

## Mary Faulkner and the potluck of women's spirituality

Sharon Abercrombie | Aug. 24, 2011 Eco Catholic

When people ask Mary Faulkner about her religious practice, she says, "I tell them I'm a Canaanite. They look at me kind of funny at first, but most of the time, they figure it has something to do with the indigenous people of the Middle East."

Canaanites were the ancient people of Israel who worshipped the Mother Goddess Asherah for thousands of years before a Father God emerged. (When that happened, Asherah became known as "the lost bride of Yahweh.")

"I would root myself in that tradition," states Faulkner, a psychotherapist who said she stopped identifying as a practicing Catholic many years ago because of the women's ordination issue. "I decided they'd just have to get along without me," she said cheerfully during a recent phone conversation from her Nashville, Tennessee home.

The topic of our interview was her third and latest book, [\*Women's Spirituality: Power and Grace\*](#)<sup>[1]</sup>.

For anyone who is seriously searching for a history and/or seeking a personal doorway into the great, generous heart of the divine feminine, Faulkner's is the definitive book to embrace. Initially she looks at Marija Gimbutas' breakthrough archeological research which opened up to us the entire ancient matrifocal world of nurturance, art and beauty.

Faulkner presents us with the language and philosophy of emerging women's spirituality and how it differs from the entrenched patriarchal/hierarchical mindset of so much institutionalized religion and politics. She provides us with a grand section on Wiccan, Celtic, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu Native American and African/Caribbean spiritual traditions.

She examines the work of well-known writers, theologians and academics, including Rosemary Reuther, Barbara Walker, Luisa Teish, Alice Walker, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sallie McFague, Mary Daly, Carol Christ, Charlene Spretnak and Sue Monk Kidd. Faulkner features a section on women who have pioneered in the healing arts, herbal medicine, ecofeminism, and spiritual literature.

Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila are some of the heroines here.

The writer tells of the impact of women such as Wilma Mankiller, the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation who worked tirelessly to improve employment, health, care and the advancement of Native American women.

It is all here, "like a survey course with a curriculum to follow," adds the author.

*Women's Spirituality* is a revised expansion of Faulkner's second book: [\*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Women's Spirituality\*](#)<sup>[2]</sup>, published in 2002.

"I hated that title," said Faulkner of the previous book, "because it put 'idiots' and 'women' together." So a few years later, when Hampton Roads asked if she would write a women's spirituality book for them, Faulkner

eagerly accepted their offer.

Before her foray into book writing, Faulkner founded and edited the San Francisco-based magazine *Recovery*. During the 1980s she took courses at the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality, studying with Goddess proponents Carol Christ and Charlene Spretnak. She also went to Boston for classes with theologians Rosemary Reuther and Mary Daly.

If this reviewer had an extra \$500 to spend on books, a group of treasured friends would soon discover gift copies of *Women's Spirituality* on their door steps. But other copies would also go to an assorted group of Vatican types, including Pope Benedict XVI, who are fighting for their lives to keep the religion of orthodox dogma and patriarchy going.

Would they read Faulkner's book? Probably not. Alas, more than likely, copies would end up in the recycling bin. But wishfully thinking, here are some truths about women's spirituality I would fantasize both their taking in and taking to heart.

Faulkner tells us that matriarchal societies were peaceful and based in economic equality. Male warrior cultures known as Kurgans invaded Europe about 6,000 years ago and imposed their hierarchical rule that replaced the earlier societies. This more warlike culture marked the end of Goddess time and the beginning of God time.

Excavation of two civilizations that survived into fairly recent times shows us a good picture of what early matriarchal societies looked like and how they functioned, the author continues.

Matriarchal societies are not patriarchies in drag, Faulkner quips humorously at one point. She goes on to say that Catal Huyuk, a Neolithic city in Turkey founded around 8,500 BC and occupied for over 800 years, was a spot chosen for its beauty, not for its ability to be defended against attack. In fact, no evidence was discovered that would lead to the conclusion that the people of these cultures were involved in warring. No weapons were found there.

The art at Catal Huyuk established an important link between the archaic Mother Goddess cultures of the prehistoric world and those of classical times, said Faulkner.

The Madonna and child, venerated in the religious art of Christian Churches and homes all over the modern world, go back in time to an unbroken line to this Mother Goddess imagery. The Great Mother that is so firmly rooted in the psyche of the people of Neolithic times is the Madonna of our psyches as well.

The Greek Island of Crete, another Goddess culture, was the most highly developed civilization of the ancient world. Crete was known for its art, music and agriculture. There were viaducts, fountains, and irrigation systems to transport water as well as sanitation systems.

Religious celebrations expressed a joy of life. Music, art, dance, processions, banquets and games were seen as religious ceremonies and were depicted in art. Male and females were equal. They dressed similarly. The Goddess was celebrated in art and dance. She was loved and respected.

Devotion to her was carried over into society. Men and women shared leadership, which was characterized by service rather than privilege.

Faulkner's book has other significant messages as well. Women's spirituality is a verb rather than a noun, a process rather than doctrine. It is a spirituality of questioning and discovering. It begins at the personal level,

becomes political and then gets practical. It questions many of the traditional understandings about power and authority and eventually questions assumptions that have been made about God.?

She emphasizes that "this spirituality doesn't preach or teach a specific theology or doctrine and it doesn't send you to the traditional religious sources. It encourages you to go within -- to find your own truth," scary as that might be.

In fact, women's spirituality is guided by an "inner sense of justice more akin to the Golden rule than to the Ten Commandments, is not threatened by your own or others' beliefs, and you sense the sacred in nature as more than just renewal; your soul is fed there.?"

Those who cling to the belief that the Catholic Church is still the only true religion will not care for some of Faulkner's other premises. Namely, that "spirituality connects us" is inclusive, incorporating a variety of people, beliefs and ways of expressing those beliefs, and doesn't seek to control them. Women's spirituality has no problem crossing spiritual or religious lines -- it's the ultimate potluck.?"

Faulkner points out that in spirituality, you'll recognize universal principles found in Buddhism, Hinduism, Native American teaching, Celtic, Wiccan, and Neo-pagan traditions, Christianity, African/Caribbean practices, Judaism, Jungian psychology, and assorted folklore. Simply put, she says, spirituality can't be bundled into one philosophy, one culture, or one set of beliefs.

Worth noting is her premise that women's spirituality "doesn't challenge God. It challenges specific assumptions that have been made about God. In doing so it challenges long-standing cultural assumptions about power and authority -- who has it, who doesn't and where it comes from. Women's spirituality considers the possibility of sacred presence here, and now in this world. It believes all authority comes through divine Source " God or Goddess " or by whatever name you may call grace.?"

She moves from spirituality into politics, underscoring that they are intertwined.

"Spirituality has a political underbelly and vice versa. At its best, politics serves to secure and protect innate rights; it stabilizes culture," she writes.

"Women's spirituality is "hard wired for relationship. We want everyone to have food and shelter; we want all babies to have a good shot at life. We believe in fairness and equality. We understand our dependence on the environment"and we refute the idea that true power is acquired through money, position, physical beauty, strength, or political manipulation -- even when we're the ones doing it!?"

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.amazon.com/Womens-Spirituality-Power-Mary-Faulkner/dp/1571746250>

[2] <http://www.amazon.com/Complete-Idiots-Guide-Womens-Spirituality/dp/0028642244>