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Arise and Come Unto Me: Spirit in Community

Liz Hood

Europeans are lost.

We have no idea what our Indigenous roots are, and until we do, we'll be a wounded people wounding others. Many of us are terribly homesick for ourselves ... The Elders at Standing Rock and other places are saying to Europeans, 'Go back and decolonize yourselves. Do your ancestral recovery work ... This is the process of recovery, not appropriation of other's Indigenous roots. This is your authentic place to stand.'

– Dashú, 2017

Symbols and ideas of human spiritual significance are not finite commodities that can be claimed or owned by any single group; they change hands, they resonate with an age, a place, a culture, and then evolve into new applications and practices, perhaps ancient to a different culture or religion. Unlike biology, culture does not follow a linear Darwinian evolution, it shifts and transforms over time (Adler, 2006, p. 24; Radin, 1954, p. 30). Ideas about God and spiritual life are tied intimately to the communities in which they arise, and the conditions and pressures those communities face over time as “an ever-changing network of interlocking relationships” (Starhawk, 1997, p. 188). Spirit, a divinely animating, creative, and restorative expression of the Christian trinitarian God that developed within its own unique community of believers, is one such idea that also exists in the broader repository of human archetype and metaphor. As a Pagan reflecting on Christian doctrine, my task is always to apprehend an idea in its own religious context, and then build a bridge between the Christian idea and my own understandings drawn from the community in which I am a part. In this work, I am supported by Spirit; reminding me that the human family shares more in common than what divides us. The following then, will contrast Christian ideas of ‘Spirit in Community’ with those drawn from a proposed historical and archeological record of pre-Christian European cultures and their descendants, focusing specifically on the concepts of gender and divinity, and immanent versus transcendent spiritual structures.

Community: Pre-Christian Old Europe

To offer a reasonable comparison between Christian and ‘Old European’ understandings of Spirit, it may be helpful to briefly summarize literature that has posited a wholly different model of community culture than the dominant Western model today. The civilization of Old Europe was identified by archeologist, Marija Gimbutas (1989), as a distinct matrilineal culture beginning as early as 65,000 BCE and peaking between the seventh to third century BCE, complete with early script, agricultural and technological craft specialization, complex religious, governmental, and social organization, and convincing evidence that women played an active role in all levels of public life. (Eisler, 1988, p. 13; Gimbutas, 1989, p. 17). Old Europe appeared to develop without the hallmarks of a

warring/dominating ethic; settlements were unprotected and situated in indefensible fertile valleys, sophisticated artworks reveal no images of war, master/slave or ruler/ruled dynamics, and no elaborate chieftain burial sites with extensive grave goods, slaves, or concubines have been found – all suggesting a relatively peaceful, relatively unstratified society (Eisler, 1988, pp. 13-14). Evidence suggests that Old European culture developed slowly through the Paleolithic, picked up in the Neolithic, advanced into the early Historic period, and was eventually dismantled between 4,500 – 2,500 BCE by three waves of invasions by “patriarchal, stratified, pastoral, mobile, and war-oriented” (Gimbutas, 1989, p. 1) Kurgan groups from the Russian steppes, giving rise to the proto-Indo-European culture we associate as indigenous to the region today (Klassen, 2006, p. 365).

Gimbutas posits that the refugees of Old Europe who fled these invasions carried ideas about the divine feminine immanent in nature to the high civilizations of Minoan Crete, to the Goddess worship found in the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman pantheons, dwindling finally in the early medieval Pagan practice of British (hedge) witchcraft (Adler, 2006, p. 10; Eisler, 1988, pp. 15, 29; Hutton, 2006, p. 332; Starhawk, 1997, p. 212). While there is no shortage of criticism about Gimbutas’ proposed theory both within and outside of the Pagan world, some contemporary Pagan feminists question why these particular mytho-interpretations of human history are evaluated conditionally upon scholarly proofs, as historical criticism is similarly ungenerous to most religious mythologies (Adler, 2006, p. 193; Hutton, 2006, p. 330; Klassen, 2006, p. 336). This quasi-mythic creation idea will serve as the working hypothesis for an Old European model of Spirit in community.

Imagistic vs Doctrinal Modes of Religiosity

Whitehouse’s (2004; 2008) ideas about *imagistic* versus *doctrinal* modes of religiosity presents another useful tool in situating the role of Spirit within a larger framework of ideological and religious modes. Whitehouse describes how doctrinal religious traditions such as Christianity encapsulate the ideas of the age into a set of repetitious and routinized ritual practices and orthodoxies to successfully preserve them across time and space (Whitehouse, 2008, p. 108). As one might expect, a strict observance of routine effectively transmits complex and powerful ideas, but does so at a cost; doctrinal mode routinization can produce tedium and loss of motivation among adherents (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 325). Reverting to more imagistic modal techniques such as highly arousing, ecstatic, or consciousness-altering ritual practice is one way to address this problem, but one that risks a collapse of the doctrinal mode altogether (Whitehouse, 2008, p. 110). Instead, Whitehouse suggests that doctrinal modes often employ alternative methods of heightening emotional arousal that tightens community networks without capitulating to imagistic strategies, specifically: 1) creating both repetitive and periodic ritual of regularized arousal, and 2) maximizing the relevance of these events, which in a more doctrinal fashion, “are typically subjected to extensive narrative rehearsal afterwards, prompted by orthodox interpretative concerns.” (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 327). Christian theologians may begin to see how the trinitarian role of Spirit serves an important tedium-relieving function of heightening emotional arousal throughout early, Reformation-age, and modern-day Christian theological development by bringing a feeling of corporal vitality, justice, and vigor to the Church body and its practices that have been often criticized for its preoccupation with orthodox corporate preservation (Bergman, 2013, p. 116). Or as Isasi-Diaz (2005) puts it, “Spirit provides boundary-crossing space where outdated and dead ideas about one’s

religious beliefs can be challenged and new energy for faithful living can be found” (p. 241). Writing from the imagistic side of the fence out of a contemporary tradition that actively cultivates peak, ecstatic experiences and regularly employs psychodrama – an active component of both Old European and Minoan spiritual practice – Spirit has been a welcome presence in my Christian theological training (Gimbutas, 1989, p. 66). I recognize in her call to justice, elemental immanence, and mytho-hybridized and en-Natured guise of bird-woman-breath, the Goddess of Paganism I know so well (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 241).

When God was a Woman

Drawing on Isasi-Diaz et al.’s explanation in the text *Constructive Theology* (2005), Spirit is identified as the source from which the gender of God, or perhaps better put, the divinity of femininity has been most successfully explored (p. 241). The Christian Spirit is recognized as “an indwelling, corporeal presence within the created order... variously identified with the feminine and the maternal” (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 241). Spirit is a birthing, nurturing force, a great wind, a cosmic bird, and a “nursing mother of creation...who protects and sustains the well-being of all things in the cosmic web of life” (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 241). While authors are quick to point out that early Christians, despite attributing female qualities to Spirit and naming her with the grammatically feminine *ruach* were not proposing that Spirit was a female deity *per se*, they knew the qualities of God included both female and male aspects that “transcends sex and gender” (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, pp. 241-242). Conceptions of a genderless or gender-transcendent God can be rendered invisible by male-neutral language conventions that place a primacy on the masculine (He/Him, Lord, King, Father). Even with a sensitivity to the complexities and ‘each-is-both’ aspects of deep spiritual philosophy, locating the authentic ground from which these contemporary statements about Christian Spirit arise can be confusing to the outside reader.

Divine gender confusion and counter-intuitive genealogy-making is notably revealed in the *filioque* clause of great Nicene-Constantinopolitan debates, in which the Spirit (Mother) was said to proceed from both the Father and the Son (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 242; Noll, 2012, p. 51). Julian of Norwich intuited her own genealogy in the early medieval era, locating the holiness of motherhood in the divinity of Jesus, writing, “Our great Father, almighty God... in his most wonderful and deep love, by the prescient eternal council of all the blessed Trinity, he wanted the second person to become our mother, our brother, and out (*sic*) savior... Our Father wills, our Mother works, our Good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms.” (Furlong, 1996, p. 237). Julian could have easily been mistaken for an Old European Goddess-worshipper, writing:

Our Mother in nature, our Mother in grace, because [God] wanted altogether to become our mother in all things, made the foundation of his work most humbly and most mildly in the maiden’s womb... the supreme wisdom of all things, arrayed and prepared himself in this humble place, all ready in our poor flesh, himself to do the office of motherhood in everything. The mother’s service is nearest, and readiest, and surest: nearest because it is most natural, readiest because it is most loving, and surest because it is truest. (Furlong, 1996, pp. 238).

If asked, any illiterate country *pagani* could tell you that the mother surely precedes the son, and fatherhood could only be assured if patrilineal lines were kept clear through

controlling the freedom of movement and sexual activity of the mother (Dashú, 2017; Orr, 2008, p. 41). Such a thing, from an Old European spiritual ideology, would violate the sanctity of the seat of all creation, thus the never-changing Goddess bears a Son/Consort that begets himself and is struck down with the harvest in the ever-changing seasonal round (Starhawk, 2006, p. 22). Put another way, “The female, who gives birth to the male, includes the male in a way that male divinities cannot include the female.” (Starhawk, 1997, p. 11). Sacred genealogies that grapple with the placement of the divine feminine reveal a cosmological schism between present day Christian and remnant Old European communities. Pressures to legitimize divine feminine attributes – which may have served Whitehouse’s function of emotional arousal for many (especially female) Christians – were restrained by the forces of patriarchal norming so prevalent in the Semitic and Greco-Roman cultures of the day (Dashú, 2017; Tamez, p. 162).

The feminine qualities of Spirit as described by Isasi-Diaz et al. are not unique to a Christian interpretation. Since Old European communities and their offshoots relied upon *orature*, or oral history teachings (as opposed to literature), it is difficult to conclusively determine what ancient communities thought or believed about their Goddess (Dashú, 2017). Instead, ideas about the divine feminine can be drawn from archeological evidence, mythology, and in Roman or Christian observer-writings about Old European or Northern European spiritual beliefs, as well as Church confessional and penitential texts (Dashú, 2016, p. pp. 35, 65; Davidson, 1983, p. 8). Tragically, beginning with edicts from secular monarchies and regional lawmakers around 800 CE and growing into the Roman Catholic Church’s persecutions culminating in the late 1700’s with its successful “systematic campaign to eradicate... [European Pagan] remnants once and for all” (Oxtoby & Segal, 2012, pp. 596-97), the remaining oral histories and folk customs of this dwindling culture were functionally lost to living memory and practice (Dashú, 2016, pp. 296, 284). Estimated deaths of female, Jewish, disabled and LGBTQ people have varied widely – between 100,000 and 9 million – though contemporary research has settled on a number between 40-50,000 people killed, with tens of thousands more who were tortured and died in prison (Adler, 2006, p. 235; Starhawk, 1997, pp. 186-187). Despite these waves of cultural genocide, rich sources of Paleolithic and Neolithic artifacts demonstrate that Old Europeans were prolific, if not devout, in creating material representations of the Goddess. Over 30,000 miniatures of religious sculptural art have been unearthed from 300 sites between the Neo- and Chalcolithic periods, along with “enormous quantities” of religious and ritual paraphernalia including ubiquitous shrines placed in every room, a practice observed again thousands of years later in the height of Minoan Crete (Gimbutas, 1989, pp. 11, 74-75). Gimbutas dedicates many chapters of her book to an exploration of the cosmological and cosmogonical renderings of the Goddess as a (water) bird, a snake, primordial waters and torrents of rain, universal eggs, and moons. Gimbutas summarizes her findings thusly, “the culture called *Old Europe* was characterized by a dominance of women in society and worship of a Goddess incarnating the creative principle as Source and Giver of All,” whereas “the male element ... represented spontaneous and life-stimulating – but not life-generating – powers” (Gimbutas, 1989, p. 1). Centuries later, historians and commentators on Minoan Crete were lavish in their praise, such as Platon who wrote, “the whole of [Minoan] life was pervaded by an ardent faith in the goddess Nature, the source of all creation and harmony... [so much so that] the fear of death was almost entirely obliterated by the ubiquitous joy of living” (Eisler, 1988, pp. 31-32). Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Doreen Valiente (2006), early founder

alongside Gerald Gardner of the revived British witchcraft tradition of Wicca, and author of the much-venerated *Charge of the Goddess* imagined the Goddess' voice announcing: "I am the mother of all living, and my love is poured out upon the earth ... I who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the desire in the heart of man, call unto thy soul. Arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature who gives life to the universe." (Valente, 2006, p. 18).

Despite significant ideological differences between these spiritual communities, there remains a consistency about the role and function of the divine feminine; Spirit is incarnate in nature, in the elements, and in acts that are tied to female-specific associations such as birth, growth, nurturing, and the benevolent guidance and protection of natural cycles and the entire web of life. In Isasi-Diaz et al.'s identification of the 'marks' of Spirit, we see that Spirit is described as *processual*; She "is said to flow, to pour, to burn, to breathe, to beat [her] wings, and to blow wherever [she] desires ... [she] calls us into a process of endless transformation, of 'entire sanctification'" (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 244). She is also *primordial*; she is "green ... a corporeal life-form who animates and sustains the natural world ... [and] makes alive the natural systems on which all life depends... Spirit is a primordial, earthen reality [attributed to the] cardinal elements – earth, wind, fire, water – that are the key components of embodied life as we know it." (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, pp. 244-245). In this description, Spirit appears to retain or borrow elemental similarities from older belief systems still present at the time of early Christianity, and retains much of her ancient coherence.

This assemblage of pieces from multiple traditions is captured by the concept of *bricolage*, or "the cultural process of stealing back forth sacred symbols" and their associations (Taylor, 2001, pp. 178-179), a process now active in the reconstructions of the Neo-Pagan movement. Sacred myths retain their vitality when they continue to affirm "the link between the self and the experienced world ... [and are] reinforced through the regular performance of religious ritual" (Griffin, 2006, p. 308). A contemporary vision of this idea is promoted by biologist Lyall Watson who wrote, "We did not come into this world. We came out of it, like buds out of branches and butterflies out of cocoons. We are a natural product of this earth, and if we turn out to be intelligent beings, then it can only be because we are fruits of an intelligent earth, which is nourished in turn by an intelligent system of energy" (Ausubel, 2016). A feminine, green concept of Spirit has thus persisted, retaining her function as divine mother, wind of change, breath of life, cleansing water and fire, and for Christianity, the restorer of vitality and justice for a doctrinal tradition vulnerable to stagnation through routinization.

The Problem of Immanence

Immanence, or the idea of en-Spirited Creation is a hallmark of nature-based, often polytheistic, and animistic spiritual traditions such as those found in Old European and other worldwide Indigenous traditions (Bergman, 2013, p. 126; Monture, 2014, p. 6; Orr, 2007, pp. 33, 56; Starhawk, 1997, p. 4; Thomas, 2015, p. 981). Stemming from "the Latin *anima*... that translates as a breeze, as breath, as soul or simply life, the animist acknowledges all of nature to be alive with soul or song." (Orr, 2007, p. 56). As Roszak points out, immanence-based spirituality relies on a "visionary style of knowledge, not a theological one; its proper language is myth and ritual; its foundation is rapture, not faith and doctrine; and its experience of nature is one of living communion" (as cited in Adler, 2006, p. 25-26).

Immanence tells a story of a spiritual power, energy, or consciousness residing in all made things that is neither divided nor constrained by the illusion of physical boundaries (Dashú, 2017; Orr, 2007, p. 57; Starhawk, 1997, p. 4). It is an idea upheld by Buddhists and physicists alike (Ausubel, 2016; Dashú, 2017). Transcendence, as it manifests within Christianity, operates on the idea that God who made the world, exists primarily outside of it. God gives life and Spirit to Creation, and from God the human person of Jesus (*Emmanuel*, 'God with us') was begotten, and who at the resurrection returned to God's kingdom in divine, non-corporeal form, 'out there' (Noll, 2012, p. 49). In Christian tradition, Spirit is identified as the bridging bond of love between the Father and the Son (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 251).

Transcendence, as a spiritual ideology, is founded on dualistic splitting: God/humanity, humanity/nature, man/woman, good/evil, truth/heresy. For example, the spiritual message of God's love promoted by Christianity and enabled by Spirit calls on believers to "proclaim this truth and to struggle against everything in our world that militates against it" (Evans, 2005, p. 237). On the surface that seems a worthy struggle, however as Isasi-Diaz et al. note, this dualistic notion of truth/heresy "has been inextricably complicit with the forces of expanding power and the inevitable complexities of dominance and submission that attend them...[branding] the objects of mission as inferior ... 'savages' or 'barbarians' practicing 'primitive' religion" (Evans, 2005, p. 236). Interestingly, anthropologists have been arguing against the idea of religious 'evolution' since the middle of last century, demonstrating that "monotheism often existed side by side with polytheism, animism, and pantheism" in early peoples, and proposing these variances in belief as simple "differences in philosophical temperament" (Adler, 2006, p. 24; Radin, 1954, p. 29).

Starhawk, a leading Pagan theologian calls this form of dualistic consciousness "*estrangement* because its essence is that we do not see ourselves as part of the world. We are strangers to nature, to other human beings, to parts of ourselves. We see the world as made up of separate, isolated, non-living parts that have no inherent value" (Starhawk, 1997, p. 5). Within a Christian ideology, this dualism is expressed even in the micro level of bodies and matter and "the disturbing, repulsive reality of living in a sinful world" (Evans, 2005, p. 226), whereas Pagan communities "fully engage with and celebrate their sensuality [and] sexuality ... [as] a force of nature that has the power to provoke fundamental change (Orr, 2007, p. 51). Many Pagans consider the condemnation of immanence and animistic belief systems as idolatry "a kind of racist perception based in ignorance" and a simple failure to appreciate that communities operating from an immanence perspective identify the material as "a transparent window of experience" into the divine (Adler, 2006, pp. 25-26). Isasi-Diaz et al. note this historical sense of spiritual superiority created the "Christian mission's imaginaries for the Other and the practises that accompanied them [which] effectively obliterated the dignity and agency of many populations in colonized territories" (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 236). Miller speaks even more strongly in defense of immanence-based philosophy which he says, "is eternally in unresolvable conflict with social monotheism, which in its worst form is fascism and in its less destructive forms is imperialism, capitalism, feudalism and monarchy" (as cited in Adler, 2006, p. 27).

Yet in blows Spirit, the "hidden and forgotten member of the Trinity... active, transgressive, hyperbolic" to re-balance outdated dogma (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 246). Through the life-giving role of Holy Spirit, Christianity can and in some cases, has returned to a place of closer approximation to the immanence approach. The illuminated manuscripts produced in early medieval Celtic Christianity root "gospel politics in a Spirit-animism that is

characteristic of tribal cultures around the globe” (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 252). Christian mystics like Joachim of Fiore and Hildegard of Bingen capture the earthen, elemental vitality and visionary urgency of immanent Spirit, while Thomas Müntzer’s “wild, uncontrollable, and insurgent force for revolutionary reform ... roused the ire of [priests and bishops] around him” (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, pp. 254-55, 257). Near-heretical, the idea that the Christian Spirit may be more accurately parsed as *Spirits* plural, is borne out in the observation that “If the Spirit is ... theologically straight-jacketed in the denomination of One, the living incarnation of that Spirit’s work in history shows up as an ever-proliferating Many” (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 259).

Drawing back to Whitehead’s idea of doctrinal religious modes, it is no wonder that pneumatology is the least studied aspect of the Trinity (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, p. 245). Whitehead’s work reminds us that the policing of orthodoxy within a religious community is a necessary function to support the doctrinal mode, but a hyper-vigilance to eradication of heresy may actually trigger a doctrinal religion to fail (Whitehead, 2004, p. 327). Conversely, mythological as it may seem in the times in which we live, the centering of post-colonial Indigenous experience in the public mind and mounting evidence from ancient cultures such as Old European and Minoan Crete demonstrates that there is a compelling case to be made for immanence-based spiritual communities’ vital contributions to a more harmonious social culture. In both cases, Spirit’s *prophetic, performative, and particular* nature make her hard to control, difficult to regulate or sanction, and her wild, irrepressible fruiting untameable (Isasi-Diaz, 2005, pp. 243-244). For imagistic immanence-based spiritual communities, Spirit’s wildness is woven into the unpredictability of Nature. Doctrinal modes such as Christianity have struggled to find ways to both welcome and contain this spiritual force, yet without such an essential role, the regular, routinized, and highly controlled orthodoxy of a doctrinal orientation might have resulted in its devitalization or passing away altogether.

The ideological conquest of one world view over another has been playing itself out for millennia; in the waves of Kurgan invasions through Old Europe; in the early Bronze age of Semitic cultures and the Greco-Roman world; in the suppression of peasant folkways in Northwestern Europe in the middle ages; and once again in the Church-endorsed subjugation of Indigenous immanence cultures around the world during colonial expansion (Eisler, 1988, p. 7; Evans, 2005, pp. 236-237; Gimbutas, 1989, p. 18; Starhawk, 1997, pp. 5, 212). Yet the very length of this dance belies the stubborn will behind its players. As Symmachus wrote in the fourth century, “Not by one avenue alone can we arrive at so tremendous a secret” (as cited in Adler, 2006, p. ix). I am inclined to agree that “the spiritual world is like the natural world – only diversity will save it” (Adler, 2006, p. ix). Whitehead and Christian pneumatology’s work demonstrates that even within monotheistic, doctrinal traditions, Spirit is the wind of change or fire of transformation. She is the life-giving and life-nurturing power of water. She shares her primordial wisdom through the green beings and the animal beings and her fundamentally democratic and earthen immanence asserts herself in a manner that cannot be denied. Call her Spirit, *ruach, anima, Goddess, Creator*. She is still with us. She never left.

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