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GENDER EQUALITY AND RELIGION **(AN INTERVIEW)**

Professor Naomi Goldenberg is a leading spokesperson for the Women's Movement in North America. A graduate of the Department of Religious Studies, Yale University, she is currently Professor of the Psychology of Religion and Coordinator of the Women's Studies Programme at the University of Ottawa, Canada. She is the author of numerous articles and books including *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1979; *The End of God*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982; and *Returning Words to Flesh: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Resurrection of the Body*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990. Dr. Colin O'Connell, an Associate Editor for the Journal of Dharma spoke with Professor Goldenberg about gender equality and religion earlier this year.

J.D. : Journal of Dharma

N.G. : Naomi Goldenberg

1. J.D. Professor Goldenberg, let's begin with some generalities and make our way to specifics. First, what are the major obstacles to gender equality today?

N.G. I would say that it is the attitudes of men and women all over the globe which express themselves in laws and cultural practices. It has a lot to do with the allotment of resources; the allotment of food, money, opportunities for education, and human development. If you think about those things in regard to women and men, traditionally women have not got their legitimate share of the planet's resources. In many cases, women are not even given opportunities for life. For instance, fetuses are often aborted in China, and women continue to be murdered by *Sati* in certain parts of India. There is also a lot of physical abuse against many women in many parts of the world, such as clitoridectomies in Africa. And

the guarantee of the safety of the person is not given to women as much as it is given to men. I'm not saying that men have an easy life in many parts of the world... but in general, women's rights are more restricted.

J.D. Okay, let's assume women have absorbed what might be called the "false consciousness" of patriarchal culture; isn't it going to be enormously difficult to break this consciousness down - to show it for what it is?

N.G. Yes, I think it will be enormously difficult. But it's important to remember that there are many kinds of consciousness. It expresses itself in different ways in different cultures at different times. In fact I'm not sure if the feminist movement is making a great deal of progress here. There are several systems that have been in place for millennia now and it's very hard to break these down.

J.D. Do you find that discouraging?

N.G. Yes I do. But it's also invigorating. Patriarchal thought is very boring. Feminism's relevance to human life makes it a much more important and interesting issue. Another encouraging thing about feminism is that it seems to be so promising... and as a scholar and intellectual that's where my stake in it is.

J.D. Is there a positive role for men in this? Or is this something women must do for themselves?

N.G. Yes, there's a role for men... but men have to study and read. They can't become instant know-it-alls when it comes to feminism. They have to read for a while and read many points of view because feminism is not a unified thing... if men do that, there's a great deal they can do. Recently, I have heard of some very interesting work being done by men. They tend to be younger men who have obviously had women as colleagues, as comrades and students for a while... so I think that there is a real place for men but they have to be humble. I find it very distressing that many men will often write books and they won't mention a single female

author. Or if they talk about feminism it will be done in a very dismissive way. I think that if men do their homework and study and talk to women, they can have a good part in all of this.

J.D. Okay, let's talk about some of the religious implications of this search for gender equality. A growing number of women are leaving their churches, synagogues, and temples because they can't find adequate spiritual resources in male-dominated institutions. Can you tell me a little about this?

N.G. To be fair, a lot of women are also joining these institutions in droves. That's more discouraging than anything.

J.D. Is that really so?

N.G. Yes, fundamentalism is on the rise all over . . . certainly within Judaism, within Christianity and Islam. And even though women do not have a very good role in these traditions, they seem to be going into them in very large numbers.

J.D. Interesting, but can you tell me a little about the women who are leaving?

N.G. The women who are leaving are sometimes leaving all forms of religion and spirituality, or finding sects in other places and forms . . . arts, for example, or in all-woman groups. Some are also turning to goddess movements. There is a Woman's Spirituality Movement across the world that makes up rituals that have certain leaders, certain ritual times, certain practices that is also becoming quite wide spread. Some women are also setting up their own groups within traditions. For instance, Jewish women are setting up Jewish women's groups. This is another form of leaving the traditional male ways. But you also get some people setting up women's religions, feminist religions . . . people walking out of traditional religions all together.

J.D. Just how prevalent is this exodus?

N.G. I don't really know. But I do know that the Women's Spirituality Movement is very healthy when you think that 20 years ago it

was almost unknown. Now there are so many books, and so many journals and conferences, it's impossible to keep up with them all. So it seems to look quite healthy. There is also an interest in goddesses now and books written on the goddess sell an enormous amount. I know that from listening to certain publishers and authors of these books, there is a real hunger and interest out there.

J.D. You've referred a couple of times to the Women's Spirituality Movement. Is this a generic term used to cover a variety of movements?

N.G. Yes, it refers to a variety of things, but particularly an interest in images of god that are female . . . getting away from traditional images of god as male. This is something that all parts of the Women's Spirituality Movement have in common. Also, much of the artistic work that focuses on female imagery is sometimes included in the Women's Spirituality Movement.

J.D. Earlier you suggested some Women are trying to recover worship of the mother goddess . . .

N.G. Yes, some call it the worship of the mother goddess, but some people think that this is a very restrictive term and criticize the finding of one goddess . . . of having that goddess as mother. It's a very lively discussion. But certainly using female imagery, thinking about divinity or what has been called divinity, is at the heart of the Women's Spirituality Movement.

J.D. Where is this imagery coming from?

N.G. It's coming from many sources. Some of it is ancient imagery, recovering such things as the Venus of Willendorf. Sometimes symbols of triangles on pottery are taken as symbols of goddesses. People are doing lots of wonderful research . . . some of them are amateur archaeologists. Others are recovering images within their own traditions . . . finding what can be said for female imagery within these traditions, and others are making up their own traditions. There is also a whole group of women artists who are being inspired by goddess things. I know one artist

who takes bits of furniture, ones that have been thrown out, something like a table leg, and construct a goddess out of it . . . she seems to see female presences all around her.

J.D. It sounds like a sort of phoenix model . . .

N.G. I guess we can talk about it like that . . . looking for something positive in discord. This artist also uses violins. She takes the faces of discarded violins and presents them in goddess kind of figure shape . . . her name is Rainbow. I know there are other artists, one well known one, Judy Chicago, who uses flowers to symbolize women.

J.D. What about the feminist movement in the East?

N.G. I only know it through Western eyes, but I have some contact with women who come to the west and talk about what's going on in the east. What I know is that there are feminine movements in the East that are affecting things in Eastern religions. I know in India there are feminist magazines. The feminist movement in India is taking on things like "bride-burning" or *Sati* and looking at these very carefully. I know there are feminist groups in Moslem countries that are working against clitoridectomies. Many Moslem women are starting to question these practices. There was also a very strong feminist movement in Iran before the Ayotollah Khomeini consolidated his power . . . I also hear that there are feminist movements in Korea and Japan . . . but I don't know about China. Western feminists have to support these movements whenever they can.

J.D. Let's shift gears for a moment: isn't there a danger in all this that we'll end up with two strands of religious consciousness; one for women and one for men? . . . That we'll end up with two communities of faith split along gender lines? Or do you think this is a necessary step in the transition to gender equality?

N.G. We probably already have this split, but it's not publicly discussed. For instance there is a cult called the Zār cult in the Middle East, and the women do many different things; women become

possessed by the Zār and the Zār will demand that they get presents and be taken care of in very nice ways . . . and things like that will happen. That's an aspect of women's religious lives that we haven't studied enough. I think this is true with any religion . . . that women often have a different understanding and see the things they're doing in different ways from the men. But this hasn't been acknowledged enough. By acknowledging that there are often two kinds of experiences within religious traditions, we'll probably have a better idea about what these traditions really mean for men and women instead of just generalizing about what these traditions have meant.

J.D. Okay but should these streams of religious consciousness ultimately be integrated or remain separate?

N.G. I don't really know. But I'm sure that there should always be some integration and some separation. What you have now is suppression of women and this has to stop.

J.D. As you know, some scholars have argued that traditions like Christianity and Judaism are inherently patriarchal . . . even misogynist can't be reformed from within . . . that there's no chance at all that women can find the kinds of resources that women need in order to be liberated as women. Do you find this position legitimate?

N.G. Yes, I have argued that, and that is still my position. That was my position in *The Changing of The Gods*. But I have to recognize that there are also women who do not want to give up their Christian duties . . . that they are working within traditions that still mean a lot to them. From my point of view, I don't see any possibility of changing those religions to accommodate women. For instance, when some women read the Bible they take certain texts . . . texts like women shouldn't be allowed to speak in churches . . . and they take these texts and somehow interpret them in such a way that they make a positive statement about women. But I think these kinds of statements will remain esoteric, because the tradition seems to be firmly on the side of men . . . of having men dominate women. And I don't see that changing very much in the future. I acknowledge that there are wonderful women within Judaism and Christianity who are doing important

work in both of these traditions. And I hope that they continue to do their work. I also think it's very important for women who will never be reached outside of their traditions to have feminists within their traditions working as best they can. I know one minister for example who was raised as a strict baptist and she now works as a minister in cases of abuse. And she is sure that the women she sees would never go to anyone outside their religion for comfort and help. So I think it's very important that women should work within their own traditions too. Those of us, like myself, who don't think these traditions are redeemable in any way, should still support the work that these women are doing.

J.D. Are arguments over issues like these causing rifts in the Women's Movement or are the bases for solidarity significantly stronger than these differences?

N.G. I don't think that women should adhere to the tribal positions that men often make . . . that christian women should only speak to christian women and that Jewish women only speak to Jewish women, or that religious women should not speak to atheists. I think we need a lot more feminism. That's the strength of the women's movement . . . a movement that's now about 20 years old. For a while it was breaking down into specific groups which only seemed to be meeting with each other. But I think this is all opening up again because we have a lot to learn from each other.

J.D. Finally, where do you think women should be heading as we move towards the twenty-first century? Is it a matter of staying the course? Or should the Women's Movement be contemplating some radical changes in direction?

N.G. Well let's see: we need to develop an ongoing understanding of racism within the women's movement and elsewhere, and I think that's happening but I think it could be happening more energetically. Race and class have to be issues taken into account by the Women's Movement. And we also require much more work on getting to know traditions in other countries . . . more international work, conferences, and learning from women in the Third World. So it's not a question of simply taking Western feminism

and using this to missionize the Third World, but of learning about the situation of Third World women and how that illuminates our own feminist theories. I would like to see much more outreach in the western women's movement and much more consciousness of the ways in which race and class affect our experience and theorizing.