

Feminism in Christianity: An Orthodox Christian Response

Deborah Belonick, Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983.

Glenys Huws

I first heard of this book in the fall of 1979, when a professor from St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary (Crestwood, N.Y.) told me, with almost gleeful pride, that their prizewinning master's-of-divinity thesis of the previous academic year had comprised a theological analysis of Christian feminism from an Orthodox point of view. The student writing this thesis had convincingly demonstrated that it was heresy.

When I tried to find out from the professor some of the reasoning that had led the student to this conclusion, I was told that feminist biblical and theological thinking was unacceptable because, in the Orthodox view, the one immutable way of understanding the Divine Revelation in Scripture is found in the writings of the Greek fathers. The Truth has already been given to the Orthodox church - there can be no conflicting interpretation, no dialogue with the Gospel that might lead to new and different insights, no change.

Further discussion at that point proved fruitless, and so I welcomed the opportunity to read the thesis in book form. I hoped that I might discover, more fully and clearly, the points of tension and therefore of possible growth that an Orthodox woman would identify when engaging some of the ideas and insights of Christian feminism.

Such hopes began to dim even

after reading the first paragraph; they were completely dashed by the end of the first chapter. In the introduction, Belonick states that the only purpose of her thesis is to investigate the ''religious beliefs'' of feminist Christians and to ''contrast'' them with Orthodox Christian theology. I had the sinking feeling that patriarchy had won again. I was right.

Firstly, Belonick has no understanding whatsoever of what the feminist experience is like from the inside. I doubt very much that she took the time to really listen to stories of Christian feminists and, as a result, she depicts them as nominal Christians who calculatingly decided that "religious structures were not beyond feminist interest." She has absolutely no empathy for the often painful struggle and profound faith journey undertaken - for instance, the deeply felt questions that feminists ask about the significance for women of a male Saviour are dismissed by Belonick as the embarrassed attempt of Christian feminists to justify their beliefs to their non-Christian colleagues.

Secondly, the descriptions of feminist thinking about Scripture, God, Christ, and the Church are superficial, patronizing, and sarcastic. Belonick bases her understanding of Christian feminist thinking primarily on one anthology of writings. Feminist views are therefore underrepresented and misrepresented. For example, it is stated that the primary concern of feminist Christology is to make Christ androgynous. Feminist efforts to address patriarchy hermeneutically are dismissed as unnecessary and misguided, since the Bible does say some good things about women and some

critical things about men. Problem solved. Belonick remains completely untouched by feminist theology - so much so that not one feminist idea or question is considered worthy of even the slightest consideration. Ironically, she admits the valuable contribution of a woman's perspective in other fields, such as journalism, but such a perspective is heretical in theological thinking because the Truth is already known. This perspective represents a static understanding of Revelation and a dualistic approach to faith that is unacceptable to many Christians, feminist or not.

I did learn more about Orthodox theology from reading this little book. I found evocative the writer's description of the feminine dimensions of the Holy Spirit as traditionally understood by the Orthodox. In addition, her explanation of the importance and meaning of the Fatherhood of God while I did not agree with it was intriguing. It was strikingly similar to the Barthian understanding of the relationship between cosmic fatherhood and human fatherhood.

All in all, however, I think this book lacks depth, integration, and credibility - for the reasons already stated and more. I was extremely disappointed that she did not include in the thesis any reference to her own story or her personal experience. This disappointment became a jarring wrench in the last chapter, when the actual situation of some Orthodox women is described. There are still parishes where women are not allowed to partake of the Eucharist during their menstrual periods, women are forbidden to read and sing in church, and in some places an altar is considered defiled because a woman has touched or approached it. Belonick condemns these practices and beliefs, considering them a deviation from true Orthodoxy. That she can go no farther in her analysis than this means that this book is of little value to any woman who wishes to struggle seriously with what it means to be faithful.

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Seasons of Woman: Song, Poetry, Ritual, Prayer, Myth, Story

Penelope Washbourn, Harper and Row, 1979, pp. 176.

Gail Cuthbert Brandt

This fascinating anthology of writings representing various literary genres attempts "to provide the reader with a sense of how women express their own spiritual sensibilities about their identities as women." According to Penelope Washbourn, there was a time when women's spiritual and religious experience revolved around "female sexuality in its fertile aspect." The readings are therefore arranged to reflect the various stages in the fertility cycle puberty, marriage, motherhood, menopause, and old age. While over two-thirds of the material is drawn from preliterate societies, the editor also utilizes the poetry and prose of modern women to underline what she perceives to be continuity in the tradition of female spirituality.

The richness of the collection is further enhanced by the diversity of cultural groups represented; for example, in the section entitled ''Separation from Home — The Wedding,'' the relevant themes are explored in Ukrainian and North American Indian folk-songs, the poetry of Sappho and Emily Dickinson, and marriage chants from Hawaii, to name but some of the items.

Professor Washbourn's emphasis on the close relationship between the female body and spirit is am-

ply illustrated in many of the selections, especially in those which illuminate the lives of North American Indian and Inuit women. In a ceremony for the purification of young virgins among the Ogalala Sioux, for instance, part of the incantation proceeds: "O You, Grandmother, upon whom the generations of the people have walked, may White Buffalo Cow Woman appears (sic) and her generations walk upon you. . ." (p. 16). In rituals such as this, one is struck by the role women play not only as participants in or objects of religious ceremonies, but also as central images (the earth as Mother/Grandmother). Modern feminists are not left too long, however, to revel in the importance of women and female images to tribal religious practices: counterbalancing the formal recognition of women's creative force, there is in many of these same societies also a fear, a loathing of that reproductive capacity. As one Fox Indian woman recalls being told at age thirteen: "Now is the time you must watch yourself; at last you are nearly a young woman. Do not forget this which I tell you. You might ruin your brothers if you are not careful. The state of being a young woman is evil. The manitous hate it . . . whenever you are a young woman, you are to hide yourself." (p. 21).

The contradictory emotions which female sexuality evokes are skilfully portrayed in this collection. On the one hand, we share in the pride of young womanhood, the joy and awe of pregnancy; on the other, we experience the agony of abortion and the shame of barrenness.

Unfortunately, the power of this book is diminished by the inclusion of much material which, while nominally associated with a phase of the female life cycle, has somewhat tenuous connections to female spirituality. Three of the ancient Chinese poems in the section ''Married Life'' have obviously lost much of their beauty and potency in translation and offer the

reader more a statement of the problems of matrimony than insights into women's spiritual experience. Too many of the selections leave one wondering why they are included and what, if anything, they have to communicate about the nature of female spirituality. This problem stems from the editor's failure to provide a clear definition of female spirituality within the context of a more extensive introduction. She could have then used that concept/definition as the basis for a more rigorous selection of materials.

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Ms. Washbourn has provided us with much grist for the mill; it is only to be regretted that she did not provide us with the appropriate conceptual tools to glean the optimal yield.

Green Paradise Lost

(formerly *Why the Green Nigger?*), Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable, 1981, pp. 166.

Louise H. Mahood

A woman's understanding of the world is opposite to a man's, a fact Elizabeth Dodson Gray attempts to explain in Green Paradise Lost. Conflict arises because man's analvsis of his environment is linear and hierarchical, yet woman's is circular and concentric. A further dichotomy is man's association with culture, woman's with nature, a fact which means that female is associated with sensuality and mortality, two conditions of human life over which man has no dominion. Unfortunately, man's linear/hierarchical culture has generally been considered superior to woman's cyclical nature. Yet Gray discusses how we must reinterpret Eve's role in the Genesis tale as a positive rather than a negative one. Eve's exit from Eden is not the "Great Fall of Humankind" but rather a gain in "humanness," "finitude of our bodies," "our mortality," and "trajectory toward dying." Our aspiration should be praise and not dominion. Man's

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abuses of the earth are justified by using the traditional interpretation of the Genesis story, which supports the male's need to dominate both woman and earth.

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Successful as Gray is in her explanations, her book is not for the atheist who finds clear references to the divinity of God offensive. This book is also not for the woman who cannot emotionally or intellectually integrate Judaic or Christian religion into her feminist philosophy. Nevertheless, I found that the book articulated some perceptions of my environment in both an academic and spiritual fashion.

Unspoken Worlds

Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross, eds., Harper and Row, 1980, pp. 291.

M. E. Bradburne

Unspoken Worlds, edited by the eminent feminist scholars Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross, is a collection of essays by various researchers that gives a wide overview of the varying roles that women play in the religious life of non-Western cultures. The essays illustrate the thesis that women's struggle to achieve identity can, in many parts of the world, be achieved only through their contributions to religious life, either through the domestic rites performed in the home or through their contributions and experiences as diviners, visionaries, and religious leaders.

This book covers the religious experiences of women in cultures as diverse as the aborigine tribes in Australia and the Buddhist nuns in India, and in a time frame that ranges from ancient China to present-day South America. It demonstrates that women's religious contributions, far from being inferior to men's, are equally as important, although they may be less obvious, since they often concentrate on life, home, and nature rather than on the more dramatic and public concerns — such as war and hunting — of men in the same culture. This parallels what is often seen in the Western world, where the men write such aggressive hymns as ''Onward Christian Soldiers'' and women write hymns such as ''God Who Touches Earth with Beauty,'' which celebrates nature and the life-giving forces of God.

Earlier researches have helped perpetrate the myth, easily believed by men, that all cultures exclude women during menstruation and during and after childbirth because they are unclean. However, the research in Unspoken Worlds has shown that instead of menstruation's being considered by some groups as a time of uncleanliness, it is looked at with awe because of its powerful, life-giving force. Indeed, the Andean Indians of South America consider that menstruation cleanses women of misfortune and prepares them for childbearing, and as such is an event to be regarded with deep respect rather than contempt.

Socialization has also been found to be an important component of women's religious rituals, probably because in some cultures, such as the Shi-ite Moslems, women rarely leave their own homes. The result is that their religious rites are an acceptable method of contacting and enjoying the company of other women, as well as a way to seek favour from Allah.

Many women become highly respected in their community for the first time in their lives when they become seers or visionaries and are considered to have direct contact with the spirits. They are viewed as speaking in voices that come directly from the gods, bringing messages to help and guide the community, so their words are heeded as being divinely inspired. These women often surmount incredible adversities in order to take their place in this capacity. Visionaries in East Africa and Korea have often suffered extreme bodily and mental symptoms that

are considered a supernatural summons from the gods to take their proper places as seers and diviners.

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The women who have achieved respect as religious leaders displayed perseverance and a great determination as well as intelligence, fortitude, and independence. This is particularly noteworthy in Eastern and Asian cultures, where these characteristics are diametrically opposed to the traditional view of women.

The conclusion reached by the editors is that when all relevant information is carefully analysed, a different picture of the relationship between men's and women's religions and sacred life must become apparent. Instead of being excluded, as previously assumed, most women of the world have developed some kind of significant religious life, and "male domination is counter-balanced by women's sacral power." Finally, although women's religious lives cannot be fully understood without reference to the religious world of men, the converse is also true; it is vital that we study women's religious experiences as thoroughly and as carefully as that of men. It is impossible to acquire a full and true picture if one uses only 50 per cent of the world's population as a basis of study. The whole is always made up of all its parts.



A World of Difference: Gender Roles in Perspective

Esther Greenglass, John Wiley and Sons, 1982, pp. 356.

Kathleen Martindale

Esther Greenglass reports this unfortunately characteristic reaction by a senior Canadian university administrator to a female psychology professor (Is she Greenglass herself, author of the very fine study *After Abortion*?) who had just published a book on abortion:

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"Are you still studying women! When are you going to move on to something important?" This is the climate in which Greenglass must work and the one which makes her overview of research on the psychological differences between the sexes as seen from a feminist perspective useful and necessary.

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Since Greenglass is a social psychologist, her coverage of issues such as socialization, sexism in the media, and assessment of achievement motivation is thorough. Freud and the neo-Freudians are given short shrift. Feminist psychoanalytic critics such as Juliet Mitchell or even Jean Baker Miller are not mentioned; Freud and company are merely attacked for making erroneous assumptions and not being sufficiently empirical.

This book is most useful for the general reader or the undergraduate who knows all about male superiority in math and spatial manipulations and about female depression and "fear of success" but is not aware of non-sexist research. By calmly discussing the studies which have been done in these areas, Greenglass helps the reader to see how social factors and cultural norms about gender roles have influenced these differences, both as the general population has been taught to live them and as researchers have all too frequently assumed them as givens.

Greenglass clearly indicates how sexism on the part of social scientists slants their findings. For example, she shows how field independence, which correlates highly with stereotypical masculinity, is valued by sexist researchers, while field dependence, which correlates with stereotypical femininity, is devalued. Field independence or dependence is then used to explain why males and females make different occupational choices.

Although she attempts to cover as much of this territory as possible, Greenglass has omitted to mention one of the most contentious studies — the one which leapt to the conclusion that even gifted young women who had grown up in ''math-positive'' families were relative plodders compared to their male counterparts. And though Greenglass mentions Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive developmental theory, she does not include the ground-breaking work which has been done by his former associate, Carol Gilligan, on the way gender affects the way we see moral issues and make moral choices.

As just and temperate as this book is, its main limitation is the way the author puts off spelling out what is new in the feminist perspective in psychology until the very short final chapter, called "summary and implications." A book of this length, with almost seventy pages of references, needs more than ten pages to discuss the shortcomings and dangers of masculinist psychology and to describe what feminist psychology would do to redress the situation. The book's clearest strength is that as a feminist, Greenglass candidly acknowledges her belief that gender roles must be abolished because they limit human choice, reminding us that there is a world of difference between the belief that females and males are different and the belief that females differ from males in ways that render them inferior.

Between Women: Lowering the Barriers Paula Caplan

Esther Greenglass

In Between Women: Lowering the Barriers, Paula Caplan has distinguished herself as a noteworthy feminist scholar who draws on research and both clinical and personal experience in her explorations of relationships among women. A highly readable, informative, and interesting book, Between Women discusses how sexist beliefs in a patriarchal society have deprived women of emotional support and affection from other

women. Several pervasive myths must be acknowledged in order to begin to understand the barriers between women, says Caplan. These are that females are inferior to males, endlessly nurturant, emotionally dependent, naturally tidy, and physically graceful. Caplan sees the devaluation of women, by women and men alike, as a direct barrier to women's relationships with each other since it fosters competition for men and encourages in-group hostility. In her treatment of Freud, the grandfather of male chauvinism, she not only shows the absurdity in the concept of penis envy but suggests in its place the concept of "penis pity," which is based on the vulnerability of the male genitalia.

Between Women discusses how the mother-daughter relationship shapes women's development; how the mother is seen both as an intruder and mirror, and how competition between mother and daughter affects the developing young girl. The complexities and contradictory feelings of the mother-daughter relationship are seen particularly when (if) the daughter marries or has children of her own. The quiet desperation of the contemporary isolated housewife is seen as another barrier between mothers and daughters. Married daughters, she points out, may find themselves unhappy and may feel that their mothers should have warned them.

According to Caplan, the barriers that isolate women affect not only their personal relationships but also their relationships in neighbourhoods and in the workplace. In discussing women's psychological isolation from other women in the workplace, Caplan deals with the Queen Bee syndrome, the womean in the token position, and the phenomenon of women pleasing men in positions of power. Her discussion of women in the workplace and barriers between them is especially interesting and relevant in light of the increasing number of women holding outside employment in these times. Moreover, recent discussions of the importance of networking and mentoring for an individual's progress through the ranks — whether that be in business, education, or politics underline even more the importance of women overcoming the barriers between them. In short, women need each other — on an individual level as well as in a collective sense.

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An optimistic book, *Between Women* points to practical steps that can be taken to break down sex-role stereotypes that stifle individual growth and impede the development of close interpersonal relationships. In so doing, Caplan offers hope for change both in our generation and in generations to come.

Between Women is appropriate for the lay reader and the student alike. It is an excellent choice as a text in women's-studies and family-studies courses as well as in those dealing with human relationships. It is also useful to the researcher as well because it is so rich in clinical insights and testable hypotheses. In short, *Between Women* is a breath of fresh air in an area so deserving of study in these changing times.

This book can be ordered from Paula Caplan, 252 Bloor St. W., Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6. Send \$12.95 plus \$1.25 postage.

Women Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada

Shirley Davy, project co-ordinator; Nancy Hardy, ed., The Division of Mission in Canada and the Jackman Foundation, 1983, pp. 311.

Janet Somerville

Shirley Davy, the competent coordinator of this polemical history of women in one Canadian Christian denomination, writes that its contents combined in her heart and head, over the first year of the project that produced the book, ''like a stew.''

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It doesn't read at all like a stew. The flavours have not penetrated each other; the contrasting textures have not been reduced to bland tenderness. This book reads like a big, very participatory patchwork quilt, sewn together at a bee whose workers span three generations and several utterly different states of feminine consciousness. What I enjoyed most about the book was the respectfulness shown by its young, or educated, or sophisticated writer-editors in receiving and enshrining the memories, opinions, poems, and self-images of many older, simpler, or less sophisticated women contributors, without rewriting or disguising their clashing states of consciousness. Section Three, called "Patchwork Pieces," is no more than its title implies.

The book is not of a piece. The last section groups six essays by (mostly) young, much-educated United Church feminists whose writing is tendentious, exciting, and well-grounded in feminist literature. The first section stitches together hundreds of fragments of local church history as it was made by women in various parts of Canada. To get through this first section, the reader would need to be quite fondly caught up in church life; otherwise, its only interest would be the consistent feminist pattern found by Shirley Davy to unify the fragments. Section Two tells stories of women who have achieved some eminence in the United Church; all are so brief that they work mostly as tributes rather than as history.

But the book as a whole is certainly a work of history, and an ambitious one — albeit about a very short stretch of history (the United Church has existed only since 1925). It is a labour of orthodox, middle-of-the-road feminist analysis applied to freshly researched facts of a little-known history. The book's energy comes from conviction: the conviction that the Christian church in general and the United Church of Canada in particular are still very important, and the conviction that feminism is a true liberation, currently the most important ingredient for human liberation. With these convictions it does a competent job of rereading the history yet manages to be passionately democratic about accepting bits of research and analysis offered by scores of women in as many localities and states of mind. It is good, bridge-building, feminist education.

It also lacks things. When the book strays from the subject it knows really well - the United Church — its sense of history tends to leap blindfolded from New Testament times (or, occasionally, the writings of the Church Fathers in the first five centuries) to the end of the nineteenth century. Its formulae have little room for the dizzying church history in between of canonized women saints, of religious orders of women with their multilevelled impact on Europe and North America, of the great women mystics whose witness still awes and challenges today's inner seekers. In fact, it is not only mysticism but the whole interiority of religion that is curiously absent from these pages. It seems swallowed up in the admirable but relentless doing of United Church women. It is uncontemplative. It is silent even about the passionate, juicy devotional life that must have animated the dedicated church women it writes about. Only rarely (as in the stories of Elda Struthers and Ruth Tillman) does that devotional passion even glint through. In real life, it is much more common.

But it is a very good book. What the United Church of Canada does about feminism — how it will integrate, or dilute, or be changed by, or advocate feminism — will profoundly affect the social future of English-speaking Canada. And vice versa — how feminism deals with the church will have much to do with its future in Western culture. The serious purpose of this book is

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to help build a movement in which feminism will transform our religious and social inheritance while preserving great truths that emerged during the ages of patriarchy.

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The Meaning of Aphrodite

Paul Friedrich, University of Chicago Press.

F. Tsipporah Nemani

I have always said that "great" scholastic works gain enormous authority because they suffer immensely from myopic vision, mainly the one inflicted by sexism. As such, they could hardly be expected to reach viable hypotheses which the realm of speculative thought thinks are imperative. Thus it was quite refreshing to read a book by an author who tries to be non-sexist when he writes about a Goddess — Aphrodite.

The author proposes a new theory about the meaning and origin of Aphrodite and attempts a synthesis of her prehistoric and historic origins. As to the meaning of Aphrodite, his conclusions are not too confused or distorted, and I think that he is not too far away from the truth — but about this we can only speculate.

Basically, the author proposes that the images/metaphors of Aphrodite are composed of elements from the Sumerian/Semitic Inanna/Ishtar, the Phoenician Astarte, the Egyptian Hathor and Isis, the Old European Bird Goddess, the Minoan/Mycenean Dove Goddess, and the Proto-Indo-European Awsos (Dawn/dawn, the bifurcation hypothesis). This hypothesis is not new to feminists who view the Goddess as one, and all her various names as different manifestations of her attributes.

The problem is, of course, that Friedrich tries to describe a complex image/metaphor which is but one part of the Great Goddess, and thus he cannot escape the inclusion of Demeter/Kore and Artemis, but he still falls short of understanding the entire system of beliefs. The structure of his argument indicates another problem. In order to demonstrate that the image of Aphrodite was formed by infusion of several earlier cultures (earlier than the Greeks, that is), he delineates several seemingly unrelated cultures, but he bases his evidence on secondary sources. Thus some of his arguments are weak. Furthermore, he analyses these earlier Goddesses as if they were primary, formed in a complete and static fashion, in order to categorize the similarity in attributes into neat little packages. In this respect this study is definitely a male-structured argument. The pitfall of such a structure is that it ignores the fluid and adaptable metaphors of the Goddess, especially at the time of transition, in which the onslaught of the patriarchy is at full force. For example, Aphrodite in The Iliad is already a male-imaged one, with all the distortions that the patriarchy inflicted. It is not surprising then that she urges Helen to Paris's bed after her lover's miraculous rescue from the duel. If anyone represents the old image of the original Aphrodite it is Helen herself, who refuses to go to Paris but is forced to by Aphrodite's threats.

Inanna, the Goddess with whom I am most familiar from my own research, had earlier affinities with Dawn/dawn and the bringing forth of the earth. Only later, in Sargon's time, did she begin to be identified with Ishtar. This is not to say that one Goddess is earlier than the other; what is important is that the attributes changed over a long time, not always simultaneously and not always to the same degree, since the patriarchs took it upon themselves to reorganize/reverse the world. Some of the Goddess attributes were transferred to male gods; those which could not be changed were limited, belittled, and denigrated. Thus what the author may consider primary may not be atavistic at all but already

contaminated with patriarchic slander.

This is not a book to read if you want a feminist synthesis of Aphrodite, but for those who want to understand the creative/transforming principle of the Great Goddess, this book offers some good and useful arguments.

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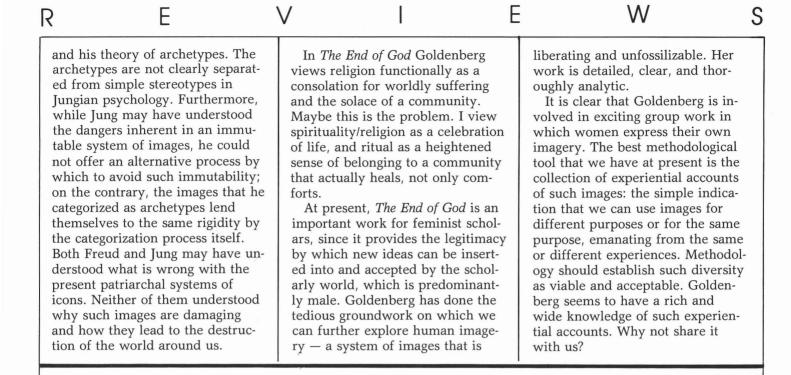
The End of God Naomi R. Goldenberg, University of Ottawa Press.

F. Tsipporah Nemani

Naomi R. Goldenberg's *The End* of *God* is a scholarly study which attempts to salvage some of Freud's and Jung's ideas for the formation of feminist iconography. Goldenberg acknowledges that most feminists have rejected Freudian and Jungian authority in matters of spirituality and psychology, but she still tries to restore, at least partially, their applicability and viability to feminist religious imagery. The question is, why?

According to Goldenberg, "both offer surprising potential for assistance in understanding the radical nature of the iconographic impoverishment feminists are working to resolve" (p. xi). I do not agree with this statement. While Freud may have understood the function of icons in the patriarchal religions, he never understood their implications for women nor why icons are necessary to human beings. He understood that human beings cannot form images which are beyond themselves and he grounded religious imagery within the patriarchy, but he could not understand the reasons for their enormous influence, which lies with images and their necessity for human interaction.

Jung, who seemed to understand somewhat better the powerful role of images per se, offered a limited, patriarchally dualistic, and simplistic view of imagery, especially with his anima/animus dichotomy



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