

MAGIC PLACES: THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF SACRED SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY GODDESS RITUALS

Kathryn Rountree

This paper is based on three years anthropological fieldwork amongst women in New Zealand who belong to what is known as the "Goddess spirituality" or "feminist witchcraft" movement. These women self-identify variously as pagan, neo-pagan, feminist witch, or simply as someone involved in Goddess spirituality.

For those who may not be familiar with this movement, I'll begin with some brief comments about it. The Goddess spirituality movement is the spiritual wing of feminism and a strongly nature-based religion. Women in the movement have a strong spiritual awareness, but the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient male God does not sit well with them. By invoking the symbol of Goddess, they recall the pre-patriarchal goddess-worshipping societies of Europe in which, they claim, women were more equal partners with men. They trace a connection between the demise of the Goddess and the demise of women's position in society. They believe that Goddess can be a powerful symbol for contemporary women in their work of re-imagining the feminine, in promoting a model of gender relations based on partnership rather than the dominance of one sex over the other, and in promoting a more holistic world view which embraces the sacred as immanent and "green" philosophies and practices. They repeatedly emphasise their sense of connection to the earth, and their rituals celebrate the earth's seasonal cycle, along with the important events of their own lives. They incorporate aspects of Wicca rituals into their own, seeing the witch as a symbol of woman's independent knowledge and power, and as a victim of Christian patriarchy. The witch as a stereotype, they claim, is a diabolised version of the Crone aspect of the Goddess.¹ The movement began in earnest in the 1970s in the United States and quickly became established in a number of other Western countries, including New Zealand and Australia.

Once when I was talking about this movement, a sceptic flippantly described it as a "designer religion". This struck me as a rather astute definition. The contemporary Goddess movement draws on deities, myths, religious concepts, beliefs and ritual practices from a wide range of cultural and historical contexts. Goddesses from ancient Greek, Celtic, Hindu, Maori and Native American traditions are all invoked with a vigorous and unabashed eclecticism. The movement draws on diverse philosophical perspectives, scientific theories and religious traditions: Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, Rupert Sheldrake's morphic resonance, the Hindu concept of Karma, Jungian ideas about the collective unconscious and archetypes, and post-structuralist ideas about the collapse of metanarratives. It draws on the women's movement, the ecology movement, the peace movement, alternative healing philosophies and practices, and aspects of New Age beliefs and therapies. It attracts women who are smart, arty, left-wing, right-brained, into recycling and rebirthing, tofu and the Tarot, and who are committed to both personal empowerment and social transformation.

"Designer religion" is an apt description because of this eclectic mix, and because the intellectual and the aesthetic are craftily integrated within the movement. Women confidently articulate and examine the intellectual basis of their spirituality, yet place equal emphasis on the aesthetic appeal of the rituals they create.

Moore and Myerhoff² have warned of the danger that those performing rituals will glimpse themselves as the inventors of those rituals, as the makers of their meaning, and that this recognition will discharge the rituals of meaning:

[U]nderlying all rituals is an ultimate danger... the possibility that we will encounter ourselves making up our conceptions of the world, society, our very selves. We may slip in that fatal perspective of recognising culture as our construct, arbitrary, conventional, invented by mortals.

This danger is not of the least concern to women in the Goddess movement. Beliefs and rituals are gathered, created, synthesised, adapted and moulded by women in a self-conscious process of construction. Participants are not only aware of but also emphasise and celebrate this constructedness and

their own role in the process. Understanding that not only their own beliefs and rituals, but all religious beliefs and rituals in all cultures, are constructed leads them not to reject all as meaningless, but to recognise the universal importance of belief and ritual in the lives of all human societies and to embrace those with which they feel a particular affinity.

As well as constructing their belief systems and rituals, the women also consciously construct sacred space, although for them the very concept of sacred space is slippery and fraught with paradox. Despite wanting to destabilise traditional ideas about sacred space, they artfully construct sacred spaces in which to conduct their rituals. On one hand nowhere is sacred unless everywhere is sacred: to designate a sacred place is to invoke a binary construction which means another place is designated *not* sacred, profane or mundane. This kind of binarism, so fundamental to thinking about religion (the focus of Eliade's classic work *The Sacred and the Profane*), runs up against their holistic world view.

On the other hand, goddess women will, with infinite care and reverence, deliberately create a sacred place which evokes the theme of the ritual to be performed, is pleasing to the senses, and is conducive to spiritual work. I will describe in some detail how women do this, in order to demonstrate that the construction of sacred space is an intensely self-conscious process.

Rituals are usually planned by at least two women, and sometimes by a small group. In Goddess ritual groups in New Zealand any woman in the group may organise and facilitate a ritual; there is no special status designation of particular women as "priestess", "high priestess" or "initiate". Several weeks, or sometimes several days, before the ritual the organisers have a planning meeting, decide where and when the ritual will be held and what will happen during it, and send invitations to the other members of the group. On the day of the ritual, which is usually pegged to one of the eight Sabbats (pagan season festivals), to a phase of the moon's cycle, or to an important event in a group member's life, the women responsible for organising the ritual will create a sacred space at the chosen site. This may be inside or outside, a private home or community building, a back yard or

public outdoor place. With equal care and inventiveness, a cave, a garden, a hill-top, a section of beach, a woman's sitting room, bedroom or back yard may be transformed for the purpose and duration of a ritual.

The creation of sacred space involves, firstly, physical transformation; secondly, what women might call spiritual or "energy" transformation; and thirdly, ritual process. Thus, a woman's sitting room may be physically transformed by draping gauze across the doorway, cleaning, tidying, re-arranging furniture, covering signs of the room's everyday uses, and creating an altar in the centre of the floor with a beautiful cloth, candles, flowers, rocks, shells, incense, symbols of the four elements, Goddess images and other symbolic objects. Before all this, the room's energy may be transformed by women meditating in the space, flicking rainwater into the room's corners to "clear" and "purify", playing soft music, or smudging with incense. Thirdly, ritual process helps mark the space as separate from the everyday world. As women enter the room for the ritual, a symbolic act may be conducted at the threshold marking their entry to sacred space. They remove their shoes, may be greeted with a kiss or hug, may wash their hands in water perfumed with essential oils, may have their aura smudged with incense, or may be welcomed with particular words. I attended a Winter Solstice ritual where women were blind-folded and guided into the ritual space (from the dining room to the transformed sitting room) by two of the organisers. In another ritual women were symbolically birthed into the circle and told: "From woman you were born into this world, from women you are born into this circle".³

As women gather around the altar, a "circle is cast" which they describe as "the container of sacred space". The casting of the circle is critically important to all Goddess rituals, being "a gesture of unification that marks the enclosure of sacred space".⁴ Diane Stein says: "To cast the circle means to create sacred space, to set the room off from earthplane reality and enter between-the-worlds".⁵ The circle is cast by a symbolic act, such as passing an object (candle, crystal, fruit, flower) around the circle, passing a hand-squeeze, hug or greeting around the circle, or passing a taper around the circle for women to light a candle in front of them creating a circle of

candle-light. Following this, women join hands, contemplating their connections to one another and the purpose of the ritual.

The circle is designated a place where women are free to be themselves, where they can expect loving acceptance and can address issues in their lives in a safe, confidential and supportive context, and where they can perform symbolic acts of self-transformation. But the cast circle is more: it is seen as an "energy form" which contains positive energy which the women generate.⁶ It is this energy which assists in making the ritual a more powerful experience for participants and which helps them make the transformations they want to bring about in their lives.

Because the circle is seen as a container of energy, it is crucial that once the circle is cast no one enters or leaves it. If someone arrives late to the ritual, she is unlikely to be admitted. If the group does decide to admit her and the circle has already been cast, the circle must be recast before the ritual can proceed. At the conclusion of the ritual, the circle is formally "opened" and the room is returned to its former state.

The creation of sacred space outdoors is less elaborate, partly because the whole outdoor environment is evocative in itself, reminding women of their connection to the earth, and partly because it is difficult to carry a lot of gear to an outdoor site. A suitable spot is found and prepared by tidying the place, clearing stones, thistles, cow-pats, and so forth. A circle of stones might be made to mark the space inside which the women will sit. Rugs may be laid for women to sit on. An altar is made, often with natural objects collected from the surrounding area - pine cones, flowers, stones, feathers, moss, driftwood, shells and anything else women see as having symbolic relevance. For Beltane, the spring fertility celebration, a maypole is prepared and a fire set. Masses of flowers decorate the altar.

Occasionally, the sacred space for a ritual is chosen spontaneously, just prior to the ritual, with the whole group of women gathering bits and pieces for the altar and deciding together where to create the altar. For an outside ritual the area of sacred space may be "protected" by a woman walking around its perimeter making a symbolic boundary using the four elements, for example, by sprinkling water, scattering herbs, ringing a bell or carrying a

fire torch. As with the indoor ritual, an outdoor site is returned to its former state at the conclusion of the ritual.

Women often comment that they prefer rituals held outdoors because there they feel more in touch with the elements and the earth, which they refer to using the pronouns "She" and "Her". In rituals held indoors the altar is usually crowded with reminders of the outdoor world: fruits and vegetables, crystals, greenery, flowers, autumn leaves and so on. Women's eagerness to hold rituals outdoors and their creativity in constructing sacred places was dramatically evident one Winter Solstice when the organisers were determined to celebrate the festival in a cave. They could not get permission to use a local volcanic cave (under Mount Eden), so they dyed a lot of bed sheets deep grey and created a tent-like cave in one of their bedrooms. It reminded me of huddling inside a hut made out of blankets draped over chairs on winter afternoons as a child.

In this way, sacred space for women in the Goddess movement may be a carefully constructed physical place, but it is also conceived of in more abstract terms, as a realm requiring imagination to enter and, if you like, faith. Lane has said that the recognition of a sacred place is existentially, not ontologically discerned; it is related to a state of consciousness.⁷ Echoing this, one woman I interviewed said: "In ritual the container of sacred space is made, energy is raised within it, and energy is moved". This is a very instrumental view of what constitutes sacred space. Through the symbolic act of casting a circle, holding hands, and a corporate imaginative effort, women believe that they move together into a different realm where they experience "an energy shift" and, often, personal transformation. They describe this entry into sacred space as "going between the worlds"; it is an imaginative transition which constitutes their deliberate, communal journey into liminality. The close bonding experienced by women in this state, where secular distinctions and attributions disappear, is what Victor Turner describes as "communitas", where the experiences of joy, pain, learning and transformation are shared by ritual participants.⁸ The ways in which women in Goddess rituals talk about sacred ritual space have, in fact, a great deal in common with Turner's discussion of liminality. I quote first

from Turner's *The Ritual Process*, and then from *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk, a well-known writer on Goddess religion.

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.... [L]iminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (Turner 1974:81).

In Witchcraft, we define a new space and a new time whenever we cast a circle to begin a ritual. The circle exists on the boundaries of ordinary space and time; it is "between the worlds" of the seen and unseen, of flashlight and starlight consciousness, a space in which alternate realities meet, in which the past and future are open to us. Time is no longer measured out; it becomes elastic, fluid, a swirling pool in which we dive and swim. The restrictions and distinctions of our socially defined roles no longer apply...⁹

The similarity between Starhawk's and Turner's descriptions of liminality is unlikely to be a coincidence. Starhawk has studied anthropology and incorporates anthropological concepts in her writing. The facilitator at one of the Goddess workshops I attended explicitly discussed van Gennep's pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases of rituals. Many women involved in Goddess ritual-making are widely read and articulate about the ritual process. In the group I worked most closely with, only two out of thirteen women did not have tertiary qualifications and about half have more than one university degree. Women attracted to the movement often value an intellectual as well as an intuitive approach to their spirituality, and I think this is one important reason why women are so self-conscious in their construction of ritual space. One woman I interviewed commented quite unprompted that the movement was "very much part of the postmodern age". The term "designer religion" would not bother her at all.

Other reasons why women in the movement self-consciously construct sacred spaces for rituals I think have to do with the nature of the movement and the kinds of women attracted to it. The movement in New Zealand is amorphous, acephalous, and lacks centralised organisation. The only structural unit is the small ritual group which waxes and wanes in size but usually has fewer than fifteen members. Groups function as autonomous units and decisions are made collectively. There is no drive to recruit new members, increase group sizes, or institutionalise in any way.

Women like it like this. They value the fluidity and flexibility and absence of hierarchy. They shun the fixed and solid structures of institutionalised religions and often shun fixed social structures generally.

Given all this, it is not surprising that ritual spaces are created with a high degree of improvisation and flexibility. Women are not simply "making do" in the absence of established temples or shrines. They seem to like the idea of creating a new sacred place for each ritual. The aesthetics of a place are very important; the place chosen should be symbolically appropriate, evocative of the energy of a particular ritual (for example, a beach is often chosen for Summer Solstice, a garden for Beltane, a cave for Winter Solstice). Convenience is also a consideration. When the weather is likely to be wet, the ritual will be held in someone's home or a community building. Women truly delight in creating artistic and beautiful ritual spaces. Creating sacred space becomes a sacred act in which women express themselves and their interpretation of a ritual's theme.

Thus, sacred places are made and unmade, they may be anywhere and are everywhere. They are not particular places where the sacred *manifests itself* (what Eliade terms hierophany); the sacred is manifest everywhere. They are places where women make magic, which they define as the ability to shift consciousness at will, using the properties of the place – fire, sand, earth, water, stone – and using symbols brought in to the circle by them. Making sacred places in which to make magic affirms women's sense of their own beings as sacred places, their connection to the earth, and their connections to one another.

Rana Singh has said that a sacred place "symbolically represents the world" and "becomes, at a very deeply sensual level, the cosmos".¹⁰ I think that for women in Goddess rituals this is true. The circular altar around which they sit with its symbols of the four elements placed in the corresponding four cardinal directions could be seen as a metaphor for the planet.

The fact that women in the Goddess movement construct their belief systems, their rituals, and the sacred spaces in which to conduct them does not make this a unique spiritual movement. All religions do this. What

makes the Goddess movement unique is that the women involved do the work of construction self-consciously. They *know* that they are making it all up. They do not claim that the sacrality of a place has to do with divine revelation, with being the site of a miraculous or other religiously significant event, with being the birthplace or deathplace or place of inspiration of a central figure in their faith. Contrary to Eliade's¹¹ and Lane's¹² claim that a sacred place is never "chosen" by humans (on the contrary, *it chooses them*) these women know that they consciously choose to make sacred places. The constructedness is acknowledged, articulated, celebrated, and, at the appropriate moments, deliberately forgotten. When women are fully engaged as actors within the rituals they have created, they do not question the authenticity of what they are doing, and are convinced of its value, efficacy and power. They know that they have "made up" the ritual, but they also talk about it as having its own power. Similarly, they know that the sacred place they have created is ultimately no more intrinsically sacred than anywhere else on earth, yet for the purposes and duration of the ritual they impute the ritual space with a special quality of sacredness and treat it with meticulous care. They give it power, and are in turn empowered.

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