
THE MISSING GODDESS

by

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I am very grateful to Alix Pirani for her article on the Hebrew Goddess, (**Self and Society** Sept/Oct 1986), and I want to describe some of my own experiences within Christianity.

Three years ago I spent some time looking at French churches, and I was particularly struck by some of the Black Madonnas, for example at Chartres and Rocamadour. They looked ancient, primitive, pre-Christian. They reminded me of African fertility sculptures. I also noticed that some of them were obviously very important devotional centres - people were clustered round them praying; there was a tremendous spiritual aura around them. They often seemed subjectively more important than the statues of the crucified Christ.

That visit happened just before I started a three year course in Christian theology. I did that course because I was impatient with my own spiritual desultoriness - reading this and that, having insights haphazardly. I really wanted to look systematically into the dominant religious tradition of my own culture. This had become more important to me than Zen, which I had worked within for ten years previously.

Of course within the Protestant tradition, within which I was studying, both the Black Madonna and the "white" Madonna are virtually absent. The Reformation condemned the cult of Mary as idolatrous and unjustified by scripture - and it is a fact that Mary is a relatively unimportant figure in the Bible.

But right at the beginning, Christianity, following Judaism, had excluded the goddess implacably. The full working out of the theory of God involved the three in one / one in three paradox, and the maleness of two of the members - Father and Son. Within the Trinity the feminine aspect of the divine is rigorously banished; and in the Gospels, women are virtually classed with Samaritans, lepers and Gentiles as unclean. There are some significant exceptions to this: for example the Syrophenician woman (a Gentile) who tells Jesus that although a non-Jew she is open to his message, and virtually rebukes him (Mark 7:24). And in Mark it is surely significant that at the crucifixion only women are left with Jesus: the male disciples have all fled, (Mark 15:40). It is also clear that in the early Church, women were preachers and prophets and had very important roles.

But the patriarchal basis of Christianity asserted itself inexorably and women were excluded from the priesthood. There must be a male God served by male priests. It is only recently in some churches in this country that women were even allowed to read the Bible lesson!

But as if by compensation, the cult of Mary grew astonishingly. Theologically, the Church was always careful to stress that she is not a goddess; she does not rank with Christ as the true human/divine being. Technically she is "mother of God". But underneath the theology, and the closer we get to the popular devotion to Mary, it is clear that existentially, and psychologically, she **is** a goddess. She has divine attributes which have accumulated doctrinally over the centuries - she is perpetually virgin; absolutely pure and sinless; she is physically received into heaven; she is free from original sin. Incidentally, many of these rather strange doctrinal attributes have quite profound psychological correlations. For example, her perpetual virginity is **not** a swipe at sexuality, although it was often used to indicate the evil of physical love. At a more profound level, virginity symbolizes the self-sufficiency of the feminine divine - the goddess has no need of the masculine to be fertilized! (1) However an exposition of such symbolic meanings would fill a book.

There is also a strong note of tenderness and intimacy surrounding her which produced many songs, poems, and of course the many great

paintings of her. At the same time, there is something unbalanced about her - there is little of the dark goddess, which is found in Lilith or Kali, and the cult of Mary can become sickly and sentimental. Thus it seems clear that the black madonnas which spread throughout Europe are representations of the dark side, perhaps going back to the ancient goddess Isis, moon-goddess, destroyer and life-giver. (2) But in the main, Christianity was unable to give form to the darker side of the divine: instead the notion of feminine evil was externalized in the great witch-hunts. It is symbolized in the story of Eve: the disobedient female, who plunges humanity into chaos and darkness and shame.

But the most extraordinary chapter in the history of the portrayal of the goddess in Christianity occurs when the Protestant Reformation completely wipes her out. There are many theological reasons for the Protestant rejection of Mary, but there are also social and psychological reasons. The Reformation is indissolubly linked with the rise of capitalism. In both we find the stress on the individual - in religion the individual conscience; economically, the right of the individual to accumulate wealth. Thrift becomes a religious duty; idleness a sin. Protestantism also embraces the rising nationalism of the sixteenth century as against the supra-national monolith of the Catholic Church.

Thus the already patriarchal nature of the Church is rendered more abrasive, with a fiercer examination of individual conduct, with a view to the expenditure of energy in a "productive" manner. How deeply embedded these values are in our culture can be seen clearly in Thatcherite Britain.

Thus in the Reformation, the values of Mary are rejected. Protestantism became a religion with a huge hole in the centre. The goddess had been removed. She became an unperson. The feminine aspect of the divine went completely underground in Protestant cultures.

But today it is clear that the goddess is emerging from the underground - or from the unconscious, to use psychological language. For example, there is no doubt in my mind that the rising tide of demands for women's ordination to the priesthood represents the unconscious return of the goddess. If the priest is the representative of God, then the argument is really about whether a woman can be the image of God. The passions aroused on both sides are fierce, since fundamental questions are at stake, not only over the nature of priests, but the nature of the divine itself.

And yet - this debate within Christianity has a strangely sterile air. I believe it is possible to find a personal framework for one's own spirituality within Christianity, as within all the major religions and spiritual traditions - but it is also true that most people are indifferent to the official churches. I think this indifference is the most important aspect of twentieth

century religion. We live in a post-Christian age. For some reason, the Christian symbols and rituals no longer have a hold on the imagination. And I am sure one major reason is the absence of the feminine divine, the absence of the goddess.

There is of course a rising tide of feminist theology within Christianity, which seeks to bring the feminine into the Church. But I cannot see how it can develop without foundering on the twin rocks of "Father and Son". If we go "beyond God the Father" (3), as I believe we must, then Christianity has effectively collapsed. Is it worth saving? For some individuals, it is, and a few years ago I would have said yes, but now I tend to feel that the human imagination and the enormous hunger for the numinous that exists today, must find new forms, new symbols, new means of expression.

And some of these new forms are already with us. The signs are here - in the peace movement, the women's movement, ecology, the whole anti-patriarchal shift that is going on today. These are relatively indirect manifestations of the goddess. **The earth** itself demands recognition, healing, a halt to the desecration and murder we have inflicted on it.

At the same time, it is extraordinary that the conscious revelation of the goddess is occurring today simultaneously in many individuals, and they are working out their own relationship with her. It may be that Humanistic Psychology can provide one of the channels whereby we can come together and do this work.

Of course many people still find discussion of the goddess frankly weird, "science fiction", regressive, infantile. I know that I have had to fight through layers and layers of deep-rooted scepticism in myself. I could accept the goddess by means of psychological reductionism - "after all, it's only a psychological image, an archetype". But I have been forced to retreat step by step from this position, and now I can only summarize my present view this way - the goddess exists objectively and independently of human consciousness. I find that a disturbing, terrifying statement, but I have to keep coming back to it again and again. Of course the goddess is an image of processes and states in the inner psychic world - but not only that. It's the same question that is commonly asked about God - is God objectively real, or subjectively real? I believe both are true.

For thousands of years human beings have been dominated by the patriarchal god, and his way of

thinking and doing and feeling and creating. But the missing goddess is returning. The solution to the "problem" of the goddess can only be the encounter with her. But this is not to be undertaken lightly. To encounter the goddess is to deal with the numinous - the non-human, the fire of the gods that burns us as well as giving light and knowledge.

But whether we like it or not, the earth demands the return of the goddess, in both her dark and light forms. Human relationships are required to break through the shell of alienation and loneliness cast upon them by our desperate society. The goddess both within us and outside us is terribly wounded and needs to be healed.

Let me add a final plea on behalf of men. Many of the books on the goddess and goddesses (e.g. Esther Harding's) are by and for women. But I believe the goddess is equally needed by men. The patriarchal god has injured us all. We have all been sacrificed on his altar.

References

1. see Esther Harding, **Woman's Mysteries Ancient and Modern**, Rider, p.104
 2. Ean Begg, **The Cult of the Black Virgin**, Arkana, p.14
 3. The title of Mary Daly's seminal book, **Beyond God the Father: Toward a philosophy of Women's liberation**, Beacon Press.
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