Hindu *Amman* Religion as a Post-Patriarchal Women's Spirituality

Alleyn Diesel
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

Abstract

In two previous articles I have, from slightly different perspectives, explained my belief that the ancient Dravidian *Amman* religion of south India is women-focused, encapsulating in its characteristics and mythology the potential for the empowerment of contemporary women (Diesel 2002a & b). I believe that these Goddesses have the potential to act, and are already to some extent acting, as empowering role models for their women devotees. I wish here to develop in more detail my contention that this religion, particularly as I have witnessed it in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, meets the criteria for women's spirituality, offering the possibility of support, wellbeing, and possibly transformation, to contemporary women. My contention is that this ancient and possibly pre-patriarchal religion has the potential to offer a valuable post-patriarchal spirituality to both Hindu and other women.

Introduction

The woman, clad in a dark red sari, stands before the *murti* (image) of Kali/Kaliamman in the small shrine in her back yard in the suburb of Northdale, Pietermaritzburg, and lights the incense and camphor on the brass tray she holds in her hand. She calls on the Mother to hear her, and "feels her coming closer". She smells the incense as overpowering, "filling me with the most beautiful smell in the world. And then the Mother comes, and the mountain falls on my shoulders." Seated cross-legged on the floor of the shrine, rocking gently in her trance, she is now the powerful, authoritative Goddess herself, and the people who have been waiting for her counsel sit before her either singly or in family groups to tell

her their problems. Their concerns involve requests for the healing of a wide range of ailments, such as curing sterility in women; helping women who have unfaithful husbands, who drink too much, abandon them, and beat them for not producing children; helping young girls to find husbands; and exorcising evil spirits from houses. Women who have been told by doctors that they are unable to fall pregnant, are assured that if they go home trusting in the Mother's power they will fall pregnant, and in a number of cases this is what has happened. With heart problems she "does a prayer to the Mother" and then gives the person ash from the burnt camphor on her tray which they are to mix with sugar and water and drink or rub on their bodies or foreheads. Husbands who drink and cause trouble are severely dealt with by the Mother, being told to give up the drink, and on many occasions they are so chastised by this censure that they improve dramatically. Even if the husbands refuse to come to see her, the wives are often helped, as the *darshan* of being in the presence of the Mother "gives them marvellous support". Prayers can also be performed to "help the spirit come out" in women, so they are able to experience the power of Goddess possession. Often women who experience possession are invited to attend other privately organised Goddess ceremonies where they are believed to bring with them and to manifest the powerfully healing and blessing presence of the Mother, which adds sanctity to the rituals (Diesel 1998: 78-80). As "payment" for these various services, devotees often leave small monetary offerings on the incense tray or, if the petition is believed to have been successful, present the healer with a gift.

Why the Need for a Women Centred Spirituality?

It is widely acknowledged in feminist circles that the androcentric nature of all contemporary world religious traditions results in enhancing the status of men and subordinating women. Women's religious experience is generally one of oppression because of the tendency to take for granted that male experience is normative, that it is "natural" (divinely ordained) for men to dominate women. This is justified by regarding women as not only physically weaker than men, but also as intellectually and morally inferior, so that their oppression is perpetuated. By not including women in many of its activities and experiences, male-dominated religion alienates them and diminishes their identity. They are not acknowledged as full members of their religious communities, their contribution is regarded as secondary and merely supportive, so that their voices are not considered valuable enough to be heard. They are therefore relegated to second-class status in the culture and religion into which they were born.

Hinduism has, traditionally, not permitted women a separate, independent identity, but only an identity acquired from a male relative, namely, father, husband, or eldest son after the death of the husband (Laws of Manu). Moreover, the custom of *sati* (widow burning) bore witness to the belief that a woman has

no right to continue to live after the death of her husband, often because she is believed to be responsible for his welfare, and his death was at times seen as due to her negligence (Kinsley 1986: 76). Furthermore, she is traditionally required to worship her husband as a god, obeying all his commands, even if they are morally wrong or impact negatively on her.

However, in spite of the male dominance in most religious traditions, women demonstrate their enduring interest in matters of ultimate reality by often forming the majority of devotees at religious gatherings, frequently finding a considerable sense of fulfilment in daily home-based, and life cycle, rituals, in the preparation of religious food, and in the conveying of religious traditions to children; all these activities giving valuable meaning and structure to their lives.

Even though many religions have begun accommodating changes that improve the lot of women, these changes are too often offered in a patronising, half-hearted fashion, with women being told that they have "an equal, but different" (usually subordinate) role to play.

The irony of this situation is that by definition religion should be life-giving and liberatory, promoting the wellbeing of all its adherents by offering support to all followers throughout the various stages of life, with its difficulties, tragedies and triumphs, and supplying satisfactory answers to questions of ultimate significance.

For many reasons, then, some women have come to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion towards all patriarchally controlled religions, largely because of their marginalizing and silencing of women, and their reluctance to challenge unjust structures. Thus they regard most religious traditions as irredeemably sexist, and despair of their ability to offer them a truly liberating and transformative experience.

The Characteristics and Mythology of *Amman* Goddesses

The folk or village tradition of south India, which is dominated by the *Amman* (Mother) Goddesses, is Dravidian in origin, belonging to the aboriginal inhabitants of the sub-continent, and probably has direct connections with the Indus Valley Civilization of c.2500-1500 BCE (Brubaker 1983: 149). This civilization almost certainly predates the Aryan domination (c.1500 BCE), but ultimately the Aryans became the rulers of India, relegating the Dravidians to an inferior place in the caste system of Aryan devising (Elmore 1913: 1-3). The indigenous Dravidian religion of south India still retains numerous features which are non-Aryan and non-Vedic (Klostermaier 1989: 278).

The numerous *Amman* Goddesses preserve an extremely ancient form of religion, and share many characteristics with one another, many of which highlight a tradition where women's experience is given centre stage.

Among the most important of these are, firstly, their close affinity with the

natural world, illustrated by their being represented by natural features such as stones, trees, anthills, rather than more anthropomorphic images. Further, as Earth Mothers they are believed to be concerned with the local interests and wellbeing of the inhabitants of the village, responsible for the fertility of all creatures, for rain, good crops, as well as for protection from famine, disease, demons and premature death. They are immanent in the world, with no real separation seen between the sacred and the secular. All life is sacred, the entire natural world is infused with spirit, so that the divine can be encountered at every turn.

Secondly, this immanence of divinity is illustrated in the phenomenon of possession which is very common in *Amman* religion, where a deity is believed temporarily to inhabit the body of a devotee. The Goddess manifests herself in human bodies, thus showing her power and her ability to communicate and heal. So the divine can frequently be enshrined and encountered in female bodies.

Thirdly, these Mothers are not only responsible for the positive aspects of existence, but are directly associated with the dark, fierce, destructive, untamable side of the natural world. They are reminders of the inherent ambiguities of life; that the very forces that contribute to the continuity and stability of life and the social order, can also threaten its existence.

Fourthly, they are also ambivalent sexually, being described as "virgin", meaning, not sexually inexperienced, but independent of male control, not having male consorts. As both mother and virgin they are often regarded as "dangerous" because in their creative, protective and destructive activities they are not answerable to any external (male) authority.

Although few written sacred texts exist, what is available of their mythology further reflects their complex sexuality and anger, by often involving stories of virtuous, faithful women who are abused and violated by men, sometimes by sexual assault (Kinsley 1986: 200-201). The Draupadi and Durga myths (*Mahabharata* and *Devi Mahatmyam*, respectively) are particularly representative, with their accounts of women overcoming the onslaughts of various males and thereby helping to restore the order and stability of society (Diesel 2002a & b). Often stories of women who were maltreated and killed by men recount how these righteously angry women were transformed into Goddesses who demand veneration from their communities in order to protect the members from further ill-treatment or calamity (Elmore 1913; Whitehead 1921; Diesel 2002a & b). Although many of these accounts are obviously ancient, preserved in the government gazetteers and district manuals of the Madras Government Museum (Elmore 1913: :xii-xiii), others are far more recent, incorporating the tales of women who became *sati* by being burnt on their husbands' funeral pyres (Dubois 1906: 406-415; Bumiller 1990: 62-74). These texts of women's suffering because of patriarchal requirements, are witness to the persistence and power of the tradition of revering women who have died in extraordinary fashions, as well as reflecting the experience of hundreds of thousands of women worldwide.[1]

This revering of humans noted for their purity and power, or who died violent, untimely deaths, were murdered, driven to suicide, or died in childbirth, and elevating them to divine status, indicates the interweaving of the sacred and the secular, the supernatural and the mundane.

The *Amman* religion almost certainly pre-dates the Brahmanical caste system, operating in a more egalitarian fashion without reliance on a priestly caste, and permitting people from all strata of society to participate, regardless of gender or caste (Kinsley 1986: 199). It is thus a religion which appeals to the poor and marginalized of society, particularly women and *dalits* (outcastes).

It is also of significance that *Amman* religion does not give the same emphasis as does the Brahmanical tradition to female pollution and the accompanying necessity for ritual purification. Female functions are regarded as far more naturally acceptable, as even the Goddess herself is, at times, believed to menstruate and give birth. As the Goddess is also closely associated with death, disease and blood, she is believed to be less concerned with purity than are the deities of the Brahmanical pantheon. Women, therefore, are recorded as playing prominent roles in *Amman* rituals (Whitehead 1921: 79; 150).

It is the festivals of these Mother Goddesses that provide the meaning of these seemingly paradoxical and puzzling deities. In the past a festival would be announced when some crisis such as flood, drought or epidemic ravaged the village. The inhabitants would then spring into action to call on the Goddess for assistance, and would arrange rituals to ensure her healing presence. The Goddess is believed to be both the initiator of the disease (evidence of her anger at neglect, or assault), and the healer of the disease, so she needs reverence and propitiation to restore order and wellbeing to the community.

The core ritual and climax of the festival is the sacrifice of a male animal, interpreted as a gift to placate her anger, and as a representation of her defeat and slaughter of what were believed to be the invading male demons of disruption and disorder. Male buffaloes were the original and most usual victims, and are directly associated with the Goddess text, the *Devi Mahatmyam*, which tells of the Goddess Durga responding to the appeals of the male deities to rescue the world from the chaos wrought by male demons whom the male deities were unable to defeat. She beheaded the Buffalo Demon, Mahisasura, so restoring peace and order to the world. Brubaker has pointed to the appropriateness of this sacrifice, as the buffalo is a powerful and unpredictable beast which often invades cultivated lands, causing great chaos and distress to ordered communities (Brubaker 1983: 152). Its beheading in the festival symbolises the Goddess's triumph over threatening demonic forces.[2]

The Mothers, divine females, are thus shown as the only protection for their children and the civilized world from the marauding male destroyers, and their devotees must identify with their struggle by participating in the festivals which re-enact the myth of female power overcoming evil and restoring order in the

face of male disorder and destruction.

Although most studies of these fierce, independent, seemingly unpredictable Goddesses express puzzlement, and even condemnation, at their wild and apparently frightful and uncontrolled behaviour, they tend almost entirely to ignore the fact that it is more usually males who behave in ways that disrupt the order of society, bringing destruction and distress (Elmore 1913; Whitehead 1921; Babb 1975). Finally, it is the Goddess, who through her battle with the demons and the forces of evil, achieves the restoration of order (*dharma*), healing and peace. The male conqueror/captor, female victim/captive/slave/harlot scenario is reversed in the Durga myth, and other stories of the Goddess vindicated.

This, then, is the powerful, and somewhat unexpected, message for women enshrined in the ancient *Amman* religion: that women (and men) must identify themselves with the Goddess, and appropriate her *shakti* (female energy), in the battle against the structural violence of a male-dominated social order; that it is women who need to initiate the revolution for a more egalitarian, peaceful society, as they have most to gain from the new regime. Even the ancient mythology of the Goddess in the *Devi Mahatmyam* preserves the belief that only a strong, independent woman (a divine female) is able to accomplish what the male deities could not: namely, the restoration of peace and orderliness in the world, after the radical disruption by male demons.

The truth preserved in the mythology and rituals of these ancient Goddesses is that sexual relationships in a patriarchal society tend almost always to be ambiguous and ambivalent, with males expected to control women, and sex too often confused with domination and violence, which are particularly harmful for women. There is a mixture of attraction and repulsion, of submission as well as the need for independence, of surrender and yet conflict, of trust accompanied by suspicion, of eroticism tinged with violation/violence.

So the phenomenon of the Dravidian *Amman* Goddesses, highlights the continued conflict between the sexes in a patriarchal context. The example and independence of the Goddess can be regarded as representing the possibility of challenging and overcoming the institutionalized and destabilizing aggression and violence of patriarchal structures.

The Worship of the *Amman* Goddesses in KwaZulu-Natal

The veneration of the *Amman* Goddesses in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) dates back to the earliest days of the Tamil Hindu immigrants who were brought to this province in South Africa from 1860 onwards, and, in general, has meticulously preserved the rituals as they were performed by their ancestors in south India (Diesel 2002a: 7). The most venerated of these deities are Mariamman, Draupadi, Ankalamman, Gengaiamman, as well as Kali and Durga, who, although officially regarded as Brahmanical, almost certainly also have non-Aryan, non-Vedic

origins and share many of the characteristics of the ancient Dravidian Goddesses (Elmore 1913: 5; Payn 1979: 68; Whitehead 1921: 24).

There are numerous temples dedicated to these Goddesses, Mariamman being the most widely worshipped, with the most temples named for her. Their worship takes the form of large, high profile annual festivals; daily veneration at their temples; and many home-based rituals centred round small shrines in back yards. Mother veneration in one form or another is the most visible and popular from of Hindu worship in KZN. All *Amman* places of worship are extremely busy, with their festivals attracting huge crowds, as well as a daily stream of devotees visiting temples to perform *puja* which frequently involves supplication for healing of a variety of ailments. Women play a very visible part in these devotions, often forming the majority of participants (Diesel 2002a: 10).

The most notable features of this worship (also typical of all Tamil worship) are the performance of elaborate ancient rituals; the taking of vows; austerities such as pinning the body with needles and hooks, and firewalking; possession trances; the emphasis on the propitiation of deities; and a strong concentration on healing.

The annual *Amman* festivals at temples - firewalking for Draupadi being the most popular – are organised by the all-male temple committees, so that male leadership predominates, although many women often play prominent roles as devotees, many becoming possessed by one or other of the fierce *Amman* Goddesses, and displaying wild behaviour not normally tolerated in a traditional Hindu woman. As illustrated in the Introduction, possessed people (both women and men) are revered as divine, acquiring supernatural powers which enable them to bestow blessings, act as oracles, and to heal. Numerous women who regularly attend festivals have established a reputation for themselves as healers and are regarded with great respect and reverence.

It is, however, the smaller temples and home-based healing practices which most illustrate the central emphasis on healing, and women's involvement. Many of these are run by women who, as described in the Introduction, on being consulted become possessed by one of the powerful Goddesses so that they are now regarded as manifesting and transmitting her potency to heal. In this mode the healer dispenses advice and blessings designed to promote a cure (Kuper 1960: 239, 257; Diesel 1998: 78-9). It is women who most frequently come to seek healing and counsel for dealing with domestic and family problems. These women healers are, obviously, offering a much needed service. Much of their work consists of counselling, reassurance, and helping to relieve stress. People always take away with them some form of "medication", in the form of *prasad*, a blessed substance such as ash, a lime, rose water, or incense which the Mother has assured them will help to relieve the pain. Women have been able to sit before a woman, and communicate "face to face" with a female divinity who "hears" their problems, and then to leave with a sense that their concerns have been

treated seriously and respectfully. In a society where women are treated as subordinate, usually sidelined by mainstream religion, where they are frequently denied access to important resources, particularly medical, and their concerns and problems often dismissed as unimportant, this can be powerfully encouraging and healing.

This women-dominated aspect of the *Amman* religion in KZN is so popular that at times it appears to pose a threat to the all-male temple leadership, some of the women healers having been dismissed as simply running "backyard temple cults" (Diesel 1998).

In recent years in Pietermaritzburg media attention focused on the fact that the all-male temple committee had for many years forbidden women to walk across the fire at the Draupadi firewalking festival, giving very sexist reasons for their exclusion, such as women having delicate feet and therefore more likely to be burnt, as well as the male fear that women aspired to "take over" the festival. So certain women, led by the Goddess devotee and healer described above, spoke out against the unfairness of this, expressing their belief that this was, particularly, a festival focused on women's interests, and they began to work at challenging the male-domination by circulating a petition calling on the temple committee to allow women's full participation , and speaking to the press about their determination to be included. Five years later they won their battle, and have now become an accepted and highly visible part of the whole festival, the indignities and injustice they suffered now a thing of the past (Diesel 1998).

The growing popularity of the Draupadi Firewalking festival and other Goddess festivals, such as those for Mariamman and Gengaiamman, indicates the power still accorded these ancient female deities and their reminder to a diaspora community of its roots. But it is important to note that the veneration and awe shown to divine females in the *Amman* religion does not necessarily translate into women being accorded the same respect and status enjoyed by men. However, I have in a number of previous papers stated my belief that the image of Draupadi is to some extent acting as an empowering role model for certain women, in KZN as well as in Delhi and London (Mankekar 1993; Gillespie 2000), and that the recovery of knowledge of some of the myths of other *Amman* Goddesses could extend these benefits (Diesel 1998; 2002a & b).

Amman Religion as Women's Spirituality

What needs to be considered here is whether *Amman* religion contains sufficient liberatory strands to achieve some lasting benefits for women, along with challenging widespread patriarchal assumptions and practices.

Many characteristics of *Amman* religion cited above demonstrate its probable origins in an indigenous Dravidian, matrifocal society, which has in the intervening centuries been partially usurped and influenced by patriarchal ideas,

resistance to which has become interwoven into its fabric. In how far is this Goddess veneration able to provide women with the strength and courage to deal with their sufferings caused by the institutionalized violence of patriarchal structures? In other words, does this ancient *Amman* worship meet the criteria to be considered a contemporary women's spirituality, as well as offering a theodicy which explains and ameliorates women's experience of subordination, violation, and injustice in male-dominated society? Does its pre-patriarchal nature have the lasting potency to offer a post-patriarchal vision?

Susan Sered (1994) has made a study of a wide variety of contemporary religious movements, scattered throughout the world, where women form the majority of participants, and fill the leadership roles.[3] She examines which features distinguish these religions from those dominated by men, and explores how women, particularly, tend to experience and construct religion, and view their lives in the light of ultimate concerns.

Sered claims that the major characteristics of these "women's religions" are that women's interests and responsibilities as mothers are central to these groups, as well as women's concerns with nurturing and caring for others. She also shows how important misfortune, illness and healing are in the lives of these women. These religions also assist women to find sacred meaning in the mundane activities of daily life, and part of this aspect of their faith is the belief in the immanence of the divine. This is often expressed in possession trance, where women claim actually to embody divinity. In all these religions women priests, shamans, and other ritual experts officiate, and demonstrate their spiritual power. She also examines the place of religious texts in women-dominated religions.

Firstly, Sered discovered that motherhood and family welfare feature as a central religious focus in women-dominated religion. Whereas male-dominated societies tend to define women's primary role as that of wife, matrifocal societies prioritize their role as mothers (Sered 1994: 72). Thus when male-dominated religions fail to give sufficient support to women's problems as mothers, they are likely to look elsewhere to religions that do address these issues (ibid.: 89). Sered maintains that the death of a child is often the crucial event that forces a woman to "ponder existential and theological questions", and to seek out a religion that, in this context, offers answers to the meaning of existence and the problem of suffering (ibid.: 90). It needs to be clarified, however, that not all female-dominated religions see women primarily as mothers; it is the social and leadership roles, rather than the biological aspects of motherhood, that are of interest here, although both are able to give women a sense of their own creative power.

The *Amman* religion of south India, as the name implies, is a religion which envisages divinity primarily in the role of Mother. It is motherhood, but not merely biological mothering, that is seen as a central focus of life. And this motherhood is almost always separated from the role of wife. It is important to emphasise that these deities are usually referred to as virgin; independent of male

domination, not defined by any relationship to a male. The Mother symbolises the earth, and fertility: the fertility of nature, animals and humans; and particularly all types of creativity in women. This *shakti* (female energy) is the creative principle of all life.

This Mother is also the ambivalent mother: she births, and nurtures, she gives from her ever-fertile womb; and she also takes away, bearing all back into the dark tomb of the earth. However, rather than being totally negative and terrifying, she is usually viewed as representing the other side of life; that alternative, dark part of the cycle essential for its continuance (Gross 1978: 281-282). Nothing that happens is beyond her sovereignty. The Mother especially understands the interests and concerns of all women, and women are drawn to her, and trust her for protection from, or the courage to bear, the uncertainties and terrors of existence.

Secondly, Sered noted the search for fortitude in misfortune, suffering and illness as one of the most conspicuous features of religious interest for women, along with a strong interest in healing rituals where their involvement can be as participant, healer, or both (Sered 1994: 6). Women's interest in participating in rituals is frequently to gain healing for themselves or for a member of their family.

In male-dominated societies, women as subordinate members often suffer from a variety of ailments, both physical and psychosomatic. *Amman* religion does not differentiate between physical illness and other types of suffering. Sered draws attention to the fact that many feminists believe that much suffering in the world is caused by the patriarchal system which associates itself with militarism, conquest, manipulation, and violence on global as well as personal levels. Feminists have maintained that patriarchy itself puts such severe demands and stresses on women that it actually makes them ill (Sered 1994: 104). Insisting that girls marry very young, prohibiting them access to birth control and abortion, and demanding that they produce children, takes a heavy toll on women's health. The solution to this, it would be claimed, is the complete dismantling of patriarchy.

The *Amman* religion, as practised in both India and KZN, places great emphasis on the Mother's power to deal with death, disease, and suffering. She is regarded as being both in the disease, and the cure for the disease; and the women who are her sacred practitioners are very engaged in healing ministries. Many of the people who consult them are women, with a variety of ailments. One of the most common of these is barrenness (cf. Introduction), which is a particularly acute problem, treated as an illness in a patriarchal society which expects women to produce children, especially male children, and puts the blame entirely on the women for failure to do this (Diesel 1998 a & b). Sered shows that treating childlessness as a female illness causes many otherwise healthy women to be regarded as ill (Sered 1994: 104).

The whole question of women and the violence and injustice caused them by patriarchal structures appears to be at the heart of *Amman* religion. Myths of the *Amman* Goddesses centre almost entirely on women wrongfully and unjustly treated by males, women dying alone in childbirth, villages suddenly and unexpectedly assaulted and threatened by male demons, many of the examples actually involving, or being very reminiscent of, rape. Unequal power relationships between women and men are shown as leading to domination and violence, often combined with sexual abuse, so that the ultimate form of domination is rape. In this context, *sati* is a special form of suicide, reserved for, and often imposed on, women/wives: the ultimate submission to institutionalized male violence; the final rape.

The Goddess-possessed women who offer healing in her name, often to women oppressed by patriarchal demands, are to some extent participating in the Mother's power to challenge and ameliorate the grip of male-domination. Here is the possibility of healing for the damaging effects of male exploitation, and violence, and a theodicy that makes sense of the tragic and seemingly uncontrolled aspects of life.

Lina Gupta regards the Goddess Kali as the epitome of suffering womanhood, expressing the pent-up frustration and anger of her oppression:

> The myth of Kali offers a story of a woman in a plight. She is the personified wrath of all women in all cultures... Kali's anger is an expression of a deep, long-buried emotion, a character trait that symbolizes deep emotional response to her situations and surroundings. She is not simply malevolent. Her "terrifying howls" are also a demand for equality where femininity is equated with meekness and subservience, since such anger is the only language that can be heard (Gupta 1991: 31).

Kali and the *Amman* Goddesses are able to teach women that it is entirely appropriate to experience anger about abuse, and to express this frustrated and pent-up rage in ways that can be healing, rather than guiltily denying and repressing it. Anger in women is generally much disapproved of, not something that "respectable" women should allow themselves to display. In fact, Sered points out that illness as a reaction to frustration and despair is considered to be far more socially acceptable in women than anger (Sered 1994: 104). Clarissa P. Estes speaks of the need for women to learn to make "rage into a fire that cooks things rather than a fire of conflagration" (Estes 1992: 364). Acknowledging and accepting anger allows it to be turned into the motivation for action against the damaging affects of patriarchy, working towards a more just society, thus transforming hurt into a renewed focus for one's life. The stories of abused women in

Amman mythology are reminders that out of the pain, suffering and death of women can come new life and determination for their sisters.

There is, too, the Hindu belief that women generate great spiritual power (*tapas*) through enduring suffering (King 1989: 19), so that their suffering actually becomes redemptive. Naturally, Kali and the other fiercely independent Goddesses, as powerful role models for women, are regarded by the patriarchy as threatening to the status quo. Independent women are seen as the ultimate threat to male institutions, which require that women should be defined by their relationships with men, their creative and potentially "dangerous" *shakti* safely under male restraint. Ultimately *shakti* has the power to challenge, dismantle, and transform patriarchal structures.

Thirdly, in women-dominated religions Sered found that a strong emphasis on ritual is typical (Sered 1994: 121), so that what women do is more obvious than what they believe. In the performance of ritual people express and experience their solidarity with one another, so that ritual is an important component in strengthening interpersonal bonds, something that is important for most women. As already noted, for many women misfortune and suffering rank high in their concerns, and it is through rituals that they attempt to ward off misfortune and ensure the wellbeing of their loved ones (ibid.: 120). Thus women tend to be more interested in the ritual aspects of religion than in the doctrinal or theological. Sered warns against creating a dichotomy between ritual, viewed as "magical, superstitious, ignorant" and theology interpreted as "philosophical, abstract, unselfish, moral" (ibid.: 121). Women's involvement in ritual does not necessarily exclude an interest in matters of ultimate concern, such as the meaning of life and the reason for suffering, but most religious activity tends to be focused on the immediate, everyday problems.

In *Amman* religion, one also finds this focus on ritual rather than doctrine; the rituals necessary to deal with day to day problems. The absence of written texts recording beliefs, and therefore the reliance on oral transmission of belief and practice, would have made any theoretical and philosophical conjecture more difficult. It is also worth remembering that in almost all religious traditions women have been excluded from any formal religious training, and because in many parts of the world women have been and still are denied equal access to any formal education, illiteracy rates among women are high, a factor still of relevance in much of the KZN Tamil community at present (Diesel 1998: 77).

Related to the above concentration on the daily concerns of their lives, a further, fourth, characteristic of women's religion noted by Sered is in not making a strict division between the sacred and the profane, but finding the sacred in the everyday world (1994: 145f). There is an almost entirely this-worldly orientation, concentrating on alleviating women's problems in the here and now.

Amman religions also concentrate their attention on this world, with daily problems of health and general wellbeing being the focus of worship. There is

no emphasis on the ultimate importance or reality of the metaphysical, and so practically no interest in creation or eschatological myths, nor the doctrines of karma and samsara, or the caste system of Brahmanical Hinduism. The importance of ritual for attaining the gains and goals of this life, here and now, takes precedence over otherworldly and philosophical speculation.

This results in a complete acceptance of the reality and significance of this-worldly mundane existence, with no obvious sense of *maya* or the illusory nature of the material world, leading to renunciation. The line between the human and the divine is very thin, with deities frequently becoming incarnated, and exceptional humans elevated to divine status. In this connection Erndl comments: "Goddesses have always been associated with mundane concerns, with the realities of life and death" (Erndl 1993: 151). There is no strong sense of separation or dichotomy between sacred and secular, and spiritual benefits are not clearly separated from material benefits. There is no need to set aside special areas for shrines or holy sites; the supernatural is everywhere present in the natural, and the entire natural world is believed to manifest the great Earth Mother, so that she can be recognised and worshipped in trees, stones, rivers, caves, mountains, and anthills.

Just as Sered found in women-dominated religion, so in *Amman* religion there is no real necessity for official religious buildings or shrines. The holy can be found in any place, inside or outside. Nearly every traditional Hindu home in KZN has a shrine, sometimes in a separate room of the house, but more usually simply part of the living room. This means that all the daily activities of family life, and of women's work, go on around, and in the presence of, the deities. Most women healers work in shrines in their own homes or gardens (cf. Introduction, above). Thus, although temples are regarded as specially holy places, enshrining divinity, most people worship far more often at their household shrines, or in the open. Although images and pictures of the Mother are popular, she can just as well be represented by a stone or clay pot. In Tamil folk Hinduism, far more religious activity occurs outside temples and their precincts, than within these spaces (Fuller 1992: 51).

Fifthly, Sered believes that women's religions tend to find monotheism, the belief in one male deity, an unattractive option, and, indeed, none of the religions she studied venerates a single male omnipotent deity (Sered 1994: 170, 177). She coins the term "polydeism" to express "a range of beliefs in more than one supernatural entity", which can include the veneration of deities, spirits, ancestors, and saints (ibid.: 169).

Like Feminist Spirituality, *Amman* religion venerates a female divinity who is immanent in the world, conceived as both the One and the many, an essential monism with multiple manifestations, and although the worship of a female deity does not necessarily raise the status of women in a religious tradition, it does help to validate the state of being female, and can strengthen a women's sense of worth.

The centering of the Goddess in the midst of life and its everyday activities, not only sacralizes all aspects of existence, but also provides a powerful environmental ethic. Seen as the "Universal Energy", "the life force", "the symbol of the life-giving powers of the universe" (Gnanadason 1994: 359), the image of the Mother Goddess of earth and fertility emphasises the centrality of the soil and its preservation for the production of nourishment for all creatures of the world. Many contemporary ecofeminists advocate that the image of the Goddess as immanent in the world should have the effect of fostering a reverence for every aspect of nature, so inspiring humanity with a renewed sense of responsibility for its environment; this planet, our Mother. The symbol of Mother Earth could become a powerfully healing energy for reclaiming the natural world, and countering the environmentally destructive forces unleashed by patriarchal dominion over and exploitation of nature.

Sixthly, possession trance is another of the central components of women's religion as researched by Sered. But she reports that some form of trance behaviour occurs in most religious traditions, and so should not be seen as particularly characteristic of women's religions (Sered 1994: 181). However, she quotes Erika Bourguingon who claims that trance as a general state of altered consciousness, but excluding possession, is reported more often in men, whereas becoming temporarily possessed by some supernatural being is more common in women (ibid.: 182). Nevertheless, not all women-dominated religions include spirit possession (for example, members of the Women's Spirituality movement often practice meditation and invoke altered states of consciousness but not spirit possession).

In *Amman* religion possession trance is very common, but appears to be as frequently experienced by male devotees as by females, although women in KZN are usually possessed by one of the wild Mother Goddesses, whereas men can be possessed by a Mother or sometimes by a male deity such as Hanuman or Shiva. This is a clear indication of the religion's concentration on divine immanence, where possessed persons are accepted as manifestations of divinity which can be encountered and worshipped "face to face". The frequent stories of the apotheosis of human women in *Amman* religion are again reminders of the interwoven nature of the divine and human, the sacred and secular. I have argued elsewhere that for the traditional subservient Hindu woman the fierce possessing Goddess appears to be her alter ego, which in the daily circumstances of her life has to be suppressed, but in the altered state of ritual and trance is able to manifest and express itself in powerful, assertive, and even wild, behaviour (Diesel 1998: 83). In a sense, the possessed women themselves undergo, for the temporary period of their trance, a type of apotheosis, and are regarded as special representatives and mediators of the Mother's powers.

Seventhly, Sered reports that most women's religions preach egalitarian ideologies, believing that all human beings regardless of sex, class or education may participate in their activities (Sered 1994: 217). This, too, accords with *Amman*

religion which almost certainly had its origins before the rise of the Brahmanical class/caste system, and still, today, shows little interest in any privileges and differences based on this, nor with the obsession with ritual purity inherent in the caste system. In KZN, as in India, there is little concern about the formal training of anyone who acts as "priest" or leader, and all are welcome to participate in rituals, provided the most general regulations regarding purity are observed. Most of the women healers have no training, and are even virtually illiterate, but this in no way detracts from their ability to lead, heal, or to command the respect of their communities.

A further characteristic of women's religions identified by Sered is an aversion to centralization, and to the use of authoritative sacred texts (ibid.: 251). She points out that most of the women in these religions are literate, so that inability to read is not the reason for ignoring texts (ibid.: 251), but, in spite of this, they do not perceive any necessity for a reliance on sacred scripture either for fixing doctrine or for conducting worship. Their worship is based mainly on direct communication with the divine, on songs, and repetition of familiar rituals. They tend to focus on the dynamic process of religious experience, rather than on theological doctrines or credal statements (ibid.: 252). Sered maintains that there is a logical correlation between a need for centralization and the use of sacred texts, and the fact that women-oriented religions tend to avoid both, as "Literate, centralized, standardized, transcendent religious cultures are often the religious cultures that are the most male dominated" (ibid.: 252-3). Women's religions appear to operate on a far more informal, eclectic, openly tolerant, and immediate approach to women's suffering and concerns.

As stated above, the *Amman* folk religion, especially as practised in KZN, neither relies on, nor has much access to, sacred texts, and has no systematized creed of beliefs. Rituals are transmitted orally from one generation to the next, and sometimes somewhat adapted for local situations. Neither is it, in some aspects, centralized with regard to who is permitted to officiate and participate at rituals. Where women officiate, leadership often tends to depend on personal charisma, and the particular requirements of the situation, although, in general, this religion does operate in a male-dominated social and religious context.

With regard to who become leaders in women-dominated religions, Sered found again that women often regard suffering as preparing them to be effective religious leaders, making them "wounded healer" figures. This is believed particularly to teach patience and understanding. Numerous women in her study stated that much of women's suffering in general stems from male aggression, both physical and psychological, and women leaders need to have an understanding of this (Sered 1994: 216). Many leaders spoke of an initial resistance to accepting a leadership role, but that finally when they acquiesced, they felt it was the spirits or the deity who had, in fact, chosen them for the task, so that the women generally attribute their skills to the divine, not to their own gifts (ibid.:

225). In keeping with the informality of the leadership in women's religions, few of these women received much in the way of financial benefits from their work (ibid.: 228). Finally, it is significant that Sered reports that many successful women religious leaders were perceived as threats to the patriarchal structures, and were more often criticized by men merely because they were women, rather than for what they were actually doing or teaching (ibid.: 229-230).

All these features of women's leadership are present in KZN *Amman* veneration, as has been mentioned above, and apply particularly to the powerfully charismatic woman cited in the Introduction (Diesel 1998). *Amman* religion, as defined above, is particularly centred round accounts of women suffering as a result of male maltreatment, and eventually experiencing vindication and recognition of their faithfulness and virtue.

These many points of similarity between Sered's study, and the *Amman* religion, suggest that women involved in this ancient, pre-patriarchal veneration of the Goddess, with a particular focus on women's interests, are tapping into a potentially powerfully liberatory tradition.

However, a crucial question is how far women's religions, including the women-dominated aspects of the *Amman* religion, truly serve women's interests and welfare and have the potential to bring about a permanent transformation of the present world order; to promote spiritual and material benefits. As Sered points out, ultimately it is insufficient that their participation assist them merely to survive better in the world as it is; the need is to change the world with its hardships and suffering.

At present short-term benefits that I am aware of in the local Hindu women's community are things such as solidarity and support from other women, healing from psychological and physical ailments, relief from frustration and aggression, greater social mobility, etc.; whereas long-term benefits are needed to achieve more radical changes in women's status, greater gender equality and women's rights. As stated above, my concern is that women should be assisted to perceive the *Amman* Goddess figures as truly empowering.

Sered believes that the vast majority of women become involved in women's religions for religious reasons, to attempt to find answers to existential problems, rather than in a search for social, psychological or economic betterment (Sered 1994: 257). But, inevitably, "religious" activity cannot be entirely divorced from certain secular and material benefits. Rather than acting as an opiate to lull women into acceptance of suffering as part of their lot, religion often is the spur to social action, motivating women to work for a better society (ibid.: 258).

In order for this to happen, Sered believes some other factors are needed to contribute to permanent change for women: namely, sisterhood, economic independence, and control over sexuality and fertility (ibid.: 269f).

"It seems that women who have ongoing, multifaceted relationships with

one another reap more extensive benefits from female-dominated religions" (ibid.: 269). Feminists coined the phrase "Sisterhood is powerful": women, united in their suffering and struggle for a better existence, can encourage one another to use their suffering as motivation for redemptive and transformative action. Sered suggests that in the final analysis it is the role of sister, rather than mother, or wife, which is the most empowering and liberating for women (ibid.: 269), and therefore needs to be consciously developed. It is obvious that some sense of sisterly support is already operating in the women dominated aspects of KZN *Amman* religion, particularly among the women who successfully challenged the all-male temple committee, but this needs more recognition as a powerfully empowering strategy.

In order for economic independence, and so independence from the control of the men in their lives, to be achieved, women need to be assisted to move into the public sphere of economic activity. Unfortunately the Tamil community in KZN is, at present, still generally very impoverished which will continue to impact negatively on women in the immediate future, although increasing numbers of women are finding employment outside the home.

Finally, religions need to encourage women to take control of their sexuality and fertility, something strongly advocated by the Feminist Spirituality Movement. In *Amman* religion this would involve emulating the independent virgin Goddesses by claiming autonomy from male control, and thus the potential for achieving the great heat/power/*tapas* of the Goddesses *shakti*/energy. I have encountered several Hindu women in KZN, including the Goddess devotee of the Introduction, who because of their Goddess veneration claim to maintain celibacy within marriage, or who have chosen to remain single.

Possibly only when these criteria are met will women in various religions find themselves in a position to challenge, not just the individual men who attempt to rule their lives, but the patriarchal structures as such, so achieving long-term benefits. In this way, male-domination with its institutionalized violence, and the negative effects this has on women's lives, will face its most radical challenge.

As stated above, there are remarkable similarities between the *Amman* religion, and the criteria for women-dominated religion set out by Sered. An additional, powerfully unique feature of *Amman* worship is its focus on the divine female. It seems probable that this worship was once part of a non-Vedic, Dravidian matrifocal society, which has managed throughout the centuries to retain strong evidence of its resistance to patriarchal attempts at appropriation. So the myths of violated women bear witness to the ravages of patriarchally-sanctioned domination and abuses of power. But the figures of the divine Mothers retain their ancient strength and autonomy, acting as role-models for women's continued resistance, and holding out the hope of victory, and the establishment of a new order. This makes it a prophetic religion in its critique of current values, and

pointing towards the possibility of a better world for women and men.

While the symbol of the divine female has been central to Hinduism for centuries, and has become increasingly popular, the conscious utilizing of this as a political feminist symbol and role model for women is something recent and Western. For most Hindu women the feminist dimension still needs to be more fully identified and given recognition, while Western feminists can still learn much from the dark, independent Goddesses, so far generally ignored (Gross 1978).

Amman Religion as a Transformative Power

Aruna Gnanadason believes that the non-Vedic, non-Aryan, female-oriented folk religions, the religions of the poor and marginalized, offer contemporary Asian, and other, women powerful elements of protest that could become a force for social change. She claims these religions are "in essence women's liberation-centred" (Gnanadason 1994: 358). She says:

> Evidence of Feminine ultimacy is widely prevalent in India whether venerated as Nature or the life-force, as Mother or Virgin, as Great Goddess, or as the Ultimate Reality... Almost every village deity in South India is a female form... Asian women recognize that religiousness can become oppressive and escapist, but there is a realization that these traditional popular religions cannot be ignored - they have to be appropriated to become a force in the transformation of society (1994: 359).

She maintains that Asian women who are struggling for recognition and visibility need a spirituality that is "particularly women's and specifically Asian", and that they will find it in *Shakti*, the Great Mother, who has for too long been "submerged under the onslaught of patriarchal religions" (ibid.: 352-3). She quotes Swami Vivekananda of the Ramakrishna Movement, who predicted that the hope for all creation lies in "the resurgence of the Mother into the consciousness of the world's population, after patriarchal religions had forced her into concealment in the unconscious" (ibid.: 352). And she concludes,

> The Great Mother breaks out of all that has bound her and frees, creates anew, and liberates all creation "which has been groaning as a woman in travail" (ibid.: 353).

Gupta also believes that in the image of the dark, untamed Goddesses, particularly as represented by Kali (and I would add Draupadi and Mariamman; Diesel,

2002 a & b), Hinduism contains at its heart a new, liberating, "post-patriarchal" model for women, as well as for men. She emphasises that Kali must not simply be viewed as "another projection of the hostility and masculine fear of the feminine that characterises patriarchal traditions", but as embodying the strength and undominated creative energy that challenges the unbalanced, unequal union between women and men that the Laws of Manu have traditionally required (1991: 15). In her associations with those at the lowest end of the social scale, such as Sudras, *dalits*, and thugs, Kali is identified with the boundaries of human society, where women have traditionally been placed. However, she is able to do battle against and transcend all such limitations, and to demonstrate her power and victory over all oppressive structures, so offering the possibility of a liberated, "post-patriarchal" humanity (ibid.: 30; Kinsley 1986: 117f, 122).

What needs, finally, to be asked of *Amman* religion is: in feminist terms, what constitutes its enduring worth, and which aspects can be regarded as inessential "baggage" that could, or should, be discarded? In other words, can *Amman* religion be demythologised, and streamlined, in order to have greater appeal to Western women, as well as attracting a broader range of Hindu women devotees?

Following the lead given by the Neo-Hindu ("Reformed") tradition[4], it would appear possible to eliminate from *Amman* Goddess worship such features as blood sacrifice[5], and physical austerities like pins and skewers pushed through the flesh of devotees, both of which are disapproved of by Neo-Hinduism, as well as numbers of Traditional Hindus. Firewalking itself is not essential, as it is practised for only a few of the *Amman* Goddesses. However, Loring Danforth (1989) reports its popularity and ability to bring empowerment and healing to participants, particularly women, in contemporary New Age and secular contexts, and this appears to happen in some South African Hindu communities (see above, and Diesel 1998 a & b, 2002a). There are, of course, other ways to achieve these benefits. The possession trances experienced by some Hindus as part of their *Amman* veneration, could be transformed into either meditative types of trance, or those "high states" enjoyed by participants in Wicca groups described by Starhawk (1989:152f). Such meditation, whether solitary or in groups, encourages women to search within themselves for their own inner wisdom and strength; to connect, at the centre of their beings, with their own powerful alter-egos, represented by the divine Mother of many Hindu women's trance experiences (Diesel 1998: 83f). This type of meditation has been shown to be potently healing in its ability to reduce stress, and transform anger and frustration into sustained and positive action (Iglehart 1982). Starhawk also speaks of the ability of trance states to "unlock the tremendous potential in our unused awareness" (Starhawk 1989: 157).

Some Neo-Hindu groups have retained the veneration of the Goddess, such as Kali in the Ramakrishna movement, Sarasvati in the Divine Life Society, Radha in the Hare Krishna movement, and Anandamayi who is herself regarded

as a manifestation of Durga (Flood 1996: 272). It could be argued, however, that this Goddess option presents a rather bland, sanitized image of female divinity, lacking almost all the strength and righteous anger of the fiercely autonomous *Amman* Goddesses, "the personified wrath of women in all cultures" (Gupta 1991: 31).

The potential physical, psychological and social healing of the *Amman* religion can certainly be seen as independent from much of its traditional ritual, which, re-interpreted into more appropriately contemporary symbols and rituals, could make a significant contribution to Western spiritual feminism. What must be retained, however, is the powerful feminist theodicy at the heart of *Amman* religion, which can be regarded as its ancient, perennial essence. It is this contribution of the dark Goddesses that could well be much more clearly recognised and appropriated by spiritual feminism. Not only does the mythology of the *Amman* Goddesses offer an explanation for much of the suffering endured specifically by women, but the Mother figure invites her daughters to join her in her independence from male domination, and her continued struggle against the established violence perpetuated by patriarchal rule. She has the power to alleviate and heal the pain created by patriarchally-controlled gender relationships. Women's anger can be transformed into healing. I believe that this is what Gnanadason's "resurgence of the Mother" could mean.

If some of the texts of the *Amman* Goddess myths were recovered and publicised, the feminist sub-text of women, divine and human, violated and vindicated, could be utilized in women's groups (Diesel 2002 a & b). This could again become part of the ancient tradition of women story tellers as purveyors of religion, culture and values, where the telling of folk tales preserves the memory of what is important for the survival of the community. These stories, or "texts of terror" (Trible 1984), recount the sad details of hosts of women, named and unnamed, abandoned, deceived, betrayed, insulted, raped, and killed by men. They also tell of how many of these angry and vengeful women drew power from their chastity and virginal status, and brought healing to communities. Many stories are of female deities who suffer in the same way that their daughters suffer, but whose ultimate victory encourages women to continue the battle against the demons of patriarchy. They can be viewed as sacred texts because of their ability to penetrate beneath the surface exposing a deeper truth: here, the alienation of the sexes. The tales of human women who were deified, becoming Goddesses, illustrate the ultimate potency of women's power (*shakti*), able to be tapped into by all women who wish to triumph over the circumstances of their male-dominated lives. These stories could be powerfully inspirational and healing, challenging women to take courage from the example of these female divinities and deified women; to regard themselves as survivors, rather than victims, of the sexism and violence of patriarchal religion and culture. Phyllis Trible speaks of women utilizing

> stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again (1984: 3).

This leads to possibly the most uniquely challenging aspect of Kali and the *Amman* Goddesses, something that no other deity offers to the same extent: their power to liberate devotees from the dark, terrifying realities of existence, too often avoided by many people. As already touched on above, the Goddess represents both the creative life-giving processes, as well as those of decay, destruction, and death, all being acknowledged as part of the great, continuous round of life, death and renewal; what Gross and Kinsley refer to as "the coincidence of opposites" (Gross 1978: 281-281; Kinsley 1978: 497). In order to replenish her powers, the Mother Goddess finally takes back all that she has given. Life nourishes itself on death; the Goddess destroys in order to create anew. This is the power of her transformative and regenerative energy. Blood is truly the symbol of her nature. "Each generation is nourished by the vigor and sap of the previous generation" (Kinsley 1978: 502). By confronting fear, death, destruction, and chaos - acknowledging or worshipping the Terrible, as Vivekananda advocated (Nivedita 1994: 106, 146) - these forces tend to lose their negativity, and power to terrorize. And with this can come the acknowledgement that suffering, death and decay, although inevitable and inescapable, cannot negate life, but are simply the other side of the great cycle of existence. Suffering and pain can awaken one to new understandings and an acceptance of the way things are, bringing compassion and transformation. These Goddesses continually remind people

> that certain aspects of reality are untamable, unpurifiable, unpredictable, and always a threat to society's feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly: life itself ... [They] invite a wider, more mature, more realistic reflection on where one has come from and where one is going (Kinsley 1986: 129-130).

The re-emergence and re-memberment of the great Goddess, with her offer of *shakti* power, presently fostered by the "new" religion of spiritual feminism, and daily celebrated by Hindu women in the ancient *Amman* religion, has the potential to transcend theistic conceptions of deity, and offer a monistic vision, where the sacred, whether sensed as Feminine Primacy/Ultimacy, Mother Nature, Life Force, or Indwelling Spirit, can be sought and found in the midst of everyday experience (King 1989: 198). Ultimately, of course, Absolute Reality is neither female nor male, is beyond all human categories and definitions. But this expanded image of divinity could result in a re-invigorating, humanizing, and truly

post-patriarchal spirituality, offering a vision of power used for the creation of a world committed to tolerance, compassion, justice, and peace.

Kinsley expresses something of this ultimately ineffable presence and vitality of the ancient and contemporary symbol of the Goddess:

> She manifests herself ... in the rhythms of the seasons, of pulsing blood, and of birth, growth and death. She is the dance of the sexes and the dance of sex itself... She is that primordial desire, urge or tendency toward being rather than non-being; she is the great actress, the great mover, that cosmic reflex toward dance rather than stillness without which this wonderful/terrible world would not exist (1978: 499).

Notes

1 Shulman draws attention to a widespread idea "in South Indian village cults, that injustice - especially an unjust or premature death - can create the conditions for the worship of the now divinely powerful victim" (1985: 361). Blackburn says, "... a violent, premature death is a prerequisite for deification in folk Hinduism... Women are raped, thrown down wells, or beaten to death, or they commit suicide to avoid these violations" (1985: 260-1).

2 The sacrificing of male animals, exclusively, is also required in the Shakti/Goddess worship of the Brahmanical tradition, recorded in the Kalika Purana, c.14th century CE: "Let not the female, whether quadruped, or bird or woman be ever sacrificed ..." (Payne 1979: 9, 10).

3 Religions studied by Sered include Christian Science, Shakerism, Matrilineal spirit cults of northern Thailand, Korean Shamanism, American Spiritualists, Afro-Brazilian cults, the Feminist Spirituality Movement.

4 The Neo-Hindu movement began in India c.1827, as a response to Western influences and criticism from Christian and Muslim missionaries of many traditional practices. Many Indian reformers emphasised the need for religious and social changes, such as the abolition of certain rituals considered inappropriate to contemporary religion, eg. animal sacrifice, physical austerities, possession. Calls were also made for the abolition of *sati*, polygamy, infanticide, *purdah*, dowry, child marriage, and improvement in the treatment of widows (Flood 1996: 251f).

5 The *Amman* religion's practice of blood sacrifice as a means of pleasing the Mother, is surely not consistent with the belief that she requires reverence for all forms of life. There is evidence that in India attempts have been made to abolish sacrifice at Goddess temples, although Erndl reports that an ambiguous attitude prevails (1993: 71-72; 91-92; 100-101). A number of South African Hindu groups also disapprove of the practice, although it is still widespread. Sometimes, in both India and South Africa, the offering (smashing) of coconuts or pumpkins is substituted for the head of the victim (Erndl 1993: 91). Sered reports that generally, with the single excep-

tion of the zar cult, "Animal sacrifice is anathema to women's religions ..." (Sered 1994: 281).

Works Cited

Babb, Lawrence A. 1975. *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Blackburn, Stuart H. 1985. "Death and Deification: Folk Cults in Hinduism." *History of Religions*, 24, 3, pp. 25-39.

Brown, C. Mackenzie. 1983. "Kali, the Mad Mother." In *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present*, pp. 110-123. Edited by Carl Olson. New York: Crossroad.

Brubaker, Richard. 1983. "The Untamed Goddesses of Village India." In *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present*, pp. 145-160. Edited by Carl Olson. New York: Crossroad.

Bumiller, Elisabeth. 1990. *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among theWomen of India.* New Delhi: Penguin Books.

Christ, Carol. 1993. "Why Women need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections." In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, pp. 273-287. Edited by C. Christ & J. Plaskow. HarperSanFrancisco.

Danforth, Loring. 1989. *Firewalking and Religious Healing: the Anasternaria of Greece and the American Firewalking Movement.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Diesel, Alleyn. 1990. "Hindu Firewalking in Natal." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 3, 1, pp. 17-33.

Diesel, Alleyn. 1992. "The Worship and Iconography of the Hindu Folk Goddesses in Natal." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 5, 2, pp. 3-30.

Diesel, Alleyn. 1998. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother: A South African Hindu Woman Worshipping the Goddess." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 13, 1, pp. 73-90.

Diesel, Alleyn. 2002a "Tales of Women's Suffering: Draupadi and other *Amman* Goddesses as Role Models for Women." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 17, 1, pp. 5-20.

Diesel, Alleyn. 2002b. "The Suffering Mothers: Hindu *Amman* Goddesses as Empowering Role Models for Women." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 15, 1, pp. 39-62.

Dubois, Abbe J. A. 1906. *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies.* New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

Eller, Cynthia. 1993. *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America.* New York: Crossroad.

Elmore, W.T. 1913. *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism.* New Delhi: Asian Educational Services (reprint 1984).

Erndl, Kathleen, M. 1993. *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual and Symbol.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Flood, Gavin. 1996. *An Introduction to Hinduism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fuller, C. J. 1992. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India.*

Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Gillespie, Marie. 2000. "Media, Culture and Economy in the South Asian Diaspora." Paper delivered at the International Conference on Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora, New Delhi.
Goodman, Felicitas D. 1988. *Ecstasy, Ritual and Alternate Reality: Religion in a Pluralistic World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Gnanadason, Aruna. 1994. "Women and Spirituality in Asia." In *Feminist Theology From the Third World*; pp. 351-360. Edited by Ursula King. London: SPCK/Orbis.
Gross, Rita. 1978. "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 46, pp. 269-291.
Gupta, Lina. 1991. "Kali, the Savior." In *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, pp. 15-38. Edited by Cooey, et. al.. New York: Orbis Books.
Hiltebeitel, Alf. 1988. *The Cult of Draupadi. Vol. 1. Mythologies: From Gingee to Kuruksetra*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Hiltebeitel, Alf. 1991. *The Cult of Draupadi. Vol. 2. On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Iglehart, Hallie. 1982. "Expanding Personal Power Through Meditation." In *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*; pp. 294-304. Edited by C. Spretnak. New York: Anchor/Doubleday.
Jagadiswarananda, Swami. (Translater) n.d. *Devi Mahatmyam*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
King, Ursula. 1989. *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise*. London: Macmillan.
King, Ursula. 1989. *The Great Indian Goddess: The significance of Female Symbolism for the Divine and its Relationship to the Image and Status of Indian Women*. Paper delivered at the Third International Conference of the European Society of Women for Theological Research.
Kinsley, David. 1978. "The Portrait of the Goddess in the Devi-mahatmya." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 46, 4, pp. 489-506.
Kinsley, David. 1986. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. University of California Press.
Klostermaier, Klaus K. 1989. *A Survey of Hinduism*. New York: State University of N.Y. Press.
Kuper, Hilda. 1960. *Indian People in Natal*. Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press.
Mankekar, Purnima. 1993. "Television Tales and a Woman's rage: A Nationalist Recasting of Draupadi's Disrobing." *Public Culture* 5, 3, pp. 469-492.
Nivedita, Sister. 1994. *The Master as I Saw Him*. 17th ed. Calcutta: Udbodhan.
Payne, Ernest A. 1979. *The Saktas: An Introductory and Comparative Study*. New York: Garland Publishing (reprint).
Preston, James J. 1982. *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Sered, Susan Starr. 1994. *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Shulman, David Dean. 1985. *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and*

Poetry. Princeton University Press.
Starhawk. 1989. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. Harper: San Francisco.
Trible, Phyllis. 1984. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
Whitehead, Henry. 1921. *The Village Gods of South India*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, Reprint, 1988.
Wilkins, W.J. 1882. *Hindu Mythology*. Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 2nd ed., Reprint, 1989.