Madonna: Pull of the Goddess

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"Madonna: Pull of the Goddess."
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A few years ago I happened to catch a T.V. documentary on the Virgin Mary appearances at Medjugorje in Yugoslavia and the ecclesiastical, political, and social hoopla coming down on the little rural village and on the six teenagers being visited by the Madonna.

Having grown up Protestant, I never had much feeling for, familiarity with, or interest in the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus. I vaguely knew that she was an important icon in the Roman Catholic Church, but since Protestants of my ilk were brought up to regard the Catholic panoply of saints as something akin to idolatry and superstition, the whole Madonna matter left me indifferent at best.

But the documentary struck me as fascinating and very puzzling. Not so much because of the sightings, as such, of the Virgin. I had long known that there had been numerous such alleged appearances; I had read some material on the phenomenon of Lourdes, particularly on the miraculous healings that were supposed to have taken place there; and I was quite prepared to accept the sincerity and ingenuousness of at least most of the people who were having the visions; yet I remained entirely skeptical that anything truly supernatural had occurred.

What caught my attention and excited my inquisitiveness was the obvious emotional, psychological, and spiritual impact upon very large numbers of people of quite different ethnic background and educational level. The documentary also implied that there is a profound responsiveness and a deep personal need to experience in some way, directly or indirectly, the supernatural, or supra-personal, or, let's say, archetypal impact of the presence of the Mother of God.

Could there be an association with the Great Goddess religion of the remote past, i.e. worship of the mother of all the gods and of the material universe as well. I asked myself: "could we see in the Maria visions an echo of the ancient archetypal human need to revere and experience the presence of the feminine deity?" Jungians seemed to think so, and so do others, as I soon discovered.
My curiosity was stirred, and I began to look for materials related to the issue. And, of course, as synchronicity would have it, much began to pop up for me. I ran into a paperback copy of a study on the Black Madonna, by the British Jungian, ex-Jesuit, therapist Ean Begg, and this work opened my eyes to the actually quite widespread and prominent reality of a popular counter culture within the Roman Catholic Church, in which a kind of positive shadow side of the lofty, official Virgin is being revered and worshipped.

Ean Begg persuasively argues that in the Black Madonna cult we can recognize the convergence of two lines of heresy: a throw-back to the pre-Christian Goddess religions of Old Europe and the Middle East; and a continuation of the early gnostic celebration of Mary Magdalene, the prostitute who became a favorite disciple of Jesus, carried his child with her after the crucifixion, and eventually got to Southern France, where her son started the line of Merovian kings, who, as the legend still has it today, will eventually regain the rightful leadership in a new and better world.

No wonder that the church hierarchy has had a bit of a problem with the Black Madonna matter and consistently tried to ignore it! But it was not able to quite eradicate this popular movement, which still continues today, and actually quite strongly.

Some of the most famous and socially influential Madonna icons are Black Virgins. To name just a few: the Queen of Poland, so called, the personal icon of both the present pope and the Polish President Walesa, held responsible for the demise of communism. Then there is the Madonna of Guadalupe in Mexico, who is also a national image, besides being a religious one. Both sides in Mexico's war of independence are said to have carried the Black Madonna in their banners, each side trying to shoot to pieces the other side's symbol. And then there is the Black Virgin of the most precious high gothic cathedral: the Notre Dame of Chartres in France, a place of pilgrimage even before it became a Christian sanctuary. A dark pre-Christian goddess was, according to legend, worshipped there already by the Druids and perhaps even earlier, in the days of the builders of Stonehenge, around 2000 to 1500 B.C.

I looked up the Madonna entries in the New Catholic Encyclopedia, and although there are many pages and subheadings on Mary, the issue of the Black Madonna is done away with in one short tucked away sentence: "The Black Madonna is a folk creation." No further discussion! In several books and articles which I consulted about the cathedral of Chartres, when I visited there, the Madonna was made of the famous lead stained glass.

The Black Madonna lists some five places where Black Madonna images are prominently displayed, and every time, the icon of her is a multifaceted image, in the Polish community.

Then I happened to find the book entitled Longing for the Mother: a study of both inner and outer manifesta tions of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in the Middle East; I find in all those places including the most vivid manifestations of this popular and intelligent and elegant worship, a very decisive underlying and unspoken claim that she is not a folk creation, but claims that in the psychic world of patients, black moods, and the awareness that occur quite frequently.

Marina Warner, in her systematic study of Mary, says unequivocally: "The Black Madonna is a place which has become an entry point into the Christian psyche, a place which is particularly true of our times. The side of the old religion is more easily accessible and knowledgeable, and a part of the very concrete and universal spirituality.

Very recently, the published articles and books are occurring to show how the many popular Maria visions are appearing in the ecclesiastical realm.

So what is going on here?

Whether or not the popularity of sightings is an indicator of an intense emotion...
visited there, the Madonna icon was discussed at length, but no mention was made of the fact that she is black.

The Black Virgin is not really such a rare phenomenon, actually. Ean Begg lists some five hundred places, some three hundred in France alone, where Black Madonnas are or were found. And, still today, she is quite prominently displayed in many churches. Even in Grand Rapids, from time to time, the icon of the Black Madonna is given a special week of reverence in the Polish community.

Then I happened upon a book, published in 1990 by China Galland, entitled _Longing for Darkness_, in which is described a personal pilgrimage, both inner and outer, in search of the dark mother, involving travel to Tibet, to Poland, to Spain, to Switzerland, to Yugoslavia, and back to America, to find in all those places and to experience figures such as Tara and various manifestations of the dark Virgin Mary. It is clear that, for Galland, a very intelligent and educated person, the search for the dark goddess was a decisive undergirding of her own womanhood and spirituality. It appears that she is not a rare exception. The Jungian therapist Marion Woodman claims that in the dreams of many of her patients, especially women patients, black mother figures of an archetypal, bigger than life stature, occur quite frequently.

Marina Warner's book, _Alone of All her Sex_, a thorough historical and systematic study of the Virgin Mary movements, makes the point unequivocally: in the modern Madonna cult we see clearly an incorporation into the Christian Church of ancient pagan goddess experiences. And this is particularly true of the Black Madonna, who represents a sort of shadow side of the official virgin: a dark, earthy, instinctual woman side, knowledgeable about fertility, pregnancy, birth, sexuality, and death, in their very concrete and real characters. She is, as it were, the underbelly of pure spirituality.

Very recently, in the past couple of months, _Time_ and _Life_ magazines published articles about the increasing number of Virgin Mary visions that are occurring today. These articles make the point that the resurgence of popular Maria worship is also inducing re-evaluation and re-interpretation by the ecclesiastical authorities, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

So what is going on?

Whether or not a super-natural divine event occurred in some of the sightings is an issue perhaps best left to the officials of the Church. But the intense emotional response of multitudes of people should be of significant
interest to a psychological approach, especially one that takes the notion of archetypal dynamics in religious experience seriously. That is the approach I take in this essay.

Do we indeed live in a time of a "Changing of the Gods", as Naomi Goldenberg suggests in her study under that title? Is our era the third time that the Great Goddess is coming out of the shadows into which she was banned by the patriarchal powers: the first time being the time of Jesus and Hellenism, and the second represented by the Gothic Middle Ages?

If so, then a flood tide of psychological change may be upon us, a change that may prove to be at least as profound as the movements of some two hundred years ago in our culture. Compare, for instance, 1825 with 1775. Will the year 2025 be as much of a new era, when compared with 1975? It might well, and then the phenomenon of the Virgin Mary visions, so prominent today, is certainly part of this change in a psychological sense.

There clearly appears to be a resurgence of the Virgin cult in terms of number of visions reported and in the numbers of people, literally many millions of them, flocking to the places where the sightings occurred. This resurgence may be tied in with the re-emergence of the archetypal feminine in our days, as we can see it in the women's movement; in various novel forms of goddess reverence and in attempts to reach back to very old forms of goddess worship; in depth psychology, particularly in Jungian approaches; in some of the theological discussions of today; and even in ritual practices in main-stream churches; further yet in archaeological and mythological studies, with Marija Gimbutas and Joseph Campbell as prominent examples.

The Black Madonna can then be seen as a complement to the all too holy, lofty and spiritualized aspects of the official Christian version of Mary, the Mother of God and of all creation. The Black Madonna represents a link with that earlier, more earthy pagan goddess of both European and Non-European origin, manifested in such figures as Inanna, Isis, Artemis, or Diana, and possibly still other goddesses of Eastern and African background. The Black Madonna rounds out the picture: this Mary is more instinctual and earthy, more fully woman, connected with death and sickness and particularly with woman problems in a very concrete way. The original meaning of the word virgin was, by the way, not the contemporary sexual one: it emphasized the feminine as not subjected to or tied to a man, but rather as autonomous, with power and knowledge of her own.
It is this old sense of the word with its implied associations to the earth and the earthy, that is perhaps most clearly experienced by many men and women, especially women, in the search for the Black Madonna.

A curious tie-in fits here with the figure of Mary the Magdalene, the prostitute, the experienced woman, the one who most closely stood by Jesus in life and death and in resurrection, according to the Canonical Gospels, and even more so according to non-canonical writings of early Christianity, particularly the gnostic scriptures. In some of the latter, it was Mary Magdalene, as an apostle, who shared the leadership in Christianity with Peter and Paul, as an equal, or even as a favored figure, since she was thought by some to have been the lover of Jesus as well as an apostle.

This Black Madonna aspect of the sinner Mary figure was suppressed, sometimes violently, by the increasingly patriarchal developments of the Orthodox Christian Church. The pre-Christian associations, also stirring in those same first few centuries, were equally forcefully repressed. The Church, as soon as it gained real power in the fourth century, clamped down hard on these heresies. The Gnostics were killed off, the shrines of the goddesses were destroyed, the nature of womanhood was degraded. To solve the problem of Mary's role, she was declared, as the only one of all her sex without sin, the chosen vessel for God's incarnation and the only one for all time. And so she was, in a basic sense, de-womanized, made pure above all, permanently virginal--now in the sexual sense--untouched by anything earthy and vulgar.

But today, it seems, we are beginning to rediscover more and more of the ancient Feminine. Of the recent discussions on this matter, I found the works of Marija Gimbutas, the archaeologist, and of Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, especially helpful. They take us far back, some six thousand years, to the time when a religion of goddess worship was dominant all around the Mediterranean and in the near East. There are still many questions about the actual history of the Great Goddess culture, especially about the subjugation of the Goddess culture by the invading Indo-Europeans and Semites, during the fourth millenium B.C. But a few things appear pretty well established by now.

There was indeed a Goddess culture. This Goddess, through various images, was conceptualized and represented as a basic feminine trinity.

First, she was the protectress of home and clan, represented in the images of a virgin--in the old sense of the word--who has strength, and
independence and is contained within herself, not subjected to a man. Later versions appear in the Greek Virgin Goddesses such as Athena or Artemis. Today we see attempts to reinterpret even the Virgin Mary in this way.

Second, there is the figure of the Great Goddess of fertility, the giver of life. We may perhaps see an echo of this in the often used titles for Mary as the Mother of all and Mother of the whole world.

A third aspect of the Great Goddess was the connection of the womb of death with rebirth, of the ultimate completion and reunification of both life and death, as the personification of fulfilled experience, represented in the figure of the crone. This aspect was especially repressed in our Christian tradition. But it seems that we might see in the curious figure of the Black Madonna a strong contemporary echo of this earthy, experienced, wise, life fulfilling aspect of the female trinity.

Another point brought out by recent studies is that the time of the Great Goddess was one of relatively peaceful and small settlements, in arcadian settings on low lands by rivers, out in the open, on rich and accessible lands. Apparently there was no need for strong defenses, fortifications, or much weaponry for battle. In Old Europe, and more recently on Crete, the evidence for such a non-combative culture appears to be persuasive. For an egalitarian society of women and men speaks the testimony of ritual representations, burial practices, and the size and amenities of living quarters. Men were apparently the hunters, the athletes, the consorts, the male power in the service of the Goddess, while the women were the priestesses and queens, tended the temples, practised the handicrafts.

An interesting feature in all this is the very ancient custom of queen’s consort renewal and possibly marriage renewal ceremonies for the common people, when the male who had been favored for a certain period of time would be replaced by a new consort.

Was this at first a peaceful and bloodless procedure? Later, perhaps after having learned from the invading foreigners the force of spectacular ritual violence, there were developed the customs of ritual king sacrifice: for instance, at the time of the change from winter to spring, the time that life in the land must be renewed, the days of the so called "Ides of March", in Roman times still a bad moment for the reigning emperor, as Shakespeare reminds us in his Julius Caesar.

Perhaps we can see a wonderfully apt remnant of this marriage dissolution and renewal custom in the ritual of a contemporary Sahara tribe, which has lived in cultural insulation for untold centuries, and whose members are the descendants to the days when African land of lush animal life.

In this tribe’s looking warrior type, particular ceremonies and dandies, and, by them they may have celebrate the contest.

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members are the heirs of a very ancient north African culture, dating back to the days when there was no great Sahara Desert yet, but instead a North African land of lush vegetation, forests, and grasslands, with rich and varied animal life.

In this tribe’s ritual of uncoupling and remarriage, the males, fierce looking warrior types with not a wimp among them, take pains during a particular ceremony to make themselves look beautiful and attractive, to dance and display; the women then can choose among the hopeful dandies, and, by making a selection, simply dissolve instantly the marriage they may have enjoyed for the past cycle of time, and then proceed to celebrate the consummation of their new and legal wedded status.

A more recent and rather more grizzly reminder of the days of actual bloody sacrifice of consorts to the queen and her priestesses may perhaps be seen in the corpses that have been found in the past few decades in northern Europe and Great Britain: bodies of vigorous princes of men, apparently killed in ritual fashion after sacred ceremonies and meals. Or we might take a look at the famous figure of Diana at Ephesus, which was very popular around the time of Christ, and which now may have to be interpreted as a cult figure to whom sacrifices were made of one of the major male attributes of the Goddess—the bull.

But after a peaceful era of the Goddess came the intruders. From the Northeast, now Russia, rode in the cattle herding Indo-Europeans, on their newly domesticated horses, to which were later added the battle chariots, ancient equivalents of our war tanks, with a fierce patriarchal warrior mentality and with axes, spears, and swords of bronze, later of iron. And from the South came the goat and sheep keeping Semites, equally fierce and patriarchal. They all brought jealous, power brandishing male gods of wild thunder, lightning, of mountain dwelling warrior character, called Zeus, Indra, Yahweh.

Initially these invaders seemed to have mostly moved around a lot, marauding, pillaging, and then returning to their own lands or moving on to other green pastures. The conflict between the tenders of animal herds and the tillers of land had begun, and as the Bible has it, the younger sibling Abel found favor with the Lord, while the older Cain was marked for life.

A bit later, around 3500 B.C. perhaps, the invaders found the lands that they entered so full of promise that they began to stay around and may well have been seduced into joining the ways of their majority companions, thus becoming assimilated. Perhaps we can still hear an echo of this in the book...
of Genesis where it says that the sons of God mingled with the women of the land, which was an abomination in the eyes of the Lord.

It was not to the liking of the jealous Gods of the mountains, who decided to put a stop to all this and ordered the wiping out of the abominations in a great flood of blood and destruction, so as to make a new start, now with the patriarchy firmly on top of things: so it went in Greece, in Persia, in India, in Judea.

But the Old Lady of the fields and the beasts and the waters proved to have more lives than the cat’s nine; she kept reappearing through the ages of the patriarchy, now in this manifestation, then in another, and presently, in the days of the changing of the Gods two thousand years after Jesus, she is once again emerging from the shadows, in various forms, all over the place, in both West and East. And the resurgence of the Virgin Mary veneration may well be one of the manifestations of this process.

It is said by an increasing number of serious people that the patriarchy is cracking, that a new kind of womanhood and a new kind of male are in the making, along with a revision of much religious experience, thought and organization. If this is so, then with our past seven hundred years of history behind us, in which human individuality became more and more emphasized, we will have to become more individually aware and involved: that is, more inward, more psychological. One important difference from earlier times is that the collective is being superseded by individual experience and search. Of this, psychology, particularly depth psychology, is an expression.

As in earlier times, we can expect troubles. If the change is indeed to be profound, then there will necessarily be strong resistance to it. We may already see this in the upsurge of various types of patriarchal fundamentalism, as well as in other forms of resistance of the collective. I think it might for instance be argued that the mass movements of the twentieth century—Marxism, communism, and capitalism—are examples of an attempt to maintain a strong controlling power in the patriarchal organization: through global corporations, through giant bureaucracies and through detailed management of the personal as well as public life of people.

The individual can get lost very easily again in those movements, unless the person finds a unique inner connection to the supra-personal, archetypal, divine realities: an inner integrity, an inner re-ligio.

We can also expect to see a very negative Goddess. This may happen for one, there can be and violent assertiveness happening in the individual cultures: in the shared experiences, in more extreme forms that are so common.

On the other hand, we can expect acquiescence, “identification with the male role” of many males. To think of the loss of masculinity may happen and that can be many profound problems.

Finally, it should be noted that the collective is beginning to resist. Jung emphasizes that the collective is not just a male property, and that evil potentials will be able to make of this yearning for a more masculine Satan, we may recognize Kali, who is perhaps the most important of the movies Spiderman.

In conclusion, we need to see the mythological business now is the understanding of the individual consciousness, that the undercurrents are now may seem, are possibilities.

One example is communism, one unexpected, very unexpected is capitalism. But is the changing of the
We can also expect, on more individual levels as well as collectively, to see a very negative side of the male reaction to the re-emergence of the Goddess. This may well take two different forms.

For one, there can grow a strong resistance through resentful, vindictive, and violent assertion and domination. Perhaps we already see this happening in the increasingly aggressive forms of male sexuality in our culture: in the shift of pornography toward more and more violent experiences, in movies and plays, and in the very macho forms of sexism that are so common in various types of gangs in our present culture.

On the other hand we may see a kind of loss of manhood occurring, an acquiescence, "identification with the anima", as Jung would call it; in other words: a wimp psychology, an emotional passivity, uncertainty, on the part of many males. To integrate the feminine does not, however, need to be a loss of masculine strength, independence, rationality, etc.; but it does happen and that can also, just as much as the violent reaction, lead to many profound problems in the relationships between men and women.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the negative, destructive, devouring side of the Goddess may also have to be recognized much more, just as we are beginning to recognize the shadow of the male Gods.

Jung emphasized the importance of the problem of evil, and evil is not just a male propensity. If the Goddess does come around once more, her evil potentials will be actualized by her shadow too. I don't quite know what to make of this yet. But I just want to point out that, besides recognizing the male Satan, we may also have to begin to open our eyes to the reality of Kali, who is perhaps already being explored in figures such as we find in the movies Spiderwoman and Fatal Attraction.

In conclusion, there certainly is a great deal going on in this psychomythological business of the gods and goddesses. What is most needed now is the understanding of underlying dynamics, coming through in individual consciousness and reconnection with the mysteries of old. If the undercurrents are indeed as deep and fundamentally revolutionary as it now may seem, then there are grave dangers ahead as well as growth possibilities.

One example: social upheaval is to be expected. We see that communism, one clearly very patriarchal system, has collapsed, suddenly, unexpectedly, very dramatically. This is now often hailed as a triumph of capitalism. But is it? Or is a deeper connection involved: namely, with the changing of the patriarchy and its final demise? If the latter might be true,
then capitalism, as we now know it, may also be on the brink of some sort of collapse.

We certainly live in interesting times. That awareness makes us come alive and alert. But at the same time we may remember the old Chinese curse, dating back to ancient times of stability: “May you live in interesting times”. This was not meant as a wishing you well, but indeed as a curse. Let us hope that the curse of our interesting times will be less powerful in its final effects than it is in the promise of better things to come.

SOURCES.

Woodman, Marion, Addiction to Perfection, Inner City Books, Toronto, 1982.