

Section 8 – The Proliferation of Deity

In the beginning was the Mother Goddess, The Sea, who became the Earth as we moved inland. We have seen how she divided into a binary male/female form when we understood procreation, and from there produced Tetrad families when we settled. When we developed agriculture, The Goddess took multiple anthropomorphic forms whose natures meant that they could relate directly to humans, and her omnipotence was divided amongst them. As people spread across the world, representations of deity proliferated. Each was a little different, reflecting the cultural values of the societies that adopted them; yet they all stemmed from the Goddess.

In these cultures the physical and spiritual were two dimensions of the same space. The supernatural world affected every aspect of human life from birth to death, love, sex, marriage, business, even war. Religion and politics were similarly indivisible.

Everything that occurred in the mortal world was governed by the will of the deities. Priestesses, and later priests, who could influence them, thus held great temporal power. Just as our hypothetical grandmother-shaman of the beachcombers had behind her the unlimited and unimaginable power of the Sea Mother Goddess, so the later clerics could wield the power of the deities and influence events in the physical world. In a time full of superstition, no ruler could challenge them. There was good reason for the proliferation of deities: their priestesses and priests were both spiritual and political leaders, and the cults themselves equated to political parties. The link between spiritual and political power became increasingly evident, and its importance continues, even to the present time.

By the time of Sumer, we had left behind the older, more organic and less organised shamanistic cults. Religion, as well as being politics, was business, and it could be very big business indeed. We have only to look at the massive wealth accrued by the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England or the many Evangelical churches in today's United States to see that religion remains profitable.¹

Essential to the development of religious cults is popular appeal. New and exciting, fashionable versions of the deities were sought to promote each cult and so acquire both political power and material wealth. People did indeed fabricate religions in order to become rich and powerful, and

¹ It has been estimated that the income, via donations, of religious groups the US is 100 billion dollars per annum. (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/296336/revenue-religious-organizations-in-the-us/> retrieved 28/08/2014). Because these organisations do not pay tax on this income, their investments or property, the taxpaying American subsidises them to \$71 billion per annum. (Cragun, R *et al.* *Research Report: How Secular Humanists (and Everyone Else) Subsidize Religion in the United States. Free Inquiry.* May 2012. (<http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/articles/3149> retrieved 28/08/2012.)

their completely fictional deities were believed in by thousands of gullible people.² A striking example of this is the well-documented case of Alexander of Abonoteichus, a fraudster who invented the cult of the snake-god Glycon.³

The cultures of the early cities were not meritocracies where the gifted or hardworking could, through their own efforts, become wealthy and powerful. One way to acquire wealth and, possibly, status was to join the city's army and be paid a share of the booty if you survived. The other was to find a new god who could help you: in other words, to invent a religion.

Religiosity and a willingness to suspend disbelief in the promise of a better life after death remain an essential, if problematic, part of the human condition; there are always followers to be had. Moonies, Scientologists, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Baha'i – history is replete with cults, every one invented by hopeful career preachers. An awareness of this tendency was one reason the Roman Catholic Church so severely persecuted heresy. In its collective consciousness was a memory of the second and third centuries CE, when Christianity had struggled against myriad other cults to be selected as the official religion of Rome, and win wealth, status and power.

Organised religions exist for thoroughly materialistic reasons. The more followers a cult has, the more the money it makes and the more political influence it can wield. Thus, there is pressure for religions to 'be fruitful and multiply', and to evangelise and gain more converts – by both peaceful and violent means.⁴ At the same time, they must retain members even if that requires threats of death for apostasy.

The other face of the coin of evangelism is the condemnation of every cult but your own, something that has led, throughout the millennia of human civilisation, to unimaginable horror and bloodshed. This is ongoing and shows no sign of relenting.

If the deities prove unwilling to help a priestly class achieve its will, an angry mob stirred up by ranting prelates will often do the trick, something we have seen countless times over the centuries. Consider Savonarola, the demented priest whose vitriolic condemnation of the Medici dynasty that governed Florence in the Renaissance led to its downfall. The Romans, too, well knew that the person who controls the mob controls the city; it was how Mark Antony turned the tables on the conspirators who had assassinated Julius Caesar. Hypatia, the Alexandrian mathematician, was murdered in 415 CE by a Christian mob stirred up by clerics bent on silencing women.

² We would not like the reader to infer from this that there are deities other than fictional!

³ Lucian of Samosata. *Alexander or the False Prophet*. (c. 180 CE)

⁴ This is the real reason why the Catholic Church decries birth control and the US Evangelicals are so violently opposed to abortion. World overpopulation and the struggles of families with more children than they can afford do not matter as long as the cult keeps growing.

Religious cults proliferated throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East in the last millennia BCE. In Akkad, Babylon, Assyria, Canaan and elsewhere the Sumerian tradition evolved. In Egypt, other traditions appeared which, while likely derived from the same original sources, were significantly different. In Greece, much of the Sumerian mythology was adopted but merged with indigenous traditions. All of these were crucially important for the later development of the Abrahamic religious traditions and cultures.

All of these cultures show the same phenomena: the suppression of the Goddess and the appropriation of her powers by male deities alongside the suppression of women and the reduction of their status. The establishment of male gods as rulers over the goddesses is a direct parallel for the objectification of women, their transformation into the property of men, and male control over women's sexuality and reproduction.

As always, the wealthy ruling elite, which included the priestly class, would have had the wherewithal to travel to other lands. They would have seen and recognised effective strategies for the maintenance of their authority. We will see how these strategies proliferated across cultures, with only minor modifications. First, women had to be controlled by assigning them to individual men and restricting their freedom. Then the Goddess had to be mastered by the gods, to indicate that female subservience was a universal, ideal, 'natural' state. Once this had been accomplished, a new model for the understanding of life had to be invented, one that filled the hearts of all the people with a terror that might only be alleviated by absolute obedience to the ruling class and the patriarchal status quo.

If we examine the mythologies, we see that the differences are merely marketing. The deities themselves are the same. Humans create gods in their likeness so all deities are human in an idealised form. The Goddess, no matter how many forms she takes, is always Woman, and the God is always Man. Myriad expressions of deity have appeared all over the world and throughout history but in all of these we find the same essential human core. It could not be otherwise because we invented all the deities we have ever worshipped. We cannot invent something that is beyond our conception, so all deities, in the end, are a reflection of ourselves.