



**The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image.** Paula Fredriksen.  
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The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image, by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford (Viking, 779 pp., \$40)

GOD THE FATHER, the Lord Jesus Christ--these masculine images for the divine have dominated traditional Western religions as men (rabbis, priests, bishops, preachers) have controlled their hierarchies. Does correlation imply cause? Would women's religious experience be different if God were "feminized"? Was it different, when ancient societies worshipped female as well as male gods?

In *Her Share of the Blessings*, Ross Kraemer grapples with these questions as an historian of religions. Concentrating on Mediterranean societies from the late classical period to the end of the Roman Empire in the West (roughly 400 B.C. to 400 A.D.), she sets herself two tasks: accurate description and explanatory analysis. The descriptive project is well realized. Professor Kraemer surveys the ancient evidence--literary, epigraphical, archaeological--and wrings from it some lively reconstructions of cultic activity, progressing chronologically from Greek festivals, to Roman urban observances, through Jewish practices (within Israel and without), to, finally, the varieties of Christian ones. (My favorite was the Eleusian haloa, a mid-winter female festival behind closed doors involving dirty jokes, raucous laughter, shouted obscenities, and genitalia-shaped pastries. The men sat outside, getting some of the pastries and none, one assumes, of the jokes.)

Professor Kraemer's speculations on what women might have felt or experienced while enacting these rites are models of historical caution. She frequently, and rightly, asserts that we just cannot know. She asks whether the religious experience of men can be securely known to be qualitatively different from that of women; alert to the perils of anachronism, she cautions against pressing ancient data into the service of modern political agenda. The data scarcely oblige even the relatively modest, and logically prior, efforts at description: again and again, Professor Kraemer points out where the evidence lets us down.

Women in pagan cults served as priestess and patron as well as devotee. Jewish women of the Hellenistic and Roman period likewise filled various roles. They could not be priests in the Temple at Jerusalem--but then, neither could most Jewish men: the job was hereditary within particular priestly families, and candidates had to meet physical qualifications as well. And while all Jews might be and doubtless were ritually impure much of the time (a condition caused, for example, by contact with a corpse, seminal emission, or childbirth), women had in addition the regular impurity imparted by menstruation. Temple service was thus out of the question. Synagogues, however, were not subject to the purity strictures of the Temple. Women evidently served as patrons and perhaps even officers of these institutions. And in the Therapeutic community outside Alexandria, Jewish virgins of philosophical disposition could participate on a level with the men of the community in a curiously monastic, extremely intellectual society.

Women both Jewish and Gentile were drawn into the new Christian communities. Jesus-as-feminist does not survive Professor Kraemer's historical scrutiny; and the triumphant orthodox

Church was finally much more misogynist than either of its cultural forebears. But until the victory of orthodoxy--that is, until Constantine's patronage forever changed the political climate of faith the new religion had some three centuries of gloriously confusing variety. Christian women in "heterodox" communities may or may not have been apostles, priests, and bishops: the evidence, again, teases us here. Heroic virgins, charismatic martyrs, and energetic women preachers people this period. Professor Kraemer asks, of course, why.

This brings us to her second task: explanatory analysis. She draws on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, particularly the latter's analysis of social organization in terms of group and grid. Group, the horizontal axis of Professor Douglas's scheme, indicates social incorporation (strong group: the military; weak group: hermits); grid, the vertical axis, indicates degree of individual autonomy (high grid: low autonomy; low grid: high autonomy). Various types of societies are then plotted on these axes. Professor Kraemer lays out this scheme in her introduction, and endorses it as "extraordinarily useful for explaining the correlations between individual social experience and beliefs individuals hold about all sorts of things." This model, in other words, is what permits her both to speculate on the beliefs of the ancient women she studies and to account for their social behavior: if she can plausibly plot her subjects' grid/ group, the method can fill in where the data runs out.

This grid/group analysis runs like a bass clef throughout Professor Kraemer's book. She concludes each chapter by restating her historical descriptions in Douglasian social-anthropologese. The jargon obtrudes, but the goal--explanation--is laudable. To the question, Why did later Christianity not remain true to its egalitarian origins? she answers, "Such egalitarianism was fundamentally antithetical to the social structure and cosmology of any high grid society [e.g., late Roman society], and that, it seems to me, is as sufficient and persuasive as any answer."

IF SOCIAL SCIENCE provides the particular accent to Ross Kraemer's history, contemporary theological concerns shape that of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, author of *In the Wake of the Goddesses*. She asks what religious and social difference female deities make. A specialist in Assyria and Sumer (two ancient Mesopotamian cultures, both antecedent to Biblical Israel), she traces the religious trajectory from the pantheon of Sumerian divinities c. 2500 s.c. through Biblical monotheism through rabbinic religion, with concluding observations on Hellenistic culture, Christianity, and "us," the twentiethcentury heirs to these things. She closes with a call to fill in the gaps in "the Bible's religious fabric," by which she means gaps she sees in the Bible's views on sexuality.

One may demur from this theological task while still admiring the several roundhouse punches Professor Frymer-Kensky delivers to sentimental goddess-ism, the belief that goddess worship bespeaks an earlier golden age when women were on top and society consequently kind. The Goddess? "There were many goddesses; they were not enshrined in a religion of women, but in the official religion of male-dominated societies; they were not evidence of ancient mother-worship, but served as an integral part of a religious system that mirrored and provided the sacred underpinnings of patriarchy." We meet the whole lot in Part I of her study: mother gods, divine domestics, sexual wildwomen, female warriors. Fertility, civilization, agriculture, childbirth, war--these goddesses oversaw it all, and were praised and worshipped by men and women alike (Professor Frymer-Kensky provides some remarkable hymns in this section), until they slipped into religious decline by the end of the second millennium.

For all its continuities with the religious and legal traditions of the ancient Near East, the author argues, Israel's vision of One God marked a spiritual revolution. She calls this the "monotheist leap," and characterizes Israel's God in thought-provoking contrast to local polytheisms. This God absorbed and, in so doing, altered the traditional functions of female gods: human fertility became not a power he enhanced, but a gift granted. "Socially" male (King, Master) but sexually neutral,

he never behaved in sexual ways (unlike, for example, the Sumerian god Enlil, who rapes his consort). As the image of God changed, so too did humanity's: it became God's marriage-partner (specifically in the figure of Israel), the recipient of revealed social, hence ethical, codes. God's primary relationship is not, as in other systems, with the forces of nature, but with humankind, which is called to behave accordingly. In its emphasis on humanity's moral responsibility, radical monotheism, Professor Frymer-Kensky nicely observes, is most like secular humanism.

How do women figure in this picture? "There is no real 'woman question' in the Bible," she asserts. It presents both genders essentially alike, with the same moral goals and expectations. (I cannot agree with her here.) The Biblical concept of humanity, as Professor Frymer-Kensky sees it, is thus gender-free, correlating to monotheism's gender-free vision of God.

But monotheism had the vices of its virtues. In de-sexualizing God, it "desacralized" sex; in emphasizing ethics, it spoke of sex in the language of law, bonding sexuality to family and social order. I do not know whether this is true or, if true, regrettable, but Professor Frymer-Kensky is convinced that erotic sexuality was the major casualty of the monotheist revolution. This "gap" in Biblical religion (goddesses served to "conceptualize" the erotic impulse in a way that God could not) left it vulnerable to the Greek disease: "antiwoman, anticarnal ways that have long influenced the Western religious tradition."

Hellenism, in brief, is the snake in the Biblical garden. It influenced the rabbis, prompting their "sexual phobia and outright misogyny." Rabbinic Judaism partly recovered, affirming that marriage was good; Christianity, alas, more Greek than Judaism, and more Greek than Jewish, was and remains more patriarchal as well. By this point in her essay, generalizing with vertiginous ease, Professor Frymer-Kensky, I confess, lost me; and in my inability to imagine what "re-sacralized sex" would be, I lost her.

What remains is her extremely informed historical construction of Sumerian society and religion, together with her swingeing critique of vaguely feminist myth-mongering about The Goddess. And into these critical cross-hairs, like a literary Lusitania, sails Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's 780-page oeuvre, *The Myth of the Goddess*.

BOTH AUTHORS are Jungian analysts. This means that their survey of goddess-images, from Paleolithic Europe (that's c. 50,000 s.c.) to contemporary culture (they close on Cinderella), serves to provide 'particular instances of a universal, eternal, cross-cultural archetype, the Goddess, also known as "the feminine principle." This principle--"an aspect," the authors assert, "of human consciousness"--manifests itself in culture whenever people value "spontaneity, feeling, instinct, and intuition... [and] the sanctity and unity of life." The Goddess, however, has been on the ropes both culturally and mythologically ever since belligerent hordes of sky-god-worshipping warriors rode out of the East c. 4500 s.c., imposing mayhem, patriarchy, and social stratification on the "agricultural and sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful" culture of Old Europe. Around 2500 s.c., human consciousness took a further downturn in Sumeria, when "a new attitude" suddenly had people looking at death as if it were the end and opposite of life. No more intuitive vision of the Whole. And so on, through hundreds of pages and four millennia. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is Bad, though Jesus was Good. Paul was Bad. The Gnostics were Good. Augustine was Very Bad. Et cetera.

All is not lost, however. Modern Science itself, as evmced in the work of both Heisenberg and Einstein, issues a renewed call to Goddess-consciousness. How so? It summons humans to think of subatomic particles in relation to one another, as part of a larger unity. We need to think in new--which is to say, old--ways. Einstein himself ("astonishingly," they say. Indeed) is "the spokesman for this need."

To say I found all this profoundly unpersuasive is simply to say that I am not, myself, Jungian. I did admire the authors' energy, their choice of photographs (the book is richly illustrated), and their romantic imagination when surveying the lost Atlantis of human egalitarian societies, such as Crete and Old Europe. (I encourage readers who like this sort of thing, but want a stronger plot line and fewer pages, to pick up H. Rider Haggard's *She*, where "Kur" functions similarly.) They evangelize, holding out the promise of redemption (peace on earth, more pleasant interpersonal relations, a saved environment). The *Myth of the Goddess*, in these ways, does no harm.

I wish I could close on this note, but I cannot. The book's pseudo-scholarship nags at me. I cannot claim to be expert in the twenty-plus millennia they review; but for the slice of time I do know, the first five centuries of the Common Era, their sources, interpretations, and arguments simply appalled me. The synagogue mural at Dura does not show baby Moses in the arms of a naked goddess, but of Pharaoh's daughter's servant (she had to swim to reach him and so, sensibly, removed her clothes). A body-mind dichotomy does not characterize Deuteronomy. "Original Sin" is a doctrinal formulation of patristic (and especially Latin) Christianity; it is not the theme tout court of Genesis 1-3. Little wonder, then, that Jesus did not refer to Original Sin: he lived several centuries shy of its formulation.

Paul did not write the Epistle to the Ephesians. Augustine did not say that women have no souls. We do not know whether Mediterranean synagogues had separate seating for men and women. Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome did not hold that women, sex, and the womb are evil: if they had, they would have been Manichees, their Christian opposition. Augustine did not write "Late have I loved Thee, Beauty so ancient and so new" late in his life, when it might have (according to the authors) "redeem[ed] his conviction of his own and humanity's sinfulness." These words appear in Book X of the *Confessions*, written c. 398 C.E., when he was a vigorous 43-year-old, still some twenty years away from his formulation of the doctrine of Original Sin for which the authors castigate him in the preceding 15 pages.

Six thousand rabbinic Jews did not live in early first-century Palestine: the authors confuse Josephus's statement about Pharisees with later rabbis. The Sanhedrin did not persecute the Jewish church in Jerusalem in 62 A.D. Ananus the High Priest executed James the elder and unnamed others, for what reason we do not know, and other (non-Christian) Jews protested to the Roman government and had Ananus removed. Jesus was not deeply learned in the rabbinic tradition for the same reason that he never spoke of Original Sin. His preaching metanoia (the word in the Greek Gospels, though Jesus himself, some forty to sixty years earlier, would have spoken Aramaic) was not a call to "face the inner world of the soul," but a call to repentance, in the Jewish prophetic mode.

Joseph Campbell, James Fraser, Carl Gustav Jung, and Mircea Eliade are not authorities on the inner life of Paleo- and Neolithic people, and cannot be cited as such. Chief Seattle, in 1855, never made the remarks attributed to him at the beginning and end of this book: an American screenwriter did, c. 1971 (see the *New York Times*, April 21, 1992). As Wanda (Jamie Lee Curtis, not the fish) complained: "Aristotle was not Belgian. The central teaching of Buddhism is not 'Every man for himself.' The London Underground is not a political movement. These are mistakes, Otto. I looked them up."

The *Myth of the Goddess* is a monument to the felt need of some religiously sensitive moderns for whom the traditional gods are dead. I condemn neither their need nor that enterprise. This essay, however--a farrago of well-meaning politics, vaporous observations, and false facts--is bad history. Surely those who would create new gods should attend to the truth. As our own unhappy century is witness, lies spawn the most powerful myths.

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