

# Religion From Nature, Not Archaeology

## Starhawk Responds to the Atlantic Monthly

January 5, 2001

I write in regards to Charlotte Allen's article "The Scholars and the Goddess" (January 2001). Although Ms. Allen interviewed me and others at great length for this article, she still seems to have missed the core insights and perspective of Goddess spirituality.

Goddess religion is not based on belief, in history, in archaeology, in any Great Goddess past or present. Our spirituality is based on experience, on a direct relationship with the cycles of birth, growth, death and regeneration in nature and in human lives. We see the complex interwoven web of life as sacred, which is to say, real and important, worth protecting, worth taking a stand for. At a time when every major ecosystem on the planet is under assault, calling nature sacred is a radical act because it threatens the overriding value of profit that allows us to despoil the basic life support systems of the earth. And at a time when women still live with the daily threat of violence and the realities of inequality and abuse, it is an equally radical act to envision deity as female and assert the sacred nature of female (and male) sexuality and bodies.

Any discussion of "the Wiccan narrative" must begin from that framework if it is to make any sense at all. And to truly understand our thealogy (with an 'a' from thea: 'Goddess') you have to be willing to move outside of Jewish or Christian concepts of deity. Ms Allen, producer of the Catholic page on Beliefnet and author of a book on Christ, seems unable to stretch beyond her own belief system, and her conclusions should be read with that in mind.

To us, Goddesses, Gods, and for that matter, archaeological theories are not something to believe in, nor are they merely metaphors. An image of deity, a symbol on a pot, a cave painting, a liturgy are more like portals to particular states of consciousness and constellations of energies. Meditate on them, contemplate them, and they take you someplace, generally into some aspect of those cycles of death and regeneration. The heart of my connection to the Goddess has less to do with what I believe happened five thousand years ago or five hundred years ago, and much more to do with what I notice when I step outside my door: that oak leaves fall to the ground, decay and make fertile soil. Calling that process sacred means that I approach this everyday miracle with a sense of awe and wonder and gratitude, and that in very practical terms, I compost my own garbage.

The current discussion within the Goddess tradition about our history and scholarship is part of the healthy development of a vibrant tradition that tends not to attract true believers of any sort. We enjoy the debate, but we are sophisticated enough to know

that scholars, too, have their biases and fashions. What is declared untrue this year may be true five years from now, and vice versa. Archaeologists may never be able to prove or disprove Marija Gimbutas's theories, but the wealth of ancient images she presents to us are valuable because they work -- they function elegantly, right now, as gateways to that deep connected state. We may never truly know whether Neolithic Minoans saw the spiral as a symbol of regeneration, but I know the amazing, orgasmic power that is raised when we dance a spiral with two thousand people at our Halloween ritual every year. I may never know for certain what was in the mind of the maker of the paleolithic, big bellied, heavy breasted female figure that sits atop my computer, but she works as a Goddess for me because my own creativity is awakened by looking at her every day.

Allen makes a big point of asserting that ancient peoples were polytheists, and that this somehow disproves the myth that they worshiped a Great Goddess. She utterly misses the point that we are polytheists, now, today. No one, certainly not Gimbutas, ever postulated a monolithic, monotheistic Goddess religion of the past. But even the terms "polytheistic" and "monotheistic" come out of a framework that actually makes no sense to us. It's like asking "Is water one or many?" The only possible answer is "Huh? Hey, it's wonderful, miraculous, life giving, vital stuff that we need to honor and respect and conserve and not pollute, that's the point." Goddess traditions of today, in all their forms and nuances: Paganism, women's spirituality, Wicca, Witchcraft, indigenous Goddess worship, are vast, diverse, and constantly evolving. Allen's bias is shown in the extremely narrow selection of Goddess thinkers and writers she chooses to interview or quote from. She quotes at length from the book I wrote over twenty years ago, but doesn't bother to mention the seven other books I've written or co-authored since, which include an economic and sociological analysis of the Witch burnings in *Dreaming the Dark* (Beacon, 1982), and a long discussion of the textual evidence for Goddess worship and the transition to patriarchy in ancient Sumer in *Truth or Dare* (HarperSanFrancisco 1988). She cites Cynthia Eller, whose own bias is revealed in the very title of her book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*. "Matriarchy" is a term that most Goddess scholars set gently aside sometime back in the early eighties, if not before, because none of us envision an ancient society that is the mirror image of patriarchy. Using the term implies that Eller is either not up to date on the very movement she's critiquing, or unwilling to engage with the full range of thought within that movement.

Allen doesn't bother to cite the dozens of other Goddess scholars, philosophers, and journalists from Carol Christ to Margot Adler, who might have provided a counterbalance to what she puts forth as the new received historic truth. But her own bias is most clearly revealed in her use of pejorative terms such as "bunk" and "hokum." This is not the language of either objective scholarship or dispassionate journalism. I doubt that Ms. Eller would write an article on new biblical scholarship, and then dismiss Jewish theology or Christian mythology as "bunk." I doubt that the Atlantic Monthly would publish her if she did. In today's world, people of good will of every religion are striving for tolerance, understanding, and sensitivity to other traditions. By resorting to religious attack under the guise of scholarly critique, Ms. Allen demeans herself and your magazine.

Sincerely,

**Starhawk**

Author of *The Spiral Dance*