# BOOK REVIEWS

Two Reviews of *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future.* By Cynthia Eller. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. 276 pages. $26.00 paper.

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CYNTHIA ELLER, WHO WROTE the first sociological study on the Feminist Goddess movement, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess,* now gives us her critique of the central mythos of the movement in her newest work, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory.* The subtitle of the book alerts readers to her perspective immediately—*why an invented past will not give women a future.* Eller's main critique of the mythos is that its purported political agenda—the liberation of women—will not be gained through a revising of prehistory, as the myth makers claim. Eller's book critiques the archeological arguments associated with this mythos as well as the conclusions drawn from those arguments. She frames her discussion in the context of the entire feminist movement.

Eller does an excellent job of presenting the mythos of the Feminist Goddess movement in great detail through examples found in literature, art, music, group travel packages and scholarship. Eller is amazed at the proliferation of this mythology during the last fifteen years or so and the level of unquestioning acceptance it has received among many women and men participating in the Goddess movement. Yet she recognizes the myths' tremendous power to transform individual women's lives in the present. "Many women … have experienced the story of our matriarchal past as profoundly empowering, and as a firm foundation from which to call for, and believe in, a better future for us all" (p. 7). In spite of this she believes it is useful to critique the mythos on the grounds

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SLIPPING OFF THE SACRED LAP

Cynthia Eller's latest book is intended to be confrontational, as can be seen in the title, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an invented past won't give women a future.* Eller begins by arguing that the sacred history of Goddess Spirituality, the myth of a golden matriarchal prehistory, is what unites an extremely diverse "feminist spirituality" movement. She refers to those who believe in this myth, regardless of their spiritual practice, as "feminist matriarchalists." Although she admits that the myth may function temporarily in a feminist way by empowering individual women, she posits that it leaves sexist assumptions unchallenged and ultimately works against women as a group. The approach used by Eller to support her arguments is both interesting and ambitious and, unlike the work of many academics, her excellent writing skills make her ideas accessible to both scholars and the lay public, if they can get past the book's title.

The book, however, is not without problems, beginning with her continued use of the label "feminist spirituality." If this term was ever a useful way to delineate Goddess Spirituality, it has long since ceased to be so. As has been argued elsewhere (for examples, see Griffin 2000; Gottschall 2000), there are many practitioners of this spiritual path who are not and would not call themselves feminists. The motives underlying and the goals of their practice may not even be feminist; they are

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that "it is my feminist movement too, and when I see it going down a road which, however inviting, looks like the wrong way to me, I feel an obligation to speak up" (p. 7).

At the onset she provides a brief history of the term matriarchy (leaving a more rigorous analysis for her next book) and decides that matriarchy can be defined as "a shorthand description for any society in which women's power is equal or superior to men's and in which the culture centers around values and life events described as 'feminine'" (p. 13). She rightly reports that proponents of the myth of matriarchal prehistory do not, in general, use the term matriarchy themselves, but argues that this shorthand is useful for the discussion. What she terms Feminist Matriarchalists I and others see as Feminist Goddess religion. Here is an indication of the youth of Feminist Goddess discourse. We still do not agree on what to call this new religion.

Eller's critique encompasses two broad areas: 1) an analysis that the feminist matriarchalist mythos actually supports patriarchal gender roles, and 2) a concerted attack on the historical and pre-historical claims the mythos embodies. The first area is the most interesting and in my opinion, the most useful of her critiques. I was disappointed that this section of the book was the smallest. She reviews ideas in the field of sex differences to support her argument that there are actually more similarities between men and women than differences. Eller believes such a finding undermines the Feminist Goddess movement's emphasis on the "feminine". She points out that the Feminist Goddess movement's use of traditional categories of femininity, such as motherhood, childbirth, nurturing, and women's association with the body and nature, though extolling these as positive, powerful aspects, are still using the same categories that have been associated with women for centuries. She questions whether using the categories ascribed by a patriarchal society should be used at all in the cause of liberating women from subjugation. She also places herself in the camp of feminists who argue for the abolition of gender altogether and even goes so far as to suggest that gender itself is a construct of patriarchal society and not an intrinsic aspect of human experience. She concludes that gender is a category that we might well do without.

After a short chapter describing the difficulty doing archeology with gender in mind and offering her scientific methodology for this discussion, Eller dissects the pre-historical and historical content of the matriarchal prehistory mythos. This material comprises the majority of the book. She organizes her "case against matriarchies" into the themes of reproduction and kinship; Goddess worship as evidence of matriarchy; work and the status of women; war and peace; prehistoric art and architecture; and evidence for a patriarchal revolution. These categories are drawn from the Feminist Matriarchalists' discourse itself. She draws on a substantial amount of material and research and, in general, her arguments about the sloppy use of archeological and historical data by matriarchalists are well-grounded.

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In her conclusion she does suggest that we see the feminist matriarchalist

theories about prehistory as myth and not history, but offers why she thinks this proposal is unsound. Origin myths about sexism "are not tailored to specific cultural environments, but rather to a totalizing image of 'patriarchy'" (p. 183). Also, thinking about origins creates a notion of the "natural" state of human existence which she argues is a useless idea since no human experience is "uncontaminated" (her quotes) by culture. If prehistory is not going to be able to answer questions about the roots of sexism, then this myth, she states, must serve feminist political purposes. But myth that describes sexism through universalizing notions about sex differences will not serve those purposes according to Eller. Instead she proposes that "if we have no inherent barriers to women's equality" (p. 187) then moral choices are our best prospect for creating a more just society for women. She concludes that "we do not need matriarchal myth to tell us sexism is bad or that change is possible" (p. 188).

As a teacher of Feminist Theology and Women's Spirituality intimately involved for the past ten years with the subject of Eller's book, I hoped that her analysis of the central mythos of the Feminist Goddess movement would deepen the dialogue about Feminist Goddess religion. Unfortunately, my desire for this dialogue was unsatisfied, but Eller's book is not without value. Eller is a sociologist, but I approach her book as a thealogian with a background in anthropology. I also situate myself as a former proponent of the myth of matriarchal prehistory who has since come to be skeptical about its historical accuracy, but am still fascinated by its tremendous thealogical power. I approach this work as a thealogian as I believe we are witnessing the creation of a new religion in the Feminist Goddess movement. Certainly religions can be analyzed as social phenomena, but I suggest that her critiques would be better couched as thealogical arguments. It will be easy for Goddess Feminists to dismiss her work as another "male-identified scholar". Additionally, feminist anthropologists have made similar critiques of matriarchal prehistory theories previous to Eller and this had not deterred the Goddess Feminists. What follows is a proposal for confronting Eller's critiques in a thealogical manner which I believe may be ultimately more useful to Goddess Feminists and the Feminist movement as a whole.

While Eller's argument that gender itself is a patriarchal construct is provocative, I do not find it convincing. Gender as a category of reality was recognized and constructed by feminists to critique patriarchal social values. Cross-cultural ethnographic evidence as well supports the notion that sex differences symbolized through gender categories are apparently a very human trait, despite the wide variation in the content of those symbols. Eller argues that it is through the performance of gender that patriarchy is expressed and women are oppressed. I counter that what is at the root of oppression is not gender categories themselves, but the value we place on them. The feminist challenge is to find ways to categorize without hierarchies. I would argue for multiple and more flexible genders as a possible solution to the sexist construction of the categories of feminine and masculine since gender *is* an intrinsic aspect of human experience. I also believe what we can learn from trans-gendered people may be key to resolving this very complex issue. Still, I agree that the feminist Goddess movement could benefit from symbolizing Goddesses and women themselves in broader categories than motherhood, etc, and I would welcome more discussion on this point from Eller and feminist thealogians.

From a thealogical perspective, the feminist matriarchal myth's perspectives on gender difference show modern women's hunger for pos-

itive images of women in the spiritual realm. Certainly in the history of Judaism and Christianity the supposed inferior spiritual identity of women has been thoroughly described. It is not unusual for oppressed people to re-value the words and symbols that have been used to oppress them into a positive light. Lesbian women reclaiming the word *dyke* is good example of this process. Can we argue that Feminist Matriarchalists emphasis on traditional "feminine" attributes gives us another example of the depths to which patriarchal culture has influenced us? Can we use this knowledge to find new categories, new attributes, new ways of talking about gender? Can the discussion move on from here? For myself, I have been seeking such a conversation for many years now and perhaps Eller's book will contribute to its genesis.

I do understand Eller's discomfort with the fact that the matriarchal prehistory mythos is so flimsy historically. From a thealogical perspective, if your faith is based on *history,* what will happen to it when people, such as Eller, are able to show that such a history probably never existed? As we look at all the religions that have had a strong influence on European and American cultures—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc—we find that all of them make claims to some sort of historicity for their mythos. Perhaps validating religious belief through history is not a tactic feminists should emulate. Can we *know* we are creating a sacred story and still have a meaningful emotional/spiritual experience when we hear it in ritual? How do we enter an unconscious and subconscious process as conscious feminists? This is an area Eller does not discuss, but seems to me one of the essential questions that Feminist Goddess thealogy needs to address. Current discussions about religious historicity among Neopagans might be useful here.

Further, the majority of Goddess feminists are white, middle class women of European ancestry. I suspect that women who identify as feminists have some notion of racism as well as sexism. For white women, racism can be an uncomfortable subject and the privileges of white people in the U.S. can become a source of guilt. The feminist matriarchal mythos projects back into the past a time when white people were tribal, peaceful, and essentially *good.* Thus this mythos may owe some of its power to the implicit redemptive quality it holds for white women conscious of racism. From this perspective, we can then ask, is the thealogical value of the mythos useful as it is, or could some other thealogical activity provide the same function? Should white women seek spiritual ease from the knowledge of racism? This example shows how a thealogical approach to the feminist matriarchal mythos opens up the possibility for a deeper dialogue about Goddess feminism while continuing to address feminist political concerns.

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Eller uses the standard social scientific method to critique this myth (p. 91). I doubt any myth could withstand this sort of treatment. Science does not adequately deal with symbols and visions. Eller uses the biblical examples of the Passion narratives in the New Testament and the Exodus

story in the Hebrew bible to argue that myths need not be historically accurate, but *historically plausible.* The example of these stories is hardly worthwhile in this discussion since they have been related as historical events for almost 2000 years and thus carry enormous symbolic weight. If one wanted to argue their historicity, it would not be any more difficult than what Eller has done with the matriarchal prehistory mythos. The evidence for the existence of an actual person named Jesus who lived in the Middle East 2000 years ago is contained primarily in the gospels. Is that source sufficient for historical accuracy? And the Exodus story is only attested in the Hebrew Bible itself. If such a large group of people were migrating and wandering around for 40 years we might think we would find some remark about it from people living in the same area other than Hebrews. However, this is not the case. I recognize the amount of work and rigor Eller has put into her book, but she has set her sights on a easy target. It seems to me that scholars need to be careful with what techniques and perspectives they use to discuss this new religion.

What I find most disappointing about Eller's book is that she seems to downplay the fact that the Feminist Goddess movement is a *new religion.* Primarily what we are observing in the feminist Goddess movement is the creation of a *woman-centered religion,* not a new scientific theory of prehistory. This may be the *first time* such a religion has appeared in human history. While I am certainly not opposed to critiquing the movement thealogically, as feminists we must also consider how to nurture this effort as well. Eller's proposal to base feminist goals for equality on moral grounds alone instead of spurious historical/mythical stories is missing the point of this new religion. Certainly, moral arguments are necessary for creating a more just society for all people. But the feminist Goddess movement (and other feminist theologies) are an attempt by women to describe what is *real.* This aspect of the role religion plays in our lives is extremely important. We need to be cautious how we critique women's attempts to define reality for ourselves. I'm not proposing that we validate aspects of the mythos that are problematic. However, I can suggest that we look at the figurines from Neolithic times and affirm that they speak to us in the present, that the intention of the original carvers is not important. What is important is the act of women now validating their own inner authority and claiming it as a *modern* symbol of the Goddess.

Goddess Feminists argue that spirituality is an important component to a feminist life and many women, myself included, have found resourcement in feminist spirituality to continue our hard and frustrating political work. Even though I have rejected the matriarchal prehistory mythos as history in my own life I do not think that Eller's approach to critiquing the Feminist Goddess movement is ultimately helpful. Yes, we need to find a more solid basis for constructing mythology for the Feminist Goddess movement, but I believe alternative proposals are greatly needed before we completely destroy what has coalesced in the past fifteen years.

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simply people who believe in a primary female divinity. Feminism is not the point, and to label their practice as feminist spirituality is reductionist. To complicate matters, there are many profoundly spiritual feminists who have remained within the boundaries of their traditional religions, though they may stretch them a bit. Some of these women envision Deity as female, many as both female and male simultaneously. The needs, goals and methods of these individuals may be very feminist indeed (for example, see Northup 1993). While this may seem to be a minor point, it is not atypical of strategies that Eller occasionally employs here.

The book is an examination of widely diverse literature from different academic disciplines and non-academic scholars, as well as religious tracts, novels, popular magazines, videos, librettos, poetry, newspaper articles, how-to books, and catalogues of Goddess merchandise. Roughly speaking, the over 500 sources she cites can be divided into materials that support belief in the sacred history and the interdisciplinary academic scholarship she uses to critique it. In its challenging examination of the discourse of the myth and the review of scholarly literature across academic boundaries, this book is unique.

Eller acknowledges that religious truth claims are rarely worth arguing but makes the point that they must be at least plausible to be meaningful. Leaving aside the plausibility of Yahweh providing Moses with the ten commandments neatly carved in stone, the virgin birth and physical resurrection from the dead of Jesus, and the Angel Gabriel's gift of instant literacy to Muhammad, Eller claims that the myth of matriarchal prehistory is simply not believable. The myth consists of two major threads: what life was like in "prepatriarchal prehistory" and what happened to that way of life and why.

THE MYTH ACCORDING TO ELLER:

The first part of the myth tells us that during the Neolithic Period in Old Europe, the Near East and the Mediterranean, human societies were matrifocal and matrilocal, centering around values we describe today as feminine and worshipping a primary female divinity in a form of goddess monotheism. Eller is careful to stress that this is not strictly speaking *matriarchal*, although she says believers usually use the word matriarchal to describe their understanding of prepatriarchal prehistory.

These cultures may have been fairly egalitarian according to the myth; however, when it came right down to it, mothers had the power and handled it "delicately and benevolently" precisely because they were mothers. Women invented agriculture and the relationship between people and nature was harmonious. Childbirth received central attention and all women were mothers to all the children in the community. Sexuality was sacred and not limited by age nor orientation, and men's contribution to reproduction unknown. Women, as a reflection of the Goddess, mediated between the Divine and humanity in the roles of priestess, healer, diviner, sage, etc.. Life was peaceful and relatively prosperous. Even men were happy during matriarchal prehistory, though their sense of inadequacy had to be carefully contained.

The second strand of the myth deals with what happened to this utopian prehistory. Believers claim that a patriarchal revolution overthrew the Goddess cultures about 3000BCE and plunged the world into war and barbarism. This is typically explained by invasions by patriarchal warriors and/or critical changes within the Goddess cultures themselves. Indo-European warriors, usually understood as the Kurgans discussed by Marija Gimbutas, brought with them their pantheon of patriarchal deities. The "great matriarchal goddess" was split into lesser goddesses and married off

to Kurgan gods. Human women were removed from positions of religious leadership and eventually reduced to an oppressed class. The internal changes that helped to bring about patriarchy include men's discovery of biological paternity, their seizing of those aspects of reproduction they could control, and their demeaning of those they could not. An additional cause suggested is that the advent of plow agriculture required upper body strength that only men could provide. They then seized the means of production and began to amass property and social power. With the ascendancy of one male god, patriarchy reigned supreme.

As prehistory deals with human experience before the invention of writing, believers rely largely on traces in classical mythology, art, the work of Gimbutas, and the writings of 19th and early 20th century romantic writers to validate their myth. In so doing, they assume a relatively stable set of meanings attached to femaleness that spans cultures, geography and time.

THE EVIDENCE:

An examination of the discourse necessarily involves a tremendous amount of work and is long overdue. For that, Eller is to be congratulated. The myth may be controversial, but she believes it serves today as a cultural resource. At the same time, lumping together materials as dramatically different as novels, academic research and catalogues of Goddess merchandise is not unproblematic. Although scholarship may have been the point of departure for some of the materials from which Eller draws, most of these are untroubled by academic attempts at historical accuracy. She writes that she finds the differences among these sources to be minimized by the consistency of their narrative and has chosen to focus on offerings by those who have considerable investment in the myth. While I understand her logic, I believe this methodology oversimplifies the discourse, ignoring important contradictions and differences. Nor is it possible to judge in this manner how widely spread a particular belief is. For example, she cites a novel as evidence for the belief that women in "Goddess Cultures" pooled their children. However, in the 12 years since I began to study Goddess Spirituality, I have yet to meet a practitioner who actually believes that, or even to hear one mention it, and I have never encountered the argument about men's upper body strength.

The book presents considerable scholarship to disprove the existence of Goddess Cultures in the Neolithic. I will not go into details of Eller's critique of Gimbutas, as *The Pomegranate* has covered the Gimbutas debate in considerable depth within the last year. For those who missed it, a severe distillation of the arguments might result in one position that holds Gimbutas developed a new interdisciplinary methodology called archaeomythodology that, unlike traditional androcentric scholarship, successfully examines the non-material aspects of prehistoric cultures, especially as these relate to gender. A second position argues that Gimbutas consistently ignored significant data that contradicted her ideas and constructed an extremely subjective methodology that fails to stand up to scientific study. Eller's position is along the lines of the latter. In a footnote, she

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notes that Gimbutas had an "impressive record of excavation and publication" (209), while in the text she argues that "Gimbutas' status in archeology was peripheral" and her colleagues considered her "embarrassingly" passé (90). The omission of Gimbutas' strengths in the text is, at the very least, misleading.

The author does a better job of reviewing literature that shows how data from the Neolithic have been selectively interpreted by believers to support the myth. For example, the fact that Mellaart found figures he identified as representations of "a male deity" in his excavations at Catalhoyuk is rarely mentioned by believers, and female figurines, usually identified as representations of Goddess worship, are present in the later levels but lacking in the early levels of this site. Supporters of the myth argue that the presence of Goddess worship is indicative of women's high status in a society and, therefore, the female figures suggest a Goddess Culture with all the mythic trappings.

Here, I find Eller less successful in her arguments. She relies on the work of anthropologist Martin Whyte from the late 1970s to argue that the only variable in religion that correlates with women's status is equally elaborate funerals for women and men. She does mention in another footnote that anthropologist Peggy Sanday (1981) had different findings. Sanday, in fact, found a strong correlation between the secular power of women and the cultures' origin myths in her study of 150 tribal societies. To bury this in a footnote suggests a consensus among anthropologists that does not exist. Instead she points to the status of women in lands dominated by Catholicism, Buddhism and Hinduism to indicate religious veneration of female figures, even goddesses, does not ensure women's power. But to use as examples three religions, all of which began in times and cultures that were firmly under male domination, begs the question. She refers again to anthropologists in the 1970s who declared that the search for egalitarian culture had proved fruitless, that women's secondary status was a true universal, a "pan-cultural fact" (35). In addition, she presents research that concludes that there is no reliable connection between forms of subsistence and women's statuses, and that economics play no role in women's status either. Regardless of what women's work is in a particular culture and how much it is valued, there is no correlation between it and women's social status in that society, according to this research presented by the author.

However, both archeologists and anthropologists have become much more sophisticated in their analysis of gender since Whyte published. There is considerable research to show that the undervaluing of whatever work to which women are assigned in any society can be both a cause and an effect of women's lower status and power (see Burn 2000). Few, if any, significant social patterns are determined by a single variable, and the tendency today is to look for a constellation of variables to explain gender systems (Agarwal 1999). There are contemporary enclaves within larger male dominated cultures where women do have considerable power and their economic activities contribute to their status. For example, in the Zapotec town of Juchitan in Oaxaca, Mexico, and in the village of Lugu Lake in southern China, women run the local economies and are fairly

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autonomous. Those who choose to marry exercise the power within the family, though many choose without censure to have children but no permanent husband. Men, on the other hand, hold most of the formal political posts and deal with the outside world. Although the women's work is unlikely to be *the* causal variable, women in both locales point to their economic activities as making their status different from that of women in neighboring towns (Darling 1995; Farley 1998).

The book argues against a patriarchal revolution by examining the research on the supposed invasions of patriarchal Kurgans. Eller summarizes evidence from archeology, linguistics, genetics, early writing systems and mythology and argues convincingly that it is simply impossible to conclude from the available data that, beginning with the 4th millenium, warlike Indo-Europeans invaded and imposed their patriarchal culture on the peaceful, Goddess worshipping cultures of the Near East.

However, she does admit that social organization became more patriarchal, hierarchical and warlike in southeastern Europe and the Near East shortly after this time (157). Since she correctly dismisses the sudden womb-envy argument, we are left with wondering what on earth happened and why. She answers this primarily by saying there never were matriarchies as understood by believers. But in a fairly short time in human history, there were dramatic changes in the way people organized their world, in both material and nonmaterial culture. Her response to this fails to address the issue adequately.

One of the book's major strategies and strengths is the exploration of contemporary understandings of gender. Some scholars focus on the official ideology concerning what is expected of members of either sex in a particular culture, others look at what actually goes on in day-to-day living. Gender is socially constructed, not biologically, which means that it is culturally and historically specific and exists only through constant reinforcement and repetition. At the same time, gender is very real in the power it has to shape our lives. Eller argues effectively that the myth presents a reductive notion of sex differences and is "rooted in a particular vision of female embodiedness" (56). Ironically, although gender may be seen as a social construct, femininity is not. It is seen as unbounded by time or culture, and is all that patriarchy sees as positive about women. But femininity cannot exist outside of culture. The myth's limited view of what it means to be a woman is based largely on the positive aspects of middle class stereotypes from today's Western and male-dominated world. That fact alone should be enough to make feminists question it.

And some have, even some who believe in the myth. But Eller glosses over these voices. As an example of her approach, she cites *The Great Cosmic Mother,* Sjoo's and Mor's 1981 epic that links the "Neolithic Great Goddess" with the Bronze Age "Mother Goddesses" to demonstrate the belief in the universal worship of "the Great Mother." In one sentence, she mentions that the focus on childbirth has bothered "even" some feminist matriarchalists, but emphasizes that childbirth is the "hallmark of virtually all feminist reconstructions of matriarchal society" (45). The reader doesn't learn that Asphodel Long, respected scholar and co-founder of Britain's first Matriarchy Study Group, almost immediately published a critique of linking women's spirituality and creativity primarily to her reproductive functions (in King 1989). This is a significant omission and shows there was a diversity of belief from the very beginning.

Eller's final point is that the myth, even when accepted as sacred history and not historical truth, will not help women. It reduces prehistory to timeless archetypes, arranges the

world into a duality which is "supposed" to be a patriarchal form of thinking, and tells an emotionally compelling story that simply raises new questions rather than providing answers for the future. We don't need a mythic explanation for sexism and other oppressions, she argues, in order to know they are wrong and to work toward ending them. Given that she admits the myth has inspired many women to make significant, empowering changes in their lives, and many of these women have gone on to empower other women, this chapter is regrettably short. Her passion for social justice is clear, but she doesn't tell us how to achieve it, just that the sacred myth is not the way. As all religions mythologize their origins, most contemporary religions are gendered, and religion is a key player in teaching and maintaining gender roles and social order, I wonder then what suggestions she would offer. Like the myth she critiques, Eller raises new questions rather than providing answers for the future.

Given that I agree with many of Eller's conclusions, I was surprised not to be more enthusiastic about the book. But in critiquing the metanarrative that she calls the myth of matriarchy, Eller comes perilously close to constructing a metanarrative herself. Although she acknowledges the diversity of belief even among those who hold the myth dear, she typically does this briefly in a footnote and goes right on to treat both the myth itself and the acceptance of it as monolithic. This strategy not only oversimplifies the myth, but it tends to overstate the evidence against it.

In spite of the fact that this book says nothing dramatically new, as the first to examine the discourse in any detail and bring together an extensive body of interdisciplinary scholarly research to do so, I believe it makes a significant contribution. Her first book, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* (1993), established her as one of a very few experts in the field of Goddess Spirituality today. In this book, Eller has taken some risks and asked some important questions. Because she is a respected scholar, this book will be closely examined, and because of its scope and interdisciplinary nature, the dialogue has been raised to a new level.

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