Come and eat my bread, drink the wine which I have drawn! Leave foolishness behind and live.

Proverbs 9:5–6

CHAPTER

1

SOPHIA REAWAKENED

One spring I found myself with nine hundred women at a spiritual weekend of lectures, music, dance, and ritual. This was my first opportunity to gather with women who were questioning "patriarchal Christianity." I never imagined it would become a life-changing spiritual event. I was in the early stages of my journey toward understanding my faith as a woman. Up to that point, I had only a vague idea of who these women were and what they were rallying against. I had a similarly vague notion of women's low status in the church and the general absence of the female voice in theology. I was aware of the institutional battle regarding women, but I had never grappled with it myself.

Here for the first time, I heard women who considered themselves Christian naming the many wrongs done to women in the name of God and refusing to suffer in silence

any longer. Here I was faced with women claiming their own knowledge of God. Through informal conversation, I heard of the wounding many had suffered in the church and at the hands of those with institutional power. In a sense, these were spiritual refugees, seeking to escape the internalized slave master, and this revival camp meeting had been conceived as a way of providing some relief from the weight of their chains.

The women I saw were a distinctly different lot from most of the women I had encountered, sitting quietly in church pews. I was used to women who continually checked their comments lest they be labeled a feminist, or worse. The women at this event, however, were strong, loud, and angry. They didn't care what men thought. I unexpectedly caught myself cheering them on at times. For the most part, though, I was filled with profound sadness over what often sounded like an exaggeration of women's experience in too many churches. It all seemed like a huge misunderstanding. Surely this would blow over, and the church and these women would find common ground and settle back into the coziness of the tradition. I was wrong.

These women felt betrayed by the institutional church and saw the very nature and basis of the Christian faith as a hindrance to their liberation. In workshop after workshop, we were challenged to do theology for ourselves and to "tell the truth" by being more honest about our lives. We were encouraged to "trouble the waters" of a patriarchal system and to reimagine the faith. The theology presented included substituting, if not completely replacing, Jesus with Sophia—the feminine personification of the Greek word for wisdom. This was a seemingly more appropriate image of the Divine

for women to embrace. Sophia was blessed and worshiped in emotionally laden prayer and song. This was the first time I had heard of wisdom being used in this way.

These women had a new vision for Christianity—a vision that pushed me to rethink everything I had come to believe about God. In this new Christianity, the Jesus I knew was seldom mentioned, and when he was, he was unrecognizable. He had been fashioned into an updated feminist version and severed from two thousand years of church history. And when I say "church," I don't mean a particular denomination or institution but rather the history of millions of ordinary people who have believed that Jesus was "God with us" and have lived their lives based on that belief. This estrangement of Jesus from the living tradition made him nothing more than a myth with a political function for whoever wanted to claim him. Instead of a divine Savior, all that remained was a quintessential feminist—the Alan Alda of the cosmos. The reinterpretation of Jesus at this gathering left me shell-shocked and deeply wounded. It made me wonder whether this was Christianity at all.

Three days of reimagining, reinterpreting, and rereading Christianity left me in a personal crisis. I remained deeply unsettled for months. What these women claimed to have experienced seemed like a different religion from mine. Yet at the same time, I knew that many of their claims were true. I could readily identify with much of what they said. I had seen many friends unable to make a meaningful connection with Christianity. Yes, it mattered that women have often not fared well within the institutional structures and in theology. It's true that women haven't had the same opportunity as men to contribute to our collective understanding of God, and

much injustice has been perpetrated in the name of Jesus. I felt as though my integrity was at stake. Could I honestly defend Christianity? I was left to sort out what had happened in a way that would allow me to hold on to the faith *and* live with integrity as a woman.

Shaken to the Core

I left this gathering shaken to my core and overwrought with questions. Is Christianity inherently patriarchal? Is the feminine voice lost in the community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Would Sophia (or any feminine name for God) rescue us from what appeared to be two thousand years of silence? I had to admit that I needed to further explore this part of my experience. Many women see Sunday morning as a male parade with hardly a female voice to be heard. I became uncomfortably aware that this was true in my own church at the time. Was the group at this gathering a tiny minority of disgruntled women to be quickly forgotten, or were they functioning as a prophetic voice, pushing all women to recognize their marginal positions? Had we all been duped into making punch and serving cookies?

This is how I began a precarious—some would say dangerous—journey to discover for myself whether the faith that had been handed down to me was really a tool to keep me quiet, powerless, and clueless. I wasn't sure of the outcome. Did I dare think about these questions or risk asking them out loud? Would entertaining these questions affect my marriage and relationship to my faith community? Then the biggest question of all: Would Jesus go with me if I ventured out on my own? With these questions, I began my tour of women's spirituality.

Since then I have attended numerous conferences, gatherings, small-group circles, and various and assorted events where women were "celebrated" and encouraged to define their spiritual traditions in more feminine ways. Christianity seems to have women coming and going. I dove into theology and scoured church history for signs of female life, trying to make sense of it all. I read everything I could get my hands on, but in my immediate faith community I found myself alone. Aside from my naturally sympathetic husband, nobody in close proximity to me seemed to have a bit of trouble with the spiritual silencing of women.

As I went out looking for answers, I did not have to go very far to conclude that Father-God language is a problem for many. Feminist theologian Mary Daly's much-quoted statement says it best: "If God is male, then male is God." The conclusion is that women will not advance as long as a male God continues to prop up the patriarchy.[1] Although this point of view is understandably appealing to women seeking to redefine Christianity and to radicals who intend to reinvent monotheism forever, even women who have never heard of Mary Daly harbor an underlying suspicion that traditional religion has lied to them and that their brothers and fathers just don't get it. Spiritually restless women sense that something about who God is has been withheld from them. They sense a lie being told about the implications of their female bodies on their spiritual lives.

In this search for answers to my spiritual life as a woman, I had to admit that the gender practices of a community say something profound about what that community believes about God. Practice is, after all, theology; we live as we believe. What I saw and heard was not reassuring. I became aware that many in my religious community believed that if God

was not literally male, God was at least masculine; therefore, men were better suited to speaking authoritatively about God. In some traditional corners of Christianity, this belief came along with a fear of adding feminine connotations to God—a slippery slope that would lead to calling God "Mother." I could hear the lament over the feminization of the church, which I found odd. Hasn't the church always been referred to as the "bride of Christ"? Of course, what is meant by the feminization of the church is that women are taking over. In this scenario, some women have come to believe that to break the hold that this lie has on us requires that we embrace the feminine face of God and write a new story. It was hard for me, at this point, to blame women for taking this route.

The Feminine Wound

Sue Monk Kidd's poignant *Dance of the Dissident Daughter* tells of her journey from the Christian tradition to the feminine Divine. For women who would otherwise find goddess language off-putting, Kidd makes the feminine Divine particularly relevant. Kidd looks just like us. I could identify with her as she faced her "feminine wound," defined as the "original sin of being born female," and her struggle to wake up from a deep sleep that kept her in a state of spiritual unconsciousness.[2] Kidd says that this struggle to find her voice as a woman was a process of giving birth to herself. I could relate to her increasing awareness that her feminine voice had been muffled. When I read her story, I felt as though I were reading my own.

Still, I was looking not so much to give birth to myself as to hold on to my faith in Jesus, which felt more vital to my

self-identity. As I compared notes with Kidd, at times I felt that I was drowning, unable to commit to her conclusions; yet at other times, I was thrilled with new insight. We had asked many of the same questions, gone to the same sources for answers, and come to different conclusions. The struggle to find a unique feminine spirituality wasn't all black and white. There were increasing shades of gray that I would have to negotiate. Like Kidd, I did not want to live the life of a "sanitized" woman—a "good" woman who can't speak from her own knowing. Unlike Kidd, I wasn't ready to ignore Jesus and abandon his historical significance. I came to realize that I could own my faith as a woman, and Jesus would go with me. Plowing through this new territory just meant going the long way around.

Kidd is one example of many women who are caught in this struggle—a very eloquent example. I have gone out of my way to meet women who have left the Christian tradition for one they believe is more woman-friendly. I thought they could help illuminate my own path. More often than not, though, these women had experienced God as a distant, harsh patriarch who has no use for a woman; they, in turn, had no use for a God like that. Others attempted to hold on to Christian tradition by reaching outside the tradition and constructing a hodgepodge of beliefs they could live with. Some women had left the faith and attempted reentry at various points in their lives, only to find themselves put off by the male authority they found within church doors. Others simply felt that Christianity didn't really speak to where they were.

As women are exposed to increased gender awareness in the culture, more of them feel they need to justify staying in any religious tradition. The question becomes no longer whether a spiritually anxious woman will grapple with religious language

and symbols, but when. She may do it in secret, but, eventually, she will ask herself the hard questions about God and her feminine life. That questioning can happen at twenty or fifty. When will she attempt to change the words in the hymns from "God of our Fathers" to "God of our Mothers," whispering the changes to herself? When will she be tempted to change the pronouns in the creeds, abolishing the reign of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the Father, Mother, and Child? When, to relieve spiritual hunger, will she weave a new feminist spirituality altogether?

Other women are bringing a distinct gender awareness with them when they enter Christianity. In 2002, when Jane Fonda, a lifelong agnostic, declared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that she had embraced Christianity, the media buzzed about her conversion from a previously secular life to being "born again." Many speculated about what this meant for Christianity and for Fonda. I feared that she would soon be confessing her sins on the speaker's circuit. At that time I remember telling several of my friends that I wondered how long she would last before she ran into religious patriarchy. Fonda didn't seem to me like the kind of woman who would put up with blatant sexism. By 2005 Fonda had revealed in her memoir, *My Life So Far,* what happened after her surprise conversion: "It wasn't long, however, before I found myself bumping up against certain literal, patriarchal aspects of Christian orthodoxy that I found difficult to embrace."[3] It was probably inevitable that Fonda would seek out an alternative understanding of Christianity.

Fonda entered into Christianity asking questions that had never even crossed our foremothers' minds. After all, the traditions and roles had remained the same for centuries—men and women doing what had been properly assigned to them.

Men did theology, ran the religious institutions, and kept guard over the faith. Women taught the children, passed along the faith at the kitchen table, and attended to the social needs of the community. For many Christian, Jewish, and even Islamic women, this is no longer enough. We want to "do" religion for ourselves by defining our faith in ways that resonate with our experience. For women and men who are perfectly content in their traditional roles, this questioning feels like a threat to their understanding of God and the divine order of the world. As more and more women have attempted to shape the language and symbols of spirituality, what was once simple and uncomplicated has become a truly messy process.

A Spiritual Boomerang

I grew up in the sixties and seventies when women were experiencing fundamental changes in every area of their lives. Liberal feminism left no part of cultural life untouched. The changes that women sought were largely secular, such as opening career and educational opportunities and securing economic and political advancement. Throughout this period of an energized feminist movement, female groundbreaking events were a constant theme. Women who didn't identify themselves as feminist were benefiting as well from the changes at colleges and in the workplace. The feminist movement was less successful, however, in its attempt to redo our domestic lives by reinventing marriage and redefining motherhood. In part, this was because women themselves would accept only so much change. The changes were substantial enough, though, that educated women were less willing than before to accept what was simply assigned to them.

My peers expected not only to work but also to achieve a lot more through their work. Younger women were told they could do anything, and they grew up expecting that they could control their lives—even their spiritual lives.

During this secular phase, feminism didn't seem to have much use for religion. Many of my friends who were pursuing the new career opportunities might still have gone through the motions of minimal religious participation as they ventured into a church for Christmas or a wedding. What I saw among my peers of professional women was that religion, particularly traditional Christianity, had become irrelevant. Some women lived with a sacred-secular split, which allowed them to be one kind of woman at church and another at work. For a few, feminism became the new religion, but for more and more educated and ambitious women, religion receded to the margins of their lives.

In this new and different world, the old religious language and symbols didn't seem to deliver what many women needed. Religion wouldn't ensure the next promotion at work, and it wouldn't secure political power. It couldn't even get men to do the laundry. More women began to view the purpose of religious institutions as simply to prop up the status quo—keeping men and women in their properly defined place, backed up by the authority of God. Yes, there were always those sentimental souls who had time for religion, but up-and-coming women were busy securing real power.

Then by the early 1990s, the feminist dream ran out of steam, and things began to change again. Women who had found hope in the promise of feminism ran into the feminine difference. We realized that we could work like men, but we ended up with different consequences. We could climb the

corporate ladder until a pregnancy threatened to put us on the mommy track. Having tasted enough worldly success to know what it felt like, we finally understood that many of our issues, such as our sense of our own authority, would not be resolved with legal or political power. We were running into walls we never knew existed because we had never gotten this far. We had never stopped to consider that we might be our own obstacle to success.

My peers realized that secular power is a self-limiting process that can only take us so far. After the dust settled from all the changes, interest in religion and spirituality, which historically played a significant role for women, began to return. Yet a traditional religious system seemed to be out of sync with the new realities of self-determined women. Younger women went knocking on church doors, assuming that things had changed, but they were disappointed. The way we practiced religion had not changed. It needed to change.

During the years of transition, not all women abandoned religion. I remained in the church while pursuing new opportunities in the workplace and somehow navigated the tension that drove other women away. I must admit, though, I was often more comfortable at work than in the American church. Like other major institutions, churches could no longer take women for granted. Women in churches became more interested in studying the women of the Bible. Women had an impact on the religious landscape by entering seminary in record numbers. Feminist theologians scoured the attic of our religious traditions, uncovering family secrets and finding new uses for old ideas. Beliefs that before had been deeply held were no longer sacrosanct and became open to new interpretations more appropriate for the new woman.

The bolder women, to the distress of many, took on the religious hierarchy and were ordained as pastors, priests, and rabbis. They would be there for the many women who eventually sought a cure for their spiritual homelessness.

A Feminist Thirst

The time to find a spiritual home had arrived. For me it was like a spiritual spring-cleaning, followed by a garage sale to get rid of what no longer worked. Spirituality writer Carol Flinders sees contemporary women as reconciling a spiritual hunger with a feminist thirst. Many women are now more open to a feminine expression of the Divine that fit their new sensibilities and are asking questions relevant to their spiritual search: What does freedom mean when you are a mother? How do I use my voice effectively in the world when I finally do find it? How do I finally feel at peace with my female body? Many are ready for a new spiritual vocabulary, a new language to articulate our new definition of and relationship to power. The feminine Divine appears to be, if not the answer, at least a way to talk about women's experience.

The latent need that women feel for a woman-affirming spirituality is illustrated by the success of Dan Brown's 2003 best-seller *The Da Vinci Code.* The novel retells Christian history, giving the feminine Divine a prominent place in the plot. Mary Magdalene, who is briefly mentioned in the gospels, becomes the wife of Jesus and bears his love child. Even before this novel made her the heroine *du jour,* Mary Magdalene was a symbol of lost female consciousness over the last two thousand years and is celebrated on her own feast day in Catholic, Episcopal, and Orthodox churches. Brown simply capitalized on what had been there all along.

The Da Vinci Code created a cottage industry of op-ed pieces, commentaries, and online conversations. With cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek,* and numerous books countering many of the "facts" on which the book is based, it got everybody's attention. Art and church historians weighed in on the obvious factual errors in the book. Whenever I served on panels relating to the women's issues raised by the book, what struck me was not that people would ask questions about church history or how the Bible was written and compiled, but that so many people, particularly women, responded deeply to the theme of the feminine Divine. The book has been so popular among women that one newspaper called it a "craze"—an apt description for how women are viewed when it comes to religion. Women in churches, book clubs, and offices found themselves intrigued with the idea that the feminine Divine has somehow been suppressed by a centuries-long conspiracy. Even young women working for the Feminist Majority—a bastion of political feminism—were excited that the book highlighted the feminine Divine. Never mind that the power of the feminine in Brown's book is a derived power, reduced to sexuality and procreation. They call this progress? Even religiously conservative women found the idea, if not acceptable, at least mischievously appealing. Catholics summoned Mary, Mother of God, as their answer to the issue. The strong feelings evoked by the idea of a church conspiracy to suppress the feminine show women's longing to connect a feminine face or voice with Christianity.[4]

No Religion for Women

Increasingly, women inside and outside the church find that when it comes to God, our female perspective matters after all. Women are seeking and finding something different in

the Divine, whether it is within the tradition or outside it. Since theologian Mary Daly's declaration that a religion with a male God was no religion for women, women who are spiritually adventuresome are not just turning to Mary Magdalene or Mary, the mother of Jesus, for models of feminine divinity. Many women have been busy exploring what an altogether alternative spirituality for women would look like.

At a national conference, I attended a workshop on advancing the idea of "the Goddess." I asked, "Does the Goddess serve women well? Do we need this? Does it work?" The resounding answer was "Yes, of course we need her! The Goddess will help women be valued. The Goddess will recapture what has been suppressed about women." Was this true? I had to know.

Interest in the Goddess has been picking up steam in recent years. Like any religion that intends to take up permanent residence as a tradition, it needs a history to give it cultural weight. The legitimacy of the Goddess is currently being put forward by a romanticized myth of a matriarchal prehistory, when women ruled the world and were revered for their life-giving power—a myth that secular leader Gloria Steinem was propagating as early as 1972.[5] I have heard highly educated women bemoan the loss of the ancient matriarchy—an idyllic, harmonious society. The overthrow of this peaceful civilization by patriarchal hordes resulted in hierarchy, violence, and alienation from the earth, which we experience to this day. In *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory,* religion scholar Cynthia Eller examines the evidence (or lack thereof) and concludes that there is little archeological basis for believing in an ancient woman-ruled society that worshiped the Goddess. Instead of helping women, the myth of

a timeless age of female benevolent rule works to maintain stereotypical ideas about women and men. For many contemporary women it does not matter whether the golden age of matriarchy is a myth or history. What matters is how holding fast to this idea functions in our life. The Goddess has returned with a vengeance to play an important role for many women, causing the whole culture to reevaluate how we view the Divine.

What started as the outgrowth of feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s has become the underlying spirituality in women's culture, with the symbol and language of the Goddess now the code for the power and authority of women. Many women no longer believe that they must accept things as they are. We have proven that we can change things by charting a new course and creating new, more empowering stories. Feminist theologian Carol Christ believes that rejecting a male-defined God is not sufficient.[6] God must be replaced with a symbol that evokes the desire in women to see themselves as powerful, deeply connected, and knowing beings. The goddess is everywoman, and everywoman is the goddess—a creative and independent power. As a powerful new metaphor, the goddess influences how women see themselves and their relationship to the Divine.

The feminine Divine is one answer women give to their spiritual questions. For the most part, men led Western theological development by asking questions that were consistent with their experience. Their conclusions reflected the reality that an individual understanding of God is located within a specific individual history and a particular community.[7] Because their curiosity was informed by their own experience, men asked certain questions and ignored others.

Influenced by the Enlightenment, Christian theology began to acquire a need for certainty and began to look and sound much like the science practiced by men.[8] In the name of "universal man," women and their particular perspectives were left out.

"Malestream" theology has emphasized God's attributes of transcendence, justice, power, and dominion, while exhibiting a tendency to silence attributes *culturally* associated with women. Women today who are on a spiritual search for their own knowing have found ways to excavate those previously disregarded attributes of the divine nature, like compassion, nurturance, creativity, and life-giving power—feminine-defined attributes that, when marginalized, result in a dispassionate, unmovable God distant from our everyday lives.

The search for the Goddess assumes that gendered attributes are in opposition to each other, a sort of yin and yang, with women as incurable romantics and men as logical conquerors. According to this way of thinking, in order to embrace the aspects of God that have long been neglected (the cultural feminine), we may have to silence other aspects that are essential to a full understanding of God. Under the surface, however, the search for the feminine Divine assumes that God has a masculine face. We have already accepted what many of us have been given—the masculinization of a God who, in reality, is beyond gender categories. We have forgotten that "feminine" and "masculine" are bodily and socially based categories that can never define the infinite. If we knew a God who was *neither* male nor female but encompassed *all* that is good, we would not settle for either a masculinized God or a Goddess.

In their search for a Divine Being with a different kind of nature, Goddess devotees are not settling for a transcendent Goddess "out there." There is no need for proof that she exists. That would be too similar to the distant God some of us have inherited in our religious legacies. We don't want an abstraction disconnected from our everyday lives. Maybe some women leap into the arms of the Goddess because all of us desperately want the Divine to walk in our Mary Janes. We want a divine being that is near to us and our female experience. Since a hermaphroditic God is just a little hard for anyone to visualize, some women are creating a Westernized, postmodern pantheon offering Greek, African, and Hindu goddesses for our choosing. No matter her name, this new goddess promises to soothe our shaking self-doubt.

Femininity and masculinity, always socially negotiated, were hardwired in the ancient gods and goddesses. Although empowering in one sense, this is limiting in another. Whether benevolent or malevolent, the Goddess embodies the best and the worst of what we believe about woman's nature. As creators of symbols, we project onto the Divine our highest human aspirations: love, courage, creativity, and a profound sense of justice and beauty. The great and "good" Mother is the domestic weaver—a powerful intuitive, waiting for our call.

We also project onto the Divine our greatest fears and the worst of our humanity. On a bad PMS day, the Goddess is the bitch, the woman scorned, the undomesticated wild and dangerous one. In the ancient pantheon, all the devotion, treachery, and jealousy of human relationships were played out in the commotion of divine life. Kali-Ma, the Hindu goddess of death and rebirth, becomes the Dark Mother who chews up and swallows her own baby.

Pop culture also reflects women's spiritual wanderings into the realm of the Goddess. Even though serious devotees of Goddess religion seek to emphasize the interdependence of all life, popular notions of the Goddess are highly individualistic. In the pop version of goddess spirituality, we read *The Red Tent,* take Web quizzes to discover the goddess who fits us best, and incorporate her into our vocabulary. Goddess religion has never been monotheistic, so there is a goddess for every need. We can call on an inner goddess who understands our motivations and will nurture us into becoming the women we were meant to be. Lilith is the original rambunctious feminist, meeting our need to assert ourselves. We can call on Ishtar for fertility, Tara for compassion, or, closer to home, the Virgin of Guadalupe for liberation. Of course, there is Aphrodite, goddess of love, Athena, goddess of wisdom, and the Martha Stewart of goddesses, Hestia, goddess of the hearth, through whom we can recapture cozy domesticity by erecting home altars out of the mementos of our lives. We can purchase herbal teas, aromatherapy soaps, and fashion to fit the feminine Divine within ourselves. In fact, the goddess has become so integrated with consumerism, I expect I'll soon catch her shopping at Banana Republic!

As good as this sounds, the current benevolent and romanticized symbol of the Goddess is not an accurate one; the goddess that is now emerging seems cut off from her real history. According to Near East scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky, the ancient goddesses were not enshrined for the benefit of women but were one aspect of the official religion of male-dominated societies.[9] In pagan cultures, where female infanticide was completely accepted and abortion was frequently imposed on women, the goddess cult remained mysteriously

silent. Could it be that the idea of Goddess was part of patriarchy's underpinning? Goddess worship never resulted in equality for women.

In ancient religions, a deity's gender was crucial to the role and function he or she played within a polytheistic system. More often than not, the goddess's divine power was tied to her biological role as mother. Because the goddess was associated with fertility, she often required bloody and terrifying appeasement if earth and womb were to yield their fruit. The Goddess ensconced motherhood forever into the sacred and cosmic realm, solidifying real women's "feminine" (read "frail and disempowered") place in the world. Do we want the Divine to be subject to our limits, our foibles, and our oppressions? Perhaps in the desire to have our voices heard and our experience acknowledged, we have created a Divine saddled with our troubles, often finding themselves paramours, sorrowful mothers, and rape victims of male counterparts. Did they fare any better than the rest of us? In goddess spirituality, instead of freedom to become what we wish, we may be setting ourselves up to become merely victims of a philandering Zeus.

Nevertheless, the popular goddesses of today are fun and sexy symbols of where women are now, speaking for women and identifying with our contemporary experience. As I sought to find answers to my own questions about God, however, I found the goddess to be too familiar for my spiritual comfort. As revealed by book titles such as *A Goddess Is a Girl's Best Friend,* she is too chummy, too hip to produce a sense of awe. I saw that as we attempt to validate our experiences, we risk being trapped by them. The popular goddesses of today seem to confirm what culture has believed all along: women are spirituality trite and inconsequential.

I learned other important things on my tour through goddess spirituality. Women's collective impulse toward the goddess yields some positive results, in that it requires that we get beyond making God an abstraction. Our view of the Divine must be connected to our real lives in some way. I learned that the appeal of the Goddess grows out of women's quest for freedom to become a whole human being with the capacity *both* to nurture *and* effect change in the world. We want to speak from our own female knowing, yet at the same time, many of us are uncomfortable with the implications wrapped up in the Goddess. We want a spirituality that can accommodate the individual particulars of each seeker—gender, race, and social placement—without reducing us to those particulars. We want to build a flourishing community that also includes men. I came to see that our view of God had to be fuller and richer in order for women to finally feel as though they could come home.

With all this mix of positive and negative possibilities, what purpose does the feminine Divine serve, not only for women but for society as a whole? The search for the feminine face of the Divine is an attempt to correct a distortion about God's nature and about women's reflections of God's image. The emergence of the feminine Divine has filled a cultural need in our search for holistic knowledge and spirituality because our religious ideas are affected by cultural values and biases. In a society where science and technology are the main modes of success (and, therefore, being), men are associated with progress, rationality, and conquest of nature, and women are associated with the body and nature; the feminine has been devalued. This knowledge split, combined with the social power that men hold, has ultimately resulted in the

masculinization of God, who becomes a symbol of order and control and whose name is invoked in order to keep women in line. As women have gained social power, they themselves have attempted to project onto God their own experience and understanding of the world. (The divine oneness continues to be made into our human projection of a dualistic world.) The result is a battle between a feminine and masculine deity and a struggle to determine which one is worthy of women's allegiance.

The reemergence of the Goddess as a woman and nature-affirming deity signals a search for a spirituality that is close to where we live: in our bodies and the natural world. Even as technology and media privilege one kind of knowledge through goddess spirituality, women are asserting a different kind of knowledge claim that has been identified with them all along: an intuitive and interconnected way of knowing. The feminine Divine appears to be a ready-made metaphor for the knowledge the current culture devalues. Very much like the Romantic poets' response to the Enlightenment, Starhawk, a leading voice for earth-based and goddess religion, expresses and responds to the current estrangement many women feel. Instead of a radically individualistic, alienated way of being, she seeks the spiritual consciousness of "immanence—the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance."[10] For many of us who crave community, affirmation of our bodies, and reconnection to the earth, Starhawk's notion of immanence answers many questions. The fleshiness we crave in our religious experiences gets lost in traditional theological abstractions. Devotion to the Goddess attempts to bridge that gulf.

The goddess symbol embraces women as life givers from first menstruation to menopause. Instead of evoking deep shame, the rhythms and cycles of women's lives are seen as powerful events; by creating rituals for first menstruation and menopause, women are taking these significant milestones out of the dark. In a time when we are increasingly alienated from our bodies through a variety of body-assaulting means, from abortion to cosmetic surgery, we long for a spirituality that recognizes our powerful bodily experiences. As we struggle to overcome self-doubt and become holders of wisdom, the goddess allows women to frame questions for the culture. Can women be authentic knowers, in both an intuitive and an intellectual sense, and actors in the world instead of tentative participants? Can women know the Divine for themselves? Can women gain the authority to speak and act out that knowledge? In order to answer these questions, women are attempting to create out of new cloth a feminist spirituality that puts us at the center of the knowing process. My fear, however, is that embracing the Goddess in this way deprives us of the possibility of a holistic, woman-affirming spirituality within the Jesus tradition. For me, such deprivation is not a viable option.

Jesus or Sophia?

As I wrestled with my questions about God, I wondered: Would the Jesus tradition allow me to answer the questions I was asking? I couldn't affirm tradition for tradition's sake. Our religious experience could no longer be about simply repeating what has been handed to us, no questions asked. To be responsible spiritual beings requires that we question what we are given so we can come to own it for ourselves. Yet unlike

professional feminist theologians, I didn't have the luxury of speculating by deconstructing everything I had inherited. Neither was I ready to throw out the baby with the bath water. I had experienced the essential core of the Christian faith as true, even though I found certain cultural expressions of it perplexing. I also had to make this work in real life, which for me meant staying connected to my roots. My need to reconcile women's contemporary experience with my faith took me back to my childhood.

I first learned about Jesus on the streets and in the plazas of my native Buenos Aires—literally, on the streets; my early childhood was not spent in church buildings. Church was a semiformal community of believers who gathered together on Friday night for three hours of prayer and singing in preparation to go out on Saturday and Sunday and proclaim the good news. Sunday school consisted of Bible stories illustrated with flannel-board figures put up in the narrow alleys of *villas miserias,* the desperately poor shantytowns into which we ventured. I learned about Jesus by listening and doing. I learned about Jesus by seeing hopelessly marginal people emerge from alcoholism, lifelong unemployment, and domestic abuse. The combination of a radical faith and an empowering community made this life transformation possible.

This living, breathing spirituality was embodied in an active faith with an overarching concern for justice for the worker, the poor, and the less powerful and was driven by a belief in the pursuit of justice on earth and the faith that a new community would eventually be ushered in. Our Protestant community saw itself as outside the dominant religious and social system. Our community was by no means perfect, but it did provide me with glimpses of what was possible. As

a Protestant in a Catholic country, I gained an institutional outsider's sensitivity. This "outsider" view has shaped my Christianity and now serves me well in understanding my female spiritual experience. In fact, the treasure trove of wisdom in this living tradition allowed me to begin making the connection between the wisdom of Jesus and the wisdom women are seeking today.

My encounter with women who were using the name Sophia as a divine name pushed me to look at Jesus in a different way. Had Jesus and Sophia emerged out of the same tradition? The Jewish culture in which Jesus lived was steeped in the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew sages. It embraced an essential idea about the nature of God: Yahweh is One. This God of Israel was the eternally wise Creator who abolished the entire complex pantheon known at the time. Yahweh had been revealed to Moses as the "I AM WHO I AM"—a self-defined being who was absolute in perfection, power, and beauty. God was not only a consuming fire of justice but also of love, expressing compassion and mercy toward his people. Today, we take for granted the statement that God is love, but in the ancient polytheistic system, gods weren't concerned with love for humanity. The establishment of Yahweh as an all-encompassing God was a major break from the surrounding polytheistic culture, setting Israel apart as God's covenant people.

Even though the sages understood God's loving-kindness and mercy, they also believed that Yahweh could never be known directly. To break into the pure, divine presence meant certain death. God bridged this gulf by saying, "I am coming to you in the thickness of a cloud."[11] The cloud—God's hiddenness—allowed them the possibility of insight into the mystery of Divine Wisdom, protecting his people

and awakening awe in them.[12] Israel gained a veiled glimpse into Divine Wisdom.

Jewish scriptures reveal God's power as his creative Word, which shapes reality and brings life out of nothingness. God's Word, once uttered, has a life of its own. God's Word is not merely a collection of sounds or of letters on a page; the Word is an independent reality. The Jewish people understood that without the Word, there is no wisdom, and by God's Word, we receive the Wisdom of God: "For the Lord giveth wisdom: and out of his mouth cometh understanding."[13] The ordinary person only heard God's Word through priest or prophet, never directly. God also made himself known through miraculous historical events like fire from heaven, a parting of the sea, and earthquakes. Prophets had to interpret these infrequent events, which meant that on a day-to-day basis, the ordinary person was on her own, left to follow a complex religious code and wait for a coming Messiah.

Against this backdrop, the Jewish sages sought to give common people guidance for everyday life, to make sense of the mundane, and to read the world for the wisdom of God that is revealed in it. By studying nature and humanity, they tried to give people a "God of the gaps"—one infused in daily life. Because they believed God created everything through the power of his Word, God's Wisdom permeated everything. The sages sought to decipher and teach the wisdom that was hidden from the casual observer. The rich, deep tradition infuses their wisdom literature, which offers guidance on work, family life, civic culture, sexuality, and fair dealings in the marketplace; they even provided counsel on how to make and keep friends, choose a spouse, rear a child, and order one's life to yield abundance and longevity. For thousands of years, the questions they asked and attempted to

answer have remained relevant and still interest us today. While growing up I was encouraged to read the wisdom literature, which, more often than not, was puzzling. But I did gain a sense that there was rhyme and reason to life, an inherent but hidden wise poetry to our days.

One of the most remarkable features of the wisdom literature is the sages' description of wisdom as a woman. In the *Meshalin,* or biblical Proverbs, Woman Wisdom is identified with God, present at Creation and infusing all. She seeks close engagement with the world and delights to be with humanity. Contrary to gender-stereotyped images of women, she is in no way passive but is portrayed as a liberator and an establisher of justice, a lover in pursuit of humanity who, in return, responds to those who love her.

Woman Wisdom is a strong literary tool with no equal in the biblical literature. Woman Wisdom is more than a simple personification but is not quite a personal being. Theological speculation about why the Jewish sages attempted to speak about wisdom with a feminine metaphor has yielded different interpretations. Is Woman Wisdom strictly a one-dimensional personification of an attribute of God? Is Woman Wisdom a sneaky disguise for the Goddess? Or is she simply a tool of a patriarchal system with no redeeming role for real women? One possible answer is that she reflects the influence of women sages in the royal courts. Another is that the literature's emphasis on knowledge gained through daily life is highly associated with women. Regardless, I believe Woman Wisdom can be, for us, a positive model of female power.

One of the key aspects is Woman Wisdom's strength and possession of her own knowing. Woman Wisdom preaches with authority, orders the world through her creative agency,

and welcomes all to her table.[14] Woman Wisdom is eager to teach us the way to long life, justice, and abundance. In the streets, she cries out to those who need direction. Over the noise of the marketplace, she promises to protect those who follow her and laughs at those who don't listen. There is no hesitation in her voice, no doubt in her proclamation. She demands attention, and there is nothing timid about her. It's a rare woman who will dare speak with her level of confidence.

Woman Wisdom also has a nemesis—the Woman of Folly—who leads foolish young men astray into chaos and confusion. Instead of life, she offers death to those who follow her. Both seductive and dangerous, Woman of Folly borrows from a negative view of women. Yet the intent of these literary devices is not to teach about good and bad women; rather, it illustrates two ways of life. The way of Woman Wisdom offers abundance and life. We are advised to follow in her way.

The role and meaning of Woman Wisdom is best understood in the context of an ancient culture. Monotheistic Israel was surrounded by cultures in which numerous household gods and goddesses were the norm, any of which could be called on for help with household, field, and livestock. All members of a household had their own personal god to help them fulfill their designated role. Today, goddess figurines have become trendy, fun things to have around for décor and a bit of inspiration, but for ancient people, these gods were crucial to their view of the world. This pantheon provided a sense of order in a frightening world.[15] Imagine how isolated from their neighbors an ordinary Jewish family felt. Yahweh was such an overarching deity that they were forbidden to reduce God to a mere stone figure. The lack of a physical symbol for God denied the Jewish people the

emotional comfort they must have seen in the household idols of their neighbors. Sometimes the temptation was too great, so they joined their neighbors and worshiped the same gods.

Through Woman Wisdom, the Jewish sages could provide their people with a picture of the immanence of God.[16] Without compromising God's oneness and transcendence, they could borrow from the surrounding cultures' understanding of divinity as closely related to wisdom.[17] In response to the surrounding religions that worshiped the earth and tried to appease its wrathful nature, they could embrace their own theology of Creation by which they placed all created things under the Creator.[18] Therefore, instead of fearing the natural world, people could be comforted by the wisdom of the earth, our sister. Over time this understanding of wisdom grew in complexity for the Jewish people, finally becoming associated with Torah—God's commandments and covenant with his people.[19]

Out of this rich Hebrew understanding of wisdom came Jesus, preaching in the tradition of Woman Wisdom. From a young age, he is described as filled with wisdom. Jesus calls on those who are marginalized and lost to come to him. Speaking in parables, paradoxical sayings, and indirect figurative language, all of which is characteristic of wisdom literature, he left many to wonder what he meant. Jesus, the sage, delivered one-liners like, "Follow me, and let the dead bury the dead" or "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a ditch"—sayings that often puzzled his closest disciples. His parables were short stories that invited the listener to see things from a different point of view. Through parables he created a world of reversals where the first was last and the

last first, where the worldly wise became fools and insiders found themselves shut out. With repetitive themes of justice and wisdom, Jesus continually directed his listeners to the ancient Jewish scriptures as a source of understanding.

When asked by his closest followers why he spoke in parables instead of speaking plainly, he said, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."[20] Like Woman Wisdom, Jesus presented himself as holding hidden wisdom that only he could reveal. Like the ancient sages, he made an otherwise inaccessible God available to the ordinary person. In this way, Jesus reclaimed the wisdom tradition from those who had reduced it to obedience to the law. Knowing God would be reflected in embodied wisdom rather than knowledge of the law and religious observance. The everyday practices in one's life, such as actively loving one's neighbor, were how a true relationship with God would be measured. The followers of Jesus, shaped by the Jewish sage tradition, recognized the wisdom nature of his teaching.

Jesus didn't hesitate to claim the authority of Woman Wisdom. Presenting himself as Wisdom, he said, "Someone greater than Solomon is here"—a remarkable claim to the ears of people who considered Solomon the greatest sage of all. Opposed by the religious power brokers, he declared that the Queen of Sheba, who had sought out the wisdom of Solomon, would stand in judgment of them. By implication, a woman was wiser than they—an obvious insult within a patriarchal system. In defending his healing work to those who opposed him, he simply said, "Wisdom is justified by her deeds."[21] In rebuking those who burden people with religious rules, he responded, "Therefore the Wisdom of God

also said. . . ."[22] In his teaching and action, Jesus claimed the Wisdom of God as his own identity. Jesus took the wisdom tradition of the Jewish sages a step further. He dispensed with speaking for God but instead spoke as the Wisdom of God—a declaration that enraged the religious authorities and moved others to faith.[23] Those who believed him had good reason to come to the conclusion that Jesus *himself* was the embodiment of Wisdom and not just one of the many traveling sages of the time. In one parable with a striking similarity to what is found in the wisdom literature, Jesus tells of a woman who is seeking a lost coin. Quickly she lights a lamp and thoroughly sweeps her house. When she finds the coin, she calls her friends to celebrate with her, because what was lost is now found.[24] Those who heard this simple parable would have recognized the search for Wisdom and Wisdom searching for those who are lost. When Jesus said that he had come to seek that which was lost, by implication he was identifying himself as Wisdom looking for lost humanity. His audience was baffled.

Jesus' claims to both divinity and wisdom left no room for opposition. He spoke in the first person in what are known as the "I AM" sayings. In a series of public addresses, Jesus identified himself by saying, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the door, I am the life, and I am the authentic wine. These statements echoed God's self-disclosure to Moses; his audience would recognize them as images from wisdom literature.[25] Woman Wisdom had made the same claims. The parallelism between Woman Wisdom and Jesus is striking. Repeatedly through his teachings, Jesus declared himself not only to be Wisdom among us but also God.

The wisdom tradition was such an essential part of the Jewish understanding of God that early Christians began to talk about Jesus as the Wisdom of God. Early hymns and songs reflect the understanding of Wisdom as the Word—the logos of God—made flesh. As Christians reread the Jewish scripture, they heard in Woman Wisdom the voice of Jesus, the Christ. In their understanding there was no way to separate wisdom, by which the world was created, from the breathing, living Jesus who walked their dusty roads. Wisdom cloaked in human flesh is neither inaccessible nor disconnected from our history; rather, it's acquainted with our ways: hunger, pain, suffering, weariness, and, ultimately, death. In Jesus, his early followers experienced Wisdom as a healing, creating, and celebratory power attuned to their bodies and the earth.

Like the ancient Jewish people, we feel that the God we inherited has become inaccessible to us, not only as women but as human beings. God seems too distant from our everyday pain and pleasure. We are left unable to read our lives, understand their underlying meaning, or make sense of our inconsistencies. We need a recovery of the wisdom tradition of the Jewish sages and of Jesus—a tradition that teaches us to seek wisdom through the observation of nature, attention to sacred text, and a community that shares in a common history. Ultimately, this tradition teaches that the path to true wisdom is through an encounter with the eternally wise God. I believe we can recover the wisdom we need. Even as Woman Wisdom speaks with authority, it is our encounter with the Wisdom of God that will allow us the power to know and speak for ourselves. It will break through our self-doubt and allow us to flourish as women in the world. As

wisdom seekers we experience multiple barriers, some that we built and others that have been built for us. In the next chapters we will look at some of the barriers that have kept women from experiencing this type of knowledge of God and of ourselves.