Riley further explains the complexity of knowledge construction. In “*Am I That Name?*” *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (1988), Riley examines the construction of historical categories in the manner of Michel Foucault. She specifically reviews the meaning of the category ‘woman’ in relation to other concepts, like ‘nature’ and ‘body,’ categories that are enmeshed. These categories are fluid, fluctuating and temporal. Riley shows that ideas about what it meant to be a ‘woman’ evolved relative to these other evolving categories. Her appraisal of the complexity is perceived not as a weakness of feminism, but as a strength since it acknowledges the reality of diversity.

Construction of Deity Models

Elizabeth Johnson, author of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992), argues for multiple models of deity within a Biblical context. Johnson presents examples of deity models that are not gendered, like rocks and breath. While Johnson is not a goddess theologian, she argues for equivalent imagery of deity in male and female terms, like Sophia or the old woman looking for the lost coin in one of Jesus’s parables. Johnson argues for an understanding of the universe in which the world is understood as a deity construct.

Carol Christ is an ecofeminist who came to understand the sacredness of nature after she discovered the goddess. In *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (1987), Christ describes how the goddess unites women and nature. The goddess is not equated with nature but she is understood as expressing a relationship between women and nature. The goddess is also a realization that deity metaphors cannot exist without creation. Christ concludes that death is finality and that eternal salvation-promoting religions have been destructive for women.

Rosemary Radford Ruether is a Catholic ecofeminist who promotes the healing of relationships through theology. Her critiques of Christianity hold the tradition accountable for its support of gender inequality through dualistic hierarchical models of dominance that endanger the survival of the earth. Ruether works within Christianity, although marginally, to promote models of flourishing on both the global and personal level. In her 1972 essay, "Motherearth and the Megamachine: Theology of Liberation in Feminine, Somatic, and Ecological Perspective," Ruether explores the relationship between the exploitation of the earth and women in ancient Greek thought and subsequently early Christian theology. She provides further historical background for this dyad in *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (1983). In *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of earth Healing* (1992), Ruether refers to the ancient name for the earth Goddess, Gaia. By doing so, she acknowledges the genuine presence of the sacred in polytheistic nature religions.

Sallie McFague is also a Christian ecofeminist. Her central interest is the naming of deity in a way that comprehends the impact of historical consciousness and promotes an appreciation for diversity and relationship. In *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1987), she proposes the necessity of having many different models of deity. McFague's insights include acknowledging the importance of the human worldview, which undermines the concept of divine revelation; an understanding of the immensity of the universe, which promotes evolution as the new creation mythology; and the necessity of particularity in deity construction, which latter acknowledges the fact that all deity models are improper.

Building on the recognition that deity construction is problematic, Grace M. Jantzen, in *Becoming Divine, Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1999), argues that, due to

the socially constructive nature of all ultimate truth claims, they should be discarded and replaced by imaginative constructs that promote feminist images of deity. Jantzen brings the submerged role of the imagination in religion to the forefront. Using Collins's idea of intersecting oppressions, she also argues that the relative nature of feminist construction can be countered since engagement provides boundaries that promote justice and "flourishing."

Finally, Starhawk (Miriam Simos) is a Neopagan ecofeminist whose book *The Spiral Dance: a Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1989) established her as the modern founder of a goddess religion in the West, one that is reminiscent of pre-Christian Europe. Starhawk is a Wiccan Witch intent on reshaping dualistic hierarchies by developing a theology that celebrates the sacredness immanent in all of creation.

As shown in this literature review, the construction of the knowledge category of deity model is a topic of concern for feminists. Consensus acknowledges a preference for a deity model that accepts its radically constructive character, acknowledges nature as manifestation and context, and critiques salvation theologies.

CHAPTER 2: THE TREE AS MODEL OF DEITY

This chapter describes the impact of social context in the construction of the tree as a model of deity. It explores possible reasons for the rooting of trees in the human religious imagination and then examines three ancient myths that depict trees as sacred.

The Sacred Tree Tradition refers to the worldwide practice of acknowledging trees as models of deity. Why trees? What could be more central to life on earth than the tree? It is safe to admit that while trees existed without the help of humans, humans could not exist without trees. Trees have been used by humans from the beginning of time for fire, medication, and construction of homes. Nevertheless, how can a resource that can be chopped down and paved over disclose deity?

Much like Philpot, I once thought of this model of deity as the imaginative construct of primitive civilizations wrestling with nature for survival. Not so very long ago, it was difficult to imagine deity as anything other than an old man in the sky. He was Catholic, male and white. This deity was my reference point, my compass, and my way of making sense of reality. Like Shug, I discovered alternative possibilities with a little help from trees.

Tree worship is an ancient practice that reveals how the idea of unseen power was symbolized in natural wonders. The tradition claimed trees as religious tools used as imaginative vehicles that revealed spiritual reality. The attack on sacred trees by early Christianity shows how tenacious this sacred symbol was.

The Christian crusade against trees, particularly sacred trees, is unparalleled in history. Previously, sacred groves had sometimes been damaged or destroyed only during periods of warfare. In fourth-century Gaul, Martin, Bishop of Tours, started the sad tradition of destroying sacred groves for religious reasons. In the second half of the seventh century AD, the five sacred trees of Ireland were destroyed. In AD 723, at a sanctuary belonging to tribes of German Saxons in Geismar (central

Germany), St. Boniface not only felled the Sacred Oak of Donar (also known as Thor), but also poisoned the sacred spring.¹⁷

Humanity has obviously resisted efforts to undermine the Sacred Tree Tradition.

Importance of Trees

Language reveals trees as a foundational source of stimulation for the human imagination in general. Robert Pogue Harrison, in *Forests: the Shadow of Civilization* explains:

Human beings have by no means exploited the forest only materially; they have also plundered its trees in order to forge their fundamental etymologies, symbols, analogies, structures of thought, emblems of identity, concepts of continuity, and notions of system. From the family tree to the tree of knowledge, from the tree of life to the tree of memory, forests have provided an indispensable resource of symbolization in the cultural evolution of humankind, so much so that the rise of modern scientific thinking remains quite unthinkable apart from the prehistory of such metaphorical borrowings.¹⁸

The impact of trees on the religious imagination is evidenced by the presence of sacred trees in creation myths around the world: in the Norse *Eddas*, Islamic *Koran*, Jewish *Talmud*, and Hindu *Vedas*, to name a few. Within these myths, trees are identified as sacred symbols of creation, the world, and knowledge, as well as individual deities.

There is little doubt that all races, at some time in their development, regarded the tree as the home, haunt, or embodiment of a spiritual essence, capable of more or less independent life and activity, and able to detach itself from its material habitat and to appear in human or in animal form....There is, indeed, scarcely a country in the world where the tree has not at one time or another been approached with reverence or with fear, as being closely connected with some spiritual potency.¹⁹

The myths reveal the role of trees as sacred symbols as a passive one in that they fit into various culturally shaped notions of sacredness and deity, notions that are remarkably similar throughout the world.

Why do trees have such an enormous impact on the human psyche? First of all, as mentioned previously, trees are necessary for human survival. Trees provide the air we

breathe, balance water tables, and maintain a stable climate. In *The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbiosis, and Inspiration*, Fred Hageneder summarizes it this way:

Trees are the most successful life forms on earth. Apart from the oceans, wildwood, mixed woodland of self-sown trees untouched and uncultivated by man and tropical rainforest form the richest eco-systems in existence, providing a habitat for the widest variety of species. Societies of trees are fundamental to weather and climate, for a beneficial water cycle; for the development of minerals; for balancing the electrical charges between the ionosphere and the earth's surface; and for the maintenance of the earth's magnetic field as a whole. In addition, their intelligent and adaptable design and their ability to co-operate have made trees the dominant life form on earth, since they first appeared more than three hundred million years ago.²⁰

While the Ancients may not have understood the science, they understood the value of trees in their survival.

The Sacred Tree Tradition acknowledges this dependence. Hageneder also suggests that it was the recognition of the significant dependence of humans on trees that inspired humans to imagine the possibility of deity. In the environments of ancient Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia, for example, fruit trees assumed special importance, as did palm and evergreen trees.

What we today label as gods were originally the spirits of trees to whom goodwill and gratitude was bestowed. This is not surprising when we remember that Athens owed its economical power to the olive trade, as did Lebanon to the Cedar-of-Lebanon, and Phoenicia to the Phoenix or Date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) after which it was named.²¹

Trees that fed and housed populations became deified models of the good life.

Trees are also impressive as the tallest, largest, and longest-lived species inhabiting this planet. The Sequoia gigantea can stand as high as 300 feet, weigh as much as 2000 tons, and live as long as 3000 years. The Bristlecone, a *Pinus longaeva*, claims an even longer lifespan. The oldest living inhabitant on the planet is a 4,767 year old Bristlecone

named Methuselah. Another tree, the quaking aspen, qualifies as the largest organism in the world and resides in Utah.

One clone of the quaking aspen, *Populus tremuloides*, is estimated to contain 47,000 trunks. Nominated by University of Colorado biologist Jeffrey Milton as perhaps the biggest individual organism on the planet, this dispersed but connected tree covers 43 hectares in Utah. It is estimated to weigh 6,000,000 kilograms.²²

Obviously, trees are inspiring organisms for a variety of reasons.

In the essay, "Trees and the Sacred," Chris Witcombe says that trees were worshiped because they were impressive plants. "Trees have been invested in all cultures with a dignity unique to their own nature, and tree cults, in which a single tree or a grove of trees is worshipped, have flourished at different times almost everywhere."²³ My first meeting with the giant redwoods left me awestruck, and gave me an appreciation for the role of trees in the religious imagination.

Linda Awdishu suggests that trees also played an important role in humanity's ability to symbolize. In the essay "The Sacred Tree" she posits that the sacred tree became a tangible symbol of intangible concepts regarding the holiness of plants and the supremacy of kings. "The sacred tree is, in essence, the divine power of the deities of those ancient times manifested in an earthly representation which the Assyrians could relate to and which they regarded as the source of agricultural power equivalent to their success as a nation."²⁴ Trees were evidently important enough to be aligned with the power structures.

Philpot also argues that the worship of trees provided a tangible symbol for intangible concepts: animism and ancestor worship.

Either the gods were developed from the spiritual forces assumed by primitive man to be inherent in nature, and gradually differentiated from the less friendly powers embodied in the various demons, until they came to be regarded as the kinsmen and parents of their worshippers; or they were ancestral spirits, at once feared and trusted

from their very origin by their kinsmen, whilst all the class of minor spirits and demons were but degenerate gods or the ancestral spirits of enemies.²⁵

Trees, therefore, impacted the human religious imagination as tangible modes that allowed the Ancients to communicate with the multitude of mysterious powers of the universe.

While Philpot establishes the worldwide practice of tree worship, after investigating scholarly research concerning the early deification of trees she concludes that, “the primitive worship of the tree had more than one root.”²⁶ It is reasonable to conclude that various elements encouraged the deification of trees.

Evidence of the popularity of the Sacred Tree Tradition is plentiful in archeological sites around the world. Artifacts reveal that the sacred tree was a common theme in Assyrian and in Mesopotamian art.²⁷ Representations of trees have been found on numerous pieces of ancient pottery and carved stone cylinders (used to engrave wet clay) that have been found in Ireland, Germany, Greece, Egypt, Africa, Palestine, China, Mexico, and India.²⁸ The location of trees in religious sites indicates their designation as sacred as well. Site explorations show that trees grew on Mesopotamian ziggurats and were a principle feature of the so-called Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the wonders of the ancient world.²⁹

Ancient Myths

Glimpses of the Sacred Tree Tradition are also evident in ancient literature, including the foundational origin myths of many of the world religions, from indigenous to classical. Of particular interest to this project are three ancient myths from the Middle East: “Inanna’s *Huluppu*-Tree,” “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” and the “Genesis Creation Story,” found in the Hebrew Bible.

The earliest known literature was composed in Mesopotamia around 2300 BCE. The author is a woman named Enheduanna who wrote hymns and poems to the ancient star goddess, Inanna. One of these hymns concerns “a single tree, a *huluppu*-tree.” While feminists are providing fascinating analyses of the hymns, my interest in the story concerns the *huluppu*-tree.

At that time, a tree, a single tree, a *huluppu*-tree,
Was planted by the banks of the Euphrates.
The tree was nurtured by the waters of the Euphrates.
The whirling South Wind arose, pulling at its roots
And ripping at its branches
Until the waters of the Euphrates carried it away.

A woman who walked in fear of the word of the Sky God, An,
Who walked in fear of the word of the Air God, Enlil,
Plucked the tree from the river and spoke:

“I shall bring this tree to Uruk.

I shall plant this tree in my holy garden.”

Inanna cared for the tree with her hand.
She settled the earth around the tree with her foot.
She wondered:

“How long will it be until I have a shining throne to sit upon?

How long will it be until I have a shining bed to lie upon?”³⁰

According to the representational discourses of Ivakhiv, a landscape may be seen as home when it is “coproduced through a specific human (local or regional) history, or available to be shaped into a new history....This is both a humanized (anthropocentric) and relational conception of land...understood as having its own needs which must be properly tended and stewarded.”³¹ The garden is the home of the goddess. The tree, an element of the landscape, is also claimed by the goddess Inanna and shaped into a new history by being “plucked” from the Euphrates and transplanted in the “holy garden.” The tree’s needs are identified and then satisfied by Inanna. Inanna cared for the tree until it was large enough to provide enough wood for a throne and a bed. In this sense, the *huluppu*-tree is a resource, a

commodity to be used by the goddess. Before Inanna is able to proceed with her plans, a snake, a bird and a “dark maiden” inhabit the tree.

Then a serpent who could not be charmed
 Made its nest in the roots of the *huluppu*-tree.
 The *Anzu*-bird set his young in the branches of the tree.
 And the dark maid Lilith built her home in the trunk.

The young woman who loved to laugh wept.
 How Inanna wept!
 (Yet they would not leave her tree.)³²

Wolkstein notes that the serpent suggests “rebirth and sexuality,” the Anzu bird craves and steals “power and knowledge, and Lillith is a symbol of being “outside of human relationship or regulation.”³³ As such, they name “Inanna’s unexpressed fears and desires.”³⁴ In order for Inanna to become civilized, she must repress these elements.

The serpent, bird and dark maiden also represent the tree that they possess, for they suggest, in Ivakhiv’s terminology, the Numinous Other, the life and sentience of the *huluppu*-tree. The serpent, bird and dark maiden suggest wilderness, being outside of civilized space, and their possession of the tree is cause for battle. The serpent, bird and dark maiden could have claimed the tree as their own if it was still growing in the wild, but because it has been transplanted in a cultivated space, it is under new ownership. Inanna, the tree’s owner, is one who fears the sky and air gods. “An, the Sky God, and Enlil, the Air God, are Sumer’s lawgivers and ordainers who direct the fates of those in heaven and on earth.”³⁵ This suggests that both the *huluppu*-tree and the goddess, Inanna, have been co-opted by the political powers of Sumer. The tree is, as stated above, a tangible symbol of the intangible concepts of power regarding the holiness of plants and the supremacy of kings.

As the poem continues, Inanna beckons her brother Gilgamesh, “the valiant warrior and hero of Uruk,” to drive the intruders from her tree, which he does. He then carves a throne and bed for his holy sister, Inanna. The tree is the means by which culture is created: a throne suggests the establishment of a political organization while the bed, a piece of furniture, suggests a degree of sophistication in the development of this civilization.

Wolkstein proposes that because the goddess and her mortal brother share the tree, it is a symbol of resolution between the goddess queen and the human king. Gilgamesh “brings courage, decisiveness, and strength to Inanna in her moment of weakness. With her consent, he rids the young woman of her ‘creatures of the wilderness.’”³⁶ The tree may well be a symbol of resolution, but a resolution that has “tamed” a goddess.

Harrison claims, “*Where divinity has been identified with the sky, or with the eternal geometry of the stars, or with cosmic infinity, or with “heaven,” the forests become monstrous, for they hide the prospect of god. (author’s italics)*”³⁷ This story lends credence to Harrison’s insight. Inanna not only fears the sky and air gods, she herself is a sky goddess. While a forest is not specified in the poem, what a forest represents is; a wild, uninhabited place. Furthermore, a garden implies cultivation, control, and boundaries, which separate it from uncultivated space. Within this cultivated place, civilization begins when a wild tree is transplanted. Before the tree can be used for its intended purpose, all aspects of wilderness must be erased, for wilderness implies a lack of boundaries, and boundaries are essential in civilization.

These ideas are also found in another epic poem written slightly later, at the turn of the second millennium BCE.³⁸ The Akkadian “Epic of Gilgamesh” depicts a hero in search of the plant that can provide everlasting life, therefore identifying immortality as an attribute

of the plant kingdom. Once again, the heroic Gilgamesh is depicted as a creator of civilization, a creator of cities. However, the relationship between the goddess Inanna (Ishtar) and her mortal brother is now altered. The goddess is no longer identified as a creator of civilization, but as a seductress whom Gilgamesh rejects. While both narratives depict culture as being created in opposition to nature, Inanna is now identified with nature and wilderness while Gilgamesh is identified with civilization.

During the epic, Gilgamesh destroys Huwawa, a demon who guards the sacred forests of the goddess. He then cuts down all of the cedar trees. "If Gilgamesh resolves to kill the forest demon, or to deforest the Cedar Mountain, it is because forests represent the quintessence of what lies beyond the walls of the city, namely the earth in its enduring transcendence."³⁹ Huwawa represents the sentience of the trees in much the same way that the serpent, bird and Lillith did for the *huluppu*-tree. They provide protection, allowing the tree to remain wild and alive. In the epic, the forest serves as a foil to the city; it represents that which is outside of the jurisdiction of Gilgamesh, outside of city walls. When Gilgamesh conquers the forest, he conquers the goddess. According to Harrison, "Gilgamesh figures as a poetic character for the historic triumph of Sumerian patriarchy over the earlier matriarchal religions of Mesopotamia."⁴⁰ A human king has conquered the great mother earth goddess.

The third narrative is the familiar Genesis creation story in the Hebrew Bible, sections of which were written in Judah and Babylonia by different authors. Sources differ for dating this ancient narrative, from the latter part of the second millennium, 1500-1200 BCE⁴¹ to 961-539 BCE.⁴² Nevertheless, both dates make this narrative considerably later than the previous two. Much like the *huluppu*-tree cultivated in the garden of the goddess, trees in

Genesis are also cultivated in a garden, one that is home to a sky god, YHWH. Evidence of the significance of trees in the story of human becoming is depicted in two particular trees growing in the middle of Eden, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life, an ancient symbol of abundance, acknowledges humanity's quest for the good life. The Tree of Life is also a symbol of eternal life: once again immortality is attributed to the plant family. The Tree of Knowledge, on the other hand, is an ancient symbol of the wisdom intrinsic within nature.

The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are intriguing plants that act more like subjects than objects within the story. The trees are living earth beings, under the jurisdiction of YHWH, but they themselves contain the power to bestow wisdom and immortality, not the deity. The trees enact "nature-as-person." They are anthropomorphized: given the power of movement.⁴³ The *huluppu*-tree was an object Inanna exploited to create civilization and political power. In Eden, Eve eats the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge to become wise and thereby gain the ability to create civilization. The tree remains as a tree, a powerful living entity. It is not used up in the process, not destroyed.

Similar to the *huluppu*-tree, the Tree of Knowledge is occupied by a serpent. The serpent is the animating spirit, the voice of the tree, interacting with Eve to reveal the tree's power to endow humanity with consciousness. Like the serpent in Gilgamesh, the serpent in Eden prevents the human race from becoming immortal. In all three myths, therefore, the serpent is demonized.

While deities and mortal men are active in all three myths, Genesis is the only myth that at first seems to be lacking a goddess. It is difficult to recognize Eve as the goddess. Although Eve and Adam were created at the same time in the Priestly version of the Genesis

creation myth, in the more popular Yahwist version, Eve is born from Adam and is later blamed for the fall. Eve's presence, however, does reflect the relationship between women and nature that was held to be sacred. The fact that Eve initiates the significant decision in the story, and that she interacts with the talking serpent in the tree is reminiscent of goddess activity.

It has been suggested that Eve represents Asherah, a Canaanite mother goddess Hebrews once incorporated in their religious practices.⁴⁴ Asherah was worshipped alongside of YHWH in Solomon's temple for two-thirds of its existence and the graves of Israelites show the symbol of YHWH and Asherah together.⁴⁵ Asherah is associated both with serpents and with trees. According to Susan Ackerman, "Inscriptural evidence...demonstrates Asherah's association with serpents."⁴⁶ Asherah is also referenced at least 40 times in the Hebrew Bible, often in reference to, "under every green tree."⁴⁷ Furthermore, Eve, as the mother of humanity, is suggestive of the great mother goddess. Asherah was also a fertility goddess. "One of the reasons for her popularity may have been the belief that she promoted fertility in women and facilitated childbirth."⁴⁸ Eve's association with the fruit Tree of Knowledge also suggests a bond with Asherah. The Tree of Knowledge reveals humanity's fear of death. Eve as Asherah, a goddess of fertility, necessitates death, since fertility without death would be overpopulation and the demise of all creation.

The three myths are evidence of the importance of trees as foundational in the development of civilization. They reflect a worldview that experienced nature as sacred, one that was augmented to some extent by a rural, nature-based lifestyle. When the Ancients worshiped trees, they did so as manifestations of particular deities. "The divine always

appears in some embodiment; no one ever worshipped matter as matter. Whatever is worshipped is seen as a mode of divine presence.”⁴⁹ Trees as symbols of deity demonstrate the commonality of the goddess/tree combination in the ancient world.

Examples of the tree as a primary goddess symbol are widespread throughout the ancient Middle East, India, Egypt, Europe, Crete, and Greece, and can also be found in indigenous religions in North America.⁵⁰ The oldest written record of a sacred tree is found on engraved stone cylinders from Chaldaea, 4000 BCE.⁵¹ The depiction on the cylinders, stones used to imprint wet clay, shows a goddess beside the Sacred Tree, with an infant seated on her lap.

Trees as foundational to religion not only symbolize life, knowledge, but according to Carl Jung, the cult of the great mother.⁵² Jung suggests that this connection of the feminine with trees goes back to the beginning of consciousness, which the three myths cited above support. “An ancient tree or plant represents symbolically the growth and development of psychic life, as distinct from instinctual life, commonly symbolized by an animal.”⁵³ Evidence is plentiful of a time when all god-talk was not masculine.

The myths also suggest a worldview in transition, where this unity of deity and nature is being challenged as patriarchy defines itself against nature. The residents in the *huluppu*-tree, the Cedars of Ishtar, and the Trees of Life and Knowledge in Eden symbolize both what humans long for and what they fear. Inanna fears unregulated sexuality and power, the warrior Gilgamesh fears death, and Adam and Eve fear both. YHWH’s garden, Eden, is portrayed as a safe space, a cultivated, abundant landscape that is walled off from the wilderness. Outside the garden, life is dangerous and difficult, for humans no longer walk with the sky god. However, inside the garden, danger lurks in the shape of a snake and a

woman's curiosity. Within Eden, as within the garden of Inanna and the Mesopotamian valley of Gilgamesh, civilization is created in conflict with nature. Wildness and wilderness are to be overcome. This is a powerful image that continues to impact the religious imagination, self-concept, and interpretation of reality.

In theological terms forests represented the anarchy of matter itself, with all the deprived darkness that went with this Neoplatonic concept adopted early on by the Church fathers. As the underside of the ordained world, forests represented for the Church the last strongholds of pagan worship. In the tenebrous Celtic forests reigned the Druid priests; in the forests of Germany stood those sacred groves where unconverted barbarians engaged in heathen rituals; in the nocturnal forests at the edge of town sorcerers, alchemists, and all the tenacious survivors of paganism concocted their mischief.⁵⁴

According to Harrison therefore, the universality of foreboding forest images testifies to patriarchy's triumph in demonizing the groves of the goddess.

The myths also reveal the centrality of the imagination in religion, although its impact has been submerged. They suggest diversity in the deity construct, as sky gods and goddesses and earthly tree goddesses all symbolize it. The three myths also demonstrate how wilderness and patriarchy impacted deity construction, as they preserve past shadows of ancient deity images that suggest other possibilities.

Religious myths support a belief pattern and provide a normative context for a way of life. Within the Christian West, where the Eden myth continues to influence reality, the goddess perched in the branches of the Sacred Tree Tradition is lurking in the shadows.

CHAPTER 3: THE GODDESS IN THE TREE

Why are sacred trees identified with goddesses, more so than gods? To answer this question, I explore patriarchy's historical alignment of nature with the feminine. I review feminist analysis of the women and nature dyad, deity symbols as privileged and/or subjugated knowledge, and the impact of both on historical critical consciousness.

Classical Dualism

The myths discussed in the previous chapter align goddesses with the Sacred Tree Tradition. Trees were not always designated as female, but generally speaking, female tree-spirits were the most common.

In numerous cases the spirit of trees is personified, usually in female form. In ancient Greece, the Alseids were nymphs associated with groves, while the Dryads were forest nymphs who guarded the trees. Sometimes armed with an axe, Dryads would punish anyone harming the trees. Crowned with oak-leaves, they would dance around the sacred oaks. The Hamadryads were even more closely associated with trees, forming an integral part of them. In India, tree nymphs appear in the form of the voluptuous Vrikshaka.⁵⁵

The ancient identification of trees with the feminine was a worldwide phenomenon. Inanna, the most revered deity of Sumer, was responsible for the growth of plants and animals. "In Lebanon, the Goddess herself was referred to as "the Cypress."⁵⁶ In Babylonia, the sacred tree was associated with Ishtar, the divine mother.⁵⁷ Asherah, the great Canaanite goddess, was associated with both trees and wood poles.⁵⁸ In Egypt, the Sycamore symbolized Hathor, who was given the epithet, "Lady of the Sycamore."⁵⁹ Artemis is closely related to wood nymphs, wild vegetation and forest beasts. She was worshipped in Arcadia as goddess of the nut-tree and cedar, and in Laconia as goddess of the laurel and myrtle.⁶⁰ The willow was sacred to the goddess Arianrhod in Celtic tradition.⁶¹ While this is a small sampling of the gender assignment of sacred trees, it clearly indicates a feminine association.

Historically, the assignment of the feminine to trees aligns with the general identification in classical dualism of women with nature and men with spirit. When Denise Riley demonstrated that ideas about what it meant to be 'woman' were "historically, discursively constructed," that they evolved relative to other categories which were also evolving, one of those categories was 'nature.'⁶² Val Plumwood's 1993 critique of Western philosophy's devaluation of women and nature describes the normative dualisms of hierarchical thinking as being devised as oppositional and exclusive.⁶³ Her sets of binaries include culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, mind/body, spirit/nature, civilized/primitive and subject/object. It is important to note that each opposite in the dyad derives its meaning from its contrast with the other opposite. In this sense the opposites do not stand alone, but require each other in order to define themselves individually. They are by virtue of who they are not: male is not female, spirit is not nature, subject is not object. The dyads are exclusive, with superiority being attributed to the reason/male/mind/spirit/civilized/ subject side of the equation. All of the superior pairings are linked to one another, as are the inferior pairings.

Ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has argued that this classical dualism explained why women's voices have been suppressed in the text and in the leadership of the Christian traditions. While patriarchal dualisms did not originate with Christianity, they were accepted by the early church, which helps to explain why the religious symbolic has worked against women.

All the basic dualities...have roots in the apocalyptic-Platonic religious heritage of classical Christianity...The psychic traits of intellectuality, transcendent spirit, and autonomous will that were identified with the male left the woman with the contrary traits of bodiliness, sensuality, and subjugation. Society, through the centuries, has in

every way profoundly conditioned men and women to play out their lives and find their capacities within this basic antithesis.⁶⁴

Classical dualism therefore reflects the historical construction that paired women with nature/trees while the Sacred Tree Tradition suggests a time when this pairing exemplified deity construction.

The three myths previously discussed reveal a gradual shift away from the worldview that identifies deity with goddesses and trees while they maintain a belief in the women and nature dyad. In so doing, the myths also disclose a movement toward masculine spirit deity construction, one that endeavored to establish control over both nature and women. Inanna, a goddess, requires the help of her human brother to create culture from her *huluppu*-tree. Gilgamesh, the warrior, overpowers the goddess when he destroys her cedars. YHWH continues to exemplify what counts as knowledge about deity in Christianity and Judaism. YHWH is understood as knowing all things, as revealed through divinely inspired texts, as unquestionable authority.

Because religion functions as a structure for thinking things through, deity symbols provide patterns for orienting ourselves. YHWH remains at the heart of Western conceptions of deity, the image of the one father god: omnipotent, transcendent, eternal spirit. According to the classical dualistic dyad, therefore, deity is male/spirit/subject and deity is NOT female/nature/object. While we now realize that it is rarely so simple, patriarchal constructs continue to insist on the either/or binaries that ignore the betwixt and between. Elizabeth Johnson, a feminist Biblical scholar, concludes that privileging the “God-the-Father” symbol is a form of idolatry. “Wittingly or not, it undermines women’s human dignity as equally

created in the image of God.”⁶⁴ According to Johnson, it is one of many deity symbols found in the Bible, and should be treated as such.

Today, the Sacred Tree Tradition identifies humans as part of nature and therefore, by characteristics we share with other species rather than those that set us apart. In doing so, the Sacred Tree Tradition counters dualistic hierarchical binaries by undermining the object/subject dyad: it makes sense of the world by regarding trees as subjects rather than objects. The Sacred Tree Tradition, therefore, by recognizing the tree as an archetypal deity construct, promotes an understanding of the natural biological connectedness of all of earth's life forms. It encourages humanity to recognize its “kinship” with nature: to integrate with nature, rather than attempt to dominate it.

Construction of Knowledge

Nevertheless, deity as male/spirit/subject became the privileged knowledge symbol, the model of the spiritual, social, and intellectual knowledge community in control. Because what counts as deity is dependent on those in authority, feminist scholars have studied the relationship between power and knowledge. The work of the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault has been of particular interest. Foucault believed that “power and knowledge directly imply one another...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”⁶⁵ Putting this in terms of deity construction, Foucault's point would be that there is no such thing as an abstract essence of deity that could be revealed or discovered by a male prophet. Rather, what matters as deity will reflect the priorities of those in privileged power positions.

In a similar manner, Patricia Hill Collins, a feminist “standpoint” theorist, also defines knowledge as a social construction. While Collins’s subject concerns the validation of what counts as knowledge for African-American women, her insights concerning the social construction of what counts as knowledge describes the nature and limits of knowledge in general. She proposes that different groups have different experience-based knowledge. What qualifies as knowledge depends on whose knowledge is being sought. Knowledge is therefore, not objective: it is personal.

Collins divides knowledge into categories that reflect the status of the knower: privileged knowledge and subjugated knowledge.⁶⁶ Privileged knowledge is that which is defined by dominating power structures. Subjugated knowledge is a specialized knowledge reflecting the experience of those who have not been included in the construction of privileged knowledge. Understanding this process redefines power and empowerment.

The Inanna epic reveals a world where the economy was agrarian and the goddess and sacred trees were manifestations of a privileged knowledge. The Gilgamesh epic is told from the perspective of the male hero warrior. It suggests a world in transition that included female images of deity struggling against an increasingly patriarchal paradigm of male privileged knowledge. The representation of the forest with the goddess suggests that the subjugated knowledge of women is something to be feared, something to be conquered.

Genesis portrays a triumphant patriarchal world. The Biblical Israelites were a kinship-structured society of pastoralists, whose basic social unit was the patrilineal and patriarchal family. The authors of Genesis, therefore, treated women’s religious lives as peripheral. Men regarded themselves as creators of culture and considered the contributions of women to be something inferior. In the Hebrew Bible in general, all that was connected to

the female dyad, such as the idea of nonhuman nature as a living organism, traces of which can be gleaned in the mention of Asherah and her fertility cults, also was considered to be something inferior, an example of subjugated knowledge. Eve, as a woman who conversed with a talking snake in the intriguingly named Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, is again a powerful symbol of subjugated knowledge, a way of knowing reminiscent of a goddess who lost her position of authority.

In today's world, Collins describes white men as privileged. "Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship."⁶⁷ But how does a white man know what he knows? According to Collins, dominating groups prefer a Eurocentric positivist method that promotes detachment, objectification and adversarial debates in the pursuit of truth. She argues convincingly that because epistemology determines which questions merit investigation and how findings will be analyzed, it reflects the standpoint of its creator. Objectivity and detachment are therefore illusions. Collins goes on to explain that subjugated knowledge, as in the ways of knowing promoted by African-American women, is created by lived experience, dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability, and caring. In other words, from the standpoint of this particular subjugated knowledge community, it is in attachment, subjectivity, and mutuality where truth is to be discovered.

Today, the Christian deity symbol of god as father continues as a symbol of privileged knowledge, a social construct that reflects the standpoint of its creators. In the West, it is common to picture this god as an old White man with a long beard, sitting on a cloud in the sky. Sallie McFague explains:

What is “true” in our positivistic, scientifically oriented society is what corresponds with “reality,” with the “facts”...Translated into religious terms...If the Bible says that God is “father” then God is literally, really, “father”...In the same way that the law of gravity refers to the way things really are in the world, so “father” refers to the way God really is.⁶⁸

The Sacred Tree Tradition, on the other hand, is presently an example of the subjugated knowledge of a marginalized group.

According to Collins, “If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect.”⁶⁹ If the knowledge of the dominant group can be interpreted as biased, as promoting the causes of its creators, perspectives change. Knowledge can then be understood as unfinished and historically situated.

Although western science, religion, and philosophy purport to offer ‘true’ statements about ‘reality’ which can be ‘empirically tested’ by ‘rational subjects’, continental philosophers have shown that each of these terms is itself a construction occupying a particular place in the western symbolic.⁷⁰

Complete objectivity, therefore, is an unattainable position since personal worldview determines what we see. The ramification of this perspective is further explained by Rita Gross, a feminist theologian.

On closer inspection, “objectivity” often turns out to be nothing more than advocacy of the current conventions and not a neutral position at all. Some perceive feminist scholarship as adversarial because it challenges such conventions; still, feminist scholarship can claim to be more “objective” than male-centered scholarship, because it is more inclusive and therefore more accurate.⁷¹

By admitting limitation, accuracy is enhanced through honesty and inclusiveness.

The three myths demonstrate the historical nature of knowledge in their changing deity images. They illustrate how forms of deity knowledge both reflect and constitute power relations. In so doing, they reveal how thinking about deity takes place in a cultural

setting in which an idea of deity has developed through the imaginative work of preceding generations. The myths disclose deity symbols adapting to the larger socio-cultural environments and accommodating themselves to changing needs. Hence, the three myths depict deity metaphors as created rather than revealed.

Two hundred years ago, when the worldview was static, it might have been possible for believers of mainstream religions to claim that god the father was an unchanging statement of a final complete revelation. That is no longer possible for anyone who is aware of the historical investigation of any religious tradition.

Feminist theologian Sallie McFague specifically refutes privileged knowledge claims of the deity symbol as divine revelation.

The “view from the body” is always a view from somewhere versus the view from above, from nowhere: the former admits to its partiality and accepts responsibility for its perspectives, while the latter believes itself universal and transcendent, thus denying its embodiment and limitations as well as the concrete, special insights that can arise only from particularity.⁷²

Once particularity and partiality are recognized, knowledge construction can be recognized as embodied, as coming from a particular site.

Furthermore, feminist analysis of so called divinely inspired texts, like the Hebrew Bible, reveals that while these texts identify the role of women in society as well as what value society placed on them in an ancient culture, that is all they reveal. Rather than an objective illumination of a divinely ordained hierarchy, the Hebrew Bible is a construction that reflects the ideas of human male authors within particular historical contexts. Genesis reveals the feminine struggling against claims of masculine superiority, a submission they did not accept willingly. If they had, there would have been little need for claims of divine revelation by those in power.

This historical critical consciousness is a recent understanding and the modern world is only beginning to comprehend its implications. McFague continues:

Most recently, we have become conscious, by deepening our awareness of *plurality* of perspectives, of dimensions of interpretation which had been largely submerged. That is to say, it is not only our time and place in history that influences our religious language, but also our class, race, and sex; our nationality, education, and family background; our interests, prejudices, and concerns.⁷³

Historical critical consciousness, coupled with an understanding of the nature of knowledge, undermines all ultimate truth claims, not only of sacred texts, but also of all deity symbols. Claiming any one symbol as ultimate truth is a ludicrous attempt to stereotype divine activities.

It is not surprising then, that Grace Jantzen suggests that all ultimate truth claims concerning deity symbols should be discarded.

I wish to suggest that much would be gained for the strong claims for women's experience made by feminist theologians if, instead of thinking in terms of the trajectory of beliefs, we were to consider women's experience as a resource and grounding for desire and imagination in the development of a feminist religious symbolic. In this way, rather than serving as an empirical foundation of religious truths, women's experience offers transformative suggestions for the religious imaginary and the development of the woman subject.⁷⁴

This insight does not undermine the importance of deity constructs, in that the human desire to create them is not affected. It does promote a less naive and complacent understanding of what passes for ultimate truth in the Western symbolic.

One way to refute deity symbols that have privileged knowledge status, according to Collins, is to focus on the particular. Grappling with multiple relevant images requires movement among epistemologies that undermines the singularity of knowledge thereby uplifting alternative ways of knowing. "Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or

suppressing other groups' partial perspectives."⁷⁵ Diversity is celebrated and convictional openness replaces exclusivist religious absolutism.

Like Collins, McFague focuses on the necessity to grapple with multiple relevant images in order to dislodge privileged deity symbols. Incorporating a multitude of particularities manifests in the use of abundant images. The more images, the better because "...a piling up of images is essential both to avoid idolatry and to attempt to express the richness and variety of divine-human relationship."⁷⁶ The more images, the more inclusive the symbol becomes.

Many feminists in search of deity symbols that imaged their experience of the divine-human relationship turned to goddess religions. In the words of Nelle Morton, "The Goddess ushered in a reality that respects the sacredness of my existence, that gives me self-esteem so I can perceive the universe and its people through my woman-self and not depend on the perception conditioned by patriarchal culture and patriarchal religion."⁷⁷ The goddess functioned to correct an imbalance, to render lone male images impotent as bearers of ultimate truth claims. Feminist reclamation of the goddess included her many manifestations, including that of the Moon, Mountain, Serpent, and Tree.

It is a conscious choice for feminists to construct images of deity that will empower women: this is their starting point for their definition of truth. Rosemary Radford Ruether provides an example of this methodology. "Whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine..."⁷⁸ The emphasis on particular experience creates a goddess who by necessity embraces change and ongoing process. The goddess becomes a both/and rather than an either/or symbol.

The ancient apprehension of Goddess as Primal Matrix has never entirely disappeared from the human religious imagination, despite the superimposition of male monotheism. It survives in the metaphor of the divine as Ground of Being. Here the divine is not “up there” as abstracted ego, but beneath and around us as encompassing source of life and renewal of life; spirit and matter are not split hierarchically. That which is most basic, matter (mother, matrix), is also most powerfully imbued with the powers of life and spirit.⁷⁹

The ancient understanding of the goddess as Primal Matrix survives in the Sacred Tree Tradition. Today, the goddess perched in the branches of the Sacred Tree Tradition is an example of a liberating deity symbol that has emerged largely because women’s experience is creating a religious imagination that is an alternative to the Western dualistic hierarchy.

CHAPTER 4: THE GENDERING OF DEITY

The fact that the Sacred Tree Tradition, as a goddess tradition, reinforces the association of women and nature is especially problematic for many. Ruether's critique of classical dualism focused on the disastrous consequences of this patriarchal ideological construct. At first glance, this would seem to imply that the woman/nature dyad should not be continued. Feminists, however, are not in agreement concerning the helpfulness of goddess spirituality in any of its manifestations. This chapter reviews theses differing views.

Essentialist Designation

By assigning gender to a gender free entity, the Sacred Tree Tradition is perceived by some as a continuation of the essentialistic, androcentric categorization that is prevalent in patriarchal dualistic constructions. For example, feminist scholar, Elizabeth Dodd, proposes, "that perpetuation of stereotyped gender roles in goddess or earth-mother imagery actually reinforces Western patriarchal sex typing."⁸⁰ In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1991) Donna Haraway proclaims that she would rather be a cyborg, a hybrid creation combining machine and organism, than a goddess.⁸¹ Haraway argues that any tradition that manifests goddess spirituality is essentialist and a continuation of the nature/female dyad and she suggests that "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms..."⁸² According to Haraway, goddess theologians are attempting to revalue the undervalued half of the binary and that will not work. Feminists too numerous to mention are in agreement with Dodd and Haraway, but ecofeminists central to this project are not. They argue that the goddess is not essentialist because she is not the female equivalent of the theistic god of the classical Western traditions but a metaphor for the healing process of women and earth.

Sanctification of Matter

Because dualistic and hierarchical thinking justifies domination, opposition to the negative association of women and nature, not the relationship itself, becomes the basis of ecofeminist criticism. Ruether's critique of classical dualism concludes that the struggles of nature are, in fact, the struggles of women. Her emphasis on women's subjectivity as ultimate value suggests an analogy that supports the intrinsic value of nature. As previously stated, for Ruether, ecology teaches that life comprises interconnected and interdependent processes. "Converting our minds to the earth means understanding the more diffuse and relational logic of natural harmony."⁸³ Her biocentric view, which posits all living organisms with innate value, rejects hierarchy and the human illusion that it is possible to categorize and control nature. Humans are one species of the animal classification, one form of earth being. The emphasis changes from being separate and superior to being part of the whole. Furthermore, when Ruether acknowledges the conscious aspect of every object, she does so from a life-centered rather than man-centered worldview. Ruether's identification of the animistic subjectivity of nature as bimorphic rather than androcentric frees it to be Numinous Other. For Ruether, as previously stated, this Numinous Other is the Primal Matrix. The realization of the Primal Matrix as the context of deity sanctifies matter and transcends duality.

McFague, like Ruether, suggests that the model of the world as the body of god breaks down the spirit/body dualism, values the body, and expresses divine concern that the basic human needs of all bodies be met. It is a model that does not split the sacred from the profane. "The breath of God enlivening each and every entity in the body of the universe

turns our attention to a theology of nature, a theology concerned with the relationship of God and our living, breathing planet.”⁸⁴ The emphasis is relationship at the deepest level.

Building on the work of Clifford Geertz, Carol Christ endorses the idea that “religious symbols shape a cultural ethos, defining the deepest values of a society and the persons in it.”⁸⁵ Because of this, the goddess is recognition that “symbol systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced.”⁸⁶ The YHWH of Judaism must be replaced with a deity construct that empowers women and for Christ, that deity unites women and nature in a special kind of relationship. “In the ancient world and among modern women, the goddess symbol represents the birth, death, and rebirth processes of the natural and human worlds. The female body is viewed as the direct incarnation of the waxing and waning, life and death cycles in the universe.”⁸⁷ The Sacred Tree, with its focus on the goddess coming to fruition, the archetypal symbol of life and wisdom, is a metaphor that deifies the feminine.

Starhawk’s goddess is a realization that deity metaphors cannot exist without creation. The goddess is a “conscious attempt to reshape culture” so that it reflects that reality.⁸⁸ Starhawk accomplishes this with rituals that celebrate nature’s cycles of birth, growth, death, decay, and rebirth. From the time of the emergence of human beings as a conscious species, people have lived embedded in nature and have observed cyclical processes in action and acknowledged dependence upon them. They have understood life/death as a natural part of the cycle, and have known, not through faith but through direct observation, that death is the medium for new life.

The Sacred Tree Tradition/Goddess deity construct, while an ancient tradition, presently arises from a new understanding of humanity in relationship with nature. It expresses itself in a new command to learn to cultivate the earth garden: the cultivation of the

garden is where the powers of rational consciousness partner with the consciousness of nature. This context for living within the Sacred Tree Tradition empowers both women and nature to flourish. When the Sacred Tree Tradition functions as the ultimate point of reference for understanding life, the goddess authorizes women to focus on the sacredness of their life on earth. It was not the breath of the sky god but the Tree of Life of the earth goddess that vivified the first earthlings. The Sacred Tree Tradition therefore embraces a methodology that engages the experience of the goddess and thus of the feminine as a starting point.

CHAPTER 5: UPROOTING SACRED SPACE

This chapter continues the discussion of the Sacred Tree Tradition/Goddess model of deity by exploring its implications concerning the demarcation of sacred space. In doing so, it explores the role of science in the present day decision to place the deity construct within nature.

Holy Ground

Historically, religious traditions have identified space as either profane or sacred. As previously mentioned, sacred space was the focus of Mircea Eliade, a historian of religions. According to Eliade, religions symbolize sacred space as that which represents the interruption of the sacred into the world, which he referred to as “axis mundi.” Eliade explains:

(a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; (b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); (c) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*: pillar (cf. the *universalis columna*), ladder (cf. Jacob’s ladder), mountain, **tree**, vine, etc.; (d) around this cosmic axis lies the world (=our world), hence the axis is located “in the middle,” at the “navel of the earth”; it is the Center of the World.(author’s italics)⁸⁹

“Axis mundi” separates the profane from the sacred, identifying certain favored terrain or natural wonders as examples of sacred interruption.

The Inanna and Genesis myths have much in common concerning the situation of sacred space. Both myths concern unitary, supernatural sky deities residing in holy gardens in which trees are of particular importance. Both myths also depict sacred space as sites where deities create. The myths concerning Inanna and YHWH describe these acts of creation as occurring from the sacred to the profane, from the deity to nature, from the

complex to the simple. It was Inanna who transplanted the *huluppu*-tree for the sake of creating culture and YHWH who created the animals, plants, and human beings. Profane space was that which was beyond the borders of the gardens.

Science and Creation Myths

Currently, the worldview expressed in these ancient myths is no longer compatible with science. Science's understanding of creation as evolutionary challenges the understanding of creation as sacred interruption. While the ancient myths posit creation as occurring from the sacred to the profane, evolution posits creation as occurring from the profane to the sacred, from the single carbon molecule to the creation of human consciousness. Evolution locates sacredness in a time/space continuum. In response to this insight, ecofeminists propose a new myth.

McFague suggests that the Big Bang Theory functions as a new creation myth, as a common cosmogenic story, because it expresses the common origin of all bodies in stardust.⁹⁰ Ruether agrees that science is offering a new creation story, but she believes that it is too early to choose the "Big Bang," since other options exist. The title of Ruether's book, *Gaia and God*, is a reference to both the ancient Greek earth Goddess and the modern Gaia Hypothesis.⁹¹ The Gaia Hypothesis, a social construct formulated by planetary biologists James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, proposes that the entire planet is a living system.⁹² Both the Big Bang Theory and the Gaia Hypothesis posit sacred space as all encompassing. There is no "axis mundi," because there is no profane world to be interrupted. If the earth is the goddess, Ruether suggests that we can come to know her by sitting beneath trees and observing her. "We need to take the time to sit under trees, look at water, and at the sky, observe small biotic communities of plants and animals with close

attention, get back in touch with the living earth.”⁹³ Observation reveals the sacred earth Mother as a holy garden that fosters interdependent, diverse life forms.

Deity as Tree

This worldview undermines the male transcendent deity construct of the classical Western traditions. If the earth is the goddess, trees become her sacred revelation, her manifestation. Sacred trees, therefore, situate the goddess in the world as an accessible, visible deity thereby privileging immanence. An immanent deity supports a worldview that depicts all as sacred.

The understanding of deity immanent in the world is historically referred to as classical pantheism. Johnson describes classical pantheism as “the notion that God and the world are virtually identical, existing in so intertwined a way that divine being is the substance or essence of all things.”⁹⁴ Nature is deity and deity is nature: the tree is the goddess. Pantheism dissolves the dualistic categories of transcendence and immanence by negating the transcendent other. It levels out experience by proclaiming that all is immanently sacred. Nevertheless, the ancient creation myths disclosed a sense of sacred space as interruption in their ordering of creation. In modern pantheism, however, this is no longer the case. Due to an order of creation that accepts the findings of evolution, there is no retention of duality.

Starhawk's earth-based Wicca is a modern example of pantheism. Starhawk describes Wicca's understanding of creation as one that comprehends that “all things are swirls of energy, vortexes of moving forces, currents in an ever-changing sea.”⁹⁵ While this worldview is derived from the ancient Paleolithic comprehension of pantheism, the sense of a separate sacred space is no longer present. Starhawk explains:

earth-based spirituality is rooted in three basic concepts that I call immanence, interconnectedness, and community. The first—immanence—names our primary understanding the earth, Goddess, God—whatever you call it—is not found outside the world somewhere—it’s in the world: it is the world, and it is us.⁹⁶

Starhawk’s immanent earth goddess can be understood as the sum total of natural processes, the primary metaphor for the sacred earth. Starhawk describes Wicca as a “religion of poetry” which strives to reveal the goddess immanent in each of us.⁹⁷

Deity as Tree and More

Pantheism has historically been disdained by classical Western cultural traditions as inadequate and pagan. Philpot describes tree worship as an example of “the dark ways of primitive thought.”⁹⁸ Today, with the exception of Starhawk, the ecofeminists in this project are sympathetic to pantheism, yet clearly attempt to differentiate their understanding of a sacred cosmos. While positing nature as the primary source of deity construction, the preferred expression of the immanent divine has become “panentheism.” Johnson quotes the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* to define panentheism. “The belief that the being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but (as against pantheism) that this Being is more than, and is not exhausted by the universe.”⁹⁹ Nature is deity and deity is nature but deity is also more than nature. The tree is the goddess but the goddess is more than the tree.

Panentheism, therefore, retains a shadow of the dualism inherent in the classical Western traditions since it dichotomizes spirit and world, positing spirit as encompassing the world but not the world as fully encompassing the spirit, thereby elevating the spirit above the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ruether and McFague, who retain their Christian worldview, favor panentheism over patriarchal transcendent theism and immanent

pantheism. However, it was surprising to find Christ, a goddess theologian, endorsing panentheism as well.

The common denominator for Christ, McFague and Ruether's preference for panentheism is the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. Christ explains:

For process theology, God as the ground of all being and the earth as the body of God are appropriate metaphors. But for process theology, God is transcendent as well as immanent because God is "more" than the sum total of all the discrete beings in the world...we might say that the mind of the Goddess is an enlivening energy throughout the world body that enables everything from cells to plants to animals to communicate with each other, and individuals to talk to the world.¹⁰⁰

For Christ, therefore, while the goddess is earth, she is also a relation that is enacted by humans in conjunction with nature and the power of being. The goddess is immanent insofar as she arises out of our own experiences: the goddess is transcendent insofar as she can empower and transform us.

Continuing the work of Whitehead and combining it with the analysis of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, McFague also describes her deity model as panentheist. Her theology of nature affirms deity and the world as interdependent, and all bodies as interconnected and interdependent. "Everything that is is *in* God and God is *in* all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe."¹⁰¹ McFague is not a goddess theologian, but her understanding of deity as sacramentally embodied in the universe and her endorsement of the necessity for a multitude of deity constructions upholds the sacredness of trees.

Ruether also grounds her panentheism on an analysis of the work of Whitehead, as well as Teilhard de Chardin and Matthew Fox, but science provides the roots. Ruether's

understanding of the deep interdependence and communion comes from her knowledge of quantum physics. Separateness is an optical illusion.

When we proceed to the inward depths of consciousness or probe beneath the surface of visible things to the electromagnetic field that is the ground of atomic and molecular structure, the visible disappears. Matter itself dissolves into the energy. Energy, organized in patterns and relationships, is the basis for what we experience as visible things. It becomes impossible any more to dichotomize material and spiritual energy.¹⁰²

Because material and spiritual energy are indistinguishable, energy is both immanent and transcendent at the same time. Is light a particle or a wave, for instance? The reality in terms of physics is that light is light, but sometimes its observed behavior is consistent with the idea of a particle, and sometimes with that of a wave. In the same way, Ruether's Primal Matrix is both immanent and transcendent at the same time.

In Ruether's terminology, "We come to recognize the continuity of human consciousness with the radial energy of matter throughout the universe."¹⁰³ This understanding recognizes the truth of ancient animism foundational to the Sacred Tree Tradition, which posited spirit in all of nature. Ruether explains:

We must respond to a "thou-ness" in all beings. This is not romanticism or an anthropomorphic animism that sees "dryads in trees," although there is truth in the animist view. The spirit in plants or animals is not anthropomorphic but biomorphic to its own forms of life. We respond not just as "I to it," but as "I to thou," to the spirit, the life energy that lies in every being in its own form of existence.¹⁰⁴

Both humans and trees are open systems that exchange energy with other systems. "Trees have bio-electrical fields that react to various phenomena. Real energy exchange is actually inevitable."¹⁰⁵ With this in mind, practices like tree hugging, talking to trees, and looking to trees for wisdom make sense.

Ruether also notes that the new scientific cosmic stories support the roles of co-operation and interdependency rather than hierarchical posturing. “The coevolution of life-sustaining air, water, and soil is as much a part of the cycle of life as the interdependency of plants and animals.”¹⁰⁶ When interdependency rather than dependency is stressed, the sacredness of nature is redefined.

Because of this, a deity model of a pre-modern world can continue as a significant model of postmodern deity construction. While it is not possible to claim that the practices and ideas being issued today in the name of the Sacred Tree/Goddess are like that of the Ancients, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that this ancient model is being appropriated. The Sacred Tree Tradition, whether as an expression of nature-as-religion or nature-influenced-religion, depicts the influence of nature on the religious imagination.

The Sacred Tree Tradition has changed into a model of deity construction that provides a model of living that challenges traditional boundaries of the mundane world. Today, the Sacred Tree Tradition implodes Eliade’s distinction between sacred and profane to create a reality infused with sacredness rather than deprived of it. It is part of a tradition that proclaims truth as interconnected, divisions as artificial, and *being* itself as deity. It is a social construct that acknowledges the profound oneness of all. As such, it is a model of deity that is in agreement with the findings of science.

CHAPTER 6: HEAVEN ON EARTH

In this sensual reconnection with nature, experiencing the goddess through relationships with sacred trees grounds the deity construct in the sacred earth, in the here and now. The Sacred Tree Tradition thereby emphasizes life on earth rather than life after death: it celebrates flourishing in the present rather than eternal bliss in the future.

Salvation Theology

This insight has encouraged ecofeminists to question the impact of traditions that emphasize the human need for eternal salvation and the importance of life after death, as both can be understood as devaluing the importance of life on earth. This is evident in the suppression of this Sacred Tree/Goddess, which is foundational to classical Western monotheism that emphasized a need for a savior. According to Mary Daly, the Tree of Life of the great goddess became the tree of death in Christianity. “The transformations in the Tree of Life symbolism unveil the fact that in Christian myth Christ assimilates/devours the Goddess. Whereas the Goddess had been the Tree of Life, Christ becomes this.”¹⁰⁷ Since Jesus Christ is a savior deity, Daly’s observation introduces ideas concerning salvation theology.

Although she retains her Christian perspective, to a large extent Ruether agrees with Daly’s assessment of women’s predicament in salvation theology. Ruether argues that Christology was distorted by patriarchy and that “we can encounter *Christ in the form of our sister*.”¹⁰⁸ In *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (1998), Ruether explains that redemption no longer implies what it once did.

Redemption in modern feminism follows a modern Western cultural shift from otherworldly to this-worldly hopes. Redemption is not primarily about being reconciled with a God from whom our human nature has become totally severed due

to sin, rejecting our bodies and finitude, and ascending to communion with a spiritual world that will be our heavenly home after death. Rather, redemption is about reclaiming an original goodness that is still available as our true selves, although obscured by false ideologies and social structures that have justified domination of some and subordination of others.¹⁰⁹

Since Ruether's methodology centers on the promotion of the full humanity of women, her critique of the implications of a male redeemer undermines both the symbols of the male as redeemer and the female as needing to be redeemed.

Jantzen also argues that salvation is not a productive metaphor for women: it implies a need to be rescued by someone, which produces a sense of passivity and reinforces connections with death and sin, rather than life and birth.

Fundamentally, the choice of the language of salvation rather than the language of flourishing both denotes and reinforces an anthropology of a very particular kind. If we think in terms of salvation, then the human condition must be conceptualized as a problematic state, a state in which human beings need urgent rescue, otherwise calamity or death will befall. But how would we characterize the human situation in all its diversity if we used instead the model of flourishing? We could then see human beings as having a natural inner capacity and dynamic, being able to draw on inner resources and interconnection with one another in the web of life, and having the potential to develop into great fruitfulness.¹¹⁰

Jantzen's metaphor of flourishing is a radical commitment to life, to right relationship between species. It is a metaphor that emphasizes cooperating with nature rather than controlling it. Interrelatedness rather than survival of the fittest becomes the principle of creation.

Model for Flourishing

Ruether also speaks about flourishing as an ultimate concern for both humans and the earth. When flourishing becomes the ultimate concern, harmony becomes a model where diversity is appreciated rather than feared.

Nature...diffuses and intersperses plants, so that each balances and corrects the vulnerabilities of the other. The inability to see the forest for the trees is typical of linear thinking. Linear thinking simplifies, dichotomizes, focuses on parts, and fails to see the larger relationality and interdependence.... Converting our minds to the earth means understanding the more diffuse and relational logic of natural harmony.¹¹¹

This “natural harmony” is one that values diversity in the search for new images and models of god and the god-world relationship. “No one type of being is ‘king of the forest.’”¹¹² In order for global flourishing to exist, Ruether explains that nature establishes limits that cannot be transgressed: “the laws of Gaia, which regulate what kinds of changes in nature are sustainable in the life system of which we are an inextricable part.”¹¹³ History has shown that salvation theologies have not ensured global harmony. The laws of Gaia are morally abiding not because they are tests of obedience to an autocratic deity who promises eternal salvation, but because they concern global flourishing.

Life After Death

Ruether’s assessment of redemption also results in her reassessment of the role of death. Whereas Christianity describes death as a consequence of sin, Ruether proposes that death is nothing more or less than a natural part of living. As stated previously, Ruether’s understanding of the unification of body and spirit recognizes the consciousness of nature. This reintegration of mind into body, of consciousness into nature reshapes ideas of both deity and life/death, and for Ruether, necessitates an acceptance of finitude. With the acceptance of the finality of death, Ruether’s biocentric view rejects the illusion that nature can be controlled. Ruether argues that this understanding of nature forces us to outgrow our fear of death.

Fear of death has a long human history. It is depicted in both the Gilgamesh and Genesis myths, where human consciousness of the reality of death is presented alongside a belief in plant life's ability to be death's antidote. The Genesis myth is also interesting since death is blamed on the woman Eve, who unlike Gilgamesh, would have had no way of knowing what death entailed. Nevertheless, according to Ruether, acceptance of finality challenges humans to take their bodies seriously: the fact that death is final encourages celebration of this life.

We should not pretend to know what we do not know or to have had "revealed" to us what is the projection of our wishes. Moreover, whatever we wish is not thereby proved to be probably true or something upon which we should "wager" our lives. There needs to be a compatibility between our wishes and what we know of our finite nature and primary responsibilities. What we know is that death is the cessation of the life and the organism itself gradually disintegrates. This consciousness is the interiority of that life process that holds the organism together. There is not reason to think of the two as separable, in the sense that one can exist without the other.¹¹⁴

Ruether therefore suggests that the quest for harmony promotes the sanctity of all life forms, while the quest for salvation in the patriarchal transcendent sense promotes wishful thinking that has not proved beneficial for women.

Christ, as a goddess theologian who roots spirituality in nature, also stresses the importance of life, here and now instead of life after death. Like Ruether, Christ questions the probability of life after death. She makes it clear that rooting the deity metaphor in nature accepts that individual consciousness cannot survive the demise of the body. Death is seen as a natural phenomenon that accepts limitation and imperfection with resignation, not in a despairing way, but as a mature confrontation with our finitude.

It must be that we do not love earth and life enough. Maybe something went wrong, massively wrong, when Platonism and Christianity became the dominant symbol systems of our culture. Maybe the return of the Goddess can help us to re-member ourselves, to re-member the earth, which is our home. Maybe she can help us to turn

away from our quest for immortality, our quest to escape change, our quest to control the conditions of our lives. Perhaps she can help us to love a life that ends in death.¹¹⁵

Christ defines humanity as a product of nature, not some godly relic destined for eternal bliss.

A theology rooted in this earth in the here and now, however, does not necessarily negate a belief in an existence after life. As stated above, Starhawk identifies the pantheistic goddess as one who includes acceptance of life's cyclical mysteries of birth, death, and rebirth.

The mythology and cosmology of Witchcraft are rooted in that "Paleolithic shaman's insight": that all things are swirls of energy, vortexes of moving forces, currents in an ever-changing sea. Underlying that appearance of separateness, of fixed objects within a linear stream of time, reality is a field of energies that congeal, temporarily, into forms. In time, all "fixed" things dissolve, only to coalesce again into new forms, new vehicles.¹¹⁶

The possibility of life beyond death is therefore a part of Starhawk's understanding.

CONCLUSION

History reveals that sacred trees have been present in religions and cultures across time and perched high in the branches was the goddess. Presently, the return of the Sacred Tree Tradition suggests an appreciation of the wisdom inherent in nature: a wisdom that rejects dualistic hierarchies. It also depicts the impact of ecological concerns on religion. The Sacred Tree Tradition, therefore, serves as a cultural corrective that embraces a new understanding of the relationship between humans and nonhuman nature. As such, it is an innovative deity construct that encourages dialogue between science and religion. Most importantly, it is a model that empowers women. It makes sense that women are drawn to trees.

According to Jung, “Archetypes come to life only when one patiently tries to discover why and in what fashion they are meaningful to a living individual. To know the Great Mother one must have a relationship with her.”¹¹⁷ Today, women are coming to know the Great Mother as they choose to defend trees with their lives,¹¹⁸ tend trees in sacred groves,¹¹⁹ and meditate under trees for mystical insight.¹²⁰ Ecofeminism is now found in all of the classical religions¹²¹ and there is a noticeable upsurge of interest in Pagan/Nature/Goddess religions.¹²²

Women are also employing ritual to strengthen this relationship. Starhawk describes a primary ritual meditation practiced in modern Witchcraft called the “Tree of Life.” The practitioner imagines herself as a tree, sending roots into the soil, sprouting branches.¹²³ The Sacred Tree Tradition finds the goddess tending the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge with increased abandon.

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- ¹¹⁸ Julia Butterfly Hill, *The Legacy of Luna: the Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwoods* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).
- ¹¹⁹ Prairiewoods FSC, www.prairiewoods.org
- ¹²⁰ Keller, *Feeling for the Organism*.
- ¹²¹ Charlene Spretnak, "Critical and Constructive Contributions of Ecofeminism," *Worldviews and Ecology*, ed. Peter Tinker and Evelyn Grem (Philadelphia: Bucknell Press, 1993) 181-189.
- ¹²² Nature Religion Scholars Network www.uscolo.edu/natrel
- ¹²³ Starhawk, *Spiral Dance* 58.

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