

Sites and Politics of Religious Diversity in Southern Europe

The Best of All Gods

Edited by

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CONTENTS

List of Tables and Figures ix

Introduction: Sites and Politics of Religious Diversity in
Southern Europe 1
José Mapril and Ruy Llera Blanes

PART 1

TRANSNATIONAL RELIGIOUS IMAGINARIES

Prophetic Visions of Europe: Rethinking Place and Belonging
among Angolan Christians in Lisbon 19
Ruy Llera Blanes

Traditions of Disbelief Revisited: The Case of Afro-Dominican
Religious Centres in Madrid 37
Cristina Sánchez-Carretero

The Metamorphoses of Neopaganism in Traditionally Catholic
Countries in Southern Europe 51
Anna Fedele

The New Age of Greek Orthodoxy: Pluralizing Religiosity in
Everyday Practice 73
Eugenia Roussou

Religious Belonging and New Ways of Being “Italian” in the
Self-Perception of Second-Generation Immigrants in Italy 93
Barbara Bertolani and Fabio Perocco

Counterpublics and Transnational Religious Movements in a
Lisbon Mosque 115
José Mapril

Blood, Sacrifices and Religious Freedom: Afro-Brazilian Associations
in Portugal 129
Clara Saraiva

PART 2

(RE)CLAIMING SPACE

Mosque Controversy, Local Responses and the Religious Life of Pakistani Immigrants in Athens	157
<i>Inam Leghari</i>	
Multiplicity of Women's Religious Expression: Albanian Muslim Women in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.....	177
<i>Nora Repo</i>	
Allah's Places in Madrid: From Spanish Transition to Recent Days.....	207
<i>Virtudes Téllez Delgado</i>	
New Christian Geographies: Pentecostalism and Ethnic Minorities in Barcelona.....	225
<i>Mar Grieria</i>	
Sikhs in Barcelona: Negotiation and Interstices in the Establishment of a Community.....	251
<i>Sandra Santos Fraile</i>	
Should we Talk about Religion? Migrant Associations, Local Politics and Representations of Religious Diversity: The Case of Sikh Communities in Central Italy	279
<i>Ester Gallo and Silvia Sai</i>	
Negotiating Religious Differences in the Cyclades: Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion.....	309
<i>Katerina Seraïdari</i>	
Religious, National, European or Inter-Cultural Awareness: Religious Education as Cultural Battlefield in Greece.....	331
<i>Trine Stauning Willert</i>	
Ethnography of Religion, Ethnicity and Reflexivity. Evangelical Gitanos in Southern Spain	359
<i>Manuela Cantón Delgado</i>	

PART 3

AN EPILOGUE

Map and Imagination: Towards a Phenomenology of Remote Places.....	383
<i>Ramon Sarró</i>	
Notes on Contributors.....	389
Index.....	397

THE METAMORPHOSES OF NEOPAGANISM IN TRADITIONALLY CATHOLIC COUNTRIES IN SOUTHERN EUROPE

Anna Fedele

One day in March 2006 I was having tea with Dana, an Argentinean woman in her early fifties who had founded in 2002 Goddess Wood,¹ a “women’s spirituality group” that was the largest and fastest growing in Catalonia and probably in whole Spain. As we discussed our future projects she told me that she wanted to write a book about “her work with women”.² She found that many English and Spanish authors had written about female spirituality and about the importance of the “return of the Goddess”, but she wanted to write about the “Christian Goddess”. Dana believed that women in Europe and especially in traditionally Catholic countries such as Spain could not and should not simply do away with their “Christian cultural heritage” but rather draw on it to find their own way towards the “Goddess”.

Little attention has been paid by social scientists to the spread of Neopagan theories and practices in continental Europe and especially in traditionally Catholic countries in Southern Europe such as Italy or Spain. This text offers insight on this religious phenomenon from an anthropological perspective and is based on fieldwork among Italians, Catalans and Spaniards between 2002 and 2006 for my dissertation on alternative pilgrimages to French Catholic shrines dedicated to Mary Magdalene or holding dark madonna statues.³

During my research I focused especially on the reinterpretation of Christian figures, rituals and churches using theories derived from the Neopagan movement. Differently from other religious movements that do not accept the conceptualization of Europe as having Christian roots,⁴ the

¹ I used a pseudonym for the group, its leader and most of its members. Only a few women of this group asked me explicitly to use their real names, but I do not refer to them in this text. Except for Celso all the other names used in this text are pseudonyms.

² All citations come from personal interviews or informal conversations. The translations from Italian, Catalan and Spanish are mine.

³ See Fedele 2009, 2013a.

⁴ See the introduction to this volume.

Italians and Iberians⁵ influenced by Neopaganism I came to know found that the “Christian heritage of Europe” could not be denied and wanted to reconceptualize it. Appropriating Neopagan theories coming mainly from the United States and the United Kingdom, the men and women I encountered during my research remodeled them to fit their own cultural and religious backgrounds.

It is difficult to determine an approximate number of Neopagans in mainland Europe. This is due to different factors such as the uninstitutional nature of the Neopagan movement, the secrecy of many individuals out of fear of social criticism or even discrimination and, finally, because of the disagreement about the religious movements that fall into the category of “Neopagan”. Among social scientists there is yet no agreement about the term or terms to be used to describe groups sharing Neopagan beliefs. Apart from “Neo-paganism” (e.g. Rountree 2006a) and “Neopaganism” (e.g. Pike 2001), terms such as “Goddess movement” (e.g. Griffin 1995), “Goddess spirituality” (e.g. Luhrmann 2001) or “feminist spirituality” (Eller 1993) are being used. Neopagan groups and movements deserve to be studied bearing in mind the range of differences existing among them (Salomonsen 2002: 10) and should not be lumped together under the general term “New Age”.

As other religious scholars studying contemporary “lived” religion and spirituality have observed, it is difficult to work with statistical data because many individuals nowadays refuse to identify with a specific religious tradition or continue to consider themselves as Catholics even if their spiritual practices are far from being orthodox (e.g. McGuire 2008: 3–17; Bender 2010: 3–5; Fedele and Knibbe 2013: 1–27). In fact, even if statistically speaking the number of Pagans in countries such as Spain or Italy are virtually invisible, a growing number of people, especially women, are attracted by Neopagan ideas and concepts. When asked about their “religious affiliation” in a survey most of my informants would not describe themselves as “Pagans”; they consider the word “Pagan” as too negatively charged within the Catholic societies they have grown up in.⁶

⁵ Throughout the text I use the term ‘Iberian’ to refer to women in Dana’s group coming from different parts of the Spanish state. I do this because many women in this group were Catalans and some of them would not feel at ease being labelled as ‘Spanish’.

⁶ Helen Berger, a sociologist who has been studying Neopaganism in the US during the last 20 years and recently tried to obtain statistical data also about the rest of the world, confirmed my impressions and commented that she had received little response to her survey from Southern Europe. She observed however that this might also be related to the fact that the survey was in English.

I will argue that in Southern European countries where the presence of Catholicism is still very evident, Neopagan theories that often contain clearly anti-Christian statements are only slowly finding their way to people's minds and hearts. When this happens, it is very often due to spiritual leaders who blend the key issues of Neopaganism with Christian symbols and ideas. Coming to terms with the ideals and structures of a Catholic belief system that they consider be "patriarchal" and "denying women's power", spiritual practitioners who shared with me their worldview claimed their right to use Christian figures and places for their own rituals. This process of adaptation is particularly interesting because of the paradox it represents. Whereas American and British Neopagans seek to restore a "pre-Christian" pagan belief system that supposedly existed before Europe's and America's Christianization, my Southern European informants wanted to bring back to Neopaganism certain Christian elements and figures whose power and influence they felt could not be ignored because they belonged to their "cultural heritage".⁷

Neopagan Movements

Neopagan theories began to circulate in the 1960s in Great Britain and in North America, and most Neopagans consider themselves as part of a revitalization process of pre-Christian nature religions.⁸ They criticize institutionalized religions and particularly Christianity as patriarchal and misogynist. Neopagans think that the Christian vision of the body as a place of sin leads Christians to despise the material world and to perceive their sexuality as sinful. This general rejection and denigration of body and matter is, according to Neopagans, one of the principal causes of both the actual current ecological disaster and of the widespread sexual perversions such as child abuse, molestation or the rape of women. In order to halt this process, Neopagans advocate a sacralization of body and sexuality and a

⁷ In Italian the words used were *bagaglio culturale*, in Spanish *bagaje cultural* or *herencia cultural*. As far as I could see in this context religion was considered as being part of the 'cultural heritage' and people from Dana's and Celso's group did not refer explicitly to a 'religious heritage'.

⁸ See Hutton (1999) for an extensive study of the origin and development of Neopagan beliefs. See Adler (1979) for a description of this development from within the movement. For an early study about witchcraft among Londoners see Luhrmann (1989, 2001). For ethnographic or sociological studies about Neopagans in the United States see Orion (1995), Berger (1999), Berger et al. (2003), Pike (2001), Salomonsen (2002) and Magliocco (2001, 2004). In Great Britain, see Greenwood (2000); in Australia, Hume (1997); in New Zealand, Rountree (2003). See Albanese (1991) for a discussion of 'nature religions' in America.

vision of nature and of the planet Earth as inhabited by divine forces. Neopagans want to create non-hierarchical communities, based on a deep respect for nature and for each other's beliefs and choices. The movements reunited under the term "Neopaganism" range from neo-shamanic groups revitalizing Native American or other shamanic traditions, over to groups that have been described as part of a "feminist spirituality" (Eller 1993), or to witchcraft groups, as well as contemporary druids and Isis fellowships. In this sense Neopaganism appears as an "umbrella term" (Magliocco 2001: 1) and not all social actors described by social scientists with this term would necessarily call themselves "Neopagans" or "Pagans". This is particularly so for European Neopagans who do not seem to share with their Northern American equivalents the need to form associations (see Berger et al. 2008: 14); they usually do not belong to any religious organization and refuse to identify with a precise religious movement.

The Italians and Iberians I came to know during my fieldwork had been brought up as Catholics and refused the idea of forming part of an established religion again. Following a common trend in contemporary religiosity in North America and Europe described by religious historians and social scientists, they stated that they were not "religious" but "spiritual" (among others: Heelas et al. 2005; Zwissler 2007; Berger et al. 2008: 14). Disappointed by the negative experiences within the Catholic framework they preferred the word "spirituality" to that of "religion" (Fedele 2009; Knibbe 2010; Fedele and Knibbe 2013: 1–27). Using Grace Davie's (1994) terminology one might say that after "belonging" to the Catholic Church "without believing" in most of the dogmas, they now shared Neopagan theories and practices refusing to "belong" to a specific Neopagan group. As we will see many Iberians and Italians influenced by Neopaganism prefer to be secretive about their spiritual theories and practices, feeling that these would be misunderstood not only by their (often practicing) Catholic families but also by their wider social environment.

The group whose activities I followed in Italy was centered upon the workshops and trips led by Celso Bambi and loosely organized in a "cultural association". In 2003 Celso regularly held workshops about an "indigenous tradition" identified as "Andean tradition". For these "Andean" workshops Celso drew upon the knowledge he had acquired during his apprenticeship with the Peruvian anthropologist and "Andean priest" Juan Nuñez del Prado.⁹ He also organized initiatory journeys to Peru and trips to sacred

⁹ See Molinier and Galinié (2006: 144, 175, 252–258) and Nuñez del Prado's book edited by Celso Bambi and Nityama Masetti (1998).

sites in Europe related to the Etruscans. In 2003 he also led two pilgrimages to places related to Mary Magdalene, the “Black Madonnas”, the Cathars and the Templars.¹⁰

In Spain and Italy workshops related to Neopaganism tend to be organized in an informal way (i.e. having no legal visibility). Once the workshops start attracting an important number of people and gaining social visibility, the most common solution is to create a non-profit organization. In 2003 Celso had already made this shift but the Barcelona based female group Goddess Wood was still in a liminal phase. When I started my fieldwork in 2004, Goddess Wood consisted of up to 300 women from different areas of the Spanish state who participated now and then in rituals or workshops organized by Dana. There was a set group of 30–40 committed members who regularly attended the group’s activities.¹¹ The most important activities of the group were the annual initiation ceremony at the beginning of February and the “pilgrimage of the blood”¹² organized every second summer between July and August. The Goddess Wood group was more cohesive than the Italian one. The group held monthly gatherings to celebrate the new moon and many of the committed members were friends and also met outside the group’s activities. Dana fostered a sense of cohesion calling the group members “sisters” and emphasizing the elements women had in common.

Both Celso and Dana had had important spiritual experiences related with Christian figures but criticized the Catholic religion for its androcentrism, its “demonization” of body and sexuality and its exaltation of life in the other world. According to them, this attitude was exemplified by Catholicism but inherent to Christianity and more generally to monotheistic religions. Both leaders had perceived that they did not need any intermediaries to relate to the divine and had therefore set out on their personal spiritual quests. On these quests both had found out that it was unnecessary to do without the Christian figures they knew from their childhood

¹⁰ Celso had been organizing workshop about the ‘Andean tradition’, trips to Peru and workshops in sacred Etruscan sites led by himself and/or Juan Nuñez del Prado since the late nineties. For more details about “Black Madonnas” see below; about the spiritual theories related to Cathars and Templars see Fedele 2013a: 15–18.

¹¹ In 2009 the group and its activities had grown both in terms of participation and of social visibility; Dana had therefore created a cultural association as a legal background for the group.

¹² The pilgrimage took its name from menstrual blood and the sacralization of the menstrual cycle was one of the key issues in Dana’s group; see Fedele (2013a: 145–190, forthcoming).

and perceived as inherent to their cultural background. For this reason they had elaborated strategies to access Christianity in a different way and shared some of their strategies in their workshops and trips. Even if Celso and Dana had different paths, their teachings had many points in common and the basic tenets derived from Neopaganism.¹³

In the shift from Catholic to Neopagan theories the conceptualization of the world in terms of “energy” plays an important role (Fedele 2009). Most persons participating in Dana’s and Celso’s activities had already learnt to interpret the world surrounding them as the visible manifestation of an invisible “energy”, a life force permeating the cosmos (among others: Hanegraaff 1996: 113–181; Heelas 1996: 15–40). They knew that it was important to receive nurturing positive energy from the outside world into their personal energy field (surrounding their physical bodies) and to release the heavy (or negative) energy to “Mother Earth” (Fedele 2013a: 85–88).

Both Celso and Dana criticized the world-denial and body-mortifying Christian attitude and considered it as the starting point of many present evils such as the exploitation of the planet. They emphasized the need to “re-consecrate matter”, to overemphasize women’s power and the “Feminine” and to venerate the metaempirical being identified as the “Goddess”. They acted similarly to the channellers studied by Michael F. Brown and wanted “to bring together elements of life ripped apart by Western civilization: science and religion, body and soul, culture and nature, male and female, reason and intuition, thought and matter. Where one half of a dichotomy has overpowered the other,” they tried “to strengthen the weaker partner” (Brown 1997: 48).

Dana’s and Celso’s groups shared a corpus of theories about pre-Christian civilizations in Europe according to which these allegedly matriarchal cultures (Eller 2000) venerated a main female divinity, the “Great Goddess”, attributed an important role to women and did not despise terrene life or bodily pleasure (among others: Magliocco 2004: 29; Pike 2001: 190–195).

Reclaiming unity with ancient paganism, these spiritual practitioners advocated the sacralization of body and sexuality and perceived that they had “lost connection” with their “feminine essence” or more in general with

¹³ The average age in Celso’s and Dana’s workshops and trips was between 30 and 60. Participants came from the lower middle and middle class. Differently from Celso’s group, Goddess Wood also attracted women from the lower classes and young women in their early twenties; this may partially be attributed to the lower prices of the activities organized by Dana. Even if Celso’s activities addressed both women and men the majority were women.

“the Feminine” and with “Mother Earth”.¹⁴ They attributed this loss to the principles of “patriarchal society” that undermined women’s power and autonomy, but also to the consequences of the sexual revolution in the sixties that led women who wanted to be successful to adopt a masculine way of life. Living according to rhythms regulated by a society dominated by men, both men and women had supposedly lost contact with nature’s rhythm, with the nurturing “energy” of “Mother Earth” and with their intuitive and sensitive “female side” or “essence”. The necessity to get attuned again with “the Feminine” and “Mother Earth’s” cycles and to reclaim the connection with an ancient “matriarchal” cult emerges from the description of Goddess Wood written by Dana:

Goddess Wood was created in February 2002 with the aim to offer to all women a place and structure where the rites of passage of female life and the sacred feasts of Mother Earth can be celebrated. Our objective is to bring up to the present our ancient feminine lineage in order to re-cognize ourselves as Daughters and Priestesses of the Goddess. (...) With the arrival of patriarchy, the sacred woods were burnt, the priestesses were murdered and women were reduced to slaves. The name of the Goddess was erased from the books and the shadow of her oblivion fell over humanity. After many centuries, today a new rising shines through. The Great Goddess, whose genesis still goes on, is reborn in our hearts and radiates her energy through the daughters who return to Her (...).¹⁵

The “return of the Goddess” could be fostered through a recuperation of theories and rituals allegedly belonging to pre-Christian, “matriarchal” times but, as we have seen, both Dana and Celso considered that Christianity was too deeply rooted into European consciousness and could not be totally left aside.

Christian Heritage and Matriarchal Roots

On their personal quest, both Celso and Dana had at some point been in touch with the so-called “indigenous traditions” of Latin America. Celso had discovered the “Andean tradition” coming from Peru and Dana had been introduced to the Mexican “Conchero tradition” through Clara. A charismatic woman in her fifties, Clara lived in Ibiza selling her own

¹⁴ “Mother Earth” and “Goddess” were sometimes used as synonyms considering that “Mother Earth” was the visible manifestation of the Goddess.

¹⁵ For the creation of this text Dana was influenced by Diane Stein (1987) and Zsusanna Budapest (1986, 1991).

handicrafts and had been the disciple of Nanita, a Mexican leader of the “neo-Conchero” movement in Mexico (De la Peña 2006: 75).¹⁶ It would take too long here to describe these two so-called “indigenous” traditions¹⁷ in detail and to discuss the implications of this kind of transcultural borrowing.¹⁸ It suffices here to say that both traditions blended Christian theories and practices with figures, concepts and ritual gestures allegedly deriving from pre-columbine civilizations (the Incas for the “Andean tradition” and the Maya and Aztecs for the “Conchero tradition”). Both Clara and Juan Nuñez del Prado had adapted the teachings received from their “indigenous” teachers to the “Western” audience using terms and concepts (e.g. energy, grounding, etc.) derived from the “New Age”, the Neopagan movement and also from Jungian psychology.

What interests us in the context of this article is that these “indigenous traditions” served as important references for the reinterpretation of Christianity. These traditions were seen as a useful example of how pre-Christian civilizations had faced the encounter with Christianity, accepting its main figures and terms but secretly maintaining its “pagan” roots and its “matriarchal” values. According to this corpus of theories the Incas, Mayas and Aztecs had found a way to include Christian theories and practices in their original belief system and continued to venerate their pre-Christian gods and goddesses without losing their connection with “Mother Earth”. Eager to reclaim and to “reconnect” with the “pre-Christian roots of Europe”, the Italians and Iberians who shared with me their spiritual theories and practices considered the so-called “indigenous groups”¹⁹ from Latin-America as a model to follow. So-called contemporary “indigenous traditions”, allegedly combining pre-columbine and Christian elements, appeared therefore as useful tools in the reclamation process of their pre-Christian European heritage. Using “energy techniques” and rituals driven

¹⁶ The Concheros derive their name from the *concha*, a musical instrument that is similar to a guitar. They perform ritual dances associated with a popular religious cult in Mexico. Their existence is attested to only since the 18th century, but their traditions may date from the period of the colonial conquest of Mexico. For more details about the Conchero movement, see Rostas (1996, 1998). For more details about the relationship between the Conchero and the neo-Conchero movement in Mexico and in Europe see De la Peña (2002, 2006).

¹⁷ For more details about the “Andean tradition” and the “Conchero tradition” see Fedele 2013a: 76–82; for a comparative study of neo-Indian movements in Mexico and Peru see Galinier and Molinié (2006); for a detailed analysis of mystical tourism in Peru, see Hill (2008).

¹⁸ For more details about the debate on transcultural borrowing in- and outside the Neopagan movement see Pike (2001: 123–154).

¹⁹ In Italian the words used were *poplazioni indigene* and sometimes the adjective *amerindiane* was added. In Spanish women more generally referred to *los indigenas*.

from contemporary “indigenous traditions”, men and women from Celso’s and Dana’s groups wanted to recuperate the connection with the pre-Christian roots of Europe and come to terms with their Christian and particularly Catholic past. With their teachings, Clara and Juan pointed towards the existence of important points in common among different pre-columbine civilizations and identified certain contemporary indigenous (or allegedly indigenous) groups as the guardians of these ancient shared features. In this context, pre-columbine civilizations as the Incas, the Mayas or the Aztecs appeared as having many things in common with European pre-Christian civilizations:²⁰ they allegedly lived in societies with more gender equality, a closer contact to nature and with pacifist and democratic ideals (Pike 2001: 146; Hill 2008).

Using “energy techniques” and/or rituals driven from “indigenous traditions”, Celso and Dana allowed their disciples to “connect” with the power places that had once been used by their pre-Christian ancestors. These power places could be archeological sites but also sites “appropriated by the Church”. In fact, most Christian churches (and particularly those dating from the Gothic period) were held to have been constructed in “power places” where the Celts or other pre-Christian civilizations such as the Etruscans, the Phoenicians or the Romans had built their temples; such churches, therefore, helped to establish a “connection” with the “matriarchal roots of Europe”.

Italians and Iberians in Celso’s and Dana’s groups wanted to reclaim power places allegedly considered as sacred by pre-Christian civilizations that the “Church” had appropriated. In this sense, pilgrimages to Christian churches allowed them to venerate and contact the “Goddess” where she had once been worshipped with different, non-Christian names.²¹

Certain figures from the Christian pantheon like Mary Magdalene or the “Black Madonnas” played a particularly important role in fostering the return of a “Christian Goddess”. Talking about Mary Magdalene, Dana commented:

[*I believe that*] the first thing you have to do is to forget about the historical existence of Mary or of the Magdalene. This is a way without an end (...) For this reason I think that the most adequate way and the way that I always

²⁰ Reference texts about the ‘Andean tradition’ for Celso’s group were Jenkins (1998); Nuñez del Prado (1998) and Huarache Mamani (2000).

²¹ For more details about pilgrimages related to the ‘New Age’ and the Neopagan movement see Bowman (1993, 1993), Ivakhiv (2001), Weibel (2005), Rountree (2006a, 2006b), Badone (2008) and Fedele (2009, 2013a).

followed is that of the symbolical, archetypal approach. (...) Following this approach I consider Mary and the Magdalene as representations of the Goddess, of what would be the Christian Goddess. The Church will never recognize this and never recognized it but anyway I interpret it in this way. (March 3, 2006)

For Dana, the different Catholic representations of the Virgin Mary relating her to different apparition sites (e.g. Montserrat, Lourdes, Fatima) or to different moments of her life (e.g. Immaculate Conception, Mater Dolorosa, etc.) further demonstrated that the Virgin was in reality only the expression of the many roles and names of the “Christian Goddess”. Celso and Dana considered Christian figures such as Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as the Christian equivalent of Pagan gods and goddesses, the multiple representations of the “Great Goddess” and her male equivalent, “God”.

Dana and Celso described Mary Magdalene as a sort of female equivalent or counterpart of Jesus, who had been transformed by the “Church” into a repentant sinner.²² Influenced by texts such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln 1982) or *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (Begg 1985), the pilgrims considered “Black Madonnas” as the representation of a “dark side of the Feminine” that had been repressed by the “patriarchal Church Fathers”. This dark side was the expression of the wild, destructive and sexual aspects of women that the immaculate Virgin Mary had been deprived of.²³ Dana and Celso presented Mary Magdalene as a “priestess of the Goddess” who belonged to a matriarchal religion and culture and had shared her wisdom with Jesus. Magdalene’s importance on Jesus’ side had later been downplayed by the “Church” and she had been transformed by the “Church’s Fathers” into a repentant prostitute. As for the “Black Madonna”, Celso and Dana followed Ean Begg’s theory that the statues were in reality representation of pre-Christian goddesses brought back from the crusades (Begg 1985). Both Magdalene and the “Black Madonnas” worked as *traits d’union* between Christianity and the “matriarchal” religions of the past because they were perceived as belonging to both these dimensions.

²² For more details about the different roles attributed to saint Mary Magdalene see Haskins 1993 and Fedele 2008.

²³ For more details about the importance attributed to ‘Black Madonnas’ in the ‘New Age’ and Neopagan movement see Weibel (2001) and Fedele (2013b: 96–114). For a discussion of the meanings of dark madonna statues in different historical periods see Scheer 2002 and Christian 1995.

Celso and Dana tried to create continuity with pre-Christian civilizations in Europe and their “matriarchal beliefs” both on a temporal and on a spatial level. On a spatial level they attained this continuity by visiting places related to the “pre-Christian civilizations of Europe”. Celso, for example, held workshops in the zone of Pitigliano, where there are many easily accessible Etruscan archeological sites. Establishing physical contact with the rests of buildings erected by the Etruscans, workshop participants could receive the “energy” stored in these sites and establish a personal connection with their Etruscan roots.

Christian heretic groups of the past, like the Knights Templar and the Cathars, helped to create continuity on a temporal level; they supposedly knew about the importance of the “Sacred Feminine”. These groups had allegedly tried to combine Christian and pre-Christian beliefs and practices and had therefore been persecuted by the “Church”. They therefore appeared as predecessors in the quest to reclaim unity with the pagan roots of Europe and both these movements were believed to form part of an “underground church” venerating the “Sacred Feminine”.²⁴

During the “pilgrimage of the blood” dedicated to Mary Magdalene in summer 2004, Dana explained that noble families belonging to the Cathar movement had lived in Catalonia and there was an “underground church” that guarded the secrets about the importance of Mary Magdalene for Christianity. For this reason, there were several chapels dedicated to the saint in this area. Dana’s pilgrimage group visited places in Provence related to Mary Magdalene’s legendary arrival to Gaul after Jesus’ crucifixion. With their journey, Dana said, Iberian women would create a web that united the places related to Mary Magdalene in France and those in Catalonia. Through the reference to a common territory (Catalonia) Dana’s pilgrims sought to find connections between past and present; they created a historical continuity that started from pre-patriarchal cults, over to the “underground religion”, and culminated in the current revival of the “Goddess cult”. Iberian pilgrims wanted to “revitalize” through their physical journey a web that allegedly existed in the past.

We will now consider two ethnographic examples, Celso’s group’s visit to the cathedral of Chartres and Dana and Celso’s interpretation of a Catholic

²⁴ Reference texts for this kind of beliefs were those of early anthropologists such as J.J. Bachofen (1948 [1861]) and M. Murray (1933); but also of mythologists such as R. Graves (1961) and M. Stone (1976) and of the archeologist M. Gimbutas (1974, 1989). Influential authors referring to the aforementioned sources were R. Eisler (1987) and V. Noble (1991).

mass; both cases illustrate well the leaders' blending of Christian and Neopagan elements.

*Celts, Templars and "Black Madonnas" in the
Cathedral of Chartres*

In summer 2003, Celso organized a pilgrimage to places related to "Mary Magdalene, Black Madonnas and the Cathars and Templars".²⁵ Asked to describe the places that had most impressed them, many Italian pilgrims described their experiences in Chartres. The Gothic cathedral of Chartres was completed in the XIII century and was an important pilgrimage site during the Middle Ages. Like some other Gothic churches in France (e.g. Notre-Dame d'Amiens) the cathedral has a labyrinth that is made of stonework laid into the floor.²⁶ Drawing on a tradition based on the theories about the French Gothic cathedrals developed by Fulcanelli (1964), Celso said the cathedral was built on a site where powerful telluric currents crossed and had been recognized as sacred by the Celts long before the arrival of Christianity.²⁷ He described the cathedral as one of the highest expressions of the "sacred architecture" built under the influence the Templar order; the labyrinth it contained represented a path of union of masculine and feminine energies. In Celso's terms, the labyrinth offered the pilgrims from the past and present an access both to the center of the world and the unifying center inside themselves. Here, as in other important Catholic pilgrimage sites they visited, Celso's pilgrims shared Charpentier's ideas in *The Mysteries of Chartres Cathedral* (1966):

What these [Catholic] pilgrims probably did not know was that they had done nothing but recover the path that many generations before them had walked; because the pilgrimage to Chartres existed well before the arrival of the Christians and probably even before the Celts. Before them, many generations had come to gather and pray inside the cave where the Virgin Mother reigned, who was beyond any doubt a Black Virgin and was probably called Isis, Demeter or Bélisama (1966: 20–21).²⁸

²⁵ For a detailed itinerary of Celso's tour, see Fedele (2013a: 311).

²⁶ In 2003 and 2004 when I visited the cathedral, the labyrinth could be completely seen, and could actually be walked upon on Fridays. On other days it was covered with chairs for visitors, in order, some pilgrims thought, to hide it.

²⁷ Pilgrims were assiduous readers; for a detailed analysis of the spiritual-esoteric literature they used as a base for their beliefs see Fedele (2008: 83–118, 167–195).

²⁸ My translation of the original French text.

In Celso's terms, the entire cathedral, and especially the labyrinth, served as a catalyst for spiritual elevation. For the Italian group, the cathedral represented a place of union not only between masculine and feminine forces but also between different traditions. The fact that a "Black Madonna" was revered in the crypt further demonstrated the place's link with previous civilizations venerating the "Goddess".

The cathedral has a long history of being the subject of esoteric research and is one of France's best-known centers for contemporary Templars, labyrinth walkers and visitors eager to contact the telluric currents allegedly crossing the place.²⁹ The original statue of Our Lady of Underground (Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre) venerated in Chartres was destroyed in a fire and the image in the crypt is a copy. Not far from the statue there is a well, which some say belonged to a previous Celtic temple. After "connecting" with the "energy of the well", Celso invited the pilgrims to receive the energy of the "Black Madonna" standing in front of her statue. Then they should take each other's hands and create a circle in front of the statue.

Immacolata, a rather small woman in her forties with short curly brown hair and brown eyes, told me that her most powerful experience during the pilgrimage had happened in Chartres in front of the "Black Madonna".³⁰ Since her childhood, she had desired to have a "normal" name, not one that evoked "her family's origins in Southern Italy and Catholic religiosity". Named after her paternal grandmother, Immacolata felt that this name "conditioned her whole life", even if most of the people knew her by a nickname. She worked as a clerk and lived in Rome on her own. Immacolata's parents had migrated to Rome from a village near Avellino. Like many Italian women of her generation, Immacolata went to a Catholic school for girls but she stopped going to church after leaving school. Immacolata had always felt attracted to esoteric themes but had not followed up this "attraction" until recently. In 2000 she made friends with Gemma, who introduced her to crystal therapy and they began to share books and attend workshops together. Even if she was no longer a practicing Catholic, Immacolata still believed in the power of Catholic religion and remembered moments of peace and serenity when, as a child, she visited the aunt of her grandfather who was a nun. She clearly felt that her spiritual interests might be perceived as being in contrast with her Catholic upbringing and underlined

²⁹ See for instance: <http://www.sacredconnections.co.uk/holyland/MysteriesofChartres.htm>. Consulted in November 2011.

³⁰ Immacolata's life story and her experiences in Chartres are also described in Fedele (2013a: 49–50, 2013b: 96–114).

that neither her parents nor her colleagues and friends knew about her “parallel life”. Immacolata commented about her experience in the cathedral:

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 with my elbow telling her: Take off your shoes! Because without shoes there was no obstacle to this flow (April 8, 2005).

In front of the “Black Madonna” Immacolata felt that she could finally connect with “Mother Earth” something she had tried to achieve for a long time. Like other pilgrims, she felt that the “energy” coming up from the ground nurtured and healed her, making her feel “grounded” and empowered. For her, the “Black Madonna” was the personification of “Mother Earth”, fully representing the earthy and mysterious “Feminine” that Cathars and Templars hinted at.

Participants in this pilgrimage but also in other workshops told me that after the “exercises of connection” led by Celso they felt more “grounded” and more “connected with Mother Earth”. For several women in Dana's and Celso's groups to recuperate the connection with “Mother Earth” implied also a healing process similar to that of Immacolata. They gradually acknowledged and transformed the negative information they had received from their parents and more in general from society and could heal their “wounded femininity”.³¹ Creating energy connections with power places related to pre-Christian times allowed people in Celso's and Dana's groups to develop a sense of being “grounded” or “rooted”. These roots had a double meaning: they were not only a link with “Mother Earth” and more in general with the “Feminine”, they were also “cultural” roots allowing to establish a link with their pre-Christian past.

Reinterpreting the Mass

Participants in Celso and Dana's workshops and trips learnt not only to reinterpret and reclaim Christian sites and figures, but also to develop a different approach to the most important rituals of Christianity. As we will see

³¹ For more details about the wounds related to femininity see Fedele (2013a: 191–242).

in the following example, they reinterpreted the Catholic mass referring to a pre-Christian, matriarchal past.

Another “Black Madonna” shrine that Celso included in this tour in summer 2003 was Rocamadour. Here Celso had arranged a mass held by a French priest he knew from previous visits there. The Italian mass for the group took place in front of the statue of Notre-Dame de Rocamadour. Before the mass Celso briefly explained to the group that the pilgrims should try to experience the mass “as if the inquisition had never happened”. He thereby meant that the pilgrims should try to forget what the “Church” had done against the “medieval witches” or heretic groups of the past they perceived as their forerunners. For Celso the mass was a powerful ritual that derived from a synthesis of different pre-Christian cults and could therefore allow its participants to commune with the divine forces.³² The pilgrims should experience this ritual as if they were doing a group ritual and were all playing an active part in it. Most pilgrims decided to join the mass and once it was finished they shared their spiritual experiences and energy perceptions during the ritual; some of them commented that this event had helped them to partially make peace with the mass they knew from their childhood. Only two of the mass participants criticized the priest as a “hypocrite” and expressed their feeling of disgust during the ceremony.

As we have seen Celso and Dana believed that many Christian churches had been built where there had previously been pre-Christian temples. Using a similar interpretative strategy they also described the mass as based on pre-Christian rituals. Celso in particular invited people in his workshops and trips to discover the pre-Christian roots of this ritual and to profit from its power transcending the limits of religious affiliation. As the following example shows, Dana’s women did not accept this reinterpretation as easily as Celso’s pilgrims in Rocamadour.

In summer 2004, while Dana’s pilgrims were visiting the cave of *La Sainte-Baume* in Provence, where Mary Magdalene was believed to have lived for 30 years, a group of French Catholic pilgrims were attending a mass, celebrated by the priest who accompanied them. Some of the Iberian pilgrims, including Dana and Clara, stayed to participate. During the French mass inside the cave, most of Dana’s pilgrims were sitting outside, talking, eating, knitting and interpreting tarot cards. When Dana and the others

³² Before the mass Celso could be seen reading in an Italian book containing a collection of articles by C.G. Jung entitled “The symbolism of the mass” (1978 [1942]).

came out of the mass, everyone began to discuss whether it was right that Dana, Clara and other pilgrims had attended this Catholic ceremony. Everybody wanted to share their feelings about the officiating priest and the way he behaved. Clara was enthusiastic about “the way he moved the energy” which reminded her of some “ceremonies of the Concheros”.

Estrella, one of the committed members of the Goddess Wood in her mid-thirties, criticized Clara’s attitude and expressed her anger openly; soon a debate about the mass started among the women.³³ Clara explained that women should have attended the mass and transcended dogma thereby taking advantage of an unique opportunity: this priest was celebrating the mass according to the pre-Vatican II model. By using movements and gestures that had disappeared from the current ritual of the mass the priest allowed pilgrims to access a deeper spiritual dimension. Listening to Clara’s explanation it seemed that in this instance there was a barrier to be overcome in order to benefit from something (a place, a ritual) that pertained to the Catholic belief system, but whose power could be appreciated by pilgrims in terms of “energy”. Latin-Americans like Dana and people like Clara and Celso who had received a spiritual formation in Mexico and Peru seemed to cross this boundary easily.

Dana explained her relationship with the Catholic Church and the way “the Christian Goddess” managed to reunite Christian and Neopagan ideals by saying that in Latin America Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, were not perceived in the same way as in Europe. For centuries, people had been used to the mixture of indigenous beliefs and dominant Catholicism. For this reason, Dana did not feel that there was a contradiction between the original message that was at the base of Christianity and the worship of the “Goddess”.

In fact, several people who had traveled with Celso to Peru told me that they had begun to see Catholicism and its related images in a different way. Discovering and observing (through Celso’s explanations) the syncretic use made of figures like the Virgin or the Christ around Cuzco had allowed them to experience statues, churches and masses more freely.

Conclusion

Throughout this text I have shown that, although almost invisible on a statistical level, Neopagan theories and practices are slowly finding their

³³ This episode is described and analysed in more detail in Fedele (2013a: 114–118).

way into traditionally Catholic countries such as Italy or Spain. Events such as the “Goddess conference” held in Madrid³⁴ for the first time in 2010 and again in 2011 confirm that more and more people in Southern Europe find that Pagan goddesses and gods address issues that divinities from the Christian pantheon do not speak to. During fieldwork among Portuguese women influenced by the Neopagan movement I found that they share with their Italian and Spanish equivalents many of the characteristics analyzed in this text;³⁵ like them they tend not to describe themselves as Pagans.

We have seen that the spiritual leaders teaching Neopagan theories and practices in Italy and Spain feel the need to blend them with Christian elements in order to make them accessible for their audience with a Catholic background. Spiritual leaders such as Celso and Dana think that Christian places, rituals and figures can be reinterpreted giving them back their “original”, “pre-Christian” meaning. Dana and Celso and their respective groups shared the widespread assumption (referred to in the introduction to this volume) that religion represents the core values of a certain area. They recognized that during the last twenty centuries the dominant religion in Europe had been Christianity and that in Spain and Italy Catholicism still was the main religion. As a consequence, they thought that if they managed to reinterpret and transform the Catholic beliefs and practices of their society they could significantly change its core values. These Italians, Catalans and Spaniards wanted to transform the “patriarchal” values they perceived as inherent to European and more generally to Western society; nevertheless they believed that they could not totally dismiss the Catholic theories and practices they perceived as forming part of their “cultural heritage”.

As we have seen, Italians and Iberians influenced by Neopaganism reclaimed their “pre-Christian roots” referring to the Etruscan and Celtic civilizations in Europe; they believed that these ancient civilizations shared a “matriarchal” set of beliefs and social values. Postulating the existence of a pre-Christian and pre-patriarchal past in Europe and also in the Americas they considered certain contemporary “indigenous groups” in Latin-America as the “guardians” of pre-columbine and therefore pre-Christian

³⁴ For more details see the webpage of the Spanish Goddess conference: <http://www.conferenciadeladiosa.es>. Consulted on April 10, 2012.

³⁵ In her analysis of practices against the evil eye in Greece Eugenia Roussou (2011) found that the spiritual practitioners she interviewed perceived continuity rather than rupture between their New Age influenced rituals and the Orthodox religion they had grown up with. See also Roussou this volume.

beliefs and rituals. Eager to reconnect with their “matriarchal roots”, they used techniques and rituals deriving from “indigenous traditions” in order to tap into the energy stored in power places identified as having Etruscan or Celtic origins. Religious movements such as the Templars or the Cathars guaranteed them a temporal continuity with their pre-Christian past; Christian figures such as Mary Magdalene helped them to bring together their Christian and pre-Christian heritage.

The “indigenous wisdom”, derived from groups described as the “guardians of ancient pre-Christian traditions”, emerged as a powerful resource for overcoming the difficulties created by what these spiritual practitioners considered their principal enemy, “patriarchy”, and what they saw as patriarchy’s most powerful ally, the “Church”. Appropriating elements from different indigenous traditions, they extracted myths and rituals from their original cultural and social contexts and tended to consider them as part of a unique corpus of “indigenous wisdom”, thereby ignoring the quite different concepts of sexuality, corporeality and gender of the indigenous group these rituals derive from.

With their theories derived from Neopaganism, Celso and Dana offered in their trips and workshops a different access to Christian figures such as the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene. Women like Immacolata felt empowered by their encounter with divinities such as the “Black Madonna” that reminded them of the Virgin Mary they knew from their Catholic background. Yet the “Black Madonna” also incorporated new “Pagan” features allowing these women to feel more “connected to Mother Earth”.

It will be interesting to observe if in the future spiritual practitioners who blend Pagan theories and practices with Christian figures and concepts will decide to become more visible or not. They might begin to describe themselves as “Christo-Pagans” as some American Pagans have recently been doing³⁶ or remain in a liminal space between Paganism and Christianity as they have done until now.

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³⁶ See for instance Higginbotham and Higginbotham 2009.

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