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## **A Dialogue on Women, Ritual and Liturgy**

### **Introduction**

Based on 20 years of development in feminist spirituality – since *Womanspirit Rising*<sup>1</sup> – and more than a decade of discussion about women’s spirituality and experience of ritual in the context of the European Society of Women in Theological Research,<sup>2</sup> we regard the interest in and the praxis of women’s ritual as one of the most fruitful, yet also most controversial, developments in feminist theology. Therefore, planning this *Yearbook*, we decided to offer an introductory article in the form of a dialogue among different women who represent diverse religious traditions and cultural contexts as well as different feminist (or non-feminist) positions within Europe. By asking them some basic questions, we hope to have shed light on notions, discussions, processes and perspectives of women’s ritual and liturgy in Europe today.

Beginning with the ESWTR conference in Helvoirt, The Netherlands, in 1987, where it was not self-evident that women academics / feminist theologians would see themselves as “ritualizing women” or could agree on any kind of mutual ritual or liturgy, we have experienced a long process of growing interest in women’s spirituality and participation in conference rituals and liturgies. Yet at the last conferences, in Crete, 1997, and Hofgeismar, 1999, we became aware that many European women theologians did not want to

<sup>1</sup> Carol Christ / Judith Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising: a Feminist Reader in Religion* (Harper & Row: San Francisco 1992, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Annette Esser, “Along the Conferences: European Women Theologians Reflect Upon Spirituality and Celebrate Rituals,” in: Annette Esser / Anne Hunt Overzee / Susan Roll (eds), *Re-Visioning Our Sources: Women’s Spirituality in European Perspectives* (Kok Pharos: Kampen 1997), 11-33.

identify themselves as feminists, let alone share in the further development of feminist liturgies. The participation of increasing numbers of women from non-“Western” countries and non-“Christian” (or “Post-Christian”) backgrounds was challenging for all involved: women theologians from Central and Eastern Europe (especially from the countries emerging from the former Soviet Union) and Greek Orthodox women were encountering these forms of feminist theology and practice as something new, and without having been involved in a long process of feminist-theological deconstruction and reconstruction; they felt at times that their own questions arising from their contexts were not being noticed or taken seriously enough by “Western” theologians from Germany, Britain or Scandinavia. On the other hand, “Western” women theologians were frustrated by the apparently uncritical celebration of an Orthodox liturgy using sexist language which they thought they had already deconstructed in their own gender-studies; they were also at times suspicious about whether Muslim women from Germany presenting their Islamic faith as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition could truly speak out for a religion with an apparently heavy gender-bias and strong contempt for women. Although these conferences found practical solutions for a number of questions – such as the morning and evening celebrations / rituals / liturgies, which were simply made the responsibility of individual women – some questions, including those around women’s ritual, were not discussed thoroughly, or, in some cases, really asked at all.

This article attempts to address that lack. Seeking to balance Eastern and Western Europe, younger and older women, and to span a range of inter-religious diversity, we invited women from a number of different cultural and religious backgrounds within Europe who have an interest in and a practice of some form of women’s ritual or liturgy to enter into a dialogue with each other. Our contributors are:

*Asphodel Long*, a Jewish woman from Britain, who celebrated some of the first feminist rituals at ESWTR conferences, and may be reckoned one of the mothers of Goddess-spirituality in Britain. *Caroline Mackenzie*, also from Britain, an artist who has participated in many ESWTR conferences and celebrated rituals; her life and work in India transformed her art, making her aware of Hindu symbolism and female imagery. For Caroline, India also marked her initiation to Catholicism, which she interprets in the light of Eastern spirituality. The American theologian *Susan Roll* spent ten years living and studying dogmatics and liturgy in Belgium and now teaches in a Catholic seminary in New York State. She brings to the dialogue the enormous impact of American feminist

theological discussion on women's ritual and liturgy. *Laimė Kiskunaite* is a visual anthropologist and film-maker from Lithuania; her interest in and development of women's ritual within the context of Lithuanian women's movement is especially moving. *Katerina Karkala-Zorba*, a Greek Orthodox theologian and linguist, now co-president of the Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women, grew up in Germany and studied in France; her insights into Western thinking and her knowledge of and work for Orthodox women's tradition and spirituality make her a most valuable partner for the European discussion. *Coletta Damm* is a German psychologist and therapist who through Sufism found her way to Islam; the trust and support of her Muslim sisters have enabled her to participate in this academic dialogue. *Thalia Gur-Klein* is a Jewish cantor and theologian from The Netherlands whose understanding of Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah are a most welcome contribution to the inter-religious perspective of this dialogue.

The first two questions we asked these women were:

- (1) *What is women's ritual? What does ritual / liturgy mean to me?*
- (2) *How do we celebrate it in our context and according to our religious tradition / feminist conviction etc?*

The responses to these first two questions were circulated to all the authors, and they were asked to respond to each other with the help of two further questions:

- (3) *What are the similarities and differences between the various perspectives?*
- (4) *What is the future development of women's ritual? How do you see it?*

This article brings together the seven authors' reflections on the first two questions. The second part includes excerpts from the further responses in a structured form. We conclude with an editorial evaluation of this dialogue.

### **Asphodel Long**

*What is women's ritual, what does women's ritual mean for me?*

When I was a child, in an Orthodox Jewish family, I was beset by two contradictory feelings about my religion. On the one hand, sitting in the synagogue gallery with the other women, I bitterly resented our exclusion from the "real service" conducted by the men below. On the other hand, when it came to parts of the service that affected everybody, most particularly the Kaddish for the dead, I, as a motherless girl, became part of the distinctive company of women mourners, who were weeping, passing around and using smelling salts, comforting each other. I had the feeling then that I was a woman among women, that we were connected, that despite my difficult fam-

ily background, which generally left me feeling alienated, these moments of women mourning together put me in touch with a reality of suffering and hope that transcended every day difficulties. It seemed to make me one, not only with those around me but also with a long tradition of women mourning and comforting and gaining strength from each other. Looking back now, I see that at that time I sensed part of this strength lay in the ritual opportunity of mourning together rather than in individual privacy.

I am also reminded of another similar paradox. In family life and in the Jewish community I resented the primacy given to boys at the expense of girls, and its continuance into adult life. But the lighting of the Sabbath candles was women's – and only women's – business, and these were the most sacred moments of the week. I sensed something of a much stronger power among women than in everyday life, also, a community of women, going back into ages past shielding and sheltering with their blessing hands the sacrality of the Sabbath.

None of this was made explicit in day to day life; the women in my family – my stepmother, her mother and her sister – all apparently acquiesced in, and promoted, the norm of male supremacy in religion and in public life (although their opinion of men in private life fell into a much more critical stance). The rituals that appertained to women, which included keeping a strictly kosher house, obeying all the food laws, and managing the Festival meals, particularly at Passover and the High Holidays, were never portrayed as more than the common practicalities of women's duties.

So, the messages that came to me as a growing girl were mixed: on the one hand, women's interface with the sacred obviously formed the structure of the religion. On the other hand this was apparently deemed massively less important than men's leadership in religion and all other forms of public life. But underlying this paradox were the unuttered relationships of women together performing their sacred tasks, with the community of shared strengths and sufferings that their lives involved.

As a very young adult I left home, joined the world of work and politics and, as I thought, put religion and ritual behind me forever. This meant becoming a "secular Jew", joining the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s and 1940s and later, through nearly three decades, working for a vision of a just society. This encompassed not only redistribution of wealth between rich and poor, but most particularly a vision of gender equality. Whatever the success or otherwise of the former, the latter was certainly as far away as ever; further, it was noticeable that women were subjected to new forms of exploita-

tion: a position which was passionately addressed at last by the upcoming feminist movement.

At this point, in the early 1970s, the two halves of my life moved together. The unexpressed solidarity of the women's rituals of my childhood was now celebrated openly and nowhere more so than in the newly created "Goddess" circles. These, at first purely political, soon moved to spiritual expressions. "Age-old rituals that we invented last Friday night," as one woman put it, summed up this part of our activity. We built on rituals excavated from folklore, from seasonal cookery calendars, from varying religious traditions, from New Age and Pagan practice and from Jungian psychology. These rituals were simple, built up of a few basic principles: there were women only, they recognized the sacrality of a place or date or event, together with honouring the appropriate female divinity or divinities of such a time or place or circumstance; candles were lit and water poured, both to burn or wash away current pains and burdens and then to affirm the new and positive; the celebration finished with the "feast" and "story-telling".

More complicated rituals could be devised, but the basic, which also usually included women silently washing each others' hands at the start, was as satisfying as any. What do I mean by that? I speak of my own feelings but I know that these were replicated among other women. That reality of suffering and hope, that sense of connectedness, the ability to comfort and support each other and above all, the certainty that what we were doing was in essence what women had done over a very long period, that it indeed represented for us a triumph of women's union and strength over centuries or even millennia of denial was expressed clearly by the ritual. That it was created within a concept of "the Goddess" meant for us an acknowledgement of our spiritual selves. I repeat here what I have often said at a ritual: "In raising Her, we raise ourselves; in raising ourselves, we raise Her."

In so doing, I have found that I have reified the indeterminate perceptions of my childhood. The Jewish women mourning, blessing, cooking and managing festival meals were indeed part of a long and continuous tradition of sacred female activity; here is indeed a connectedness, which becomes outwardly manifest in the modern reclamation of the female in divinity. Further, the latter concept has led me – and others – to search for its historical and hidden presence in Judaism, and an appreciation of the richness of earlier forms of the religion which have been obscured in the interest of a patriarchal agenda. Thus such ritual for women binds together the spiritual with the

intellectual, and with the political: it helps create a healing and a wholeness, making a major contribution to our self-empowerment.

### **Caroline Mackenzie**

*What is women's ritual? What does ritual/liturgy mean for you?*

At the most basic level, ritual/liturgy is a way of channelling energy. I have a picture of the *Yin Yang* symbol where the dark and light parts are in a continuously revolving relationship with one another. The liturgies I grew up with saw the light, masculine *Yang* energy as superior to the dark feminine *Yin* energy. The aim was to overcome the darkness with the light. For me, ritual is a creative relationship between the dark and the light in which both are potentially transformed. Thus I try to balance imagination, creativity, wildness, fearfulness with stillness, chanting, peacefulness, reading from scripture, silence and order. I hope that both women and men can experience themselves as the subject in these rituals.

*How do you celebrate it in your context and according to your religious tradition, feminist convictions etc.?*

The background to my work is formed by the influence of Indian culture, particularly Hindu, on Catholic tradition. I lived for twelve years in India and it is there that my interest in ritual started. Back in Europe, I find myself on the edge of the Church, involved with people inspired by eastern spiritualities and also with the more serious end of the so-called "New Age" movement. I have worked with four main types of ritual.

The most important for me, yet also the most difficult, is to re-work the "great" Christian feasts such as Easter. In 1992-3, Sarah Lionheart and I spent a year preparing an Easter Retreat entitled "The Renewal of the Way". This approximated most closely to my aim of balancing dark and light energies in a creative way. Around the traditional structure of the Easter Triduum there was an interweaving of Indian chants and scriptures. The wild dark side was given a place in a masked performance of "The Green Man" around the Easter fire. This shadowy figure, full of life and energy, represented the renewed vitality of the earth. It was created from my experience of the Hindu deity, Lord Shiva and our Celtic Green Man who is so often found in old churches. Shiva embodies both creative and destructive qualities. The idea behind the appearance of this figure was to suggest that the resurrection includes a new consciousness of the instinctive life-forces. After a vigorous dance, the figure prostrated itself before the Pascal candle. It remained dark

and shadowy yet it clearly had a relationship with the light. On the Sunday morning this darkness was balanced by a dance through a labyrinth marked out in ash left from the bonfire. The same performer appeared dressed in yellow. Thus she symbolized the returning sun and gave another dimension to the understanding of the resurrection. All the participants joined in a dance through the labyrinth singing “alleluia” and throwing a golden ball between them.

The second type of ritual concerns the relationship of sacred space and iconography to ritual. At the opening of my exhibitions I create a liturgy which is the main part of the “Private View”. In one, the focus was a picture of “The Woman with the Found Coin”. In another it was the “Blue Woman Christ” referred to by Anne Hunt Overzee in her article “Shadow Play”.<sup>3</sup> I believe these strong female images affect the self understanding of the people participating in the rituals. I try to keep a balance between male and female images. Out of these exhibitions of my personal work, public sacred spaces have grown. The most complete is the chapel of some Cistercian nuns in India.

The third type of ritual is less specifically Christian, although I myself would like it to be more so. These are seasonal festivals that I have developed in my village – the Maypole in spring and *Divali* / All Souls in autumn. The aim here is to experience a relationship between the inner processes and the outer seasonal changes. The people who attend these festivals are rather “alternative”. Most of them never attend church.

The fourth type of rituals are very private and personal, created with just one or two friends. Recently, following the death of my father, I did a series of “Grieving” pictures. There I discovered a family “secret” about the death of a brother just before I was born. He had never been mourned. On his death anniversary a woman friend who is an Anglican priest came and celebrated a Eucharist in my meditation room. Just one other friend was present. It was very significant that the celebrant was a woman. She brought a special sensitivity to the situation and the ritual was deeply cathartic and healing.

### **Susan K. Roll**

*1. What is women's ritual / liturgy? What does ritual / liturgy mean to me?*  
For me, as a Roman Catholic woman engaged in feminist theology and academic liturgical studies in both European and North American contexts,

<sup>3</sup> In Esser / Hunt Overzee / Roll (eds), *Re-Visioning Our Sources*, 94-107, here 99.

women's liturgy means an enormous collective burst of creative energy, new self-confidence, an embrace of women's authority and a pro-active stance toward the future. Catholic women have historically been permitted very little place in public worship space except as attendees, and have exerted no direct influence on the symbolic structures of worship and their official interpretations. Words written by women are almost completely absent from official liturgical texts. Where women as such become the focus of liturgy as in Marian devotions, the tone is often sentimental or moralizing, promulgating "appropriate" virtues for women such as humility and self-sacrifice.

Even to speak of women's "liturgies" (because "liturgy" refers to official ecclesial worship), is to create a deliberate, and a delightful, oxymoron. This is even truer of the designation Women's Liturgical Movement. The main characteristics of women's liturgies, in my experience planning, celebrating and teaching women's liturgy, are similar to those already sketched in the literature by Teresa Berger, Mary Collins and Marjorie Procter-Smith, among others. These include the following: (1) In the Women's Liturgical Movement women ourselves act as creators of liturgy, active agents and not merely passive recipients of what the Flemish call "liturgical care of souls." Women's liturgy means (2) mutually shared leadership, (3) a generally circular configuration of worship space with plenty of room for bodily gesture and dance, (4) spoken texts and songs written by women-identified women, (5) often stunningly creative uses of visual, especially natural symbolic elements, (6) attention to colour, drama and thematic unity, (7) new interpretation of traditional ritual forms such as litanies and exorcisms, (8) new rites of passage and of healing, and (9) a new sense of liturgical time as a journey.

## 2. *How do we celebrate it in our context and according to our feminist conviction?*

A few illustrative examples:

1. At the University Parish in Leuven, Belgium in the early 1990s a local "Vrouw en Geloof" ("Woman and Faith") group was forming with an express interest in liturgy. At the first meeting a number of participants said, "Oh no, we don't want to DO any liturgies, we just want to read and discuss something." So that year we read Herman Wegman's *Geschiedenis van de christelijke eredienst in het West en in het Oost*, chapter by chapter. The following year there was some hesitant openness to trying our own little opening liturgies. I planned and carried out a "demonstrator model" at one point to show what was possible in women's liturgy, and after that the group said to



me, “Bring us some written models we can follow, we don’t know how to do this.” The following year we spread our wings a bit more, and began each meeting with a modest ritual of some sort, heavily text-based. By the end of that year, the group was soaring with new confidence in their own creativity as liturgists, celebrating with original and highly inventive symbols and ritual actions.

2. When I teach the elective course “Perspectives in Feminist Theology” at the seminary in Buffalo, New York (where seminarians constitute 10% of the student body, and 50% of the total number of students are women), one of the course requirements is for each credit student to plan and organize a short liturgy / prayer service for the class according to the feminist principles of liturgy planning (the main characteristics of feminist liturgy as listed above.) The first class included three men: a Canadian seminarian who had studied in Belgium and taught in Korea, a seminarian from Colombia who had settled in the US, and an African-American Baptist social worker. The “feminist” liturgy that each of these men planned was infused with richness and depth from the individual’s own cultural perspective(s) as well as a woman-identified re-reading of his own tradition which showed that “feminist liturgy” is a new way of undertaking liturgy, not merely an identification of the physical gender of the participants. Ultimately women-identified liturgy is a quality of consciousness enacted in patterned public prayer.

3. One aspect of feminist liturgy, which deserves mention precisely because of its profound implications for Roman Catholic women, is that of *Womeneucharist*, a distinct new genre within the general field of women’s liturgy. *Womeneucharist* takes place when a group of women gathers to share some form of a liturgy of the Word, and to break bread and share wine, explicitly calling it Eucharist. This too is a deliberate oxymoron: according to canon law [in the Roman Catholic church] only an ordained priest can validly and licitly consecrate the bread and wine at Eucharist, and only a baptized male may be ordained a priest. In 1997 a vestment designer named Sheila Durkin Dierks was able to survey members of some 100 regular *Womeneucharist* groups in the United States, and to publish her findings. For most participants the intent is not so much to protest limitations on women in official liturgical leadership, but simply to survive with some dignity as women linked to their faith community. Many of these women take an enormous risk, particularly if they are employed by the church in any capacity. Interestingly, while the theological content of Eucharist in the Roman Catholic tradition involves both sacrifice and meal, sacrifice as a theological theme is unknown in *Womeneucharist*.

With the number of priests dropping steadily, almost precipitously in Western Europe and North America, coupled with a trend among the relatively small numbers of seminarians toward a mentality of “entitlement” rather than of identification with the poor, the character of public worship is bound to undergo significant shifts in the foreseeable future. The Liturgical Movement of the 19th and 20th centuries which led to the formal changes in liturgy enacted at the Second Vatican Council in 1963 revolutionized the way Roman Catholics experienced worship. At present, in a sort of second stage of reform, liturgies enacted by Roman Catholic women as part of the Women’s Liturgical Movement are providing a laboratory for credible, creative and prophetic liturgies of the future. These experiments, which originally developed almost as ritual play among small local groups of women, have the potential to shift the shape and focus of public worship so as not only to renew liturgical practice in the mainstream, but to assure the authoritative presence of women in the public space of worship.

### **Laimė Kiskunaite**

#### *1. What is women’s ritual / liturgy? What does ritual / liturgy mean to me?*

A new woman is sitting in the middle of the circle of her friends and elderly women while the leader of the ritual says: “Remember, in your time of sorrow, that you are in the wide women’s circle. Remember, being in difficulty, that you can depend upon it. As a sign of our connection we will drink from this goblet of charm.”

This is the beginning of the celebration of woman initiation – the first journey of woman’s soul through symbols and shapes which enables her to enter into the world of soul-making, the area of the ritual.

In my opinion the ritual is a sacred journey – external as well as internal – while in this action the body and the soul both are active elements with an important task – to break the present barriers of consciousness and create new relations to oneself and to the world. This three-stage process (separation, metamorphosis and reintegration) passing through transitions or life crises is accompanied by symbolic signs. Material: water, milk, honey, clothes, adornments, flowers, food, repetitive gestures or immaterial: songs, dances, prayers, blessings, special words. However, woman needs the ritual energy and safety in the circle of close friends in order to regain a new self perception. The inner power of the circle holds a woman in the highest point of the session and helps to carry a flow of the divine energy.

When I am writing these words I feel that I am myself in the enormous circle with all those women with whom I have ever performed ritual actions, in flats, forests, school sport halls, kindergartens, green fields, deserts, hills, beaches, boats, court-yards, farms, saunas... In such places women perform their rites of the transition into the new life status – womanhood, motherhood; a farewell ritual for an unborn or dead baby; joyful and serious rituals of baptizing (name giving) and blessing of a godmother... According to my personal experience, tears, joy and intense energy are the main elements of all women's rituals.

#### *A brief characterisation of Lithuanian women's rituals*

Women's rituals in Lithuania – new and old – are divided historically by a period of about 50 years. The country women's communities were destroyed during the beginning of the Soviet occupation (1945-1950). The practice of traditional (empirical) midwives was forbidden in the year 1963. Spiritual midwifery and home births again appeared about 1990. Around this phenomenon, a new women's community began to develop, which was based upon a holistic world outlook, spiritual midwifery, feminist spirituality, spirituality of childbirth and motherhood, feminist anthropology and psychology. This system of values, absolutely new because of the disintegration of our inherited convictions and limitations, evokes for many of us younger women the strong desire to create our own authentic life style free from traditional, patriarchal relationships. In this fundamental transition of our lives we inevitably have to remember and creatively re-think old traditions, customs and rites of our grandmothers and create anew whatever it is that we feel is needed at this moment, most often connected with the transition into motherhood.

After ten years it is already possible to state that women's rites are developing in two directions: the creation of new ones and the integration of reconstructed old rituals. The content of new ritual is often based not only on the old rituals and customs of Lithuanian women, but also accepts women's ritual actions from the rest of the world.

#### *New Rituals*

##### *The sewing of birth shirts*

Unexpectedly, the sewing and embroidering of a birth shirt is becoming a very attractive ritual. According to Lithuanian folklore sources, women never used to make any special birth shirts. But the shirt in which the mother had given birth was always regarded as very important. Mothers would lay their

baby on this cloth when it was ill or fractious. For this reason, women put off washing the shirt in which they had given birth for as long as possible. Nowadays pregnant women gather together in a small group and make a special birth shirt with protective signs. Pregnant women consciously try to create a safe space. Shirts or little dresses made in this way transfer a spiritual charge to the mother and to the newborn.

#### *Initiation into childbirth*

When a pregnant woman enters her new status and feel separated from her previous, familiar life, she becomes very open to new information, defining her new, as yet unknown, reality. Therefore she is extremely vulnerable but also very strong with her fertility power. When she is not alone she can share that dangerous and sacred way with her chosen friends. Dressed like a newborn, she is welcomed to the ritual feast by women who are already initiated. Having received the gift of physical fertility, here she matures to accept spiritual wisdom.

#### *Baptising outside the Church*

The ending of the birth process and name-giving ritual with blessings for the mother, the father (if he is participating), older sisters and brothers, and a special blessing for the godmother.

#### *Farewell ritual for an unborn or dead baby*

Mourning and meditation after abortion, miscarriage or the death of a baby, which takes place in the supporting and understanding circle of women.

These new rituals need particular safety and women's empathy for each other, for reasons of intimacy and open confessions.

The *Midwife's day* on the first weekend of September has more the character of a mass. The ritual of a small child's *birthday* is celebrated even in some kindergartens. The celebration is performed with a personal story of how this child arrived on this Earth and how she/he has lived up to this birthday, with two circles of children, one representing the stars, sun and moon, the other the earth. The child has to leave the first circle and enter into the next, the circle of the earth.

#### *Integrated and reshaped old rites*

With the collapse of women's community, many old rites, including a social maturity ceremony such as the first bread baking, customs of intercommunication such as the borrowing of fire, the tasting of the sourness of bread, and women's indoor gatherings in the evenings, disappeared from Lithuania in the middle of the 20th century.

For example, in May women would arrange the altar decorated with flowers and wreaths inside the house of a big farm, and throughout the month members of the family and neighbours would gather every evening to chant *mojavos*, special songs and litanies in the honour of the Virgin Mary. At other times of year women would spend evenings singing, praying, telling myths and fairy tales.

Lithuanian saunas were the traditional place for women's rites. In the sauna they would perform a bathing ritual for the bride. In this way she was introduced into the women's community. This action would finish with a ritual meal and drinks.

In eastern Lithuania a woman was called "Bear" immediately after childbirth. "The Bear is coming!" women would shout as she approached the sauna for ritual bathing about five weeks after giving birth. After bathing the new mother would make offerings to the Birth Goddess Laima.

Women could also give birth in saunas while warming themselves and relaxing, surrounded by female company. The rituality was concentrated in the special clothes, herbal drinks and oils which eased the labour. However, there were no particular chants or meditations. In difficult moments women would unbutton the new mother's dress, open doors and windows, and unplait her hair. These were the most important ritual actions during giving birth.

The ritual visiting of new mother has survived almost to our time. Just after birth the neighbouring women would bring food, herb tea for the new mother, clothes for the newborn and give some advice to the new father, especially if he had not looked after his wife properly.

#### *Celebration of first menstruation*

With the exception of weddings, women's rites at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries were short and simple, performed in the very closed women's community. I suppose the attitudes of Catholicism toward feminine sexuality and woman's body deeply shaped the ritual life of women.

An example of a girl's initiation into womanhood was documented in written form at the end of the 19th century. When the mother noticed that her daughter was bleeding for the first time she showed the blood to her daughter and asked "What do you have here?" and without waiting for an answer slapped her cheek with her palm. From this moment the daughter assumed a higher position in the family and could sit at table with the adult members of the family.

Understanding the importance of woman's initiation, we now mark with girls the day of the ending of her childhood and the birth of a fertile female body. On this day our daughter or another girl is invited into the women's circle

where she sits covered by a white cloth in the middle of the singing and dancing circle. Later she is crowned with a wreath of roses and given small fine gifts by her mother and other women. The celebration finishes with a feast, open talking about women's sexuality and fertility, and answering the girl's questions.

Other rituals often performed are the ritual burying of the placenta, and the ritual thanks to the midwife after childbirth. Both parents, or the mother, wash the midwife's hands and present her with the towel and soap.

The rites described above have some common features. All of them are open to every woman and a few for men also. Every action and symbol is carefully deliberated. The choice of symbols and actions depends on a women's ability to accept them and to actively participate in ritual. In every case a woman's ritual journey is performed with deep respect for the level of the woman's self consciousness. A circle is made for every ritual, to ensure a high and strong energetic and spiritual field.

### **Katerina Karkala-Zorba**

*What is women's ritual? What does ritual / liturgy mean for me?*

*How do we celebrate it in our context and according to our religious tradition / feminist conviction etc.?*

"Women's ritual" is not really an expression in the Orthodox Church. We do not distinguish between men's and women's ritual. All rituals are equally for men and women. There are no men's rituals either. On the other hand, there are some prayers or celebrations which are more frequented by women than by men, and those are:

- the prayer-cycle dedicated to the Mother of God before Easter, on five Friday evenings in the Great Lenten season ending on the Friday of the second week before Palm Sunday with the *Acathist Hymn*. Those prayers are called "greetings to the Mother of God" (*Chairetismoï*) and the hymns follow the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet. *Acathist* means the "non-seated song", referring to an eighth-century miracle in Constantinople when the people of God went to the Church of Saint Sophia and sang the hymns to the Mother of God while all standing up together.
- the intercessions (*parakliseis*), when, for two weeks before the Assumption on 15 August, the great and small intercessions are celebrated in the evenings. These are well-known hymns which are also used in every intercession and every prayer request for something specific.
- the song of *Kassiani*: used in the Great Lenten season before Easter, this is the well-known hymn or *troparion* of Kassiani, a woman in Constantino-

ple, who was chosen to become the wife of the Emperor. She was very beautiful and the Emperor, seeing her, said: "Through women evil has come into this world;" by this he meant Eve. Kassiani answered: "But through a woman good has also come into this world;" by this she meant Mary who gave birth to her son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This is understood to be the answer of a very intelligent woman who did not become Queen, yet showed her own will and strength.

Those prayers are not independent of the daily prayer cycle which includes prayers to the Mother of God, as well as to women saints, martyred and glorified with God. What is important is that those prayers are not independent; they are not prayers only for women, but for the whole community.

In Greece today, we can observe that at the prayers before Easter and before the Assumption, more women are present in church, or in some parishes practically only women. But sometimes this is also true for other celebrations and liturgies. Women are present in the church and give their own accent to the celebrations by taking on the wonderful attitude of the women at the tomb of Jesus, the church, the temple of God. The Myrrhophores, the women who brought myrrh to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, were the first to witness the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This attitude, and this first evangelisation of humankind, is something very important for women today, too.

For me liturgy does not mean something apart from the community where men and women, old and young, clergy and lay people meet in order to celebrate together. The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek words *laos* = people and *ergon* = work or task. So the liturgy is the task of the people. And as such it is a men's and a women's task.

Within the Orthodox tradition, women are not ordained to the priesthood. But we do recognize the ordination of deaconesses (although this was not in preparation for becoming a priest) from the early church until the 12th century. The deaconesses have disappeared, but some Orthodox churches want to revive this tradition. Still, Orthodox women do not feel excluded from celebration. We are present in the whole liturgical context. We feel that men and women have different tasks to fulfill in order to celebrate the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of sacraments. The priest's task is to administer the sacraments. He does this in a line of succession from Jesus to the Apostles up to today. We continue this tradition because it is still the one in which we are fulfilled as members of the church. This is our conviction. As women we feel that we can express ourselves in other different tasks and ministries

(*diakonia*), such as the preparation of the liturgy and of its different parts (bread, candles, the church space etc.), but also by readings, songs, etc. We would perhaps like to have more participation for lay persons in the church, both men and women, but we know that to do that we need more instruction in Byzantine singing. In some Orthodox churches there are good choirs for men and women, or only for women.

I personally think that to a very large extent our faith is transmitted to us through our mothers and foremothers. The liturgical aspect is very important here. Women pay a great deal of attention to the way the liturgy is celebrated. Going to the liturgy feels like we are going to a special feast. This was transmitted to me through my mother. Women feel more free to express themselves bodily in church and during the liturgy; more easily than men, they may make prostrations and kneel down. The whole body takes part, and all the senses are present: I make my cross, I take a candle, I light it, I see the fire, I smell the incense, I feel the icon, I kiss it, etc. I think for women this process is especially important and is transmitted to the children. I still remember a grandmother in a monastery in Greece, who almost forced her little granddaughter to kiss the icon. After the third icon, the child had “learned” and did not want to stop kissing all the icons. Also I remember an old babushka in the Cathedral in Moscow, who turned to me, showing me in which direction I had to look: God is at the Iconostasis, why do I look at the bishop and the priests...? Those women feel themselves to be the guardians of faith, the living tradition-holders. They feel they are the ones who have to transmit what they have received from their mothers to their children, and especially to their daughters. This is perhaps why there is no feeling of exclusion or of being oppressed. The priesthood is just one aspect of the tasks of ministry. But there are so many others.

If I say or hear the word “ritual” I am not sure this is adequate for Orthodox tradition. But there are some habits which are important for Orthodox believers, like making the cross, lighting the candles, or the incense. I would perhaps end by referring to the fact that there is another aspect of life in which women play the most important role and that is the commemoration of the dead. Women go to the graves and light the oil lamps, as they also do at home. They bring flowers and say the prayers at the cemetery. They keep track of the right commemoration days: 3, 6, 9, 40 days; 3, 6, 9 months; and every year after the death of a relative, so that he/she is never forgotten. Women prepare the sweet-wheat cake (*kolyva*) and bring it to the church to be blessed. This is also made visible by their black clothes: they are the women



in black. It is very important that dead persons continue to be a part of our community, and this is made possible mainly by the help of women.

### **Coletta Damm**

#### *Women's ritual in Islam and Sufism – some impressions*

As a German Muslima and psychologist I was asked to write something about women's ritual in Islam and Sufism. It may be surprising for some Christian women, but for us this is not at all an inferior subject, but an important part of our spirituality. This fact is unfortunately rather unknown in the literature, on the one hand for historical reasons (discussed below), and on the other because many Muslimat (plural of Muslima) seem to believe that those things are not "modern" or not interesting enough for others. I shall try to give some impressions of the background and of my personal experiences, in the hope that better-founded research concerning this topic will be done in the future.

Every pilgrim, woman or man, who walks the ritual way between the hills Safa and Marwa seven times (altogether about 3 km) and drinks from the spring of "Zamzam" is following the example of Hagar, the second wife of the prophet Abraham (as she is seen in Islam), as it has been passed down for centuries. Today the hills Safa and Marwa and the spring "Zamzam" which Hagar found, are part of the Holy Mosque of Mecca. In this way, an important part of the Islamic pilgrim's ritual is attributed to a woman, a "mother bringing up her child alone." Especially for many modern European women, this aspect of the ritual is very meaningful: a woman, standing alone, struggling for survival in the desert, and at last being able to open her heart to the source of all existence, at the turning point, when her human abilities and her human knowledge couldn't help her anymore. At this point she saw the water.

In the Qur'an Allah is called again and again "rahmani rahim", translated as compassionate and all-merciful. In Arabic writing this word is based on the letters "RHM", similar to the Arabic word for uterus. Allah, neither male nor female, the source of everything, is reflected in feminine nature.

For centuries Hagar has been a living symbol of the mysterious connection between effort and grace: the very desperate search for water and at last the opening to the real source. In this way she got the water she needed and we, the pilgrims, expect the same for us. For me the old ritual also has the meaning that it is very important to look for the essence, water, without being satisfied with the "sweet synthetic juices" of modern life, which can never quench spiritual thirst.

Today many Muslimat travel to Mecca and Medina: in our group 2/3 were women. Many of them were married women whose husbands had stayed at home. There is a belief that Hagar is buried just beside the Kaaba, the small nearly quadratic building in the middle of the huge Holy Mosque in Mecca, a simple house, empty on the inside, which is called the House of Allah. In Islam the tradition says that Hagar's son Ismael built the Kaaba together with his father Abraham, who visited them later. The pilgrims have to walk around the Kaaba seven times (this is called "Tawaf"), which for me was also a remarkable experience.

At one time, in the prophet's mosque in Medina (about 1400 years ago), women and men prayed together in one single room. In the early Islamic epoch women also taught in mosques. But in the centuries that followed there came to be a more and more strict separation of women and men. (The reasons for this cannot be discussed here.) Most mosques acquired separate prayer rooms for men and women. The separation in everyday life in parts of South Arabia went so far that there was a unique women's dialect, spoken and understood only by women.

Beside the usual prayer five times a day, in the Islamic world a "separate religious women's culture" developed. Not only in Islamic countries, but also in, for example, Germany, Muslimat (most of whom in Germany are Turkish) meet with friends and neighbours to sing religious songs, pray and recite the Qur'an. No men are allowed to be in the flat during these hours. If he cannot enter through a back door into a separate room inconspicuously, the husband has to visit friends or to spend the time in a tea-room. These meetings always take place 40 days after the death of a relative or on the anniversary of a death; this is a custom also for women who are not very religious. Religious women meet their female friends at least several times a year, and many of them come together every week on a fixed day. In rotation a different member of the circle hosts the group each time. During the ceremony the women wear scarves (even if they do not generally do so in everyday life), and most of the pictures on the walls will be veiled. Sometimes a female Hodsha from the mosque leads the ceremony, or this is done by a woman who "knows how it is done." But often there is no chosen leader, and the women begin to sing or to recite in turn. Not only older women, but also many young women come to such meetings. During this time there is no private talking and everybody is very concentrated. Many songs relate to the prophet Muhammad. A very emotional, loving connection comes into being, sometimes tears are flowing, but at that moment nobody would ask why. The turning towards religious

belief is as consoling as the community of the other women. Everyday occurrences or problems are far away from the members of the group; this is another level of understanding. As the psychologists say, rituals function as collection barrels for emotions. During these meetings the women create the opportunity to transcend thinking and feeling. Non-Muslimat, generally friends, may also be invited to join these meetings if they are interested.

After this ceremony (about two hours) the women sit together drinking tea or coffee and eating. The woman who invited the others has prepared something. (During the ceremony normally they only drink a sip of water, if possible water from Mecca, from the spring Zamzam, in memory of Hagar.) Now they like to talk, to have fun and to tell news, to be together.

In Sufism, also called the “Heart of Islam“ (millions of Muslims all over the world belong to one of the many Sufi orders), there is a famous, central woman character, Rabi’a al Adawiya (lived ca. 800 CE). Accentuating the love of God, she changed the ascetic tendencies in Sufism at that time; at a later period the famous Ibn Arabi followed this way and many others did too. They also influenced the Christian Spanish mystics. After Rabi’a there were many important women in Sufism, sheikhas, who had female and male disciples. But even in Sufism the separation of sexes became generally accepted, except in the Bektashi Order in Turkey. While in Christian culture women are remembering and rediscovering their “own rituals” or trying to create new ones, many modern (and most western) Sufi women today are still struggling for integration, to have spiritual rituals together with men. For example, in the Ashki Jerrahi Order (New York, Mexico City) the ceremonies are also guided by women and the female members choose whether they want to wear the traditional scarves or headgear like men.

I myself belong to a Sufi order (called Tariqat As-Safinah) of the Andalusian tradition, which is also open to Jews and Christians. Women’s rights are a central concern of this order; and this is also a main focus of the work of the German Muslim League in Bonn which is connected with the order. We have been working for integration for many years, and for a long time we always held our ceremonies with women and men together, sitting in a circle, with women on one side, men on the other.

Learning from the oriental women, some of us also found that it is important to have meetings only with women. I asked several women about their experiences with a Dhikr only with women. (“Dhikr” means “remembrance of Allah”, which is realised in different ways in different orders, generally with recitation, singing, and sometimes dancing). They described these events

as “softer (but without being superficial!), deeper, going deeper into my heart;” others said, “I liked it more than the way the men do it; I wouldn’t want to give up these women’s meetings, although I appreciate the ceremonies together very much.” What is very important is that nowadays we can do both.

In our order we are now exploring the possibility of private meetings – Dhikr – for those of our female members who would like to participate. Some women do not want to join such a private meeting because they are afraid of new tendencies towards separation. But I think there is no danger because nobody in our order would like to restore those traditions, and on the other hand integration in working together in all areas is a *central principle*. (As far as I know, we are the only order with this target in Germany, similar to the Ashki Jerrahi Order in the USA)

When I was growing up, I learned that women alone could not work together, “because they are not capable – there had to be rational men to make things substantial.” (My mother – a single mother – also thought this way and I was often angry about it.) So I support the struggle of modern Sufi women for integration, but on the other hand I like to do “substantial things” only with women too. Our difficulty is that most of us do not live together in one town, but insha’allah we will succeed in realising this idea. Writing this article I was more and more confirmed that this would be a very good aim. Therefore many thanks to the initiators of the theme “Women’s Rituals”! If somebody would like to see such a ritual, she is invited to join us, because in Sufism it’s most important to “taste the hidden things”, not only to know about them intellectually.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Further literature: Margaret Smith, *Rabi’a the mystic and her Fellow Saints in Islam* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1928; repr. Philo: Amsterdam 1974); Uwe Topper, *Sufis und Heilige im Maghreb* (Diederichs: Munich 1991); Michaela Özelsel, “Die Integration einer kulturspezifischen Sichtweise in therapeutische Rituale,” in: *Hypnose und Kognition* 11 (April 1995), 36; dies., *Forty Days* (Rowohlt: Hamburg 1995); Annemarie Schimmel, *Meine Seele ist eine Frau* (Kösel: Munich 1995); Sara Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things* (Golden Sufi Center: Inverness, CA 1997); Karimah Stauch, “Ein maghrebinischer Sufi-Schech des 20. Jahrhunderts. Schech Al-Alawi” (essay published on the website of Tariqat As-Safinah: <http://members.aol.com/TASafinah/homepage.html>); dies., “Die Tariqat As-Safinah und ihr Dialog mit dem Anderen”, in: *CIBEDO* 13/3 (1999), 113-114.

### **Thalia Gur-Klein**

#### *To be Holy or not to be Holy: on three forms of Love*

I demonstrate my devotion to Judaism in my research into my Jewish sources, and in my everyday life in singing Hebrew liturgy, story telling and poetry. In all these, I try to find joyful ways to enhance the Jewish-Christian dialogue, for joy is compatible with devotion. I believe that joy opens up people to empathic relationships with the Other; for as people are open to joy, hatred and mutual fear do not persist. I believe that the Self always contains the Other and is contained by the Other, as a woman, as a Jew, and as a human being; and it is to us to experience the Other in empathy or disharmony. To make this belief my own, and to make it communicative to others, I present my belief in a piece of Kabbalistic thought and a poem:

A relatively unknown ecstatic mystic of the 13th century, Abraham Abolaffia, presented a model for man's psyche in the form of two-half-circles. Abolaffia reflected earlier rabbinical writings positing ideal humanity according to the primordial body designed at the Creation; it is an idea in its divinely original intention. The materialisation falls short of its ideal. This arouses the yearning of the Self for harmonious wholeness within an ideal union, in finding its other-half. This perception aroused many interpretations.

The concept of primordial body posits three possibilities of a universal model for the human soul. Philo: The two halves of the circle offer two possibilities. Seen as a vertical circle designed to be divided vertically, the primordial body is perceived as an undifferentiated body, like an embryo which contains the whole of humanity in itself. The two halves of the circle create a vision of a universal soul in which the Other is the other half of the Self. Genesis Rabba 8 explicitly posits the original woman, like the man, as an entity containing the universal soul, on her creation. In this model, one sees the creed of "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18), in which the Other is a model for the universally human. The Hebrew verse can be read as "Love the Other as you love yourself" or "Love the Other, who is like yourself". In the first case the Self subjectifies the Other. In the second case the Other and the Self mutually subjectivise each other. Rabbi Hillel's commentary famed him in his saying that the entire Torah stands on this creed, namely that whatever is hateful to the Self, one should not do the Other. All the rest of the Torah is but the interpretation of this one creed. In this, the Self can not find oneself without generating sympathy with the Other, altruistically and reciprocally.

Eros: The other possibility of the vertical model posits the primordial body composed as a heterogeneous union. The primordial body was thus divided

into two sexes, and sexual attraction is perceived as a return to a pre-destined union of body and soul (Gen 2.24). Rabbinic literature describes man and woman as originally forming a primordial body, attached to each other back to back, until God cuts them into two halves. The word rib, *tsela*, is translated as an equal side, as the same word appears in other contexts with this meaning, as in Ex 26.20, where it refers to the two sides of the tabernacle. Like the universally human model, this model inscribes man and woman as being contained and containing. This text posits man and woman as equal parts of a whole, the same way that man to man are equal parts of a whole.

Agape: The third model favored by unio-mystics like Abolaffia places the two halves of a circle horizontally. The image of the primordial body becomes a matrix of upper and lower halves. In this model of mankind, the upper part becomes the divine image in humanity. The upper half corresponds to the universal mind. The lower part is the human living soul, which is the Self. The upper part was created after the divine image but can not procreate, and the lower part can procreate but was not created after the divine. As God shared His image with humanity in Gen 1.27, the human is partly divine and partly earthly. Here the yearning to the return to primordial body is materialised in finding the Self in the Other, which is divinity. If the two halves are contradictory, to reach the divine the human must either erase the self, or deny God. On the other hand, if the primordial body contains the divine image as its other half, then it has divinised the other half, the earthly, and humanised the divine. In this the Self yearns to come close to the roots of all that exists through the divine that created it, as it creates sympathy with the divine part within the Self.

Eighteenth-century Hasidic thought saw in this model the divine illumination in human life. They saw the urge to reach harmonious wholeness in finding the divine roots within the Self, which is uniquely personalised in each human being. Human deeds performed with devotion bring each human being closer to the divine roots of the Self. The personalised roots of divinity in the Self are equated with the scattered light of the Sekhina, the divine spirit, perceived as the feminine aspect of God. Finding the personalised divine root in the Self is thus equated with a return to the mystical union of the primordial body containing the divine image and earthly humanity: being one. In this, every phenomenon of life experienced with devotion becomes a manifestation of Grace to rejoice. A human being thus stands in reciprocal sympathy with the immediate environment. This relationship is creative, imposing a task befitting the personalised divine roots of the Self, a task unique only to that

Self. Hassidic thought accords equal worth to all three ideal models of primordial humanity; love of God, sexual love, and human love of the Self to the Other are thus permuted and complementary.

*A Holy Woman*

*I am a saint  
of a miniature statue.  
Out of my little side pocket  
I jiggle two magic marbles,  
with an eye of light;  
one with an image of God in man,  
the other, with an image of man in God.*

*A card of broken heart  
I hide in my right sleeve;  
one half with longing for love,  
the other with love for another.*

*By the full moon  
I duly offer my payment  
to the high priests  
of water, and electricity.*

*The hungry children  
feeding on my generous hand  
are my own.*

*The dog too, I would not forget,  
and I teach high-school children.*

*For messiah I still long  
and thereby hope to find  
a new job and/or a lover.*

*I am a saintly woman  
of a miniature state.*

**Evaluation of Responses**

After their statement to the first two questions had been circulated, the authors reacted to one another, guided by two more questions (*What are the similarities and differences between the various perspectives? What is the*

future development of women's ritual? How do you see it?). In their responses, women did not only express what they thought they had in common with each other but also what they regarded as their differences. They also stressed points of special interest in other women's contributions and shared again aspects of their own tradition which they thought important for the mutual discussion and development of feminist ritual / liturgy. In the end, what arose was a vision of what feminist liturgy / ritual in a European context can / will be about.

What follows here are excerpts from their responses discussed under five headings:

- (1) Similarities
- (2) Differences
- (3) Special responses to one another
- (4) Contributions to the dialogue from the author's own tradition
- (5) Future perspectives

### 1. Similarities

All participants in the dialogue wished to express what they believed themselves to have in common. Themes that were named included the feeling of being on "a journey – indeed a pilgrimage" as women (*Asphodel*), of "modalities of identification with women's concerns" (*Susan*), of having to struggle with the "perception and object of feminist theology" (*Laimé*), of participating in as well as feeling "side-lined" from the mainline of their tradition (*Caroline*), of sharing in "female characteristics and feeling" (*Katerina*) that may open women specifically to an "embodied, incarnate, sensuous perception of liturgy / ritual" (*Caroline*). Here are some of the voices:

#### *Asphodel*

It is difficult to respond with any sort of formal analysis of the very varied stand-points described by the seven contributors (of whom I am one). What impacts most strongly for me is the perception that we are all on a journey – indeed a pilgrimage. We start from different backgrounds, countries, languages, beliefs: do we have an actual known destination? I do not think so: it is the journey that matters. The journey itself becomes the homecoming (as Nelle Morton pointed out quite a long time ago).<sup>5</sup> We are women living in the 21st century CE. What is common to most of us is a sense of moving to a sense of our own spirituality and power –

<sup>5</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Beacon Press: Boston, MA 1986).



whether within mixed-gender or women-only groupings – and that this is part of our century's journey.

### *Caroline*

I think the most striking similarity is the embodied, incarnate, sensuous perception of liturgy / ritual that women share. They all feel side-lined from the mainline structures and each one reacts differently to this.

### *Laimé*

The reading of the contributions to the ESWTR Yearbook reinforced my assumption that the main problem which divides women in theology into "Eastern" and "Western" still remains the problem of perception of the object of feminist theology and of the ability to apply the methods of feminist theology in their own religious tradition. Self-limiting, suspicion toward new ideas, desire to be a part of the prevalent culture and to justify social expectations at any cost are still very strong in women's consciousness. They make a pregnant woman believe that the safest place in the world for her birth-giving is a hospital, women-theologians are assured 'a priori' that feminist theology is a big heresy...

### *Katerina*

I have learned something myself by writing and reacting on the theme given to us. Women are always present in liturgical contexts. Very often they represent the major part of Church-attendees. But how do they understand their participation? I think we have still a lot of things to share between the different denominations and religions. But let us keep in common what is for sure, i.e. our female characteristics and feelings, our sensitive way of approaching things and matters and our special "motherhood" (bodily or spiritual). My wish is that we can all communicate through the common things which are uniting us, and not through our differences.

### *Coletta*

All these articles – each in its own specific way – show a wonderful treasure of women's spirituality, different, but similar. In my own life there is always one theme again and again: to accept and to overcome antagonisms... I was very glad to read these stories, to see so many similarities and interesting differences. In all articles I found ideas of separation and unity: partnership with men, but concentration on one's own roots and one's own capabilities.

## *2. Differences*

The differences named by several authors relate to two parameters: (1) women's relationship to their religious and cultural tradition (*Susan, Laimé*), and (2) a consciously feminist position of the authors (*Asphodel*). This was formulated as follows:

*Susan*

The texts submitted in response to the initial Dialogue article invitation certainly testify to the rich diversity, not only of culture and religious affiliation, but also of modalities of identification of/with women's concerns. Each one is conditioned both by types of participation available to women within one's own tradition/s and by the perceived limitations of those tradition/s. Asphodel, Laimé and I [Susan] each describe how involvement in women's ritual provided a deepening of one's identity as a woman within new possibilities for women-identified worship in settings quite apart from the traditions of public worship in Judaism and Catholicism respectively. Katerina and Thalia, on the other hand, identify themselves as women securely within a particular received tradition, and explore instead what that tradition meant to them and where the specific spaces and possibilities for women's participation were located. Coletta describes women's ritualization within the Muslim context but specifically within the Sufi orders, and Caroline merges two vital faith-traditions within a variety of new ritualizing, which is both enacted by women in "free space", as it were, and synthesizing elements of East and West. – While a vast difference appears among the various contributions in the degree to which women see the realities of their own lives and the goodness of their own female bodies reflected in official public worship, each one testifies, one way or another, to a process of grappling with the issues.

*Laimé*

While contemplating the reflections of a wide variety of women's rituals and liturgy over the world I mainly concentrate on two mainstreams: (1) the remembering and creative re-thinking the tradition of the ritual / "sacred female activity" (Asphodel Long) as well as integrating of "a new consciousness of the instinctive life-forces" (Caroline Mackenzie), and (2) acting within one's own religious tradition (Islam, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish etc.) "assuring the authoritative presence of women in the public space of worship" (Susan Roll).

*Asphodel*

Both Thalia Gur-Klein and Caroline Mackenzie, coming from vastly different background, speak from the realms of the one-ness of mystical experience; Thalia presents hers from Kabbalistic sources, Caroline from Hindu. Both to a large extent are "gender-blind" in that it is the joyful union of Self with Divine, or with Nature, or of Self with the Other that is sought and celebrated. Unlike the feminist path represented by Susan and myself, or the woman-oriented traditions described by Katerina and Coletta, the mystical experience is defined within the journey of the individual.

### *3. Special responses to one another*

Authors responded to each other on the basis of their own experience, system of thought, and beliefs. Just as a prism spreads one light into various colours, several women looking at one person and her paper will focus on different aspects according to their own specific perspective. The more voices that can be heard, the more colourful the picture; and yet it is never complete. What we need to remember by reading these responses is always to consider the two sides, the one who perceives as well the one who is perceived. For example, we have here two Jewish women looking at a German Muslim, or an American Catholic Feminist looking at a woman doing ritual in Post-Soviet Lithuania, or a Greek Orthodox woman looking at a British Catholic woman informed by Hinduism. Reading the result is like an invitation to a women's group.

#### *Reacting to Asphodel*

*Susan*

Asphodel's description of her life journey and how it came around in a circle, in a way, has a wonderful depth and wholeness and integration about it: the domestic rituals over which women presided in Orthodox Judaism were echoed, in some sense, in the new/ancient Goddess rites which drew on deep traditional roots of a different sort, discovered, designed and enacted by women.

#### *Katerina*

The text of Asphodel Long speaks to me and I find a lot of similarities to my own orthodox Christian tradition. We also know the mourning and some rituals reserved to women and men. I think we have a lot in common with Judaism and of course we do, since the Jewish religion and tradition is our precursor. It is very much coherent to Christian understanding and we have common roots. Asphodel has answered in a personal way on the question of women's rituals which I found very easy to relate to. – Still I could not identify with what Asphodel said about Goddess spirituality. It is very difficult for me to understand or to accept any ritual coming from "folklore, seasonal cookery", "from New Age and Pagan practice". In a way and in an Orthodox understanding it is very difficult to "create" in liturgical practice something totally new or something which is a mixture.

#### *Coletta*

A wonderful message for me from Asphodel Long: Finding one's own way of spirituality – lighting the Sabbath candles in a very deep sense.

### *Reacting to Caroline*

*Katerina*

I have a hard time to understand the text of Caroline Mackenzie as well as that by Coletta Damm. Perhaps it is the fact that there is a “combination” of traditions which makes it so hard. Caroline is coming from a Catholic tradition with Hindu influence. And one can see this when she refers to Easter. I still wonder what there is to be “re-worked”, since Easter is referring to something very concrete, which is the Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This important event, important also for me as a Christian woman today, can be re-experienced, can be rediscovered, but it cannot be re-worked, in the sense of being changed. And the Resurrection of Christ is present in Eucharist, so this event is very important and is the centre of my liturgical life. And this liturgical life is experienced in the Church (at least in my understanding). So I could not find this dimension in the private Eucharist in her meditation room.

### *Coletta*

A wonderful message for me from Caroline Mackenzie: The creative relationship of the dark and the light, which together leads us to the essence of life. This reminded me of the 99 names of Allah: The many different aspects of the source of everything, some of them for us seem to be “dark”, threatening, others kind and light. We cannot understand this really, but we can try to reach a certain knowledge about it.

### *Reacting to Susan*

*Asphodel*

Susan Roll shows that it is not easy to follow a model of feminist rituals such as that presented by Laime Kiskunaite. Writing of Western Europe, she provides an intense insight, a “lamp of Wisdom” when she says that “many women take an enormous risk”: she is referring specifically to those who participate in Womeneucharist, and may be employed by the Roman Catholic church. But all women stepping outside traditional male-directed spiritual conformities take such a risk. It is of becoming an outsider in one’s own community, sometimes even in one’s family. There are economic as well as emotional and physical consequences. I see in the various contributions to our dialogues some of the different strategies women are devising to enable them to begin and sustain their pilgrimage.

### *Caroline*

I was particularly struck by Susan Roll’s paper because I am working in the same area, that is Roman Catholic liturgy. Inspired by her paper, I want to focus on how

women may be able to have a “direct influence on the symbolic structures of worship.”

### *Katerina*

A text that is familiar to me and in which I could slightly see myself is the text of Susan Roll. Coming from a Christian Roman Catholic tradition it is easy to understand what she means when she is saying: “even to speak of women’s ‘liturgies’ is to create a deliberate, and a delightful oxymoron.” Although in Orthodox tradition we do not know such renewals, I can understand them, since I have participated in the ecumenical movement in the last ten years and I have come to understand how important it is for traditions where women had no “voice” in the liturgy to get one, to be heard and seen. I also like the new interpretation (e.g. of litanies and exorcisms) which is a very actual and important point for any liturgical renewal. I also found her examples concerning the feminist liturgies and her clear theological and ecclesiastical approach very interesting. I think there a broad field of elaboration is opened up by this.

### *Coletta*

A wonderful message for me from Susan K. Roll: Being active and no longer passive, but going this way step by step in connection with the growing capabilities of the other women (and such men as she told about!).

### *Reacting to Laimė*

#### *Asphodel*

Laimė Kiskunaite’s account of women’s rituals in today’s Lithuania is especially moving. She emphasises that women-only circles enable the participants to “enter into the world of soulmaking”; this includes creating new rituals and renewing old ones. A strong sense of feminist spirituality is engendered not only by the occasion but by the various practical rituals marking different stages of women’s life. I find her account particularly interesting as it sits so well with my own experience as a Jewish women in goddess circles; we have to re-invent. Laimė and her friends, in a culture that came late both to Christianity and industrialisation, are nearer to folk tradition and memories. It is inspiring that they can integrate these with “holistic world outlook, spiritual midwifery ... feminist anthropology and psychology”. My hope is that this provides a model of rituals that more and more women can follow.

*Susan*

When Laime's article arrived, I found it particularly thought-provoking in her sensitive sketch of the support of women for each other in Lithuanian women's rituals.

*Katerina*

Coming to the text of Laime Kiskunaite, I would like to remark that I liked very much her historical approach by referring to Lithuanian history of the last 50 years. I can understand this, since in Lithuania there was a great change in the last years. Then I liked very much the rediscovering of old, earlier rituals which come now to fill the emptiness and which help one to understand one's own tradition (the sewing of birth shirts, etc.). "Creating new rituals and integrating re-constructed old rituals": this is really a good approach. Although I do not know from my own tradition a midwife's day, I think it is appropriate, since she is the one who helps the child to be born. All the rituals concerning the circle of life, (birth shirts, initiation into childbirth, baptizing, etc.) are really interesting (cf. Orthodox tradition) ... Then I found interesting in Laime's text the menstruation celebration. I also got a slap from my mother, or rather from my aunt, as she was the first to discover my menstruation. My mother then explained me that she had also been slapped and so on. No-one could really explain why. The red cheek made visible the blood which would come every month, but why? – I would like to reply also to her suggestion: "I suppose the Catholic attitudes towards feminine sexuality ... heavily shaped the ritual life of women". This is certainly true and this has something to do with cultural interference and not with religious tradition. Could this perhaps also be the reason why so many women in Western tradition are looking for new rituals today? And since in Orthodox tradition we have maintained a lot of symbolic acts, is this the reason why we do not have to make this step for discovering new ones? This is just an honest reflection which comes into my mind.

*Coletta*

A wonderful message for me from Laime Kiskunaite: To look for old traditions and to create new ones in a very living way, to "create our own authentic life style." Also as a psychologist I like her descriptions of these moving and powerful rituals.

*Reacting to Katerina*

*Asphodel*

I like the story by Katerina Karkala-Zorba of the old woman in the Greek [sic] Orthodox church telling the younger one to look for God not at the Bishop and Priests but at the Iconostase. Katerina gives us a moving account of women's religious activities and responsibilities which give them an inner perception of their dignity and power. On the whole she appears to see no need for separation of the

genders, but I found it especially interesting that the Greek Orthodox women feel powerful in having their own spiritual tasks and understand themselves to be the guardians of the faith and upholders of community with the dead.

### *Coletta*

A wonderful message for me from Katerina Karkala-Zorba: “ I personally think that to a very large extent our faith is transmitted to us through our mothers and foremothers.” Perhaps in all religions women are the guardians of the fire, giving the inner sense of religion to the next generation.

### *Reacting to Coletta*

#### *Asphodel*

I felt grateful to Coletta Damm for her description of the important part the Muslimat have played historically in Islam and Sufism and how she wants to see more research on this subject which I hope can be widely disseminated. I was struck by her reference to the Arabic word root RHM (basis of description of God as compassionate and all-merciful) meaning uterus; the same of course is true in Hebrew. Phyllis Trible’s work on the female nature of God in the Hebrew Bible is based on this fact.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Muslim and Jewish women walking alongside each other on this pilgrimage, as they have already started to do, sharing what is common to them, can help heal the effects of the atrocious history of the current era.

#### *Susan*

In Coletta’s description of the separate women’s gatherings, specifically the meeting which takes place forty days after a relative has passed away, I saw a wonderfully cohesive women’s ritual community. She also deals with the question of ritual for men and women separate-or-together, as well as the impetus toward greater equality between men and women in the larger Sufi movement.

#### *Katerina*

I do not want to appear to overreact to a Muslim, being myself Orthodox. Of course we have a very painful history in Greece with Muslims – or especially with Turkey – but I really feel that we have to be very honest in our relationship. It is very hard for Christians and Muslims to enter a dialogue just because we interpret some basic notions about justice, freedom, war, peace, love, etc. totally differently. – The text of Coletta Damm, although she is a German Muslim, and so, I suppose, a German woman who became Muslim later in her life, shows a great acceptance and understanding of the Muslim tradition. It is interesting to read about the rituals

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, PA 1978), 31-59.

in Islam, and also about the meetings with other women, where religious songs and prayers are shared. But I have to struggle not to see in front of me the women in Islam with their black veils, totally covered, where women are equal to any other property of men, where they are just second class human beings. Perhaps it is easy to say that “Women’s rights are a central concern of this (Sufi) order,” when you live as a German Muslim in Germany, but what about Iraq or some African countries or even in oriental Turkey? – Coletta is speaking of a “separate religious women’s culture” developed in Islam. But is this not the case simply because of the fact that women cannot or are not allowed to meet in the same locations as men? Is a separation not therefore implicit to all gatherings? The interesting aspect, which also shows the openness of women, is that women would invite also non-Muslim friends to join the meeting (women, I suppose). Interesting are also the references to Hagar, the second wife of Abraham. This refers directly to the connection with Israel and also with Christianity. I think we can walk together on this path and personally I would welcome an encounter with Muslim women.

### *Thalia*

I would like to take as my motif the figure of Hagar, whom Coletta Damm has presented as an ideal model for her as a Sufi woman. In Hagar women can see a choice of feminine model – together or alone. Hagar distinguishes herself as a single mother and as such receives God’s grace. The biblical Hagar, however, forms a disharmonious feminine pair with Sarah. They fail to collaborate and their competitive relationship becomes ferocious.

### *Reacting to Thalia*

#### *Asphodel*

From my own background I would say to Thalia that she is blessed in being able to take part in Kabbalistic studies and celebrations, denied to women of my own and earlier generations.

### *Katerina*

I cannot really see myself in the Kabbalistic thought of Thalia Gur-Klein’s text, where she goes through recent Jewish mysticism with a strong symbolism. I just keep from this text the verse which is also important for us Christians “Love your neighbour as yourself,” because I think this is common to those two religions. But I do not really know how this fits into the liturgical or ritual context we were asked about.

### *Coletta*

A wonderful message for me from Thalia Gur-Klein: “I believe that the Self always contains the Other and is contained by the Other...” The model of Abraham



Abolaffia reminds me of the ideas of the Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi who lived in the same century. I like very much this ideas of separation but unity on many different levels. But most I like the wonderful poem: Being a “saintly woman of a miniature state.” That means to me: I try to grow, and while I am trying to grow I try to accept my miniature state...

#### *4. Contribution from one's own tradition*

Four women responded to other author's contributions by sharing and explaining more of their own traditions. Caroline Mackenzie took one quote by Susan Roll about the symbolic elements and the use of arts in women's liturgy in order to stress the valuable contribution that could be made here from the Eastern Indian tradition, but which has not yet adequately been perceived by women liturgists. Laima Kiskunaite felt a need to explain further to Western women the situation of women in post-Soviet Union. Katerina Karkala-Zorba wanted to share the recent discussions of Orthodox women about the re-interpretation of women's rites as well as liturgies in her Church. And Coletta Damm attempted to evaluate further the problem of separation between men and women in the Islamic community as a question also to other feminists today. This seems to highlight voices that need to be heard for further feminist theological discussion in a European context.

#### *Caroline*

As Roll puts it, women's liturgy can combine “stunningly creative use of visual, especially natural symbolic elements, attention to colour / drama and space for bodily gesture and dance” within a Catholic context. The only other place I have witnessed this combination has been with Catholics in India who are trying to *inculturate* or Indianise their faith. In marked contrast with this, in my context here in Britain I find there is plenty of creative, body-based, imaginative ritual but it will not be found in association with anything Christian. Rather it will be “New Age” or Neo-Pagan. While enjoying this creativity, I often experience a lack of depth because no one can agree who or what is the devotional focus.

I observed in India that deep structural changes have come about through the combination of spiritual / liturgical experiences, theological reflection and political circumstances. This has led to more than fifty new churches and chapels that reflect and *support* a more holistic liturgy. A major problem in my experience of the creative liturgies is that it is so difficult to maintain a sense of continuity and community.

It may be impossible to do things on the scale I achieved in India; however, it is important to pay attention to the iconography and symbols in the space where the ritual is done. The most fruitful commission I undertook in India was for a community

of Cistercian nuns. The Hindu architect created a *mandala* style chapel (i.e. circular) and I designed the twelve windows. Since the two sisters I was working for agreed with the idea of *inculturation*, I was given the freedom to develop an iconography that is Biblically based, yet has as many images of women as men. The women are as much the subject of the journey as the men.

This sacred space would be supportive of the rituals described in these articles. It is more cosmic than the average western space. Eastern culture has a language of symbols that fits more easily with a female spirituality than that which has been developed in the West. Perhaps the most salient point is that the combination of eastern symbols with Christian texts is a new development. The problem with so many of the traditional western forms is that they have been created in such a different climate from our own where men have assumed their dominant position without question.

### *Laimė*

I often read in the local press now that at least the aesthetic aspects of our social life (theatre, cinema and art) are undergoing rapid changes: the separation into “East” and “West” is noticeably decreasing and more young people are engaging themselves in these areas. The question is, which people? These optimistic statements raise some suspicion because we almost can not see any courageous and provocative women’s works. Even those women artists who dare to show a piece of authentic feminine experience shout ahead that they *aren’t* feminists. This situation can be found traditionally in the most active and leading fields of culture. The basic structures of society are much more inert. The Catholic Church of Lithuania still remains the bastion of patriarchy. In such conditions the feminist theories which criticize traditional politics and the fundamental “values” of patriarchy (including theological dogmas) find their way into everyday life of the post-soviet society with great difficulty. – Geographically I come from the post-soviet world – one of those “Eastern European women” – brought up as a resistant Catholic in the time of the Soviet regime. I spent the first 25 years of my life in the secluded and frightened society. There are many other women who were raised in the environment of ideological war, political fanaticism and demagogery, fear, lies and a permanent hypocrisy. For many Eastern European women religious experiences were extremely private and still are. Even today just a few women are open to the spiritual experience in the circle and actively participate in the creation of a new women’s liturgy “in the public space of worship” (Susan Roll).

### *Katerina*

In my own Orthodox Christian way of celebrations and liturgical practices there are a lot of things which wait for me to be rediscovered or reinterpreted. So, I do not need – for myself – to look into other traditions, just because I would not

understand fully these other traditions and because my own practice just fulfils me. I also think that in Christianity we have to rediscover some sides of our liturgical or ritual life, sides which perhaps have been hidden so far. In the Orthodox tradition, we have a lot of such practices, like the preparations of the Prospora (the bread for communion), the preparation of the Epitaphios (the tomb of Jesus on Good Friday), etc. Those practices are done by women. – For example, we have blessings similar to those practised by the women in Lithuania: the blessing of the mother and the child on the 40th day after birth, the name-giving prayer on the 8th day, the prayer after a miscarriage or a still born child. After having given birth and for 40 days, a woman is called “lechona”, which means the one who is in bed (from lechos – bed). Of course the blessing prayer after this is not easy to understand as it still has some references to impurity and sin. This comes still from the Jewish tradition. Some other rituals are connecting with liturgy or liturgical ornaments or objects. I already referred to the preparing of the bread. The first dough is prepared out of the water of the flowers of Thursday of the week before Easter (Passion). This is given from mother to daughter. Then the Epitaphios is prepared by women, although now in the big cities flower-shops take the job over. The girls preparing the tomb of Jesus are singing hymns – and there are also myrophores at the procession of the Epitaphios on Good Friday. – I would like to end with a short reference to the Report of the Inter-Orthodox Meeting held in May 1997 in Istanbul where I had the chance to participate as a delegate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. More than 50 women met on the subject “Discerning the Signs of the Times”. The second recommendation was on “Liturgical life”:

The perception and interpretation of some of the practices pertaining to liturgical life need to be addressed. We ask for re-evaluation of certain liturgical customs, for example, the presentation of infants and the 40-day rule for childbirth, the prayer for miscarriages, abortions and post-partum mothers, and expectations pertaining to the reception of communion. Some of us feel these practices and prayers do not properly express the theology of the church regarding the dignity of God’s creation of women and their redemption in Christ Jesus. We realize that the practices in the various local communities may differ. We recommend the incorporation of the lives of the martyrs, both women and men, and the new experience of the people in this century into the hymnography of the church. While this may be happening in some churches, we recommend a universal incorporation of the new martyrs of this century into the life of our church. Perhaps the best forum for such a recommendation is the upcoming Great and Holy Council.<sup>7</sup>

The meeting of Istanbul was the latest of several inter-Orthodox women’s meetings over the last 25 years, including Damascus in 1996 (on the same subject as the Istanbul meeting), Livadia/Greece in 1994, Crete/Greece in 1991, Rhodos/Greece 1988, Agapia/Roumania, 1976. There have been other meetings and of course

<sup>7</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes-FitzGerald (ed), *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the “Signs of the Times”* (Holy Cross Press: Brooklyn, MA 1999; WCC Publications: Geneva 2000).

Orthodox women were always invited to and participated at ecumenical and inter-faith meetings, but these were the most important meetings on the role of women in the Orthodox Church and the question of the ordination of women. The liturgical aspect has always played an important role at those meetings. But we have to add that this is the case for men and women. It is also important that at most of those meetings the question has been raised whether the establishment of new ministries for women as well as the creation of a women's association or institution worldwide would be necessary. I have to add that at the biggest clerico-lay Conference of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, held in Constantinople/Istanbul 25 November – 1 December 2000, the two elements which were most discussed were liturgical renewal and women's place in the church. For me it was an honour to introduce the subject "Women in the Parishes", a paper which has caused much discussion; I am still getting reactions to it.

### *Coletta*

In all articles I found these ideas of separation and unity – partnership with men, but concentration on one's own roots and one's own capabilities. The Qur'an says that we are created differently (women and men, people, nations etc.), to become acquainted with each other, to understand each other. I know several women who first left their traditional religious system because they were discontented, and then later they came back or found another form of spirituality. Had I been a man I would have joined Islam when I was about 14 or 15 years old: I was so impressed by the deep mystic reality of Islamic theism, but I couldn't accept the role of women (as far as I knew about at that time). At that age I still belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, where I had the same problems: I wanted to be active and no longer passive, and not sentimental or moralising (as Susan K. Roll wrote). So I joined a meditation group where women and men were accepted in the same way. After this experience I could come closer again to Islam, trying to find my own way beyond those traditions I didn't like, but looking for good traditions like the ones I wrote about.

### *5. Future Perspectives*

In our questionnaire we asked women explicitly for their perspectives on the future development of women's ritual. The answers given stressed "different ways" (Asphodel) and the need of "valuing diversity" (Susan), rather than envisioning one mutual ritual for all. It seemed to me that answers were given only with hesitation, because women felt the need to reflect upon their own experiences first, before going a step ahead into the future. Some steps to be taken were named in talking about the rift between body and spirit (Caroline) that needs to be healed, as well as reflection about the positive and negative impact of the experience of difference (Coletta).

*Asphodel*

Future development of women's ritual must learn from all different ways; the experiences of the last century exhibit the folly of proclaiming any one course to be the right and only one. This dialogue has shown clearly the resonances that are to be perceived in the effort of women, through ritual, to break through restrictive practice, to retain and maximise collective women's strengths in traditional settings, and to enjoy the freedoms of individual spiritual experience. The pilgrimage rings to the songs, age-old and new, that uplift and heal and give us strength to continue.

*Caroline*

Women in Europe have a special role to play in healing the deep rift between body and emotions and spirit in religious culture. This is a theological task but eventually it involves a commitment to create sacred spaces that incarnate the insights in a practical way. It is these spaces that could enable women to have an ongoing "direct influence on the symbolic structures of worship" (Roll).

*Susan*

What does this indicate for the future? First off, I see even more that unity is expressed in honoring and valuing diversity. ... Secondly, liturgy is never really just "empty ritual", or hollow words, or in this case a sort of artificially constructed playtime for religiously marginalized adults. In whatever ways, or to whatever degree, women see themselves present and constitutive of communal liturgy, that liturgy does indeed matter. ... I fear that there is a deeper question which underlies the future of women's liturgy, namely: if, in the long term and on a large scale, women continue to form separate groups to do creative liturgy from explicitly women-identified / feminist perspectives, does this reinforce the argument that men and women differ from each other in essence? Or is gender simply one among a range of variations among human persons, whose humanity is held in common? Among Catholics there is an aggressive reactionary right wing promoting the former, "essentialist" argument as a way to keep women "in their place". Does the proliferation of women's liturgies inadvertently give support to this position? Do we want to say instead that eventually, in a world of greater gender justice with sensitivity and acceptance of all human persons as such, liturgical forms should evolve in a more and more inclusive manner to the point that gender injustice is erased? This will take considerable groundwork, since there is a monumental amount of subliminal misogyny present in official public worship (at least from what I can see), and which presents itself uncritically as a universal norm. It looks to me as if the journey toward just and authentic liturgy, in whatever tradition, has barely begun. The good news, however, is that it has indeed begun!

*Laimé*

Still focusing upon the women's rituals of my country, I begin to feel a lack of a liturgy of the Word. The next very important task which could be achieved through the women's rituals is elaborating new ways, forms of expressing the religious sense and the regular introduction of new people to women-identified liturgy. ... I hope that through my thoughts and words, through the fragments of our spiritual life we will become more familiar and understandable for the women from the rest of the world.

*Coletta*

Even today for many people in the traditional religions, "different" means for women and men a specific kind of difference, as Asphodel Long said: men's leadership and a less important role for women, exclusion from the "real service". But on the other hand there are deep connections with the other women and the possibility of transcendence of every day's difficulties. For me one of the main questions is: How can we find (or re-find) and appreciate our own female way of spirituality and how can we live this in our religions / spiritual systems. Should we look for separate ways or should we avoid them, because we could be fixed in a less important role? Women's rituals – this is my conclusion – are as important today as they were in former times and they help us find a better connection to our own roots and the own possibilities. Women should join (and create) them and they should help men to understand and accept their importance.

**Conclusion**

The dialogue on women, ritual and liturgy was intended to raise authentic voices of European women from different religious and cultural contexts, rather than presenting an academic discourse in the field of liturgical studies. Thus we are glad to have been able to present not only voices from Christian backgrounds, but also contributions from Jewish and Muslim as well as those with interest in, and knowledge of, Goddess and Hindu spirituality. Our original intention, as incorporated in the four questions, was also to offer a contribution to the feminist theological discussion on women's ritual which arose less out of theory than out of liturgical or ritual praxis within a European context. Having said this, I regret the lack of Protestant and Anglican Christian voices, that is, those Christian traditions in which women are now "blessed in being able to take part" in leading normal worship (as Asphodel said to Thalia, who did not, however, thematise this experience), and in which it is no longer necessarily an oxymoron (however deliberate or delightful: Susan)

to speak of women's liturgies.<sup>8</sup> Still the question remains: What has been achieved in this dialogue? And how can we evaluate its results? As editor and silent partner of this dialogue-article, I, Annette Esser, suggest looking at the following feminist theological, liturgical, and sociological aspects:

### *Group dynamics*

From a sociometric perspective what arose in this dialogue was a rather interesting group dynamic that may be representative for, or give an image of, similar constellations of women when they discuss or practise rituals, e.g. at ESWTR's conferences. The affinities between and / or rejections of other positions were not always to be expected.

For example I would have expected an affinity between Asphodel Long's Goddess spirituality and women creating new rituals in Lithuania, but found the mutual interest of Asphodel and Katerina Karkala-Zorba in each other's praxis a surprise. Similarly, I wondered how the Muslim voice of Coletta Damm would be adopted by other Jewish and Christian participants and was surprised by the very positive reaction of the two Jewish contributors on the one hand and the very critical Christian Orthodox voice of Katerina on the other hand. To find that the Biblical figure of Hagar, represented at first by Muslim Coletta, was taken up as a new discovery and adopted as a figure of identity by both a Jewish (Thalia) and a Christian woman (Katerina), might also surprise those who are aware of the impact of this figure in African American womanist theology.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the voices which were more generally accepted or rejected, particularly those of Susan Roll and Caroline Mackenzie, it is revealing to look more closely into women's reasoning and assessment of the other's position. Thus, Caroline's approach to women's ritual as a Catholic woman artist informed by Hinduism was criticised from two different angles: one representing Christian Orthodoxy (Katerina), the other representing a feminist position (Asphodel). What was questioned here was, on the one hand, Caroline's combining of traditions that led her to "re-work" the Easter liturgy, and on the other hand the "gender-blindness" that allowed her to glorify femininity in the Eastern mystical tradition. In responses to Catholic American liturgist Susan

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Charlotte Methuen, who in her editorial reading critically remarked the lack of just these voices. This was not intentional; unfortunately, the two Protestant women we had originally invited to participate had to drop out for personal reasons.

<sup>9</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY 1993).

Roll, however, these two categories, the relatedness to tradition and to feminism, seemed to have played out in just the other way. Susan was applauded from contrasting sides, e.g. from Orthodox Katerina as well as from Laime Kiskunaite who represents newly constructed women's rituals in Lithuania. Several participants quoted her words explicitly, and Caroline wrote her entire essay as a response to a phrase of Susan's. It seems to me that the way Susan Roll struggles between her own Catholic tradition and her feminism in regards to developing women's ritual and liturgy functions, or can be understood as, a kind of bridge-building between very disparate positions. That Susan, as an American professor of liturgy, is of all our participants the best informed by the academic feminist discussion in the liturgical field, demonstrates also how enriching and constructive this discussion can be in the European context.

### *Categories*

Thus said, it is interesting to look more closely at the categories into which women put each other in order to understand or position themselves and the other. Asphodel Long, for instance, uses three categories:

- (1) mystical and gender-blind (Caroline, Thalia)
- (2) feminist (Susan, Asphodel)
- (3) women-oriented (Katerina, Coletta)

But Laime Kiskunaite, whose work seemed so closely connected to Asphodel's, talks about two mainstreams of women's ritual and liturgy around the world:

- (1) the remembering and creative re-thinking the tradition of the ritual / "sacred female activity" (Asphodel) as well as integrating "a new consciousness of the instinctive life-forces" (Caroline), and
- (2) acting within one's own religious tradition (Islam, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish etc.) "assuring the authoritative presence of women in the public space of worship" (Susan).

In this model, Asphodel is put in the same first category as Caroline, whereas Susan Roll is in a different category from her. The issue at stake seems to be again whether the notion of one's relation to feminism (Asphodel) or to tradition (Laime) counts as the primordial parameter for understanding each other. Therefore it is urgent to look and to communicate more deeply about our respective understanding and definition of feminism and of tradition regarding our ritual / liturgical praxis.

Concerning the notion of feminism, notice for example that Caroline Mackenzie herself puts her work into a feminist perspective when she identi-



fies women feeling “side-lined from the mainline,” and sees a connection between Eastern spirituality and what she perceives as a Western feminist position. It is precisely her intention to contribute to this discussion from the perspective of her practical (and artistic) work in order to influence “the symbolic structures of worship and their official interpretations” (Susan).

With respect to tradition, it is important to notice that although all women seem to need a sense of tradition each of these women has a very different understanding of and relationship to her own tradition, depending on how deeply rooted within or disconnected they are from it (e.g. the contrast between Asphodel and Thalia in regard to Judaism) or the extent to which, and with what additional consciousness, they seek to grasp it anew. I would suggest distinguishing between four categories of relationship with tradition:

- a newly chosen tradition (Coletta, Asphodel, Laime)
- a tradition recognised as a root, but no longer as a direct source of faith (Asphodel)
- the awareness of an unbroken tradition that may have to be rediscovered and reformulated (Katerina, Thalia)
- a feminist consciousness of one’s own tradition as patriarchal, and thus in need of deconstruction and reconstruction (Susan, Caroline).

### *Voices to be heard*

Considering the discussion on feminism and tradition in women’s ritual / liturgy as an agenda, it is interesting to see which women feel an urgent need to contribute to this discussion from her own tradition and perspective. I think that it was not just by chance that lengthy statements were given by Caroline Mackenzie on the Eastern Indian tradition, Laime Kiskunaite on the Eastern European praxis of women in the Post-Soviet countries, Katerina Karkala-Zorba on Orthodox women’s discussions, and of Coletta Damm on Muslim women’s questions of separation versus unity with men. It seems that these contributions represent the voices missing so far in the European feminist theological discussion on women’s ritual and liturgy, voices which now wish and need to be taken into account.

### *Future Vision*

What vision for the future arises from this? I would affirm Asphodel Long’s remark about “the folly of proclaiming any one course to be the right and only one,” which would almost inevitably depend on a superficial evaluation of what unites us all. But I also think that before we fall back into individualism

and just let everyone celebrate her own ritual according to her own belief, we should start to dialogue better with each other. Interestingly, it was Katerina Karkala-Zorba, who at times appeared to be the most critical regarding other women's contributions and praxis, who expressed her wish that we should "all communicate through the common things which are uniting us and not through our differences." I think we should indeed consider our commonalities but also talk open-mindedly about our differences, since these constitute our identities. We need to listen to all the voices amongst us, pleasing or not, before we attempt to reconstruct a mutual feminist vision and practice. In theory, it is politically correct to stress difference and to name our identity (such as mine as a white, Catholic, German woman). But it is another step to experience our differences in encounters that may not always be delightful but can be challenging and painful as well.

What we can build up in this way is a mutual connectedness that does not ignore our differences. I hope that one day we will be able to celebrate this in a ritual that does not lack a "devotional focus" (Caroline), but is a "liturgy of the word" (Laimé) as well.

Dieser Artikel dokumentiert einen schriftlichen Dialog zwischen sieben Frauen über die Fragen nach Ritual und Liturgie von Frauen. Dabei repräsentierte jede der Teilnehmerinnen eine, manchmal auch zwei, Frauentradition in Europa, sowie einen unterschiedlichen Zugang zu ihrer Tradition. So kommen die Frauen zwar mehrheitlich aus christlicher und jüdischer Glaubenshintergrund, aber islamische und hinduistische Traditionen, sowie Göttinnenspiritualität und die Praxis feministischen Rituals sind ebenfalls unter ihnen gegenwärtig. In dem Dialogprozess schrieb zunächst jede über ihr eigenes Verständnis und ihre eigenen Erfahrungen als Frau mit Liturgie und Ritual. Diese ersten Statements wurden dann untereinander ausgetauscht, so dass in einem zweiten Schritt eine Reaktion darauf erfolgen konnte. Dabei identifizierten sich Frauen manchmal mit einer anderen Frau aus einer ganz anderen Tradition, oder reagierten in einigen Fällen auch sehr kritisch aufeinander. Für die Zukunft feministischen Rituals / Liturgie bedeutet dies, dass verschiedene Stimmen gehört und verschiedene Perspektiven akzeptiert werden, während wir lernen Brücken zwischen Frauen mit unterschiedlicher Spiritualität zu bauen.

Cet article rend compte d'un dialogue écrit entre sept femmes sur les questions de rituel et de liturgie féminine. Chacune des participantes représentait une voire deux traditions féminines en Europe ainsi qu'un rapport différent à leur tradition. Les femmes viennent certes majoritairement de l'arrière-plan religieux judéo-chrétien mais sont parmi elles également représentés les traditions islamique, hindouiste et la

spiritualité mettant en exergue les divinités féminine et la pratique du rituel féministe. Dans le processus de dialogue chacune écrit sa propre compréhension et expérience en tant que femme de la liturgie et du rituel. Les premiers témoignages furent échangés au sein du groupe afin de permettre au groupe de réagir lors d'une seconde phase. Ainsi les femmes s'identifièrent parfois avec une femmes d'une toute autre tradition ou réagirent dans certains cas de manière très critique les unes envers les autres. Pour l'avenir des rituels ou de la liturgie féministe, cela signifie que différentes voix doivent être entendues et différentes perspectives acceptées tandis que nous apprenons à construire des ponts entre des femmes de spiritualité différentes.