

APOCALYPTIC FEMINISM OF THE GRAIL MYTH

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In the reading from Revelations 21:1-4 we find the prophecy of a return to Eden. After a period of growing historical crisis and natural catastrophe, there will begin a 1000 year reign of the saints as the kingdom of God is finally established on earth. Then, we are told, God will dwell with humanity, or, in another image, be married to humanity which will appear as his bride, the holy city of justice and peace anticipated by the Hebrew prophets, the new Jerusalem, a society here envisioned as feminine. There have been many myths of the restoration of a lost Golden Age. The Grail story is one of them and tells similarly of humanity's psychological, spiritual and social transformation. Significantly, that liberation is expressed once again in the idea that such a renewal will be accomplished through a feminization of society.

In legend the Holy Grail is the cup of redemption, salvaged from the Last Supper and preserved by the Fisher King in a castle on Mount Salvation where it is guarded by Grail maidens, maidens also associated with a life-giving well of fructifying waters. The king, however, has become disastrously ill, struck with a genital wound; consequently, the waters of life have ceased flowing, and the once fertile garden kingdom has turned into a desert wasteland where no human needs can be met. The various Grail stories recount the quests heroically undertaken by such Grail knights as Arthur, Parzival, Lancelot and Gawain to find the holy Grail, heal the king and restore the kingdom.

The Jungian author Edward C. Whitmont has written in his *Return of the Goddess* that this Grail myth is "the most significant and most modern form of the redemption myth....of paradise lost and found again." In the wasteland of the Grail legend, he writes, we can easily recognize our own world:

Our cultural development has reached a critical period, a point of danger, sickness and stagnation. Industrialism, technology, and capitalism have turned our planet into a wasteland. The resources of the earth, formerly

plentiful, are being exhausted. Mankind is threatened by ecological disaster and by self-inflicted destruction. Suffering and oppression prevail. Large masses of people--indeed society itself--are in need of liberation from the illness of industrial, technocratic or capitalist repression of the natural flow of life. Likewise, women have been repressed and deprived of their individuality by the prevalent male-dominated society. They need liberation. Humanity is alienated from the wholeness of nature. Yet we are on the threshold of a new age. In the coming age of Aquarius, the water-bearer, the "flow of the waters" will be restored. Life and spirit will be renewed. Peace, love and wisdom will be regained. The way into this new age is the object of man's (sic) quest.

In order to save the Grail king, Parzival must ask the right question--"What ails thee?" What answer does the Grail myth offer, and what can we learn from it about the nature of this quest? Throughout these stories there is a recurring motif which suggests that the source of catastrophe lies in a society's mistreatment of the feminine aspect of life. The Grail cup of Christian salvation itself has a far more ancient history as a feminine symbol in which mother earth was envisioned as a life-giving vessel: a cornucopia, a cup, a cauldron, identified with the womb or the breast of a vital, nourishing maternal body. When Christianity takes over the symbol of the cup in the Grail legend, it announces itself as not abolishing but fulfilling the ancient, feminine mysteries. In fact, the Grail symbolism is suspected to have been a code through which an esoteric version of Christianity preserved ancient rituals and beliefs which revered a divinity which did dwell among humans in a spirituality imminent in the individual in harmony with the earth. In this feminized Christianity, as in the poetry of medieval troubadours, ancient ideas of the sacredness of woman and her spiritual gifts were preserved, as woman herself was imaged in the sacramental cup as a vessel of the spirit. This tradition might have influenced the great theological innovation upon which the Grail was founded, the idea that the Holy Spirit was the feminine part of the Trinity (a near kin to that great "heresy" that it is as the feminine spirit itself, in man or woman, that the divine dwells in humanity).



Whitmont writes that "Through all these versions...[of the Grail story] we can now discern the chief elements of the hidden myth: the angry or insulted Feminine, hidden away in a bewitched, grim and joyless yonder is to be redeemed by a quest into the threatening, roadless, 'other' land." In one version, the cause of the kingdom's bewitchment has been an assault upon the maidens of the well. Moreover, the nature of the king's illness and its effects on society reveal his condition as a crisis of the patriarchal leadership principle which had dominated Western culture for centuries since the loss of that wisdom of earlier matrifocal cultures embodied in the symbol of the sacred feminine cup. So too, Gawain must face challenges set for him by the ladies of a charmed castle and submit himself in marriage to a loathly hag who becomes transformed into a beautiful bride once he is able to perceive her inner value. Similarly, Arthur can only avoid a condemnation to death when he answers that same question which would later so perplex Sigmund Freud: "What do women want?" What Arthur learns they want is feminine sovereignty, which is really just an end to the subjugation of the feminine.

I am not suggesting, as some might, that men and women, masculine and feminine are ultimately different and opposed. Rather, I think we must understand how for millennia our culture has enforced a false and excessive division of gender which has relegated all the maternal, nurturing, relational, empathetic, emotional and interior aspects of human life to women and banished them into a private realm. Concomitantly, men have borne sole responsibility for a public realm devoted to the production of material goods and the organization of power, a world rendered oppressive by that division, and one whose capitalist form is characterized by competition, deprivation, violence and psychological alienation. So long as that division prevails, the entry of women into that public realm and into formerly male roles in itself will not really change all that much.



The real problem is that our society is not a loving and nurturing Jerusalem. We do not revere the earth as our common mother; no one guards the nourishing forces of nature which instead are perpetually ripped off, depleted and turned into commodities of exchange and sources of private profit. Nor is our society a loving family; we take less and less common responsibility for our brothers and sisters, thousands of whom at this very moment are wandering the streets of this city cold and hungry, a city with 50,000 children in a failing foster care system, in a nation where millions live in households headed by women abandoned to poverty and begrudged even the most minimal support. We know, moreover, that we are breeding a whole generation of deprived children in our dangerous streets who, having experienced nothing of the laws of human kindness, are learning only the vicious laws of survival which reign as much in the corridors of power as in our lawless streets.

What ails thee? Are you all right? We recognize the question immediately as the one most constantly and commonly heard from a mother's lips. Parzival in his manly isolation did not know to ask it. In fact, the Grail story offers us the enormous, comical irony of these archetypally virile warriors setting out, barricaded in armor, and armed to the teeth to discover a feminine truth found only in the open response of one vulnerable human being to another.

Thus, in the question itself lies its answer: the loss of nurturing care, of the maternal principle from our common social life, the abandonment of Jerusalem for Babylon. And the second question--"Whom does the Grail Serve?" reminds one of the idea that all Marxism boils down to is the simple question "For whom?" and leads us to ask whom does our society serve: the nurturing of all human and natural life, or the aggrandizement of wealth and power by the few? Our society has divided the world into a realm of production of goods and services and a realm of reproduction in which not only the bearing, but the care and development of human beings is still mostly left to women. In our upside down world, this reproduction of human beings serves production, people serve the goals of profit, and we raise human beings to be used

like so many tools in an economic process whose ends have little to do with our fulfillment. We need to reorient those priorities so that instead all the productive economic activities of society serve to create the ever expanding potential of human persons, their ever greater capacity for fulfillment, relationship, creativity, and spiritual growth.

Jesus's commandment to "love another" might, thus, be most lucidly translated as "nurture one another." Therein lay the true, prophetic Christian vision of the restoration of a world which had been lost, but by the time the Grail was formed, Christianity seemed to have long forgotten it. Hence, the Grail was founded on the understanding that, in order to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth, a massive world wide awakening of women would have to occur, which would restore to Christianity and to society its lost feminine core.

Within our original vision, there was, I believe, the basis for the most radical feminism, one that sought not merely to integrate women into things-as-they-are but to accomplish the "conversion (or re-conversion) of the world" by reintegrating all the feminine aspects of life and the psyche, and rectifying what Fr Van Ginneken saw clearly as the imbalance of modern, patriarchal capitalism. Seeing a world deprived of the redeeming energies of millions of women excluded from meaningful activity and influence in it, he challenged the early Grail, asking "What is your task?"... "to counterbalance IN THE WORLD all masculine hardness...." For he insisted, now "the woman is going to play a part" for "you hold the balance," and "If we could only succeed in solving the antithesis of man and woman....we could unite this matriarchal and patriarchal culture in a beautiful new synthesis...more beautiful than anything which has been before."

We in the Grail have been happy to see much of that early prophetic vision coming to pass and to play some small part in the awakening of millions of women across the world which is the prerequisite for any real transformation. And indeed, I have often felt that in my experience of Grail community I have been offered that glimpse of possibility which is so essential to any revolutionary faith. I have sometimes thought that what I experienced at Grailville was the highest stage of Western culture as, in a rare woman-centered community we created a glimpse of what a truly humanized society, integrating work and relationship, art and spirituality, might look like. Let us hope that our world's deepening signs of historical crisis will prove to be only those tribulations presaging transformation prophesied in the Book of Revelation, and that our efforts of fifty years now sown in the wider upsurge of women throughout the world will bear fruit, for as Father Van Vinneken told us: "if you do not do that, no one will do it, and you can do it."

Jackie DiSalvo

