The Goddess movement in the U. S. A.

A Religion for Women Only*

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In the literature of the women's movement in the United States of the past 15 years time and again I came upon authors, who relate the women's movement to the Goddess, the Great Mother. (Broner, E. M. 1982, Rich, A. 1977, Spretnak, C. 1978, 1982, Stone, M. 1978, 1979, 1980, Wittig, M. 1969) to mention a few. Adrienne Rich puts forward that reclaiming a herstory where women were powerful offers a positive identification for modern women. She sees the power of the Great Mother as a source of inspiration for women today. I was puzzled by the connection she made. The idea of women identifying with the Great Mother seemed far fetched to me. At the same time I became interested, wondering what this Goddess meant to women. Soon I discovered that the Goddess movement in the USA had been in existence for at least ten years.

I would suggest that the Goddess movement is a movement of feminists searching for a spirituality of their own, for symbols with a positive meaning for women. Inspired by historical data about matriarchal cultures, Goddess religions and by stories about strong women of today women of the Goddess movement are re-defining their womanhood. They see themselves as part of the women's movement. As a rule they donot separate the political from the personal and the spiritual. They are expressing their experiences of the women's struggle and the oppression of women in different ways: in private and group rituals, in matriarchy studygroups, a feminist spirituality center and a feminist Church of the Goddess for women only. In this paper, exploratory in its character, I will go into several aspects of the Goddess movement, giving a description of the movement and questioning the meaning of the Goddess movement for the women involved. My point of departure is: what does this movement mean to the women themselves, and why are they involved in this way?

The material for this paper consists mainly of the literature of the movement.

A bird's eye view of the history of the Goddess movement

In 1971 the Susan B. Anthony Coven no. 1 was having its first meeting in Venice, California. Feminist women only are being admitted to the coven – a

coven is a witches circle – which is rather exceptional in traditional witchcraft, where women and men participate in the circles. (Adler, M. 1979) The coven puts out a magazine: Thesmophoria, Voice of the New Women’s religion – 2000 subscribers in 1982 – and edited together with its spokeswoman Z. Budapest four books and two tapes (Budapest, Z. 1979, 1980). The books deal with the witches calendar, Tarot reading, candle-, and herbal spells, how to organize your circle and the principles of women’s religion. A witches shop was opened called ‘The Feminist Wicca’. Now, 1982 there are two more shops, one in Oakland, California and one in Seattle, Washington. A witches shop sells herbs, oils, candles, books, posters and magical objects. It also is a center where workshops are announced.

On the initiative of the lesbian feminist community (Big Mama Rag, 1975, p. 25, p. 27) summersolstice rituals have been held in the summer of 1973, 1974 in New Mexico. Barbry My Own and Hallie Mountain Wing – related to their spiritual experiences the women give themselves or receive new names – describe one of these rituals in Moon Moon (Kent Rush, A. 1976, pp. 375–391). The women created a ritual to integrate body and soul. They began the ritual with a birth rite. In pairs of two the women made a birth canal – conceived from childhood games like “London Bridge” –. At every part of the tunnel each woman was embraced, kissed and told, “Through women you were born in this world. Through women you are born into this circle.” They paint each others faces with menstrual blood and say: “This is the blood that promises renewal. This is the blood that promises sustenance, This is the blood that promises life.” (Kent Rush, A. 1976, p. 381)

From 1974 on Woman Spirit magazine appears 4 times a year at the major holidays: Wintersolstice, Springequinox, Summersolstice, and Autumn Equinox. The magazine is an excellent source, reflecting what is going on in the movement with topics like: feminist interpretation of astrology, healing, dream-exploration, cosmic-, plant-, and animal rythms, story-, and myth-telling, celebrating of groupsrituals and raising of female energy through chanting, dance and meditation. The editors of Woman Spirit live on Rootworks, Oregon, a women’s land, where workshops have been organized for example on feminist photography, and dream exploration.

Susan Rennie and Kirsten Grimstad travel in 1974 through the U.S.A. in order to describe what is happening in the American women’s movement for the New Women’s Survival Sourcebook (Rennie, S., Grimstad, K. 1975). They discovered that feminists independent of each other are working at the ‘spiritual aspects’ of life. Their evaluation of this phenomenon is a positive one: “It is as if feminists have recognized an even deeper source of female alienation and fragmentation than the sex role polarization which has so effectively limited women’s lives – the mind/body dualism progressively fostered by patriarchal culture. In acknowledging this side of our being, women are in effect striving for