



Spirituality and Mothering

The connection between mothering and spirituality can be discussed in a framework that views spirituality as a sphere of meaning or a sphere of existence associated with the divine. Spirituality is often described as involving "the other world" as against "this world." Spirituality also can be described as the inner, or esoteric and secret, meaning of religions. Motherly elements or principles are variously prevalent in spiritual traditions, with some traditions less concerned with motherly symbols than others.

Within the spiritual realm, mothering and femininity are often highly connected, and mothering is frequently perceived as the spiritual epitome of femininity. Two central aspects are described and discussed. The first includes the description of various motherly deities (or quasi-deities), namely *Mary*, *Binah*, *Shakti*, and Mother Earth. These deities embody and represent spiritual and divine qualities or principles that are related to mothering, such as unlimited divine love, creation and fertility, holding, caring, and sustaining life. They also signify various motherly symbols (womb, Earth), and various myths (world creation). The second aspect discussed is the issue of spiritual valence (good versus bad) attributed to mothering in various spiritual traditions.

Motherly Deities

In various spiritual traditions a variety of motherly goddesses or divine mother figures (represented in varying degrees of abstraction) are described. For example, in the Christian tradition, *Mary*, who conceived Jesus the Messiah and the son of God, is championed as a symbol of motherly love. For many Catholics and other religions that uphold the Virgin *Mary*, *Mary* is a principal dispenser of God's grace and an advocate for the people. *Mary* is described as being involved in miracles, expressing her qualities of compassion, caring, mercy, and divine power. Even though Jesus is the most adored image in this tradition, *Mary* is viewed and admired as the "Mother of God" and her image is invoked in various prayers and rituals.

In Theosophical Kabbalah (a main current of Jewish mysticism), mothering symbols are abundant. The third of the 10 *Sefirot* (aspects or powers of God), *Binah* takes the shape of a womb and functions as the Upper Mother giving birth to the seven lower *Sefirot*. It symbolizes actions or processes similar to those that take place in the womb, including conception and the illation of one thing from another. The tenth *Sefira*, termed *Malchut*, is described as the Daughter as well as the Lower Mother, who procreates our physical, material world.

Hinduism also evinces several different symbols of mothering or motherly deities. The term *Shaktism* pervades Hinduism to denote a feminine divinity, or more specifically the Mother Goddess or *Devi*. The Mother Goddess is identified with the Supreme as opposed to other forms of divinity in Hinduism. *Shakti* is unique in that it refers not only to the supreme and abstract form of Divinity known as *Brahman*, but also to matter or nature, known as *prakriti*. As *Shakti* embodies both abstract and concrete divinity, *Shaktism* combines theoretical reflections on the identity of *Shakti* with *Brahman* and concrete forms of practice called *Tantra*, which aspire to extract spirituality from activities generally aimed at bodily or material enjoyment, such as sex or meat eating. In the Hindu *Vaishnava* tradition, motherhood is considered to evoke *rasa*, an aesthetic principle representing a fine emotional state, ultimately liberating the devoted mother from this world. A famous example of this is *Yashoda*, who due to her motherly love for her son *Krishna* experienced refined ecstatic motherly emotions considered to represent a pure mode of spiritual existence.

Finally, Mother Earth or *Gaia* is considered a mythological goddess personifying nature (or our planet). This divine image is prevalent in many indigenous cultures, taking different names and forms, and represents the fertility of the earth and women alike. It is worshiped as being the mother from whom all life sprang and as all life's sustainer and caterer. In current alternative spiritualities, the qualities attributed to motherly divinities (such as earthliness, equality, softness, receptivity, lightness) are presented as opposed to the abstract male God of the monotheistic traditions, who is frequently perceived as a father that dwells in heavens.

Spiritual Valor Attributed to Mothering

Mothering is often described in spiritual traditions as a spiritual experience, originating from a divine source similar to it in acts and traits such as creation and caring. In some cases, mothering itself is even described as a divine state. For instance, in Chasidism (another Jewish mystical tradition), humans are perceived as a reflection of the divine, so mothers reflect and actually affect divine processes and qualities of mothering. In 20th-century and current alternative spiritualities, the positive focus on femininity and admiration of motherhood is expressed in various ways.

Myths of ancient matrifocal (as opposed to patriarchal) cultures, in which mothers were the family head, have become widespread among alternative spiritual groups. Apparently, in ancient societies based on the mother

figure, goddesses were worshiped as symbols of their cultural values, such as caring, sanctity of life, catering to physical necessities, and attunement to cycles of nature. These cultures involved identification through the mothers' blood relations, stressed life-cycle rituals, and admired mothering and fertility. In modern Western societies, various groups and doctrines of this kind have proliferated that venerate mothering using spiritual symbols; they include Wicca, the Goddess Movement, Neo-Paganism, and modern nature religions. Some social and political movements and actions stem from and are reinforced by these current alternative spiritualities and New Age movements, including ecofeminism, the natural birth movement, and the encouragement of prolonged breastfeeding.

Some spiritual traditions, such as Christianity, hold a largely positive view of motherhood, although at times complex. Theologically, because motherhood involves procreation and therefore sex, it has been associated with sin and impurity as well as blessing and life. Because Christianity is so diverse across cultures and denominations, teachings about motherhood vary. A few common threads include the image of mother as nurturer and healer; and though the theological details may differ, the centrality of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as model and principal image. Eve, as the first human mother, is also, along with Adam, representative of humanity in general. Eve's alienation from God through sin is counterpoised to Mary, the Blessed Virgin, who conceived the Son of God by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Balanced Feminine Role

Other spiritual traditions view mothering and femininity as encompassing positive and negative possibilities, or as involving neither of these poles in their essence. For example, in Theosophical Kabbalah, *Malchut* is considered the mother of everything in the physical world, giving birth to blessings as well as to scourges. The Chinese religious tradition, Daoism, refers to two elements: yin, generally associated with the feminine, birth and generation; and yang, associated with masculinity. The two are considered complementary, and necessary for harmony. Jungian psychology, prevalent in current spiritual circles, accords a similar complementary role to the feminine element in men termed *anima* and the masculine element in women termed *animus*.

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[Further Readings](#)

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