

FEMINIST
SPIRITUALITY: AN
INTRODUCTION TO
FEMINIST THEOLOGY
IN JUDAISM,
CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM
AND FEMINIST
GODDESS WORSHIP

Johanna Stuckey. Toronto: Centre for Feminist Research, York University, 1999.

BY CLARA THOMAS

In her introduction Johanna Stuckey states her purpose: "It is not my aim to be comprehensive, but to summarize and explicate." She has done exactly that. *Feminist Spirituality* is an excellent introduction and overview of four world religions from a feminist perspective, valuable to anyone seeking even-handed information and enlightenment about matters of the spirit that affect all of us. It also contains an extensive bibliography, reaching out to others of the world's religions as well as giving an abundance of references to her four major divisions.

How much do I know about Judaism when I require students to read Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* or many other works? More important, what should I know? What is it my responsibility to know? I would like to see Stuckey's book on many, many reading lists—it makes an excellent religious knowledge introduction to students and faculty alike.

A product of years of study and teaching in the field, Stuckey's introductory chapter, "Women's Spirituality" begins from her own experience—the recognition that, increasingly, numbers of women are eager for enlightenment. Her own determination to be even-handed in her treatment is evidenced in the Introduction's final paragraphs: "I am not today a follower of any of the forms of spirituality I discuss here. Consequently, I write as an outsider.... I

have chosen to focus on the traditions that I think have had the most impact in the West. Christianity, Judaism and Islam.... As a scholar of goddess-worship, I also include consideration of one of the fastest-growing new forms of spirituality in the West today: Feminist Goddess Worship." She ends each discussion with its present-day implications for women, especially from the point-of-view of feminism and feminist theology.

In every case she begins with a short history and goes on to bring the current practices and divisions up to date. For Judaism, for instance, it is extremely useful to know of the beginnings of three major groups, the Askhenazim, Sephardim and Hasidim and their differences as well as the present-day practices of the Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist divisions. Her final paragraphs deal with women and religious leadership in Judaism, especially with the enormous advances that have been made by feminist theologians, entrenching a tradition of education as well as leadership. Finally she asks the hardest question: if alteration persists, will the final transformation be recognizably Judaism?

Beginning with its monotheistic roots, like Judaism's in the Covenants God made with the people of Israel, she deals with the radical break from Judaism that Christianity represents and goes on to describe its three major divisions and the beliefs basic to them: Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. Under these we have a division between "liberal" and "conservative" Protestantism with thumb-nail sketches of their best-known subdivisions.

Under the wide umbrella of Christianity women were very early to become prominent in the gospels as well as in accounts of the early church. Today, most branches of Protestantism are alive with activity, from sober enquiry to passionate revolt, seeking to disengage their worship from

the prejudices and discriminations that have hampered them and continue to do so. In strong opposition to reform there is the disquieting tendency for the most conservative to follow the recent declaration of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S., that women should "submit graciously" to the leadership of their husbands. The inevitable human weakness of splitting into factions; often warring factions with their overriding political agendas, produces a fascinating, though frustrating spectacle. Then too, there is finally the same hard question to be asked: will a transformed religion still be recognizably Christian?

Islam is immensely more complicated for an outsider either to summarize or to grasp than either Judaism or Christianity. Partly this is because, relative to the other two, it is a recent religion—Muhammed lived from 570 CE (Common Era) to 632 CE. Already in his lifetime he had set out upon the path of conquest that was to define Islam henceforth, subduing Mecca, his home city, and sanctifying the Kaaba, the Black Stone of Mecca, already for centuries a sacred object. Unfortunately, he neglected to name his heir before death, setting in train controversy among his relatives (he had daughters but no living sons) that eventually resulted in the separation of Islam into Shiite and Sunni Muslims; Sufism, Islamic mysticism was ascetic in origin. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a large part of the Islamic world belonged to three empires: Persia, officially Shiite in religion, north India, where the Mughal dynasty practiced Sunni Islam, and the Ottoman empire, also Sunni, finally comprising Algeria, Tunisia, Cyprus, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Iraq and western Arabia. Although there is considerable mixing of the two branches among the world's Muslims, the division in general remains.

Stuckey lists Islam's chief tenets as these: "First and foremost, Islam is monotheistic ... further character-

ized by lack of separation between sacred and secular: for practising Muslims, their religion *is* their way of life." Their articles of faith comprise Oneness, Prophethood, the Quran, Life after death, a world community of Islam and finally, Jihad, meaning "struggle," first against evil, then against polytheists. The Quran, derived directly from God, is more than a sacred book; it is "coextensive with God" and Muslims live under its authority. There is a wide variety in practices, laws, and rituals involving or excluding women. However, the United Nations' Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was ratified by many countries in 1981, including Islamic countries; by January of 1995 forty-two countries had declared reservations with the Convention, twelve of which were predominantly Muslim. In recent decades, a surge of nationalism in many areas has resulted in a great increase in women wearing the *hijab* or veil to demonstrate at once their commitment to Islam and their opposition to western imperialism.

It is not surprising that the feminism of the western world is rejected by many of Islam's woman activists, or that they advocate working within their own societies to make the changes they see as necessary. "There is one way, perhaps only one way, for a Muslim woman to criticize Islam without having to face the charge of being a 'Western-inspired lackey,' that is to call herself an 'indigenous feminist,' an Islamic feminist." Inevitably it follows that a writer or reader from the west finds enormous difficulty in assessing the actual state of Islamic women's affairs. It is easy, and sad, however, to point to obvious offences against women by such fundamentalist "revivalist" groups as the Taliban movement in Afghanistan which, in 1996, began to impose a strict reading of Islamic law on the population, with men and women obliged to be covered head to toe in public, and women forbidden to work outside the home except in medicine.

Goddess Worship has occurred for thousands of years, as scholars have abundantly demonstrated, but in our time it is the most recent of important feminist religious movements. Only recently has it differentiated itself from other groups, particularly Wicca. Because its practices are widely varied and its basic tenets are anything but stable, it is the most difficult of the four to encapsulate. There are, however, certain principles common to feminist Goddess Worship: Femaleness is central to their beliefs, combined with a rejection of the body/mind-spirit dualism of western culture. Female empowerment is their primary aim, Nature is alive and sacred, tolerance of other's views is a given, the sacred history of Goddess Worship is accepted, and finally, decentralization and lack of hierarchy are absolute rules. Consequently, each group, however small, is free to set up its own practices and rituals—and ritu-

als are a very important part of the dynamic of the believers. Like other religions, Goddess Worship is open to factionalism and disagreement, about political involvement, the role and status of men, their inclusion or exclusion, or the eventual possible fashioning of a truly woman-centred culture. What is abundantly evident to both practitioners and observers of Goddess Worship is its move towards healing, of the self first and then of the entire society—an often powerful movement towards order, community and cultural transformation.

As Stuckey began her study from a feminist viewpoint, though one uncommitted to any of the religions she treats, so she ends with her own conviction and the assurance that spirituality and religion have become a lasting and powerful part of the feminist agenda. This is a wise and a hopeful book—it is also an extremely valuable one.



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