

Article

In the Study of the Witch: Women, Shadows, and the Academic Study of Religions

Laurel Zwissler

Central Michigan University, Philosophy and Religion Department, AN 288, Mount Pleasant, MI 48859, USA; Laurel.zwissler@cmich.edu

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Abstract: This article examines historically competing categories of magic and religion and their gendered traces in the history of religious studies. On one hand, we have a genealogy that traces the term, “magic”, back to an early modern European Christianity trying to understand itself through contrast with an imagined heresy that comes to be personified with a woman’s face. On the other, we have contemporary political and religious communities that use the identification as Witches to reverse this version of dichotomous Christian gaze and legitimize religious difference, which also comes to be symbolized by a female body. Between these historical moments we have the beginning of the academic study of religion, the theoretical turn in which Christian-dominant scholarship comes to see itself on a continuum with, rather than opposed to, different religions, as first characterized by cultural evolution theories about the origins of religion. Especially given the field’s theological roots, examining the constructed relationships between religion and magic, both of which represent crucial foci for early theorists, through the analytical lens of gender, which does not, provides opportunities to surface implicit assumptions of the current field about what is and is not worth studying.

Keywords: gender; women’s spirituality; witchcraft; anthropology; early modern Europe; matriarchy; prehistory; feminism; magic; cultural evolution

1. Introduction: Origin Stories

The academic study of religion is built on early speculation about the origins of belief and ritual practice. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century fathers of the field cast their imaginations back in time and speculated on early “man” and his experiences. What caused “him” to look past the material world, to become so certain that there were forces beyond it? What great strivings to serve drove him to accomplishments of architecture and civilization, yet also left him enslaved to false ideas and fears, displacing his own powers into the heavens? In pursuing these origins, foundational scholars, such as Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, and Freud, turned to distinctions between religion and magic as key to understanding the role of religion in human culture and individual lives.

Over the last few decades, contemporary scholars have laid bare an historiography of the field as one steeped in competing ideologies, despite its aspirations to objectivity. This is not a unique story; it reflects an interdisciplinary experience across academe. Yet, there is a special sting for the academic study of religion because, as many scholars labor to articulate differences between their endeavors and those of theologians, the very methods, categories, vocabulary, and concerns of the discipline turn out largely to be unacknowledged inheritances from Christian theology (e.g., Long 1986; Asad (1993, 2003); Smith 1998; Masuzawa 2005).

The distinction between religion and magic that so captivated early theorists is one of these heirlooms, initially arising from missionizing concerns as Christianity spread to Europe, but developing most fully during the witch panics of the early modern period (1450–1750 CE). Theories about religious origins and the proper distinctions between religion and magic are products of and perpetrators of

intersecting mechanisms of power. This article focuses on the shadows of witchcraft, and therefore women, in both the formative debates of our field and in contemporary engagements with feminist new religious movements.

Such an investigation can grant insights into motivations for and appeals of extra-academic theories of religious origins that circulate within popular culture more broadly and within spiritual feminist circles more specifically. Scholars often react with frustration when faced with theories of ancient matriarchy and Witchcraft¹ fertility cults. As a discipline, the academic study of religion, in conversation with history and anthropology, has debunked matriarchal origins claims from scholars, such as Maria Gimbutas and Margaret Murray, filing contemporary proponents, such as Carol Christ and Starhawk under the category of thea/olgy (Gimbutas (1974, 1989, 1991); Murray 1921; Christ 1997, 2005; Starhawk [1987] 1990, Starhawk [1979] 1999). Yet, as a field, we continue to revisit foundational scholars such as Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, and Freud, despite the now inescapable flaws we see in their work (e.g., Pals 2015). Is it really any wonder that non-academics are confused: why argue that venerable, androcentric narratives of human origins are important to rehearse, no matter how mistaken, but that gynocentric narratives are beyond the bounds of even conversation? Debates about the origins and proper distinctions between religion and magic reveal many forms of power and domination, including race, class, and colonialism; here, I want to examine especially ways that they intersect with gender. Specifically, I examine the distinction between religion and magic through several iterations: first, in discourses among foundational scholars of religion; secondly, among early modern European theologians; finally, within feminist new religious movements.

2. Magician to Priest

As Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection revolutionized understandings of the natural world, early anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists extended his models into their own fields, creating theories of cultural evolution, survivals, and inherited psychological repressions. As with most conversations of the day, early religious studies was an androcentric, Eurocentric, and Christian-centric pursuit—with a little Judaism thrown in as ancestral—dominated by elite voices. Yet, naturally, even within nineteenth- and twentieth-century patriarchal European and American societies, women existed, as did people of color and non-heterosexually normative people. It may seem strange to assert such basic facts, but it becomes especially important to do so when addressing the self-centered silencing of early narratives of the origins of religion.

We know that these scholarly men knew women. In fact, we know empirically that they were fed and cared for, often loved, by real women in their lives. Yet, given the regimes of knowledge dominant in the time periods through which these early scholars speak, the women that they knew may as well not have existed, any more than women may have at the various dawns of religion which these men imagine. In the earliest stories of Tylor, Frazer, and Durkheim, for example, women do not appear. Later theories, such as those of Freud, take women's presence seriously as a catalyst for male action, but not as agents, who may have had something to contribute to societal and religious formation. It is important to be clear that these scholars' theories differ in significant ways from one another; however, all of them share concerns about distinguishing between magic and religion and none of them foreground women as protagonists in the imagined dramas of religion's origins. While the following section's discussions of a few chosen theorists may tread overly familiar ground for some readers, in order to see the forest, we must take a path past some of the particular trees that compose it.

¹ I follow anthropological usage in capitalization when discussing witchcraft. Because victims of early modern persecutions self-identified as Christian and were labeled as Satanic witches by other Christians, I do not capitalize witchcraft and witches when discussing historical hunts. In contrast, because members of new religious movements do identify as Witches and participate in legitimate religions that they call Witchcraft, such as Wicca and feminist Witchcraft, I do capitalize for contemporary practitioners and their traditions (see Zwissler 2016a).

Edward B. Tylor was certainly not the first or the only scholar to speculate on the origins of religion among “mankind”, but he was one of the first to explicitly super-impose Darwinian notions of biological evolution onto the development of religion and other aspects of human culture, arguing for his invented cultural stages of development through which each society must pass: savagery; barbarism; civilization (Tylor [1871] 1920, vol. I. 26–69). He explains away contradictions to his progressive scheme with the concept of “devolution”, essentially cultural backsliding (vol. I. 40–44), and “cultural survivals”, vestigial beliefs and practices that remain from earlier stages of cultural evolution (vol. I. 70, 160).

While the racism, cultural chauvinism, and ethnocentrism of his approach are shatteringly obvious from contemporary perspective, it is also notable that his insistence on what German anthropologist Adolf Bastien had termed the “psychic unity of mankind” (see Köpping [1983] 2005) was his purposeful intervention in debates about whether non-European peoples, especially people of color, were of the same species as Europeans. Despite his condescension, Tylor insists in his work that all human beings share a biological species classification and a universal potential for cultural development. In other words, all humans are human.

Hence, even the “lowest savage” shares the trans-human capacity for logical thought and “philosophy”. Tylor then imagines himself into the head of ancient man and speculates that he must have wondered about two great mysteries: (1) the difference between a living and dead body; (2) why, in dreams, he could see people who had died. The perfectly “rational” conclusion “savage man” draws is the doctrine of souls, or “animism” (vol. II. 1–2). Therefore, Tylor famously declares the most “rudimentary form” of religion to start with “belief in spiritual beings”, the lowest stage of which is animism, the belief that everything in the world is animate, has a soul (vol. I. 424).

As cultures develop, so does religious belief. First comes animism, in which the world is made up of the souls of all humans, animals, plants, and natural fixtures, such as rocks, trees, rivers, and lakes. Over time animism generalizes into propitiation of nature spirits (pp. 204–8). For example, instead of each tree having its own soul, people develop the idea of a “Spirit of the Forest” (pp. 214–29). Just as “savagery” develops into “barbarism”, polytheism results from further religious generalization and anthropomorphism. For example, discrete water spirits consolidate under the persona of a god of water or sea-god (pp. 274–78). Finally, in the civilized state of human development, polytheism transitions into monotheism, in which serving a single high god replaces individual devotions to disparate deities, ushering in universal laws and developed ethical systems (pp. 331–61). While Tylor clearly favors monotheism, conveniently the dominant religion of his particular society, as the culmination of cultural evolution, he nonetheless describes all of his proposed stages of religious development as representing their own versions of “philosophy of religion” (vol. II. vii).

James Frazer, deeply inspired by Tylor’s classifications, delves into the project of fleshing out both the universality of the Tylor’s stages of religious development and the specific mechanisms of the transition from animism to polytheism, which he argues reflects a transition from magic to religion (Frazer [1921] 1947). Building on Tylor’s notion of associative thinking, through which magicians mistake metaphorical connections for concrete, worldviews of animism and nature spirits would naturally lead to human attempts to control the physical world through the spiritual realm. Frazer bases his theory of “sympathetic magic” on the sympathies, the assumed underlying connections, between objects and their spirits. Homeopathic or imitative magic operates on the logic that “like affects like” and contagious magic on the logic that “part affects part” (pp. 10–15). Ancient magicians used these sympathies to control the world around them, including natural forces, prey animals, and other humans. Magicians commanded the elements to do their bidding (pp. 37–41).

Over time, however, the inherent rationality of human beings would reveal magic to be a false system. Magicians and their communities would come to realize that they actually had no control over awesome natural forces and would give up the hubris of trying to command them. In the place of dominance, ritual specialists would instead humble themselves before the overwhelming powers of the cosmos, becoming supplicants. Through innate powers of empirical observation and rational thought,

magicians transition into priests. Frazer understands the inevitable shift from magic to religion as crucial in the development of civilization (pp. 711–14).

Emile Durkheim, building on Tylor and Frazer even as he develops his own method of “sociology”, shares Frazer’s interest in the distinction between religion and magic (Durkheim [1915] 1964). Just as Frazer applies an implicit moralizing, that is, that magic is materially self-serving and -aggrandizing, whereas religion is spiritually other-serving, Durkheim defines magic as utilitarian and individually focused, as compared to the forging of social bonds and the creation of moral community, what he terms a “Church”, which occurs through religion. Religion and magic are fundamentally incompatible: “There is no Church of magic” (p. 44).

Sigmund Freud outlines his conjectures about the origin of culture and religion in *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Life of Savages and Neurotics* (Freud [1918] 1961). The subtitle signals clearly both his project and its connection to previous theorists, but unlike earlier work, he emphasizes the presence of women at the dawn of religion, if not their agency. In his androcentric view, religion is the result of collective, brotherly guilt resulting from the original “primal hoard” turning on their domineering alpha-father in order to have sexual access to his females. To atone for the murder, they project their now-dead father into the heavens and honor him through ritual practice (pp. 140–52). Freud is not interested in outlining the distinctions between magic and religion that so fascinate his scholarly conversation partners. Rather, he emphasizes the similarities between the kinds of beliefs and practices found in both categories, ultimately reducing religion to magical thinking in order to dismiss it as collective neurosis. In a way, however, the categories of religion and magic remain important to Freud, if only because he hopes to spread the disdain with which magic is generally viewed over into the category of religion as well.

As these forebears elaborate shared narratives of human origins and practices, they construct religion against shadows: chaos, magic, primitiveness, irrationality, hubris. Each of these categories is deeply racialized for our scholarly gentlemen, poised as they are at the heart of modernity and empire (Fitzgerald 2007; Long 1984; Styers 2004; Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 2014). Theories of cultural evolution contested even *more* racist assumptions that only white Europeans were truly human beings, but they did so in a way that nonetheless reinforced European superiority, this time through culture, rather than biology. In arguing that all cultures are on a continuum of development, with European civilization representing its culmination, cultural evolution justifies European colonial intervention and Christian missionizing as charitable means through which to speed up other groups of people along the universal track to civilization. If European culture is the apex of human striving, then the more swiftly other peoples can be encouraged and disciplined into emulating it, the more quickly they will reach their potential. While theories of cultural evolution were not born from explicit theological projects, and most major theorists understood themselves as distanced from, in some cases even opposed to, specific religious institutions, this supposedly objective theory was thoroughly compatible with Christian triumphalism (Fitzgerald 2007; Chidester 2014). As Randall Styers elucidates, “Opposition to magic—both through missionizing and through colonizing—was seen as an appropriate Christian duty” (Styers 2004, p. 15).

3. Priest versus Witch

The distinction between religion and magic is an explicitly theological concern for early modern Church elites, those shaping control both at home and abroad, before it becomes an implicit one for Victorian theorists. The very dichotomies upon which founding scholars rely are inherited from early modern theologies, which were deeply concerned with dividing the world up into God’s domain and that belonging to Satan. While specific causes of the theological shift are difficult for historians to definitively pin-point, it is clear that the consolidating church becomes especially concerned with a

dualistic cosmology that requires vigorous, violent imposition of orthodoxy and -praxy, just as it shifts from missionizing Europe to being hegemonic.²

For Tylor and the scholars who come after, determining the category differences between religion and magic seems an obviously important project because the distinction is a preoccupation for Christianity historically (Smith and Knight 2008). From its origin, it struggles to articulate differences with the Judaism that rejected its reform movement and the Roman polytheism that surrounded it (Frankfurter 2006). Through the early missionizing in which it formulated its differences with other pre-Christian European traditions, into Medieval struggles to distinguish itself from alternative Christian heresies, Islam and, once again, Judaism as an internal alterity, Christianity's self-identity has repeatedly been articulated through difference from Others (Cohn 1975; Kors and Peters 2002). In the early modern period, the Other wore a decidedly feminine face (Roper (1994, 2012)).

As Christianity successfully moved into Europe and remade local worldviews, its main preoccupation was with demonstrating that the Christian God was the one true god and all of the previous deities were mistakes, illusions, and falsehoods. The problem with previously engaged gods, spirits, and diverse other-than-human persons (Hallowell [1960] 1975)—such as fairies, house sprites, ghosts, and sometimes witches—was not that they were evil beings in conflict with God, but that they were mistakes, silly stories. While belief in them was unacceptable from a Christian point of view, it was a confusion, not a sin, and could be corrected through proper education, spiritual direction, and penance.

For example, in the early 1000's, Buchard of Worms compiled a Confession manual for fellow priests in recently Christianized communities. He outlines all sorts of local, pre-Christian beliefs and practices about which a Confessor might quiz his parishioners, everything from leaving food offerings at cross-roads to beliefs that unbaptized children can return as predatory revenants, and, therefore, must be staked in their graves (Buchard of Worms 2001). The point of all of these lines of questioning, for Buchard and his audience, is not that there are demonic beings active in the world with which foolish parishioners may be consorting, but that false ideas about these beings may be circulating and need to be corrected. Good Christians do not believe in witches, werewolves, nature spirits, etc. Those creatures are not real demons; they are fake ideas. Good Christians must be taught to abandon these old illusions and learn to think and practice Christianity correctly.

Over centuries, however, the worldview of elites shifts. Instead of the beings in folk stories and pre-Christian practices representing silly, old-fashioned delusions, they come to be seen as real, demonic creatures, which are powerfully opposed to God. The perspective shifts from one in which old gods are false to one in which they are representatives of the Devil, or even one of the many faces of Satan or Lucifer himself (Ostling 2018; see also Robbins 2004). In this new worldview, magic is not a foolish mistake, but diabolical, literally threatening to God and his flock.

This paradigm shift is, ironically, largely a result of Christian consolidation across Europe. As the church moves from a missionizing stance, in which other religious ideas are bound to be encountered through the process of establishing new Christian communities, to one in which almost everyone identifies as Christian, concerns about purity of practice and belief take the fore (Cohn 1975; see also Keane 2007). In the Medieval period, elites within what becomes the institutional Catholic Church begin to be unsettled by what they perceive as alternative versions of Christianity. Any unauthorized deviation in theology or ritual is heresy. A major explanation for the necessity of persecuting and executing heretical groups is that, although they identify themselves as Christians, they are actually worshiping Satan and are either duped or willfully misleading others into false religion, to wound God and strengthen His enemy. The Luciferian line of logic is initially rehearsed in

² This trend is similar to those within successful colonizing contexts. See, for example, Keane (2007); Latour (1993) argues that the impossible quest for purity is the foundational experience of modernity.

accusations against the Cathars, the first European group against which the Church organizes a crusade (Cohn 1975; Kors and Peters 2001).

Over time, the Church successfully consolidates its power through the removal of rival communities. First, military campaigns kill Cathars. After the Church conquers the region and executes practitioners, it establishes the “Inquisitors of Heretical Depravity”, popularly known as “The Inquisition”, to root out any left-over sympathizers. Once they run out of suspected Cathars, they turn their energy to chasing down another alternative Christian sect, the Waldensians (Cohn 1975). While this campaign of persecution succeeded in sending sympathizers into hiding, Waldensian theology resurfaced during the Reformation to influence Anabaptists, and hence the contemporary “Peace Churches”, such as Amish, other Mennonite, and Quaker denominations (Waite 2007).

The point of this diversion through medieval heresy and its persecution is that, as the early modern period arrives, elite Christians have a ready model for internal enemies who secretly support Satan in a battle against God and his good, true Christians. Having eradicated the actual communities of people that gave rise to heresy ideas, the Church nonetheless now has elaborate machinery in place to seek out hidden enemies. Without specific groups, like the Cathars and the Waldensians, upon which to project it, the stereotype of secret Satan worshipers becomes detached from specific, physical enemies and becomes free floating (Cohn 1975; Silverblatt (2004, 2006)). At this point, elites must find new groups to fill the stereotype of secret, Satanic enemy working to destroy all eternal life by corrupting Christianity (Cohn 1975; Frankfurter 2006). When this elite quest collides with popular fears about witches, who are understood as destroying actual, physical life through attacks on crops, health, and reproduction (Hutton 2017), it becomes a terrible and efficient shared project. Elites need to eliminate Satanists, non-elites need to eliminate witchcraft (Broedel 2003). If they are actually one-in-the-same problem, they can work together to mutual benefit.

With this collapsing of stereotypes into each other, the early modern period delivers a shared vision of diabolical witchcraft. Drawing on popular notions, this stereotype of the evil enemy of God is gendered as female, unlike the medieval stereotype of the heretic, the face of whom was usually a rival, male priest (Cohn 1975). Nonetheless, elites still understand witchcraft as primarily a religious crime, one of false belief and practice, even if peasants focus on maleficia, or the practical effects of witchcraft. People on the ground become persuaded to alert the authorities when their cows die or when their children sicken so that the curses will stop harming them. Elites become interested in hearing about dead cows and sick children because these are symptoms of Satanic collusion. They agree on the practical effects, even as they continue to disagree on the main problem (Broedel 2003). Framed in such a way, early modern witchcraft fears also serve to shore up Church authority by setting up a struggle between the figures of priest and witch for the control of the community’s fate. Further, it positions priests as the solution to all of the disparate problems that are attributed to witchcraft: sickness, accidents, crop failure, sexual hindrances, and other threats, tragedies, and inconveniences.

Witchcraft fears lead to extensive theological and legal theorizing on the nature of Satanic worship, along with elaborate explanations of the difference between magic and religion. Under this new, early modern cosmology of Christianity vs. Diabolism, all magic is Satanic, no matter how harmless or feckless it may appear. If witches are supporting the Devil in his quest to take over God’s world and to turn it into his own domain, that is, to literally turn our world into hell, then there is no clue too small to follow up. Unlike earlier conceptions in which magic was a foolish mistake that indirectly distracted people from proper Christian practice, for early modern elites the distinctions between magic and religion are crucial tools in distinguishing malicious enemies from God’s beleaguered servants. Discerning religion from magic was a matter of eternal life and death.

Given the stakes, early modern elites agonized over how to determine proper theology and ritual practice. Any deviation was the same as being Satanic. For example, in one of his firebrand speeches, Bernadino of Sienna exhorts to the crowd that allowing astrologers to operate in town, even if you yourself do not patronize them, is exactly the same as the infanticide that Satanic witches commit (Bernadino of Sienna 2001; see also Hutton 2017). You might as well eat those babies yourselves.

As elites labored to impose a Satanic worldview over morally diverse popular understandings of magic, the project remained incomplete, with local authorities often relying on their own judgments to maintain legal distinctions between non-Satanic magic, especially for protection and healing purposes, and the diabolical witchcraft that the elites insisted upon. For example, Joyce Miller (Miller 2002) has documented the continued category of “charming” in Scottish trials to describe prophylactic and healing spells. Charming, while still unacceptable to church authorities as a superstitious practice, was nonetheless not prosecuted as diabolical witchcraft. Punishments doled out upon conviction for charming are similar to Buchard’s “corrections”, in contrast to the executions meted out for witchcraft convictions, which these same authorities were perfectly willing to hand down.

As another example, Gustav Henningsen’s work on Sicily documents the lengths to which locals went to maintain their beliefs in non-diabolical beings, even in the face of educational and punitive campaigns on the part of the Church. For example, one woman on trial for consorting with fairies explains that her supernatural friends are acceptable because they are, themselves, Catholic and took her along with them to a fairy Mass (Henningsen 1993, p. 206). Even as Church elites are striving to remake a previously complicated, morally diverse world into a simple one of official Church vs. Satanic conspiracy, the people on the ground are resisting, arguing for their particular supernatural creatures and practices to be included on the legitimately Christian side of the dichotomy. They do not challenge the overall project explicitly, but justify their own exceptions in practice.

The trouble of defining magic vs. religion in the early modern period is further complicated by how similar illegitimate “magical” practices and legitimate practices, either religious or quotidian, appear. For example, throughout European communities, many women gathered herbs at dawn. As Ostling documents in early modern Polish communities, picking herbs and whispering a prayer to Mary was legitimate practice, but witches were believed to harvest herbs and mutter devilish incantations. From a distance, how could an observer know what a woman across the field was reciting (Ostling 2011, p. 108)? Compounding this problem is the idea that witchcraft twists and corrupts everyday caring practices. Good women cook for the people they love, nurse the sick, and tend to children. Witches secretly cook poisonous potions, cause illness and exacerbate it through false ministrations, harm children through malicious, cursing touch. Good women and witches appear to do the same things involving food and care, but witches are secretly delivering harm instead of nurture (Larner 1984, pp. 84–88; Roper 1994). How can someone watching, even a victim themselves, really tell the difference?

As these struggles about acceptable and unacceptable beings and practices demonstrate, early modern witchcraft definitions, among educated elites, are all about a dichotomy between God and Satan in which everything marginal and other is Satanic. Is it officially sanctioned by Church officials? Did it happen in a sanctuary with a priest? If you have to answer, “no”, or add exceptions, then it is Satanic. In an androcentric society, women are “other” by default (Lester 1992; Clark 1997, pp. 119–33). If everything other is Satanic, then women are Satanic and the Satanic is feminine. When this worldview is fully operational, women’s practices can never be “religious”.

If the major anxiety is about what is officially sanctioned, and therefore what is policed by the Church and its official representatives, then what is more suspect than women (Roper (1994, 2012); Jackson 1995; Reis 1997; Zwissler 2016b)? They can never be educated in church laws. Because of gender segregated labor women are often off by themselves and away from the supervision of men. Finally, thanks to two to five millennia of male-produced theology, women are understood as the spiritual weak-link between men and Satan. Sexism causes a looped problem for women: because they and their activities are less respected than men’s and because men, especially elite men, do not understand very well what women are doing, men do not really pay much attention to “women’s talk” or “women’s work”; yet, because they do not pay much attention, elite men have very little idea of what women actually do, so women’s worlds become mysterious; mystery is suspect; women are suspect; elite men become deeply concerned about what women do when they are off together.

Not to lay the whole affair at the feet of the *Malleus Malleficarum*, that infamous inquisitional instruction manual (Smith 2002), but “When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil” (Kramer and Sprenger 2001, p. 183). Concerns about surveilling women also help to explain the authors’ obsessive hatred of midwives as the worst kind of witches, despite the fact that, historically, midwives are underrepresented in trial records and often participated in trials on the side of the prosecution (Harley 1990; Holmes 1993; Roper 1994). As men were never in the birthing chamber, it provides the ultimate metonym for women’s unsupervised social spheres, not unlike the way women’s hijab becomes the focus of Islamophobic colonial and neo-colonial concerns about security (Abu-Lughod 2013; Cavanaugh 2007; Najmabadi 2008; Scott 2007). When people are unobservable, they become undisciplinable (Hoodfar 2001).

Furthermore, if the human soul is gendered as feminine, as it must be to heterosexually couple with God through Christ, both of whom are conceived in exclusively masculine terms, then all humans are weak and are susceptible to seduction by evil. Women are even more so, however, because they are doubly feminized: a physically weak body enshrouds a metaphysically weak soul (Bynum 1987; Reis 1997; Ruether 2005). God’s community is always under threat from the Devil and women are his easiest way in (Ferber 2004). As a result, they must be policed and monitored by men, each other, and themselves (Jackson 1995; Zwissler 2016a). Even arguments against persecution, such as those from Reginald Scot and Frederick von Spee, relied on misogynist assumptions about women’s lack of intellectual and spiritual capacities (Purkiss 2005). Old women’s addled incompetence should save them from prosecution.

Early modern debates about diabolical witchcraft presage the very concerns that rebound in academic theories distinguishing religion and magic. Demonology was deeply concerned with racial and religious difference. (Styers 2004; Brauner 1995; Silverblatt (2004, 2006)). Ranting, dark fantasies about antinomian orgies and malefica later develop into colonial diatribes about treatment of women, which are still painfully politically salient today (Fitzgerald 2007; Loomba 2005; Mahmood (2005, 2016); Gürsel 2014; Loenen 2014; Hammer (2012, 2016); Zwissler 2018).

The distinction between religion and magic is also classed. European elites in the early modern period worked very hard to impose a dichotomous worldview onto local beliefs, engaging in an active public education project to convince rural working classes that all magic was Satanic (Brodell 2003; Smith 1998). Peasants were a hindrance in God’s war with Satan because they did not understand it. However, a few centuries later, when elite consensus shifts away from endorsing witch hunts to denouncing them as examples of ignorant violence, peasant belief in diabolical witchcraft is held up as a reason that it is a ridiculous idea (Levack 1987, pp. 218–19; see also Styers 2004, pp. 43–44).

Over time, the same developments in early modern science and law that were initially performed in elaborate demonologies and witchcraft prosecutions come to be understood, instead, as disproving the reality of witchcraft (Styers 2004). Scientific methods progress, leading eventually to breakthroughs, such as Darwin’s evolutionary theory and its application by scholars to human cultures. “Superstitious” beliefs and practices among the European working classes come to serve repeatedly in their work as examples of survivals from earlier stages of cultural development, evidence of the cultural evolution that takes humanity from magic to religion.

4. Witch as Priest

Given the androcentric silence about women in theories about the origin of religion, it is no wonder that women, and men who actually saw them, began to weave them into prehistorical narratives. While reconstructing women’s participation prehistorically requires pure speculation, this process was legitimated by the speculation that was already underway by canonical theorists. In imagining “primitive” life and the thoughts of “savage” man, scholars, such as Tylor and Frazer, provided a model for other kinds of creative narratives about the origins of religion.

Unfortunately, the first major effort to write women into otherwise androcentric religious history came, not from a feminist, but as Cynthia Eller (Eller 2011) has explicated, from a

misogynist, Johann Jakob Bachofen, a wealthy lawyer-turned-classicist in nineteenth century Basel. Bachofen notices that women exist, but is adamant to explain to his readers why they should not have political power or moral influence. He shares what will later be Feud's desperate preoccupation with distinguishing mothers from lovers.

For Bachofen (Bachofen [1861] 2003), the original form of human community, the "hatearic" stage was a collective, debauched "swamp" (Eller 2011, p. 42). Essentially, everybody has messy sex with everybody, though power is concentrated in single, tyrannical strongmen, and there is no understanding of parental lineage. However, over time, women come to realize how sexual reproduction works and therefore insist on limiting men's sexual access to them, as well as obtaining paternal support for their children, in the form of monogamy. As a community, the magical power of life-giving that is associated with women as mothers develops into humanity's first, rudimentary social system, gynocracy, or a political system that is based in the female rule, *Das Mutterrecht*. However, this matriarchy is still unorganized and poorly disciplined, as laws and social values are based in the vagaries of women's emotional whims and sexual desires. Rebellion by sexually oppressed males leads to the overthrowing of the matriarchy and the establishment of patriarchy, an evolutionary step that is necessary for the development of mankind into civilization, complete with universal laws, literacy, and the architectural wonders of ancient Greece, Bachofen's favorite precursor to nineteenth century European culture. For Bachofen, the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy was a necessary evolutionary development from the dark ages of primitive prehistory towards the glories of modernity.

Despite his unsavory views on gender, Bachofen's ideas of the overthrow of matriarchy by patriarchy influenced generations of feminists—as well as fascists, labor organizers, and eugenicists—to reimagine the popular assumptions about human history (Eller 2011). For example, Elizabeth Josyln Gage, a formative American suffragist, took the shift from ancient matriarchy to patriarchy to be the beginning of a devolution from which humanity was just beginning to recover through the increased participation of women in politics (Gage [1893] 1980). Jane Ellen Harrison, the first professional woman academic in Great Britain, a staunch suffragist, and a formidable classicist, combined the evolutionary schemes of matriarchal theory with Frazer's stages of religious development, and, consequently, found evidence for matriarchy in pre-Olympian Greece by reading backwards from the extant myths (Harrison [1903] 2010). Beginning in the 1960's and 70's, spiritual feminists revisited and reinvented counter-narratives about human history to challenge the prevailing archetype of the primitive [male] philosopher. In doing so, they recast religious and societal origins, not in lone men pondering the nature of the universe, but in collective worship of a Great Mother goddess.

Individual men and their contemplations of death are replaced by community celebrations of the power of life as the true catalyst for the creation of religion. The "myth of matriarchal prehistory" (Eller 2000) is a way to insert women into the androcentric model of history, pushing back against the exclusion of women from the cultural evolution narrative, placing women at the heart of the origins of religion, and therefore, civilization. These theories insist that women are not only an important part of humanity, but they are its original heroes. Rather than unfolding without women, the story of human history can actually only truly be told through focus on them.

In the twentieth century, a major scholar who championed the theory of original goddess worship is the archeologist and folklorist Maria Gimbutas. After several Neolithic excavations spent discovering hundreds of feminine figurines, Gimbutas uses her method of "archeomythology" (Gimbutas 1989, vol. xviii) to synthesize diverse sites, cultures, and time-periods into a universal theory about Neolithic religion, in what she terms "Old Europe". Through several bursts of personal revelation, she comes to understand that all of these figurines represent a single, Great Goddess, an earth-mother divinity, who would have been the original figure of worship for Neolithic peoples. From this revelation, that the figurines are all religious icons and that in their diversity they represent the same Goddess, she reconstructs the original religion of humanity and the structures of the society that would have accompanied it.

Based on her creative interpretations of her excavations and those of others, Maria Gimbutas concludes that the early settlements of Old Europe were peaceful, female-led, and practiced a religion based on the Great Goddess, giver of all life, whose truths could be read in the solar, lunar, seasonal, and life stage cycles:

The main theme of Goddess symbolism is the mystery of birth and death and the renewal of life, not only human, but all life on earth and indeed in the whole cosmos. Symbols and images cluster around the parthenogenic (self-generating) Goddess and her basic functions as Giver of Life, Wielder of Death, and, not less importantly, as Regeneratrix, and around the Earth Mother, the Fertility Goddess young and old, rising and dying with plant life. She was the single source of life who took her energy from the sun, moon, and moist earth. This symbolic system represents cyclical, not linear, mythical time. (Gimbutas 1989, vol. xix)

She was the goddess of both birth and death, for death leads to regeneration.

Gimbutas postulates that humans would have naturally discovered the Goddess based on their observances of women's power to give life, that is, to become pregnant and give birth. Their reverence for this most fundamental of powers would have evolved into personification and honoring, which in turn, would have reinforced their core values of respect for all life as interconnected, peace practices, as opposed to violence and war, and social power for women, a lifestyle that she summarizes as matriarchal (Gimbutas 1991). Her theories have been deeply inspiring for several generations of spiritual feminists searching for alternatives to mainstream, androcentric religious traditions (e.g., Christ (1997, 2005); Eisler 1987; Starhawk [1979] 1999; see also Eller (1993, 2000, 2011); Purkiss 2005; Ruether 2005; Zwissler (2016a, 2016b)).

As with our early scholars' speculations about the origins of religion, Gimbutas' speculations about Neolithic goddess-worshipping matriarchy have been deconstructed by scholars (Eller (2000, 2013); Ruether 2005; Rountree (2001, 2007a, 2007b)). An overwhelming majority of archeologists, feminist and otherwise, emphasize that there is very little scholars that can decisively conclude about the lives and worlds of prehistoric peoples. By definition, "prehistory" means that the time period predates writing, so we only have material objects, and only those that were durable enough to be preserved for millennia, on which to base ideas about what life was like for people at the time. We do not have any details about what people thought or felt about those objects. The feminine figurines on which Gimbutas builds her theory could have been and meant many different things to Neolithic peoples.

Further, as Cynthia Eller (Eller 2000) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Ruether 2005) each document, the idea of a monotheistic mother goddess is a decidedly modern and Western preoccupation. It is not a common cosmology cross-culturally (Sered 1994). Further, assumed causal links between goddess reverence and the respect for human women do not play out in any certain terms within the historical and current living goddess traditions for which there is documentation (Sered 1994; Pintchman 2000; Foley 1994). In other words, when a society has feminine models for the sacred world, there is no reason to assume that human women have had opportunities to contribute to these models or that these models impact social understandings of women and gender roles. Goddesses can be, and largely have been, patriarchal fantasies about women. Moreover, within their mythologies, goddesses are able to get away with many things that human women cannot.

However, it is also important to emphasize the deep irony with all of this scientific deconstruction that is aimed at Gimbutas. In many ways, she is simply using the tools of her predecessors. Just as theorists, such as Tylor, speculated about the thought-processes of early modern men through imagining what they, themselves, would do in the same situation, so Gimbutas speculates about the thought processes of early modern humans, projecting herself back. In her reading of the images of the Goddess across art and grave goods, Gimbutas is doing something very similar to Freud's psychoanalytic dream interpretations. As a result of the new hands that hold them, the tools create something new.

Reclamation of prehistory as matriarchal is a related project to the reclamation of witchcraft as a feminist religion or spiritual practice (e.g., Starhawk [1979] 1999). They are compatible

meta-narratives that shift the focus from men's theorizing to women's lived experience, from theology to ritual practice, even if that focus is still just as speculative and ungrounded in empirical evidence as competitive theories. The connection is even more concrete: Margaret Murray, the major scholar to reframe early modern European witch hunts as a persecution of a woman-friendly religion, based her work on James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

Murray, an Egyptologist locked out of her field sites during World War I and looking for something to research, began knocking about in British archives reading witch trial transcripts (Murray 1963). Once she made the connection between her archival material and Frazer's work, especially the theory of sympathetic magic and his evolutionary model of religion, she had her paradigm-busting epiphany: early modern witchcraft persecutions were a deliberate campaign on the part of the Church to eradicate a rival, pre-Christian religion (Murray 1921). This pre-Christian religion was a fertility cult based on seasonal cycles, celebration of life, and was officiated by ritual specialists of both genders, serving a Great Goddess and her consort, the Horned God of the Forest. Women tried as witches were priestesses and practitioners of this both deep-seeded and wide-spread faith, the original religion of all Europe before the encroachment of Christianity.

Overall, European history and the mainline theories that grow from it have had very little to say about women. With the exception of occasional queens and villains, women generally do not come up as important historical actors. Witches provide one of the only options for including women in the narrative. That is, for this exceptional early modern period, religious and political elites pay a great deal of attention to women and their power, even if this attention is based in paranoid misogyny and inversion. With so few models of women's power and agency from which to draw, the witch stands out starkly. It is therefore probably not a coincidence that Murray, as a woman in a predominantly male field, may have looked for other women in European history. It is also not surprising that she would have seized on the witch hunts as an important place to find evidence of alterity, both gendered and religious.

Murray's work deeply influenced the contemporary founder of Wicca, Gerald Gardner. There was a symbiotic relationship. Murray's scholarship provided historical evidence to support the ancient roots of Gardner's new religious movement; she even wrote an introduction to his first non-fiction account of Wicca, *Witchcraft Today* (Gardner 1954). Gardner, for his part, provided contemporary evidence to corroborate Murray's argument that witchcraft in the early modern period was a survival of a pre-Christian fertility cult that continued, hidden, into the present-day. It suited both Gardner and Murray to see his contemporary Wicca as the continuation of Witchcraft as a real religion.

Wicca extended beyond Gardner's initiation circle and diffused into diverse forms of contemporary Witchcraft. Many of those strands were reinvented or significantly changed by contact with North American feminist movements, including the spiritual feminism that embraces narratives of matriarchal prehistory (Hutton 1999; Salmonsén 2002; Magliocco 2004; Clifton 2006; Zwissler (2016a, 2016b)). The results are a fusing of the two narratives into a worldview of improving women's current social status, and ending systems of domination more broadly, through reclaiming women's proper spiritual power. Victims of the early modern persecutions were representatives of this stolen strength. As Zsuzsanna Budapest, the founder of Dianic Wicca writes, "... I like the word 'witch.' It is the only word in English that denotes 'woman with spiritual power'" (Budapest [1980] 1990, p. xvii). Explaining the connection between Witches, the Goddess, and contemporary social justice struggles, Starhawk, founder of Reclaiming Witchcraft, and her co-author, Hilary Valentine, write in their ritual manual:

We are Witches: our roots are in the initiatory Goddess traditions that arose in Europe and the Middle East, though our practice is strongly shaped by the multicultural traditions of this land. We make a powerful, personal commitment to the Goddess as we understand her, and we are willing to identify with the victims of the Witch persecutions and work to counter negative stereotypes associated with the word *Witch*. We are feminists: we believe that neither women nor men can be truly free until the unequal power relations between

genders are broken down. Our analysis of power extends to the relations between races, classes, between humans and the earth; we see all forms of domination as interconnected and destructive. (Starhawk and Valentine 2000, p. xvi)

Within contemporary Witchcraft traditions, early modern “witches” are evidence of a matriarchal past, as well as life-models for correcting contemporary oppressions, part of what Magliocco describes as the “oppositional culture” of contemporary Witchcraft (2004).

Theories of ancient matriarchal religion and its survival through persecution as witchcraft in the early modern period serve to reframe the androcentrism of early work in the academic study of religion, work that has nonetheless been fundamental to contemporary new religious movements, such as Paganism and feminist Witchcraft. As much as source materials, such as scholarship by Tylor and Frazer, offer models for alternative cosmologies and ritual practices into which women and their allies have read their own experiences and concerns, their works still imagine religion bursting like Athena out of the masculine mind. Theories that place the origins of religion in ancient matriarchal cultures, who first begin to worship a Mother Goddess, replace that “primitive man” with women-centered communities, recast animism, not as ignorance of scientific cause and effect, but as recognition of the interconnection of humanity to the natural world. For example, Starhawk writes, “The word *Witch* throws us back into a world who is a being, a world in which everything is alive and speaking, if only we learn its language. The word brings us back to the outlawed awareness of the immanence of the sacred, and so it reeks of holy stubbornness, an unwillingness to believe that the living milk of nurture we drink daily from the flowing world can be reduced to a formula administered from a machine” (Starhawk [1987] 1990, p. 8). Furthermore, this counter-narrative of religious origins reframes women who died in European witch hunts, not as pitiful victims of pointless violence, but as martyrs in the cause of the Goddess (Zwissler 2016b): humanity must remember Her when we remember them.

5. Conclusions: In Theory, Merry Meet and Merry Part and Merry Meet Again

This article has examined the historically competing poles of ideas of magic and religion and their gendered traces in the history of religious studies. On one hand, we have a genealogy that traces the term, “magic”, back to an early modern European Christianity trying to understand itself through contrast with the other, an imagined heresy that comes to be personified with a woman’s face. On the other, we have contemporary political and religious communities that use the identification as Witches to reverse this version of dichotomous Christian gaze and legitimize religious difference, which also comes to be symbolized by a female body. Between these historical moments we have the beginning of the academic study of religion, the theoretical turn in which Christian-dominant scholarship comes to see itself on a continuum with, rather than opposed to, different religions, as first characterized by cultural evolution theories about the origins of religion. Especially given the field’s theological roots, examining the constructed relationships between religion and magic, both of which represent crucial subjects for early theorists, through the analytical lens of gender, which does not, provide opportunities to surface implicit assumptions of the current field about what is and is not worth studying. By way of conclusion, I outline three main ways that the unacknowledged, gendered genealogy of “magic vs. religion” impacts the academic study of religion: routinizing androcentrism through the current canon of foundational theorists; perpetuating limited theoretical categories; continuing to decenter women and other marginalized people as legitimate foci of study.

None of the historical narratives—origins of religion in primitive man’s rationalizing his universe, origins of religion in ancient worship of a Great Mother Goddess, early modern witchcraft as survival of an ancient fertility cult—is empirically true. Cultural evolution theories have been thoroughly deconstructed within anthropology and archeology as ethnocentric, colonial, false, and frequently racist. Theories of ancient Goddess matriarchy have likewise been laid bare as disconnected from available evidence. It is general scholarly consensus that Gardner was inspired to invent Wicca. So, as an anthropologist, my next question must be: if these narratives are not about facts, what are they about? What actual debates are taking place beneath the veneer of competing historical data?

In each of these cases, it is helpful to approach the narratives themselves as a form of ritual performance, a way of reconciling ideals with reality (Smith 1987). They are not empirically true, but ring for their proponents as emotionally true; they express cosmological worldviews that are difficult to express in other forms (Victor 1993; Zwissler 2016b). Respectively, they tell different stories about human nature through connecting our pasts to our possible futures. From one perspective, humans are the same, but “we”, that is European Christians (and perhaps post-Christians) are the culmination of human progress. Alternatively, the story of human progress begins with women and their recognition of the interconnection of all life, but modernity has since stripped us of what makes us truly human. Nonetheless, we can reconnect to our real power, in order to become whole by returning to our past ritual practices. Over all, these competing narratives are about what is best for humanity: an androcentric hierarchy culminating in technological modernity; or a gender-egalitarian society that transcends the hierarchies of modernity.

These narratives are equally inaccurate historically. Nonetheless, stories of matriarchal Witchcraft as Ur-religion solve problems that are created by cultural evolutionary theories.

Where were the women? Where do women fit in now? Ideas of Mother Goddesses and Witches are means through which to write women into the history of religion and human development. However, theories that rely on prehistorical matriarchies do not challenge the underlying structures of traditionally androcentric foundational theories; rather, they minimally adjust their formulae to include women. In doing so, such feminist theories flip the dichotomies, but maintain their power imbalances. Witches are a way of adding women into the discourse, but at the cost of accepting androcentric perimeters, maintaining cultural hierarchies, and perpetuating false models of cultural evolution.

Nonetheless, matriarchal origin stories serve a practical purpose. Feminist theologians working in different religious contexts, North American evangelical Christianity and global Islam, respectively, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (Mollenkott 2004) and Riffat Hasan (Hassan 1997) have advocated for not leaving conservative scriptural interpretations without challenge, because allowing them to stand hurts women and other marginalized people, especially those in traditionalist communities that encourage literal interpretations of scripture. While androcentric narratives about human origins are not sacred scripture in the same ways that the Bible and Qur’an can be argued to be, they are nonetheless creation narratives for contemporary culture, mythologies that tell women, men, and those who do not fit easily into those categories, that men are the only humans who matter. Being able to tell origin stories centered on other heroes, even if those stories are as equally untrue as androcentric cultural evolutionary theories, allows for marginalized people to see themselves reflected in the shared story of humanity.

Turning from pragmatic concerns to a more theoretical lens, the androcentric structures underlying foundational theories of religious origins are shared with early modern theology. Moreover, its ‘problem of gender’ continues to be reflected in contemporary theory in the academic study of religion. Just as early modern women’s practices could never, truly be legitimately “religious”, so too have the major categories of our field been constructed around androcentric assumptions. In focusing on, especially, the intellectual theologies of religious leaders and other elites who have, in our cultural context and many others, historically been men, the academic study of religion has implicitly accepted the idea that whatever women do is never official, but always magic, superstition, folk custom, focused on practical/immanent concerns, not part of the core of what our field is really about. How might foregrounding women change where theorists direct their gazes (Braude 1997; Sered 1994; Mahmood 2005)? In a similar strategy to pursuing comparative-religions work by starting from perspectives that take as normative religions other than Christianity (McClymond 2018), how might our theoretical categories—such as theology, ritual, sacrifice, mysticism, secularism—change if women and their experiences were centered, rather than marginalized (e.g., Mahmood 2005; Walton 2011; Frederick 2003; Chireau 2003; Bell 1997, pp. 237–42; Sered (1992, 1994); Duncan 2008; Fedele 2013; Bynum 1987; Jay 1992; Mizruchi 2001; Dubisch 1995, 2009; Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Scott 2011; Zwissler (2011, 2018))?

A further result of the historical interest in parsing the distinctions between religion and magic is the more recent concern, especially important for ethnographic work on newer religious movements, with distinguishing “religion” and “spirituality” (Bender 2010; Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Knibbe 2013; Sointu and Woodhead 2008; Wilcox 2009; Longman 2018; Zwissler 2018). For both proponents and critics, religion aligns with institutional authority and the social collective, whereas spirituality is associated, often virtuously, with individual experience and well-being. As with the embrace of the historical witch as a feminist figure, this usage of “spirituality” adopts Durkheim’s relegation of magic to matters of self-interest, but flips the moralizing that he ascribes to it, instead criticizing social aspects of religion as too easily combined with oppressive political power. Given the marginalized relationship women and other sexual minorities have had to the authoritative institutions of church and state, it is not coincidence that, in the current moment, the language of spirituality is especially associated with and deployed by women (Zwissler 2018).

As long as androcentric narratives about the origin of religion continue to gloss over women as full humans, agents, and practitioners, some of them, and their allies, will continue to tell parallel stories. Women, LGBTQ people, people of color, and others who are marginalized by dominant academic narratives create their own histories because they, like all human beings, need stories that include them as full actors and reflect their equal right to be (Purkiss 2005; Zwissler 2016a). For scholars who remain discomfited by myths of matriarchal prehistory and alternative Witchcraft narratives, a solution far better than condescending correction is to join the project of developing more inclusive scholarship, so that creative projects compensating for glaring lacunae in representation are no longer so desperately needed.

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