

New Age Spirituality is the Invention of Heteropatriarchy

When lesbians began to focus on ourselves and each other, we created a lesbian social meaning. From that lesbian social meaning, we developed a lesbian spirituality which honored equality, diversity and our lesbian selves. We elevated the female principle as defined by lesbians. We sought not power-over but power within in order to strengthen our interactions with each other. Lesbians challenged heteropatriarchy. Heteropatriarchal beliefs were suspect. Our social context excluded the male principle and males.

I plan to critique new age spirituality from a lesbian perspective through the following points:

1. New age spirituality justifies the status quo by naming it good and proper.
2. It honors hierarchy by encouraging those who exercise power in society to continue to do so through the search for enlightenment.
3. New age spirituality promotes males as important.
4. New age spirituality denies its connection to spiritualism.
5. Males want to recapture our attention.
6. By rejecting resistance and challenge to heteropatriarchy, a term developed by Julia Penelope, new age spirituality undermines lesbian connectiveness.

One of the basic tenets of new age spirituality is what exists is freely chosen. Hence the status quo is affirmed. What makes us human is interacting with each other. Our interactions, therefore, have social meaning. It requires power to arrange the world as one would want. Power coupled with wishes provide the social context within which we operate. As MacKinnon argues in *Feminism Unmodified*, "The beliefs of the powerful become proof, in part because the world actually arranges itself to affirm what the powerful want to see . . ."1

Apparently, it is in the interest of new age proponents to ignore power-over and focus on wishing, thereby rendering the social context invisible. It is in their interest to ignore the power-over

needed to arrange the world because then they can argue those who do not create the world in their image are less enlightened. The failure to create the world one desires is due to personal shortcoming, not powerlessness.

Free will to be truly free necessitates the absence of constraints as Sarah Hoagland points out in her recent book, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward a New Valuation*.² By denying unequal power in our interactions, new age spirituality adherents can claim the illusion of equality of our choices. Once they have established that illusion of equality, the concept of oppressors becomes meaningless.

Free will or choice becomes the basis for perceiving the absence of oppression which is the second point I want to discuss. If there are no oppressors, there can be no oppression. By claiming the absence of oppression, new age spirituality proponents honor hierarchy. New age spirituality adherents do acknowledge horrible circumstances. In a conversation, one of the new age advocates told me that the master-slave relationship was a horrible one but did not indicate oppression. It did not indicate oppression, she went on to say, because the master and the slave freely chose to enter the world for their own reasons. While she could not ascertain the reasons, it was an opportunity for each of them to learn some lesson and for the rest of us to become more enlightened.

In focusing on free will, new age spirituality denies oppression occurs. The negation of the reality of oppression encourages both the powerful and the powerless to view each other's situation as chosen. The denial of social meaning of our interactions makes it possible for no blame to be attached to the powerful. The powerful did not impose powerlessness. The powerless chose their situation, if only by choosing the circumstances under which they were born. If the powerless do not choose to change their situation, then new age spirituality would have us believe it is because the powerless have some lesson to learn.

Once horrible circumstances are freely chosen, then the responsibility of the powerful is to accept that choice. The status quo represents unequal power dynamics and must remain so until those who are less equal, hence less enlightened, freely choose to arrange the world differently. The powerful are able to define the world on their terms. They perceive the powerless as the axis on which the status quo revolves, thus absolving themselves of any

responsibility for the control they exercise in their interactions with the powerless. This reversal in logic is accomplished by new age spirituality honoring hierarchy.

While hierarchy is not specifically acknowledged by new age spirituality proponents, the implicit goal engenders hierarchy. The goal of every new age spirituality seeker is enlightenment. The powerful have defined those in horrible situations as lacking the rarefied enlightenment that the powerful possess. While the powerful cannot challenge the status quo for that challenge would interfere with the less enlightened one's free will or choice, they can and must teach the lessons they have learned. Unlike free will, the teachings are not free. The cost of the teachings will be explored later.

I want to return for the moment to the concept of individually chosen paths which on the surface would seem to coincide with free will. In fact, individually chosen paths do coincide with new age spirituality's concept of free will. The concept of enlightenment presents a continuum on which seekers exhibit more or lesser degrees of enlightenment.

This continuum is used to measure all paths to discover the degree of enlightenment exhibited. The concept of enlightenment forces those who are less enlightened to seek those who are more enlightened for guidance. While each of us has the capacity for enlightenment, only a few display highly evolved enlightenment. Those few are to be honored, respected and paid. The vagueness of evolved enlightenment is not coincidental. It is as deliberate as other patriarchal religions are and as therapy is intentionally vague. Each focuses on the inner being isolated from social meaning. New age spirituality and therapy do not value self-defined success. Success is measured by external authority.

It is not surprising that many new age spirituality adherents have previously embraced therapy as a way of life. New age spirituality is a logical step for those who seek the quick fix and instant revelation. The quick fix and instant revelation are both discussed in my paper, "Therapy: the Evil Within."³

New age spirituality departs from the path of therapy by removing any hint of human agency inasmuch as new age's arbitrator is a spirit guide. In a story about two lesbian lovers growing old in the nineteenth century, Sarah Aldridge in her book titled *Madame*

Aurora describes Madame Aurora as a medium who exercises human agency in her interactions with her clients.⁴ The channeler, unlike the therapist or the medium, presents herself as simply a vehicle for the spirit guide(s). Her representation of her role is similar to a priest claiming to be only the mouthpiece of god. Why is human agency or judgement defined as wrong and certainly less evolved than spirits?

Part of the answer lied in the fact that humans have been imperfect. New age spirituality, similar to christianity, proposes a higher power to lead us to perfection. Both christian and new age spirituality tenets accept famine in Ethiopia, men's rape of women in the home and the street, u.s. invasion of Grenada and so forth as examples of human imperfection. The tenets of new age spirituality and christianity allow such imperfection by promising that the spirit world does represent perfection. New age spirituality, christianity and other patriarchal religions provide the justification for acceptance of what is. By counseling disregard for the existing hierarchy, new age spirituality supports heteropatriarchy.

The third point about new age spirituality concerns its promotion of male and female principles. These principles are arbitrarily assigned characteristics. New age spirituality accepts that males have sex specific characteristics and females have different sex specific characteristics. These characteristics are innate to each sex.

New age spirituality proponents seek to incorporate each set of characteristics to become whole beings. This concept is also referred to as androgyny. Each set is incomplete without the other, which is the justification for heterosexuality. While male and female characteristics are perceived by new spirituality seekers as having equal value, although incomplete, male and female characteristics are not equally valued in society. The characteristics of males, such as rationality, strength, decisiveness, domination and so forth, as MacKinnon and others have pointed out, are the characteristics valued as important by society. The characteristics of females, such as emotionality, maternalness, vacillation, subordination and so forth, are not highly valued by the powerful. New age seekers claim to want female characteristics to be equally valued. As we discovered with their claims about free will and power parity, their commitment to equally valuing female characteristics is equally false.

One reason the claim is false is the sex specific characteristics are, in fact, not sex specific and can be found in both sexes. For example, females can be both rational and emotional. This overlap of allegedly sex specific characteristics is not the exclusive province of highly evolved females. Since there is a great deal of overlap of characteristics between males and females, then the assignment of a specific set of attributes to one sex or the other sex is arbitrary.

The arbitrariness of the assignment of a specific set of characteristics to one sex or the other sex is the second reason the equality claim is false. The characteristics assigned to males are the characteristics valued by the powerful. MacKinnon notes, "In reality . . . virtually every quality that distinguishes men from women is already affirmatively compensated in this society. Men's physiology defines most sports, their needs define auto and health insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies define work place expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their objectification of life defines art, their military services define citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along with each other — their wars and rulerships — defines history, their image defines god, and their genitals define sex. For each of their differences from women, what amounts to an affirmative action plan is in effect, otherwise known as the structure and values of American society."⁵ New age spirituality as we have discussed in terms of honoring hierarchy does not challenge the unequal power dynamics existing in society. As long as new age spirituality does not challenge the inequality of male and female characteristics existing in society, then their claim to value female characteristics is suspect.

The third reason the equality claim is false is developed through examining those characteristics primarily exhibited by each sex. While a set of characteristics is not primarily sex specific, males are trained to be males and females are trained to be females. Part of male training is to possess females. Part of female training is to be possessed by males. MacKinnon states, "Women are there to be violated and possessed. Men to violate and possess us . . ."⁶ If males desire to incorporate the female principle, then they would be willing to be possessed by other males. If females want to incorporate the male principle, then we would need the ability to possess

other females. The androgynous model denies the inequality in relationships. MacKinnon argues, "Men's power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be."⁷ Denial of unequal power relationships is not the same as challenging unequal power relationships. Since new age spirituality refuses to challenge the current hierarchy of unequal power relationships, female characteristics are not equally valued by new age spirituality.

In fact, new age spirituality promotes the male principle which leads to my fourth point. Spiritualism could provide new age spirituality the opportunity to value the female principle, for spiritualism is practiced primarily by women. Spiritualism at its cores is the belief that you can contact spirits who once lived in this world. Some spiritualists believe that spirits from other worlds and other realities can be contacted and these spirits do have an interest in providing guidance to humanity. Spiritualism also includes reincarnation. Spirits are almost always known by the seeker. A friend pointed out spiritualism had been around a long time.⁸ I began to think about how even the name of new age spirituality severs it from the root of spiritualism. The denial of spiritualist roots is deliberate. New age spirituality divorces itself from spiritualism by renaming many of the practices. A medium becomes a channeler. Spirits known by the seeker become impersonal guides. New age spirituality takes common multifunctional tools and offers in their place costly monofunctional ones. Practices such as crystal ball gazing, fortune telling, reading palms and tea leaves and so forth were seen as the beliefs of the witless and old women. The two groups are often synonymous with each other. In a rational age, the witless and old women are not credible. Credibility is defined by the powerful. By yuppifying the spiritualists' techniques, the practices could be made credible to those who were powerful. Male participation in new age spirituality lent further credibility to that system of beliefs. The powerful require male participation in order to grant credibility.

Another reason new age spirituality is reluctant to claim spiritualism is spiritualist practitioners utilize tools which do not necessarily lend themselves to conspicuous consumption. Part of the maintenance of the status quo is to protect unequal economic distribution. Under such a system, conspicuous consumption is

valued by the powerful.⁹ While it is true the rich frequented mediums, the services of mediums were accessible to those less well off. Even today, palm reading is advertised for \$5.00. The cost of crystals has not only escalated, but also their usages have become so specialized that more crystals are required to achieve the same results.

As we examine who the believers are, it becomes even clearer that new age spirituality panders to the powerful. New age spirituality proponents are primarily white and financially comfortable. New age spirituality appeals to those who value conspicuous consumption as I discussed earlier. Hence the proponents have already demonstrated a propensity to buy services and material goods. New age spirituality adherents are eager, even require, that evolved enlightenment be costly. Given conspicuous consumption, a service or object is not valuable if it is not expensive.

For example, a psychic workshop lasting for four hours costs \$35.00 per participant. It is led by a straight woman and more women want to attend than the space can accommodate. The participants are all women, primarily lesbian, but not one black woman is present. When I talk with several of the lesbians who attended, they report surprise they failed to notice the absence of black women. The white lesbians express shock the guru is straight. I believe two things were operating in this situation.

One is that the cost of the workshop made it very valuable to those who wanted to participate. The same guru offered a lecture for a similar length of time but the cost was free or nominal. The second dynamic operating in the above situation is the undermining of lesbian agency.

My fifth point concerns the undermining of lesbian agency through males seeking to recapture our attention. The straight woman guru is perceived as more evolved than lesbians for she has already incorporated the male principle as important and valuable. As I discussed, the male principle is intrinsic to new age spirituality. In fact, while straight women are higher in the enlightenment hierarchy, it is males who have gained rarefied enlightenment status. This explains why most spirit guides are male. Males are in the forefront, foreground and foreskin of new age spirituality. Males wanted to be included in our lesbian interactions with each other. They tried many tactics to regain our attention.

Males became transsexuals and applied for jobs at lesbian record labels, lesbian production companies and battered women shelters. Males professed to be feminists and demanded to be included in our organizations and women-only spaces. Males threatened us with disaster if we did not bond with them to fight nuclear power. Males denied our commitment to anti-racist work if we did not bond with them to challenge u.s. invasion of central america. Males appealed to maternal instinct to coerce us to provide caring, money, time, energy and blood to those males dying of AIDS. In short, males clamored that their issues were primary and lesbians should attend to them. Fundamentally, heterosexuality was promoted even by gay males.

Some of us succumbed to these scare tactics, but some of us did not. As Bette Tallen observed, "Lesbian separatists are the only stability the women's movement has known, holding on to the basic political analyses developed in the early seventies while other parts of the feminist movement wavered and often abandoned the politics with which they began."¹⁰

When the male scare tactics did not fully destroy lesbian connectiveness, males promoted theories which would destroy that connectiveness from within. They advocated focusing on the inner being divorced from social interaction or context. Our focus on the inner being would be guided by males who had achieved enlightenment and credibility. The focus on inner being could not be directed by males if a lesbian inner being were central, for a lesbian focus excludes males. The inner being had to be separated from a social context. If a social context were retained, then male power in the interaction would be questioned.

Both new age spirituality and therapy accomplish the male mission to re-establish males as primary. New age spirituality promises to value the female principle while devaluing females.

Which brings me to my sixth point. Once lesbian spirituality sought the knowledge lost during the witch burnings. Now new age spirituality only values male knowledge. Once lesbian meaning was central to our world view. Now new age spirituality values humanist meaning. Once lesbians challenged hierarchy. Now new age spirituality admires hierarchy and has institutionalized it as enlightenment. Once we knew oppression was imposed by males. Now new age spirituality denies oppression exists. Once

lesbians examined power dynamics to explain how the world operated. Now new age spirituality wants us to believe power is irrelevant.

New age spirituality not only resembles but promotes heteropatriarchy. By rejecting resistance and challenge to heteropatriarchy, new age spirituality negates female agency. It is not coincidental that new age spirituality undermines lesbian connectiveness. New age spirituality is truly the invention of heteropatriarchy.

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1. MacKinnon, Catharine A., *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1987.

2. Hoagland, Sarah Lucia, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value*. The Institute of Lesbian Studies, Palo Alto, California, 1988.

3. Lee, Anna, "Therapy: the Evil Within," *Trivia*, #9. Fall 1986.

4. Aldridge, Sarah, *Madame Aurora*. The Naiad Press, Tallahassee, Florida, 1983.

5. *Op. cit.*, *Feminism Unmodified*.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. This was pointed out to me in a conversation with Tara Ayres.

9. Evans, Lee, *Sinister Wisdom* #37, Spring 1989.

10. Tallen, Bette, quoted by Sarah Hoagland in *Gossip* #6 in her article "Lesbian Separatism: an Empowering Reality," London, England, 1988.