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# Source of connection, strength and identity : an exploration of how a belief in the divine as feminine affects women's internal and external relationships

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Stephanie A. Melmed  
Source of Connection,  
Strength, and Identity: An  
Exploration of How a Belief  
in the Divine as Feminine  
Affects Women's Internal  
and External Relationships

#### ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative, exploratory study in which thirteen women were interviewed about their belief in a God and/or the Divine as feminine and how they understand this belief to affect their relationship to their sense of self, and to their community. This study was undertaken to explore how women who hold this belief, use a female God concept as an internal and external resource. This study used a non-random sample. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant either in-person or over the telephone. The inclusion criteria to participate in the study were: identifies as a woman, eighteen years of age or older, holds some belief in God as female. The average age of participants was 45, with an age range of 28 to 63 years.

Through thematic analysis, a number of overarching themes emerged including: Embracing womaness, Source of inner strength, The importance of connection, Fluidity of belief, and Creating community. These themes illustrate how the participants' belief in a Divine as feminine, deeply affects internal and external relationships.

The themes that rose in the interviews open the door for a fuller integration of self psychology, and an examination of spirituality in social work training, and practice. Additionally there is a need for future research into women's development of self, and women's relationship to female-centered spirituality within a clinical social work context.

SOURCE OF CONNECTION, STRENGTH, AND IDENTITY: AN EXPLORATION  
OF HOW A BELIEF IN THE DIVINE AS FEMININE AFFECTS WOMEN'S  
INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

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## PREFACE

My interest in this subject surfaced while I lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I moved there for a job in International Development, and while there, I was exposed to Santa Fe's spiritual aura. Not intending to seek out any sort of spiritualism, it came to me through co-workers and new friends. Water may have been in short supply, but there was no drought of Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist places of worship. On an intellectual level, I became interested in reading about and discussing my religion of origin, Judaism, as well as the mythologies of other religions. I moved into reading books about Hindu and Greek Goddesses and wondered why the God in my own faith was so male in attribute and pronoun.

As I began to explore more about the concept of the Goddess, I read about her ancient history and her present state throughout the religions and cultures of the world (including her present form in Judaism). As I followed my intellectual interest, I became more aware of my own personal associations, feelings, imaginings, and dreams of this concept. I realized that I was connecting to an important aspect of myself which was yet unclaimed and unexplored. This process of exploration and connection is on-going and probably life long. In realizing how important this process was to my identity as a woman, I wondered if and how this concept serves other women to access their internal resources and identities as women. This was the seed of my research study to come.

Having completed this study, the participants' own eloquently told stories, and the process of analysis caused me to contemplate my own evolution in understanding this concept called God, or the Divine. I now recognize that this concept did not just pop up in New Mexico, but was with me as I grew up in a mostly secular Jewish household.

My family attended synagogue on important holidays, and celebrated important coming of age markers (bar/bat mitzvah) but for the most part religion was not integral to our family life. I did attend Hebrew school twice a week for some years. The God of Hebrew school was male, demanding, judgmental, and I mostly feared him. That was my understanding of God. Yet, during those same years, I would spend hours pouring over the D'Aulaires's Book of Greek Myths. I was drawn to many of the stories but especially to the stories of Artemis/Luna, the maiden huntress, guardian of the moon. I felt as if she had to be real somehow. If I caught a glimpse of the moon at night, she would run through my mind. I wanted to be her at costumed gatherings. I think back now to my little girl self, at age nine, when I was just beginning to explore my independence. It seems to me that at that time, I was struggling to find a mythic model of God/dess that I could connect to, who would understand me, and who I could strive to emulate as a girl.

Only now do I have an understanding that I was connecting to something through these more feminine images and stories which was affecting my internal world. I do wonder if my sense of self would have been strengthened at a younger age, as a girl, if I could have understood those connections to be "God". How would that have changed my interactions with the community and world around me? For this reason, I am very interested in how women actively hold an understanding of God and/or the Divine as feminine, and how they feel that that belief affects their internal as well as external world.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

People often seek clinical social work services during a time of crisis, life transitions, emotional turbulence, and/or to better solidify a sense of self. These are times when some people reevaluate, embrace, reject or contemplate their understanding of God. These are also times that people use spirituality as a resource to overcome hardship and adversity. Studies illustrate that women in particular use spirituality as an emotional, physical, and social healing mechanism. Yet the literature leaves many gaps and holes in the understanding of women's connection to their internalization of God and/or the Divine and their relationship to that spirituality. The field of social work may benefit from a closer examination of women's important relationship with their internalization of God and/or The Divine and how that belief affects both their internal and external world.

People's concepts of God and their use of spirituality is not only an important part of how an individual interacts with adversity but can be at the center of how people develop their own sense of self in relation to the world around them. Understanding different aspects of people's experience of God and/or the Divine can help social workers in their clinical practice, yet the relationship between the individual and their understanding of God and/or the Divine, aspects of religion, and spirituality is often overlooked in clinical social work practice. An important part of social work practice is to uncover a client's internal world. Internalizations of God and/or The Divine are often

an aspect of one's internal world. Those internalizations can be an oppressive system of thinking, or can be a source of inspiration and healing, like any other. Understanding people's concept of God and how that affects their relationship to the community around them helps to uncover another layer of the psyche.

Like any internalized object, one's God object is both a reflection of and an influence on a person's sense of self. Understanding how women internalize God and/or the Divine is important because it provides a key to understanding one aspect of women's development of self. Throughout history the concept and internalization of God serves many purposes for individual people, for communities and for society as a whole. Whether under the aegis of Judaism, Christianity, Islam or other religions, women in many parts of the world grow up with an internalized image of God as a man. Hinduism is the only major world religion which includes portrayals of God as a woman. In the United States, many manners of institutions, private and public represent God as male. This representation is expressed in both pronoun use (using "he" when referring to God), and the attributes associated with God (the lord, the father, the son). The internalization of a male God affects the creation of society and culture which affects gender roles and expectations as well as an individual's sense of self.

Women's internalization that the mighty powers that be are masculine can at times debilitate a healthy sense of self as a woman. While society purports a male God, some women have moved outside of the frame of this normative male God and have incorporated a female image of God. There is also a minority of women in the U.S. who grow up with a female concept of God. Women who turn to God and/or the Divine as

feminine often do so because a male God does not serve them entirely, but the addition of a female aspect of God is more fully relatable.

Because spirituality is shown to be an important aspect of how women interact with life, the questions arises, how do women who conceptualize God and/or the Divine as female, and have this concept at the center of their spirituality, understand this belief to affect their internal and external relationships and their sense of self in the world? The purpose of this study is to explore how women who have an internalized image of God and/or the Divine as female, understand the effect of this belief on their sense of self and their outside relationships. This study looks at thirteen interviews with women who hold a belief and practice.

The research question for this paper is: How do women conceptualize God and/or the Divine as female, and in what ways does an adherence to this belief affect their relationship to their sense of self and inform their interactions with their external lives. “External lives” is understood to be women’s relationships with family, friends, and the social milieu in which she lives and works. Some sub questions to this overarching question are: How is God and/or the Divine conceptualized as feminine? What is the pathway to conceptualizing God as female? Is her sense of self affected by her belief in a female God concept? Was a male God concept rejected before orienting toward a female God concept? If not, are both present or was a male image of God never part of her understanding of God? What is a woman’s sense of her sense of self when her God is female? How does a woman’s concept of a female God affect her relationship with her family? With her work? With her friends? With her community? With her mental health?

With her physical health? How does she perceive that the community responds to this belief? How does the community's response affect her internally?

One important note, deserving of mention at the outset, concerns the language in the study used to describe the notion of God and God concepts. Any word that would be used to describe this concept would be restrictive to someone's concept of the Divine. "God" generally connotes male and monotheistic. Feminist scholar, Carol P. Christ, critiques the use of the word "God" as a general term for that concept because the term itself connotes male gendered God after centuries of sociocultural associations in Western society with a male God. Christ argues that this word has been used for centuries as a masculine anthropomorphic concept of assigning power and meaning to something outside of any one individual human. This study will look at women's use of a concept which is outside the male dominated concept of "God". Yet, because the literature, both theoretical and empirical, uses the language of "God", the literature review will follow suit. In the chapters that follow the literature review, the language will shift to reflect study participants' language. Yet any one word or name is shorthand for a complex internalization that eludes the written word.

The next chapter will examine the relevant literature on God concepts and the use of spirituality. A closer look at the past and present theoretical and empirical literature will demonstrate the importance of individuals' and communities' concepts of God, and the importance of the use of spirituality. A review of the literature will also illustrate the areas which need further research and contextualize this study.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on “God” concepts and use of spirituality is quite varied from its early theoretical analysis to empirical studies done today. Common throughout the literature is the attempt to theorize or examine how and why people use concepts of God, or spirituality in their development, and throughout their lives. Early on, psychoanalysts theorized about how God functioned in human psychology. A subset of later empirical studies focused on how women use spirituality in the face of adversity, sickness and poverty.

A search within these bodies of literature revealed no citations of studies which examine women’s use of feminine God concepts or what concepts of God are present when women use spirituality to face adversity. This review will examine three areas of inquiry as they inform the study question, methods and potential significance of study findings for the profession. These areas include: Psychoanalytic perspectives of God concepts; Feminist critique of God-as-male dominated religions; and Studies of the role of spirituality in coping among women. The review will conclude with a summary of the strengths and limitations of the extant literature in terms of attention to female concepts of God, and sample diversity, ending with discussion of the need for exploratory study.

### *Psychoanalytic Perspectives of the God Concept*

A historical review of psychoanalytic theorists' conceptualization of God is important to the extent that it informs the studies and theories which follow and most likely affects clinicians in their clinical social work practice. The "fathers" of the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic fields had plenty to write about the concept of God and the God concept's relationship to an individual's internal world. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung laid the foundations for theories about people's concepts of God. Few theorists or researchers have questioned their postulations. Freud and Jung both emphasized the importance of the internalized object God represents in the human psyche. According to traditional psychoanalytic theory, the internalized God object is as important to understand as any other internalized object which affects one's sense of self and relationship to the world.

Freud hypothesized that God derived from two different sources in human history and development. (Freud, 1989) Freud argued that humanity transmitted throughout the centuries an unconscious memory of the murder of a primal father by his sons. (Freud, 1989) This event was so traumatic that the memory was repressed. The result of this repression was a projection outward of an idealized external father. According to Freud, religious expression through rituals was a neurotic attempt to appease the wronged primal father. Freud also believed that developmentally as a child (a son) passes through the Oedipal stage and represses murderous feelings for his father, and sexual desire for his mother, he internalizes an idealized image of his father which is adopted as part of the superego. Freud closely connects images of God with sublimated images of the father.

Freud believed that one's religious beliefs were a sign of one's developmental stages (Freud,1989).

Jung theorized that the God image is an internalized image reflective of the self. Like Freud, Jung believed that the God image is inherited, but that its origin cannot be known. He believed that the inherited God archetype creates a reflection of various cultures' expression of their self concept. Jung theorized that the God archetype was most likely influenced by both father and mother images (Jung, 1982). Jung disrupted convention by suggesting that the origins of God were in fact female as well as male. Jung created a space for later feminist thinkers to posit the question; what if God were female? This connection between Jung's theories on God and feminist critiques of Judeo-Christian theology will be further explored in the literature review. While both Freud and Jung have differing ideas about the origin of God and its function in the human psyche, both do agree that it is important to an individual's interaction with her internal object world and sense of self.

There is a body of empirical literature which focuses on people's concept of God. These studies followed object relations theorists' postulation that God concepts reflect early childhood relationships with primary caretakers (Rizzuto, 1979). These studies are informed by an object relations hypothesis that God is an extension of the parent objects. Many of the studies look at whether a person's relationship with or concept of their mother and/or father influences their concept of God (Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak, &Nixon, 2006; Pepperman 1980, Peterson, 1990).

There have been mixed findings in empirical studies based in object relations theory. (Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak, &Nixon, 2006; Pepperman 1980, Peterson, 1990).

While individual studies find certain correlations between God concepts and parent objects, the studies contradict each other for the most part, leaving the question still unresolved as to whether or not there is a correlation between God concepts and parental objects. Yet these studies do show that the object relations lens understands and studies the God concept as a potential outgrowth of an individual's object of their mother and father. These studies are important because they reflect the influence that traditional psychodynamic theories have had on clinical concepts of God and religious belief and their connection to internalizations of parental figures.

In later half of the twentieth century, Heinz Kohut's theory of self psychology focuses on the formation and maintenance of the self. Kohut understood the self to be "the essence of a person's psychological being and consists of sensations, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes toward oneself and the world". (Banal, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005). Kohut introduced the notion of healthy narcissistic development which includes three axes: the grandiose axis, the idealization axis, and the alter ego-connectedness axis. These three axes create a matrix of empathy which in turn creates the platform for healthy development. The grandiose axis is connected to an individual's ability to maintain a stable sense of self-esteem. The idealization axis is connected to an individual's ability to create and attain goals. The alter ego-connectedness axis is connected to an individual's ability to communicate feelings to others, to form intimate relationships, and to become part of larger groups and organizations. (Banal, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005)

Healthy development along each of these axes leads to cohesive self-structure. This healthy development is dependent on certain relationships to other people and to the



outside world. A child needs to be responded to and mirrored by their caretakers, teachers or peers in order to grow and to have a cohesive sense of self. Kohut uses the word selfobject to describe that object which a person uses as an extension of the self for mirroring, validation and affect regulation. When a person is able to access a mirroring selfobject that reflects and validates the individual, that person is then able to develop their own ability to regulate affect and have a cohesive sense of self. (Banal, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005) Selfobjects are often people in an individual's life but can also be art, music, the sun, a place, among many other things including God (or their concept of God). (Holliman, 2002)

Unlike Freud, Heinz Kohut believed that religion and concepts of God should not be assumed to be a neurotic expression but rather another pathway to empathic attunement. (Kohut, 1984). Kohut created a space within his theory of self psychology for the God concept to act as a selfobject which provides empathic attunement. Within self psychology literature there is a subset of theorists who focus on God concepts as selfobjects (Holliman, 2002; Rector, 1996).

Following Heinz' theories about individual's concepts of God, Pamela J. Holliman, a self-psychologist, writes about how individuals use religion and religious experiences as a selfobject. In Holliman's essay, *Religious Experience as Selfobject Experience*, she argues that:

Religious experience can (1) provide compensatory structure; (2) sustain self cohesion; (3) enhance development of self structure; and (4) provide opportunities for transformation. (p.197)

The word “religious” and “religion” often refer to experiences within an organized community; this study will explore whether the God concept itself functions as a mirroring selfobject.

Lallene J. Rector, a self psychology theorist, has examined the issue of women who have rejected a male god-image based on her clinical work. She argues that women articulate several reasons for transferring their beliefs from a male to a female-god image, including, “1) traumatic experiences with men, 2) the need for an idealizable feminine presence, or 3) a compensatory need to redeem a failed selfobject experience with a maternal figure,” (p.263). Rector argues that “the need for an idealizable feminine presence” occurs in this society because “male” traits (anger, aggressiveness, competitiveness) are often idealized and honored while women are taught not to engender these traits. Those traits that are considered feminine (to care for relationships, to be emotionally expressive, to support others) are not idealized within society but rather are devalued and seen as a sign of weakness. A shift to a selfobject God concept which embodies these traits and possibly male traits as well may provide women with an opportunity for empathic attunement.

This researcher is interested in using self psychology’s concept of a selfobject as a lens to inform how women explain and understand their concept of God as female and how that affects their sense of self. The concept of selfobjects may be further useful to understand how an individual sees their sense of self as it affects one’s external life.

### *Feminist Critique of God-as-Male Dominated Religion*

Patriarchal religions and male-god images and concepts impact women on many levels. Through institutions, leaders, literature, rituals, and regulations oppressive systems

are created which allow men more agency and power than women. Women are affected on many levels, from their internal psychology to their roles in society. Gender roles and definitions encompass limits of permissible sexual behavior, gender specific dress-codes, gender-specific religious rituals and observances (Choldin, Orost, & Siegle,1995).

Patriarchal systems define family units along heterosexual imperatives, create limitations on sexual partners, and enforce ownership of women and children by male heads of household. Rules and regulations are established to control sexual reproduction. Male established hierarchy perpetuates a male dominance over females, which is exacerbated by the near absence of women as deities, historically recognized figures, role models, or as religious officiants (Choldin, Orost, Seigle,1995).

In the Western world, a feminist critiques of psychodynamic theory and practice has followed on the heels of the feminist critiques of various disciplines. (Ray & Moodley, 2006). Psychodynamic theory and its correlating practices (social work, psychology, and psychiatry) have had to reconsider the very fabric of the disciplines including: rationality, objectivity and scientific accountability. (Ray & Moodley, 2006). This critique within the field has forced a reexamination of concepts that were postulated by men about men. A number of theories were based on men's behavior and psychology and extrapolated to encompass women. As part of this larger critique, the spotlight has begun to shine on how religion and concepts of God affect women. The internalized father image of Freud's time is now in question. (Daly, 1973; Christ, 1997; Firestone, 2004, Kidd, 1996; Stone, 1997; Cleary & Aziz, 2000; Matthews, 2001) Very recent literature has opened to examine women's roles and place in religion, and religious texts, as well as women's use of spirituality. The theoretical literature has begun to examine the

barring of women in religious tradition and the dominant conceptualization of a solely male God (Ray & Moodley, 2006).

Feminist writers have critiqued and deconstructed the notion that God is male and the effect that a male God concept has on women in society. In 1973, Marly Daly wrote *Beyond God the Father*, in which she defies the notion that God can only be understood as male. Furthermore she named women's secondary position in society as an outgrowth of the notion that God is male. Daly's ideas grew out Jung's theories that the notion of God is both male and female. Jung's ideas did not posit a connection between God concepts and gender role expectations. Daly made this leap in her work about God concepts. On Daly's heels, feminist writers began to critique the male notion of God (Christ, 1997; Firestone, 2004, Kidd, 1996; Stone, 1997; Cleary & Aziz, 2000; Matthews, 2001). These writers began to unearth and reconstruct ancient notions of God as solely female or female along with male.

Feminist scholarship ensued documenting the goddesses of pre-history through today. Evidenced by statues of fertility figures from pre-historic times, scholars pointed to the first evidence of worship as worship to feminine figures. Scholars wrote books which wove together the lost history of the reverence of a feminine Goddess through ancient Greece, Rome and Ireland, the Middle East and elsewhere to connect the idea of a female God to the history of Western Civilization. (Christ, 1997; Kidd, 1996; Stone, 1997; Cleary & Aziz, 2000; Matthews, 2001). Some of the same writers also began to explore their personal "awakening" to a notion of a female God. (Christ, 1997; Kidd, 1996, Firestone, 2004) Often their new relationship to a female God concept shifted their

perspective on the larger world, as well as their personal world of work, family, and community.

Relating to the concept of the Divine is not just a matter of using “She” instead of “He”. For some women writers who have documented their beliefs, relatability comes through the metaphors of a woman’s life experiences. For Lynn Gottlieb, the first woman Rabbi, her relating came through re-imagining the metaphors of her internalized concept of God. In the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea to escape Egypt, Gottlieb visualizes God in this way,

**YHVH Giving Birth**  
YHVH giving Birth  
At the shores of the Red Sea  
Squatting over the waters  
Spreading her legs wide  
Women dancing in the salt sea waters  
Midwives at Her occasion  
YHVH’s birth cries  
Sounds of jubilation  
As a people is born  
YHVH midwife woman  
With strong arms and outstretched hands  
Opening Her womb  
Giving birth to freedom (Gottlieb, 1995)

Here Gottlieb imagines God, in childbirth, as a midwife, and as a baby being born. Her metaphor, or imaging, more fully incorporates women’s life experiences which enhances its relatability for women.

This shift in perspective differed for each woman but the language used in their narratives express both a sense of empowerment and a felt sense of reflection of themselves in the larger world. (Christ, 1997; Kidd, 1996, Firestone, 2004) The literature

review will include a closer look at this documented shift in women's perspectives through their new belief in a female centered God.

Organized groups began to form around the notion that the female aspect of God must be reclaimed or that the male notion of God must be disregarded altogether. While it is unknown how many women ascribe to this female understanding of God, various sociological studies examined female centered religious organization. The qualitative studies look at both women only groups as well as mixed gendered groups. (Foltz, 2000; Bloch, 1997; Roundtree, 1997; Griffin, 1995). While the groups studied were diverse in their span of the socio-economic scale, and their range of sexual orientation, for the most part the group's composition was predominantly White women and men. It is unclear from these studies whether these groups in general are predominantly White, or whether the groups that the researchers chose were predominantly White. (Foltz, 2000; Bloch, 1997; Roundtree, 1997; Griffin, 1995) The researchers observed, and at times partook, in these groups for a period of time and then wrote qualitative studies about their observations of and involvement in the groups.

According to these studies, the groups often incorporated a period of reading and reflection in which a new member comes to understand the power of male dominated society and religion. The new member is then permitted to participate in the group's rituals. Rituals are held in private and public spaces and at times co-sponsored with other groups. Rituals are women and nature centered. (Foltz, 2000; Bloch, 1997; Roundtree, 1997; Griffin, 1995) It is noteworthy that these groups exist and are being studied however it is outside the scope of this review to examine the literature which describes how these women formally organize their beliefs with other people.

This literature is important because it begins to deconstruct long-held notions about the concept of God in modern Judeo-Christian based, Western thinking. Not only is there a deconstruction of theories, but these theories are put to practice by women and men who actively have a concept of God as female, and nature based. While this researcher is interested in women of all religions and backgrounds who may hold a belief in God as female, this literature demonstrates at least one group of women, in the United States, who actively hold and interact with a notion of God as female.

*Role of Spirituality in Women's Lives and Implications for Social Work Practice*

In the past several years, there have been a number of articles which look at the importance of incorporating an understanding of spirituality into social work practice. A number of studies elucidate the importance that spirituality has in individual's lives. An individual's spiritual and religious beliefs may either help or work against a client to move past adversity in her or his life. Examining a client's use of spirituality allows clinical social workers to better understand how a client's spirituality is positively or negatively affecting that individual (Canda, 1988; Hathaway, W., Scott, S.Y. & Garver, S.A., 2004; Sermabeikian, 1994). Carolyn Jacobs, Dean of the Smith School for Social Work argues, "Social Work practitioners must recognize that spiritual strivings and religious experiences are additional aspects of the person's development. They help us to understand the role of ideas and values in shaping the individual's identity." (Jacobs, 1997) According to Jacobs, understanding the relationship between a client and their spirituality is as important as any other relationship in a client's life.

There is a body of empirical literature which illustrates a strong connection between women's ability to confront adversity and their personal spirituality. (Mansfield,

Mitchell, & King, 2002; Black, 1999; Baron, 2004; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Vidrine, 1996) Several of these studies have looked at African American women's ability to confront racist, socio-economic, and systemic oppressions through spirituality (Banks-Wallace, & Parks, 2004; Black, 1999; Mattis, 2002). In these studies, spirituality provided meaning, connection, motivation, and close personal female relationships which were all impetus to confront hardship, both external and psychological. One study emphasized the importance of bringing the connection of spirituality and female community oriented relationships into actual practice through community programs that emphasize mental and physical well-being through community models (Bank-Wallace & Parks, 2004).

A different set of studies have examined the relationship between women's health and their spiritual beliefs. (Guinn & Vincent, 2002; Meadows, Thurston, & Melton, 2001; Mansfield, Mitchell & King, 2002; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Daaleman, Cobb, & Frey, 2001) Three of these studies found that African American women were better able to confront sickness and emotional disturbances if they had a strong sense of spirituality (Mansfield, Mitchell, & King, 2002; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Daaleman, Cobb, & Frey, 2001). One study looked at spirituality and health among immigrant women in Canada (Meadows, Thurston, & Melton, 2001). This study found that participants identified spirituality as an important resource for their health. Another study looked at a health intervention on Latina immigrant women in relationship to their spirituality and their overall physical and emotional health (Guinn & Vincent, 2002). This study in the end supported interventions that increase spiritual well-being as an effective means of increasing overall (i.e., both physical and emotional) well-being.



Another study examines the power behind spiritual beliefs and practices as one woman is able to transcend gender norms in her society to hold a position of sway and influence in her community (Baron, 2004).

All of these studies demonstrate the importance of spirituality not only within an individual's belief system, but also terms of its effect on that individual's interactions with their community and society at large. Spirituality is an important factor in a person's internal world as well as in their relationship with others. As with any other aspect of a client's internal world, it is crucial for clinical social workers to have a better understanding of how spirituality plays a role in aiding or impeding people's resilience to difficult life situations as well as how that their spirituality affects their external relationships. Further examining individual's spirituality and their internalized notions of God, can assist social workers in understanding how a client can strengthen their resilience to hardship.

#### *Critical look at the Literature*

The research designs for studies on God concepts and spirituality have varied. Some of the studies were quantitative, and some were qualitative. The quantitative studies included surveys, both self-administered (Guin & Vincent, 2002; Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak & Nixon, 2006; Peterson, 1990), and telephone (Mansfield, Mitchell & King, 2002), as well as retrospective data collection (Glass & Jacobs, 2005). While surveys are a good measure of larger-scale phenomena, they do not capture someone's nuanced notions of a parent or of God. Various methods were used for the qualitative studies. Researchers used both interviews (Mansfield, Mitchell, & King, 2002; Black, 1999; Baron, 2004; Vidrine, 1996; Faver, 2004; Mattis, 2002; Meadows, Thurston, Melton,

2001) and focus groups (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Daaleman, Cobb, & Frey, 2001). Both of these qualitative methods delve more deeply into the textures of an individual's concept of or relationship to their spirituality.

Due to the current literature on God concepts, the implications for this proposed study are to use a flexible qualitative research design. Many of the quantitative studies highlight important limitations in their design. As stated above, researchers have noted that looking at an individual's concept of God is difficult to quantify and compare to others' conceptualizations through preset scales. (Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak, & Nixon, 2006; Peterson, 1990) Because the beliefs and concepts of God are very personalized even within in-group religious groups, it is hard to capture such concepts through a structured questionnaire which include layers of bias, often of a male God, and of a Judeo-Christian God. (Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak, & Nixon, 2006; Peterson, 1990) A structured questionnaire with such biases may not capture people's experience of God outside of the concept created by the scale or questionnaire. A flexible qualitative research design could better capture an individual's more nuanced concepts of God by allowing the study participant to respond freely to open-ended questions rather than respond to a structured questionnaire.

While the overall empirical literature looks at diverse samples (African American, White, Latina), the samples are segmented. Individual studies look mostly at homogeneous populations but the studies together capture a fuller picture of people's concepts of God and relationship to spirituality. One weakness is that the literature tends to look either at upper-middle class Whites (Mansfield, Mitchell, & King, 2002; Black, 1999; Baron, 2004; Vidrine, 1996; Peterson, 1990; Pepperman, 1980; Faver, 2004) or at

African American women from a lower socio-economic bracket (Mattis, 2002; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Black, 1999; Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak & Nixon, 2006). Yet having a fuller picture of both socio-economic and racial communities' use of spirituality and concept of God and use of spirituality would be beneficial. It would also be beneficial to look more extensively at other communities in the United States (Asian, First Nation, Multiracial, etc.).

One glaring omission in each of these empirical studies which looked at spirituality through a social work lens is that it seems as if God is presumed male. While there are some references to God's more female attributes, even in those studies, God is assumed to be male in pronoun. Lacking any reference to or room for a female God concept, one can assume that these studies adhere to a male God concept. Not one study looked at a female centered spirituality or concept of God. This assumption that God is male further enforces a system in which the authoritative, transcendent force in our lives, at the center of our culture, and the foundation of our society and psychology, is male. This assumption of a male God denies women's (and men's) connection to spirituality and their external lives through more female centered God concepts and spirituality.

Thus far, there have not been studies in the social work field which examine women who have an internalized image of a female God. Thus this research study proposes to investigate an unstudied population: women who have an internalized female image of God. A flexible, qualitative study allows participants to present the researcher with their concept of God whatever that may be. There is a possibility for a rich, deep narrative which can reveal individual's ideas, concepts and relationship to their God concept which is not possible to capture in a set questionnaire. The researcher can then

look comparatively through the transcripts of the interviews, searching for themes among the respondents. This method of analysis would be thematic analysis.

The overall literature is strong in that it looks at diverse communities. This researcher will strive to interview a diverse group of women racially, socio-economically, and religiously (although all respondents will have to have some notion that God is female). Furthermore, because spirituality is shown to have a positive correlation with facing adversity, this study will examine how women, who internalize God as female, understand their belief to affect their external lives. This study will make an effort to uncover how some women cope with or transcend a society where ultimate power is considered male through an internalized female God concept.

The next section will further examine the methodology of the proposed study.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to explore in depth women's internalized concepts of God as female and women's understanding of how their adherence to this belief affects their lives. The study explores how women have negotiated a female focused spirituality in the midst of a culture dominated by the male God concept. The study further delves into the participants' perceptions of the relationship between their concept of a female God, their sense of self, and their interaction with others.

#### *Study Design and Sampling*

The design for this study is qualitative. The method for this study is flexible. Open ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a non-random convenience sample of thirteen women over the age of 18 who indicated a belief in a female God concept. The use of a semi-structured interview offered participants an opportunity to provide rich and detailed narrative accounts about their female God concept and how this concept affects their internal and external lives.

This researcher attempted to reach a demographically heterogeneous group. The recruitment process, including the strategies used to recruit a diverse sample, is discussed below. The study used a non-probability sample by snowball and by convenience. The recruitment email (see Appendix B) was sent out to 30 people known to the researcher from previous work, school or other social settings as possibly being able to identify other people who could participate in the study. Only three (3) of these individuals were known in advance to fit the inclusion criteria for the study. Inclusion criteria included:

participants must be women over the age of 18 and must indicate having a belief in a concept of God as female.

The initial group of 30 individuals was asked to respond or send on the recruitment email to others who might fit the inclusion criteria and have an interest in participating in the study. This group was demographically diverse in location, age, race, and religious affiliation, in an attempt to reach a demographically diverse sample group for the study. They ranged in age from 22 to 65 and resided in different regions of the United States. Racially, the group was White (10), Latina (5), South Asian (7), and African American (8). Religious affiliations within the group were Judeo-Christian religions (10), Paganism (3), Hindu (7), Buddhist (3), and no affiliation (7). Due to this group being part of the researcher's own pool of colleagues, and acquaintances, this was a relatively highly educated group, with most having at least part of a college education if not a graduate education.

The process of recruitment was as follows: This researcher sent the recruitment email to 30 potential participants, or people who might identify potential participants. Potential participants would receive the recruitment email and respond to the email address provided. A recruitment period of a month and a half was initially planned in order to obtain a sample of 12-15 participants, with the understanding that this period would be extended if a sufficient number of potential participants had not been recruited by the end of this period. Those who indicated by e-mail their interest in participating in the study would be contacted by email by the researcher and screened. Screening questions consisted of the following:

1. Do you identify as a woman?
2. Are you over the age of 18?
3. Do you have a belief in God and/or the Divine as female?

If the answer to all three of these questions was “yes”, then the potential participant became a participant.

Additionally, flyers (see Appendix C) were posted at multiple local university campuses as well as local spiritual centers. As part of the effort to recruit a demographically diverse sample, flyers were posted at a local historically African American university.

The snowball effort led to a total of 54 responses from individuals expressing interest in participating in the study, (including two individuals from the original group of 30), only 28 of whom were screened for eligibility. Of these, 13 were found to meet study criteria and agreed to participate. This number was reached prior to the end of the month and half-long recruitment period, projected as being necessary to obtain this large a sample. Of the remaining 15, thirteen did not answer “yes” to the third screening question, “Do you have a belief in God and/or the Divine as female?” and the remaining two individuals identified as men. The remaining 26 responses were received after the study had been closed to new participants. These individuals were notified by e-mail that the study was closed to new participants and thanked for their interest in the study.

As far as this researcher knows, no one responded to the flyers. Asking how the participant found the study was not included in the data collection, but should be in future studies. Because the majority of respondents were geographically distant from where the flyers were posted, this researcher is deducing that everyone responded through the

recruitment email as opposed to the flyer. Those who responded locally indicated that they knew about the study through people on the original email recruitment list. For future studies, this flyer method was not successful in recruiting participants. This may be due to location, time, or the method itself.

The table below illustrates the break down of potential participants who responded to the recruitment effort for the study.

Table I. Responses to the Recruitment Effort

Total Responses: 54	
# Participants screened	28
# Inquiries After sample closed	26
TOTAL	54

Table II. Participants Screened

Total Participants Screened: 28	
# Not met inclusion criteria	15
# Met inclusion criteria (Final Sample)	13
TOTAL	28

#### *Data Collection*

Eleven interviews were done by phone while two were done in person. The original goal of this researcher was to do the majority of the interviews in person. Yet, the majority of people responded to the recruitment effort through a recruitment email rather than through local flyers. Interviews were set according to the convenience of the



participant. When setting up the interview appointment, it was made known to the researcher that eleven respondents were geographically distant. For the eleven respondents who were in geographically distant places, telephone was the only viable option for data collection due to time and money constraints on the researcher.

The interviews varied in length. The longest interview was 68 minutes and 42 seconds. The shortest interview was 13 minutes and 40 seconds. The average interview was 30 minutes. The length of the interview did not correlate with whether the interview was in person or over the phone. Both the longest and shortest interviews were over the phone.

Prior to conducting this study, the application for this study was approved by the Smith College Human Subjects Review Board. In order to participate in this study, each participant was selected after the screening process which determined whether a potential participant fulfilled inclusion criteria. Once selected, the participant took part in one interview session. Two of these interviews were in person. Both were conducted at the participants' place of work. The remaining interviews were conducted over the phone.

Interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and then transcribed to written documents by the researcher. Confidentiality of the participants was carefully protected by a system of codes known only to the researcher. The data will be kept for three years consistent with Federal regulations. The researcher will be the only person handling the data during that time. No identifiable information is used in the written findings or discussion of this study. After three years, the raw data will either continue to be safeguarded or it will be destroyed by the researcher.

Prior to each interview, each participant signed an informed consent form. For the in-person interview, participants signed the informed consent form at that the time of the interview. Participants for phone interviews were mailed informed consent forms which were signed and returned to the researcher. (see Appendix D) Participants were informed of the nature of the study, their rights of participation, and the safeguarding of the data.

As the literature demonstrates, it is important to understand how someone's race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and stage in the life cycle location may influence their concept of God and how that affects their external lives. Therefore demographic data was collected at the beginning of each interview including, affiliation with a religion, age, race or ethnicity, educational level and employment status in open-ended questions. Socio-economic status is measured by education level and employment status.

Following the collection of demographic data, the researcher asked open-ended questions about the respondent's conceptualization of God as female (following the respondent's language), and how that belief affects their external lives. (see Appendix A) The open-ended questions explored the participant's concept of God and/or the Divine. At times there were follow up questions probing further into the feminine aspect of their belief. The questions then explored how the participants understood this belief affected their identity, their relationship to themselves, as well as their relationship to their community and the affect of the community's response to their belief within themselves.

The participant's participation in this study was voluntary. Each participant could refuse to answer any question. She could withdraw before the study began. She could stop her participation in the interview at any point. She could decide after the interview to withdraw participation. She could decide to withdraw her interview from the research

study up until March 15, 2007. Each participant completed the interview session and no participant asked to have their interview withdrawn from the study. Each participant could contact me at the email or telephone number listed on the informed consent form, before or after the interview. No participant contacted me about the study after the interview took place. Referral resources for mental health providers were provided in case a participant wanted to address thoughts or feelings that arose during the interview.

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. The audio-files were then transcribed by this researcher. Once the interviews were transcribed, this researcher began to code the data. The coding process involved reading each interview numerous times, analyzing the manifest content of the interviews for relevant and repeating themes (e.g. Conceptualizing God and/or the Divine; Coping with stress; Coping with death; Source of strength; Emotional support; Regulation of emotions; Reflections of women in Divine; and Identity) Outlying examples which did not fit themes were also noted. This researcher marked themes as they emerged in each line of the interviews. Looking over all of the interviews, with themes written in the margins, broader themes emerged (e.g. Embracing womaness, Source of inner strength, The importance of connection), which this researcher noted. This researcher then went back and color coded the themes in the margins of the interviews according to the larger themes. Finally, quotations, excerpts and concepts were cut and pasted into the broader themed categories, within their smaller sub-themes. The final product was a coding document with themes and sub-themes, which included all of the quotations and interview excerpts that fell into each category or multiple categories.

### *Sample Characteristics*

The demographic questions looked at age, employment status, last year of formal education, ethnic or racial identity, and religious affiliation. This was a predominantly middle-aged, White, highly educated group. The average age was 45 with an age range of 28 to 63 years. When asked to identify themselves ethnically or racially, eight women identified as Caucasian, White, or Anglo. One person identified as Jewish. Three women identified as South Asian. One person identified as Hispanic (See Table I). Only one person in the sample had not completed an undergraduate degree. Five people had at least some education beyond an undergraduate degree. Eleven people were employed. Of those, four were self-employed. Three people identified as currently students. The responses varied when the participants were asked if they identify with a particular religion. The break down of religious affiliation is: three women identified as Hindu, two identified as Jewish, one as Catholic, five did not affiliate with an organized religion (does not preclude attending organized worship services), one identified as Protestant, and one identified as Pagan (see Table II).

Table I. Participant-identified Race/Ethnicity

“White” or “Caucasian”	8
“South Asian”	3
“Jewish”	1
“Hispanic”	1
TOTAL	13

Table II. Participant affiliation with organized religion

No affiliation	5
Hindu	3
Jewish	2
Catholic	1
Protestant	1
Pagan	1
TOTAL	13

*Limitations*

The methodological biases in this study are both selection bias and information bias. Because this is a small study and because it is a non-probability study, data from this study is not representative of the larger population. Also, the very nature of the study is to look at women who are outside the normative culture where concepts of a male God are concerned, so there will be little ability to generalize the findings beyond this population. However, this study adds to the body of knowledge which examines women's relationship to spirituality and how that belief affects their outside relationships. It is possible that there was also an information bias in that data collected was not collected in exactly the same manner with each interview. Whether in person or over the phone, locations of interviews differed, and internal and external events affect both the researcher and the respondent and may affect respondent's answers for the interviews. The limitations of the recruitment process and the lack of demographic representation in the sample will be discussed at length in the discussions chapter. The next chapter will look at the findings of this study.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter will present the results of qualitative analysis which uncovered several themes that arose in an exploratory study of women's beliefs in the Divine as female. Study participants were asked how they conceptualize the Divine and how they understand that concept to affect themselves and their outside relationships. It is important to note at the outset of this discussion that this is not a theological study. God as a concept is not being defined; participants from similar religious backgrounds may have differing beliefs and understandings of God and/or the Divine. Rather, this is an exploratory study, the purpose of which is to begin to describe how women conceptualize God as feminine, and to further explore how the participants understand the effect of this belief on their sense of self and their external relationships.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, interview questions were open-ended and exploratory and covered the following broad categories: Conceptualizing God and/or the Divine, Relationship to Belief, Relationship to oneself, Function of Belief, Identity, and Relationship to Others. Within each of these categories, the following overarching themes arose which will be highlighted in this chapter: Embracing Womaness; Source of Inner Strength; The Importance of Connection, Fluidity of Belief, and Creating Community. Sub-themes emerged within some of the overarching themes and will also be presented and discussed.

Because the questions addressed broad areas such as spiritual belief and the function of spirituality in one's inner and outer life, the interviews have a vast amount of overlapping material. Themes did not show up in neat boxes in response to certain questions. Rather, themes from the interviews often overlap and connect throughout the structured interview categories. Participant responses to specific interview questions may show evidence of several themes at one time. Therefore, the presentation of findings will be organized by the overarching themes listed above, with reference made to the specific categories of response in the interview, as appropriate, throughout this chapter. While this researcher has attempted to untangle and cull out the relevant themes, portions of the transcribed interview will also be used as illustrations throughout this chapter, enabling the reader to gain a clearer sense of the participants' responses, the nuances of beliefs, and the interconnections between themes.

The discussion will begin with a demographic description of the sample, highlighting characteristics which may be associated with participant beliefs and the impact of these beliefs on their lives and their relationships.

#### *Demographic Findings*

The demographic questions looked at age, employment status, last year of formal education, ethnic or racial identity, and religious affiliation. This was a predominantly middle-aged, White, highly educated group. The average age was 45 with an age range of 28 to 63 years. When asked to identify themselves ethnically or racially, eight women identified as either, Caucasian, White, or Anglo. One person identified as Jewish. Three women identified as South Asian. One person identified as Hispanic (See Table I). Only one person in the sample had not completed an undergraduate degree. Five people had at

least some education beyond an undergraduate degree. Eleven people were employed. Of those, four were self-employed. Three people identified as currently students. The responses varied when the participants were asked if they identify with a particular religion. The break down of religious affiliation is: three women identified as Hindu, two identified as Jewish, one as Catholic, five did not affiliate with an organized religion (does not preclude attending organized worship services), one identified as Protestant, and one identified as Pagan (see Table II).

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Catholic	1
Protestant	1
Pagan	1
TOTAL	13

### *Embracing Womaness*

An important theme which surfaces throughout all of the interviews is embracing womaness. Each participant spoke about their understanding of and connection to a Divine which mirrors their experiences as women. And how through that belief are better able to embrace their own womaness. Within this theme of embracing womaness, the following sub-themes emerged; Conceptualizing God and/or the Divine, Relating to the



feminine Divine, Closeness to feminine Divine, Reflections of women in Divine, Validation as women, and Identity. The theme of embracing womaness, along with its sub-themes, illustrates the centrality of womaness in the respondents' belief.

### *Conceptualizing God and/or the Divine*

To understand how this belief in God and/or the Divine as feminine affects women's relationship to themselves and others, it is first important to understand what this belief encompasses and to explore how women conceptualize their belief. Embracing womaness in the Divine to feel closer to the Divine is emphasized in how respondents understand God as a whole. The respondents' notion of God, not specifically feminine, reveals a more abstract notion of God. When asked about God alone, respondents had very abstract associations and descriptions of God. Over half of the participants stated that they felt God was both male and female. Two of those participants stated that God was both and neither gender at the same time. Participants used words such as "source", "force", "energy", "beyond image" to describe God. These abstract terms for God highlight the respondents' mode of identification and connection to the Divine through feminine images and attributes, a more tangible concept. The feminine aspects are a means for connection, and reflection of the Divine of their own experiences as women which allow them to feel closer to the more abstract unknowable God concept.

The theme of embracing womaness arises in how respondents conceptualize the feminine aspect of God and/or the Divine. All of the respondents described the feminine aspect of the Divine as a part of a larger whole. For many of the respondents this aspect of the feminine was a means of connection to that larger whole. When describing their concept of the feminine aspect of the Divine, their responses reflected the spectrum of

experience, traits, and images of being a woman, (such as religious/mythical female figures) representative of what might be conceptualized as an “embracing of femaleness”. As women, respondents were able to better identify directly with these aspects of the Divine which they understood to be female or feminine. Rather than just seeing the Divine feminine in one light, respondents answered with a panoply of what they understood to be aspects of the Divine as feminine which reflect the full experience of being a woman. For example, respondents name mythologies, images and embodiments of the feminine Divine through their forms as Hindu Goddesses, biblical matriarchs, and archetypal figures. One respondent lists traits associated with her belief, “Gentleness, tenderness, maternal love, nurturing”. Another participant names a less tender side of the Goddesses by explaining their capacity for getting mad, angry, and their ability to kill. From lover, to mother, to protector, respondents named how they embraced feminine aspects of the Divine through the varied experiences of being a woman.

Embracing womaness is seen in direct contrast to how respondents understood the popular notion of God. In response to the question of how their belief compared to the popular notion of God, respondents named images and traits that differ greatly from womanly traits and experiences. Respondents named a distant, unknowable, male traited God as the popular notion of God in the U.S. When asked to compare their belief to the popular notion of God, every participant except one said that they felt their belief differed greatly from the popular notion in the U.S. Almost all of the respondents named the popular notion of God in the U.S. as, “God-the-Father”, a “big man with a beard, and bald, a grayish peppery beard with a kind face on”, “an old white man sitting in a chair, “masculine”, “an old man with a white beard, a young man with a brown beard, and a

bird” among other descriptions of a masculine imaged God. These rejected images of the popular notion of God are in direct contrast to respondents’ description of their belief in the feminine aspect of God which they embrace.

The language which women used to name their belief in God sheds further light on how women conceptualize their belief. The names vary and are personal to each respondent. Some of these names include, “sacred feminine”, “Shekinah”, “Tree of Life”, “The Divine”, “Divine Source”, “Durga”, “God”, “God-the-Mother”, “Mataji”, “Goddess”, “The Virgin”, “Divine Presence”, “Overriding Mystery”, “Sophia”, among other names. Naming is an important part of the conceptualization process.

#### *Relating to the Divine as female*

One sub-theme that surfaces within embracing womaness is respondents’ ability to relate to the Divine through their gender identification. Belief in God and/or the Divine reflects the respondents’ experiences as women which create an ability to relate to that belief through the shared traits, experiences, and images of womaness. One respondent states, “I could just not find anything that felt right until I met God-the-Mother, and umm, and all of a sudden, it just opened up this whole thing for me, of relatability, this universal mother nurturer which made so much sense to me,”. Another respondent shares, “we believe in the Goddess Durga a lot, we pray to her for everything, I kind of think about her and think that being a woman, she really understands my particular problems.” This respondent relates with the Goddess (or feels her Goddess will relate to her) because of her womaness. The belief holder can better relate when the Divine encompasses womaness.

### *Closeness to Divine as female*

Respondents share how they feel closer to their belief when they embrace womaness in their belief. A couple of participants spoke about their relationship to their belief as feminine is very different from how they experience God as male. The feminine feels closer as respondents can relate through their own gender identification. One respondent states, “I think for myself, on a personal level, it (*the feminine Divine*) allows me to have a relationship with the Divine that I feel is personal and significant, and is not this way up there, out there, or over there, relationship, that’s right here, I feel like God, the Goddess, is closer than my next breath, umm, and then I feel like it’s a relationship based on a relationship, and by that I mean that I think it is difficult to have a real relationship with somebody that’s way up there, way out there, way over there.” Another participant states, “I feel really comfortable praying to her, and feel like- I mean it’s pretty basic – but I feel like I’m taken care of by her and there is this sense that she’ll always look after me cause she is the Mother. I don’t feel that way about the other deities, like Krishna, or Ram, or anything. I do feel that way about her and that relationship has been influential.” Both respondents illustrate how their relationship to their belief in the feminine aspect of God is a more personal, closer relationship when embracing the womaness in their belief.

### *Reflections of women in the Divine*

Many of the participants spoke of the importance of seeing reflections of themselves as women in the Divine. The reflection of one’s womaness in their belief can be considered another sub-theme within the larger theme of “embracing womaness”. Many participants speak about “parts” or “pieces” of themselves reflected in the Divine

through traits, aspects, or images of being a woman. One respondent explains the importance of seeing womaness in the Divine by saying, “I realized that one reason is that it drove me crazy having images of God all being masculine. I needed images that reflected me.” She goes on to say in a later section of the interview, “...so I that I find it much more useful to me in figuring out, and learning, and having mirrors to myself, and parts of myself, and to have more than one God figure, but also to have female figures whose roles and range of activity in these stories mirrors more of my own range of feelings and activities.”. . . Another participant explains, “...how we encounter God is a reflection of who we are and so more and more I’ve been seeing a feminine face of it as a reflection of being a woman and experiencing it as a woman.” Participants spoke about identifying with a Divine that reflects their experiences as women. One respondent speaks to this by saying, “I think as women we need someone to identify with us. Someone who will understand our way of thinking about love and life and childbearing. I think it helps me a lot.” Reflections of the spectrum of womanly experience in the Divine are an embracing of womaness (which validates their experiences as women).

The respondents further discuss how through embracing womaness they can embrace their own power and importance as women. One respondent says, “... my most basic prayer is to be given that sort of strength, and Shakti, and everything is woman, it’s feminine, and I believe that. It gives me a better sense of power in myself. It gives me a better sense of power in myself. Another participant shares, “...as a woman, my belief in the sacred feminine makes me much stronger. And it enhances my self-esteem, my ideas that I can accomplish, that I matter.” Embracing womaness allows the respondents to embrace their own power and sense of importance as women.

### *Validation as women*

The participants' embracing of womaness in the Divine validates their own experiences as women. From mother to wild woman, from menstruation to wisdom, many participants discuss how their belief reflects an aspect of their own womanhood or an aspect of their own life. This participant is able to identify with her belief through the image of the Virgin Mary, a mother. In speaking about the Virgin Mary she states, "I believe maybe because she was a mother she will be more understanding of my feelings of protecting my children and my nephews and guiding me as a mother to guide them through life". Another participant discusses how she identifies with different aspects of femininity in the Divine depending on her current life experience embarking on a higher education degree program. In talking about the Hindu Goddess, Saraswati, she says,

Well, right now because I'm going through all the work and school, I have been praying specifically to Saraswati who is the Goddess of teaching and education. So I have been praying to that aspect of the Mother Goddess, when I'm back in school, or doing work and I need that extra support, I pray to one aspect of the Goddess. And I have in the past prayed to Kali and other Goddesses. I think in different times, different aspects of the feminine, I feel like, are what I need to focus on, I focus on that.

Embracing womaness through one's own life experiences whether through motherhood or student-life reinforces the respondent's own life experience as a woman.

Embracing womaness through a belief in a female Divine also allows respondents to claim the more taboo aspects of being a woman. In discussing menstruation, this respondent, Hindu, age 28, shares,

And also when I was growing-up, I think in Indian society, when I had my period then, not my parents, they were open-minded and things like that, but in school, you know how girlfriends use to talk about how that's not a good thing and you should not be going into the kitchen or, and I would think, we pray to the God in the Temple and She probably has it too, so you know, I think throughout

my life having a female image of God made me a stronger woman, I think, and a more bold woman. Because I think, the Goddess can do it, and so can I. And if she put this in me, it's for a really good reason I am not dirty or anything because of my period.

This participant expresses the social isolation a woman can experience because of her natural body functions, but in her case, her belief kept her from feeling “dirty” or isolated. This participant goes on to explain how her belief counters social expectations of women always being “soft” and gentle. Her identification with womaness includes the wilder side of being a woman,

The Goddesses are really wild, and they get mad, and they will get angry, they will kill, and they will dance with themselves, and I think, I don't know if that is a hundred percent a good but I kind of just believe that we're not suppose to be all soft because we are females. That you have to stand up for you're rights. I think believing in the Goddess helps me be that sort of person.

Identification with womaness in the figure of a divine deity in this case allows for feeling “stronger” and “bold” rather than isolated in relation to socially taboo aspects of being a woman.

### *Identity*

Within the theme of embracing womaness is the sub-theme of the belief as one's “core” identity. This theme emerged as women discussed their own sense of identity. Half of the women spoke about how their belief in the feminine Divine was somehow at the center of their identity, thereby taking that belief on as an identity of sorts. In explaining the centrality of this identity, one respondent states, “I think your beliefs make you the person that you are. So if you believe in something, and have faith in it, you live it, in a certain way.” Another participant says, “I guess it is sort of at the core of who and what I am.” These are illustrations of the belief being at the core of one's identity.

This sub-theme of embracing womaness through identity is further fleshed out as participants discuss feeling embodied or attempting to embody their belief in the Divine as feminine. One respondent, identifies as Jewish, age 33, states, “it’s something you can physically embody, and can hold and take on to express the Shekinah through your work”. This participant continues on to say, “I’ve now committed myself, to a basically seminary program of women committed to embodying the Divine feminine as a priestess.” Another participant explicates her experience of embodiment and identification with her belief.

And in that movement, I had bent over, and the point of this veil had come over my face and when I stood up, I realized that I was that veil figure. That I had become her. That she wasn’t something that I was looking out at, but she was in me looking out. And so my sense was now wearing or being this archetypal figure. In a way, I had only sort of looked at from the outside in and now I was looking from the inside out. So what I’m seeing is that shift in my own consciousness.

The belief is not compartmentalized as one of many beliefs but becomes woven into the very identity of the person.

Within this sub-theme of identity emerges the infamous word, witch. Embracing womaness can mean embracing the positive and negative associations that come along with womanhood. This word has been used to negatively portray, and harm women for centuries. In the 20th century, this word has been reclaimed by some. Three participants used the word “witch”. Each of the three participants says others might identify them this way in relation to their belief. Two of the three do not want to be associated with the word witch. “And when people ask, I’ve had people say, ‘are you a witch’, and I say no, I’m not a witch. A witch is bad in people’s minds usually.” One participant talks about



her fear of the label of “witch” but finds she is tentatively reclaiming the word as an identity. This word is and has been associated with women who embrace and celebrate their womaness. These respondents are grappling with embracing or rejecting this word which defined in the past or redefines in the present, womaness.

### *Source of Inner Strength*

Discussion of how participants’ beliefs functioned for them throughout their lives and in their present lives is woven throughout the interviews, rather than appearing in response to any one question. For these participants, their belief serves varied and overlapping functions. The functions of the participants’ belief are often integrally connected with the feminine or womanly aspects of their belief. A salient theme throughout the interviews is the belief as a source of inner strength. Under this larger umbrella theme are many sub-themes of how the belief is used as a source of inner strength; Coping with stress, Coping with death, Source of strength, Emotional support, Regulation of emotions, Source of healing, Guide, Transcending narrow mindedness, Improved self-esteem, and Self-acceptance. This theme of source of inner strength illustrates the important function that this belief has for the respondents.

### *Coping with Stress*

The theme of a source of inner strength is salient as all of the respondents state that they access their belief during times of stress. Four participants qualify their responses, by saying that they having an on-going relationship with the Divine and while they may turn during times of stress, they tend to turn to the relationship each day whether or not there is added stress. Yet upon further reflection, even these respondents state that turning to their belief during stress is an important part of how they manage

stress. One respondent shares, “Actually, every day I pray to Mataji. And it’s a very basic prayer but it is daily so that is something that I do everyday. But particularly when I’m feeling kind of bad too, actually. I pray to the Mother Goddess. It makes me feel like something is happening. It makes me feel better.” For this respondent, her belief is a source of strength during times of stress and duress.

### *Coping with Death*

Belief in the feminine Divine as a source of inner strength also gave rise to the sub-theme of source of strength while confronting or coping with the death of a loved one. One respondent spoke about how her belief sustained her through visions of and connections to the Divine while caring for a dying infant. Another respondent spoke about “leaning” more into the Divine while coping with the death of her husband. Yet another respondent spoke about “leaning into the arms of the great mother” after the death of her father. The use of the word “lean” highlights using the belief in the Divine as a support and source of inner strength. One respondent, formally Catholic, gave this account about being with her friend at her moment of death,

I had a friend die about three or four weeks ago and I was at her death bed at the hospital...She was dying at 51 of a cancer and I was called to her bedside at the hospital and I went. And I stood with her the last three hours, as she was under an oxygen tent, breathing hard, and what I found was, none of my old Catholic programming came up. None of the old pictures and the stories. Being an artist and a word person, I’m intrigued and moved and find expression through art and language and so the story of my childhood of hell and Jesus and salvation and all that kind of stuff which had impacted me hugely, but I stood those last several hours, and I didn’t have any of those old prayers that came up, what I found, this is what, this is my hope for the future of spirituality, what I found was just being with her, and breathing with her, and holding presence, and holding attention and love in the room was enough. I sang to her. I had my hand on her chest trying to ease her breathing. And when all the clinicians came in, all the doctors and everybody, I found myself just stepping off to the side and just breathing. And then as she was dying, two of her friends had come in, as we sang her this lovely

song, these friends were in the chorus with her, and it was a song that they had sung, it was a lullaby that they knew, the chorus was, “Sail baby sail, out across the sea, only don’t forget to sail back into me”. And she took her last breath. Well I guess the point I’m making here is that all my programming about the crucial relationship between the Christian and God, didn’t kick in with pictures, stories, Jesus language, prayer, wailing, none of that stuff. What I did, was find myself often doing with great integrity, knew I was called to do which was to be there. And breathe and love and hold presence.

This respondent illustrates how her current belief in the Divine, as opposed to her beliefs from childhood, provides her inner strength while she is present to her dying friend. For each of these respondents, their belief is a source of inner strength during the transition of the death of a loved one.

### *Strength*

The belief itself provides a source of strength. Half of the women spoke about drawing a sense of strength from their belief. One participant shares, “I think it is a force in me. A strength.” Other participants talk about calling on their belief for strength, underlining the function of the belief itself as a source of inner strength.

### *Emotional support*

Using their belief as a source of inner strength, many of the participants talk about how their belief offers emotional support and containment. When describing their belief, half of the participants use language such as the “container” of their belief, “leaning” into the belief, a “holding” by the belief. After discussing the death of her father, this participant shares how the spiritual space that she has created offers on-going emotional support

I do have the sense of, the phrase that I use is leaning into the arms of the great mother. So I have the sense of how I can lean back into my own spiritual container. It’s pretty personal. My office where I’m sitting right now, is

absolutely filled with pictures of pigs, little sculptures of pigs that I have gotten or people have given to me, of drawings that I have made during exercises where I was being introspective or being creative or using those forms of connecting myself to my better self, my images of spirit, etc. Little hand-crafty things that I've done, photographs of my whole family, images of animals, artifacts that have a spiritual – from different parts of the world that were given to me, that have a spiritual connection. I say I have no form but I sit inside this form, everyday.

In this excerpt, the respondent creates the visual image of the container that she has created for herself as an emotional support. In discussing emotionally tumultuous teenage years, another participant says, “somewhere in that later teen period I began to have a vision of being rocked in the arms of a round, huge, HUGE, round woman of dark skin who would hold me in her lap and rock me and just say, ‘there, there’. And I knew it was God. Rocking me. Nurturing me.” These are just a few examples of how participants express their belief as a container of sorts which provides grounding and emotional support during emotionally turbulent times. One participant, described herself as a container to receive support. When discussing taking care of a dying infant, this participant discussed how her belief supported her, “Like I was gifted with these incredible visions, and openings and connections, at times when I most need it.” The belief acts as an emotional support and source of inner strength.

#### *Regulation of emotions*

Not only does the belief act as a source of inner strength during difficult times, but participants explained how their belief helped to regulate varied emotions. This function of affect regulation is a source of inner strength which allows participants to regulate their feelings rather than feeling overwhelmed by their feelings. One respondent states, “...I think it's (*the belief*) given me a sense of strength and I guess somewhere to

go when I'm feeling really, anything, nervous, or anxious, or happy." When discussing confronting discrimination at work, another respondent states, "It aggravates me and makes me angry. And I have to sit down and do some calming of myself through meditation. Letting go of my anger when they are trying to put their belief systems on me." Her practice of meditation, a method to access her belief, allows her to calm down when aggravated. One respondent discusses how she connects to her belief through nature, and states that during the emotionally riling teenage years, nature was where she was able to calm herself emotionally. "I would feel at a certain time, at random times, like I needed to go to a mountain or to the beach or whatever, that I needed to have that connection. And then as I got into the teenage years, where everything got dramatic, and chaotic, and angst ridden, I would go there for grounding and centering." The belief provides affect regulation, which is an inner resource.

#### *Source of healing*

An important sub-theme within the larger theme of source of inner strength is a source of inner healing. A number of participants discuss how their belief is a source or function of healing or aid in their life or in other's lives. One respondent shares, "I can say that I've had, like most people, some significant events in my life and traumas, the relationship that I have with the Divine has helped me through those relationships, I mean through those difficulties." The belief is not only a function of healing for themselves, but also a function which allows someone to aid others. In talking about another woman who holds similar beliefs, one participant explains, "...seeing how her embracing of Divine feminine has helped her to work with women in crisis situations, especially rape, trauma, sexual abuse, and a lot of other, distinctly feminine, well sexual abuse is not distinctly

feminine, but body image, a lot of crisis problems, that are uniquely feminine experiences, and realizing what an effect it has in what it helps her to bring to them, and how healing it can be, never would have occurred to me.” Belief in God and/or the Divine as feminine is a source of inner strength for healing as well as seen as a source of inner strength to help heal others.

### *Guide*

An important sub-theme that emerged was the belief in God as female as guide, or a moral center. One respondent, in reference to her belief in the Virgin Mary says, “It’s a positive affect because even though I try to read a lot of books about how to raise children, and things like that, I think my first option is asking Her to guide me when to say yes and when to say no.” Her belief in the guidance of the Virgin allows her to tap into and trust her own inner strength. Another respondent states, “I think that because it is a strong positive relationship, then just like any other positive thing in my life, it bleeds into all aspects of my life and if I’m interacting with someone and they have no clue what my beliefs are then I’m led by certain moral guide posts, ah, cause me to act a certain way and therefore it affects people”. The belief is a source of inner strength and guidance.

### *Transcending narrow mindedness*

The belief acts as an inner strength by providing respondents with the ability to expand their mindset when they felt they were being small or narrow minded. This belief allows respondents to tap into their inner resources to transcend pettiness. One participant states “And I have to continually pull myself back into that mindset because it’s easy to get caught up in all the minutia of the day,”. Another shares, “When I get petty and small-

mindful, I turn through practices through yoga, or drumming, or meditation, or remembering the times when I did those practices more regularly to calm myself into connecting beyond myself.” The belief functions as an inner resource to go beyond the smaller details of relationships or one’s life.

### *Improved self-esteem*

A crucial sub-theme which emerges out of the source of inner strength is the belief as a function of improved self-esteem and confidence. Many of the respondents discuss how their belief positively affects their self-esteem, their sense of empowerment, and their confidence levels. When discussing how her belief affects her feelings about herself, one participant shared,

I think that it helps, it adds to the sense of self that I have, and to the sense of self-esteem, ahh, of the way that I value myself, if you can see yourself as an aspect of the Divine, in that I mean that if I can acknowledge the fact that the Divine may be female, because I am female, there is a Divine aspect within me as well, umm, so I think that’s a positive affirming kind of belief and it certainly has been for me..I think it’s an empowering thing for the women to be able to see God as the feminine, and to relate to that, so I see it as powerful and empowering.

The belief in God and/or the Divine as feminine, acts as a source of inner strength to achieve higher sense of self-esteem and empowerment.

### *Self-acceptance*

The belief in God and/or the Divine as female, acts as an inner source of strength which allows for a tolerance for, or acceptance of, themselves as they are. One participant shares, “But sort of focusing on mercy and compassion, I think that I am definitely much more compassionate towards myself and forgiving of myself which then translates into being that way with others. But I think that’s the primary change that I’ve noticed about myself is that I no longer beat myself up as much as I use to.” Another participant states,

“And certainly, God the nurturer, and God-the-Mother, and Mother Earth, Mother Nature, all this is a very big part of my accepting myself, my accepting the female and the feminine, as a very beautiful, strong, and necessary part of maintaining this earth.” This respondent shares, “And so all of these shifting beliefs have made it so much easier for me to accept myself, live with myself, laugh at myself, to honor more fully my own gift.” Respondents illustrate that their belief is a source for inner strength which allows them to accept themselves for who they are, as women and otherwise.

### *Importance of Connection*

The theme of the importance of connection highlights how, when and why women connect to their belief. The theme of connection emerges in relation to the participants’ relationship to their belief, to themselves and to other people.

### *Connection to belief*

Participants used the words, “connect”, “connected”, or “connection”, to describe their relationship to God and/or the Divine. One respondent shares, “the whole point is to connect and just feel like you’re in the presence.” Another respondent says, “It was like an intuitive knowing, an inner knowing, a larger knowing, a connection with a larger wisdom, a larger source than me and my programmed teachings.” This respondent shares, “I always pray to the Mother Goddess. I feel more connected to her.” Each of these respondents talks about a “connection” to their belief which is inherently a relationship to their belief.

### *Relationship with belief*

The theme of an on-going connection is ever present in the respondents’ relationship with their belief. Belief in the feminine Divine is not just something accessed



in times of need but is a source of continual connection. Eleven participants state that they have a daily practice of some sort to connect to God and/or the Divine. This practice ranges from, “prayer”, “conversation”, “meditation”, to “living in the presence” of the belief. Participants speak about the importance of their daily relationship or connection to their belief. One respondent shares,

Well, the ‘how’ is very much conversation with the Divine. It is not necessarily in a prayerful way although it can be but it is a pretty constant part of my daily life so that I guess what I want to say is that whatever I am doing, I want to have consciousness of the Divine in me as part of all decision making and all action..

Another respondent states, “I pray all during the day to the sacred feminine. Praise God and Goddess, Mother of all creation.” For many of the respondents, there is an on-going, daily connection to their belief. This connection to the belief plays a steady and influential role in their internal world.

This theme of connection also surfaced when participants spoke about the personal history of their belief. A number of participants state that they have always felt connected to their belief that they hold today about the Divine. Three of those participants, each Hindu, said that they grew up with their current beliefs, in their family of origin. Other participants spoke about feeling connected to their belief even though it may have been contrary to their childhood organized religion.

### *Nature*

One sub-theme that surfaced under the theme of connection was respondents’ connection to their belief through nature. Half of the respondents cite nature as the medium of connection to their belief in the feminine aspect of God. One respondent shares, “going out for walks, I like to be out in nature, that’s where I am closest to God.”

Two participants talked about how their connection to nature as a child was their connection to the Divine rather than the place of worship of their childhood organized religions. One respondent, age 43, who identified as Jewish, spoke about her mother taking her into nature as a child. She talks about having her connection to the Divine grow from her relationship to nature. She spoke about always having this belief, but as she grew up, she was able to begin to put words and concepts to her belief. Another respondent, with no formal religious affiliation, talked about nature as her central connection to her long held belief. She shares that even though her family took her to Church as a child, she connected to her belief through nature,

I can remember some times very, very early in my early exposure to my parents' church. Today I go into that church and I marvel at the beauty of the building but as a child I remember how dark, because of the dark paneling, which I can admire for the gorgeous work today, but back then it was very dark and oppressive and even the light coming through the stained glass windows, there was so little of it, I just felt this heaviness. And I couldn't explain it, I didn't get it at that time, but I knew that it wasn't doing anything for me. And that I felt more in connection with a spiritual being even though I couldn't define spiritual being, when I was outside and it was sunny, and I felt warm on my shoulders, and I could smell grass, and feel dirt between my toes. It was just that I felt more in touch with the things around me than I did sitting inside this building.

The above response illustrates that nature, and feeling connected “with the things” around her, gave this respondent more of a sense of the Divine. A number of participants similarly indicated that they connect with their belief through nature.

#### *Physical response*

The theme of the importance of connection is echoed not only in belief, but in the physical response to the belief. Participants spoke about body responses, or shifts in their

bodies in reaction and in connection to their beliefs. In talking about her transition away from Catholic doctrine, one respondent shares, “

And I think what helped the transition for me, or what maybe even forced the transition was that when I started to experiment with the feel of my prayers as I prayed to Mother-God, or God as, as, I guess Mother-God is the language that I use, even though it sounds heretical to me being, growing up Catholic, what I noticed is that my body softened and relaxed. Like I would lie in bed at night and I would start my prayers, and I would say Mother-God instead of Oh Lord, and my body would go, (*long sigh*), and it was a real sense feeling, knowing of the body acceptance of what this holy mystery was, and of course the feminine is all about the body and the acceptance of the body whereas the masculine throughout history has been polarized that the body has been dirty, it's been something to be ashamed of, it's been something to get past, to disintegrate, to rot away when you die, and there was a certain loving acceptance that I knew on a very visceral level, that maybe this energy, this mystery, this holding, this source, could be conceived as a feminine thing, than a masculine.

In discussing her shift to a more female based practice through the pig fertility Goddess, another respondent states, “And then in my forties, when I had this dream, and kind of body experiences in this workshop that were then interpreted for me by somebody who was like, this is the pig, and this is kind of earthy, yonic God feeling. That started me on the literature search.” Other participants discussed body sensations created through ritual. Depth of connection is illustrated in these body responses to the belief. The body response is a physical manifestation of the importance of the connection to the belief.

The theme of connection also emerged within the context of the function of the belief. As one participant shares, without the connection to her belief, she would have felt something missing in her life.

An intellectual paradigm for my belief system that having that connection was the thing that gave me strength and kept me from being a person with something missing. If I hadn't had that connection with nature, that was the embodiment of divinity for me, even though I wasn't conscious of it, like I didn't have any words or conceptual concepts or learning or anything like that, but if I hadn't had that connection then I would have had more problems and more things missing but

just having that, even though it wasn't something conscious like, this is the Goddess, that would have made it even another step better, but just having that connection, helped me a lot.

Instead of feeling a sense of lack in her sense of self, this function of connection allowed for internal fulfillment for this participant.

### *Fluidity of Belief*

Another theme that emerged is the fluidity of the respondents' belief. Unlike static, dogmatic ideology, the majority of respondents spoke about the transforming nature of their belief. Almost all of the participants talked about how their beliefs have changed, matured, or become more refined over the years. For one participant, her current belief was an "awakening". For another participant, her current belief is a "refinement" of a belief she has always held. In discussing the history and transformation of their belief, seven participants talked about exploring their spirituality as a preliminary step toward arriving at their current belief. Participants talked about "research", "reading", "peyote trips", visits to other countries, and exposure to various religious traditions. Five participants talk about stages in the development of their belief which included a stage of non-belief, a stage of searching, and then coming to a belief or connection with the feminine Divine some years later. These stages varied for different participants and were not necessarily linear. Their backgrounds also varied. Some came from backgrounds of organized religion, while others from non-religious backgrounds. Yet each of these respondents talked about the past and on-going transformation of their belief.

### *Creating Community*

In response to questions about the community response to their belief, all of the participants discuss how their belief affects their relationships with the people around them. Whether talking about family, friends, spiritual community, work, or town of residence, participants share how their belief affects their external lives. Each participant talks about people who are supportive or non-supportive about their belief in a female concept of God and/or the Divine. While those who make up a participant's supportive and non-supportive community differ, the way that they each participant speaks about their interactions with supportive versus non-supportive community is similar. As respondents talk about how they interact with or react to non-supportive people, and discuss how they found and practice with supportive, like-minded folk, the overarching theme of this section was creating community. Sub-themes emerge under the umbrella of creating community: self-censorship, tolerance of others, connection, spiritual community, and sharing beliefs.

In the creation of community, by its very nature, there are those who are not a part of the community, or are on the outside. In this case, the respondents who are creating community do so because they are not always accepted openly for their beliefs in their own community. All of the participants share having a non-supportive community which varies from their family of origin, to their work community, to the larger community within which they lived. Within this non-supportive community, self-censorship is a salient theme. Ten participants discuss how they could not freely talk about their belief in a feminine Divine with the community that they find non-supportive. Participants talked about the need to "tailor", "censor", or "translate" language to communicate their beliefs.

Other participants discuss having to change words or learn how to communicate their ideas in non-threatening ways. For some this censorship of ideas happens within a non-supportive family, for others this happens within a non-supportive work environment or the community at-large. Talking about her non-supportive family of origin, one participant shares, “I have to hold my ground in my family who think I am crazy. So, it affects my choicefulness about how much to talk about my own practices and what I believe.” Another participant who talks about the community at large states, “So I think that’s the challenge, is finding a balance because I don’t have an interest in specifically converting anyone. I’m not trying to save your soul. So it’s a balance of a comfort level and my comfort level of how much do I *not* say without feeling uncomfortable.” Creation of supportive community around someone’s beliefs becomes all the more important in the face of a non-supportive populace where one has to self-censor their beliefs.

Even though respondents interact with those who may not accept their belief, a majority of respondents say that they feel more tolerant of other’s beliefs. This sub-theme of tolerance allows for community creation and community interaction outside of only those who share similar beliefs. Nine participants speak about how their belief leads to tolerance and acceptance of other people and of their beliefs. One participant discusses how her belief leads her to be more “tolerant” and more “accepting of other people’s paths”. She goes on to say that her belief helps her to forgive and have “a little bit more mercy” than she had in the past. Often respondents connect being accepting and tolerant of themselves, to being accepting of others. One respondent shares that she is more loving of herself and other because of her belief, while another states “the more that I

know and see the many aspects of myself, and including claiming all of my horrific, evil, murderous sides of myself, as well, I can see and accept that in others.” Tolerance and acceptance of oneself can lead to tolerance of others and their beliefs, even if they are different from one’s own which allows for connection and community creation outside of one’s set of beliefs.

The majority of respondents mentioned, without a specific question about the topic, that they do not proselytize their beliefs to others yet one participant indicated the opposite. This participant shared that she felt her belief was healthy for the planet and those around her so that she tries to communicate her ideas when she can. She shared that as a teacher, she tried at least once a year to introduce the idea that God might be a “She”. She discusses,

And I see a lot of girls like the kids that I work with, that don’t have the female Divine, and don’t have the connection to nature, and if they don’t have it, in some form, they struggle a lot. Self-esteem is huge, it’s a huge issue, trying to look for reflections of yourself in this supreme being, I think that affects self-esteem for sure. And I try to, even though I am a teacher, all my teaching is math and science, I teach biotechnology, physiology and statistics and geometry and stuff like that, somehow I try to bring that discussion in the classroom at least one in every class just to plant that seed. Like, why is God called “He”, isn’t it possible that God can be she? And to watch the girls react to that is really interesting. So I think that is huge.

This participant feels that sharing her belief is important for other’s (especially girls’) well-being.

While being able to create community with those who are not accepting of one’s belief is important, so too is finding a spiritual home as evidenced in the theme of the creation of spiritual community. Eight participants discuss having an accepting, specifically spiritual community. Some spoke about their families being supportive but

the majority of these eight spoke about having a regular meeting, “circle”, or “group”, each week or month with other people who share or at least accept their spiritual beliefs.

One participant shares,

Well, I have a, two women and I are the remaining three women of a larger group who meet every three weeks and do shamanic drumming together and that’s a guided meditation actually. For healing and information, that we do. And that’s a ritual connection, a friendship, and form that I studied, and made use of and don’t know that I believe but a channel into this intra- and interconnectedness.

This participant goes on to say that she does not have to “censor” her language in her spiritual meeting circle. Another respondent shares a similar group experience,

Every other Tuesday at one o’clock, for five years, I have a group of friends who come over and we do a drumming meditation and that’s the biggest prayer that I know of. And we gather and we share whatever our concerns are that we are praying for and then we pick up our drums and drum to the rhythm of a heart beat for twenty or thirty minutes and then we sit in silent meditation for twenty or thirty minutes and then we grin a lot... a real sense that drumming of the heartbeat aligns us with the Mother, with the vibration of the planet. And if we are a part of that vibration we are doing a small part to put positive energy out there. That’s my biggest sense of gathering with like-minded spirit people.

Another respondent communicates,

Although my most intimate community, like my Quaker meeting and I belong to a couple of different circles of people who get together once a week, one gets together once a week and one gets together every other week, and definitely focuses on the Divine and the light in all of us and our gifts and that sort of thing. In those communities, I feel very safe and very much aligned with others that, in the broadest sense, my specific spiritual beliefs, although they may differ in some details, with my circles, my communities, I think overall, I have enough in common with them, that I feel very comfortable.

Yet another shares this feeling about her meeting circles, “I would call it my sisterhood. My community support system.” Creation of supportive spiritual community allows for a



specific support system of kindred folk in the external world where belief in the feminine aspect of God and/or the Divine does not have to be censored or withheld.

Several participants used the words, “connection”, “interconnectedness”, and “connecting” when describing connecting to their belief in a communal setting.

Participants discuss feeling both connected to their fellow spiritual seekers, as well as connected to God and everything in the universe when practicing communally. This feeling of connection activates the creation of community. At the core of any community is connection and relationships between people.

### *Conclusion*

The findings in this study illustrate how women conceptualize their concept of the Divine, and how this belief affects their sense of self and their relationship to others through the themes; Embracing Womaness; Source of Inner Strength; The Importance of Connection, Fluidity of Belief, and Creating Community. Within these broader themes are more specific sub-themes which demonstrate how women connect, use, and relate to their belief, and to their sense of self and others through their belief. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these findings for the clinical social work field.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore how women conceptualize God and/or the Divine as female and how this belief is understood to affect their sense of self and their outside relationships. This is a qualitative, exploratory study in which thirteen women were interviewed about their belief in a God and/or the Divine as feminine and how they understand the effect of this belief on their sense of self, and on their relationship to others.

This study finds that women who hold a belief in God and/or the Divine as feminine, feel that their belief deeply affects both their relationship to their internal world (sense of self) and their external world (outside relationships). Through thematic analysis, a number of overarching themes emerged from the thirteen interviews as participants expounded upon their belief and its effect on their internal and external worlds; Embracing womaness, Source of inner strength, The importance of connection, Fluidity of belief, and Creating community. Sub-themes surfaced within some of these overarching themes. The following six (6) sub-themes arose from the larger theme, Embracing Womaness: Conceptualizing God and/or the Divine; Relating to the feminine Divine; Closeness to feminine Divine; Reflections of women in Divine; Validation as women; and Identity. The following ten (10) sub-themes emerged from the larger theme, Source of inner strength: Coping with stress; Coping with death; Source of strength;

Emotional support; Regulation of emotions; Source of healing; Guide; Transcending narrow mindedness; Improved self-esteem; and Self-acceptance. Within the larger theme of Importance of connection, participants talked about their connection to their belief, to their sense of self, and to their communities.

The findings in this study show that participants' beliefs are a source of comfort, as well as connection to others. Given the opportunity to discuss their beliefs in this area, participants discussed a self-affirming aspect to their belief that transcends previous studies. Previous studies find that spirituality is used in times of stress and adversity and this study demonstrates that participants' use their belief as self-affirmation as women, particular to their belief in a Divine as feminine. The literature thus far has not examined women's spiritual concepts (specifically female-centered) and how they may serve them.

A significant finding in this study was that a majority of the participants expressed a belief a God concept that encompassed both genders but felt that it was through the female aspect of this concept which they could relate to the Divine. For each participant, the very concept of God and/or the Divine as feminine was central to their relationship to their belief and their sense of self.

Although respondents were predominantly white, middle aged, and highly educated, it is likely that the belief in God and/or the Divine as feminine cuts across all demographic lines and that the diversity that actually exists among the population of women who believe in the Divine as feminine may not have been fully represented in this sample. Different methods for recruitment will be required to draw a more representative sample for future exploration of the beliefs of this population.

Each of the themes that emerged in the study holds significant importance, and each has varied implications for the field of social work. This discussion will focus on two themes, Embracing womaness, and Source of inner strength, because they reflect how this study has advanced the social work literature in the area of examining spirituality and have direct implications of social work training and practice.

### *Embracing Womaness*

This significant theme which emerged throughout the thirteen interviews is an important window into the participant's development of identity and self. Embracing womaness illustrates the importance of understanding women's need for mirroring and validating womanly images, symbols, metaphors and language to reflect her unique development and life experiences. The findings in this study raise questions about the avenues available to women to access validating selfobjects, as women. The use of female-centered spirituality as a specific mirroring selfobject therefore becomes a point of interest for clinical social workers when working with clients who may be struggling with their womaness.

Many women seek services from clinical social workers who have low self-esteem, self-hatred, and little self-acceptance, among other symptoms which point to the lack of a cohesive sense of self. One issue may be their lack of embracing of their womaness. Clinical social workers need a theoretical lens which can help them understand how to work with such clients. Clinical social work programs might consider highlighting self psychology, which creates the space for female-centered spirituality and development, in addition to the other more Freudian-based theories of God concepts,

which do not affirm for the most part a female-centered spirituality, into clinical social work programs and continuing education workshops.

The theme, embracing womaness, raises questions about earlier psychoanalytic theories of God concepts. The study findings raise questions about the applicability of Freud's concept of God as simply a sublimated father figure (Freud, 1989) to God concepts among this population. While Freud's theory may offer us some insight into religious development to some extent (popular, Western notion of God), it is limited in that it does not encompass those concepts of God which are female-based, nature-based, or something else altogether. Rather, Jung's theory that the God concept is a representation of both male and female representations and attributes appears to be more closely applicable to study findings (Jung, 1982).

Yet, even Jung's theory does not fully capture how and why there is a need for a broader understanding of people's use of God concepts and spirituality. Self psychology better contextualizes how certain beliefs serve an important function. The sub-themes, Reflections of women in Divine, Validation as women, and Identity, can be understood through Kohut's theory in which selfobjects offer mirroring and validation. In the interview, participants discuss how through images, attributes, and stories, "part" and "pieces" of them as women are reflected in the Divine as feminine. Kohut's theory postulates that individuals need mirroring and validating selfobjects to provide empathic attunement which allows that individual to achieve a cohesive sense of self. The participants' life experiences and identities as women are both mirrored and validated by something outside of themselves which leads to a more cohesive sense of self.

Embracing womaness through their belief allows the participants to develop a self-structure which is permissive and celebratory of their identities as women. The belief allows for their self-structure development through their identities as women. This study corresponds with Holliman's essay which examines how religious experience can be a selfobject experience. The theme of embracing womaness, corresponds with Holliman's second two points, "(3) enhance development of self structure; and (4) provide opportunities for transformation," (Holliman, 2002). For every participant, this belief allowed for some sort of personal transformation in belief, mood, or sense of self. Because clinical social workers often work with women who are learning how to access internal resources, they need to be able to explore how a woman client accepts, and embraces herself as a woman in society today.

Coming into one's identity as a woman may not be done easily in the absence of idealizable women figures. The theme, embracing womaness, directly corresponds to Rector's supposition that women who hold this belief are fulfilling "a need for an idealizable feminine presence", which is Kohut's second axis, need for idealization (Rector, 1996). Through the theme embracing womaness, the participants express how they want, and need to be able to see themselves reflected in the Divine, and the Divine reflected in themselves. The concept of God and/or the Divine is by its very nature an idealized whole, beyond but also including the individual. Self psychology proves here to be an important lens through which to understand women's identity development specifically through female-centered spirituality.

Interestingly, study findings do not support Rector's ideas regarding two other possible reasons for this belief in God as female, "traumatic experience with men" or "a

compensatory need to redeem a failed selfobject experience with a maternal figure”. This study did not directly ask about any of these three reasons for a belief in the Divine as feminine. The other two reasons may require further study, and possibly more direct questions about personal experiences and relationships in connection to one’s belief.

Through the sub-themes of, Relating to the feminine Divine, Closeness to feminine Divine, Reflections of women in Divine, Validation as women, and Identity we see that the participants in this study are able to connect to their belief in the Divine. These themes expand on the theoretical feminist critique of the God-as-Male concept. This study provides qualitative data which supports a body of work which thus far has been generally theoretical. The overarching themes of the study demonstrate how women put into practice a belief in the Divine as feminine. This study also provides information about how women conceptualize and name their belief through embracing womaness. The study participants link their relationship to their belief as the reason for a higher level of self-acceptance and level of self-esteem through their identities as women which demonstrates women’s inner strength through a female-centered spirituality. Clinical social workers need to be aware of a woman’s possible need to connect with and have validated her woman-related life experiences. This study points toward the importance of a better integration of feminist critique into mainstream literature which may not account for women’s experiences spiritually or developmentally.

This study expands on the body of autobiographies which chart individual women’s “awakenings” to their belief in the feminine Divine (Christ, 1997; Firestone, 2004, Kidd, 1996). These feminist spiritualist writers argue that women are deprived of a powerful connection to the Divine when they are not able to relate through their own

experiences as women. The findings speak to the importance of having clinical social workers hold a space open for women clients to explore their womaness (whether through spirituality or otherwise) in the clinical social work relationship. This space provides an opportunity for the client to better relate to her womaness which may not be reflected in her culture or religion.

An area for future study is how women embrace their individuality as women through spirituality and otherwise. As Kohut expounds, mirroring selfobjects are an important part of how an individual gains a cohesive sense of self. Questions for further study might include; How do women do this through their spirituality and otherwise? What are the failures and successes in our society's ability to provide women access to mirroring, validating selfobjects throughout their life cycle? What happens to a woman's development of her sense of self when she does not have access to such selfobjects?

#### *Source of inner strength*

The study also provides important qualitative data about how women use their belief in God and/or the Divine as feminine as an important internal resource to cope with stress, cope with death, as a source of strength, as an emotional support, to regulate emotions, as a source of healing, as a guide, and to transcend narrow mindedness.

Participants speak directly to an improved self-esteem as well as a self-acceptance and tolerance that they feel because of their belief, thus illustrating the significance this belief holds in participants' internal worlds. The belief provides a vital internal resource for the participants' emotional health as illustrated by its numerous functions. Consistent with current social work literature which examines spirituality, the implications of this study on clinical social work demonstrate that it is crucial to examine clients' spiritual



beliefs in clinical social work practice (Canda, 1988; Hathaway, W., Scott, S.Y. & Garver, S.A., 2004; Jacobs, 1997; Sermabeikian, 1994).

This study not only supports those studies which illustrate women's use of spirituality to overcome adversity, (Mansfield, Mitchell, & King, 2002; Black, 1999; Baron, 2004; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Vidrine, 1996) and improve emotional and physical health (Guinn & Vincent, 2002; Meadows, Thurston, & Meltonn, 2001; Mansfield, Mitchell & King, 2002; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Daaleman, Cobb, & Frey, 2001), but also points to a new area of study with implications for social work practice, encompassing the use of spirituality as well as the use of specific concepts of God and how such concepts serve various populations. Further research is needed to explore diverse samples of women who have a belief in the Divine as feminine and how this female-centered spirituality may act as an internal resource for women. As clinical social workers, one must support clients' access to internal resources. There also needs to be more education and training for clinical social workers to be able to explore and examine a client's spirituality and learn to examine their own possible countertransference to the client's spiritual beliefs.

### *Strengths*

The overall research question and its sub-questions did provide important exploratory data which answered the over arching question of how women who conceptualize God and/or the Divine as feminine understand their belief to affect their relationship to their sense of self and others. The instrument used (see Appendix A) data, collected qualitative, exploratory data which could then be boiled down into essential themes which answered the overall research question. The themes, embracing womaness,

source of inner strength, the importance of connection, fluidity of belief, and creating community, explain how the participants conceptualize their belief, and how they understand this belief to affect their relationship to their sense of self and to others.

The sample was demographically more homogenous than heterogeneous. While this does not give us a fuller picture of women who hold this belief, it provides themes that could be used to explore and study more diverse sample groups.

This study opens up the space for future study into how women embrace their womaness in this society, either spiritually or otherwise. It also opens the space for future study into how women use their spirituality as an internal resource.

#### *Limitations*

The methodological biases in this study are both selection bias and information bias. Because this is a small study and because it is a non-probability study, data from this study is not representative of the larger population. Also, the very nature of the study is to look at women who are outside the normative culture where concepts of a male God are concerned, so there will be little ability to generalize the findings beyond this population. However, this study adds to the body of knowledge which examines women's relationship to spirituality and how that belief affects their outside relationships. There will also be an information bias in that data collected was not collected in exactly the same manner with each interview. Whether in person or over the phone, locations of interviews differed, and internal and external events affect both the researcher and the respondent and may affect respondent's answers for the interviews.

While this researcher attempted to recruit a diverse sample group by sending the recruitment email to a diverse group of people, the sample group is limited in two ways.

The majority of participants has an undergraduate or advanced level degree and is employed. This limits our understanding of how this belief is understood among populations who do not have this level of education or are not employed. Secondly, the sample had a majority of White women represented. Of significant note is that no women who identify as African American are included in this study's sample. Women who identify as East Asian or First Nation women were also not represented in this study. The leaves a gap for further exploration of more diverse research samples for a future study.

This lack of representation may be due to a number of factors. For future studies it would be important to collect data about how the potential participant learned about the study. This researcher does not know with certainty how participants learned about and responded to the recruitment effort. Both location and seasonal weather comes into question. Because the snowball email recruitment effort would limit participation of those who may not have access to a computer, posting flyers is an important method for recruitment. But it is crucial to post flyers in areas and locations that may draw people from the full socio-economic spectrum (not just universities, but public libraries, or other public program locations). Additionally, posting flyers outside, in the wintertime, may not be the most effective method to recruit potential participants.

This researcher did not collect any identifying information about the 26 potential participants who responded to the recruitment effort and hence it is possible the sample could have been more diverse if the time frame for accepting participants was left open longer. The set time frame for accepting potential participants may have limited who participated in the study. Future studies would hopefully capture a more diverse sample group, and to do so, different recruitment methods would have to be explored.

The question of validity rises in the language used in this study. The study set out to look at women who believe in God and/or the Divine as female. But does this capture a representative sample of women who might hold a belief in a female-centered spirituality who might shun the language of “God” for its male, monotheistic-dominated associations? Language becomes central in who would respond to this recruitment effort. Using the word “God” in itself is limiting because it echoes both monotheistic and male centered associations of that concept. The language itself in the recruitment process or in the interview itself may have limited the sample or the participant’s answers during the interview about their belief in something outside of, or beyond the word and/or concept of “God”.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, this study offers important qualitative, exploratory findings about how women conceptualize God and/or the Divine as female and how this belief affects women’s relationships, internal and external. Participants shared how they understand their belief in the Divine and its profound affect on their sense of self and outside relationships through the themes of embracing womaness, source of inner strength, the importance of connection, fluidity of belief, and creating community. These themes open the door for a fuller integration of self psychology and examination of spirituality into social work training, and practice, as well as the need for future research into women’s development of self, and women’s relationship to female-centered spirituality within a clinical social work context.

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## Appendix A

### Interview questions

#### *Demographic Questions*

- Do you identify with a particular religion? If yes, what?
- How do you identify yourself ethnically or racially?
- What was your last formal year of education?
- What is your age?

#### *Semi-Structured Questions*

- What do you think of when you think about God and/or the Divine?
  - Do you see this belief as different from the popular notion of God and/or the Divine?
  - (If different) In what way do you think having this different view of God affects you?
- Have you always thought of God and/or the Divine as feminine?
  - (If not) When did that shift occur?
  - Was it gradual, in response to a life event? Otherwise?
- In what way do you think having this belief in God affects you?
  - How does your belief affect your identity?
  - How does this belief affect your relationship with yourself/feelings about yourself?
- How and when do you turn to God and/or the Divine?
  - During mental or physical stress?
- How does your belief help, hinder, or affect in anyway your outside relationships with work? With family? With friends?
- What do you think of when you think about God and/or the Divine?
  - How does this belief affect you vis-à-vis your larger community?
  - How does your community understand your belief? Accepting? Rejecting? Other?
  - How does your community's response to your belief affect you?



## Appendix B

### Recruitment Email

Do you or someone you know (age 18 or older) believe in God as female? Or do you or someone you know believe in something beyond yourself that has feminine attributes? If so, you or they may wish to consider participating in a research study, carried out in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, exploring women's concepts of God and how those concepts affect their lives. Your participation will add to the body of knowledge about women and God concepts.

The data from this topic will be used for my thesis in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work and for future presentation and publication on this topic.

Participation would include an in-person or telephone interview lasting approximately an hour to an hour and a half at a mutually agreed upon time and location. Confidentiality will be maintained and your name and any other identifying information will not be included in any written materials, publication, or presentation.

If you are interested or know someone interested, please contact me at [smelmed@smith.edu](mailto:smelmed@smith.edu) or 202.680.2229. Please forward this email to people who may be interested.

Thank you,  
Stephanie Melmed

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

Study Participants Needed

ARE YOU A WOMAN WHO ORIENTS TOWARD DIVINITY AS FEMALE?

DO YOU ENVISION GOD AS A WOMAN?

WHEN YOU CONNECT SPIRITUALLY TO SOMETHING BEYOND YOURSELF,  
DO FEMALE ATTRIBUTES COME TO MIND?

**If Any Of Your Answers Are “Yes” To These Questions, and you are age 18 or older, You Are Invited To Participate In a Study On Women and Their Concept of God and/or the Divine**

Participation Would Involve an Interview Lasting Approximately an Hour to an Hour and a Half

You Will Be Adding to the Body of Knowledge of Women and Concepts of God and/or the Divine

Contact:  
[smelmed@smith.edu](mailto:smelmed@smith.edu)  
202.680.2229

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form

Dear Potential Study Participant:

I, Stephanie Melmed, am a candidate for a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree from the Smith College School for Social Work and I am conducting a study exploring women's concepts of a female God and how this belief affects their social relationships. It is my hope that shedding further light on this phenomenon can add to our overall understanding of how such beliefs play a role of in people's lives. The data from this topic will be used for my thesis in partial fulfillment of the MSW degree at Smith College School for Social Work and for future presentation and publication on this topic.

You are being asked to participate because you are a woman over 18 with a belief in a female God. You are being asked to participate in a semi-structured, open-ended interview. The interview will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half depending on your responses. The interview will ask general questions about demographic information while the rest of the questions in the interview are open-ended. The questions will ask about your belief in a female God and your thoughts about the effect this belief may have on your relationships. The interview will be recorded on a digital audio recorder and then transcribed, by me, to written documents.

There is minimal risk associated with your participation in this study which includes the possibility that reflection on responses to some questions may be emotionally difficult for some people. I have attached a list of referrals if you wish to talk with someone about your experience.

By participating in this study, you may gain new insight into your beliefs about God and about how this belief affects your "external life". You will also be contributing to our understanding of women's beliefs about God in general and the role these beliefs play in women's lives. You will not receive compensation for your participation in this study.

Your interview will be kept separate from your name and other identifying information and will be kept in locked files to which no one but my research advisor and I have access. If any publication or presentation results from this research your name or identifying information will not be used. The notes and tapes will be kept in a locked file cabinet for a period of three years, after which time they will be destroyed consistent with Federal Guidelines.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you have the right to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study without penalty. However, the final date for withdrawal is March 15, 2007 when the thesis will be written. You may contact me at [smelmed@smith.edu](mailto:smelmed@smith.edu) or telephone at 202.680.2229 with any questions or concerns about this study, before or after the interview. You will be provided a copy of this consent form for your records.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Human Subjects Review Approval Letter

January 7, 2007

Stephanie Melmed  
2400 16th Street, N.W.  
Apartment 629  
Washington, DC 20009

Dear Stephanie,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are glad to give final approval to your study. You did an excellent job of justifying your study in relation to the contribution it can make of useful knowledge to social workers. You also grounded it very well in a theoretical position.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,  
Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Joan Lesser, Research Advisor