

# The Pomegranate

## Readers' Forum

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CYNTHIA ELLER WRITES:

Dear Editor:

My thanks to Laurel Holmström and Wendy Griffin for their recent reviews of my book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, and to the editors of *The Pomegranate*, who requested a response from me. It's rewarding to read reviews from those who are invested in the subject matter and who have thought critically about it.

Both reviewers raised questions about terminology. Griffin says that I claim that "believers usually use the word matriarchal to describe their understanding of prepatriarchal prehistory," while Holmström, in contrast, says that I claim that "proponents of the myth of matriarchal prehistory do not, in general, use the term matriarchy themselves." Holmström is correct on this point (see pp. 12-13).

More pressing terminological questions revolve around the appellations "feminist matriarchalists" and "spiritual feminists." I apologize for any confusion I may have caused on this point, but I don't believe these are coextensive categories (see p. 10). Many spiritual feminists do not believe in the literal truth of matriarchal myth, and perhaps more importantly, many feminist matriarchalists have no interest in ritual, magic, or goddess worship, caring only for this singular story about prehistory. It is feminist matriarchalists that I'm critiquing in

this book. Apart from its affection for matriarchal myth, I think feminist spirituality has much to recommend itself (a point I'll come to again later in this response).

I definitely believe, as Holmström says, that feminist spirituality is a new religion, or I wouldn't have bothered to write a book about it (*Living in the Lap of the Goddess*). I don't, however, think that it is wise—as Griffin apparently does—to conflate "feminist spirituality" and "Goddess spirituality." As Griffin herself points out, many practitioners of Goddess spirituality are not feminists. I want to distinguish their spirituality from that of those who, in Holmström's words, are creating "a woman-centred religion." Readers of *The Pomegranate* are better able to comment on this than I am, but it is my observation that feminist practice of Goddess spirituality is different from Goddess spirituality per se, and the two are often the subject of separate retreats, rituals, covens, newsletters, and so on. In any case, in this book, I am interested in the phenomenon of feminists telling stories about prehistoric matrifocal and goddess-worshipping societies, whether or not this happens in a spiritual or ritual context.

Both reviewers make the point that I don't dissect the purported historicity of the Exodus or Passion narratives, which I refer to in the text. They imply that I have unfairly singled out matriarchal myth for critical attention. But I believe I have made it clear why I am taking the time to refute this myth rather than others. Most of those who champion matriarchal myth claim that it is history: that it does not need to be taken with some degree of faith, but can be apprehended by any sincere and unbiased investigator of prehistoric human society, using only the usual implements of scientific and historical research. This is a grander claim than, for example, the one that the Angel Gabriel gifted Mohammed with instant literacy.

However, my more important reason for criticizing matriarchal myth is because I am a

feminist who believes that matriarchal myth runs counter to feminist interests.

I don't believe that critiquing the historicity of matriarchal myth necessitates doing away with it entirely. I would answer Holmström's question, "Can we know we are creating a sacred story and still have a meaningful emotional/spiritual experience when we hear it in

this is not my religion.

Holmström's point that matriarchal myth may be a strategy through which white feminists manage racial guilt is well taken. I have addressed this issue in my forthcoming article "White Women and the Dark Mother" (*Religion*, Fall 2000).

Perhaps I can clarify this by returning to my

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## *I am a feminist who believes that matriarchal myth runs counter to feminist interests.*

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ritual?" with a definite yes. Indeed, I believe that some spiritual feminists (and neopagans) do just that. This is why I've thought it crucial to criticize matriarchal myth on additional grounds, namely its underlying notions of femaleness.

Holmström has zeroed in on this as a key point of disagreement between us: that I view gender categories as problematic in and of themselves, while she sees difficulties lying rather in how certain gender traits or categories are valued (though the fact that she wants to see "multiple and more flexible genders" suggests to me that she's somewhat ambivalent about this). Holmström is exactly right here, and this explains why, in spite of some very attractive aspects to feminist spirituality, I'm unlikely to ever count myself as a spiritual feminist.

Because I do not count myself as a spiritual feminist, I don't feel any obligation to do what both Griffin and Holmström want me to do, namely to offer some constructive alternative to matriarchal myth. I think Griffin and Holmström are searching—appropriately enough—for ways of empowering women spiritually and escaping the pervasive maleness of most traditional religions, without at the same time handcuffing themselves to a potentially burdensome (because unconvincing) myth. If I critique the myth, they seem to say, I should tell them what they can do instead. But I am not a theologian;

earlier distinction between spiritual feminists and feminist matriarchalists. Some feminist matriarchalists (many, I would argue) are not practicing any alternative religion, nor do they have more than a hazy idea of what such a religion would be. For them, matriarchal myth serves the same function—that of inspiring and directing political action—as what Holmström calls my "proposal to base feminist goals for equality on moral grounds." At that level, I believe I am offering a constructive alternative to matriarchal myth. But feminist spirituality is operating on many more levels than this. It is not just a mouthpiece for a mythology (or worse, an ideology in historical disguise), it is a religion. It involves worship, ritual, meditation, magic, community, political vision, theology. And as I said before, it could, arguably, flourish without recourse to matriarchal myth.

Though I am not a spiritual feminist, I believe the movement is engaged in some important work. Moreover, as a feminist, I feel that I have a vested interest in where the feminist spirituality movement goes. But it is not my work. At least not yet.

Sincerely,  
Cynthia Eller

*Editors' Note: For a review of Dr Eller's book from the perspective of Archaeological scholarship, please turn to page 52.*