

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 8 October 2018

## A Dark Goddess: an inter-religious language for feminine spirituality



Podcast with **Áine Warren** (15 October 2018).

Interviewed by **Ross Downing**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/a-dark-goddess-an-interreligious-language-for-feminine-spirituality/>

**Ross Downing (RD):** *My name is [Ross Downing](#). We are at the [BASR conference](#) in Belfast. And I'm speaking to [Áine Warren](#), also known as [Áine Orga](#). She has an article in the works for the [Journal of Contemporary Religion](#), entitled “*Altars for The Morrigan: the legitimising agency of the Goddess in the networked flow of a YouTube subculture*”. And under her pseudonym *Áine Orga* she has three essays in a book independently published, edited by John Halstead, entitled: [Godless Paganism: Voices of Non-Theistic Pagans](#). She has a BA in English Literature, two MA's – one of which is in Religious Studies from Edinburgh, where she is currently doing a PhD under the supervision of [Steven Sutcliffe](#). And her project, and what we're going to be talking about today, is on the Dark Goddess. So my first question is, what or who is the Dark Goddess?*

**Áine Warren (AW):** That's a great question to start with. It's kind-of what I've been trying to figure out, I would say, during the entire process of my PhD so far! Because the Dark Goddess is a title that's used in quite a lot of different ways. It's a title that can be used to kind-of describe something quite vague – a vague idea of what the goddess is – or a type of great goddess or, more specifically, to describe individual goddesses. And what interested me about it was that it seemed to be used, in the online pagan community, to mean something quite specific, despite the fact that the title is so kind-of broad. So it became apparent to me that it was being used in this very particular way and associated with a “journey” to the Dark Goddess, and very particular kind-of journey: an inward journey to the inner self that was being facilitated by this Dark Goddess figure. And she was being associated with trials and hardships during someone's life. But the Dark Goddess experience was seen as being kind-of caught up in difficult life moments and life experiences. And so that led me to try and find out, well, where does this idea originate? Where does this Dark Goddess figure originate? And I came across,

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really, just a handful of books. There's only a dozen books that I was able to find – non-fiction books – with the words “the Dark Goddess” in the title that have been published since the 1990s. So I've been kind-of figuring out from there and limiting myself just to those books. And then to [YouTube](#) videos which as far as I've found, have given the best understanding, certainly within the community, of contemporary pagans and sort-of goddess spirituality, and what the Dark Goddess is within that community. There's certainly more that I could be looking at, like on-line forums and Facebook or Instagram and Tumblr and so on, but I have decided to draw a line.

**RD:** *And how did you get into that subject? Because it is obviously a marginal or . . . fringe, perhaps, is a negative term . . .*

**AW:** Yes!

**RD:** *But it's certainly a small community – alternative, certainly. So how did you come across it and what drew you to it?*

**AW:** I think the way I came across it, initially, was through a personal interest in the Irish goddess, the Morrigan. And it was kind-of through . . . Before I was actually in Religious Studies academically, I was encountering people on line talking about [the Morrigan](#) and watching YouTube videos, and so on. And so it sort of became apparent that there was quite a specific understanding of that particular deity evolving on-line. And I've done some previous research on that. I did my Masters dissertation on that particular, small community of people, on the Morrigan and creating Morrigan altars. Yes, and one thing that I noticed was that she was being described as a Dark Goddess. And it was kind-of becoming apparent that calling her a Dark Goddess meant something a bit more than she was a goddess and dark: that there was some sort of title of the Dark Goddess that was being used to describe her or to contextualise her. And that was how I got into it. And then in the wider, contemporary YouTube community there's definitely a lot of people mentioning other goddesses as being the Dark Goddess or part of the Dark Goddess.

**RD:** *It's interesting because it seems almost to be . . . rather than a specific cult or community based on, as you say, a specific Dark Goddess with a name, it almost seems to be . . . In the Sociology of Religion is one idea that religion or religiosity or movements, certainly [New Age Movements](#) or [New Religious Movements](#), that these are perhaps languages to allow people to handle the post-modern world, and a globalised world. And you see this through media. And this specific case is perhaps a good example of that. Do you think that is a relevant description, or tool, to understand?*

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**AW:** Yes, I think so. I think, in the first instance, it's interesting that it's a name that can be used to describe the experiences of devotees of a multitude of goddesses, in this kind-of . . . . The online Pagan community is very much focussed on people's individual solitary practices. And there's kind-of this sense that if people are engaging with the Dark Goddess through these individual goddesses that they can relate to one another, in a way that might be more difficult if they were just kind-of trying to explain to each other what their individual practices are. This is a way of saying, "Yes, I work with [Hel](#), or I work with the Morrigan, or I work with [Kali](#)," and this is kind-of the understanding that because these are under the umbrella of the Dark Goddess, that therefore they have a commonality. And therefore they are part of some sort of implied community. And there's definitely a sense, then, that there is a specific discourse on the Dark Goddess, that a lot can be understood just through one person saying "I work with a Dark Goddess" or "the Dark Goddess". A lot is implied through that. And anyone who has kind-of delved into the contemporary Pagan community online, or on YouTube, will immediately have an understanding of what that means. They'll immediately be familiar with the discourses of that community and of the Dark Goddess, and have that understanding that this is something that is quite focussed on the female experience, quite focussed even sometimes on environmental issues – that can be something that comes up. And there's sort-of this . . . . absolutely like a particular discourse that's being tapped into, that is being implied even just through the use of that term.

**RD:** *It's an interesting descriptor that she's dark. It's obviously a very loaded word, or descriptor. And it's obviously negative to some people. But there's also an aura of mystery and a hell-of-a-lot of power in that. And it seems to be an empowerment movement. Would you care to elaborate on the meanings of dark?*

**AW:** Yes. I mean I think a lot of the time, a lot of different understandings of what the Dark Goddess is are tried up in people's understandings of what the word dark means, and the implications of that. I will mention, briefly, just the question of skin colour and dark skin. That's something that gets referenced. Very occasionally, people will interpret the Dark Goddess as meaning a goddess with dark skin, but I would say that, across the literature that I'm looking at, that's not what's intended at all. But it is something that gets picked up sometimes. And maybe, perhaps, misinterpreted occasionally: that this is a weird appropriation of a dark-skinned goddess, sometimes seen as being Kali, primarily. But that is definitely not the primary understanding here. Yes there's definitely an understanding that dark is a part maybe of nature, broadly, that has kind-of historically been relegated from . . .well, from society generally, but also from religious practices; that it's been seen as something that is not to be

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approached, not to be encouraged, that's not to be approached with the self, as well. So the dark is definitely seen as something that can be interpreted that is being negative or something that is being difficult in some way. The dark is kind-of the difficult parts of the self: the parts of the self that are maybe destructive, and so on. But maybe it's seen as something that is very necessary to the cycles of nature and to just the ups and down of life, of a personality, and so on. So it's definitely seen as necessary to any kind-of holistic understanding of the self, and also of nature more widely.

**RD:** *And when you mentioned the goddess Kali the great [Vivianne Crowley](#) was in the audience for your presentation, and asked specifically about the types of people that are drawn to the Dark Goddess or are participating and contributing to this idea. Have you looked at the wider historiographical development of the goddess? What countries did it seem to develop from? Are there any specific movements that have been connected to this? Who are these people, and what draws them to it? What motivates them?*

**AW:** Yes. I mean, because the numbers here are so small it's a little bit difficult to make generalisations. I would say, similarly to the kind-of contemporary Pagan demographic generally online, that the majority of the voices are white women from either America or from Britain, mostly speaking. There are some Australians in there as well. There are always Australians . . . and some of the books, as well, have definitely been written by some Australians. But there is a little bit of diversity. I certainly remember there was at least one black woman in the YouTube videos and then there are a couple of Indians as well, specifically related to Kali. And when I first started doing the research I actually expected that there might be two different threads going on: that there might be one thread of sort-of the white Westerners' Dark Goddess which would be emerging in books that weren't specifically associated with Kali, and that there was going to be something slightly different going on with the books that were written specifically about Kali as the Dark Goddess. But interestingly I discovered, once I started analysing the texts, that it was largely the same sort of discourse emerging across the board. And that those texts were kind-of engaging with . . . maybe not the contemporary pagan milieu, but certainly with goddess spirituality. So, generally speaking, the same kind of idea seems to be arising across the board and connected to – very roughly speaking – to [Jungian psychology](#). So it is quite a diverse span of people, really. But again, a little bit difficult to make generalisations based on the amount of data that I've been looking at. And to delve into that further I would be wanting to probably look more at the viewers of the videos, and to look maybe at Facebook groups and so on, to get a wider range of . . . a greater number of practitioners to make any kind of generalisations from.

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**RD:** *You mentioned Jung, and Jungian psychology there. And in New Religious Movements, or certainly New Age Movements – say, [Wicca](#) - are tightly bound to female spirituality. There seems to be an element of therapy involved in these things. Jungian psychology and therapy seem to go together. So how do they . . . ? Do they consciously apply that?*

**AW:** Yes, Jung is a figure who just sort of floats in the background of all of this. I find that he tends to be present kind-of across the board, in these communities. And he's kind-of invoked but then not really addressed. And there's no kind-of direct line drawn, really, between the books. And sometimes there's even overt statements made that this is . . . “we're talking about the shadow, but we're not talking about Jungian practices.” But there's a definite therapeutic element to the practices and to even just the way that the Dark Goddess is talked about. So there is this sense that the Dark Goddess is something that can be used, or an entity that can be used, or invited into the individual, in order to really to kind-of improve one's wellbeing. But I would say that the focus is really not so much just on focussing on one's . . . how well the individual is performing in society, or just their physical or mental wellbeing. There is always this wider implication about the Dark Goddess – while interacting with the Dark Goddess, or having a dark goddess experience – that as a side-effect these good things will happen, and the person will have an improved sense of wellness. But, widely speaking, it's a much deeper and broader question, and seen as much bigger picture . . . a necessary step. That there is something that's deep and important about the human experience, and about our own understanding of nature, and kind-of a disjoint between the human and nature. And that encountering and working with the Dark Goddess is going to heal that at some kind-of basic level. So that transcends any personal therapy and goes beyond, into some much bigger picture idea of what needs to be solved in the world.

**RD:** *The aspect of being dark sounds rather spooky, quite scary. And from the data that you've presented that seems to be something that they're consciously aware of – almost like this daredevil aspect – or perhaps even picking up on cultures say, that focus on possession. One of the bits of data that I picked up on, that you presented, was when one of these writers said that someone was not “really looking her in the eye”. And that sounds to me a very powerful, visual thing there. I think [Rudolf Otto](#) dealt with that in [The Idea of the Holy](#). *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans: the deity that you're in contact with is both fascinating – you're drawn to it – but it also instils a sense of terror. So what's going on here? Is it that kind of Ottonian duality there?**

**AW:** Yes, very much so. There's very much a sense going across the board that, yes, if one is interacting with a divine entity of some kind and there isn't this sense of almost fear or discomfort, that

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something is lacking: that there's something that's not being contacted, or there's something not quite authentic about that experience. And this is particularly so with the Dark Goddess. There's a kind-of sense that, "Yes, well, if you want to do something nice, and easy, and light then you can go and talk to some other goddess. But if you want to talk to the Dark Goddess it's going to be uncomfortable, it's going to be a bit spooky, and that's just how she is. But I think there's a sense that this is saying something authentic about religion in general and that, in order to be truly authentic as a spiritual person you need to be encountering the Dark Goddess. And that is sometimes explicitly stated. That if you're not having Dark Goddess experiences, or interacting with that kind-of essence, that there's something crucial about divinity and the nature of existence that's being missed, and that's not being addressed. And that's a really common theme across the board, and kind-of ties into the idea that, in order to kind-of have a holistic self or a holistic understanding of the nature of cosmos, that the Dark Goddess has to be encountered and has to be acknowledged, and has to be embraced.

**RD:** *I think it's a really exciting topic that you're bringing up here, generally, for the Study of Religion. Because you mention that there's an ambiguity of ontology. It's really fascinating: that awakening or searching for the authentic self, inside them, and at the same time inviting something in from the outside. That seems to me to have great potential to be applied to Religious Studies theory in general.*

**AW:** Yes, absolutely. I kind-of like the sense that, in this community – and I've seen it reflected in some other Pagan communities, and some other contemporary spiritual communities – there's this sense that religion and spirituality, or the divine, that is primarily something that's been contacted within the self. It kind-of almost negates the question of its reality, or whether it needs to be . . . or whether there's any need for it to be kind-of authorised by science, or by a scientific paradigm. So it, very interestingly, allows the people in this community to kind-of buy into a couple of different kinds of authority. And that there's no need for them to negate science, or a scientific paradigm that they've been raised in, in order to really see the importance of, or the kind-of efficacy of, this practice. Which I think is very interesting.

**RD:** *You said . . . there was a key word there that I picked up on, that I really liked. You talked about "interiorisation". And it became apparent, as you were discussing it, that you weren't talking about internalisation. Internalisation seems to be – as I understood from what you were saying – perhaps just an act or a method, in an overall doctrine of focus on the interior. Could you talk more about the dichotomy, or the difference, between the interior and the internal?*

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**AW:** Yes. I guess, again, it kind-of comes down to that idea of whether the religious practice in question is really about just focussing on something inside the self, to the detriment of something outside the self, versus that the religious or spiritual practice in question is more about taking the interior as the kind-of motive of interpretation of something that is understood to not just be within but also be without. But that, then, the subjective experience of what they're doing, and what they're looking at in the world, kind-of becomes a way of reinterpreting, a way of understanding their surroundings. And this ties into the idea of the Dark Goddess as something that is both simultaneously within and outside of the self. So I think it kind-of breaks down that barrier, then, of the question of whether divinity is something that is purely in the mind, or it's purely a metaphor or an archetype of something that isn't real, versus something that is real outside in the world and that needs to be kind-of found outside of the self. It's like this alternative version of reality that can be viewed from that particular, internalised understanding of reality.

**RD:** *It's a difficult situation . . .*

**AW:** Yes, it's very difficult to express!

**RD:** *That's why I think it's so fascinating with Religious Studies. Because there's this constant pursuit in terminology to try and find different ways of expressing the inexpressible. And when you look at a community that is trying to do that without academic language it's almost like, "Yes! Maybe they know something that we don't?!"*

**AW:** (Laughs) Yes. Absolutely!

**RD:** *So, a lot of your data involves YouTube and social media, because it's obviously a really good tool for people in New Religious Movements. I'm interested, and concerned, that a lot of women put themselves out there, talking about very personal things which are probably open to ridicule. What kind of reception have they had? I mean trolls, and the [Alt-Right](#), and all sorts . . .?*

**AW:** Yes, absolutely. And the videos that I've been analysing . . . there are no kind-of negative comments to be found on those videos. Generally speaking, the community are very affirmative and the people who are commenting – or at least the comments that are left for the public to see – are from like-minded people, usually women who have had similar experiences. But, I mean, you don't have to scratch the surface too much to see that there definitely are a certain amount of issues with that kind of behaviour in the community. I'm part of one group where I've seen a conversation very recently of

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people expressing concerns about their YouTube channels; about continuing with their YouTube channels; women who are feeling uncomfortable because they have witnessed other women in the community experience really terrible trolling behaviours, to the point of being stalked or harassed. And it's always kind-of there, under the surface. It generally just gets dealt with by people just blocking, deleting comments. So there isn't a culture of it being out in the open and being able to read the horrible comments on these videos, because they tend to just be deleted and blocked. But it's definitely there, under the surface. It's definitely something that, yes, that YouTubers encounter in particular. Particularly, I think, female YouTubers, yes.

**RD:** *It does really sound quite . . . part of the zeitgeist, really, of what's going on at the moment in Western society. Even in Eastern countries, you got the [Hindutva](#) movement in India, where there's just this rise of intolerance and the [New Right](#), which is almost becoming established and institutionalised. So it seems like this – even though it's a small happening in a small community – has a much greater . . . . It's perhaps a litmus test for massive social relevance and social movements.*

**AW:** Yes, absolutely. I mean across the board, the question of feminism, outright, gets dealt with in different ways, I would say, in the texts, in the books and in the YouTube videos. Sometimes it's not a word that will be raised at all. And some of the women will say, “We're not saying that men are a problem or . . . railing against the idea of the patriarchy”. But really, across the board, the Dark Goddess is very much a feminist one. And very much, sometimes just outright discussing the problems of the patriarchy, and so on and so forth. So it's definitely a movement. I can understand why it's still being . . . still kind-of maybe, on the rise. I would say that, certainly, the Morrigan is an increasingly popular goddess. So, while it is a very small community, there's definitely this sense that it's reflecting something that's happening in broader society.

**RD:** *So where do you go from here now, with your research? Obviously you've got publications coming out . . . and you've got your website, which is a mix of academic and more free expressionism. But once you've done your PhD and things . . . ? And as we said, there's so much material here that . . . . You've got feminism, and the theory of religion, political relevance – so are you just going to see where the next step is . . . ?*

**AW:** Yes, I'm kind-of on the fence at the moment. I may branch out and do something completely different beyond the PhD. I haven't completely decided. I have been considering doing something that's not necessarily within Pagan Studies. Because one question that I was asked – I think I was asked, or maybe I just brought it up – was about fieldwork and the question of doing interviews and so

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on. And I think, if I was going to continue down this line of research I would want to be broadening my field of data by doing some sort of interviewing or something along those lines, some fieldwork. And that's something that I've always been uncomfortable about doing because of my role within the community. Because of the kind-of insider/outsider problem. And because, as Áine Orga, I am a figure in the Pagan community, and certainly within the Dark Goddess movement. Anyone who is online talking about the Morrigan has probably come across me. And so I kind-of already get this sense that the community, maybe, has a lot of trust in me. And I've always been afraid of abusing that trust in some way. That people might say things to me, or might open up about things, or share things, without necessarily realising that I've got my academic hat on, or without necessarily wanting me to use that in my academic publications. So I think, yes, I may branch out. I may do something a little bit different in the future. But I'll have to wait and see. Get the PhD finished first!

**RD:** *There's so much food for thought here. Thank you, soon-to-be Dr Áine Warren!*

**AW:** Thank you.

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