



## Goddess Religions

by Andrew Matzner

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Goddess religions, especially those that feature a singular Great or Mother Goddess, emphasize the relationship between femininity and nature. These belief systems honor female energy for its role in fertility and the creation of new life. The earth is valued as a manifestation of the Goddess, and the connections between people, animals, plants, and the environment are respected.

### Female-centered Religions and Sexuality

Female-centered religions traditionally were sex-positive, in that sexuality was not limited to procreative acts, but also encompassed non-generative experiences that were considered to be transcendent and spiritual in nature. A sense of fluidity was attached to sexuality and gender expression, which led to the validation and even honoring of androgyny, bisexuality, homosexuality, and transgenderism.

Research has shown that cross-culturally and transhistorically, homosexuality and transgenderism have often been associated with priests, priestesses, and devotees who were dedicated to Goddess worship.

There is evidence that indicates that the temple priests and priestesses of Mother Goddess traditions engaged in sexual acts with worshippers, both male and female. It also appears that male priests would sometimes cross-dress and/or castrate themselves in order to serve the Goddess as transgendered women.

In addition, female sexuality and procreative powers were highly valued in Goddess religions. Male-oriented religions, on the other hand, have generally devalued women. These patriarchal belief systems, in contrast with Goddess religions, also have traditionally maintained that sexuality is shameful, and that non-procreative sex acts are sinful.

### Goddess Worship in History

Goddess worship is found within the frameworks of a multitude of religious traditions, including those of ancient Canaan, Sumeria, Egypt, India, Native North America, Western Europe, Australia, and Africa. Religions centered around a Mother Goddess have also been popular throughout history. Indeed, the divine feminine has a long history, as stone statuettes indicate that Goddess worship existed as early as 30,000 years ago, during the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages.

It is believed that over time, Goddess religions were challenged by male-oriented belief systems that honored the rule of the Father and denigrated female principles. This religious shift has been linked with changes in food production and settlement strategies. In Europe, invasions from the east in the 4th and 3rd millennia B. C. E. by warrior Indo-European tribes introduced religions based on patriarchal beliefs.



**Top:** The Venus of Willendorf was created during the Neolithic era.  
**Above:** An Etruscan sculpture of the Magna Mater. Photograph by Giovanni Dall'Orto. The photograph of the Venus of Willendorf was created by Wikimedia Commons contributor Oke and appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

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Later, the development and spread of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam served to suppress the so-called "pagan" religions, whose followers venerated goddesses and feminine energies. Judaeo-Christianity's negative stance regarding homosexuality and transgenderism has been linked with antagonism towards these aspects of Goddess religions.

### **Competition of Judaism and Christianity with Goddess Religions**

As young religions, Judaism and Christianity were in direct competition for followers with the older belief systems, which had been prevalent in the ancient world from before Biblical times up through the Greco-Roman era.

In fact, by the time of Jesus's birth, the worship of divinities such as Demeter, Artemis, Aphrodite, and especially Cybele (also known as Magna Mater or the Great Mother) was widespread throughout Italy, Greece, and the Middle East. Indeed, Cybele was one of the most revered of Roman divinities when Jesus was born.

Thus, there is speculation among scholars that the anti-homosexual and anti-cross-dressing regulations and polemics found in the Old and New Testaments were influenced by the desire of early Jews, and then early Christians, to differentiate their developing religions from already popular modes of worship.

### **Goddess Religions Today**

In the mid-to-late twentieth century, people living in Europe and the United States who were interested in non-patriarchal, sex-affirmative spirituality turned to belief systems such as eco-feminism, feminist theology, neo-paganism and Wicca. This phenomenon resulted in a modern-day renewal of Goddess worship.

With their emphases on the feminine principles of interconnectedness and inclusion, these philosophies and religions provide some members of the glbtq community the safe space that is typically lacking in patriarchal religions.

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