

Reflections on the Divine Feminine

John Nash

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Background

Over the last 30 years feminist theology has become a field of intense interest. The main driving force has been women reacting against the masculine portrayal of God and the patriarchal structure of organized religion. Women are seeking divine images that relate to and support their own spiritual experiences, and they want greater opportunities to express their religious aspirations.

The response to these initiatives has been the incorporation of gender-inclusive language into the liturgy, increasing attention to ancient goddesses and to women in scripture, and the admittance of women—even at senior levels—to some traditionally male-dominated religious institutions.

The process is still in its early stages. Stiff resistance has developed in many quarters—from both men and women—and more education is needed to raise the general consciousness. But it is probably fair to say that a majority of the people in this room support the rights of everyone to express his or her spirituality in meaningful, relevant terms. Whether this is done through organized religion or through new forms of individual and group spirituality is a matter of personal choice.

My purpose today is not to contribute to the political debate over women's role in religion. Nor do I feel competent to tell women what form of spirituality they should express. Each of us must do that for ourselves. Instead, I want to step back and look at the divine nature, to see what remarks can be made about what has come to be called the feminine face of God. I want to explore what it means to speak of the divine feminine and what responses it may evoke within us. We may or may not choose to use the word "goddess" in that context, and there are problems with that term which we shall address later.

However, I do want to emphasize that interest in the divine feminine is not just a women's issue, an offshoot of the larger feminist cause. Our gender should not be allowed to dictate the types of spiritual images we find evocative and inspiring. Many women find masculine divine images fulfilling. And many men—throughout history and alive today—are moved by feminine images.

What is Gender?

In any event, we must be careful how we define gender. Gender can have more than one meaning, even at the purely human level. First, there is biological gender, measured in one of three ways, by:

- the chromosome pattern in our genes
- physical appearance, including the existence and size of genitalia
- ability to fulfill reproductive roles.

However, there is not complete correlation among these criteria. Each year in the United States, 55,000 babies are born with sexual ambiguities. A larger number of people grow up with the strong belief that they have been mistakenly categorized. Genetic males believe that they are really women, and vice versa. Attempts can be made to modify biological gender using hormone treatment or surgery, but these are of limited effectiveness.

Then there is psychological and sociological gender, which transcends biology. Sociological gender is defined by attitudes or behavior, as judged by culture or tradition. For example, aggressiveness and ambition are considered masculine characteristics, while nurturing and peacemaking are considered feminine

ones. Psychological gender is defined by something more basic within us—or own claim, based on whatever criteria we find meaningful. Transgender conditions are obvious examples of mismatch between biological and psychological gender.

Modern society insists on our right to choose psychological gender irrespective of biology. Women are rejecting the constraints of traditional gender roles, and we applaud women who succeed in traditionally masculine roles. To a lesser extent society praises men who enter traditionally feminine fields such as nursing. We say that they are comfortable enough with their sexuality to overcome cultural stereotypes. Stereotypes aside, society as a whole is moving ever more strongly toward a pervasively masculine self-concept. And this is a trend that could have far-reaching implications for the development of human consciousness.

When we turn to levels of reality above the human, biological gender automatically loses its relevance. Deities have neither chromosomes nor genitalia, although sacred art may depict them with the latter. For the most part the gender expressed by a deity is behavioral or psychological. We project characteristics of appearance, attitudes, or behavior onto our deities. But it is also possible that certain responses are evoked within us that suggest the gender they wish to express.

Feminine Archetypes

We can learn much about gender at the divine level by examining the archetypes of mythology and religious tradition. In particular we shall find that important aspects of the divine feminine can be discerned in the archetypal goddesses.

Importantly, we must recognize that gender is a polarity, and we cannot define the feminine except by contrast with the masculine, and vice versa. For example, there was no doubt that Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, was feminine. Similarly, it is clear that the Hindu warrior god Indra and the Israelite Yahweh were masculine. Ambiguities arose from time to time. The Roman god Cupid never exhibited strongly masculine characteristics. On the other hand, the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet of Egypt and the Phoenician Astarte—in her role as Queen of the Morning Star—were goddesses of war. The Hindu goddess Kali did terrible things—very unfeminine things—to her husband Shiva.

Despite these difficulties, the archetypes warrant careful examination to see if they shed light on the present search for more a comprehensive understanding of the deity—relevant and of interest to men as well as to women.

The Virgin

Many ancient divine or semi-divine personages were portrayed as virgins. The best-known were the Babylonian Ishtar, the Greek Athena, and the Virgin Mary. Virginity can be interpreted as an undefiled or pure state of being. And in Christianity of course it got caught up in negative views of sex. But in the ancient world, divine virginity was not necessarily compromised by childbearing. Both the Egyptian Isis and the Christian Mary preserved their virginity, despite bearing sons. Isis and her son Horus were depicted as original the Madonna and child.

Virginity also has a larger meaning. The archetypal virgin is autonomous and independent. She is not yet committed to a particular path—or to a particular man. Virginity is freedom to choose future modes of expression. It is eternal potential, the ability to become anything and to create anything that might be desired in the future.

Most virgin goddesses were transcendental, the source of great power but remote from the everyday lives of the people. Isis and Mary were prime examples of this transcendental virginity, symbolized by the High Priestess card in the Tarot. Transcendental virgin goddesses contrasted with others who became deeply involved in human affairs. For example, the Celtic Brigid was a fertility goddess and a healer. The Roman Diana was a huntress. However, one virgin goddess who was worshipped around the fire-sides of Greece was Hestia, the sister of Zeus.

The Bride

Many goddesses were portrayed as brides awaiting their weddings. In some cases the bridegroom was human, and in numerous ancient rituals goddesses consorted with priests or kings. For instance, the Sumerian goddess Inanna extended her favors to the king in an annual fertility ritual. After a night of ecstasy in the goddesses' arms, the bridegroom—king was sacrificed for the common good.

More often the bridegroom was a deity, but in several traditions the wedding was delayed for some reason. Psyche's marriage to Eros was delayed because she ignored his warning to meet him only in the dark of night. Foolishly she lit a lamp, whereupon he was forced to flee. And only after much suffering could Eros finally rescue and marry her.

A more important example, for our purposes, is the Shekinah of esoteric Judaism. The Shekinah, first discussed in the *Talmud*, is the embodiment of divine glory, God's presence in the world. She was betrothed to the Holy One, blessed be he. However, she was exiled, lost in the wilderness, and defiled as the result of humanity's fall from grace. For their part, the faithful was charged with finding the Shekinah, adorning her for the wedding, and presenting her to her bridegroom. The relationship between the Shekinah and her bridegroom is depicted well in the Qabalah. The Shekinah is associated with the divine emanation of Malkuth, and the Holy One with Tiphareth. In the Christian Qabalah, Tiphareth is identified with Jesus Christ. In both the Judaic and the Christian traditions, the goal of spiritual development is to raise the consciousness from Malkuth to Tiphareth, restoring the Shekinah to her rightful place with the Holy One.

Qabalists insist that all the emanations on the Tree of Life are all divine. In particular, they insist that the physical world is divine. Indeed, the very essence of the Shekinah is an expression of the immanence of God, the Glory of God in the natural world. Her role, in relationship to her bridegroom, finds an echo in many traditions in which the feminine aspect of God is identified with the earth, and the male aspect with the sky. For example, the Essenes spoke of the Heavenly Father and the Earthly Mother. Hindus identify the Brahman as the unknowable Godhead, and mother Maya with physical existence.

Some critics have complained that the portrayal of a goddess as a bride is demeaning: that a bride is somehow inferior to a bridegroom. Significantly, it was the Shekinah who was lost in the wilderness, not the Holy One. However, we may ask why the Holy One never went looking for her. He comes across as a passive, somewhat ineffective figure. For her part, the Shekinah did not abandon fallen humanity but chose to share its suffering, while the Holy One remained aloof. To that extent, the Shekinah served the same compassionate role as the Egyptian Isis, the Tibetan Buddhist Tara, or the Virgin Mary of Christianity.

There is no need to deny that the bride goddesses were, to a great extent, the products of male devotion. The Shekinah was created—or should we rather say discovered—by rabbinic scholars in a society of rigid gender roles. But we must also recognize that the rabbis accorded her the highest honors of their culture. She was adorned, she was beautiful, and she was sought-after.

Moreover, the Shekinah was not forced into virginity. Later Qabalistic tradition has the Shekinah and the Holy One united in sexual fulfillment at midnight on the Sabbath. The healthy persona of the Shekinah reflects the principle—stressed in esoteric Judaism—that men and women are incomplete without the other and that both can joyfully and spiritually come together in marital union.

The Wife

Many goddesses were portrayed as wives, and it is significant that ancient gods usually had consorts. It was considered that the union of the masculine and feminine was necessary to represent the fullness of the Godhead.

Asherah, goddess of forest groves was the wife of El, Canaanite god of Abraham. Sekhmet was the wife of the Egyptian god Ptah. Nut, the Egyptian goddess of the sky, was married to Geb, god of the earth—

one of the very few divine marriages in which the heavens were considered feminine and the earth masculine. The Greek goddess Hera was the wife of Zeus and served as the protector of marriage (despite her husband's philandering). The Norse goddess Frigga was the wife of Odin. In many traditions the Sun god was married to the Moon goddess. Wicca considers the Moon goddess to be trinitarian, corresponding to the three phases of the moon or the three phases of female life.

The Hindu trinity is conceived of as three divine marriages. Brahma's wife was Saraswati, patron of knowledge, music, and the arts. Vishnu's wife was Lakshmi, embodiment of beauty, goodness, and prosperity—and for the Hindu masses a kind of Lady Luck. Shiva's wife manifested in a number of forms, including Kali and the more pleasant Shakti. Kali was the force behind Shiva's destructive activities. But Shakti, who represented energy and strength, assisted Shiva in his mission of transformation and recreation.

The Mother

Goddesses have often been portrayed as mothers—mothers of gods, worlds, or people. The Buddhist goddess Prajnaparamita was worshipped as the mother of all Buddhas. The Egyptian Nut was believed to be the mother of the Sun and Moon, and also of Isis and Osiris. In turn, Isis was the mother of Horus. Hathor was revered as patron of childbirth and “Mother of Mothers.” The Greek Aphrodite was the mother of Eros, and Gaia was the Earth Mother. Numerous traditions—including our own—speak of “Mother Nature.” In early Christianity, the Council of Ephesus declared the Virgin Mary to be the mother of God.

Mothers are the archetypal creators. In the Old Testament, Chokmah, embodiment of divine Wisdom, was identified as co-creator of the universe. In the book of *Proverbs* Chokmah addresses the reader:

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth... Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth... When God prepared the heavens, I was there... When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep... when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him. [*Proverbs* 8:22-30.]

The biblical Chokmah was unambiguously feminine, and a passage in the *Wisdom of Solomon* portrays her as the bride. But during the early centuries of the Common Era—for reasons that are not entirely clear—Chokmah evolved into a masculine force. This is seen most clearly in the Qabalah, where the feminine principle was transferred to Binah, translated as “Understanding” or “Compassion.”

Chokmah and Binah emerge as equals from a single source, the androgynous Kether. But they represent the primordial duality. Chokmah is the archetypal father, the potent masculine force in the universe. Binah is the archetypal mother, the receiver of the father's energy, offering resistance but at the same time converting raw force into useful power. Binah is the creator of all forms that receive divine energy. She is often represented as the primal ocean. In fact, one of Binah's names is *Marah*, from which we get words such as “matrix,” “matter,” “maritime” and Mary.

Chokmah and Binah comprise the first manifestation of the duality necessary for God to be revealed. We cannot comprehend pure spirit, pure unity. We can only comprehend existence in terms of contrasting opposites. The One splits into Two; but the Two are reunited in eternal relationship and in the offspring to which they give birth. In the Qabalah, the gender polarity between Chokmah and Binah gives rise to creative tension which is resolved in the generation of the lower emanations, including Tiphareth and the Shekinah. The father and mother give birth to the son and daughter. However, Binah and the Shekinah, Mother and daughter, retain a close relationship. In fact Binah is often referred to as the “higher,” or “supernal, Shekinah.”

The Wise Woman

The Greek goddess Athena was regarded as the embodiment of wisdom, and her sacred bird was the owl. The Buddhist Prajnaparamita was revered as Perfect Wisdom, the source of highest enlightenment for all the Buddhas. Moreover, she was believed to awaken wisdom and understanding in the heart chakra of every sincere seeker.

We have already seen that the biblical, feminine Chokmah, co-creator of the universe, was the embodiment of Wisdom. The biblical Chokmah became the Greek Sophia, and in due course the Latin Sapientia revered by the medieval alchemists. The Gnostic Sophia is the successor of both Chokmah and the Shekinah. For example, like the Shekinah, she was exiled from heaven. There are different accounts of how the exile came about. In the first *Book of Enoch* her descent was voluntary, an attempt to dwell with humankind. She is rejected and returns to heaven of her own accord. However, another text has her cast down from of the heaven and tormented by the spirits of the ages. The Shekinah could be rescued by the faithful, but the Gnostic Sophia had to be saved by Jesus Christ.

Sapientia was the subject of discussion by none other than St. Thomas Aquinas:

[H]er fruit is more precious than all the riches of this world, and all the things that are desired are not to be compared with her... She is the tree of life. [*Aurora Consurgens*, I: 20-25].

Elsewhere, he attributed to her: “power, honor, strength, and dominion.” [*Ibid*, V: 13]. Remarkable words for a celibate cleric! But they were reportedly spoken after a profound mystical experience shortly before his death.

Until recently, Sophia was virtually ignored in mainstream Christianity, at least in the West. Divine wisdom was either regarded as a kind of nebulous soul, or anima, of Christ. Alternatively, “feminine wisdom” was projected onto the Virgin Mary. But Sophia was always revered in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. A Russian Orthodox icon shows her with her three daughters: Faith, Hope, and Charity. At times Sophia has been identified with either the second or the third person of the trinity. In fact, the Holy Spirit has often been regarded as a feminine aspect of God. But modern thinking in the Russian Orthodox tradition—expressed most clearly by Sergei Bulgakov—is that she is an expression of the divine essence manifesting through all three persons of the trinity.

Conclusions

Leaders of modern groups involved in goddess worship rightly insist that all goddesses are the One Goddess. The divine feminine is multifaceted in expression but one in essence. And the various archetypes we have explored simply provide partial views of the whole. We would add that the One Goddess and the One God are complementary views of an undivided Godhead. They are not in competition, not in eternal opposition to each other. Just as the trinity expresses the essence of a single god, the divine masculine and feminine are like the two sides of a coin.

We remind ourselves that the masculine and the feminine are fundamental polarities that make possible the manifestation of the divine Oneness. They spring from a single source, but exist in juxtaposition to each other, in mutual and eternal relationship. From their relationship, the universe, life, and we ourselves are born. Similarly, at the human level, the male and the female are complementary aspects of our humanity, jointly expressing the wholeness of the human condition and providing the basis for creative expression.

We are developing a new understanding of gender, new ways to express sexuality at the multiple levels of our being. We reject traditional gender roles and seek new ways to express ourselves and interact with others. But the timeless archetypes, like those we have explored today, are still there to guide us.

Those archetypes represent the accumulated wisdom of human experience, informed by the divine powers that overshadow us. And we recall that Wisdom itself is an expression of the divine feminine. To this perennial wisdom, we add our own insights, affirming that, as human consciousness expands, a more

complete understanding of the divine nature will emerge. And as this larger picture comes into focus, all of us—women and men—can find new opportunities to express our spirituality.