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THE GREAT MOTHER/GODDESS AND THE PSYCHOGENESIS OF PATRIARCHY

Recent years have witnessed a "return of the Goddess" in such movements as neo-paganism, the new theologies, and ecofeminism.¹ For many, this return signals the collapse of a worldview, or a set of fundamental assumptions underlying a series of worldviews, that has dominated the entire historical period. What has dominated is the spirit of domination itself, the spirit of empire and conquest, of exploitation and enslavement, a spirit now commonly identified with patriarchy – the "rule of the fathers". "Four thousand years ago," write Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor,

patriarchal religion and culture began forcibly defining biological beings – and primarily the female being – in mechanistic, exploitable terms. Since then, because behaviour follows definition, the human world has undergone a logarithmically accelerated process of mechanization. Patriarchal religion emptied biology of spirit and consciousness, through its machine dualisms of fleshly body versus divine mind, of material evil versus abstract goodness – in this way it destroyed the Neolithic Goddess religion, and enslaved female beings. Patriarchal science followed with its eventually Cartesian definitions of a totally mechanoid deadness of matter being acted upon – objectively observed, manipulated – by the detached male mind.²

In what follows, I wish to explore the genesis of this "detached male mind" through an appeal to current theoretical and clinical/experiential observations from the field of transpersonal psychology (as represented by Ken Wilber, Michael Washburn, and Stanislav Grof). In so doing, I

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1. Apart from the book by Sjöö and Mor listed in note 2, see also Naomi Goldenberg's *The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.
 2. *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers. 1991, p. 384.

will attempt to clarify the significance of the Great Mother/Goddess in the evolution of patriarchal consciousness.

I

While there is no doubting that the domination of women by the "fathers" (and their sons) has gone hand in hand with the generalized exploitation of the Earth and its less powerful inhabitants (whether plant, animal, or simply "other"), the question remains: why patriarchy? Obviously, to say that the patriarchy arose, either from the "natural" fact of male superiority, on the one hand, or from male brutality, on the other, merely begs the question. Sjöö and Mor, for their part, appeal to a generalized life-hatred and womb-envy as essential correlates of the "detached male mind."³ Again, however, nowhere do they offer a sustained reflection on why or how such feelings should ever arise.

Building on a wide spectrum of anthropo-social, psychological, and philosophical reflection (some of the main influences being E. Neumann, J. Gebser, J. Campbell, E. Becker, L.L. Whyte, Hegel and J. Habermas), Ken Wilber is one of the first to propose a comprehensive psychological answer to the why of patriarchy. To begin with, Wilber considers that human evolution or overall development proceeds along two distinct, though interpenetrating, trajectories. The first describes the differentiation of human consciousness out of its "prepersonal slumber," or relative identification with animality or nature in general, towards the personalized sphere of the mental ego. The latter is associated with the emergence of linear or historical time-consciousness, literacy, concrete and formal operational thinking and self-conscious reflexivity. In terms of species evolution, humanity (or certain elements thereof) saw the initial emergence of the mental ego somewhere around 2500 B.C.E. (around, that is, the beginning of the historical period). The "high" egoic period began around 1500 C.E. (the beginning of the modern period, in effect).

The second trajectory describes the progressive widening of consciousness beyond the ordinary parameters of the separate-self sense, whether personal or prepersonal, into the sphere of spirituality or transcendence. The centre of this sphere - which Wilber describes variously

3. See, for instance, *ibid.*, p. 383.

as Atman, Spirit, or the Self – is the absolute goal or telos of both trajectories, though only implicitly so with regard to the first. Both trajectories manifest a parallel structural – developmental logic, running from the relatively gross and less differentiated to the relatively subtle and more differentiated. The details of Wilber's structural-developmental hierarchy need not detain us here. With respect to the question of patriarchy, the main point is that, from the recognition of these two distinct trajectories, Wilber is able to posit a crucial distinction between what calls the "Great Mother," on the one hand, and the "Great Goddess," on the other. The latter is reserved for transpersonal epiphanies of subtle or archetypal oneness.⁴ These epiphanies are typically accompanied by a willing sacrifice, or spontaneous release, of the separate-self sense along with a corresponding insight into the deeper, or higher Self.

The Great Mother, by contrast, represents the prepersonal sphere of material embeddedness. Relative to the first constellation of the separate-self sense – which Wilber calls typhonic⁵ consciousness – She is the "Great Surround," the giver of life and death, the ground or matrix of bodily feeling, of vital sentience, of physicality in general. The intimacy or proximity of typhonic consciousness to the sphere of the Great Mother is reflected in the fact that, at this stage, self-consciousness is more or less identical with the body-sense. While consciousness is not yet able to apprehend itself as distinct from, though related to, the body (in Piagetian terms, thinking is still limited to sensori-motor and preoperational functioning), there is nevertheless a growing differentiation of the self-sense away from the earlier participatory fusion with the general environment. Because of this proximity, however, because they both share the same flesh, as it were, typhonic consciousness is prone to periodic regression to its prior matrix – i.e., to the less differentiated sphere of the Great Mother. While such regression is to a certain extent both natural and revitalizing (as in sleep, for instance), it is also in tension with the *principium individuationis* of human consciousness which intends, or is driven to actualize, a certain degree of differentiation. Building upon the discriminatory awareness already required at the organismic level, competency in the specifically human realms of culture and spirituality demands an even higher level of differentiation, though at a

4. See *Up from Eden: a Transpersonal View of Human Evolution*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1981. p. 148.

5. From the Mythical figure of the Typhon, which is half human, half snake.

subtler level, than is possible in a state of identification with the sphere of the Great Mother. Developmentally, however, it appears to be due largely to tensions within typhonic consciousness itself that lead not only to differentiation from, but repression of, the Great Mother. For, with each emergence from its matrix, typhonic consciousness is faced with its apparent separateness from, and vulnerability towards, the general environment. According to Wilber, awareness of this separateness and vulnerability is the occasion for the first manifestations of "primitive forms of dread, anxiety, and the terror of death."⁶ "We might say," Wilber continues, "that at this point, if repression did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. There is simply no other way the separate self could face its own emergence . . . except by repressing death, and its reflex terror, and all aspects of life that threaten death."⁷

Since, however, the locus of typhonic death angst is the body itself—since, moreover, there is no life without death—it is life and embodiedness, along with typhonic consciousness as a whole, which become the object of repression. And because, as we have seen, typhonic consciousness is intimately associated with the sphere of the Great Mother, She too inevitably suffers the same fate. Here, then, we have a first answer to the question of patriarchy. To summarize, as Wilber puts it:

. . . where the egoic self ought to have gone from... identification with the Great Mother to.... differentiation from the Great Mother (which allows subsequent integration; you cannot integrate that which has not been differentiated in the first place), it went instead into.... dissociation. It went to far, as it were, and turned transcendence and differentiation into repression and dissociation: the dissociation and alienation of the Great Mother.⁸

By the same token, the cult of the Great Goddess, insofar as it appealed to the same complex of maternal symbols, became subject to the same dissociation and alienation. For, "when the feminine Imago is rejected *in toto*, the higher wisdom, or Sophia, which often finds its natural expression in the Great Goddess, is likewise denied expres-

6. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

ssion".⁹ The same, needless to say, holds true for individual embodiments of this Imago, along with women as a distinct bio-class.

Despite significant differences between his "dynamic-dialectical" and Wilber's "structural-hierarchical" paradigm,¹⁰ Michael Washburn agrees with Wilber in considering the dissociation of the feminine to be an inevitable, if lamentable, by-product of egoic development. According to Washburn, "the body-ego is programmed for a trajectory of independence . . ."¹¹ This is so, primarily, because of the impossibility of the body-ego's fundamental project, which is to be an "independent intimate of the Great Mother".¹² While, ideally, the body-ego would like to enjoy "both the blissful contentment of the oceanic state and self-possessed life,"¹³ it "lacks sufficient strength in being to survive the solvent power of the Great Mother, in whose presence the body-ego tends to disintegrate".¹⁴ The desire for intimacy and fusion, therefore, comes into increasing conflict with the adaptational need for differentiation and relative autonomy. In this way,

there ensues a battle between the body-ego and the maternal power that terminates in original repression: the dissociation of the ego from the maternal power, which is at the same time a dissociation of the ego from its own instinctual, affective, creative, and spiritual life.¹⁵

While original repression is a desperate act on the part of the body-ego to defend against its sense of threatened integrity, the concomitant dissociation, as both Washburn and Wilber point out, is directed not only at the Great Mother, but inwardly at the body-ego itself. The result of this self-dissociation is the emergence of a new locus of identification for the separate-self sense - the mental-ego. Facilitated

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

10. See, in this connection, my article, "The Prodigal Soul: Religious Studies and the Advent of Transpersonal Psychology," in *Religious Studies: Issues, Prospects, and Proposals*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, pp. 429-441.

11. *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground: a Transpersonal Theory of Human Development*. New York: SUNY Press, 1988. p. 52.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

13. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

by the acquisition of language, the advent of operational thinking, and the introjection (via the Oedipal conflict) of the parental imagoes, the mental ego tries to create for itself a "surrogate body"¹⁶ in the form of a subjective thought-world, an immaterial, and thus imperishable, personal core along the lines of the Cartesian *res cogitans*. In so doing, the mental ego

considers itself to be altogether independent of and superior to the body. Physically, for example, the mental ego, associated with the head, sits atop the body and commands it from on high. Metaphysically, the mental ego thinks of itself as being invulnerable to the dependencies, and even mortality, of bodily existence And morally, the mental ego stands in judgment of the flesh as making up our "lower nature". However, since this so-called lower nature is a central part of our total self-nature, the rule of the mental ego, however warranted it may be for developmental reasons, is ultimately a species of self-negation. It is a negation of the non-egoic pole of the psyche - which negation must itself be negated before the self can be whole and true.¹⁷

II

Though Washburn leaves open the theoretical possibility that "a child of extraordinary ego strength blessed with parents of unlimited understanding and love might be able to weather the contradictions of early childhood without succumbing to original repression,"¹⁸ he considers it highly unlikely. Some feminists, however, would object that Washburn and Wilber (and Freud and Jung before them) have constructed a developmental paradigm based exclusively on the masculine experience of being in the world and posited this paradigm as normative for members of both sexes. Catherine Keller, for instance, argues that the "matricidal" ideal of the "separative self" has gone hand in hand with a systematic censoring and denigration of a more authentic "connective" or "relational" self which, though not exclusive to women, is more typical of their experience of being in the world. Invoking the theories of Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow,

16. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Keller maintains that experience of the connective self is more typical of women primarily because of their (stereo) typically defined roles within the nuclear family.

The very structure of a family in which women are primary caretakers preprograms daughters to identify with their mothers, with whom they also relate intimately; they consequently experience self-identity as intrinsically relational Sons, by contrast, experience themselves as not-female, as opposite to the mother with whom they first identified, and therefore as separate.¹⁹

Though she stresses the influence of extrafamilial social and ideological structures, Keller agrees with Chodorow that, to liberate the connective self from its nearly exclusive identification with the feminine - and perhaps more importantly, to thwart the correlative inculcation of the stereotypically masculine separative self - it will be necessary to challenge the patriarchally sanctioned division of labour within the nuclear family. Given the determinative role of early childhood experience in the formation of adult personality structure, it is essential, argues Chodorow, that the male child in particular experience members of both sexes as both "mother" and "other". As Keller notes, however, while "equal affective and practical involvement of male and female parental figures is imaginable and desirable," "prenatal bonding and breast-feeding may work a certain inevitable imbalance in favour of maternal influence".²⁰

Keller's brief caveat takes on a whole new depth of meaning in the light of Stanislav Grof's extensive clinical and experiential investigations. Most significant for our purposes is his estimation of the critical impact of the birth trauma on the overall development of personality. According to Grof, the experience of being born to a certain extent "determines one's basic feelings about existence, image of the world, attitudes towards other people, the ratio of optimism to pessimism, (and) the entire strategy of life" ²¹

19. *From a Broken Web. Separation, Sexism, and Self.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, p. 126.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

21. *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy.* New York: SUNY Press, 1985. p. 251.

The traumatic character of the birth experience can be understood from the two complementary perspectives reflected in the standard distinction between traumas of commission and traumas of omission. The latter refer to situations where the individual suffers as result of the frustration of certain fundamental needs (to situations of deprivation, in other words), as in malnutrition or insufficient touching of the neonate (which results in mirasmus). The perinatal²² prototype for traumas of omission is the initial separation from the mother in the third and final stage of delivery, culminating with the severing of the umbilical cord. Traumas of commission, on the other hand, are associated with situations of more immediate vital threat, as in cases of extreme physical or emotional abuse (here it is a question more of violation than deprivation). The perinatal prototype for traumas of commission is the second clinical stage of delivery where the fetus is typically engaged in a life and death struggle in its passage through the birth canal. This stage, as Grof notes, "involves an enormous struggle for survival, crushing mechanical pressures, and often a high degree of anoxia and suffocation".²³

A comparable abuse imposed on an unconstrained animal would result in outbursts of rage and a motor storm. However, the child trapped in the narrow confines of the birth canal has no outlet for the flood of emotional and motor impulses, since he or she cannot move, fight back, leave the situation, or scream. It is therefore conceivable that an enormous amount of aggressive impulses and general tension would be, under these circumstances, fed back into the organism and stored for belated discharge.²⁴

This is indeed a profound observation, and is of particular moment to our inquiry into the psychogenesis of the matricidal tendencies of the separative self and patriarchal consciousness in general. While one can assume that the experience of being born is initially equally traumatic for members of both sexes, the fact that men come to see themselves (by virtue, if nothing else, of anatomical specificity) as "not-mother," would tend, to begin with, to reinforce the omissive (deprivation) component of the trauma. Given the continuity between

22. Perinatal means "surrounding birth."

23. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

the second and third stages of delivery, moreover, where the life-threatening passage through the birth canal culminates with the severing of the umbilical cord, one might expect that reinforcement of the omissive component might work to exacerbate the commissive (violation) as well. In any case, what is most significant in this context is that the male ego, as "other" than (i.e., separate from) the mother, will be more prone to perpetuate the oppositional, and thus potentially conflictual, dynamics of the perinatal process. More particularly, the "enormous amount of aggressive impulses" which were "fed back into the organism and stored for belated discharge" will find their natural "object" in the "mother" or her surrogates. Such might sometimes be the case, for instance, for the rapist who, according to Grof, "exteriorizes and acts out the introjected forces of the birth canal, while simultaneously taking revenge on a mother surrogate".²⁵

Again, Chodorow might interject at this point to remind us of the crucial role of patriarchal family dynamics in the genesis of the separative self and its associated aggressive impulses. Grof, for his part, also stresses the importance of early childhood experiences, which can serve to reinforce or mitigate the negative impact of the birth experience. In Grof's opinion, however, childhood experiences in themselves "are not the actual sources of malignant aggression (or, by implication, of the separative self). They only contribute to the (already) existing abysmal repository of perinatal aggression, weaken the defenses that normally prevent it from emerging into consciousness, and colour specifically its manifestations in the individual's life".²⁶ Thus, while it is obviously necessary to address, and redress, the pathogenic influence of patriarchy's social and familial structures in the formation and perpetuation of the separative self, it would be foolish to neglect the singular impact of the perinatal factor. "Sensitive handling of the newborn," writes Grof, restitution of the symbiotic interaction with the mother, and sufficient time allowed for bonding seem to be factors of critical importance that can counteract much of the deleterious impact of the birth trauma. In view of the observations from modern consciousness research, a basic revision of present medical approaches, which emphasize impeccable body mechanics but violate fundamental biological and emotional bonds between

25. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

mother and child, is of critical importance for the mental health of humanity.²⁷

Conclusion

Given the preceding discussion of the psychogenesis of the separative self as the root structure of patriarchal consciousness, how are we to understand the contemporary "return of the Goddess"? If, as many would maintain, the separative self is an essentially pathological structure, one might appeal to Freud's notion of the "return of the repressed,"²⁸ though in this instance the primal trauma would be the "murder" of the mother rather than the father. If, however, Wilber and Washburn are right in their understanding of the dissociation of the Great Mother/Goddess as an inevitable by-product of the differentiation of the mental ego out of the (relatively unconscious) state of material embeddedness, then the Goddess's return might signal not only the bankruptcy of patriarchal consciousness, but the successful completion of the process of differentiation which the patriarchy has subserved. From a transpersonally informed perspective of human development, moreover, this differentiation would itself be seen as subserving the more fundamental and overarching drive toward wholeness (Jung's "individuation", Wilber's "Atman" or "Unity Consciousness", Grof's "holotropic mind"). In this context, the return of the repressed would not be a manifestation of continuing psychopathology (à la Freud), but of a natural, and thus more authentically human, process of growth and self-healing.

Insofar as the psychological dimension of the healing process requires a certain degree of compassionate self-understanding, it is clear that the rhetoric of blame and condemnation which prevails in many accounts of the ravages of patriarchy can only take us so far. It is my hope that the preceding will contribute, in however minimal a fashion, to such an understanding. For until we arrive at a satisfactory account of the why and how of patriarchy, it is doubtful that the wounds with which it is associated will ever completely heal.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

28. See *Moses and Monotheism*, in Volume 13 (The Origins of Religion) of The Pelican Freud Library. Penguin Books, 1986. pp. 323f. and 381f.