

Women's ecofeminist spirituality: Origins and applications to psychotherapy

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to theoretically explore the origins and possible psychotherapeutic applications of some neo-pagan, neo-shamanic, or psycho-spiritual women's movements that are currently spreading in Western countries. In spite of their great diversity, they are all encompassed within the term "ecofeminist spirituality." This article analyzes their ideological, historical, and cultural origins, placing special emphasis on their psychotherapeutic role and describing the main tools and fields of application.

*Keywords:* psychology, spirituality, ecofeminism, gender

## **Introduction**

From a psychological perspective, there are a large number of scientific articles that show evidence of a faith-healing association. Undoubtedly, contemporary psychology can accommodate the healing power of faith, both empirically and in theory. <sup>1</sup> In this paper, we look closely at spiritual movements stemming from the “Divine Feminine,” <sup>2</sup> This is a model of spiritual ecofeminism that English-speaking female writers refer to as “earth-based,” where immanence supersedes transcendence, and God is a Goddess. In this model, sexuality is not proscribed because it is sacredly guarded as a source of health and well-being. The model’s ethical paradigm focuses on self-learning and exploration of the self through the body as well as experience, feelings, and emotions, along with myths and pagan rituals in communion with nature in all its light and darkness, rather than with a supra-natural masculinized being. This is a model of spirituality whose most important feature is its overall healing vocation, of which there are many aspects, although this article will focus only on the association between the spiritual and the psychotherapeutic applications.

The aim of this paper is to theoretically explore the origins and possible psychotherapeutic applications of some neo-pagan, neo-shamanic, or psycho-spiritual women’s movements encompassed within the term “ecofeminist spirituality.”

## **Justification**

Despite the noticeable rise of neo-pagan spiritual movements among women, very few research studies have focused on them. Countless scientific articles have explored the general impact of spirituality and religious beliefs on mental health, and there is even a division in the field of psychology called Psychology of Religion and Spirituality (PRS). However, most psychological scientific literature has been focused on Christian or currently Buddhist milieus and practices, such as mindfulness practices used to deal

with stress,<sup>3</sup> and faith and deep beliefs used to deal with grief.<sup>4</sup> Reference books on the PRS do not take ecofeminist spirituality into account: the manual by the American Psychological Association<sup>5</sup> and the one by Paloutzian and Park<sup>6</sup> do not mention it, and there is only one chapter in the Oxford manual<sup>7</sup> that describes the basics somewhat sparingly. It is true that in recent years, more attention has been paid to gender within the PRS, and many articles have been published dealing with the relationships between spirituality, health, and women from a scientific psychological perspective; Mattis's studies of spirituality in African-American women<sup>8</sup> is one such example. There has also been other research on the role that spirituality plays in women's health in the following different fields: drug abuse,<sup>9</sup> HIV-AIDS,<sup>10,11</sup> breast cancer,<sup>12,13</sup> and male violence.<sup>14-16</sup> However, the majority of articles are framed, again, within the Christian or Buddhist tradition.

It is no coincidence that mainstream PSR does not pay attention to feminine neo-pagan spiritualities and practices. One reason is the heterogeneity of the movements, which very rarely constitute organizations, and whose diversity of beliefs and practices is rather overwhelming. Some examples of this are Feminine Spirituality, Wicca, Wicca Reclaiming, Paganism, Neo-Paganism, the Goddess Movement, Feminine Mystique, the tradition of the Great Mother, the tradition of HispAnna Iberia, Feminine Spiritual Psychology, and spiritual healing through Goddess Archetypes, among others. The second reason could be the lack of sensitivity in studies carried out in primarily Western Christian milieus. Finally, there is a general invisibility related to gender because, in most of cases, these are women's movements.

In spite of the lack of information in most PRS manuals, there are other seminal publications (mainly feminine best seller books), which are reference works for those women close to the ecofeminist paradigm, such as, *Woman Soul: The Inner Life of*

*Women's Spirituality* by Rayburn and Comas-Díaz,<sup>17</sup> *Goddesses in Everywoman: Powerful Archetypes in Women's Lives* by Bolen<sup>18</sup> and *Women Who run with the Wolves* by Pinkola Estés,<sup>19</sup> both doctors in psychiatry, and also Gray's best-selling essay, "Red Moon."<sup>20</sup>

For all the above reasons, the aim of this article is to fill the gap between academic research, biased by the Western Christian patriarchal perspective, and the spiritual interests of thousands of women. This article will use a theoretical framework to explore the origins of these ecofeminist movements and the implications that this spirituality could have for the psychosocial health of women who approach it.

### **Ideological origins: ecofeminism**

It is difficult to specify when ecofeminism first appeared in the Western world. It has been acknowledged that the germ of ecofeminism is part of the history of women linked to the earth, challenging gender roles and norms, sexuated, and deeply involved in the health and welfare of their communities in the roles and shapes of midwives, healers, and women accused of sorcery and witchcraft. Outside the Western capitalist world, pagan traditions or spiritual models linked to nature have always been present and are still alive in some parts of the world. However, this article will focus on the reappearance of these traditions in Europe, where there was a break with these traditions due to the execution of hundreds of thousands of women accused of witchcraft, mainly in the 16th to 18th centuries,<sup>21</sup> and where a new model is currently being generated that receives influences from a variety of sources.

The configuring ideological background of this new subculture could be traced back to the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in movements such as naturism, pacifism, Native American traditions, and some vindications of anarchism, as well as various alternative and protest movements.

However, D'Eaubonne coined the term, "ecofeminism" as a current aspect of late-20<sup>th</sup> century feminist movements.<sup>22</sup> In her work, *Feminism or Death* (1974), D'Eaubonne explains that the key to facing environmental and equality issues is equal to, and lies within, radical feminism, thus defining a new feminist subculture.<sup>23-24</sup>

The essential principle of ecofeminism is the affirmation that women's oppression and the destruction of nature have the same origin: the patriarchal perspective, which exerts control and power over both.<sup>25, 26</sup> Since women are regarded as a part of nature, they experience the same type of violence: the need to control what is different, that is, women, emotions, sexual diversity, and eroticism.<sup>27-32</sup> Women and nature thus become potential resources that must be exploited and controlled.

The inability to understand that human beings have our share in the unity of nature comes from the foundational duality of "man-reason vs. woman-nature," which has its origins in Plato in Western civilizations.<sup>33, 34</sup> For many female authors, this duality leads to ecocide and, therefore, to the suicide of our own species.<sup>35</sup> Further, this foundational gender dualism is considered the "Master Patriarchal Model," and comprises privileges according to the following axis: species-race-class-sex-sexuality,<sup>27, 34</sup> as opposed to the ecofeminist values of interdependence between human beings and the Earth. In this regard, there is both scientific and psychological evidence for the correlation between both authoritarianism and sexist attitudes against women, an orientation toward social dominance, and non-sustainability attitudes toward the environment.<sup>36</sup> However, according to ecofeminism, most humans treat themselves the same way they treat nature. Therefore, it is also necessary to develop a transformation in psychology, where human identity should avoid the atomistic positions of liberal thinking and move toward the evolution of a greater consciousness regarding ecology, relations, and interdependence.<sup>28</sup>

## **From ideology to spirituality**

It was evident that the appearance of a feminist and ecologist consciousness was going to be at direct odds with certain sectors of the current anthropocentric consciousness<sup>37</sup> in the Christian theology that is prevalent in Western countries. The eminent Christian cosmivision, with a *deus ex machina* that controls everything from the outside, is completely opposed to the immanent sacrality that this feminist and ecologist consciousness finds in the natural environment. The ecclesiastic hierarchy of Christianity, as opposed to Christian communities themselves, is not compatible with the ecofeminist emphasis on communal spaces where active listening and the group's voices of wisdom and experience are vital in making decisions. Christian sexism is also not compatible with the promotion of egalitarian relationships. The ecofeminist ideal that we humans are all a whole sacred body, with all its subtleties and diversity, is incompatible with the moralistic values of good and evil, or righteousness and sin.<sup>35</sup> Despite this, it should be emphasized that within Christian communities, there is a tradition of the Divine Feminine, integrating Christianity and Goddess spirituality.<sup>38</sup>

Spirituality based on the divine feminine is an ecofeminist spirituality, stemming from both feminism and environmentalism. Nevertheless, an originative controversy is still present in the different types of feminism that ponder whether "women's spirituality" would not reinforce gender stereotypes and, therefore, diminish the political and philosophical aims of feminism itself. In this regard, two clear-cut currents of spiritual ecofeminism can be discussed. First, the queer approximations, where gender is transcended. Second, those found within the "feminism of difference," where women's spirituality and their difference is a key factor in their own empowerment. In both cases, spiritual ecofeminism plays a significant role in defying the very heart of the patriarchal perspective, and all its beliefs.

Ecofeminist spiritualities involve a set of non-dominance principles and an assertion of belonging to nature—linking interdependence, eco-dependence, and some psychological implications with values, behaviors, and ways of relating to others or to nature itself—that differ from patriarchal principles.<sup>26</sup>

Parallel to the evolution of feminism, specialists from a variety of research areas (i.e., anthropology, archeology, literature, philosophy, history, and psychology) coincide in their perspective and contribution to creating the Culture of the Goddess. These specialists include Johan Jacob Bachofen, Robert Briffault, Riane Eisler, James Frazer, Marija Gimbutas, Carol P. Chirst, Robert Graves, Esther Harding, Carl Jung, and Erich Neumann, among others. They have all discussed and contributed to making the concepts of matriarchy and matriarchism more understandable. Further, they have managed to bring back into existence the figure of a feminine divinity from Prehistoric and Ancient times. This figure was given multiple names and consecrated in hundreds of stories, depending on the different places on Earth. She had been worshiped, in spite of her unique true essence as the Great Creatrice—or the Great Universal Matrix—which represents and sustains life on Earth. All these voices would play an important part in nurturing Second Wave feminist movements, in order to resuscitate and grant visibility to women’s culture from within cultural feminism and the feminism of difference, melding into concepts of feminist, feminine, indigenous, ecological, sacred, revolutionary, transformational, and psychotherapeutic. This confluence and transversality has been referred to as “the discourse of the Goddess culture,” an alternative discourse that warrants thorough and conscientious study, as in any other cultural discourse.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, Woodhead and Heelas pointed out the existence of an implicit cultural discord, a sort of historical vengeance in the Western world: vitalism versus



rationalism.<sup>40</sup> Thus, contemporary ecofeminist spirituality becomes a powerful counter-cultural force that discreetly, but effectively, acts as a means to turn the rationalist Modernity of the Enlightenment upside down, along with all the different practices, beliefs, and forms of organization that have been attributed to this model.<sup>41</sup>

### **The psychology of ecofeminist spirituality**

As previously stated, psychological knowledge is a key factor in these movements. Ecofeminist spiritualities are therapeutic and healing, whose background stems from Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology, which incorporates ideas from anthropology, mythology, religions, and philosophy. It is distant from the prevailing patriarchal and reductionist perspectives of the time, which had been strongly criticized by feminism, for the assumption that conduct and behavior, or only things that are observable, serve as the main object of study in psychology. Current reductionism attempts to comprehend the human being and its complexities from the notion of a unique, universal, and ahistoric being. Standardization and measurements are used, disparaging the arts, creativity, subjectivity, and human intuition in favor of logic, cognition, and rationality. Some current academic trends devalue relatability and everyday life as a space of human harmony, a space where the mental and the psychological abide,<sup>42</sup> and a place where the dialectics of knowledge-building come into existence.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Pinkola Estés argues that:

Conventional psychology is often conceived as sparing or completely non-existent in addressing the deepest and most significant issues for women: the archetypal, the instinctive, the sexual and the cyclical, the ages and course of action of women, their wisdom and their right to breed.<sup>19</sup>

Ecofeminist spirituality is, therefore, based in the realms of Jungian psychology. Jung's disciples, Esther Harding and Erich Neumann, came to develop the archetype of the Great Mother. They created a more feminine outlook with regards to Jung's analytical psychology and later matured these fundamental ideas.

One of the main characteristics of ecofeminist spirituality is its link to humanistic psychology, even though its principles steer away from behavioral psychology in favor of alternative principles:<sup>43</sup>

1. The unlearning of stereotypical gender roles and the principles of hegemonic masculinity to empower women.
2. The analysis of culture and its elements of dominance.
3. The importance of women's experiences, feelings, and their own life stories.
4. The development of equitable bonding with the therapist as a person who is also growing.
5. The acceptance of individual transformation to make social transformation possible.
6. The acknowledgment of psychotherapeutic experience as a spiritual process that moves towards personal well-being
7. The conception of the social atmosphere and hegemonic culture as an alienating element in the process of human development.<sup>44</sup>

There is another area of psychological work that consists of the deconstruction of Christian guilt: the "wild" elements, the very nature within us, which belongs to the body, sexuality, feelings and emotions, and relationships, has been demonized by some Christian sectors, causing women to internalize guilt as a means of self-hatred. These women then must recover the will to live a life of their own, far beyond social limitations, despite the castrating efforts of society.<sup>43</sup>

Ecofeminist spiritualities combine the will for personal development and the well-being of women, unlike other spiritual and religious movements, which usually focus on transcendence and the fulfillment of the set of canons established by the hierarchy. In these ecofeminist spiritualities, spirituality and health converge and coexist.<sup>41</sup>

In 2005, Perez-Argote and Santiago described the empirical convergence between health and spirituality,<sup>45</sup> defined by Heelas and Woodhead as the “spiritualities of life” or the “holistic milieu.”<sup>40</sup> These authors claimed that a “holistic milieu” emerges from these movements, but there is scant information about the participants in these groups, with some exceptions, such as the investigations carried out at Universitat Rovira i Virgili, the Madrilenian Institute of Anthropology, the Pluralism and Cohabitation Foundation, and the Observatory of Religious Pluralism. However, there is a significant increase in what is known as Habermas “post-Christian spiritualities,” which mostly occur in women and young people under the age of 39 who are well-educated and live in cities.<sup>45</sup> In addition, this phenomenon can be related to the average European situation,<sup>46</sup> and there is also evidence of the preference for alternative therapies in women from the United States.<sup>47</sup> The psychological model of therapeutic spiritualities is based in humanistic psychology and its basic tenets: the pursuit of the self, the experience of one’s self as a means for subjective validation, and the healing and transformation of the personal and the collective.

In the 1960s, a spiritual type of humanistic psychology emerged in California as the Human Potential Movement, which was greatly influenced by psychologist Abraham Maslow. It involved the psychologizing of the spiritual process, with influences from Gestalt and Transpersonal psychology.<sup>48,49</sup> The basic theories emerged in the seventies with the rise of contemporary spirituality, and had direct influence from Native American traditions, paganism (such as Wicca), and shamanism (especially influenced

by the writings of Carlos Castaneda and his impact on the counter-culture age). Thus, these spiritual experiences are equipped with a magical naturalism that can be considered a synthesis between pantheism and a practical nature, along with some influences from 19<sup>th</sup> century esotericism<sup>41</sup> and spiritual elements from oriental mysticism.<sup>50, 51</sup>

In sum, a new psycho-spiritual framework has been created, which is synthetic and syncretic, a fusion of disciplines from different traditions, cultures, and ages, and a transcultural and spiritual blend updated with ecofeminist values. Some authors have criticized this framework, considering that it deals with “spirituality à la carte,”<sup>52, 53</sup> which is the case, although most contemporary religions have emerged in a similar manner. For instance, Christianity synthesizes and renovates at the same time, with the inclusion of dozens of myths and rituals that already existed in the ancient Mediterranean, which in turn themselves came from different cultures.

From a gender perspective, women have a strong interest in these holistic milieus, due to the legitimization of this proscribed subjective spirituality in academia to the expression of their own-selves and the autonomy that these women are offered in these places. Therefore, it is an open, relational, and utilitarian spirituality that promotes and strengthens the agency of women.<sup>40, 54</sup>

### **Applications to psychotherapy**

As mentioned above, ever since it originated, ecofeminist spirituality has had a healing and psychotherapeutic vocation, and the development of this direction is spreading significantly in Western countries. Some psychologists and counselors, although indifferent toward religion and spirituality for decades, are now rediscovering their spiritual roots with renewed interest.<sup>55, 56</sup> Given the diversity of faith-based beliefs, both diagnostics and treatments would benefit from becoming more faith specific<sup>57</sup> and

culturally sensitive<sup>58</sup> in the field that relates religion and mental health,<sup>59</sup> and this relationship appears to be stronger for women than for men.<sup>60</sup> As long as psychologists are open-minded, well trained, and closely monitor ethical issues with competence, respect, integrity, and responsibility, they can learn a great deal from traditions with spiritual wisdom.<sup>61</sup> In this case, ecofeminist spirituality has some core points that should be heeded by therapists or counselors. First, it is an embodied spirituality,<sup>62-64</sup> and it considers the female body to be a sacred place where the creative force lives.<sup>65, 66</sup> Second, the emotional world matters, and so affects as human relations are emotion producers, and these emotions are mediators in health.<sup>67-69</sup> Third, the entire therapeutic process should be addressed from a gender perspective: there is nothing more annoying for an ecofeminist woman than to stumble on a psychologist who is misogynistic, homophobic, or a defender of patriarchal values.

In this regard, several tools are used in spiritual circles of women:

1. Groups of women, who are empowered through dialogic learning, share experiences and practice mutual care.
2. Myths are used as coping strategies to deal with everyday psychological processes.
3. Rituals are used to express and produce individual or collective emotions and blessings.
4. Nature is considered an intrinsic element of the body, and in the cycles of women, and special attention is paid to menstruation, womb blessing, and a spiritual awareness of motherhood.<sup>70</sup>
5. Dances, drums, songs, and music are tools for connecting with divinity,<sup>71</sup> and a wide variety of relaxation, meditation, and awareness techniques are used.

Some areas of psychotherapy where these tools could be applied include the following: generating resources to cope with stress; coping with grief due to significant losses, due to either separation or death of a loved one; analyzing and reviewing linkage models as health or disease generating agents; the development of agency in women, such as assertiveness, autonomy, self-confidence, and activity<sup>72</sup>; questioning patriarchal impositions on the canons of feminine beauty, and the acceptance of diversity in the composition of self-image, improving self-confidence, which could prevent self-image disorders); and the promotion of sexual rights<sup>73</sup> and the experience of pleasurable, free, and safe sexual experiences from a positive and non-guilty perspective, in particular allowing reconciliation with women's sexuality, or helping in sex abuse cases.

### **Conclusion**

Ecofeminist spiritualities look to the future, but they find, collect, and, above all, update pagan symbols, identities, traditions, rituals, and teachings of the Neolithic. On occasion, the scientific prism is used, through knowledge generated by scientific disciplines such as psychology, history, sociology, or anthropology. At other times, an artistic point of view is used, through narratives, stories, metaphors, images, and poetry. This may seem chaotic and incoherent from a Cartesian perspective, and yet it is a model that seems close and affordable because people are, think, feel, and act in this manner. People are objectivity and subjectivity, updated pasts, influences from a variety of sources. It is only from this non-categorizing, non-dualistic view that this spiritual model can be understood (if it needs to be understood). It is partly reason, partly poetry, partly West, partly East, partly past, and partly future.

From a theological stance, this spirituality is not based on a specific book, dogma, or revealed truth. It is not subject to a tradition, but rather is nourished by many traditions; nor does it pretend to have a scientific nature, although it is sometimes based on

scientific facts (e.g., the common origin of life or the universe, psychological studies on well-being, and scientific evidence of the worship of ancient goddesses). It is not intended to be merely an intangible myth; instead, it is used to explain everyday life.

From a philosophical perspective, this model does not belong to a tradition of speculative reason, enlightened, or unifying thought. It no longer belongs to the traditions of Parmenides, Plato, or Socrates. It does not divide knowledge between philosophers (reason-science), poets (art-creativity-intuition), and priests (religion-spirituality), but rather it harmonizes and unifies this knowledge and its different ontological and epistemological approaches. This model's philosophical principles could approach the concept of "poetic reason" proposed by the philosopher Maria Zambrano.<sup>74</sup> This makes it a diverse model of spirituality, in which organized movements coexist with individual experiences, without norms but with common values. It is not a model that tries to explain reality, but like its Goddesses, it creates, generates, and regenerates it. It is, therefore, a living model of creative psychotherapeutic spirituality that begins to show scientific evidence for being a potential source of psychosocial health,<sup>75</sup> and it can be addressed by health care providers, psychologists, and counselors.

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