

Is God A Woman?

by Gayle S. Myers

Preposterous, right? If you think so it's time to sit back and review the evidence. But be careful. You risk shaking the entire foundation of your belief system and perhaps even worse, recognizing how badly you've been duped. Women have demanded equal rights on the job and in the home, but Heaven has still remained a patriarchy. Or has it?

In actuality, there is a ground swell movement throughout this country taking note of enormous archaeological evidence which indicates that at one time, God was not thought of as male, but as a woman. Revered for centuries, she was the Great Mother who gave birth to all life in the universe. She was no virgin queen, but the fertile vessel of sexuality and creativity regarded as both sacred and central.

The first archaeological finds in this area were made as early as the 1800s by J. J. Bachoffen. Being both male and chauvinistic to boot, he sloughed it off as primitive cultures exercising primitive beliefs. Recent evidence, however, has begun to sing a different tune. New archaeological finds reveal that far from primitive, these early mother-worshipping societies seemed to have everything necessary for civilization. From art to sanitation, they created, farmed, manufactured and governed within cultures that were as advanced as the early Greek states. In fact, only one thing was absent from their societies; warfare. Their cities, though equipped with everything from temples to drainpipes, had a distinct absence of defensive walls, their gravesites a remarkable absence of weapons. By all counts, evidence shows they were both advanced and peaceful, a combination which may seem as startling as the concept of a feminine god.

God was the Great Mother, and being a mom, the values she espoused were ones you would expect from a good mother. Nurturing, cooperation, and an acute reverence for life seemed to be the foundation of these mother-centered religions.

The workshop of this feminine creatrix was not limited to a single isolated geographic area. In fact, though worshipped under different names such as Ishtar, Inanna, Isis and Kali, the Great Mother was the central deity of vast regions encompassing Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and India. These mother worshipping cultures were stable and thrived for at least 2,500 years. Within them, women had power and prestige in both government and religion. Family name and property were passed through the lineage of the mother. Yet, despite these facts, there is no archaeological evidence that there was an oppression of males. Quite the contrary; the games and activities depicted in their art indicates a valuing of both genders, as well as an equality and trust between them. However, because they were reflections of the Great Mother herself, women did tend to function as the primary leadership. They seemed to do well in this capacity; the cultures they ruled flourished.

Change came to these cultures between 2000 and 1000 B.C., when they were destabilized by a series of natural disasters in the form of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Simultaneously, Northern nomads began to migrate South. These warlike Indo-European tribes (also known as Aryans), though generally less culturally advanced, were fiercer and larger in stature than their agrarian neighbors. They were quite advanced in warfare and weaponry, seeming to actually worship these pursuits. Many of their religious motifs centered around the blade, which they obviously regarded as sacred. They had horses and war chariots as well, which gave them a lightninglike strike capacity. Already weakened by geographic cataclysm, and untrained as they were in warfare, the goddess societies were no match for the invading tribes. Whole cultures were decimated by these brutal invaders.

The men of the conquered cultures did not fare well with the invaders. Generally, they were annihilated, often in torturous manners. Women however, were badly needed by the Indo-Europeans, in fact the need for them may have been part of their reason for migration. Thus, many were kept alive to become wives, concubines, or slaves to the invading tribesmen. As these two radically different societies blended, so did their religions and mythologies.

The conquerors had brought a male dominated religion. The once ruling Great Mother was reduced in stature to become the wife or consort of the new prevailing male god. The values of the invaders, instead of centering around nurturing, creation, and the ability to give life, revolved around power, warfare, and the ability to take life. Death and funeral ritual became very important in the blended cultures. Gravesites of male warriors were elaborate, often containing the corpses of numerous, seemingly sacrificed women as well as weapons and possessions. A rigid class stratification emerged that had not been in evidence in the previous mother-worshipping societies. These vast changes, all marked by archaeological evidence, seem to have taken place in a period of a few hundred years. The world as it had been known was suddenly turned upside down as God the Mother became God the Father.

In the new societies, family name and property were passed through the line of the father. Since paternity can be difficult to establish, the new system required a severe restriction of the movement and freedom of women. They were, in fact, now regarded as part of the man's property. New laws emerged granting few protections or rights to women. In many of the new cultures, the penalties for rape or assaults on women were reduced or eliminated. Often, if penalties were exacted they were paid to the male to whom the woman "belonged," not to the woman herself.

In some cultures, the ancient symbols of the Great Mother, the serpent and the fruit tree, became symbols of evil and man's fall. Some historians feel this distortion of religious symbolism was intentionally done to discourage worship of the Great Mother. Sexuality too, which had been free and open in the mother-centered societies, became shrouded in darkness and guilt. Woman became viewed as the great temptress.

Though initially a feminine aspect was included in the new religions, it was eventually eliminated almost completely. Of course, she occasionally reasserted her presence through

cults and mystery groups. These usually experienced brief periods of power, only to be resuppressed by the dominant male order. The Cult of the Virgin, popular during medieval times, was such a re-emergence. With its great reverence for the sacred feminine, it was the foundation of the Age of Chivalry.

Despite these brief forays, the Great Mother was generally denied, disposed of, and deposed, as were most women of wisdom and power. This suppression of feminine wisdom may have reached its peak during the popular witch-hunts of the Middle Ages. These shameful persecutions even make up a chapter of our own nation's history. In the course of a few hundred years it is estimated that over nine million women were murdered on the accusation that they were witches. The widespread acceptance of the belief that women were inferior and evil made the witch-hunts merely a reflection of the prevailing doctrine. Any woman who demonstrated exceptional ability, especially in an intuitive, spiritual, or healing capacity, was viewed as extremely dangerous and threatening. Of course, once accused of witchcraft, it was almost impossible for a woman to prove herself innocent. In one European town, the frenzied men killed all but one woman!

This persecution of women under the guise of Christianity was responsible for the death of most of the midwives and herbalists of this period. Their absence ushered in many dark centuries in which the mortality rate in childbirth escalated enormously. The once natural act of giving birth became a greatly dreaded event. Countless women died of "childbirth fever" in the unwashed hands of poorly trained male doctors. Ignorantly moving from morgues to delivery rooms, they unwittingly spread contagion and death. Even these deaths may have seemed almost appropriate to the general populace, given the prevailing belief that God himself had condemned women to suffer in childbirth. In the final analysis, it was probably more regarded as Eve's fault than that of the inferior medical practices of the day.

It is remarkably freeing for today's woman to even consider rethinking the Adam and Eve creation story. It has functioned as a powerful tool used by men to disempower and control women. Whether it was intentionally set out as such or not, even into our present day it holds millions of women in a self-image of inferiority and guilt. What a striking contrast its image is to the archaeological evidence of our ancient foremothers!

It is perhaps no coincidence that during this era of ecological crisis, the Great Mother is reemerging in our world consciousness. The attitude of domination and exploitation of our Mother Earth has led humanity and our world to the brink of destruction. This attitude toward the Earth and its species is but another reflection of the attitude which has prevailed against women for thousands of years. Both continue to be victims of rape.

Among women today, there is a new movement whose primary focus is not social or political. It is a feminine spiritual revival. Women are meeting in groups and workshops to rediscover their link with the Great Mother of our ancient past. In realigning with the concept of the Great Mother, women are recognizing both the divinity in themselves and in their sex. Unlike in the early liberation movement, women now recognize that their empowerment will not be found through imitating or beating men at their own game. Nor is it found by skewing the feminine values of motherhood and child rearing. Through the

Divine Mother, women now recognize their true power rests in nurturing and embracing the qualities in themselves that are uniquely feminine. Femininity and wisdom are in no way viewed as mutually exclusive.

We stand at the edge of a revolution in consciousness. Out of global necessity, in this age we may witness a return of the values of the Great Mother with her reverence for all life. Through understanding her, perhaps we will come to truly know ourselves and to reclaim the power and dignity of our sex. In the values she espoused, perhaps we can once again learn to live in peace, caring for each other and our world.

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Further reading on this subject may be found in the following books:

When God Was a Woman, Merlin Stone, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976.

The Chalice and the Blade, Rianne Eisler, Harper and Row, 1976.

The Language of the Goddess, Marija Gimbutos, Thames and Hudson, 1989.

Goddesses in Everyday Woman, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Harper and Row, 1984.

Immaculate Deception, Suzanne Arms, Bantam Books, 1975.

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