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Transcendence from Below: The Embodied Feminine Mysticism of Marion Woodman

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This article outlines the mystical path followed by Jungian analyst and author Marion Woodman. It unpacks the mystical aspects of Jungian psychology and uses Woodman's life as a lens to view how the practice of mysticism can operate within alternative psycho-religious belief systems. Woodman deeply embraces mysticism as a transformative, feminist practice by focusing her work on healing the psycho-spiritual effects of patriarchy and the associated repression of women and the body. This paper also discusses how Woodman's mystical revelations have begun to affect the epistemological foundation of Jungian psychology in a way that echoes the embodied and enactive perspective of participatory theory.

Keywords: *mysticism, psychology, Jungian psychology, embodiment, the feminine, feminism, Marion Woodman, participatory theory*

Marion Woodman was an influential Jungian analyst who walked beside women for over thirty years as they unearthed, explored, and redefined their spiritual lives within the psycho-religious container of Jungian psychology. She was a cultural historian and agent of change who helped the Western world understand the psyche-level effects of patriarchy and its associated repression of the body, the feminine, and women. Born in Canada in 1928, Woodman pursued a career in English literature and teaching for more than twenty years before moving to Switzerland and being trained as an analyst at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich (Bogdan, 2008). Her influential work as a Jungian analyst and author began at this time, after the age of 50, and continued until her retirement. Woodman passed away in 2018 at the age of 89.

Woodman followed and built upon the work of Carl G. Jung (b. 1875). She undertook a fresh and embodied exploration of *the feminine* archetype within Jungian psychology. She also can be classified as a modern, wild mystic (Hulin, 2014) and this paper seeks to explore the mystical aspects of her life and work. Operating just outside of the West's Christian religious traditions and with the mythopoetic toolbox of Jungian psychology,

Woodman has crafted an intimate, embodied, and feminist psycho-mystical path that has sated the deep spiritual thirst of many women whose spiritual needs were no longer fully contained by more traditional modern religions, especially Christianity. By first looking at the roots of her mystical work, Woodman's own path and experience come alive and then highlight her specific contributions to the transformation and growth of Jungian psychology, mysticism, and culture itself.

This paper will hold Woodman's work as the product of her unique personhood as informed by and interacting with the world in which she has lived. Woodman was one of the early Jungians to do the gritty, personal work of opening up feminist issues within the Jungian container. As such, much of her writing holds onto some of the more androcentric, essentialist, and universalist elements of Jungian psychology that are now often contested by the strongly constructivist feminist movement. Wehr (1987) shared her perspective on a reconciliation between feminist theory and Jungian psychology, viewing the individual psyche as always in dialectical relationship with society. She suggested grounding Jungian archetypes in their social context, allowing their psychological

power as symbols to be retained without a claim to universality. At minimum, this perspective helps frame Woodman's work as a *healing fiction*, a potent story that can provide helpful psychological and spiritual guidance but is not necessarily "true".¹ However, from the vantage point of participatory theory, Woodman's healing fiction is a creative and dynamic spiritual world amid a plurality of religious possibilities, living beyond the simplistic division between subjective and objective reality (Ferrer, 2009). Whether as healing fiction or participatory enactment, for those who resonate with Woodman's own perspective and context, her work can be a transformative, mystical pathway for reclaiming authentic selfhood from the internalized oppression of androcentric and patriarchal social systems.

Defining Mysticism

The aim of this paper is not to "prove" that Woodman is a mystic, but rather to outline the content and form of her arguably mystical path, which rests deeply in the tradition of Jungian psychology. The first step in this process is to clarify the meaning of mysticism that will be used for these purposes. Like many concepts, *mysticism* is a word with soft edges that often overlaps with other concepts, such as religion and spirituality.² These edges can also shift in response to both personal interpretation and the evolution of cultural meaning. This paper honors this conceptual fluidity by first looking at some of the ways that mysticism has been defined over time, and then at how these various interpretations relate to Woodman's life and work.

Mysticism is a Western construct with origins in the Greco-Roman mystery traditions, where knowledge of these groups' inner workings and ritual proceedings was gained only after initiatory rites. The Greek word *mustikos* bounds this original description of mysticism, with its root meanings of "closed lips/eyes" or "too close," denoting the secrecy of these religious organizations (King, 1999, pp. 14–15). Mysticism evolved in relationship to early Christianity as a component of religious practice. Early Christian mysticism was composed of liturgical, biblical, and spiritual or contemplative aspects, tied together under a *mustikos* that highlighted the unveiling of

divine meaning and knowledge to the dedicated religious aspirant (Bouyer, 1980, p. 44). Then, due to study and discussion by Western intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century, the concept of mysticism in the Western world came to mean a personal experience of union with the divine, and focused most heavily on individual spiritual and contemplative practices (King, 1999, pp. 20–24).

As mysticism is intimately connected to religious traditions, it is appropriate to define how religion will be held for this discussion. Two definitions of religion are drawn from sociologist of religion Bellah (2011). First, Bellah summarized anthropologist Geertz's definition of religion as a "system of symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence" (p. xiv).³ Second, Bellah outlined Durkheim's definition of religion as "a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community" (p. 1). From this perspective, the concept of religion is expanded past what is generally circumscribed by major religious traditions—and includes secular thought systems like science and psychology. These definitions are also somewhat similar to the Jungian notion of the *containing myth*, or a central story-based framework that provides the living psychological container for a given society (Edinger, 1984, p. 9). Theologian Soelle (1997/2001) described her vision for such a democratized future of mysticism, boldly stating that "we are all mystics" (p. 9) who possess the transformative potential "to immerse and transcend ourselves" (p. 22) through unitive experiences within theistic, atheistic, and pantheistic worldviews.

Both Woodman and Jung lived at a mystical boundary between the religious and the secular, between the Christianity of their youth and the field of psychology, creating a new format for the West's evolving religious impulse. This paper will not debate whether Jungian psychology can be considered a religion or if Jung himself was a mystic, but it is important to note that these topics have been hotly contested and extensively discussed (Dourley, 2008, 2014; Jaffe, 1989/2012; Lachman, 2010; Shamdasani, 1998; Wehr, 1987). Although Jung

constantly denied that his psychology described any metaphysical reality, he described psychological experience in confident detail. It is the mystical path within this psychological experience that will now be discussed.

The Jungian-Mystical Path of Marion Woodman

Rawlinson's (2000) taxonomy of spiritual and religious traditions helps elucidate the mystical path embedded in Jung and Woodman's "spiritual psychology" (p. 103). Placed in one of Rawlinson's four categories, the basic beliefs of Jungian psychology would be described as: "The cosmos is vast and inhabited by innumerable powerful beings; liberation consists in finding one's way through the labyrinth with appropriate passwords" (p. 100; see also Schlamm, 2001). In the case of Jungian psychology, these "powerful beings" can be seen within Jung's theory of archetypes and the concept of the unconscious mind while the "labyrinth" is the process of individuation. Rawlinson's framing begins an exploration of the fundamental building blocks of Marion Woodman's Jungian-oriented mysticism. This will include a discussion of how the goal of salvation or liberation is both defined and obtained, as well as outlining the spiritual and contemplative, scriptural, and liturgical components of this mystical pursuit.

The Jungian-Mystical Goal: Serving Cosmic Purpose

Jung's psychology follows a spiral model of development with its goal being an ever-increasing sense of wholeness through the process of *individuation*. Analyst Edinger (1972, 1984) summarized Jungian psychology's soteriological goal as being the *creation of consciousness*. He described this journey-like process as the development of the ego-Self axis, or the formation of a relationship between the personal ego (the center of the conscious personality) and the Self (the center of both the conscious and unconscious mind). The Self is both prepersonal and transpersonal, the center of the person and the entire universe. Personal transformation in Jung's spiritual path is developed through the continued examination of the teleological relationship between these prepersonal and transpersonal elements (Schlamm,

2001). The insights from this process can connect a person more deeply with both their psyche and the cosmos simultaneously. Jung described this interconnection when stating that "Individuation is an at-one-ment with oneself and at the same time with humanity, since oneself is a part of humanity" (Jung, 1954/1966b, para. 227). This process brings "the individual into absolute, binding, and indissoluble communion with the world at large" (Jung, 1953/1966a, para. 275). Woodman (1993) also described this concept:

The further you go in understanding yourself, the more you realize that the kingdom of God is within. And certainly if you are dedicated to the dream process, it will take you into the religious dimension. So that in finding the "I," you're also finding the "I" that is God within. And in finding that, you are finding the God in other people, in plants, in animals—the animating soul that is in everything. You realize that while you're finding your own soul, you are finding also that you are *ensouled*, that there is one soul to which we all belong. (p. 95)

Woodman (1993) further stated that "the goddess energy is trying to save us" (p. 97), alluding to the fact that the transpersonal Self, an aspect of which she is calling goddess energy, has a teleological purpose behind its actions. Rawlinson (2000) called this type of ultimate realization or liberation "serving cosmic purpose" (p. 104). Hence, Woodman's Jungian-based mysticism has formed itself around the idea that following the teleological path provided by the Self serves the individual, humanity, nature, and the cosmos simultaneously.

Revealed Knowledge as Initiatory Experience

Both Woodman and Jung's mystical paths are defined by an initiation into the sacred knowledge of both psyche and world. Revealed teachings from these sources include a gnosis of esoteric, cryptic knowledge that is slowly granted over time through ordeals and events, often described as miraculous or numinous (Rawlinson, 2000; Schlamm, 2001). Lachman (2010) affirmed this by stating:

What seems to pin Jung to the mystical bull's-eye is his claim to special, secret knowledge,

knowledge not obtained through the normal methods of cognition, what some Christian sects of the first centuries after Christ called *gnosis*, direct spiritual experience. (p. 5)

A classic example of this kind of special knowing can be seen in Jung's famous answer to the question "Do you now believe in God?", to which he replied, "Difficult to answer. I know. I don't believe. I know" (Papadopoulos, 2006, p. 45). This *knowing* of God through personal journey and direct experience also comes up frequently in Woodman's writing. In her book *The Pregnant Virgin: A Process of Psychological Transformation*, Woodman (1985) told the story of a trip to India where this kind of knowledge of God appeared to her:

Six months later I arrived in New Delhi. God was with me all right but His ideas were somewhat different from mine. He turned out to be a She in India, a She that I never imagined existed in the narrow confines of my Protestant Christian tradition. (p. 176)

Woodman's work is based on the belief that life is a mystical series of transformational and initiatory experiences. In her book *The Ravaged Bridegroom: Masculinity in Women*, Woodman (1990) wrote that "life, when it is truly being lived, is like a series of birth canals" (p. 8) and described how this process is the natural rhythm of the psyche that ultimately leads to expanded consciousness, or in more mystical terms, access to special psycho-spiritual knowledge revealed by the divine unconscious. In Stromsted (2005), Woodman highlighted her connection with the source of these revealed teachings, which she named as both "God" and "Sophia," the latter being the way she often described the feminine face of God. She stated:

There was a great pact between me and God doing this work. . . . My relationship with Sophia and God was sufficiently deep that I didn't have any fear. I trusted the dreams and I believed that the dreams were given by God. And I simply did what the dreams told me to do. (p. 13)

This kind of statement is reminiscent of Jung's relationship with his own internal archetypal figures

in *The Red Book*, such as Philemon, who shared with him knowledge over time that aids in his quest for consciousness (Jung & Shamdasani, 2009). This revelation of knowledge by the divine is core to the classical Christian definition of mysticism (McGinn, 1994).

Spiritual and Contemplative Mysticism

For psychologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the divine formerly associated with the Christian otherworldly creator God was now placed within the unconscious psyche (Kripal, 2006). Colman (2006) described the idea that mystical experiences in Jungian psychology are "the result of a shift in centre from the ego (which is the centre of consciousness) to the self (which is the centre of the conscious *and* unconscious)" (p. 157–158).

For Woodman, the divine Self has been most often reflected as the feminine aspect of the archetypal God-Image, the Goddess. In her book *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness*, Woodman and co-author Elinor Dickson (1996) wrote that the Goddess is "the life force in matter" (p. 3) and "the flux of life" (p. 7), with equal and interdependent dark and light aspects. Woodman held that the Goddess has many archetypal manifestations and often works with two key archetypal aspects: the nurturing, life-giving, maternal aspect called Sophia and her counterbalance, the fierce Dark Goddess who destructs in the service of life. By working on creating psychological balance of these two aspects of the Goddess, as well as of the feminine and the masculine in general, Woodman's work focused on understanding and recovering the psychological feminine that she described as repressed and distorted under the Western social system of patriarchy.

Woodman believed that the archetypal Goddess is often best discovered through the body and her concept of divine union rests in a multi-sensorial, embodied experience of the divine feminine. In *Dancing in the Flames*, Woodman described one of many experiences of union with the divine feminine (Woodman & Dickson, 1996). For two years after a major car accident, Woodman heard a constant ringing in her ears and was

incredibly frustrated by the intense symptom. One night after a powerful dream, the following divine union occurred:

The ringing was so loud now that I rushed out of bed and landed on the floor of the kitchen before I knew I was awake. I prayed to God to take away that ringing or let me die. Immediately, a vision of a mock-orange bush in full bloom appeared, with its delicate ivory-colored blossoms that perfume the month of June. I was so enthralled by the beauty of the bush that I was not at first aware of the perfume in my feet but slowly, slowly the perfume rose in my legs and its sweetness moved into every cell of my body until the perfume and I were one. I became the metaphor. Gradually, unknowingly, I had come to a standing position with my arms raised. When the vision faded, the ringing in my ears had ceased. It has never returned. (Woodman & Dickson, 1996, p. 190)

She wrote about this experience several times, describing it in ways that underline the quality of embodied mystical union with the feminine aspect of God. Woodman stated that before this experience, she had “never known that kind of love before—pure, transcendent—feminine transcendence from below” (Stromsted, 2005, p. 27). She wrote further about this experience:

Knowing that someone is moving you, whether you understand it or not, is an awesome experience. That nonrational knowing, which is *being known*, is what brings the heights and depths together . . . The sweetness of my body surrendered to her love. In *being known*, I knew myself as part of the one. (Woodman & Dickson, 1996, p. 191)

In these passages, the language of Christianity and psychology construct a unique and personal manifestation of mystical union.

Scriptural Mysticism

King (1999) contended that many modern privatized and psychologized forms of mysticism have left behind their scriptural and liturgical components. Jungian psychology was clearly a part of this lineage of “psychologization” (p. 23).

Embodied Feminine Mysticism of Marion Woodman

However, Jung and Woodman’s work has created a depth of practices that, in many ways, continues the scripture-based practices of early Christian mysticism. King (1999) described these practices as focused on “investigating the allegorical significance of biblical truth” and “the discerning of the cryptic and hidden meaning of the scripture” (p. 15). Jungian psychology has several forms of “scripture” that need this kind of mystical interpretation and Woodman worked with them all.

First, Jungian psychology’s theory of archetypes connects deeply with mythology and folklore. Many Jungian analysts look to these enduring stories to discern archetypal patterns and templates for psychological growth. In this way, Jungians believe that these stories hold hidden depths that must be discovered with metaphorical analysis and interpretation. Woodman framed many of her books around a key myth or fairy tale that “unlocks” the greater meaning of the psychological journey (Bly & Woodman, 1998; Woodman, 1985, 1990; Woodman, Danson, Hamilton, & Allen, 1992).

Second, Jungian psychology treats communication from the unconscious as a kind of scripture that needs to be interpreted. Metaphor is heavily employed to unveil the hidden meaning of somatic symptoms, dreams, visions, and artistic creations. This practice is absolutely fundamental to Jungian psychology and Woodman used it intensely in her work. Woodman also extended this practice more deeply into embodiment than Jung, seeing the body as a spiritual text to be both honored and discovered.

Liturgical Mysticism

Woodman crafted new communal psycho-spiritual activities that can be viewed as forms of *liturgy* (collective worship). She extended the Jungian path beyond Jung’s primary mystical liturgical practice: analysis. Although the practice and *temenos* (safe, sacred space) of analysis are an important form of liturgy, it is a ritual for only two people, analyst and analysand.

First, Woodman’s books were often written in collaboration with her analysands, either as subjects or co-authors. Working together with individual and collective themes, their writing

can be seen as a communal mystical practice. This is best exemplified in the book *Leaving My Father's House: A Journey to Conscious Femininity* (Woodman, Danson, Hamilton, & Allen, 1992). Woodman wrote this book with three analysands—women who can be referred to as Woodman's *commystes*, a term coined by Soelle (1997/2001) meaning fellow mystics (p. 15). Woodman's introduction to the book highlights that the women's mystical connection had a life of its own, a destiny that felt like an emergent liturgy. She wrote: "I had been at the center of this foursome, watching and participating in a process which from the beginning was propelled by a sense of inevitability—a book that wanted to be" (Woodman et al., 1992, p. ix). She also stated that the women's "inner worlds were communicating across the seeming emptiness of time and space" (p. ix). Throughout this book, Woodman acted as participant but also as cleric and conductor, weaving together an experience of meaning in a new form of collective worship.

Second, Woodman co-developed a workshop called *BodySoul Rhythms* with dancer Mary Hamilton and voice and mask teacher Ann Skinner (Marion Woodman Foundation, n.d.). Incorporating tools from Jungian psychology as well as the creative arts, the workshops follow a specific format and include a variety of practices that all seek to catalyze the individuation process. These practices include dance, theatre, dream work, voice work, mask making, art, and group discussion. Although a lot of work is done individually, it is done within a structured, collective container. Here, the dynamic between facilitator/prophet/cleric and participant/aspirant/congregation comes alive within Woodman's work, re-engaging several forms of active, structured liturgical mysticism.

Mysticism as a Culturally-Transformative Force

Bellah (2011) described a completely interdependent relationship between the evolution of religion and culture.⁴ Kripal's (2006) work layers onto this idea, explaining the mystical component of religion as a deconstructive evolutionary force of both religion and culture. "One of the most recurring elements of mystical writings is the attempt to deconstruct

orthodox discourse, to deny traditional authority, and to transgress the social norms of their own conservative cultures" (p. 330) in order to "effect a state of religious happiness" (p. 330). In this way, many mystics have been transformative revolutionaries of some form or another, using their connection with a sense of divinity as a force of personal, and then as a result, cultural change.

Kripal (2006) identified mysticism's tradition of subverting orthodoxy and oppressive cultural structures. Nevertheless, other theologians have noted a distinct lack of social and political engagement from traditional Western mysticism, whose world-transcending philosophies often value mind over body and spirit over matter (Lanzetta, 2005, p. 21). However, Jungian psychology understands these relationships differently, positing the complete interdependence of personal and cosmic evolution. For example, Jungians believe that doing healing work within the psyche will also naturally heal some aspect of outer world. Hence, in some ways Jungian psychology as a mystical practice is well placed to avoid the transcendental disengagement of traditional Western mysticism and participate more actively in contemporary social-political issues here on earth.

Jung as a Culturally-Transformative Mystic

As a scholar and a mystic, Jung used his own work to partially deconstruct the Christian paradigm and reshape it into a new containing myth that he believed was more relevant and accessible to people in the Western world. Kirschner (1996) suggested that the components and narrative of psychoanalysis—an overtly scientific lineage of which Jung is a part—are a modern evolution of Neo-Platonic mysticism and the Judaeo-Christian religion.⁵ Edinger (1984) expressed this transformation in another way, describing depth psychology as the next *dispensation* (system) meditating the Western world's relationship to the divine. "In essence, the Jewish dispensation was centered in the *law*, the Christian dispensation was centered in *faith* and the psychological dispensation is centered in *experience*" (p. 90). Edinger asserted that this psychological dispensation locates the relationship to God within the individual's relationship to the unconscious.

Jungian psychology was indeed founded on experience—more specifically on the direct experience of Jung engaging with his own psyche and the psyches of his patients. Several scholars have discussed the transformative power of Jung's work for the Western world (e.g., Ellenberger, 1970; Shamdasani, 2003; Tarnas, 1991). However, his work was unavoidably confined by contextual limitations. Jung could only experience life from his own perspective: as a white, upper-middle class, European male living through the turn of the nineteenth century. This means that for current times his psychology is distorted in several ways. Notably for this discussion, these distortions include the continued use of Christian terminology (Clarke, 1992) and an outdated perception of women (Douglas, 1990; Goldenberg, 1976; Rowland, 2002; Wehr, 1987). It seems that, to some degree, Jung knew of these limitations. Perhaps this is why he was always adamant that people not consider themselves "Jungians" even though many continue to do so. He did not want people to copy his life or work but rather respond to it, build upon it, and create something that moved with time and was not static within the past.

Woodman as a Culturally-Transformative Mystic

By diving into her own experience, Woodman began to evolve both Western culture and Jungian psychology in several critical ways. Woodman discovered that the freedom and health of her psyche were imprisoned by the patriarchal power structures and related belief systems of her culture, in particular the repression of the feminine and the splitting of the mind from the body. In working to deconstruct these inner shackles, she began to chip away at the same structures in Western culture that put them there in the first place, structures that were present in much of Jung's androcentric psychology. Here, Woodman is in good company with philosopher-theologian Jantzen (1994, 1995), who has brought attention to how cultural systems of power and authority have shaped the modern Western conception of mysticism. Jantzen expressed the contemporary mystical task as the deconstruction of mysticism itself in order to unearth and rectify vestigial inequalities and then help build something more equitable. As Jantzen has unearthed the hidden power and authority

beneath the construction of mysticism, Woodman has pursued a similar deconstructive task within the Western psyche as viewed through a Jungian lens.

Woodman's "conscious femininity." In the heart of second-wave feminism and five years before Woodman published her first book, the Women and Religion section of the American Academy of Religion produced a publication of their proceedings entitled *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion* (Gross, 1977). In one essay, Plaskow (1977) laid out two tasks for feminist theology: "first, the inquiry into the nature of women's experience; second, the statement of the implications of women's experience in wider and wider terms" (p. 29). Woodman (1993) took up both these liberating tasks under the umbrella of what she has called "conscious femininity" (p. 7). She has used her own psycho-mystical methodology to address the origins of patriarchal oppression in Western consciousness. In doing so, she has also helped Jungian psychology begin to evolve past Jung's own androcentric and misogynistic determinations about the psychology of women (Goldenberg, 1976, 1993; Wehr, 1987).

When Woodman went into her own experience, she found the deep, oppressive roots of patriarchy on her psyche. She then spent the rest of her life describing the experiences that she and her analysts had working with this internal oppression:

We are all the children of patriarchy. While our culture depends upon three thousand years of cultural process focused through masculine eyes, it has been won at a high cost. What began as masculine values has degenerated into lust for control. Power has bludgeoned both our femininity and our masculinity The task of releasing the feminine from the tyrannical power of the driven, crazy masculine is long and arduous. The process is just as difficult inside as it is outside. (Woodman et al., 1992, p. 2)

This passage highlights a key point of Woodman's work: she talked about releasing the archetype of the feminine from the confines of patriarchy and believed that this archetype is relevant for both men and women although each person may hold

it in a different way. Although often confusing for readers, especially with the increasing awareness and acceptance of non-binary gender constructs, Woodman understood both the feminine and the masculine as interdependent, non-gendered energies rather than essentialist declarations on biology (Bogdan, 2008, p. 106).⁶ When putting her theory into practice, Woodman focused much of her effort on working with women because she felt that her experience as a woman lined up more clearly with other women, particularly in light of the patriarchal tendency to conflate women with the feminine and then “other” them both. Although she was clear in stating that men need as much help as women in reintegrating the archetype of the feminine, she has left this task largely up to others aside from co-authoring one book with Bly on the topic (Bly & Woodman, 1998).

Woodman’s work on the experience of women dealing with releasing their own internal feminine from patriarchal oppression is mirrored in the work of contemporary feminist theologian Lanzetta (2005), who has endeavored to deconstruct mysticism as a product of patriarchy. Lanzetta created the concept of the *via feminina*, an apophatic mystical-spiritual path that “pulls up the roots of misogyny and seeds of oppression that have been handed down from generation to generation and planted in our souls” (p. 17). She described the *via feminina*’s most distinguishing feature as the fact that “it does not transcend differences—whether gender, culture, race, or sex—but enters into them directly to experience a deeper unity capable of transforming the underlying causes of soul suffering” (p. 22). The similarities between the psycho-mystical perspectives of Woodman and Lanzetta are striking: the aspiration to heal the split in the consciousness of men and women that is reflected in gender dualism, the fact that this healing happens not through transcending difference but by living out soul wounds, the discussion of women’s oppression in the external world as rooted in a spiritual oppression within, their desire to envision a feminine God, and their devotion to Sophia.

There are also differences. Lanzetta is a scholar-theologian and, although she has discussed

a mystical path that has theoretic overlap with Woodman’s, she has often written about the nuance and possibility of this path with an academic tone. Woodman has worked another way. By sharing the details of her own path in clear, accessible language, Woodman has provided a mystical path for other women to follow. By doing this, Woodman has contributed to the project laid out by Lanzetta (2005) of creating language to describe the “mystical dimensions of women’s suffering” (p. 72) and having “women’s spiritual teachers who have mapped out the structures of consciousness and stages of the soul’s journey explicit to their gender” (p. 40). In this way, Woodman has lived out some aspect of the transition described by religious scholar Goldenberg (1979): “feminist theology is on its way to becoming psychology” (p. 25).⁷

It is important to underscore that in the broader context of feminist theory, Woodman’s work was strongly rooted within second-wave feminism, where concepts like *universal womanhood* were prevalent and provided a foundation for the assumed constructions of sex and gender often found in that perspective (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006).⁸ Many feminist theorists have taken strong issue with the biological essentialism that underpins this viewpoint (e.g., Grosz, 1994). In a recent overview of modern feminist theory as it relates to socially-constructed differences and the biological within feminist psychology, Radtke (2017) stated that there is still little consensus on the issue. She suggested that future research focus on the multidimensional interconnection between the biological, cultural, and social within feminist psychology and identity. Lanzetta (2005) has studied the complicated and dynamic relationship between feminism and mysticism. She concluded that “the creative interplay of mysticism and gender provides insight into the ways in which social factors impact the spiritual consciousness of women and how women’s resistance pushes back the boundaries of male-dominated traditions” (p. 40). This statement also describes the nature of Woodman’s personal contribution to both the feminist-mystical project and Jungian psychology.

Woodman’s “embodied consciousness.”
Jung held that the body was an important vehicle for

the manifestation of the unconscious and, during his time, it was revolutionary to simply recognize the body and its role in the life of the psyche (Sassenfeld, 2008). The patriarchal split between spirit and matter, between heaven and earth, ensured that transcendental monotheism generally devalued the immanent body in favor of the transcendent mind. However, as discussed by Clarke (1992): “[Jung’s] assertions of human embodiment and of human sexuality . . . sometimes have an overly academic quality and lack the richness of phenomenological detail that he accorded to the world of dreams, fantasies and symbols” (p. 182). Woodman worked on this embodied exploration left open by Jung.

For much of her life, Woodman had a very difficult relationship with her body. She saw her body as a source of shame and struggled with a decades-long attempt to transcend its confines through anorexia. Through inner work, she discovered that she needed to go into her body to find the Goddess and a nourishing connection to life itself; she could no longer try to transcend it (Woodman, 1993, p. 114). Her body was—had to be—the loving container for her psyche. Stemming from this personal journey, she pioneered many ways of creating what she called “embodied consciousness,” a way of accessing the spirit in matter and discovering insight through a deep, loving relationship to the body as life.

The work of creating embodied consciousness uses metaphor and multi-sensory imagination to mediate between and reconnect spirit and matter (Chodorow, 2005; Stromsted, 2014). In an interview with Jungian analyst and dance therapist Stromsted (2005), Woodman described what it feels like to fully surrender to and imaginatively embody a metaphor as a healing bridge between these two often disconnected entities:

This is the secret of the transformation: *I become the orange bush. I become the perfume. So the ego is not present, . . . there is union. My being is permeated; it is total intercourse with the divine. And it feels like an orgasm, yes, it does . . . and there’s nothing new about that.* (p. 28)

With this statement, one hears echoes from mystical writings through the ages, particularly of Christian bridal mysticism (Kripal, 2006, p. 328) and the

embodied mysticism of Theresa of Avila (Lanzetta, 2008), as well as an answer to Jantzen’s (1995) call to deconstruct the roots of Christian mysticism that often deny the somatic and erotic (see also Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 12). It is no surprise then that Woodman (1999) called practices that reconnect women to the wisdom of their body “a common sense, mystical revelation” (p. x) and “feminine transcendence from below” (Stromsted, 2005, p. 27).

Woodman’s work on embodiment began after she went to Zurich in the late 1970s to undergo analysis. Although Jung discussed embodiment (Sassenfeld, 2008), Woodman noted that no one was doing somatic work in the Zurich-based Jungian community at the time. Early in her experience there, she had a dream that showed her various healing images and told her to visualize putting them in her body. She told her analyst about this somatic practice that she had begun and, later, described his response: “My analyst was outraged at the thought of body movement. So he didn’t want to know anything about what was going on. His attitude was, ‘If you can’t transform through your dreams there’s something wrong with the way you’re handling your dreams’” (Stromsted, 2005, p. 13). Thus, Woodman did this work in her own time, both moving from her own internal guidance and building on the work of other groundbreaking female Jungians who had also explored the integration between psyche and soma. Swiss physician and psychotherapist Keller used body-based practices including movement and dance as tools in her own analysis with Jung’s protégé Toni Wolff (Swan, 2011). Dance therapist Whitehouse pioneered the discipline of *Authentic Movement*, an improvisational and therapeutic practice that combined modern dance with Jung’s process of active imagination (Frantz, 1972/1999; Stromsted, 2009, 2014, 2015; Whitehouse, 1979/1999). This practice was deepened by Whitehouse’s students, including Jungian analyst Chodorow (1991, 1978/1999) and dance/movement therapist Adler (1995, 1992/1999, 2002), who has also written about the connection between Authentic Movement and mystical practice.

In a special issue of *Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture* dedicated to Woodman,

analyst Greene (2005) discussed why this kind of embodied work was transformative for Jungian psychology:

Body that is regarded only as flesh, bone, sinew—*materia*—is still caught in the old idea of the body/mind antithesis. To introduce somatic awareness and body techniques into the analytic framework is *not* to introduce a suspect or alien element. Rather, it is to heal a split that has haunted the analytic process for generations. (p. 203)

Woodman's work not only has begun to heal this split in Jungian psychology, but also Western culture at large. It has been a part of the great wave of postmodern transformation sweeping over psychology and spirituality that has returned the sacred to the immanent body (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 11). Schlamm (2001) underscored this trend when he described Jungian psychology as a secular spiritual path that can help the West heal its mind-body-spirit split (p. 34). Ferrer's (2008) work on sacred "bodyfulness" (p. 6) has echoed the essence of Woodman's conscious embodiment. "Embodied spirituality regards the body as subject, as the home of the complete human being, as a source of spiritual insight, as a microcosm of the universe and the Mystery, and as pivotal for enduring spiritual transformation" (Ferrer, 2008, p. 4). Woodman's mystical connection to her own sacred body and to this Mystery has created a unique form of embodied spirituality that has helped others also arrive at this critical form of homecoming.

Woodman's Subtle Work:

Opening Towards an Epistemological Integration

Woodman's efforts to bring the feminine and the body to the forefront of Jungian psychology highlight a meaningful addition to both theory and practice from the work of Jung himself. As Woodman helped develop new ways to know the self within the context of Jungian psychology, it is natural that her work may have assisted in an epistemological transformation of Jungian psychology as well. In many ways, epistemology is a reflection and barometer of cultural values. By working to shift these values, Woodman subtly also began to heal some of the confusion in Jung's

epistemological foundations and related cultural assumptions.

Jung's Epistemology

Anyone who has read Jung has likely noted a fuzziness in his work. Sometimes he says God, sometimes he says God-Image. Sometimes he seems to speak like a scientist, sometimes like a theologian. Lachman (2010) called this Jung's "doublethink" (p. 4) and Papadopoulos (2006) outlined how Jung's own personality and the time in which he lived shaped the epistemological duality at the foundation of Jungian psychology.

The first epistemological foundation of Jung's work was *neo-Kantian empiricism*. It was radically subjective, positivist, and based on external verification. Building on Kant, Jung felt that it was fruitless to try and determine what was outside of a human's psychological framework. To him, objectively observing any ultimate reality was impossible. From this epistemological perspective, Jung was a scientist observing an open system of reality with a constructivist and relational view of the world. As described by Nagy (1991), in order to build the new field of psychology into a respected academic discipline "it was very important for Jung to be able to point out that a theory of the psychology of the human person is not necessarily a doctrine about reality as a whole" (p. 3). In order to do this, Jung would rest much of his work on Kant's notion of the *boundary concept*, something that cannot be known in actuality but only through its manifestations (Brooks, 2011). Jung lived at this boundary between the world he could never know—ultimate reality—and the reality of the world he spent his life exploring—psychological experience. It was at this fuzzy boundary that he used the terms *God* and *God-Image* somewhat interchangeably.

Jung's second epistemological stance was formed by the conviction with which he made hypotheses and assertions about psychological experience. Papadopoulos (2006) described Jung's *gnostic epistemology* as one that "provides ready-made answers, offers proclamations and views phenomena with a closed system of belief" (p. 46). Much of Jung's denial of this rather mystical way of knowing was based on the fact that, since

Kant, mysticism was regarded as “the antithesis of rational investigation” (King, 1999, p. 29) and Jung was determined to found psychology as a science accepted within the academy. Jung often defended himself against claims that he was a mystic or creating a religion by stating that what was being interpreted as a metaphysical assertion was only his hypothesis of psychological experience, not ultimate reality. However, it is hard to ignore that many of his boundary statements obfuscate the difference between the scholar and the mystic, the psychological and the metaphysical, and the subjective and the objective.

It is this dance at the boundary that leads to the epistemological confusion in Jung’s work and then also raises the idea that perhaps these two different concepts of reality are not separate things at all. It seems as if Jung’s neo-Kantian epistemology was conscious, an *epistemological persona* of sorts, and his gnostic epistemology was unconscious, perhaps a *shadow epistemology* that lived below cultural consciousness—and possibly below Jung’s consciousness as well. Both were waiting for some future post-Kantian integration so that Jung, as well as other academics and culture-creators, could publically be both scholar and mystic.

Woodman Hints at Epistemological Integration

Woodman has not overtly discussed epistemology. Her work has been deeply grounded in lived experience and not academic theory. However, in the closing chapter of one of her later books, *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness*, Woodman and co-author Dickson (1996) began to ask questions and make observations that hint at a possible resolution to Jung’s “doublethink.” The final chapter discussed the big picture of Woodman’s work in relation to the evolution of human consciousness and the discoveries of post-Newtonian physics. Her embodied feminist narrative, combined with a preliminary knowledge of quantum physics, began to chip away at the male “man of reason” (Lloyd, 1984/1993) in the Western philosophical tradition and worldview, including the perspectives of Kant.

While living through the postmodern feminist turn of the second half of the nineteenth century, Woodman has been a part of the

emergence of the phenomenology of *embodied subjectivity*. Ferrer and Sherman (2008) described this concept as it relates to the study of religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences: “postmodern feminism replaces a masculinized, discarnate, and supposedly universal and autonomous *Cartesian mental ego* with a gendered, embodied, situated, and participatory *intersubjective self* as the agent engaged in religious pursuits” (p. 13). Woodman and Dickson (1996) had begun to integrate this kind of embodied subjectivity into Jungian psychology:

The opposites are complementary, not contradictory. They are partners in the dance of life—partners, that is, in the ongoing interplay between observer and observed. This dance, this interplay cannot take place in a world of absolutes, for such a world has no room for differing modes of perception—only for a patriarchal God who is himself the observer and observed. The world of opposites is a world of relativity, a world in which the observer creates his or her own reality and engages it with the reality created by others, a world in which *all* things are possible and all things coexist. (p. 211)

Although the classical Jungian language of duality is still being used here—observer and observed, partners in a dance, the world of opposites—Woodman and Dickson are also pointing to another intuitive world that they perceive, one that is co-created, irreducible, multi-dimensional, and participatory.

Woodman and Dickson (1996) also discussed paradoxical questions concerning objectivity, which they described in such terms as “quicksand,” “unattainable,” and a “mirage” (p. 217). They related these descriptions to insights from quantum theory and concepts of subjectivity. They framed the paradox with which they grappled as follows:

We seem to be left with no way of getting a “true” picture of the object—and the elusive question as to whether such a view is at all possible. Attempts to find a solution to this quandary have led to a renewed interest in consciousness. (Woodman & Dickson, 1996, p. 217)

Ferrer and Sherman's (2008) participatory theory provided a perspective that not only transcends the objective/subjective paradox that Woodman inherited from Jung—as well as the cultural milieu surrounding them both—but also connects to the intuitive sense of the enactive, participatory reality that Woodman and Dickson (1996) began to describe in *Dancing in the Flames*. Ferrer and Sherman (2008) wrote that “giving up this dualism [between framework and reality] calls us to move beyond objectivism and subjectivism, and thus to redeem our participatory, connected, and direct relationship with reality as the source of our being” (p. 29). They further described this post-Kantian vision:

The adoption of an enactive paradigm of cognition in the study of religion, however, frees us from the myth of the framework and other aporias of the Kantian two worlds doctrine by holding that human multidimensional cognition cocreatively participates in the emergence of a number of plausible enactments of reality. Participatory enactment, in other words, is epistemologically constructivist and metaphysically realist. (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 35)

This conception of a participatory universe is a model that can integrate Jung's dual epistemologies into a vision that supports his tendencies to be both scholar and mystic.⁹

Jungian psychology is focused on continually “welcoming the stranger” within the psyche. Jung worked on welcoming the unconscious and creating a new psycho-religious path. Woodman then worked on welcoming the feminine and the body and, in doing so, has helped situate Jungian psychology more comfortably in current times, as well as within participatory theory. In a world that calls for an ever-greater ability to honor diversity and nurture pluralism, the concepts of participatory theory, working in concert with some of Jungian psychology's key findings may help people hold many different views of reality as co-existent and equally valid. This compassionate holding of plurality resonates in many ways with the foundation of Woodman's mysticism, one that creates a thoughtful reception for all that arises and focuses on a loving, embodied immersion in life itself.

Conclusion

The life of Marion Woodman provides a rich example of the ever-evolving exploration of religious worlds, highlighting how a mystical path can be embedded within a system that blurs the lines between psychology and religion as well as between secular and sacred. She also demonstrated how mysticism can courageously and creatively be used as a transformative force for generating greater understanding and equality in the world. Her poetic imagination, commitment to the feminine, and celebration of the somatic—with all its historical contributions and contextual limitations—has contributed to the wild and brave exploration being done by theologians, psychologists, and others to create space for the peaceful coexistence of all authentic selfhoods.

Woodman's own personal path highlights many important inquiries into the future of how religious worlds may be defined and perceived. This includes how the religious is distinguished from the secular, how the trend towards embodiment will impact belief systems, and how the democratization of mysticism may be used to create more peaceful or tolerant societies. Another significant, complicated, and exciting line of questioning is how the current expansion towards non-binary gender constructs, intersectional awareness, and post-patriarchal possibilities will continue to impact both psychology and religious studies as well as their related epistemologies. Lastly, there are several interesting lines of inquiry to explore within participatory theory, including how it relates to feminist philosophy and phenomenology, as well as how it relates to Jungian/post-Jungian psychology.

Notes

1. Jung (1933/1976) first used the term healing fiction in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (p. 225). Hillman (1983) also used the concept in his book *Healing Fiction*.
2. For an excellent discussion on the problems of defining both mysticism and religion, see Chapter 1 of *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* by King

(1999). Discussing the limits and problems of using these terms as “explanatory constructs” (p. 11) is important but beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Bellah’s summary of Geertz’s definition provides an interesting opportunity to study the evolution of the definition of religion, and perhaps by association, mysticism as well. The original definition by Geertz (1973) states: “Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely real” (p. 90). Bellah (2011) changed Geertz’s definition in two major ways. First, he changed the word “men” to “human beings,” thus acknowledging and neutralizing the implicit androcentric power structures in Geertz’s construction of religion. Second, Bellah left out points four and five completely, making religion less about believing in one universal truth, which Geertz makes sound almost deceptive or false, and transforming the definition of religion into something more open to a spirit of pluralism and many “true” truths.
4. Bellah (2011) was very clear that such an evolution was not necessarily “good” or “bad”, but it did involve adaptive changes to fit external conditions. In comparison, according to Schlamm (2001), Jungian psychology’s *Hot-Structured* system would consider the deep insights revealed by the psyche as a *teleological evolutionary force* for the creation of human cultural and religious consciousness.
5. The term *Judaeo-Christian* has been kept here in reference to the author’s own usage of the term. See Cohen’s (1969) article “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition” for a preliminary discussion on the debate surrounding whether these two distinct religious traditions can be conflated into one term.
6. In order to make this more clear, the archetypal binaries of lunar/solar or eros/logos are sometimes used by Jungians instead of feminine/masculine. These alternative terms can make it easier to see the binaries as non-gendered constructions. However, gender stereotypes and archetypal constructions are often confused and even conflated in Jungian theory.
7. Goldenberg, an expert on the intersection of religion and psychoanalysis who has studied at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, eventually favored the work of Freud over Jung for this transition.
8. Furthermore, the second-wave feminist agenda was largely constructed from the limited perspective of white, middle and upper class women. Further research could try to understand how Woodman’s work is received by people of races, ethnicities, and income levels other than her own.
9. Although this paper looks at embodied subjectivity through the lens of religious studies and transpersonal psychology with the work of Ferrer and Sherman (2008), it is important to acknowledge related work coming from feminist theorists who were also studying embodied subjectivity around the same time, including Young (2005), Grosz (1994), and Kruks (2001). Young drew from the work of existential phenomenologists, including Merleau-Ponty (1945/2014), and resonated with Ferrer and Sherman’s participatory theory when she wrote: “This move to situate subjectivity in the lived body jeopardizes dualistic metaphysics altogether. There remains no basis for preserving the mutual exclusivity of the categories subject and object, inner and outer, I and world” (p. 48). Note that Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on embodiment and enaction provided a foundation for Varela, Thompson, and Rosch’s (1991) theory of *enactive cognition* which was in turn drawn on by Ferrer and others (Ferrer, 2002; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008) in constructing the participatory turn in transpersonal psychology and the philosophy of religion. For a comment on this connection, see Goldberg (2010).

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