The Spiritual is Political: A Black Feminist Analysis of Contemporary Integrative Spirituality

What is signified by the term ‘spirituality’? Does it always represent the same values and practices, and what—or who—does it cast in its shadow? Far from an enlightened, universal category of knowledge and experience, I argue that representations of spirituality are structured by the power relations of gender, colonialism, race, class and disability. In particular, hegemonic representations of spirituality are structured around the objectification and erasure of women of colour as subjects produced by complex gendered, racialised (post)colonial histories. Marginalised and sometimes appropriated by spiritual feminism, writing by feminists of colour—I’m thinking especially of Audre Lorde, but also writers such as Alice Walker and Gloria Anzaldúa—offer us a site of resistance to whitewashed constructions of spirituality, in their refusal to separate personal spirituality from collective political movement, and in the valuing of the creative, emotional and psychic lives of women of colour struggling against oppression. In the following I’m going to discuss some of the background to contemporary spirituality, and then briefly summarise my doctoral research on the Goddess movement in Britain as a case study.

In contrast to secular narratives of the progressive decline of religion and the Marxist-feminist conflation of religion categorically with patriarchal oppression, in recent years feminist scholars Sonya Sharma, Kristin Aune and Giselle Vincett have pointed out that androcentric and Eurocentric secular narratives have obscured the multifaceted interactions between religion and gender.¹ For instance during the Enlightenment, even as public religious authority was deinstitutionalised in favour of the rational, transcendent, individual subject, the privatisation and feminisation of religion coincided with women’s increasing involvement in religious communities, both traditional and countercultural. Scholars have shown that religio-spiritual affiliations continue

to be important in women’s lives, emphasising the category of ‘lived religion’ as a way to denaturalise an assumed separation between religion and spirituality, public and private.

Marion Bowman, a scholar of ‘vernacular religion’, argues that the term ‘alternative spirituality’ is over-used. The distinction between what is alternative and mainstream has undergone a ‘renegotiation’ linked to the challenge to the secularisation thesis, and to the commercialisation of alternative spiritual practices over the past two decades. Bowman prefers the term ‘integrative spirituality’, referring to lifestyle choices which combine ‘a wide variety of religious, historic, indigenous and esoteric traditions in order to produce highly personalised forms of religiosity’.² One critique of this representation is that it obscures structural patterns in favour of the atomistic individual, encouraging compliance with the dominant norms of neoliberal capitalism.³ Related to this, I think a crucial point is that while the category of countercultural or ‘integrative spirituality’ entails some analysis of the relationship between ‘the local and the global’, the violence of European colonialism which enabled the ‘colonial syncretic’ of these personalised spiritual practices remains under-acknowledged.⁴ From a decolonial black feminist perspective, the interrelationship between religion, spirituality and colonial modernity requires closer examination.

Critical scholars of religion have deconstructed ‘religion’ as a colonial category, projected by a white, European, secularised modernity, discursively identified with progressive rationalism and civic nationalism (and implicitly gendered as masculine), in opposition to romanticism and the irrational, superstitious, primitive and feminised non-Western world. The displacement of femininity onto the colonised and racialised, and by implication the erasure of women of colour as subjects, is evident in the orientalist trope of the mysterious ‘mystic East’ which influenced nineteenth century theosophy and esoteric spiritualities.⁵ I think it is mirrored quite usefully in the

example of the American Transcendentalist poet Ralph Waldo Emerson referring to his wife (a white woman) as ‘Mine Asia’—a term of endearment, ‘his own beloved but inferior continent’. The nineteenth century discourse of progressive evolution from prehistoric matriarchy to patriarchal civilisation is also implicitly racialised and linked to colonial power. The repudiated matriarchal civilisation of the Great Mother was regarded as irrational and primitive on the one hand, and on the other, as a lost, romantic ‘golden age’, in opposition to industrial modernity. This gendered progress narrative left its mark in Freudian psychoanalysis, which imagined women’s sexuality as the ‘dark continent’—a reference to the colonial exploration of Africa. The French feminists Cixous and Irigaray later cited these ideas, seeking to articulate the erasure of women’s sexuality and subjectivity by patriarchal language and history. However the articulation of female subjectivity as the ‘dark continent’, signifying a foreclosed, feminine language, itself rests on the erasure of a ‘difference that matters’: the specificity of black women as subjects of racialised, colonised histories.

These ideas have influenced the discourse underlying women’s spirituality, especially the Goddess movement, which in its British form is the focus of my doctoral research. A western, contemporary, post-Christian phenomenon, the Goddess movement emerged in the late twentieth century, combining romantic Goddess mythology with 1970s radical and socialist feminism. It celebrates female divinity and the Great Mother as immanent in the Earth and nature, drawing inspiration from images of individual goddesses from cultures around the world, interpreted as the remnants of prehistoric, matriarchal civilisations, reconstrued as sources of women’s empowerment. Women’s subjectivity and embodiment are the focus of ritual circle gatherings, festivals, art and music, intended to revalue women’s experience in the face of oppressive cultural norms.

During my ethnographic fieldwork in Glastonbury, Somerset, the site of an annual Goddess Conference and a priestess community centred around a Goddess Temple founded in 2002, I researched the movement’s underlying discourses of race and gender, and found that my

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positionality as a woman of colour brought to the surface essentialist cultural narratives. To give some brief examples: an Italian woman at the Glastonbury Goddess Hall one evening told me she ‘wished she could be an Indian person’. Following a discussion with a research participant where I’d explained that I thought of myself foremost as a ‘Londoner’, she said, ‘Look, you should be proud of your culture!’, pointing to the window display as we walked past a New Age shop on the High Street selling imported Indian goods. A musician in a shamanic drum circle told me I reminded her of ‘Hindu goddesses on YouTube mantra videos’, and another participant told me that ‘of course she understood the energy of India’ when I tried to explain the romanticist misrecognitions involved in what I called ‘New Age orientalism’. Ritual practices adopted by priestesses involve chakras, mantras, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, singing bowls, Native American drumming—all forms of ‘integrative spirituality’. The Goddess Temple altars are often decorated with brightly coloured sari fabric, and many participants at the annual Goddess Conference wear eastern-influenced clothing while participating in ceremonies, sharing circles, moon lodges, sweat lodges, and so on.

These practices occur within a framework celebrating the reclamation of a British ‘indigenous’ Goddess culture rooted in the idea of the sacred land, an imagined prehistoric memory of Goddess temples and priestess sisterhoods before a patriarchal conquest. As one research participant explained, ‘women are the colonised’, the global victims of patriarchal oppression. A notable feature is the Glastonbury Goddess community’s celebration of Britannia, the Romano-British imperial symbol. They view themselves as reclaiming a figure who was once the prehistoric ‘indigenous goddess of the land’ from patriarchal misappropriation—both from the Roman conquest of Britain, which produced the first historical representation of Britannia as a subjugated woman, and from her association with the British Empire. The reclaiming of a lost, indigenous Goddess culture is ethnocentric and exclusionary, implicitly relying on a ‘blood and soil’ connection between racial ancestry and the ‘energy’ of the land, constructing white Goddess priestesses as reclaiming an indigenous way of life colonised by patriarchal modernity. This
discourse precludes the recognition of black feminism, and erases the subject positions of modern, postcolonial European women of colour, objectifying and exoticising them through the white gaze.

While some of the women I interviewed identified with feminism, others viewed feminist anger as belonging in the past, preferring a transcendent, non-political ‘feminine’ women’s spirituality (in terms of Jungian psychology) as the successor to ‘negative’ politics. Additionally, integrative spiritualities in Glastonbury emphasise the spiritual healing of personal wounds without social context. Political critique is viewed in terms of unresolved psychological issues rather than social oppression— in the case of the Glastonbury Goddess community, this results in the ostracism of women who draw attention to its covert structures of authority.

In contrast to both secular feminist narratives and integrative spiritualities, the writings of feminists of colour describe a politicised spirituality which embraces creativity and emotion as well as feminist struggle, most notably the work of Audre Lorde. Examples are her essays ‘The Uses of the Erotic’, ‘The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action’, and ‘An Open Letter to Mary Daly’, in which she criticises the feminist theologian’s erasure of difference and misrepresentation of black women, but also affirms the value of black feminist spirituality. I quote from Lorde’s ‘Poetry is Not A Luxury’:

> For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises….These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.⁹

In her naming of the creativity and power of women I do not think Lorde is describing a mystical feminine essence or succumbing to romantic nostalgia. I read her as bringing to light the position of black women as the subjects of gendered, racialised histories of erasure, silencing and oppression, and as articulating the affective forces which can sustain and move us to political transformation amid our differences. The spiritual, emotional and creative life of black women is a vital source of

political re-imagination, and suggests a counternarrative to colonial, gendered, racialised representations of spirituality.