

**“Black” madonna versus “white” madonna:
Gendered power strategies in alternative pilgrimages to Marian shrines**

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Abstract:

This chapter describes the theories and rituals of non-Christian pilgrims influenced by the transnational Neopagan movement visiting Catholic shrines holding dark madonna statues and is based on observations of three organized pilgrimages. “Black Madonnas” represent, for these pilgrims, “the dark side of the Feminine” and serve as a counterbalance to the “White and Immaculate” Virgin Mary they know from their childhood in Christian, mostly Catholic, families. Non-Catholic devotion to Black Madonnas with its critique of “the Church” and “patriarchal” society represents a privileged window upon the supposed opposition between “religion” and “spirituality”. Through the analysis of fieldwork data and of the pilgrims’ comments, Fedele argues that these pilgrims’ spirituality has many things in common with vernacular Christian religion of the past and present. The author further situates the pilgrims’ theories in a wider historical context and shows how Black Madonnas allow these spiritual travelers to acknowledge and come to terms with the gendered disempowerment they experienced within Christianity and to find a different approach to their vulnerable, gendered bodies.

Recent years have seen remarkable growth in pilgrimages aimed at discovering and contacting the “energy” stored in “power places,” in communing with “Mother Earth” or in contacting the power of the “Goddess.”¹ Influenced by the transnational Neopagan movement and by the so-called “New Age”² such pilgrims may have a Christian background but do not consider themselves practicing Christians, preferring instead to identify themselves as part of a growing worldwide “spirituality.” During fieldwork for my dissertation (2002-2005)³ I joined three organized pilgrimage groups visiting Catholic pilgrimage shrines in France dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene or that house dark madonna statues; one pilgrim group was from Italy, another from Spain, while the third was comprised of pilgrims from the United States and Britain.

Like other spiritual practitioners described in this volume, the pilgrims I encountered rejected what they identified as “religion” in favor of a “spirituality” they perceived as more gender-equal and which allowed more freedom to the individual. Happy to have escaped from the dogmas and practices of a Catholic religion they described as constricting and disempowering, these men and women did not recognize themselves as part of any particular religious group. And yet, even if they did not describe themselves as “Pagans” the pilgrims had a great deal in common with the transnational Neopagan movement.⁴ They venerated a feminine, immanent divinity identified as “Mother Earth” that manifested

¹ Among others: Ellen Badone, “Pilgrimage, Tourism and The Da Vinci Code at Les-Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer, France,” *Culture and Religion* 9:1 (2008): 23–44; Marion Bowman, “Drawn to Glastonbury,” in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. Ian Reader and Tony Walter (London: Macmillan, 1993), 29–62; Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001); Kathryn Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims as Tourists: Inscribing the Body through Sacred Travel,” *Sociology of Religion* 63 no. 4 (2002): 475–496; Deana Weibel, “Kidnapping the Virgin: The Reinterpretation of a Roman Catholic Shrine by Religious Creatives” (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2001); and Deana Weibel, “Of Consciousness Changes and Fortified Faith: Creativist and Catholic Pilgrimage at French Catholic Shrines,” in *Pilgrimage and Healing*, ed. Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelmann (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2005), 111–34. For an overview of this kind of alternative pilgrimage see Laurel Zwissler, “Pagan Pilgrimage: New Age Movements Research on Sacred Travel within Pagan and New Age Communities,” *Religion Compass* 5 no.7 (July 2011): 326–42.

² As Matthew Wood shows in *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), “New Age” is a contested term and it is difficult to understand what each researcher means when referring to it. The pilgrims I met tended to have a negative image of what they identified as “New Age” and did not like to be called “New Agers.” See also the introduction to this volume.

³ Anna Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) [pages will be provided once available].

⁴ Among others: Helen Berger, *A Community of Witches* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic and Witchcraft*

through nature, and claimed roots in the pagan religions of their European or American ancestors. They also advocated the sacrality of body and sexuality and the need to transcend dichotomies inherent to “patriarchal” religions and societies—body and soul, material and spiritual, human and divine were no longer considered separate aspects but as two sides of the same coin. The pilgrims’ concern with ecology also led to a critique of what they saw as patriarchal and misogynist ideas inherent in the current and globalized social order, ideas which underlie the exploitation of the planet and the human domination of Mother Earth. And, they blamed the (Christian) “Church” for providing the theological and ideological underpinnings that have made it possible to dominate women, exploit the planet and persecute pagans throughout history.

This essay centers on the kind of relationship these pilgrims established with what they identified as “Black Madonnas,” and the kind of “energy” described as emanating from the madonnas themselves. Most of the attributes of the Black Madonna derive from a strategy of construction by opposition that allows pilgrims to see the dark madonna statues as an antidote to the “White and Immaculate” Virgin Mary the pilgrims associate with their Catholic upbringing. The pilgrims, influenced by certain books, use the Black Madonna to come to terms with their Christian past and to articulate emotions they perceive the orthodox Virgin Mary as incapable of addressing. Encountering in the Black Madonna a female divinity that could relate to female corporeality and sexuality, the women and the few men I accompanied described profound experiences of gendered empowerment.

For these pilgrims the Black Madonna represents an icon of a transnational and transhistorical spirituality that does not belong to any particular religion, historical period or nation and that expresses a “dark side of the Feminine” that has been repressed by the patriarchal order inherent in organized religions. The meanings ascribed in this context to the Black Madonna offer a useful example of the importance of gender and power in the construction of a contemporary “spirituality,” as opposed to “religion,” in this specific case, Christianity and particularly Catholicism. Just as the concept of Paganism (and Neopaganism) presupposes the existence of Christianity—the term “Pagan” was adopted by the early Christians to distinguish themselves from those worshipping other divinities—the pilgrims’ concept of “spirituality” loses much of its meaning if dissociated from its opposite (and opponent), “religion.”

in Present-day England (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Sarah M. Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (London: Routledge, 2002). See also Hegner and Trulsson this volume.

Nevertheless, analysis of the ways in which the pilgrims relate to Black Madonnas and speak about their experiences of contact with “her energy,” and a comparison of these details with other ethnographies about lived Marian devotion, shows not only rupture but a striking continuity between these pilgrims’ spirituality and vernacular devotion to the Virgin Mary, past and present.

Black Madonnas

The Marian images the pilgrims described as “black” range from light brown to jet black. This language is telling alongside that used by Christian devotees who often use color words other than “black” to characterize these same images. As William A. Christian has shown in the case of the Virgin of Montserrat,⁵ commonly referred to by Catalans as “la Moreneta” (the dark one), Catholic devotees in the early 1990s did not attribute any particular importance to her color. This observation coincides with my own findings among Catholic devotees of the Christ of Lepanto,⁶ a dark brown statue venerated in the cathedral of Barcelona; when I asked the devotees where I could find the statue of the black Christ (el Cristo Negro) in the cathedral, they could not answer.

Images of the Virgin or the Christ with a skin tone darker than that of devotees are mostly venerated in France, Italy and Spain. Ilene H. Forsyth⁷ in her study of early French madonnas found no evidence for dark images before the sixteenth century.⁸ Like other art historians, she suggests that devotees became used to soot-blackened images and that eventually the images were painted to follow suit. Other writers ascribe the darkness of Madonna images to the syncretism of pre-Christian devotion to fertility goddesses.⁹ As William Christian found, “questions of origins have been the main, indeed the

⁵ William Christian, “La devoció a les imatges brunes a Catalunya. La Mare de Déu de Montserrat,” *Revista d'etnologia de Catalunya* 6 (February 1995): 24–31. On the Virgin of Montserrat see also Josefina Roma i Riu, “Nigra sum? Reflexions antropològiques entorn de la Mare de Déu de Montserrat i la Santa Muntanya,” *Quaderns-e* (July 2006). For a study on Black Madonnas in Italy see Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

⁶ Anna Fedele, “La figura del Santo Cristo de Lepanto en la Catedral de Barcelona, puerta hacia el mundo de arriba para la comunicación y la negociación con lo Divino,” *Actas del IX Congreso de Antropología de la FAAEE* (Barcelona, 2002).

⁷ Ilene H. Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

⁸ Christian, “La devocio,” 24–31.

⁹ Marie Durand-Lefebvre, *Étude sur l'origine des Vierges Noires* (Paris: G. Durassié, 1937); Emile Saillens, *Nos Vierges Noires; leurs origines* (Paris: Les Éditions Universelles, 1945); Leonard W. Moss and Stephen C. Cappannari, “The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing,” *The Scientific Monthly* (June 1953): 319–24.

only focus of studies of dark Madonnas in Europe.”¹⁰ Different authors who have tried to find common features make these claims: that the images date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, are located along certain pilgrimage routes, and were considered especially powerful by the local population.¹¹ Monique Scheer¹² offers a detailed overview of earlier studies about black madonnas and argues that focusing primarily on the color’s origin, authors debated “whether the color came about intentionally or not, oscillating between extremes of exoticization and denial.”¹³ Scheer points out that the historical moment in which an image was created does not necessarily coincide with the moment it became black; she also notes an “apparent lack of interest in the color of the images”¹⁴ until the seventeenth century. For Scheer this discrepancy does not necessarily imply that the statues later identified as black were not dark before that time period, but that “regardless of the actual color of the image, the concept of a black madonna had not yet been fully developed as an accolade heightening an image’s prestige.”¹⁵ She argues that what were elements of prestige were the image’s antiquity and its origin near or in the Holy Land, and that blackness might have suggested “not only aged wood but also precious types such as ebony or cedar thought to grow only in the Eastern Mediterranean.”¹⁶ The dark madonnas’ supposed antiquity might explain their popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but as Scheer argues: “whether it was already visible or in fact ‘helped along’ to its blackness at this time is not as important as the point that the color eventually became an indispensable visual marker for these particular images.”¹⁷

In the mid-nineteenth century “a new conception of Mary’s appearance” as predominantly white was fostered by the Catholic Church’s dogma of the Immaculate Conception and by subsequent Marian apparitions throughout Europe. Suddenly, it became important to emphasize the Virgin’s whiteness, and the most common theories about the darkness of certain statues asserted that they had turned dark because of candle smoke or frequent touching by devotees. It is only recently that the color of the statues became significant, and mostly among people interested in spirituality.¹⁸

¹⁰ William Christian. Citation from the unpublished English version of the article, with permission of the author.

¹¹ Jacques Huynen, *L'énigme des Vierges Noires* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1972).

¹² Monique Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries,” *The American Historical Review* 107 no. 5 (2002): 1412-1440.

¹³ Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1419.

¹⁴ Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1422.

¹⁵ Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1427.

¹⁶ Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1430.

¹⁷ Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1427-34.

¹⁸ Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1439-40.

Like many other spiritual practitioners I met during my fieldwork in Italy, Spain, France and later in Portugal, the pilgrims I met were assiduous readers,¹⁹ and when talking about Black Madonnas most of them referred directly or indirectly to Ean Begg's popular book, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (1985). Begg's work revives theories about the dark madonnas' intentional blackness and hint at a continuation between dark statues and pre-Christian earth and goddess cults. According to the author, black madonnas, "essentially a product of the 12th century Gothic renaissance,"²⁰ represent survivals of the statuettes of ancient goddesses; the dark statues were made with these statuettes in mind or were brought back to Europe by the Crusaders. A Jungian psychologist, Begg considered the "Black Virgin" a powerful archetype and believed that its reappearance in various forms signaled "the profound psychological need to reconcile sexuality and religion."²¹ Begg was also influenced by Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), and in fact his Black Madonnas appear as an antidote to the Immaculate Virgin Warner describes:

(...) every facet of the Virgin had been systematically developed to diminish, not increase, her likeness to the female condition. Her freedom from sex, painful delivery, age, death, and all sin exalted her ipso facto above ordinary women and showed them up as inferior.²² (...) The cult of Mary is inextricably interwoven with Christian ideas about the dangers of the flesh and their special connection with women.²³ (...) By setting up an impossible ideal the cult of the Virgin does drive the adherent into a position of acknowledged and hopeless yearning and inferiority (...). The process is self-perpetuating: if the Virgin were not venerated, the dangers of sex, the fear of corruption, the sense of sin would not be woven together in this particular misogynist web, but would be articulated in a different way.²⁴

As we will see in some detail, the pilgrims and their leaders I accompanied all knew Warner's theories directly, or indirectly, through other works that drew upon her writings. Influenced by Warner's

¹⁹ Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) [pages will be provided once available].

²⁰ Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London: Penguin Books Arkana, 1985).

²¹ Influenced by Begg's theories in the 1990s, other authors went on to consider black images of Mary as archetypal; the most popular book among pilgrims was China Galland's *Longing for Darkness: Tara and the Black Madonna, a Ten-Year Journey* (London: Rider, 1990).

²² Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 153.

²³ Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 67.

²⁴ Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 337.

approach, the pilgrimage leaders stated the importance of substituting the ideal of the Christian (white) Virgin with another one that did not disconnect human sexuality from sacrality.

Contacting the energy of the Black Madonna

All three organized pilgrimages I took part in included visits to dark madonna shrines. The Italian group I accompanied in the summer of 2003 consisted of ten women and three men between the ages of 35 and 53, as well as a two-year-old boy. This group was led by Celso, a naturopath and spiritual teacher in his early fifties, who had organized the eight-day tour that included a visit to two Black Madonna shrines: Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre in the crypt of Chartres cathedral and Notre-Dame de Rocamadour. I also accompanied a Spanish and Catalan group on their seven-day tour in the summer of 2004. This group visited only one dark madonna statue, Notre-Dame de la Confession in Marseille. Led by Dana, a Barcelona-based Argentinean woman in her late forties, this exclusively female group consisted of two dozen women aged 24 to 55.²⁵

Black Madonnas played a particularly important role in the American and British pilgrimage led by Roger Woolger,²⁶ which I joined in the fall of 2005. Roger, who worked mainly as a past-life therapist, was the best-known of the three pilgrimage leaders and had published several articles and two books. His group consisted of 12 women and three men, aged 50 to 73, all Americans except for two British women. Roger's pilgrims spent a great part of the 12-day "basic" tour²⁷ visiting the French region of Auvergne, a region with a high density of dark Marian statues. Among those that most touched these particular pilgrims were the statues at Notre-Dame de la Confession (Marseille), Notre-Dame du Puy (Le-Puy-en-Velay), Notre-Dame d'Orcival (Orcival) and Notre-Dame-de-la-Bonne-Mort (Clermont-Ferrand).

In his introductory speech to the pilgrimage Roger Woolger observed:

The problem of Christianity, as I see it, is that it tends to take everything up into the sky. It neglects the earth. And it is left to the old religions, the pagan religions that still remain under disguised form, to sort of bring Christianity down to earth (...) the underworld becomes a dark, dangerous, nasty place in the Middle Ages (...) More earthy pictures of the [underworld] spheres

²⁵ For a detailed description of the itineraries see Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, [pages will be provided once available].

²⁶ Roger Woolger, Celso and Margot asked me to use their real names and signed releases to that effect; I have used pseudonyms for the other pilgrims quoted in this text.

²⁷ It was also possible to choose an extended version of Roger's tour that lasted 15 days.

[come] from Celtic culture. They felt that the earthy and the spiritual dimensions were intertwined. (October 1, 2005)

This vision of Christianity as denying both the body and darkness—as opposed to the Celtic tradition (and other traditions honoring the “Goddess”), which welcomed the interrelatedness of darkness and light, body and spirit—appeared in the discourse of all three pilgrimage leaders. On another occasion Roger referred directly to Warner’s writings, and observed:

We have idealized the mother of Jesus so much that almost nothing human was left in her. (...) She [Marina Warner] says that the Early Church was so terrified of sexuality that they idealized virginity (...). All it did was to bring this [Madonna-Whore] split in society that we’ve been living with for almost two thousand years. It’s been haunting so many generations. (October 6, 2005)

Roger refers here to one of his articles²⁸ in which he speaks of a “Madonna-Whore split” in Western society that relates sexuality to procreation and that divides women into two categories: those who remain virgins and could therefore remain pure like Mary and those who have had children like Mary but could no longer be immaculate because of the sexual relationship entailed. In both cases, Roger asserted, women are deemed failures; either they fail to fulfill their role as procreators or they become corrupted by sexual intercourse.

In the view of the pilgrims, Black Madonnas, like other divinities related to darkness,²⁹ offered the possibility of actually healing this split. The pilgrims saw healing as possible because these images represented acceptance of the dark, bodily dimension of humanity and the possible co-existence of sexual pleasure with sacredness; these dark images represented a kind of spiritual elevation attained by inhabiting the body instead of transcending it. As emerges in the pilgrims’ narratives about their encounters with different Black Madonnas, each dark statue seemed to have her own personality and inherent power or effect. All dark statues or images of Mary (for example, Our Lady of Montserrat in Catalonia) shared certain attributes related to ancient Goddesses, Mother Earth, the sacrality of the body, and so on, but had additional distinctive traits that related to their external features, their particular

²⁸ Roger Woolger, 2005.

²⁹ For an analysis of Mary Magdalene as another Christian figure who fosters access to darkness see Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, [pages will be provided once available].

location, history and so on. To the pilgrims each Black Madonna was different, each with specific traits and powers; this specificity explained why one statue could have a strong effect on some pilgrims while not particularly impressing others. The specific effects of each madonna were explained and interpreted according to the different kind of “energy” emanating from them.

During visits to the dark madonna shrines, pilgrims from all three groups followed a similar ritual pattern when approaching the statues. They stood or sat in front of the statues (most of the times with eyes closed) and established a connection with “Her” in order to receive her “energy.” Even if the pilgrims had come from different countries of origin they shared a common spiritual background and used common terms and theories to describe their experiences in front of the statues. All pilgrims considered themselves to be part of a world permeated by a living force that was most often referred to as “energy.”³⁰ Establishing an “energy connection” with a Black Madonna, pilgrims could then receive the energy contained in “Her” energy field and store it in their own energetic body.³¹

The pilgrims I accompanied often developed personal rituals to intensify their contact with the statues. The three leaders of the organized groups all invited their pilgrims to respect the sacrality of the Catholic churches they visited and not to disturb other, Catholic, devotees. Sometimes (as in the case described below) Celso or Dana, the Italian and the Spanish leader, respectively, encouraged their pilgrims to perform a common “ritual” in order to foster the connection with the Madonna.

The pilgrims described the effects of the energy they received from the statues in terms of physical sensations such as a feeling of warmth but also through messages and visions. Their experiences in front of the dark statues had certain elements in common; most of them were related to a sensation of “grounding” and of contact with “the darkness.” The centrality of these two experiences is further emphasized by an American pilgrim who had been a priest of the Liberal Catholic Church, the denomination founded in 1916 by James I. Wedgewood and Charles Leadbeater, which had a close association with theosophism and which was not recognized by the Vatican. The American pilgrim, Leonard, described the spiritual crisis that had led to his separation from the Liberal Catholic Church:

³⁰ For a detailed analysis of the pilgrims’ energy discourse see Anna Fedele, “Gender, Sexuality and Religious Critique among Mary Magdalene Pilgrims in Southern France.” In *Old Routes, New Journeys: Gender, Nation and Religion in Europe*, edited by Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012 [pages will be provided once available] and “From Christian Religion to Feminist Spirituality: Mary Magdalene Pilgrimages to La Sainte-Baume, France,” *Culture and Religion* 10 no. 3 (2009): 243–261.

³¹ Regarding energy connections with the dark Madonna of Rocamadour see Weibel, “Kidnapping the Virgin,” 107.

In Christianity the darkness was something evil that had to be avoided. But now I was beginning to see that the darkness was not at all evil, it was just the other half, the other half of who we are, the other half of our being and that if we deny the darkness we deny a huge piece of who we are. In the church, there was a suppression of the feminine and suppression of anything to do with the darkness. (...) The Virgin Mary was brought in as the feminine aspect, but I saw the Virgin Mary as being basically sterilized and sanitized for most of the feminine aspect. She too was cut off from the earth; she was never seen on the earth; she was seen in the stars. (October 5, 2005)

These pilgrims had had enough of the “white, celestial Mary,” who was always loving, motherly and perfect. They thought that she had been mutilated and deprived of all bodily secretions other than her maternal milk; they wanted instead a flesh and blood “Mother” who expressed not only their moments of love and serenity but also of rage, pain and destructiveness. As the shadow of the “White Virgin,” the Black Madonnas projected in dark tones all that had been “hidden.”

The Dark Side of the Goddess

Immacolata, an Italian woman in her forties who had started work right after high school, was living on her own in Rome, where she worked as a clerk. Immacolata told me that her most beautiful experience during the pilgrimage had happened at Chartres, in front of the Black Madonna:

In the crypt of Chartres I stayed near the tabernacle and I still shiver when I think about it. I felt like a hollow reed, crossed by that energy coming from below. It was an amazing experience. I would like to go back there (...) it was near the Black Madonna. (...) Celso made us form a circle and take each other’s hands. I remember taking off my shoes and nudging Gemma [a fellow pilgrim and friend of Immacolata] with my elbow telling her: Take off your shoes! Because without shoes there was no obstacle to this flow [of energy]. (April 8, 2005)

There, in front of the Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre, whose advocacy means “underground,” Immacolata experienced a connection with Mother Earth. Like other pilgrims, she felt energy rising from the ground, through her feet, nurturing her and making her feel “grounded” and full of power.

Her description is telling. When speaking about what drew them to the pilgrimage groups in the first place many pilgrims referred to a lack of grounding, a loss of connection with the nurturing energy of Mother Earth. Like Neopagans in Britain and the United States these pilgrims considered Mother

Earth a powerful, feminine divine being that should be honored and protected.³² To them the planet Earth was the physical and visible representation of Mother Earth, and its pitiless exploitation was proof of the overall lack of grounding of Western humanity. From the pilgrims' vantage point, only those who are unable to establish a nourishing relationship with Mother Earth could possibly engage in processes that dominate nature. Like Neopagans the pilgrims interpreted the human domination of nature as the consequence of the patriarchal domination of the Feminine and the demonization of the body, especially the female body, by the Church. According to this view humans harmed the environment because they considered it separate from themselves and thus could not feel supported by her nurturing, feminine energy.

Just as the Black Madonna was constructed in opposition to the White Virgin, Mother Earth was constructed in opposition to the Christian God, as Father, situated in the Sky. The pilgrims wanted to overcome the feeling of being dominated by the rules proclaimed by a male (Christian) god who sat far above them, proclaiming women inferior and all bodies impure. The opposition thus created was a female god(dess) situated below, thereby allowing for the direct empowerment of bodies that came into contact with her. Black Madonnas with their "earthy" color represented Mother Earth, thereby offering seekers the opportunity to reconnect with "Her" in a double sense: first, as in the case of Immacolata, by the madonna's energy fostering a sense of grounding; and second, using Leonard's words, by bringing the Virgin Mary down from the stars, returning her to earth. Black Madonnas also allowed the pilgrims to invert the Church's processes that Leonard had described as sterilization and sanitization. Mary, and the female part of humanity she represented, had gained back the right to express all the aspects that had been "obscured" by the Church's debasing them as dark and dangerous: aspects such as female anger and destructivity, sexuality free from reproductive pressures, menstruation and so on. Female pilgrims, especially, perceived the recovery of the connection with Mother Earth as the recovery of their own right to be powerful women and not to feel ashamed or guilty because they were not the good and ever-giving, understanding women/mothers. This sense of female empowerment emerges from Immacolata's account of the pilgrimage's effects on her:

I... I don't know if it was the journey or because of other reasons, (...) but I feel myself much more... Whereas before I felt myself to be a woman, but more of a victim, now I feel great force, great power. (...) Because I always felt like the one who had to undergo things. I mean, you were born woman (...) you had this misfortune. This also is in some way part of the Southern Italian mentality of my parents, that (...) it's a misfortune [to be a woman] (...). Because there is a

³² Among others: Pike, *Earthy Bodies*; Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism*; and Magliocco, *Witching Culture*.

difference between the woman who has to find her way through indirect, hidden ways, and the fact of feeling it [the power of being a woman], of feeling it like a sense of being one's own center, of being centered (...) this has been something, a really beautiful feeling, I did not have before. (April 8, 2005)

The pilgrims wanted to recuperate all the aspects the Church had labeled as "dark" and attribute to them a different, positive meaning. Accepting the relationship of certain areas of "the Feminine" with darkness, the pilgrims inverted the meaning of dark. In this way they did not totally refuse the "Christian ideology" they criticized but conferred on its basic concepts a different meaning. This process mirrors their attitude to dark madonnas in general: instead of refusing the Christian figure of the Mother of God, they included her in their pantheon, ascribing to her another, opposing meaning.

Notably, even in cases where all the dark statues in question represented Mary holding her child, Jesus was seldom mentioned. The pilgrims' Black Madonna was not subordinated to a male "God." She did not need to ask Jesus or "God the Father" to have mercy on those who prayed to her, thereby acting as a mere intercessor. She was the female equivalent of the heavenly God, the expression of his complement, Mother Earth. The dark statues venerated in the shrines visited by pilgrims represented a woman crowned as queen, sitting on a throne or adorned with royal robes. To them she was the "divine Queen" of her own accord, a woman with her own son, demonstrating no need for either father or husband. And, like the ancient pagan goddesses, she was seen as representing the fertility of the earth, the possibility of life but also the power of death.

References to goddesses from ancient religions such as Inanna, Artemis or Isis and from other contemporary religious traditions such as the Indian Kali, the Afro-Brazilian Oshun or the Chinese Tara did occur on occasion, but the main female figures the pilgrims invoked derived from the Christian world. Unwilling to abandon the figure of the Virgin Mary they had known from childhood or to renounce the use of Christian churches as places to commune with the divine, the pilgrims, with the help of their leaders, created their own Mother of God by turning her into a Mother Goddess. Even though they saw the official Christian religions as the expression of what they identified as patriarchy, they still believed in the potentialities of what some described as "the Christian tradition."

Through the work of authors such as Marina Warner and others influenced by her, the pilgrims had learned to see some of the ideological and political implications of the heavenly and immaculate Virgin Mary and thus considered her to be the personification of the patriarchal domination of women.

Influenced by Jungian theories about the power of archetypes³³ shared by their pilgrimage leaders, the participants looked for a female archetypal figure that could serve as a reference for women and men freed from the boundaries of patriarchal structures.

The following shows the oppositions that have emerged so far, as they relate to the Madonna:

White Madonna -- Black Madonna

Virginity -- Sexuality

Light -- Darkness

Heaven -- Earth

Domination of women -- Empowerment of women

Religion -- Spirituality

Shadows cannot exist without the light. Just so, it seems that the Black Madonna, described by one Catalan pilgrim as “the Goddess against the light,” would not exist without her white equivalent. Similarly, the pilgrims’ spirituality was also presented as a construction in opposition to what they perceived as (Christian) religion.

Marina Warner, authors of spiritual-esoteric literature who were influenced by her, as well as the leaders and pilgrims themselves all refer to the cult of the Virgin Mary in abstract terms, taking for granted the assumption that she has been venerated by Christian laypeople according to whatever features were ascribed to her by institutional Christianity. By so doing, the pilgrims and their leaders have accepted the idea that laypeople have been passively absorbing formal ecclesiastical teachings about the Virgin Mary throughout the centuries. But ethnographies about Marian devotion³⁴ as well as

³³ Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*; Jennifer Baker Woolger and Roger J. Woolger, *The Goddess Within: A Guide to the Eternal Myths that Shape Women’s Lives* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994).

³⁴ Among others William A. Christian, Jr., *Person and God in a Spanish Valley* (rev. ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and *Divine Presence in Spain and Western Europe, 1500-1960: Visions, Religious Images and Photographs* (Budapest: Central European University, 2011); also Elisabeth Claverie, *Les guerres de la Vierge. Une anthropologie des apparitions* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Simon Coleman and John Elsner, “Performing Pilgrimage: Walsingham and the Ritual Construction of Irony,” in *Ritual, Performance, Media*, ed. Felicia Hughes-Freeland (London: Routledge, 1998, 46–65; Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Communion in Italian Harlem 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans, eds. *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); and Deborah Puccio, « La beauté

historical studies about Christianity³⁵ show that the Virgin (and other Christian divinities) of Christian writers and priests is quite different from the Mary of everyday devotees and pilgrims. These accounts show a Mary who appears as a powerful figure associated with a plethora of meanings that often challenge the status quo, including the predominant social and religious order.

In her ethnography about pilgrimages to Medjugorje, Élisabeth Claverie³⁶ analyzes the local apparitions of the Virgin since 1981 that have not been recognized as authentic by the Catholic Church. Claverie has shown how Our Lady of Medjugorje has been used by locals to make sense of and even to justify the war that brought about the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and to come to terms with the traumatic experiences related to massacres during that war, as well as earlier conflicts in that same region. In his historical ethnography about the visionaries in the Basque town of Ezkioga in 1931, William Christian also found that their Virgin allowed the local Basque community to cope with current political and social changes and to voice their protest accordingly.³⁷ To take an example of another dark Madonna statue, Judith Samson describes Catholic American women making pilgrimages to Czestockowa (Poland) to confront their guilt for having had an abortion and to recover from what they identify as “post-abortion syndrome.”³⁸

In the introduction to their edited volume about Marian pilgrimages Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans observe that, in a context of modernization that sharpens inequalities such as those of gender, ethnicity, class, religion and age, “for many Catholics, Mary provides the answer to such globally produced problems, and they bond with Mary to gain empowerment and improve their lives.” The volume as a whole suggests that “old and new Marian symbols, places and movements are put to work,” and Marian devotion is used “to legitimate suppression, inequality and

de la Vierge », in *Le goût des « belles » choses*, ed. V. Nahoum-Grappe (Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2004), 271–95. About lived religion see Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁵ Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); see also Christian, *Person and God* as well as *Visions, Religious Images and Photographs*.

³⁶ Claverie, *Les Guerres de la Viege*.

³⁷ Christian, *Visionaries*.

³⁸ Judith Samson, “Sexuality and Gender Discourses at European Pilgrimage Sites” (PhD diss., Radboud University Nijmegen, 2012) and “EU Criticism in Two Transnational Anti-abortion Movements,” in *Old Routes, New Journeys: Gender, Nation and Religion in Europe*, ed. Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

violence” but also to resist oppression and inequalities. The editors conclude that “Marian devotion simultaneously uses modernity *and* acts against certain outcomes of modernity.”³⁹

In this sense there exists more continuity than opposition between these pilgrims’ Black Madonna and the vernacular cult of the Virgin Mary, past and present; in both cases believers have used the Madonna creatively, to address specific situations and to justify personal and social claims.

Gendered empowerment and healing

Like Immacolata’s experience at Chartres, other pilgrims’ experiences included contact with the “nurturing and grounding energy of Black Madonnas.” Thanks to this encounter they said they were gradually able to acknowledge and heal wounds related to gender and sexuality. Black Madonnas allowed the pilgrims to come to terms with aspects of themselves that had been previously repressed, including negative emotions and, more generally, weaknesses and frailties inherent to the human condition.

For some pilgrims Dark Madonna statues like those at Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre in Chartres or Notre-Dame-de-la-Bonne Mort in Clermont-Ferrand awakened the image of a female figure related to the underworld. Interpreting the underworld in Jungian terms as the unconscious, pilgrims held that the energy of the dark statues helped them to recover memories and traumas, thereby freeing them to pass from the unconscious into consciousness. In effect, a Christian-Pagan divinity emerged that allowed the pilgrims to express a sense of alienation about deep-seated problems related to sexuality. The Black Madonnas allowed women to feel their pain and anger about the domination and medicalization of the body that had characterized their entire lives.⁴⁰ These statues helped women to acknowledge and to give new meaning to experiences of abortion and sexual abuse but also to more common experiences such as menopause or depression. The Black Madonna, according to two men in Roger’s group, helped them to recognize and resolve the sense of rejection and humiliation they felt when manifesting their vulnerability in a society that expects men to be invariably strong and performing.⁴¹ Margot Henderson, a poet and story writer living in the Findhorn Community in Scotland, had organized a fundraising party

³⁹ Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans, eds., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 2. Marion Bowman also observed continuity between spirituality and vernacular religion in Glastonbury; see “More of the Same? Christianity, Vernacular Religion and Alternative Spirituality in Glastonbury,” in *Beyond New Age*, ed. Marion Bowman and Steven J. Sutcliffe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 83–104.

⁴⁰ See Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, [pages will be provided once available] chapter 6.

⁴¹ See for instance William’s experience in chapter 6, Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, [pages will be provided once available].

in order to be able to join Roger's "Magdalenetour" for her fiftieth birthday. She told me about her pilgrimage experience:

One of the other strong moments for me was knowing I was coming to meet la Mère de la Bonne Mort [the Mother of the Good Death], because I suppose that part of my journey, you know turning fifty, was something about facing mortality, facing my own aging and my own human frailty. And preceding my fifties, going through menopause, the experiencing of a lot of changes through my body, some concerns about what was going on in my body. So there was something powerful in facing her, you know, really thinking about death. (October 13, 2005)

Tanya Luhrmann has analyzed the meaning of the destructive side of the "Goddess" among women she met during her research into witchcraft practitioners in London, in the 1980s. These middle-class women criticized Christianity as sexuality-denying and told Luhrmann about experiences that mirrored those in the pilgrims' accounts, such as having fathers who despise femininity.⁴² Luhrmann's women described the Goddess as "death, underworld and destruction" and felt that this aspect of the Goddess had helped them to reach the "deepest," "truest" aspect of themselves.⁴³ What Luhrmann observed about the London women of the Goddess movement applies to both male and female pilgrims I spoke to during my research. Black Madonnas allowed the pilgrims to acknowledge their experiences of violence and sometimes to share these openly with other pilgrims. In Luhrmann's words, these men and women were using "a very old, very powerful, way to deal with suffering, which is to name it, to place it within a narrative of transformation, and by the naming and narrativizing to feel some mastery over it."⁴⁴

Unable to find in the Christian Virgin a useful, or meaningful, feminine reference figure and a divinity capable of helping them deal with their daily problems as well as their past pain, the women and men I accompanied on their pilgrimages had crafted their own Madonna whose traits did not contradict their own humanity. The "dark side of the Goddess" helped female pilgrims come to terms with a social order "in which they experience violence" and "in which women's anger is not well tolerated."⁴⁵ Through the concept of darkness female pilgrims found ways to express the mixture of "anxiety, doubt, fear and anger" related to the politics that rose subsequent to the feminist movement of the 1970s and

⁴² Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, [pages will be provided once available], chapter 6 .

⁴³ Tanya Luhrmann, "The Ugly Goddess: Reflections on the Role of Violent Images in Religious Experience," *History of Religions* 41, no. 2 (Nov. 2001), 121–3.

⁴⁴ Luhrmann, "The Ugly Goddess," 130–2.

⁴⁵ Luhrmann, "The Ugly Goddess," 130.

1980s⁴⁶. As Luhrmann observes, “women are socialized to be nurturing, relationship oriented, and, usually, the primary parent of their children” but also “cut-throat, competitive, and successful within the canons of a male-dominated workplace.” Black Madonnas offered female pilgrims positive figures of reference for their negative emotions, which in turn seemed to allow the women “to transform culturally induced shame at being angry and female into an experience of pride.”⁴⁷

Referring to her experience in front of Notre Dame de Sous-Terre, Immacolata explained that the energy she perceived there allowed her to overcome the sense of victimization she had learned to associate specifically with being female. She also started to feel the power inherent in womanhood. Throughout this process she grew able to acknowledge and to voice the kind of domination she had perceived, having always to be a “buonina,” a good girl, and “to find her way through indirect, hidden ways.” In Immacolata’s case the kind of empowerment she experienced during the pilgrimage went hand in hand with important changes she then made in her life. After the pilgrimage she took up biodanza and eventually became a teacher of this “spiritual dance technique.” While I was writing this chapter she contacted me, proudly announcing that she had just completed her BA in psychology and wanted now to pursue her master’s degree.

In her study of how women’s reproductive processes are described and perceived in American culture, Emily Martin⁴⁸ has argued that women in the United States feel they must behave well and hide their anger and other negative emotions, and that this pressure relates directly to women’s sense of alienation from their bodies. Women perceive their own body as an entity separate from the self, something they need to control if they want to fulfill the roles assigned to them at work or in their families. Building on Foucault’s⁴⁹ analyses of power and corporeality, other social scientists have argued that the model of domination and alienation proposed by Martin can be applied more generally to women in Western countries.⁵⁰ In this same vein, studies about masculinity have shown that men also experience a sense of alienation because they perceive the expression of certain emotions and in general their own

⁴⁶ See also the introduction to this volume.

⁴⁷ Luhrmann, “The Ugly Goddess,” 131–2.

⁴⁸ Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon, 1987) and “Premenstrual Syndrome: Discipline, Work, and Anger in Late Industrial Societies,” in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, ed. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 55–74.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. La volonté de savoir*. (Paris : Gallimard, 1976).

⁵⁰ Faye Ginsburg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, eds. *Conceiving a New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990 and *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004); Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1992).

vulnerability as disallowed.⁵¹ These forms of gendered domination emerged from the pilgrims' discourses and through their pilgrimages they tried to formulate alternative ways of describing and approaching their body and their gender identity.

Male and female pilgrims spoke of the need to accept the “dark aspects of oneself” they had once rejected as a result of their Christian, mostly Catholic, education. Some weeks after participating in Roger Woolger's pilgrimage Leonard sent this e-mail, explaining its effects on him:

The primary message I got from the tour is that it's important to embrace the darkness within myself—to explore and integrate those aspects of myself that I've rejected—and I've been doing that intentionally since I returned. (...) This collective darkness is huge and complex, but I feel that some of the issues it touches upon are sexuality, receptivity, and vulnerability. It is the fertile, earthly quality that the church rejected in favor of a sky god who came from a virgin mother.

As we can see from Leonard's account the Madonna-Whore split mentioned by Roger was also deeply affecting to men, who had been taught to choose between immaculate women, who would be rendered impure by the very act of making love with them, and women who, by virtue of the fact that they were open to sexuality, would already be deemed “impure.” Male pilgrims also complained about how the patriarchal rules of the social order they had been raised in did not allow men to discover or express their own vulnerability. Expected to be strong, performing and proactive, these men felt cut off from a part of themselves they now referred to as “feminine,” a part they had had to deny just to fulfill the conventional roles assigned to males. Again, here we see that the nature of the spirituality embodied in the Black Madonna corresponds directly to a sense of disempowerment related to gender.

Black Madonnas allowed male and female pilgrims to voice emotions they felt were not welcome in their inherited social and religious order. Through their encounter with the dark statues the pilgrims could narrativize past experiences of domination and violence and endow sometimes painful physical processes such as menopause, operations on sexual organs or simply aging with meaningful interpretations. This process of acknowledgment and narrativization fostered a healing experience described by some as “embracing the darkness,” that is, voicing and accepting those parts of themselves they had been taught to “obscure.” The process of transformation described by the pilgrims implied not

⁵¹ Robert Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, The Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (1990. Reprint, London: Rider, 2001); Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

only a healing experience on an individual level but also a collective resistance against a social and religious order perceived as deeply sexist and oppressive.

Conclusion

Far from receding into legend like the goddess Ishtar, as Warner had predicted (1983:339), the Virgin Mary, in her “black” or “white” version, continues to attract hundreds of pilgrims every year, and the features ascribed to her offer insights into her devotees’ needs and troubles as well as into the paradoxes of our age. Throughout this chapter I have analyzed the way in which pilgrims who do not call themselves practicing Catholics, or even Christians, conceptualize and interact ritually with Black Madonnas. Even allowing for the influence of Ean Begg’s and Marina Warner’s texts on the pilgrims, we can see that these men and women did not passively accept the theories formulated about the Virgin Mary but rather went about establishing their own personal relationship with the dark statues themselves.

Analyzing the changing significances attributed to dark madonna statues throughout the centuries, what emerges as the topic that preoccupies researchers are questions regarding the figures’ color. I believe with Scheer (2002) that it would be more telling if we understood when and if the statues’ darkness became an important factor for people, why darkness became an attractive feature in certain historical periods and the range of meanings associated with the dark figures. As for the pilgrims I have described in this chapter, their interpretation of the dark statues drew on a sort of magical mirror that reflected the image of their patriarchal white Mary, but that inverted her conventional attributes and meanings. The Madonna’s darkness was for the pilgrims a central element of her nature that spoke to them about the female earth as opposed to the male sky; sexual power as opposed to virginity; anger, pain and destruction as opposed to an ever-nourishing and humane, mothering attitude.

I have argued that the Black Madonna is connected to a series of dichotomies that are also related to the way in which the pilgrims distinguish and even set spirituality in opposition to religion. As an icon of a transhistorical and transnational spirituality constructed in opposition to (Christian) religion, the Black Madonna should counterbalance the negative effects of the immaculate white Virgin, representative of a religion marked by gender inequality and the stigmatization of the body as impure.

To set the pilgrims’ narratives in a broader perspective: their strategy in constructing both their Black Madonna and their spirituality can be seen as an example of how people in Europe and Northern America who self-identify as “spiritual” rather than “religious” tend to construct their own spirituality in opposition to an inherited religion that has been clearly influenced by Western culture’s Judaeo-Christian heritage. This process of construction, however, is based on a conceptualization of religion that does not

distinguish between the religion as prescribed by formal ecclesiastical teachings and the actual lived religion of religious practitioners. Drawing on historical and anthropological texts about vernacular Christianity, I have argued that the way in which dark Madonna pilgrims creatively appropriate and reinterpret Christian figures and symbols is not so very different from the ways in which Marian devotees, past and present, have created their own Mary. Cases such as that of the Virgin of Medjugorie as analyzed by Claverie⁵² or of another dark Madonna, Our Lady of Czestockova, analyzed by Samson,⁵³ show how Mary is creatively appropriated by pilgrims in ways that allow them to justify their own beliefs and practices.

Through their creative rituals and the use of an energy language, the pilgrims I accompanied rejected the theories and values related to sexuality and gender they had received through their Christian, mainly Catholic, education. Through reference to the Black Madonna men and women managed finally to voice emotions and to come to terms with aspects of themselves they had learned to suppress, or alienate—aspects of the self, male or female, that were not well accepted by society at large. The pilgrims also elaborated on different notions of body and sexuality that did not entail dichotomies such as body/soul or material/spiritual. Indeed, the pilgrims' own accounts revealed that contacting Mother Earth and the “darkness within” implied profound processes of recognizing psychological and physical wounds that related to their gendered bodies and, in particular, to what they had finally come to name as “the feminine side.”

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⁵² Claverie, *Les guerres de la Vierge*.

⁵³ Samson, “Sexuality and Gender Discourses” and “EU Criticism in Two Transnational Anti-abortion Movements,” in *Old Routes, New Journeys: Gender, Nation and Religion in Europe*, ed. Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

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