

SACRED PROSTITUTION:
THE WHORE AND THE HOLY ONE
a paper by Elizabeth Cunningham
prepared for The New Seminary

I was sent forth from the power,
and I have come to those who reflect upon me,
and I have been found among those who seek after me,
Look upon me, you who reflect upon me,
and you hearers, hear me.
You who are waiting for me, take me to yourselves
And do not banish me from your sight...
For I am the first and the last
I am the honored one and the scorned one,
I am the whore and the holy one...
I am the silence that is incomprehensible
and the idea whose remembrance is frequent.
I am the voice whose sound is manifold
and the word whose appearance is multiple.
I am the utterance of my name...
Excerpts from "The Thunder, Perfect Mind",

THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY.

So opens "The Thunder, Perfect Mind." This short tractate is part of the Nag Hammadi Library, a collection of mostly Gnostic writings from the third century CE, discovered in Egypt in 1945. Scholar George W. MacRae calls "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" a revelation discourse. It is the proclamation of the great female I-Am. Throughout the piece this powerful voice utters apparent paradoxes in what seems more like a hymn or a poem than a discourse. In his introduction, MacRae comments that "in terms of religious tradition "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" is difficult to classify as it presents no distinctly Jewish, Gnostic, or Christian themes."

I believe "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" may represent or contain fragments of a religious tradition older than Judaism, far older than the classical period of Greek civilization, certainly older than Christianity and Gnosticism, a tradition that was no longer intact at the time "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" was written down. MacRae compares the tone of "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" to the Isis aretalogies, but he notes that "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" differs from the aretalogies in its insistent use of paradox and contradiction.

I invite you to consider this possibility: If the voice of "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" echoes the voices of Isis, Ishtar and Inanna, goddesses who were once all powerful, who contained all paradox in a magnificent wholeness, then at the time that this voice lifted itself up she had to speak in paradox. The voice of "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" is the voice of a divine female power asserting her importance to a people who were already deeply ambivalent about her and their attraction to her, whose ancestors had been torn for centuries between honoring and scorning her. Even more, this female I-am knows that she is pleading with a people on the verge of forgetting who she is, becoming deaf to her

wisdom, silencing her. Some 1,800 years have passed since the writing of "The Thunder, Perfect Mind", and our own time. We are only just beginning to hear again "this voice whose sound is manifold."

Once upon a time, so long ago that we only have fragments of Sumerian and Babylonian tablets, myths and our own dreams to tell us this story, the assertion "I am the whore and the holy one" would not have been a paradox at all. In ancient Sumer and Babylon, temple priestess/prostitutes of the goddess received the god-bearing stranger. Their sexual union was, for both participants, communion with the divine. In many ancient cultures, in order for the land to prosper and for a king to have legitimacy in the eyes of the people, he had to celebrate the hieros gamos (sacred marriage) with a priestess who represented the goddess. In Sumer, the people sang ecstatic, erotic hymns to encourage and celebrate the marriage of the shepherd-king Dumuzi with the goddess Inanna. Here's a passage from the Sacred Marriage Rite translated by Samuel Kramer from the Gudea Cylinders written in Sumer around 3,000 BCE.

The King goes with lifted head to the holy lap
He goes with lifted head to the holy lap of Inanna,
The King coming with lifted head,
Coming to my queen with lifted head
Embraces the Hierdoule.

According to Jungian analyst Nancy Qualls-Corbett, author of *The Sacred Prostitute*, the term hierdoule literally means sacred servant. It refers specifically to the priestess whose functions included sexual rites.

Over time the enactment of the king's symbolic marriage with the goddess probably became mere form and finally obsolete as Babylon and other societies became more stratified and war-like. Then military might, instead of mystical union with the goddess, conferred legitimacy on a ruler. In Babylon there was also a hierarchy of prostitutes from the high-ranking temple priestesses, the entu and naditu, to the tavern or street whore called harimtu. It's worth noting that in Babylonian religious texts, the goddess Ishtar identifies herself with the lower ranks of the street prostitutes, saying "When I sit in the entrance of a tavern, I, Ishtar, am a loving harimtu." In another Babylonian text Ishtar proclaims, "A prostitute compassionate am I."

Isis began her long, illustrious life as a goddess in Egypt around 2,500 BCE. Worship of Isis spread all over the Mediterranean world and beyond. There was even a temple to Isis on the Thames River. In Rome, though she was regarded by the ruling class as an exotic (and suspect) Oriental import, she was worshipped well into Christian times. Like Jesus, Isis was a universal and merciful savior who paid no attention to social class or lineage. Like the Virgin Mary, she was a divine and devoted mother. She was also beloved by prostitutes. According to the wealth of lore surrounding her, during her long search for the body of her lover/brother Osiris, she was a prostitute in Tyre for ten years, perhaps a temple prostitute. She eventually found Osiris' coffin in a pillar of a temple to Ashstarte in Byblos. Isis's own temples were often located near brothels and had the reputation of being a meeting place for prostitutes.

Isis, like Inanna and Ishtar, was all in one: whore, wife, mother, all holy. Apparently worshippers saw no contradiction, no need to exalt one aspect of the goddess (or divine

feminine, if you prefer) and debase another. But something happens, some dis-integration. Listen again to the voice of "The Thunder, Perfect Mind."

I am the one whom they called Life
and you have called Death.

I am the one whom they call Law
and you have called Lawlessness.

I am the one you have pursued
and I am the one whom you have seized.

I am the one whom you have scattered
and you have gathered me together.

There are many theories about what might have caused the near total-eclipse of goddess worship(at least in the Western world) and I don't want to address them today. I just want to observe that she (whoever, whatever she is) seems to be re-emerging. It is time to gather together her scattered archetypes. In her virgin mother aspect, she never completely disappeared, at least among Roman Catholics. I can't help wonder if the tragic adulation/hounding of women like the late Princess of Wales doesn't have something to do with the absence of a goddess to adore in the predominantly Protestant cultures of the United States and Britain. I believe that in order to heal our individual and collective psyches we need the divine feminine not only as the holy mother or the virgin or as a disembodied divine Wisdom, but as the holy whore, the "prostitute compassionate".

It is probably not practical or possible to reconstruct temples to the goddess for the practice of sacred prostitution (although some of us might like to). But we can begin to reclaim the archetype of the holy whore—or to put it more colorfully, we can embrace the sacred prostitute within. We can also examine our own and our culture's attitude towards secular prostitutes, the descendants of the harimtu with whom Ishtar identified herself. The virgin/whore dichotomy, with all women implicitly forced to one side or the other of the good girl/bad girl divide, has harmed us all, women and men. If the virgin/whore dichotomy stands, then our souls and our bodies, our spirituality and our sexuality also remained divided, even at war.

As noted, Inanna, Ishtar, Isis and other great goddesses played all parts: wife, mother, lover, and in their completeness-in-themselves, also virgin. (As an aside, it is worth observing that the patriarchal classical Greeks divided these archetypal roles between many goddesses so that no one female deity had the kind of power Zeus wielded.) Though in Isis's case, her lover is her brother, the goddess often bears a son-lover. The son begets himself as is technically the case in Christian doctrine, the son and the father being different aspects of one god. But in our culture we can't quite grasp the concept of divine sexual passion. So Mary conceives mystically through an angelic messenger, and her virginity is taken literally as intactness of the hymen. We do not allow her to experience sexual ecstasy.

Although we profess to believe that Jesus became incarnate to share our human nature, in all its joy and sorrow, we do not allow him sexual expression or freedom. We know that a lot of women followed him (although they are not, officially, acknowledged as disciples), chief among them Mary Magdalen, the first witness of his resurrection. We are

not supposed to speculate on the nature of his relationship with Mary Magdalen, although of course we have for centuries.

It is interesting, in terms of archetype, that so many women in the Gospel are named Mary, at least five, possibly six. No doubt Mary was an ubiquitous first century name. But it almost seems as if all those scattered parts of the goddess—virgin, wife, mother, sister, lover, whore—want to come back under the name Mary. The name Mary in Hebrew is Miriam (also the name of Moses' sister) a name rich in meanings, among them bitterness, rebellion and the salty brine of tears, of the womb, of the sea.

The virgin/whore dichotomy demands that Mary Magdalen serve as the whore counterpart to Mary the Virgin, although there is no scriptural evidence that Mary Magdalen was a prostitute. Also, according to the lore that has accrued to her over the ages, she was a repentant prostitute, turned from her sinful ways by Jesus who heals and forgives her. And so, ironically, despite her reputation (deserved or not) Mary Magdalen doesn't get to experience sexual ecstasy either. Regarding Mary Magdalen as a repentant, redeemed prostitute does nothing to heal the split between spirituality and sexuality, for in that scenario she does not integrate her sexuality with her new found life of the spirit, she merely renounces it.

Nickie Roberts, a former prostitute and prostitutes' rights advocate writes in her book *Whores in History*: "To this day the whore stigma affects all women, whether or not we subscribe to the good girl/bad girl dichotomy which can be traced back to the beginning of patriarchal thought. Any woman can be branded a whore if she steps out of line."

Until the holy whore archetype is honored, there will be a whore stigma. Women will be divided against each other and themselves, and we will all be at odds with our own human nature. As a practical counterpart to archetypal integration, I'd also suggest that we advocate for decriminalization of prostitution. However women (and men) enter what is called the oldest profession, whether as victims of circumstance or by choice, whether they practice in a manner that we view as sacred or profane (another aspect of the same dichotomy) they do not deserve to be persecuted or prosecuted.

I'd like to leave you today with this proposition (pun more or less intended): Maybe Mary Magdalen, whom according to Gnostic texts Jesus loved above all others, was a whore, a real and unrepentant whore. Though there is no scriptural evidence that she was, scripture also makes no mention of her father, brother, husband or son. Without male protection and support her options for livelihood were few. The Gospel (Luke 8) indicates that she (and other female followers) may have provided Jesus with financial support for his ministry. They had to have some source of income. Why not the oldest profession? (Thanks are due to Judith Marcus for helping me develop this line of thought.)

Maybe Jesus, who had no tolerance for hypocrites and who was not exactly a proponent of conventional family values, loved Mary Magdalen just as she was. Perhaps he had the wisdom and the greatness to recognize in her the prostitute compassionate, the whore and the holy one.

Thank you all for listening today. If anyone is interested, I have a bibliography available.

May the compassion of the Holy Whore be with you and flow through you for the healing of us all. Amen and Blessed Be.

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