

## ***The Female Divine Figure within Several World Religions,*** **By Dorothy Yoder Nyce**

### **Abstract**

This article, with Mary the Mother of Jesus as a starting point, examines the female divine in several notable living faiths. To be fixed on one deity or truth claim can imply that one alone is superior, and that by extension others are weak or false. Little can be known of the wisdom or strength of the plural when diversity is ignored, for pluralism responds to diversity. Pluralism prompts religiously faithful yet open-minded people to relate with those whose beliefs differ. As they increase knowledge of and sensitivity to others' god or goddess concepts, personal wellbeing or neighborly good might more easily emerge.

### **Introduction**

Ann Lee, Anandamayi Ma, Ammachi, Mata Gujari (Gujri), and Kwan Yin are rarely named in one sentence. They exemplify what this article seeks to describe in more detail.

Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, migrated to America from England in 1774. A few influential followers, not she herself, later credited her with being the “second appearing of Christ in the female.”<sup>1</sup> Sri Ananda Ma,<sup>2</sup> (Ananda Ma, 1896-1982) saint and guru from the Bengal area of India, traveled extensively as a pilgrim and teacher. Gifted with divine power and knowledge, though never having studied, she healed others and experienced ecstatic states. Thousands gathered—to be in her presence, observe her compassion, hear her chant divine names, or teach that “everything is One” (*advaita*, nonduality). Ammachi (Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi), a currently active Hindu guru known as the “hugging saint,” travels the world followed by thousands. Her remarkable memory, stamina for continuous hours of giving “audience” to the loyal, and wisdom shared in addresses are valued by disciples.

Honored among Sikhs, Mata Gujari mothered the tenth and final Guru, the noted Gobind Singh. With her husband, the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur, Mata founded the city of Anandpur in India's Punjab state. Guru Tegh established for Sikhs the moral duty to protect the rights of people of all faiths. In 1705, when Sikhs fled Anandpur, Mata Gujari and two young grandsons became separated from the group. Betrayed by a Muslim officer, they were arrested and imprisoned in a cold tower in Delhi. Mata Gujari prepared the boys to appear in court, urging them to remain steadfast to the Sikh faith. Bricked up alive inside a wall, they died the same day that she was martyred. Sikhs credit Mata for causing Sikhism to continue through instilling loyalty to the Dharma in descendants.<sup>3</sup>

Taoism had a celestial mother figure whose womb was known as the cosmos; this Divine Feminine was thought to have resurrected in the figure of Kwan Yin. Kwan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of Compassion, chose “to stay on the wheel of life to help other people achieve spiritual enlightenment.”<sup>4</sup> Like *Shekinah* for Judaism or the Virgin Mary among some Christians, she is presence within all. Ever engaged in the world, her energy and compassion saves and enables others in their spiritual work. Somewhat like the universal Holy Spirit, Kwan Yin guards and teaches Buddhists to listen, be open to serve, and cultivate compassion.

To what extent might these women known for sacred actions represent the Divine? At one level, for people who believe that all human beings are created in God's image, the question of symbolizing might seem moot. For loyal followers, special significance may extend to such honored ones due to distinct, beyond average human qualities. They truly inspire faith or motivate good will. For those with a firm view of one God alone, as Allah, to include other figures might risk diminishing the Supreme One.<sup>5</sup>

Increasingly, a pluralistic framework that includes the female divine figure can help people realize the limits of a particular religious focus and truth. To own the relative (limited) nature of a religion may help a person loyal to one faith also be open to the fact that other faith

systems also prompt members to relate to the Ultimate or God within. Mindful and knowing oneself, a person can become freer to inquire into, respect, and learn from others whose central, sacred truths and practices differ. To understand another's self-understanding or universe, while confessing distinct beliefs, enables solidarity and liberation. Such trust fortifies pluralism, part of time-honored reality. Granted, major religions today are largely seen as patriarchal in focus. But, if honoring the female through divine figures might prompt women and men to be more balanced in crediting each other's worth, why forego the wisdom of inclusion? This article pursues that task through insight into Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism.

### On Crediting the Sacred

An issue hovering over content is whether and how female divine or holy figures affect human, notably woman's, sacred being. Readers are invited to ponder the impact of truly perceiving what devotion to a female figure or goddess might offer a devotee and, with the same honesty, how devotion only to a male-oriented god concept limits views of both human and divine. Not until living in India in the 1960s did this writer engage the female divine figure more seriously.

Remarkably, thirty-four direct or indirect references to Mary the mother of Jesus occur in the Qur'an. Sura XIX is titled "Mariam," its content focused on her. Although Allah alone is divine for Muslims, Mary's purity and uniqueness are nonetheless distinctly valued, beginning with the miracle of her own childhood.<sup>6</sup> Nourished by angels, she had daily visions of God. Greatness appeared also in her response to Gabriel's announcement of her role as mother: "When shall I have a boy and no mortal has yet touched me, nor have I been unchaste?" Despite physical facts, she wonders when the birth will occur. Convinced that Allah creates what Allah desires, Mary's Jewish piety suggests abandon to God's will.<sup>7</sup> With the Arabic title of *Islam* meaning "submission," Muslims resonate with her willing spirit. They see it as devotion or worship, as crediting divine authority.

The Qur'an provides further details.<sup>8</sup> From a place of withdrawal, Mary gives birth; tired and sad, she invokes death. The divine Spirit of truth brings comfort: Mary's thirst is quenched by a stream under her feet; she eats dates. When she faces slander on returning to her people, the infant speaks; he defends his mother from the cradle. Such a miracle persuades Muslims that the Spirit pervades the child. Mahomet recognizes Mary as chosen by God to be linked to her son.<sup>9</sup> The Qur'an later mentions Mary's last years and ascension to heaven. But, because she is human, "Jesus son of Mary" cannot be Son of God. While beliefs of religions, like that one, differ, to live with contradictions and ambivalence may enable openness. More female models of holiness would likely enhance theology and worship that may have in part historically relied on patriarchal dominance.

How then address human sexual dominance and its effect on understanding the sacred in any religion, for god-concept or for people? Not female or male, biblical divinity reflects activity and qualities that characterize human beings—whether making and keeping covenants or forming and building relationships. Whether making garments, giving birth, or winnowing grain; compassion, joy, or judgment. Since all people reflect God's image, all need to claim and endorse that fact with comparable strength. When primarily the Supreme One is described or experienced as masculine or men are valued more highly as humans or for leadership, patriarchy reigns. For Jews, along with Christians and Muslims who followed, the basic understanding of human creation has been flawed. However, to name the first, non-sexual being "earth creature," which is faithful to the Hebrew text, with distinct sexuality following simultaneously, could prompt human equity. Hebrew scholar Phyllis Trible taught that condition of created goodness decades ago.<sup>10</sup> For equity, each is dependent on the other, as light and darkness, for identity. Each is created to responsibly care for the earth and other life. Each represents the divine. The divine, being beyond human limits, is not identified with one more than the other. For true equity to emerge, all need genuinely to desire it.

Women and men address the concern for equity—Riffat Hassan, Yvonne Yazbeck, and John Esposito among Muslims, Hindu Arvind Sharma, Jewish scholar Susannah Heschel, Christian Leonard Swidler, and Buddhist Rita Gross, to name a few others. Noted writer Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks to the issue at hand: “It is idolatrous to make males more ‘like God’ than females. It is blasphemous to use the image and name of the holy to justify patriarchal domination.”<sup>11</sup> Theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains her broader term *kyriarchy*—rule of domination or power that divides as with master, lord, head—including but beyond sex/gender.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps a corrective eon will yet follow patriarchy to credit the sacred more broadly. If God will bring together people of all nations before the world’s end, might people of faith be gracious enough to learn from other living faiths, in part to bring more balance and wholeness to concepts of the Ultimate?

### Christian Inheritance of Judaic Female Divinity

What might Christians observe from their Jewish heritage? Hebrew scripture includes about forty references to the phrase “Yahweh and his Asherah,” the singular or plural forms of the word *asherah*, or its symbol—a wooden pole or cultic tree. Studies have examined a thirteenth century BCE ewer (pitcher), sacred storage jars, and inscriptions of “Yahweh and his Asherah” etched into stone. The latter appear from ninth or eighth century BCE sites southwest of the Dead Sea. Scholar Judith Hadley<sup>13</sup> traces the goddess Asherah from Syria (as Asratum) to Ugarit, where she was the head goddess. In Canaanite myth, Asherah or the Great Mother Goddess was known as consort of the chief god El. When Yahweh became the name of Israel’s replacement God for El,<sup>14</sup> Asherah carried over too. So, prior to monarchy, Israel engaged Asherah’s cult; by the tenth century, Israelite worship included devotion to a female figure.

The author’s latest book, *Multifaith Musing: Essays and Exchanges*, includes imagined exchanges between people of different Christian groups or living faiths. Diverse themes include water, crossing cultures, scriptures, religious conflict, and goddesses. A brief excerpt from the chapter titled “Asherah from the Hebrew Bible: Story of a Divine Pair Revoked” follows. After an exchange focused on a number of Hindu goddesses, two university students—a male Hindu Indian and a female Christian visitor to India—dialogue here (learn from each other) about ancient Jewish Asherah’s presence:

**Utpal:** How about the second jar?

**Marie:** On one side of *Pithos B* appears: “Amaryau says: Say to my Lord (X): I bless you by Yahweh [our guardian] and by his Asherah.”

**Utpal:** A clear blessing formula.

**Marie:** The reverse side is of more interest. Five worshipers appear in procession, their hands raised. The inscription alongside suggests: “I bless you by Yahweh of Teman (a region) and by his asherah. May he bless you and keep you and be with (you) my lord.”

**Utpal:** A more profound blessing.

**Marie:** What’s more, it states the blessing form that Christians now call the “Doxology.” We might conclude worship services with it!

**Utpal:** And you’d never known that the same blessing sent your religious ancestors on their way, grateful for Yahweh and his Asherah!

**Marie:** Precisely. To learn that a remnant of loyalty to Asherah persists in my worship experience prods me to pause also, when meeting a Hindu goddess form today.

**Utpal:** We can all recall visual and tangible symbols that connect people of faith with the One God. Most people who revere an object before them know that it’s not actually divine. It reminds them that the Ultimate constantly enters human experience. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Power patterns exist. Hebrew prophets Amos and Hosea had not denounced the Asherah object. Hosea later advised Israel to call the entire people of God “God’s wife.” Since men filled primary leadership roles, women as a whole could be therein overlooked. A similar male power pattern took place after Jesus ascended; with patriarchy well established, the collective church was named the “bride of Christ.” Whether Christians since then confront the direct linkage of maleness with divinity through Jesus might be discussed; such attitudes and values continue to shape believers.

We next note Jewish prophet Jeremiah’s scene. Three-fifths of his chapters contain material about some form of forsaking Yahweh, of idolatry. But diverse, visible reflections of the divine mattered to Israelites. Details of burning incense to the queen of heaven, kneading and offering cakes, and pouring libations to gods concentrate in Chapter 44. Patrons served not mere prostitutes but a class of sacred or ‘undefiled’ woman called *zonah*. These or the cultic pole symbol—a tree trunk with its branches ‘lopped off’—could appear at most sanctuaries, by the wayside, “on every high hill and under every green tree,”<sup>16</sup> at a threshing floor, or by the city gate. Israelite women might also have held small, clay figurines for assurance during childbirth or when desperate to survive a natural disaster. Symbols may have expressed the holy better than words for some people with whom Yahweh seemed less real.<sup>17</sup>

E. O. James<sup>18</sup> contends that “nowhere in the Ancient Near East were goddesses of fertility...more dominant and persistent than among Canaanites, Phoenicians, and Hebrews.” Not until exile did Judaism rid itself of the Mesopotamian mother goddess or fertility symbols. Complementing Yahweh, the entrenched symbols had met psychological need. For over three centuries—first introduced into the Jerusalem Temple by King Rehoboam until exile in 586—the divine female form enhanced cultic life. Morton Smith argues that syncretism persisted even as the Yahweh-alone covenant spread.<sup>19</sup> People need not doubt the ‘staying power’ of goddess worship within popular Judaism. Merlin Stone suggests, however, that generally “the sex of the deity [was] determined by the sex of those in power.”<sup>20</sup>

We next briefly highlight Jewish Wisdom literature. Wisdom (*hokhmah* in Hebrew and *sophia* in Greek) takes on the role that *Shekinah* formerly filled during wilderness, Tabernacle and early Temple years. *Shekinah* was the all-pervading radiance, power, or divine presence of God in the world; she signifies God’s dwelling within. The Hebrew book Proverbs reflects passion about acquiring Wisdom. In the first chapter, personified Wisdom calls aloud from the street. She laments about how the fools who hate knowledge and fail to fear Yahweh are rejecting her message. Over thirty verses of Chapter 8 find Wisdom eager to be heard from the city gate. As God did for kings, God had bestowed power and sound judgment on Wisdom. Surpassing others with words of truth, Wisdom had been fashioned by Yahweh; Proverbs 8:24-31 records her being delighted to accompany the Creator in crafting. Elizabeth Johnson’s theology points to divine, holy Mystery. Aware of how oppressive and idolatrous speech about God can be when male dominant (obscuring divine height, depth, and breadth), she welcomes the biblical figure of Wisdom/Spirit.<sup>21</sup> But, early church writers transferred details about personified Wisdom to describe Jesus. What Judaism had said of Sophia, Christian hymn makers and epistle writers say of Jesus. How Judaism described Sophia’s dealing with people, gospels describe as Jesus’s acts. For example, calling the burdened to come, find rest; befriending the outcast or caring as a mother bird; nourishing through bread, wine, and water. Through such shifts, strengths of Spirit/Sophia were diminished. That type of shift occurred again during the early Reformation when qualities that described Mary for Roman Catholics, Protestants focused instead on Jesus.

Almost needless to say, the Christian heritage from Judaism has been great. Some cultures retained honor for the Virgin Mary within their belief systems, but many Christians have focused on a male Jesus. The author wishes to study how such a focus has diminished

Jesus's main focus on God's inclusive kingdom. Such a study will pursue also the wisdom if *kindom* replaced *kingdom*, with a focus on relating rather than ruling.

### Examples of the Goddess or Female Divine in Hindu Experience

Within the major religion of Hinduism, goddess worship is prominent. Names of either gods or goddesses can stand for the underlying Ultimate Reality. Well over a century ago, Max Muller coined the term "henotheism" to explain how a religion explains or justifies multiple deities. Rita Gross explains how, although many deities can be real, only the one being worshiped at a given moment is psychologically 'real.' She believes that to comprehend such plurality without competition, western people need to rise above limited bias for oneness.<sup>22</sup> She might well have recommended the three religions with a strong view of God alone—the monotheism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—to all re-examine their strong bias of oneness.

Yearly, Hindus who worship Lakshmi, Goddess of Abundance or Wealth, welcome her into their homes through special rituals and ceremonies. Lakshmi, linked also to fertility, is known alongside the preserver god named Vishnu. In rural settings, after thoroughly cleaning the house, old clay pots are replaced. Farm animals are washed in a nearby river. Their space in an attached barn gets cleaned and dried before women resurface all floors and walls, outside first. They swirl a mixture of clay with cow dung. After grinding rice with a granite rolling pin, they form it into a paste to use as paint. Using cotton cloths, women creatively paint on most surfaces auspicious symbols for Lakshmi: sheaves of rice, rice mounds, lotuses, elephants, and peacocks. Finally, footprints are painted to suggest the goddess's arrival. With meager furniture moved from the main room, a shrine is drawn on the floor and a wooden altar placed in it, surrounded with lotus flowers and a Lakshmi image. A small black stone from the *puja* (worship) room is added to a large pot, unhusked rice, red silk, and garlands of marigolds. The oldest woman chants a welcome to Lakshmi as other women howl in high voices. As the camphor ignites, Lakshmi 'enters' the image formed. "What only seconds before was a sacred object is now the Goddess herself." During the next two days family men join for prayer and feasting in the home-become-temple.<sup>23</sup>

The goddess Lakshmi is also honored during the five-day festival of Diwali. Hindu festivals combine legends, myths, and traditions. Earthen oil lamps illuminate pathways and rooflines. With homes cleaned and utensils polished, streets and public buildings lighted, and new clothes purchased, merchants and traders join to celebrate. Through songs and prayers, people express goodwill, hoping to be rid of poverty and to overcome ignorance. This splendid Indian festival commends the supreme energy, grace, and glory of the goddess Lakshmi. It validates female strength alongside male competence.

Questions surface: How do we show interest in or validate sacred meaning for others? What benefits might non-Hindus gain from learning about goddess worship practiced in living faiths? Do Christians know enough about Hindu thought and practice to judge it? Hindus often note Christian ignorance or arrogance. Hinduism, the third largest religion in the world, has 800 million loyal members in India (more than double the U.S. population).<sup>24</sup> Accounts of Hindu goddesses often reflect human experience common to both women and men.

Not only are gods and goddesses deeply honored in India. Consider Mira Bai who lived during the 1500s.<sup>25</sup> A saint, mystic, and famous poet, she exhorts the way of *bhakti* or deep devotion. Fully devoted to the *avatar*<sup>26</sup> Krishna, she gave up her princely husband to live with kindred, devoted *bhaktas* known for equality and care for the poor. She also chose a Muslim to be her Guru (religious mentor). Traveling to many temples sacred to Krishna, she sang and danced her devotion. A "favored symbolic figure" of Gandhi's, Mira Bai's nonviolent non-cooperation prompted his being her disciple. She symbolized for him, and for many others who honor her or her poetry, the "power of love."

Clearly, people will question whether or not Hindu goddesses or female religious figures benefit women. Adherents themselves will need to respond. And responses will vary because of

diverse, ambiguous, and complex issues. Anne Elvey reviewed the book titled *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*,<sup>27</sup> in which writers address political, social, and religious aspects. They find contradictions in goddess power and lives lived by women. Although the Hindu religion honors more goddesses than any other religion, traditional features also characterize the faith and many devotees. How women identify with goddesses and how they use their images affect influence. So does a person's perception of *shakti* (female energy or power) or how she responds if not thought worthy of symbolizing the sacred. This writer nudges being broadly informed about living faiths.

## Conclusion

Issues raised in this essay will linger. Prompted by looking to Mary the Mother of Jesus, people learn about patterns with divinity that express faith in diverse ways. Buddhist scholar and practitioner Rita Gross, with decades of interfaith experience, thinks that female names and images of deity are crucial for women's wellbeing.<sup>28</sup> When either women or men are thought unworthy of symbolizing divinity, wellbeing or self-image for all become factors. From ancient Judaism, we learn that those who honored the queen of heaven felt that they lacked nothing until they quit pouring out libations to her.<sup>29</sup> J. Severino Crtoatto suggests that female metaphors—*Shekinah* glory, Wisdom, and Sophia—express “the other side” of divinity.<sup>30</sup> From Hindus, we learn that both women and men honor both gods and goddesses. Female features of deities matter to those who give prime loyalty to Vishnu or Shiva, and male features matter to systems that highlight female *shakti* or *Devi* energy. Most adherents look to a particular reflection of divinity with whom they connect for a given point in time.

May we honor the divine in Mary and ever explore and engage insight from diverse, living faiths to communicate with divinity.

**Dorothy Yoder Nyce** is from Goshen, IN. Formerly a teacher, she continues as a researcher, author, and activist for justice. She has lived in India several times, toward a total of six years, where the interfaith reality gained close attention. Her latest book is titled *Multifaith Musing: Essays and Exchanges*. She presented much of this paper at a conference titled “My Spirit Rejoices in God, My Savior: Mary in Anabaptist Dress” held at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, IN, March 2011.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jean M. Humez, “Lee, Ann,” in *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion*, Serinity Young, ed., vol. 2 (NY: Macmillan Ref USA, 1999), 577-78.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Kechillis Prentiss, “Anandamayi Ma (Ananda Ma),” in *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion*. Serinity Young, ed., vol. 1 (NY: Macmillan Ref USA, 1999), 29. See also “Sri Anandamayi Ma,” <http://www.anandamayi.org/ashram/1i.htm>; retrieved 3/21/2011, 9 pp.

<sup>3</sup> N.A. “Mata Gujari ji (1624-1705 A.C.),” <http://www.sikh-history.com/sikhhist/martyrs/matagujari.html>, retrieved 3/21/2011, 3 pp. [With thanks to Sikh friend Surinder Sahni's introduction to Mata.]

<sup>4</sup> Sandy Boucher, *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion* (Boston: Beacon Pr, 1999), 5, 68-9.

<sup>5</sup> The author wishes to use diverse names for God-ness in this essay, in part to encourage naming divine breadth rather than limit or stereotype as through male pronouns, and in part to honor the richness of divinity—of name and form—known among loyal Hindus (like Lakshmi or Krishna for the Universal Being) and Jews (El Shaddai or Yahweh/Adonai for the Ultimate).

<sup>6</sup> Sura 3:34-37.

<sup>7</sup> Sura 19:20. To compare the Luke text (1:34): “How can this be since I am a virgin?” The implied “Here I am. . . So be it” (*fiat* in Latin) of Luke 1:38 does not directly appear in the Muslim text.

<sup>8</sup> Sura 19:22-36.

<sup>9</sup> Giancarlo Finazzo, “The Virgin Mary in the Koran,” <http://www.ewtn.com/library/martyr/marykran.htm>, retrieved 10/25/2010, 4 pp.

- <sup>10</sup> Phyllis Trible. Chapters 1 & 4 in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr, 1978).
- <sup>11</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Pr, 1983), 23.
- <sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Pr, 1992), 8, 117, 122-25, 201.
- <sup>13</sup> Judith Hadley, "Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud,'" *Vetus Testamentum*, xxxvii/2, 1987, 180-213; See also Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ Pr, 2000).
- <sup>14</sup> YHWH, Exod. 3:14.
- <sup>15</sup> Dorothy Yoder Nyce, *Multifaith Musing Essays and Exchanges* (Nappanee, IN: self, 2010), 106-7.
- <sup>16</sup> Dt. 12:2; I K 14:12; 2 K 16:4, 17:10; Isa 30:25; 57:5, 7; 65:7; Jer. 2:20, 3:6, 13; 17:2; Ez 6:13; 20:28; 34:6; Hos 4:13; 2 Chr 28:4.
- <sup>17</sup> Dorothy Yoder Nyce, "Probing the Shape of Syncretism known to Jeremiah." Paper for Seminary course on Jeremiah, Prof. Millard C. Lind, Assoc Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Dec 1978, 46 pp.
- <sup>18</sup> E. O. James, *The Tree of Life* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 181.
- <sup>19</sup> Morton Smith, Chapter IV in "The Survival of the Syncretistic Cult of Yahweh," in *Palestinian Parties that Shaped the Old Testament* (NY: Columbia Univ Pr., 1971), 82-98.
- <sup>20</sup> Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman* (NY: Dial Pr, 1976), 53, 51.
- <sup>21</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (NY: Crossroad, 1993), Part III, 124-87.
- <sup>22</sup> Rita M. Gross, *A Garland of Feminist Reflections Forty Years of Religious Exploration*, (Los Angeles: Univ of Calif Pr, 2009), 145, note # 4 p 328, 152. She recommends reading Laurel C. Schneider's *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London and NY: Routledge, 2008).
- <sup>23</sup> This entire paragraph draws from Stephen P. Huyler, "Embracing the Ephemeral: Transitory Images," in *Meeting God Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven: Yale Univ Pr, 1999), 179; See also his description of the Lakshmi celebration in an urban setting 176-83 in Huyler, "Bidulata Welcoming the Goddess," in *Daughters of India Art and Identity* (NY: Abbeville, Pr Publ., 2008), 116-27.
- <sup>24</sup> Jaclyn Youhana, "Religion is third largest in the world," from *The Journal Gazette*, titled "Ind. seeing gradual growth of Hindu impact," in *The Goshen News*, [Goshen, IN], Nov. 8, 2010, A8.
- <sup>25</sup> Madhu Kishwar & Ruth Vanita, "Poison to Nectar: The Life and Work of Mirabai," *Manushi*, No. 50, 51-52, 1989, 74-93. [See also Yoder Nyce, *Multifaith...*, 122.]
- <sup>26</sup> An *avatar(a)* suggests the descent (or advent) of a god to earth. Such a figure descends in order to help people or show a path to salvation. Karel Werner, *A Popular Dictionary of Hinduism* (Chicago: NTC Contemporary Pub Co, 1997), 38. Originally published in Surrey, UK by Curzon Pr, 1994.
- <sup>27</sup> Anne Elvey, review of *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*, Alf Hildebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl, eds. 3 pp, <http://www.politicsandculture.org/2010/08/10/anne-elvey-review>; retrieved 4/28/2012.
- <sup>28</sup> Gross, 173.
- <sup>29</sup> Jer. 44:17-18.
- <sup>30</sup> J. Severino Crtoatto, "Recovering the Goddess Reflections on God-Talk," in *Toward a New Heaven & a New Earth, Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, Fernando F. Segovia, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 33-53.