

Goddess Spirituality

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Goddess spirituality is the reverential experiencing and expressing of divine female energies within the universe. It emerged among our early human ancestors in Africa during the Palaeolithic Age, and it continues to the present in societies around the world, because it meets profound needs in the psycho-spiritual life of adherents.

Goddess spirituality played a major role in the Neolithic Age with its agrarian revolution and emphasis on the fertility of the Earth, perceived as Great Mother, Bearer of all Life. Artemis of Ephesus is a late expression of this Goddess, here wearing a necklace of zodiac signs and costume of sacred animals, bees, and flowers. Votaries called her Great, Magnificent, Queen, Commander, Guide, Advisor, Legislator, Spreader of Light, Savior, Controller of Fate. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. Artemis, Goddess of Ephesus, many-breasted Great Mother and Mistress of Animals. 1st century CE. Ephesus Archaeological Museum, Selçuk, Turkey. Photo courtesy of Diane L. Martin (2001).

This kind of multi-faced Great Goddess continued to be worshipped into the Bronze and Iron Ages, although Goddesses generally became subordinated by male-dominant societies that worshipped male Gods as supreme. Goddess

spirituality has persisted in most indigenous cultures of Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. But the male-oriented Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have extensively suppressed Goddess spirituality in regions they came to dominate, due to superior military might, and sometimes through more brutal tactics, such as the witch-persecutions in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, in the Christianized Americas, and in Africa.

How is it that humans can imagine, feel, and relate spiritually to a Goddess as symbol, metaphor, psycho-spiritual energy, and cosmic reality? For much of human history, people believed they were created by deities and so invoked their powers and gifts through religious rites. Modern secular psychologies and philosophies have reversed the causal relationship by claiming that humans created deities -- as the "projections" of human ideals (Feuerbach), "wish fulfillment" (Freud), or the "opiate of the masses" (Marx). Yet, the epidemics of violence, despair, and apathy afflicting even the young in contemporary cultures, point to the emotional and spiritual need of individuals to find a spiritual and moral compass and to celebrate aspects of life that offer love, companionship, family, health, wellbeing, community, ecological balance, and purpose. Goddess spirituality offers these benefits through the prism of divine feminine energies, energies of the cosmos that generate female beings and the capacity to bear and nurture female and male offspring.

Goddess traditions around the world have guided persons transiting the most intensely intimate passages in the human life cycle -- birth, sexual initiation, procreation, disease and death, and the prospect of rebirth. Goddess religion (like other religions) also prescribes rules and regulations regarding the everyday necessities of food and nurture, survival, and healthcare. It provides answers for perennial questions about the meaning of life, our place within the cosmos, and our relationship to the Source of all being and becoming. Sacred stories and myths about Goddesses portray their interactions with humans, giving divine meaning and inspiration to key life experiences. Generally, Goddesses and their priestesses provide archetypal energies and role models for women and girls, while Gods and priests provide archetypal energies and role models for men and boys. However, many scholars argue that evidence shows that Goddesses sometimes presided over whole cities and civilizations and were worshipped as the primary deity by men and women (for example, in Anatolia, Crete, Old

Europe, India, Japan, Hawaii, Brazil, and numerous North American Indian tribes.) (Monaghan 1981, 2011; Allen 1991; Gimbutas 1991; Biaggi 2005; Goettner-Abendroth 2009, 2012).

Beginning in the 1970s in the United States and Europe, there began a great popular re-turning toward the Sacred Feminine (mostly but not exclusively by women) -- in Goddess circles, neo-pagan groups, scholarly studies, and the arts -- as a way to access the psycho-spiritual and political empowerment that accompanies the affirmation of the Divine as female. Mary Daly's work *Beyond God the Father* (1973) catalyzed the desire of many women in the North/West to come to terms with the male-centeredness of the religions in which they had been raised. Marija Gimbutas' archaeological study of *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* ([1974] 1982) and her subsequent books provided a window into Neolithic European societies that worshipped a Goddess (or Goddesses) of birth and nurture, death and regeneration as their primary deity -- immanent within the procreation of all life; a transcendent principle of the cosmos; and sometimes accompanied by a stimulating and fructifying Sacred Male Consort.

In 1975, eighteen hundred women attended the first women's spirituality conference in Boston. Ntozake Shange's 1976 Broadway play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide /when the rainbow is enuf*, dramatized women's embrace of a female God for the sake of survival and strength, with the exuberant exclamation, "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely!" Also in 1976, Merlin Stone gathered scattered fragments of evidence for ancient Goddess worship, *When God Was a Woman*, tracing changes in religious symbolism from matristic or mother-centered cultures to patriarchal father-centered cultures. Stone relied on archaeological studies such as those of James Mellart at Çatalhöyük and Arthur Evans at Knossos, Crete; and ancient literatures such as the *Enumah Elish*, the Babylonian myth of the primordial Goddess Tiamat being defeated by the young God Marduk; and the account in *Genesis 3* of the Hebrew Bible of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where the snake in the tree is interpreted as representing knowledge of the early Goddess-centered culture rejected by promulgators of the new Yahweh-only religion, during the Bronze Age, with the cultural shift towards patriarchy and male dominance. In 1978, Charlene Spretnak published *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece*, reconstructing the

Hellenic Goddess myths from a pre-Olympian, pre-patriarchal point of view, portraying Greek Goddess archetypal qualities free from androcratic distortions.

At the conference on “The Great Goddess Re-Emerging” at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the Spring of 1978, Carol P. Christ delivered the keynote address, “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections.” Christ proposed four compelling reasons why women might turn to the Goddess: the affirmation and legitimation of female power as beneficent; affirmation of the female body and its life-cycles; affirmation of women’s will; and affirmation of women’s bonds with one another and of positive female heritage.

Goddess priestesses began creating community rituals and publishing books about how to create personal and communal ceremonies that invoke the Goddesses: Z Budapest, Starhawk, Luisah Teish, and the anti-nuclear activist women of Greenham Commons in England, among others. In 1987 Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor produced *Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*. Many Goddess Spirituality activists and authors emphasize that the multicultural women’s spirituality movement is not an escape from political engagement with urgent social and environmental issues, as critics argue, but a way to connect with them in deeply personal and powerful ways.

Building on earlier Goddess studies by Arthur Evans, Jane Ellen Harrison, G. Rachel Levy, Martin P. Nilsson, Robert Graves, Eric Neumann, Carl Kerényi, N. N. Bhattacharyya, and others, many feminist scholars formed powerful arguments for the existence of pre-patriarchal Goddess-worshipping cultures that had been subsumed by male-dominant cultures: Riane Eisler, Patricia Monaghan, Gerda Lerner, Elinor Gadon, Paula Gunn Allen, Mara Lynn Keller, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, Asphodel Long, Cristina Biaggi, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, and Max Dashu. A deep and rich history of Goddesses was being resurrected. For example, the myth and ritual of Demeter and Persephone in Greece comprised a popular mystery religion celebrating the birth, sacred marriage, death, and rebirth of all life; it is again infusing seasonal Goddess rituals with its affirmation of the Mother-Daughter bond and its sense of the kinship of all beings. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Demeter, Persephone, and Ploutos (Plenty) sharing the gift of grain for feeding humanity, from the Eleusinian Mysteries. Pentelic marble relief, Eleusis, Greece. c. 440-430 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NAMA_Triade_éleusinienne.jpg.

Inspired by Goddess spirituality's embodied sense of self, nature, and cosmos, many artists created paintings, poetry, songs, novels, and films about Goddesses, such as Judith Anderson, Jennifer Berezan, Susan Sedon Boulet, Janine Canan, Meinrad Craighead, Rose Wognum Frances, Tricia Grame, Vijali Hamilton, Sue Monk Kidd, Audre Lorde, Mary Mackey, Alexis Masters, Burleigh Muten, Mayumi Oda, Donna Read, and Lydia Ruyle. Some curated Goddess art exhibits or published magazines, encyclopedias, or beautiful collections of Goddess scriptures and sacred art. Others made pilgrimages to ancient Goddess sites or devoted themselves to Goddess avatars. More and more Jewish and Christian women explored the feminine aspect of God and invoked the Feminine Divine and Sophia/Holy Wisdom.

Unlike today, in ancient cultures, religion and psychology were conjoined. The Greek word *psyche* means *spirit* and *soul*. The ancients conceived of Spirit as a dynamic life force or essence manifest in particular material forms, including male, female, and androgyne genders. In the modern era in North/West sectors of the globe, psychology has to some extent supplanted religion, addressing the

emotional wellbeing of individuals who in many cases no longer (or never did) turn to religion for sustenance, solace, or significance. Freud's secular approach to psychology was countered by Jung's spiritual approach called archetypal psychology, which named *sacred feminine* and *sacred masculine* aspects of the human psyche and theorized that both were to be found in individual women and men – undercutting the extreme dualism of masculine vs. feminine entrenched in European and Euro-American societies. While acknowledging the valuable contributions these two fathers of psychology made to a deeper understanding of modern human emotions and behaviors, feminist psychologists critiqued the patriarchal bias in both theorists. Others criticized the use of notions of gender altogether.

Goddess spirituality can be understood psychologically in the concepts of conscious and unconscious gestalts that result from personal experience, family inter-relationships, and trans-personal constellations of behaviors as mother, father, daughter, son, spouse, lover, healer, oracle, wise elder, etc. Archetypal energies may have been repressed from conscious memory, but remain encoded in psycho-spiritual patterns, having profound influences on the choices of one's day-to-day life. Many spiritual feminist psychologists, including Jean Shinoda Bolen, Kathie Carlson, Virginia Beane Rutter, and Tanya Wilkinson, build on the work of Jung, using mythic archetypes of the ancient Goddesses to assist contemporary women in developing a deeper sense of self, spirituality, and fulfillment.

Key themes debated within *Goddess theology* reflect the psychological, religious, and political diversity among Goddess-spirituality people. Is the Goddess one and/or many? Is she immanent and/or transcendent? Is she only of the female gender, and/or bi- or multi-gendered, and/or beyond gender? Is she metaphor, symbol, and/or reality? Is she anthropomorphic (having human form), therianthropic (having animal-human form), and/or aniconic (without an image)? Is she knowable and/or mysterious and ineffable? Is she all-inclusive (encompassing good and evil, sacred and profane) or all-good? Is Goddess spirituality political or apolitical? Many Goddess devotees hold a *both-and epistemology* that accepts (linguistic) contradictions and embraces the paradoxical nature of the Female Divine with her multiplicity of attributes and unitary

Oneness. This inclusive and pluralistic understanding offers complexity and expansiveness, affirming diversity as limitless as nature itself, and seeing humans embedded within the Great Mysteries of life.

The tremendous resurgence today of Goddess spirituality has grown in tandem with the worldwide women's liberation movement. Both seek to meet the material and psychological needs of peoples and the planet to redress the over-masculinization of cultures and associated fundamentalist patriarchal religions, stresses, and devastations from overly-aggressive ways of life. This is reflected in mass phenomena such as devotional festivals to Goddesses attended by millions in India or Brazil, the globally popular movie *Avatar* with its Earth Goddess-centered spirituality, the best-selling Dan Brown novel *The Da Vinci Code* with its thesis of the Christian Church's suppression of the Sacred Feminine and the Sacred Marriage and the irrepressible yearning for their return.

Despite ongoing efforts by androcentric and thea-phobic religious traditions and sectors of academia to denigrate or deny Goddess spirituality, it continues to blossom in Goddess Studies (notably at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco), Goddess conferences (the Association for the Study of Women and Mythology), Goddess-related journals (*Goddess Thealogy Journal*; *OCHRE Journal of Women's Spirituality*; *Journal of Archaeomythology*), and the closely related field of Matriarchal Studies, advanced by Heidi Goettner-Abendroth and Peggy Reeves Sanday, that documents matriarchal cultures where Goddess spirituality has persisted through millennia. All this affirms the continuing presence of the Goddess in the hearts and minds of millions of adherents around the world.

See also: Ashtoreth, Bridget of Ireland, Cailleach, Cybele and Attis, Dark Mother, Demeter/Persephone, Earth Goddess, Female God Images, Goddess, Goddess and Gimbutas, Great Mother, Guan Yin, Isis, Kali, Lilith, Maria Lionza, Matriarchy, Moon and Moon Goddesses, Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Pele, Persephone, Rites of Passage for Girls, Sarasvati, Wicca, Women and Religion.

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