

Cakes for the Queen of Heaven: In Ancient Times

SESSION 1:

THE NEW FOREGROUND¹

We begin this session with our most private experience—our feelings about our female bodies. Until recently there was hardly a woman alive in this society who did not dislike something about her body. During the past twenty years that attitude may have changed, at least for some women who have learned to love and care for our bodies. The culture, however, still bombards us with negative messages. As women we learn that we are too short unless we teeter about on high heels; that we must color our hair because blondes have more fun; that we must diet unless we are pencil thin; that size A breasts need the help of surgical breast implants; that the hair under our arms and on our legs is unattractive and must be removed. Everything around us conveys the message that physically we are not okay as we are. We learn in subtle ways that we are inferior, an aberration from the male norm. We also learn that to be truly feminine we must look childlike, have no adult hair, and yet be able to nurture endlessly with large breasts. For women of color the problem is even more profound in a dominant culture where the main standard of beauty is a thin, blond, white adolescent girl. No woman can change the color of her skin or the racial structure of her body. By the time we are grown, the notion that something is wrong with the way we look is too often still ingrained in most of us. It takes courage and determination to resist these messages.

Perhaps the most destructive aspect of this unrealistic standard of beauty is the emphasis on being thin. According to psychologist Mary Pipher, “We are living in a culture that promotes a monolithic, relentless ideal of beauty that is quite literally just short of starvation for most women.” She points out that “women diagnosed as bulimic or anorexic are merely the extremes on a universal continuum,” and that “56% of the women in the United States are on diets.”² Because we internalize the standard as children, women who do not fit the emaciated look set by the fashion industry consider themselves overweight.

There is a related problem for women in a patriarchal society—our sexuality which tends to define our identity. For centuries sexuality was shrouded by traditional Christian notions of sin and

guilt. Women were divided into good girls whose sexuality was owned and controlled by one man, and bad girls who freely chose many lovers but were held in contempt even by the men who had sex with them. Today these old stereotypes have been abandoned by many and sex with many partners is more acceptable. Or is it? Virginity pledges and endless TV shows in which women, usually prostitutes, are murdered seem to suggest that the old stereotypes are being reasserted.

Lesbians, women who love women, are especially discriminated against for their sexuality. In most places they cannot marry and cannot safely make the nature of their relationship known in the work world.

*Off With Her Head!: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture*³ is the title of a collection of essays whose premise is that most research has been concerned with women's sexualized bodies: our wombs, vaginas, and breasts. But women's heads, that part of the body which gives women a voice and an identity has had to be sexualized as well in order to keep women in an inferior position. According to co-author Howard Eilberg-Schwartz in the introduction to this collection, this sexualization of the female head “extends the body, turning the head into an alluring and sexually provocative organ.” Thus “Speaking to a woman is a form of sex, seeing her hair a violation of modesty.”⁴ So it is that some cultures insist that women's heads be veiled. Other cultures eroticize the head by promoting cosmetics and hairstyling.

Both the veil and the cosmetics turn the female head into a symbol of sexual desire, rather than a symbol of identity.

In ancient times the female body was revered as the source of all life. Female images abound. This focus on the mystery of the Divine Female continued over thousands of years. During the Old Stone Age in Eurasia, female figures were carved into the entrances of caves or set in niches inside.

In later Neolithic agricultural times, a powerful Goddess known by many names presided over the regeneration of the Earth as well as its people and animals. The mysteries of birth, death, and the renewal of life were central to this ancient Goddess religion. She was, according to archeologist Marija Gimbutas, the Giver of Life, the Wielder of Death, and the Regeneratrix. Gimbutas points out that all of these images can be viewed as aspects of one

Great Goddess, analogous to Nature itself. The Goddess is immanent. She is within the whole of her creation. No mere “fertility figure,” she is the creator, sustainer, and transformer of life. Nor is there any trace of a father figure in the Old Stone Age. “The life-creating power seems to have been of the Great Goddess alone.”⁵ In very early historic times, women were the primary religious and cultural leaders who founded a settled economy, devised systems of language, and developed the arts.

It was from Goddesses that the first kings of city states received their power. Archeologist G. Rachel Levy has carefully documented the fact that for most of the millennia of human existence, life revolved around the celebration of female processes.⁶ A great cosmic analogy was made between the mysteries of menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth, and the abundance of the Earth and its cycles of time.

Today we know that every human embryo begins as female. Stephen Jay Gould writes, “The female course of development is, in a sense, biologically intrinsic to all mammals . . . The male route is a modification induced by secretions of androgens from the developing testes.”⁷ Males, it seems, are derived from the primary female pattern. Men of course have not wanted to know this basic biological fact. They did not discover it until 1951 and then proceeded to ignore it until a woman scientist, Mary Jane Sherfey, brought it to light again in 1961.⁸

Those thousands of years when the divine was understood as female constitute the longest span of our human heritage, a span that is especially significant for women. Would we have more self-esteem and be more accepting of our bodies and our sexuality if the divine was commonly understood today as Goddess rather than God? Can we be helped to break out of these crippling stereotypes by reclaiming our heritage?

NOTES

¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press 1973), xxiii, wrote that the foreground of our experience in this culture was male-defined and toxic for women. She urged women to journey into the Background, the real world where they could “weave and re-weave faith and hope in our power of Presence.” The use of the word Foreground in these sessions is meant to suggest that women are perhaps becoming a real Presence in a New Foreground.

² Mary Pipher, *Hunger Pains: The Modern Woman's Tragic Quest for Thinness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 4-5.

³ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, eds., *Off With Her Head!: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴ *Ibid.* 1-2

⁵ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 316.

⁶ G. Rachel Levy, *The Gate of Horn* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1948).

⁷ Stephen J. Gould, *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 153-154.

⁸ Mary Jane Sherfey, *The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 43.