



The Religion of the Goddess

By: Lawrence Durdin-Robertson

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The cover illustration of this booklet is by Olivia Robertson and represents the Goddess sitting on the Holy Table. It is based on the High Altar of the Temple of Isis, Clonegal Castle. The following excerpt is from a lecture that Lawrence Durdin-Robertson gave in the Assembly Room in Wexford on October 26, 1974 at the Opening of the The Wexford Arts Centre, during the Wexford Festival.

Excerpt from Lecture

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to start by quoting a passage from a book written by a certain Dr. Alexander. It is from a long treatise entitled "The History of Women". Although living 200 years ago, the author might well be an advanced advocate of the Women's Liberation Movement. He writes as follows :

"The mythology of all antiquity is full of female as well as male deities. The Hebrews and many of their neighbouring nations, worshipped the Queen of Heaven; the Phoenicians adored Astarte; the Scythians, Apia; and the Scandinavians, Frigga, the consort of Odin. Wherever female deities have obtained a place in the religion of a people, it is a sign that women are of some consequence; for we find in those modern nations where the women are held in the most despicable light, that even their deities are all of the masculine gender".

In other words, to achieve a healthy society - something more is needed than "Votes for women", "Equal pay" and so on. For achieving a healthy society there is only one adequate answer; and that answer is: - a return to the Cult of the Goddess.

This lecture is divided into two sections. First, we shall survey the history of Matriarchal religion. Second, we shall consider the rituals, both the public or outer, and the esoteric or inner Mysteries; the second section will end with a few examples of the effect of the cult of the Goddess on ethics.

Starting, then, on the history of Matriarchal religion, I shall begin, where one would expect to begin, at the Prehistoric Era.

Now it is generally accepted that the dominant religion of all races, at that time, was Matriarchal Polytheism. This might be defined as a multitude of goddesses and gods - in that order - dominated by a Great Mother or Mothers.

We have confirmation of this in archaeology. Erich Neumann, in "The Great Mother" writes :

"Of the Stone Age sculptures known to us, there are fifty five female figures and only five male figures. The male figures, of youths, are atypical and poorly executed, hence it is certain that they had no significance for the cult. This fits in with the secondary character of the male godhead, who appeared only later in the history of religions and derived his divine rank from his mother, the Goddess."

The same conclusion is reached from another angle. The profound esoteric writer, Gerald Massey, states that "The First Mother was the earliest divinity in all lands."

We come now to the early historical period, covering the era as far as 2,600 years ago.

Here, Matriarchal Polytheism is still a potent factor, although it varies with different races and civilizations.

According to Mme. Blavatsky, in "The Secret Doctrine," the two great civilizations, in historical times, - where the Goddesses held a position of importance at least equal to the male god - were Egypt and China. Crete is not mentioned, since the major discoveries had not yet been made.

The strength of Polytheism in Egypt may be seen in the opposition to the changes attempted by Akhnaten. Although it is doubtful if he were a monotheist in the present meaning of the word, he certainly wished to banish - perhaps for political reasons - the deities of Thebes; and most of the Egyptian deities were worshipped there. It is, however, said that he always venerated the goddesses Maat and Bast. Anyhow, his attempt to remove even a part of the Pantheon was resented, and we see the Old Religion restored under Tutankhamen.

In China the dominant position of the Goddess of Mercy, Kwan-Yin, has always been, and still is, maintained.

We come then to the historical period dating from about 2,600 years ago and ending with the Renaissance.

Here we see a definite loss of the cult of the Goddess, more in the West than in the East.

In the West (and I am using this term in the wide sense, to include all countries to the West of India) we notice a reduction in the number of deities, in some cases leaving only one.

Nevertheless, this loss is more apparent than real.

If we start with the time when the Israelites had entered Canaan, (although this was considerably earlier than the beginning of the period we are now describing), we have much information in the Hebrew Bible.

Now it is unfortunate that most people are acquainted only with the translations of these books. For if we study them in the original Hebrew we will see a considerable amount of polytheism and, indeed, the cult of the Goddess.

To give some examples :- Taking the first word of Genesis :- B'rashith. This consists of the prefix B, "in", and the feminine noun Rashith. Of course it is not inaccurate to render this as "In the beginning". Nevertheless, Rashith means more than that. It has also the meaning of "source, origin". Thus the following alternative renderings are given in "The Secret Doctrine": - "In the Essence," and "In the womb". These translations are in keeping with the great Chaldean Scriptures (of which the Hebrew Bible is, as it were, only a selected edition). In the Babylonian Creation Narrative, Heaven and Earth are made from the body of the goddess Tiamat.

Coming now to another word in the first verse of Genesis: "Elohim". - There appeared an article in "The Times" a few months ago by the Religious Affairs Correspondent. He quotes the words of Professor Nelle Morton: "The early Hebrew name.. Elohim, was the combination of the word Eloh, a goddess, and Im, the masculine plural Hebrew suffix.... Yahweh (the pure form of the corruption Jehovah) was ... derived from the name of the earlier Sumerian goddess." And so an accurate translation of "Elohim" is not "God" but rather "the Deities" or "the Pantheon." One wonders when the official translators will have the honesty, or perhaps the courage, to translate this word properly.

If we can see Matriarchal Polytheism in the Hebrew Scriptures, we can also see it practised, sometimes as the established religion, all through the 400 years or so of the period of the Kings. Thus "Solomon worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians" (the great Phoenician and Canaanite Astarte). Mention is made of "the high places that were before Jerusalem which Solomon the king had builded for Ashtoreth"; it is significant that they are recorded as standing 300 years later. At the end of the period of the Kings, we have a record of an interesting dialogue between the Jewish exiles in Egypt and Jeremiah. Part of this is as follows :

"All the men and all the women that stood by, a great multitude, even all the people that dwelt in the land of Egypt in Pathros answered Jeremiah, saying. . we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the queen of heaven as we have done .. in the cities

of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, for then we had plenty of victuals and were well and saw no evil. But since we left off to burn incense to the queen of heaven, we have wanted all things and have been consumed by the sword and by the famine. And when we burned incense to the queen of heaven, and poured out drink offerings to her, did we make our cakes to worship her and pour out drink offerings unto her without our men?"

The Queen of Heaven here mentioned may be either Astarte or the Babylonian goddess, Ishtar.

We come now to the later period of the Hebrew Bible, the period of the return from the Exile. This covers the era before the Greek occupation. This period is characterized by the cult of Wisdom. In the "Wisdom Literature" Wisdom is seen personified as a female figure and is given the feminine names, Chokmah, Binah and occasionally, Tebunah, the Greek equivalent being Sophia. Robert Graves describes Wisdom as here depicted, as a "quasi-goddess". I shall read a few passages, describing Wisdom, in the Book of Proverbs.

"I was from everlasting. . from the beginning, or ever the earth was .. before the mountains were settled, before the hills.

"Wisdom crieth without, she uttereth her voice in the streets, she crieth in the chief places of the concourse, in the opening of the gates..

"By me kings reign and princes decree justice, by me princes rule and nobles and even all the judges of the earth. . I lead in the midst of the paths of judgement, that I may cause those that love me to inherit substance. .

"I will pour out my spirit unto you. . For whoso findeth me findeth life. .

"Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars; She hath sent forth her maidens. . Come, eat of my bread and drink the wine which I have mingled. ."

This female figure, Wisdom, is also referred to by Jesus, in his words, "Wisdom is justified of all her children."

Another female personification which occurs all through the Hebrew Bible is Sheol. This is a feminine noun defined by Brown, Driver and Briggs in their Hebrew Lexicon as "Underworld. . compare, hollow place, 'Holle', hell". This may be one of the Semitic words which have come into the English language and may be related to the Norse proper name Hela, the Norse Goddess of Hell. Some examples of this female figure personifying the Underworld are as follows:

"Therefore hell (Sheol) hath enlarged herself and opened her mouth without measure."

In the Proverbs Sheol is seen as one of the daughters of the ancient Canaanite goddess Alukah, and as sister of "the Womb".

In the Books of Esdras are the words: "The storehouses of souls in the world below are like the womb".

Here, in personifying the Underworld as a female figure, Hebrew tradition is in keeping with that of nearly all the great Pantheons.

During the later stages of the Greek and Roman occupations of Palestine we see the growth of Hebrew-Greek literature. The important characteristic of this is that the Holy Ghost is regarded as female. This was probably inherited from the earlier Jewish tradition, which referred to the Holy Spirit by the word Ruach, a noun which is in most cases feminine.

Thus the Holy Ghost is seen as a female figure among the Gnostics (Simon Magus sees his wife Helena as one of her incarnations). The same applies in the Book of Enoch, among the Nazarenes, and among the Essene Ebionites; they saw - as an incarnation of the Holy Spirit - the Virgin Mary. In the biography of Jesus, attributed to the Hebrews, Jesus speaks the words: "My Mother, the Holy Spirit."

Coming to what is, perhaps, better known literature -- the writings of John. He starts with the words -- using the English translation, "In the beginning." The original Greek, however, is far more significant:

"En arche". Now Arche is a feminine noun which is an almost exact translation of the Hebrew Rashith. Arche is defined as "a first cause, origin, a first principle, element" as well as a "beginning" (in time). In Parkhurst's Greek Dictionary is the following definition: "Arche in this application answers to the Hebrew Rasit (i.e. Rashith) or wisdom. . a word which had the meaning of the emblem of the female generative power, the Arg or Arca." And so the words "En arche" might also be rendered "In the Source, In the Matrix". Indeed, some scholars see in them a hidden reference to the Virgin Mary.

In the Revelation of John, or the Apocalypse, there is an interesting passage; it refers to a person often identified with Aima Elohim, the Mother of the Elohim, or Great Mother, of the Kabbalah. "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." Further on in this passage she is described as having two wings of a great eagle.

Coming now to the last years of the Roman Empire in the West, - we know that from the time of Constantine the Old Pantheon went officially into abeyance. Yet, in spite of this, it was still venerated by many - for instance, among the aristocracy; for the Senate was under the guardianship of the goddess Nike or Victoria. Also the country dwellers, the "Pagani", kept to their old faith (hence "pagans" - the adherents of the Old Religion). The cult of Vesta, the Goddess of the hearth fire, - whose temple was the centre of the Roman Empire - lasted more than 60 years from that time. And in the extreme South of Egypt Isis was still worshipped for several centuries, until the reign of Justinian.

How seriously these devotees of the Old Religion held to their Faith may be seen in Edward Gibbon's account of the Emperor Julian. In his reign the old Pantheon was re-established, until his early death in the Persian Wars. Gibbon writes of him as follows: "It was in honour of Pan or Mercury, of Hecate or Isis, that Julian, on particular days, denied himself the use of some particular food, which might have been offensive to his tutelary deities. . Notwithstanding the modest silence of Julian himself, we may learn from his faithful friend, the orator Libanius, that he lived in perpetual intercourse with the gods and goddesses."

We turn now to the end of this particular period, - that long era known as the Middle Ages.

Generally speaking, in this period, the Cult of the Goddess took place in "underground" movements. And by far the most important of these was Witchcraft. Here the old Goddess names were retained, and the goddesses themselves represented by the coven priestess. Thus Lilith is presented, - the Assyrian storm-goddess appearing about 4,500 years ago, the first wife of Adam, the mother of those half-human beings known to the Hebrews as the Lilim, to the Arabs as the Jinn and to the Irish as the Sidhe. Then there is Ashtoreth, the Moon and Love Goddess of Syria - her worship was transmitted through the Greek and Roman witches, to continue in the Medieval covens. The Moon-goddesses of Greece and Rome, - Hecate (who is mentioned by Shakespeare in Macbeth) and also Diana were venerated. New goddesses appear; Bensozia, Aradia and others.

Another great preserver of the Old Religion was the Tarot. This is a kind of small Pantheon in itself. Thus the second trump, the Priestess or Female Pontiff wears the horned head-dress of the great Egyptian goddess Hathor. In some packs she is called Pope Joan or Juno, - the "Queen of Heaven" or Juno of the Romans.

The gypsies kept, or perhaps developed, their own polytheistic religion. Their chief goddess is believed to be of Indian origin, and bears the Sanskrit name Amari De or De Develeski.

These cults of the goddess were not all "underground". A perpetual reminder of the Old Religion was given, and still is given, in the Calendar. Monday is the day of the Moon (compare the French Lundi and La Lune); Friday is the day of the Norse goddess Frigg (compare the French Vendredi, the day of Venus). The month of May according to the Oxford English Dictionary is connected by some with the goddess Maia; she is the old Italian Goddess of Spring who had her festival on May 1st.

Another factor helping to preserve the cult of the Goddess in Medieval times was the sympathy shown in general by the Plantagenet rulers of England to the Old Religion. Thus King Edward III founded the Order of the Garter - the garter, of course, being one of the great symbols of witchcraft. Although the story is well-known, I shall repeat it, in the words of Miss Valiente.

"The story goes that when King Edward III was dancing with a lady of his court, either the Fair Maid of

Kent or the Countess of Salisbury, her garter fell to the floor. The lady was embarrassed; but the king gallantly picked up the garter, saying, 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' ('shame to him who thinks ill of it'), and tied it upon his own leg. This incident gave him the idea to found the Order of the Garter.

The above incident of court life seems a very trivial one for this noble order to have been founded upon, unless it had some inner significance. But if the garter that the lady dropped was a witch-garter, then the whole episode assumes quite a different aspect. Both the lady's confusion and the King's gesture are seen to have a much deeper meaning than in a mere pretty story of courtly gallantry. She stood revealed as a leading witch; and he publicly showed his willingness to protect the Old Religion and its followers."

Another open cult of the goddess which reappeared towards the end of the Middle Ages is the invocation of the Muses - the nine goddesses of literature and the Arts and Sciences. Thus Calliope presides over epic song, Melpomene over tragedy, Urania over astrology and astronomy. I should like to take an example from the work of Edmund Spenser, who though living in the Renaissance era is often regarded as strongly influenced by medieval chivalry. He is of particular interest to us here, having been connected with Enniscorthy and having written the Fairie Queene in Ireland. His invocation is as follows:

"Lo! I the man whose Muse whylome did maske,. in lowly Shephard's weeds..
"Help then, O Holy Virgin! chiefe of nyne, Thy weaker Novice to performe thy will..
"And with them eke, O Goddesse heavenly bright! " Shed thy faire beanie into my feeble eyrie,
To think of that true glorious type of thine .."

This cult of the Muses became almost universal among the poets of the next century - including Milton. We see it continued at the present time by Robert Graves, whom one might describe as a devotee of the Muses.

There was also, during the Middle Ages, and still is, a cult of a very different nature: the cult of Nemesis. This goddess, in the background of the Greek and Roman Pantheons, was seen as "She whom none can escape". And yet, strangely enough, she is not a terrifying figure. Dr. Oskar Seyffert describes her thus: "She is represented as a meditative, thoughtful maiden with the attributes of proportion and control (a measuring-rod, bridle and yoke, among other symbols). Nemesis always has, and still holds, this position in the background, with her same basic characteristics. Nemesis is defined thus in the Oxford English Dictionary. "The Goddess of retribution .. Retribution, justice. ."

As so to summarize this long period of history, in the West: We can say that the Cult of the Goddess, while officially in abeyance, was zealously maintained by the faithful few.

In the East, during this period, Matriarchal Polytheism remained far more in evidence.

India has always kept her large Pantheon in spite of many invasions. China, though not normally associated with religion, has always been careful to venerate ancestral spirits. Among the deities, Kwan-yin, whether as an indigenous goddess, or in the Buddhist Pantheon, has maintained her position. Japan has always kept, as part of the established religion, her immense Pantheon of powerful and often sophisticated deities - eight million is the official number. The most important personage within this pantheon is, according to most writers, the Sun-Goddess, Ama-terasu. She is the official ancestress of every emperor or mikado.

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