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<th>Title</th>
<th>Is there a Feminine Gnosis? Reflexions on Feminism and Esotericism</th>
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ÉTUDE

IS THERE A "FEMININE" GNOSIS?:
REFLECTIONS ON FEMINISM AND ESOTERICISM

Résumé: On se représente souvent le féminisme en le considérant de l'extérieur, comme une simple idéologie, par opposition à l'ésotérisme, qui se présenterait comme possédant des fondements métaphysiques. En partant du parallélisme entre mysticisme et féminisme, proposé par Deirdre Green qui établit l'articulation entre les deux, en partant aussi des caractéristiques majeures de l'ésotérisme exposées par Antoine Faivre, je propose une comparaison entre féminisme et ésotérisme pour montrer que chacun des deux possède un fondement métaphysique. Ensuite, précisant davantage mon propos à l'aide de la description que fait Antoine Faivre de la gnose ésotérique, j'essaie de montrer la pertinence de la notion de gnose "féminine", et je soulève certains problèmes découlant de la position dite "essentialiste". Ce faisant, je traite également d'un certain nombre d'idées connexes: l'eros, dans ses rapports avec une dialectique qui englobe la gnose; l'expérience personnelle, en tant que composante importante de la gnose; et finalement l'androgyne comme image sur laquelle peuvent se modeler des éléments potentiellement présents dans l'être humain.

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A chance (and I might say rather heated) conversation two years ago provided the initial impetus for me to ask about and then consider the issue of the relationship between feminism and esotericism. That consideration rapidly led to the question: "Is there a 'feminine' gnosis?" And in turn that question, when combined with subsequent forays into the work and methodology of several women scholars, became the focus of a paper which I was invited to deliver before a gathering of American scholars of the study of
religion. Finally, all of the above activity has resulted in the present analysis, which represents still another stage in the development of my thinking about this issue. It is my hope that the present analysis will serve two purposes. First, that it will bring the work of some of those women scholars to the attention of a different audience (several of whom, I think, may not be well known to the readership of ARIES). Second, that it will elicit interest in what I believe are some very important, certainly controversial, connections between esotericism and feminism, connections which have been for too long ignored.

Introduction

The attempt to answer the question “Is there a ‘feminine’ gnosis?” necessitates an immediate plunge into an area of the history of religions which has already been schematized by Antoine Faivre, namely, that of esotericism. For a number of years, Faivre has been engaged in the progressively refined articulation of a taxonomy which proves useful not only for approaching esotericism as a whole, but also for considering the question at hand, because the characteristics he has identified contain implications which bear directly on the question of feminine gnosis; their explication also helps makes it possible to see the relationship between esotericism and feminism. In addition to Antoine Faivre’s work, there is a discussion of parallels between mysticism and feminism, by the late scholar of mysticism, Deirdre Green, which I have found exceptionally helpful in developing my thoughts on the relation between esotericism and feminism.

I will begin by discussing my use of the terms “feminine” and “feminist”. Second, I will provide a description of each of Faivre’s characteristics of esotericism, together with a summary of the salient points of Green’s analysis. Third, I will explain some of the connections between esotericism and feminism, and make some comparisons between what I call “feminine gnosis” and esoteric gnosis, illustrating these connections by way of a discussion of the work of Deirdre Green, Carol Christ, and Margaret Miles. Finally, I will discuss the symbol of the androgyne which is important within both feminism and esotericism.
Definition of terms

The English word “feminine” is derived from the Latin *femina*, meaning “woman”. Although there is no inherent valuation in the term, from a very early time, and for a variety of cultural and historical reasons, the term “feminine” has acquired a plethora of baggage which I find unacceptable and inaccurate – along the lines of the French word, *femmelette*, whose literal meaning is “little or weak woman”, but which is usually used to denote a male “weakling”, a “womanish man”. (I note that the two latter terms correspond to the colloquial English term “wimp”.) According to our current stereotypes, being “feminine” means being vulnerable to “hysteria” (the word “hysteria” is similarly problematic); acting in a manner which is “dainty”, “ladylike”; it means staying in one’s place, etc. But in this paper I have deliberately set out to redeem the term “feminine”, and therefore I am using it adjectivally, meaning simply “of, or pertaining to, woman”. I find the word “feminism” in need of least as much qualification and remythologization as “feminine”. Feminism needs above all to be elevated from a position of being thought to be, or even worse, actually being, mere ideology; ideally, the term would denote a state of self-reflexive being as distinct from a stance of automatic adherence to political correctness. Like esotericism, some forms of feminism often have metaphysical underpinnings, and I will say more about this as we go on. For the moment, it should be understood that I am using the term “feminism” here to denote a specific type of feminism, “spiritual feminism”, which is identifiable because of the presence of a five-fold awareness: 1) that reality is subtle; therefore, for example, it is not comprised of rigid categories neatly corresponding to the charming particularity of male and female genitalia; 2) that reality is inherently processual and dynamic; 3) that it is multi-dimensional, multi-valent, and meaning-full; 4) that to be human is necessarily to participate in that condition (a necessary participation which is potentially active, conscious, intentional, and creative); and 5) that there is an ontological relationship between the self and the universe (1).

The characteristics of esotericism according to A. Faivre

Esotericism is perhaps best described as an attitude or an approach to the world. It is a world view which can be observed throughout the history of the West, as Faivre explains, and is tied neither to a particular religious tradition nor to a particular historical epoch, but rather becomes discernable through the manifestations of one or more of its characteristics. Faivre has
identified four characteristics: 1) the doctrine of correspondences, which entails the premise that all things in the universe are interrelated and thus, can influence, or be influenced by, each other; and also, that there is a relation between the microcosm and the macrocosm such that a single part can be an occasion for the manifestation and/or apprehension of the whole; 2) the idea that the entire cosmos is a living organism; 3) the belief that mediation, often by means of what has been called "active imagination" between all of these parts, is not only possible, but vital to the interior life of persons; and 4) the idea that persons are transformed as a result of their outer and inner experiences. Closely related to the third and fourth characteristics is esoteric gnosis, which lies at the heart of esotericism. To be distinguished from the gnosticism of the early centuries of our era, esoteric gnosis should be understood in a broad sense, meaning knowing and understanding as a means of spiritual development (2). I shall say more about esoteric gnosis shortly, but now we turn to some parallels between mysticism and feminism, which relate to the question at hand.

Deirdre Green's comparison of mysticism and feminism

In her book Gold and the Crucible: Teresa of Avila and the Western Mystical Tradition, Deirdre Green devotes an entire chapter to a comparison of mysticism and feminism, which she says share five "common areas of concern". First, mystics and feminists not only perceive personal experience as valuable, but primary: it is "the most important guide in understanding reality". Second, both emphasize the importance of finding "one's true self or identity" (3); moreover, living according to the script derived from knowledge of that true self is deemed far more important than fulfilling cultural expectations. Green's description of the next three bears quoting in full. The third common concern of mysticism and feminism is that they each

point to a transformation in consciousness. The mystic searches for spiritual transformation validated in personal experience, often finding this awareness outside the domain of established religion, or at its fringes. Feminism points to a transformation in our consciousness of women's roles and abilities. Although these are two different forms of transformation, I would argue that they are not unrelated, for both... offer a new, liberating vision of the order of things that challenges established views... (4)

Fourth, both

have tended on the whole to espouse a holistic worldview entailing an aware-
ness of the interconnectedness of all things, looking beyond the strictures of dualistic models of reality and dichotomous modes of thought.

Fifth and finally, mysticism and feminism deny that reason and logic alone, as defined by (largely male) rationalist philosophers and theologians, can tell us all there is to know about reality, and insist that feeling and intuition too have their own contribution to make to our understanding of life. (5)

Deirdre Green is comparing mysticism and feminism, but the same "common areas of concern" apply to esotericism and feminism, as we will see when we consider Faivre’s characteristics of esotericism once more.

There are at least two perspectives from which each of his four characteristics can be viewed. First, as Faivre points out, the use of these characteristics as organizing principles enables us to fruitfully order and study specific material from what might otherwise appear to be an unsorted morass (6). But, second, while they are undeniably useful for constructing a methodology for studying esotericism, these organizing principles are more than simply methodological tools; by making esotericism identifiable, they also allow us to discern a spirituality, a way of living in the world (7). It is both interesting and significant that if one wishes to take seriously the idea that esotericism as described by Faivre has historically constituted and continues to constitute a spiritual path, a way of living one’s life, then it becomes critically important to note the kinds of attitudes and behaviors which arise from an adherence to each of the four. What does it “look like” when these characteristics are found to comprise someone’s world view, when they are used as guiding principles for doing whatever it is one does (8)?

The answer – perhaps surprisingly for some – is that the attitudes and behaviors which are consistent with the four characteristics of esotericism appear very much like those which are informed by certain feminist world views, i.e., those comprised of the five-fold awareness of which I spoke earlier, and the five “common areas of concern” set forth by Deirdre Green. Theoretically at least, both esotericism (as Faivre has described it) and feminism (as Deirdre Green and I have described it) are embodied in a cluster of related attitudes and behaviors having to do with relationships between the self and the other, and between the self and the world. The similarity between esotericism and feminism becomes even more striking when we examine esoteric gnosis.
Esoteric gnosis

Faivre himself has written that esotericism is “both a way of life and an exercise of vision” (9). This marriage between esoteric practice and theory is perhaps most apparent in esoteric gnosis. Esoteric gnosis possesses a dual impetus which serves initially to turn us inward to probe the nature of the relation of the self to the divine, and secondarily, moves us outward, to discover the nature of the relation of the self to the natural world. It thus entails an exploration of the nature of things by means of an exploration of our relationship with them. This exploration takes the form of a journey of self-discovery. We should note here that esotericism demonstrates a marked tendency toward individualism. Both the inward and the outward form of gnosis also entail a progressive acquisition of knowledge which corresponds to an initiatory process. In a sense, one can speak of initiatory stages, each stage having its own “guardian”, as it were, with whom one must negotiate before passing through to the next. Faivre comments that regardless of the term used to describe these guardians, they all “have something in common with the initiate, since otherwise the necessary relationships could not be established” (10). Thus, esoteric practice is highly personal and individual. Regardless of whether its practitioners are connected to a tradition or are independent, each person necessarily forges his or her own path (11). The form under which knowledge is apprehended is in large part dependent on an individual’s cultural, social, economic, political, and spiritual experience.

Comparison of esoteric gnosis and feminine gnosis

Esoteric gnosis often resembles (and I would argue is often the same as) a process which I observe taking place in the lives and the work of many women (12). This process is informed by intuitions that the entire cosmos is comprised of interrelated parts, that the universe itself constitutes a meaningful whole which is greater than its parts, that the totality is characterized by emergence and process, that nature is a living organism, that different levels of reality are mediated such that we are enabled to move through them, and that we are transformed by our experience. Great emphasis is placed on the value of personal experience, and the importance of discovering “who I really am”, as opposed to “who I am supposed to be”, i.e., what role does the culture and the time in which I live expect me to play? Frequently, we find that much attention is given to deciphering significance: the levels of meaning which reside in new events, circumstances, hitherto unfamiliar
books, encounters of one kind or another are all kabbalistically probed. Often, and in a very real sense, such encounters function for women in much the same way as the guardians of the various spheres of the *mundus imaginalis* of esotericism function for esotericists, and the meanings, or lessons, which they reveal are taken very seriously. Finally, the notion of context, with all its ramifications (not least of which is the necessity for embodiment), as opposed to the idea of the abstract, is very important. It seems appropriate to term this *modus operandi* "feminine gnosis". By way of illustration, let us turn to three contemporary examples (13).

**Feminine gnosis**

**Carol Christ**

For Carol Christ, one of the most widely known foremothers of the academic study of women and religion, it was not just her experience as a human being which gave rise to certain research interests, but her particular experience as a woman. She began to question and re-examine the implications of using almost exclusively male language and male concepts to talk about the nature of God and religious experience while a graduate student enduring the oppressive atmosphere of what was at that time an almost entirely male faculty and student body at a prestigious East Coast university. Later, after receiving her Ph.D. (for which she wrote a dissertation on the work of Elie Wiesel), Christ, along with several other women, successfully lobbied for the formation of a permanent research section called "Women and Religion" within the structure of the American Academy of Religion. Since the time of its launching (which I believe was in the late 70's or early 80's), the "Women and Religion" section has contributed immeasurably to the life of the academy (14).

Over the years, Christ has made increasingly consistent, explicit, and bold connections between her scholarship and her experience. Her personal experience eventually proved to be a source of insight into the nature of Greek goddesses on which much of her writing focuses at present. In one book, *The Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess*, she writes: "the earth is holy and is our true home", and "women’s experience tells us something about the nature of the divine" (15). The implication of course is that things which have often been viewed as split (perhaps because they were experienced as split by the men who wrote about them), and therefore as unrelated to each other, are in fact interrelated. If the earth is holy it implies that the divine is not solely related to the heavens, but to nature as
well. If women’s experience is theophanic it not only implies that human beings are located on the same spectrum as that which we call divine, but also that divinity is reflected in Woman’s experience as well as Man’s. In *Laughter* Christ tells us how her interest in Greek goddesses developed, explaining that she was at first drawn to study the goddesses of her ancestral background and of Native America, but instead, “Without my choosing them”, she writes, “the Greek Goddesses have chosen me” (16). In fact, it seems that they did choose her. It began when she was invited to teach at a summer institute in Lesbos, Greece, enjoyed the experience, and returned each summer for a number of years. What started as a recipe for a pleasant summer vacation ended with her decision to resign from her tenured university position. She now lives and writes in Athens.

Deirdre Green

As I wrote in my review of Deirdre Green’s book on Teresa of Ávila for *ARIES* no. 11, one of the most striking things about Green’s text is the methodology she uses to approach Teresa of Ávila. Deirdre Green intentionally “focuses on Teresa as a mystic, as a human being and as a woman” (17). She argues convincingly that much of Teresa’s experience as a mystic was shaped by her experience as a woman, and that this experience enriched rather than detracted from her particular relationship with the divine. In my review I commented that special note should be taken of the fact that Green makes room for her own experience as well; making it an explicit part of her methodology, she asserts:

*It is my... firm belief, that in order best to understand mystical experiences we must not divorce intellectual study from our own intuitive and experiential understanding. The scholar of mysticism should herself or himself have at least some practical knowledge of mystical experience at first hand.* (18)

By using an approach which is at once personal and scholarly, Green produced a well-researched, authoritative, thoroughly academic work, which transforms the reader in addition to informing her. But it is the relationship between methodology and the character of Teresa which emerges from the pages of this impeccably well-researched text which I wish to take up here.

Green begins the chapter entitled “Teresa and the Issue of Women’s Spirituality” by stating that Teresa was once described as a *femina inquieta* – a restless female (19). Citing three reasons for Teresa’s vulnerability to the Inquisitorial authorities: “she was a visionary and mystic”, “she was of Jewish ancestry”, and “she was a woman” (20), Green explains that it was difficult (although not always impossible) for Teresa to justify herself, i.e. to
justify her experience, in the face of the very learned and apparently always rational male theologians she was forced to confront. Green writes:

*Teresa was often so intimidated when she was in the presence of theologians that she could not find words with which to dispute the verdict of these men regarding her experiences. She says that she did not dare to contradict them for fear that they would accuse her, a "mere woman", of trying to instruct them. She felt that they were mocking her, as if her experiences were just feminine fancies.* (21)

And:

*Teresa's lack of training in theology made it extremely difficult for her to justify her spiritual experiences to learned men (letrados), who could present counter-arguments to challenge her intuitive promptings, debate fine points of doctrine, and cite scriptural passages in support of their own convictions.* (22)

Now, I find there exists a tendency to dismiss contemporary concerns about sexist language, women's rights, etc., as one of the aberrant manifestations of modernity, especially prevalent in the late twentieth century, and perhaps most prevalent in the United States. Keeping this in mind, we would do well to note the fact that, according to Green, Teresa apparently made "occasional disparaging remarks about being a woman" in the culture of sixteenth century Europe, a culture which devalued women, and which made for a situation which Teresa herself described as being "enough to make your wings droop" (23). Thus, in a context which was in some important ways like the one in which contemporary women find themselves, Teresa had to struggle to trust her own experience. Green believes such a struggle is "a typical experience of a woman lacking self-confidence in a patriarchal culture", and quotes the words of one of Teresa's male contemporaries:

*Whenever these visions and raptures came to her, she felt perfectly certain that they came, not from the devil, but from God; but, once they had gone, as she feared God and was mistrustful of herself, she believed what these people said to her and accepted the reasons which they gave her for thinking her to be deceived.*

In the final analysis, however, verification of the validity of Teresa's experiences could only come from within. As Green writes, "When she trusts her own experience, Teresa is convinced of its divine origin" (24).

I submit that Green's book presents inarguably hard evidence that feminism, in the sense in which I portray it here, cannot simply be dismissed as an aberrant manifestation of the late twentieth century, but is instead a perennial manifestation which is discernable throughout the history of western patriarchy. I further submit that the figure of Teresa which emerges from Green's approach, does so in large part thanks to her methodology. Fi-
nally, I submit that it is Green’s use of this very methodology, this “feminine gnosis”, that allows us to see the manifestation of that phenomenon at work in the life of one of the greatest mystics in European history. Green’s concluding statement, which incidently provides us with an additional basis for a comparison between feminine gnosis and esoteric gnosis, is succinctly eloquent: “Teresa”, she writes,

was a woman who found herself: in that sense she was a feminist. And through finding herself she found God: it is this that makes her a mystic. (25)

Margaret Miles

While explaining her aim and methodology in the preface to her book *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture*, Margaret Miles, in a style less overtly personal than Christ’s, but still clearly written from the heart, provides a third example of feminine gnosis.

One of the most radical statements I have ever come across in scholarly writing occurs in the preface to her book. Miles explains how she views her own writing, saying that “the content and agenda of my work [are] a matter of moral responsibility, [they are] a political statement” (26), and she locates the present book in the context of a project involving the efforts of many, many people, declaring that:

*The goal is not simply the consciousness-raising of a few individuals, but the most pervasive readjustment of human society ever conceived: equalization of the dignity of all human beings.* (27)

Thus, at the outset Miles explicitly states that she intends for her work to have meaning, and to occasion change. Her purpose is not to advance a sectarian view; rather, her “agenda”, as she unapologetically refers to it, is to occasion transformation. This type of scholarship, which I shall term the “transformative model”, is a different matter altogether from either the “bibliographic model”, which purports to be mere reportage, wholly objective, conventionally academic, and entirely agendaless; or the “missionary model”, which aims to convert its readers to some (often religious) “truth” or other. I note that among these three modes of writing, only the transformative model can be appropriately said to have an ontological dimension. The second model seeks only to inform; neither the compilation nor the reading of reams of data is inherently transformative. [Readers familiar with Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* will remember that nowhere is it claimed that Abulafia, the computer, is a spiritual master. (28)] The third model seeks to emerge victorious from an encounter which in many cases involves
coercion of one sort of other; however, the only possible result from such coercion is the appearance of compliance.

At any rate, it is quite clear that Miles did not carry out her research as a scientist coolly and unsympathetically observing the phenomena she sought to study. To the contrary, in keeping with the use of the "transformative model", we see that her approach includes empathy with the object of study. Miles relates that when she went to Rome to do research on Christian images it was

*with an interest not dissimilar to that of an illiterate medieval worshipper in images that order, sustain, and comfort a human being in the midst of the overwhelming and potentially disorienting beauty and pain of a human life.* (29)

She distinguishes the relatively personal and engaged "voice" which she and other writers are beginning to use from the traditional (generally, if not exclusively, male) discourse which purports to hold forth from the perspective of a "God’s eye view" (30). The implications of this misogynous perspective which consciously or unconsciously masquerades as universality are further developed later in the book, in a chapter entitled "Hermeneutics and the History of Image Users", where she writes:

*One of the underlying reasons that women are not willing to accept traditional political history and history of ideas as our history is that a history of continuous development does not resonate with our physical experience of irreversible change and discontinuity.* [emphasis mine] (31)

Here I call attention in particular to Miles’ use of the word “our”; Miles does not speak of women’s history in the third person, but the first. Thus the voice of the scholar becomes identifiable as the voice of a woman who, just as other women, is affected by the biases and the omissions in the history of ideas.

We find also that nature has a place in the economy of Miles’ analytic framework. “Objects of the natural world”, just as cultural images, “are capable of evoking religious awareness”, writes Miles. “Objects can train the eye, can reveal ‘the world in a grain of sand’.” (32) In another era, we remember another woman, Julian of Norwich, who experienced the macrocosm under the microcosmic form of a hazelnut.

Miles’ perspective on the importance and the efficacy of images is remarkable, appearing as it does in a book written by a Harvard professor in the late twentieth century, with a background and training in art history, literary theory, and historical theology. Throughout the book she offers an adroit and theoretically sophisticated delineation of the complex relationship between images and language. Reminding us that the “printed word” was likened by Plato to “‘a kind of image’ of printed speech” (33), Miles advises
twentieth century people on the choice and the use of images. The transition from the history of Christianity in the west to the consumerism of North America in the late 1990’s is easily accomplished:

From this cluster of historical theories and practices relevant to the use of language and images, we can sketch a theory that will enable us to identify practical methods for heuristic image use in contemporary society. Language and images need not compete... (24)

Since, from the sixteenth century onwards, the use of images as foci enabling contemplation has become increasingly diminished, and since “neglect of images is neglect of contemplation” (35), Miles advocates “Training oneself in image use... [as] a matter of moral and social responsibility”, and outlines a three step process of learning to manage images. She recognizes that we are bombarded daily with media images frequently accompanied by captions with “repressive value”, which manipulate the viewer “towards a meaning chosen in advance” (38). Because such images are not designed to foster spiritual insight, but rather to hone consumer instincts into the fine art of emptying private coffers into the collective coffers of manufacturers and providers of services, she advocates the intentional selection and cultivation of a “repertoire of images” (39). Ultimately, Miles seeks to encourage using images as enchainments to “Theoria” – contemplation in which one is lifted out of one’s familiar world and into the living presences of the spiritual world...” This then is “image as insight”, the title of her book. It is “a trained and concentrated seeing that overcomes conceptual barriers between the visible and the spiritual worlds.” (40)

I am struck by the similarities between Miles’ program and that of Marsilio Ficino, who, in the third volume of De vita triplici, “On Making Your Life Agree with the Heavens”, offered a prescription for integrating the elements of the human person – body, soul, and intellect – and for integrating the human with the divine. If one followed Ficino’s directions for making and using images, one could transcend the conventional understanding of an ontological bifurcation of the celestial and terrestrial spheres (41). Margaret Miles holds out yet another opportunity to cure this perennial human ill.

**Eros and the dialectic of gnosis**

By means of these examples I have tried to illustrate something of the way in which the characteristics of esotericism manifest themselves in the work and the lives of women scholars, and also something of the way in which many of the same features associated with esoteric gnosis are found in feminine gnosis. Both types of gnosis manifest an additional feature which is
important to note: namely, both involve a dialectic between the subject who studies and the object that is studied. This dialectic appears to me to be analogous to the dialectic of Eros which we see in the lives and the writings of persons in the esoteric tradition like Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno and mystics like Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch, and others (42). While this is not the place to set forth a full analysis, I think the following excursus will be sufficient to convey the basic idea.

When certain persons want to study something, to come to know it, it is because they are attracted to it, because of their personal experience, their disposition, their temperament. There is a dynamic relation between myself and the object of study. In Whiteheadian terms, the object of study possesses "causal efficacy" (43) such that it is not only intelligible and attractive in itself, but is intelligible and attractive to someone. Its nature is such that it reaches out to that person; he or she is drawn to it; and he or she reaches out to it subsequent to (or perhaps simultaneously with) its reaching out. Personally, for example, I find enormous difficulty in studying and becoming familiar with things which do not hold an attraction for me. We all speak, by way of illustration, of subjects which are do not excite us, and sometimes, we call such subjects "dry". But surely this is an example of projection! Such subjects are "dry" because they do not arouse us; putting it another way, they leave us cold, and therefore we do not desire intimate knowledge of them.

In esoteric gnosis and in feminine gnosis, when we seek to know something, it is rather like falling in love – whether it is the divine or the world (and in the last analysis, the world is the body of God), we seek to become one with it. Not identical to it, but intimately joined with it, so that we finally experience ourselves and that which we seek to know, as participating in a single ontological condition. In each case we are enlarged, so to speak, by our knowledge of what was previously the "other"; in each case we become transformed by that knowledge; in each case, there is a change of being.

The androgyne as a model of human potentiality

Our final example of commonality between esotericism and feminism is the symbol of the androgyne. It is particularly important in esoteric gnosis and feminine gnosis because, as I will attempt to show, it too can help occasion a change of being. My thoughts on this topic are still preliminary – there is a good deal of material on the androgyne which I want to spend more time with: I think, for example, of Wendy Doniger's analysis of the androgyne in Hinduism (44), of Rita Gross's writings on androgyny (45),
and of Antoine Faivre's work on androgyny in Franz von Baader (46). (My interpretation of the significance of the androgyne here is informed by previous work which I have done on symbolic oppositions in western alchemy.) (47)

When one considers androgyny, regardless of whether one is an esotericist for whom nature is a theophany or a feminist for whom nature and the body are primary, perhaps even sacred, it soon becomes clear that careful consideration of the essentialist position is inevitable, if one is going to take the idea of androgyny and the idea of the body seriously. It seems to make good philosophical sense to posit that the universe is subtle, that things are not really divided, dichotomized as we conceive them to be, that the cosmos does not resemble a junior high school gymnasium on the night of the first dance – with girls huddled on one side, boys on the other; it equally appears that if our response to this insight is to take the position that all manifestations of sexual particularity are the result of cultural, hence, conceptual constructs then one is, at bottom, anti-body. But is there a way, in that case, of being “pro-body” without insisting that males and females are two essentially different kinds of beings?

We can honor the fact of embodiment without embracing essentialism, a position which I consider not only extreme (a matter of my particular tastes) but more importantly, wrongheaded (here, a question of ontology). And we need not pay an exorbitant price. For example, we needn’t discard the Jungian ideas of anima and animus, which are very useful ordering concepts, on the grounds that to use them means that we accept the primacy of “inner”, interior life, and thereby ignore or denigrate the importance of “outer”, exterior life. Nor do we have to embrace the position that differences in male and female genitals are somehow reflective of metaphysical mystery.

If someone wants to consider androgyny as a model for human potentiality, but is disturbed by its implications for the body, he or she has only to remember that there are no qualia which can be actualized without the vehicle of corporeality. Therefore, whatever the anima and the animus are – structures of the unconscious, qualities of personality – no matter: they cannot be actualized without body. Androgyny, just as everything else, has to be embodied in order to be at all. But I would argue that while the mere fact of specificity (to paraphrase Whitehead) (48), together with corporeality, are necessary, i.e., essential conditions for the actualization and expression of qualia, particular physical features are accidental. At best, there are subtle connections between qualia/nature/inner and outer (i.e., physical appearance). Connections which are far too subtle for essentialism to account for. Besides, when it comes to sexuality, there are times when genitalia are simply not necessary for its expression.
There is still, as Wendy Doniger puts it in *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, “the visual image” (49) of the androgyne for us to consider here, not in the context of iconography, as she does; rather, in the form of a concern about how, or whether, becoming androgynous might change one’s appearance. In fact this concern is mentioned in passing by Kathryn Rabbuzzi in a discussion about the androgyne in *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*, although she apparently does not share it (50). The concern about how androgyny might look if it were to be embodied is one which I don’t really understand. No one would suggest that a serious Christian has to arrange to be nailed on a cross before he or she could embody Christianity. The *quality* of androgyny can be embodied without physically, literally duplicating the physiognomy depicted in images of the androgyne. It strikes me that problems inevitably arise when we are too literal and confuse androgyny with hermaphroditism.

In short, I am arguing that retaining the androgyne as a symbol does not commit us to an anti-body position, even if we do not accept a literal meaning, nor does it require that we subscribe to an essentialist position. However, in a discussion about symbolism, it is more to the point, and far more interesting, to talk about the meaning which a symbol is meant to express. What, then, does the symbol of the androgyne mean?

The androgyne is not essentially about maleness and femaleness. It symbolizes a condition in which *all* of our dichotomized concepts are dissolved. And, as an ideal image, it functions to encourage us to actualize I-Thou relationships. Let me try to explain.

It seems to me that the symbol of the androgyne often suffers from what Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (51). Much of the material which I have examined, both inside and outside the context of theological belief, reflects that fallacy. But the symbol of the androgyne *must* be interpreted philosophically in order to be understood; it requires that we become hermeneuts. The androgyne, as a symbol of wholeness, of totality, of multiplicity, includes, but is not limited to, the qualities of masculine and feminine, as well as all other qualities. And a welcome corrective would be to think of the androgyne not as a symbol reflecting various conceptual dichotomies, in particular, those of “masculinity” and “femininity”, but as a refractory symbol pointing to the entire spectrum of human potentiality which includes an infinite number of sexual permutations. In the same way that a prism takes white light and goes on to reflect more than the primary colors, so too does the androgyne take the form of wholeness in order to symbolize more than two clearly defined genders. The androgyne is not a symbol for a condition of stasis, in which all differences are reconciled by virtue of the fact that there is no longer any movement, nor is it a symbol for
transcendence, as this is commonly understood, in which case all difference would be dissolved. The androgyne symbolizes the totality, which includes potentiality, process, and multiplicity. (To be sure, as a symbol for the totality, it has to include what might be called “moments” of stasis, but the idea of momentary stasis is altogether different from the idea of an ultimate condition of non-differentiated stasis toward which we are supposed to strive.)

As I’ve already mentioned, I have seen material which supports an interpretation of the symbol of the androgyne as transcendent (52), but I would argue that the androgyne signifies transcendence, not of the body, or of nature, but of the erroneously, indeed, tragically, concretized conceptualizations of reality which many of us adhere to. It is not matter which enslaves us; we are trapped by a culturally constructed conceptual framework which encourages us to believe that various dichotomies, like those of male and female, reflect ontology. The androgyne beckons us to a potential condition wherein what Buber called the I-Thou relation is actualized. This relation does not necessitate loss of particularity; it does require that we forever relinquish the illusion that there is a fixed and impermeable barrier between the I and the Thou, between each and every manifestation of the Self and the Other. A fuller explication of all that would necessarily follow from such a transformation must be reserved for another time. Here I will say only that it would be profoundly radical: it would entail changes in attitudes and behaviors in every sphere imaginable, including, but of course not limited to, that of the personal and that of the political.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have attempted to sketch the basis for a valid and fruitful comparison of esotericism and feminism. I have tried to illustrate the major commonalities I see between esoteric gnosis and feminine gnosis, have briefly touched upon the dialectic of eros in gnosia, and have offered a re-interpretation of the androgyne. It seems appropriate to add here that the present analysis reflects many of the issues with which I am currently grappling in my work as well as in my life. Indeed, these two are not two at all, but one. In a sense, therefore, what I have written here about feminine gnosis is itself a product of feminine gnosis; it is self-referential, and thus the mode of presentation, the particular “voice” employed in writing, the style, etc., are themselves illustrative of the subject matter. For this reason, the way I have written about these ideas may well be as valuable as what I have said about them.
Finally, I know that what has been said here has answered some questions, probably begged others, and raised still more. I make no apology for this; indeed, I am pleased by the fact that things are not neatly packaged, that things are unfinished and nothing is nailed down, that there are still questions. Such fluidity entails and calls forth creativity, and my greatest hope for this paper is that it will engender an ongoing and authentic conversation between what I consider to be the two most vital areas of religious studies: esotericism and feminism. We have much to discuss.

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Veyrins-Thuellin, France 1992

NOTES

(1) Some readers may tend to dismiss this discussion of etymology, by saying that this is merely a matter of semantics. I would respond by saying that language is powerful; moreover, that it has been recognized as such, and has been utilized as a political tool. In fact, such recognition is part of French history, as we see when we consider the fact, for example, that in 1790 Abbé Henri Grégoire was entrusted with the task of “investigating the linguistic state of the nation”. As part of that trust, Grégoire subsequently polled priests in parishes throughout France asking for information about how many parishioners spoke in dialects, and how many others spoke in French. The questionnaire which he sent those parishes was an integral part of a deliberately planned effort to effect an enforced use of French throughout the country. Why? Because widespread use of one language functions to unify otherwise divergent populations. See Peter Richard, A History of the French Language (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1974), p. 123-4. In this case, a reminder that originally terms like those discussed here were not intended to polarize groups of people, that they developed as descriptives, meant solely to enable differentiation, is useful. The accretions which have become associated with terms like “masculine” and “feminine” are not the result of etymology, but politics. However, politics, as every historian knows, is a moveable feast. In the example above the political goal was to bring groups of people together through the use of language; thus, it was relatively benign. The examples in my discussion reflect political goals too; namely, the dichotomization and hierarchicalization of the two sexes.
(4) Ibid., p. 184. An extremely worthwhile enterprise would be to consider the idea that esotericism has a tendency toward individualism together with Gershom Scholem’s analysis of what he describes as the “dialectical interrelationship between the conservative aspects and the novel,


(6) Faivre, *Esoteric Spiritualities*.

(7) This is not to say that providing a methodology for approaching esotericism is without importance. This is by no means the case. For too long, the term esotericism has functioned too imprecisely, rather like the “Metaphysics” signs which one finds designating a particular section in many of the bookstore chains in the United States. We might wish that those responsible for the misuse of this rubric would read H. W. Fowler’s entry “Metaphysics” in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944). Currently, if one takes the time to look, one finds under this rubric books on everything from history of religions to myth studies to magic to pop psychology lumped together in appallingly haphazard fashion, without any regard for whether they are spurious or scholarly, serious or tongue-in-cheek. I myself have seen the works of Frances A. Yates and Mircea Eliade sharing the same shelf as a book about the hollow earth and one providing astrologically informed “tips” on how to win at horse races. My point is that esotericism cannot be a conceptual “catch-all”, and Faivre’s efforts to develop an appropriate critical methodology for esotericism are long overdue, and will do much to legitimate esotericism as a *bona fide* field.

(8) For that matter, it is also a good idea for us to get into the habit of asking which attitudes and behaviors are consistent with the principles to which various individuals pledge allegiance, especially those espoused by gurus of one kind or another. While I am no longer personally surprised to observe inconsistencies, I know instances in which other persons are not only surprised, but crushed, when they discover that someone whose teachings they greatly admire has clay feet.

(9) Faivre, “Esotericism”, p. 41.


(11) See Scholem’s chapter in *op. cit.* “Religious Authority and Mysticism”, esp. p. 16-17, for his views on the connections between mystics and religious traditions.

(12) I have chosen to exemplify this process as it appears in the work of scholars, but its manifestation is by no means limited to them. I’ve observed it at work in the lives of women in Australia, North America, and France, in the countryside and in the city. Most recently, I have seen it embodied in a woman who owns a *boulangerie* in the medieval town near where I live this year, another in the same town who runs a business, a family, and apparently never becomes pessimistic about anything, and a third who reigns with incredible grace over a five hundred year old farmhouse also close by. So far as I know, none of them write, but the desire for transformation and the quality of empathy are evidenced in all they do.

(13) I refer to only three women; the list is endless and could have included many women, some more famous than others, for example: poet-writer Adrienne Rich, writer Susan Griffin, scientist Evelyn Fox Keller, philosopher Mara Keller, religious historian and archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, and artist Judy Chicago.

(14) The American Academy of Religion is the largest and most important organization of professional scholars of religion in North America. Its annual meetings attract upwards of five thousand persons. Membership is not restricted to U.S. citizens, but is open to all persons with a serious interest in the academic study of religion.


(22) Ibid., p. 162.
(23) Ibid., p. 171.
(24) Ibid., p. 163.
(25) Ibid., p. 185.

(27) Ibid.


(29) Miles, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

(30) Ibid. We are reminded that one of Ignatius’ exercises instructs the practitioner “to see and consider the Three Divine Persons, as on their royal throne or seat of Their Divine Majesty, how They look on all the surface and circuit of the earth”. (Emphasis mine.) David J. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), p. 72. My point here is to call attention to the fact that Ignatius does not portray God as looking on part of the earth, but on all of it.

(31) Miles, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

(32) Ibid., p. 2-3.
(33) Ibid., p. 140.
(34) Ibid., p. 145.
(35) Ibid., p. 150.
(36) Ibid., p. 146.
(37) Ibid., p. 129.
(38) Ibid., p. 148.
(39) Ibid., p. 149.
(40) Ibid., p. 150.


(42) I have written about the dialectic of eros in several unpublished papers: “The Phenomenon of Imagination in Marsilio Ficino, Ignatius de Loyola, and Alchemy”; “Three Exemplars of the Esoteric Tradition in the Renaissance”; and “The Theme of Eros in the Writings of Hagedoijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg”.


(49) O’Flaherty, *op. cit.*, p. 289.


(52) For example, in Élémire Zolla’s *The Androgyne: Reconciliation of Male and Female* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), p. 4-5 we see two 4th century b.c.e. images of Dionysus in the form of an androgyne. The caption says that “the devotee” of Dionysus “identified... with every aspect of nature... capable both of flowering and bearing fruit, of circularly giving and receiving the seed of life and light”. Fine. Then in the text Zolla explains how, among other things, the androgyne symbolizes “the point where sexual divisions are... bypassed”.