

Womb Envy
How God Replaced the Womb with the “Word”
Joan d’Arc Interviews Barbara Walker

Barbara G. Walker has published numerous articles and books on comparative religion and mythology, rituals, symbols, feminist history, the Tarot, and the I Ching. Her 1100-page *Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* encompassed 25 years of research and received a Book of the Year award from the *London Times*. She is listed in *Who's Who in Hell*, a compendium of freethinkers around the world. She has presented numerous lectures to Humanist and Unitarian groups, which are contained in her latest book, *Man Made God*, published in April 2010 by Stellar House Publishing (www.stellarhousepublishing.com). A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Barbara has worked as a journalist, dance teacher, artist, professional knitwear designer, wife and mother, in addition to her many years of research, writing, and knitting.

Joan: *Your new book, Man Made God, is composed of a series of lectures, is that correct? Where were the lectures given, for example, and over what period of time? What is your background in religious studies? How long have you been researching ancient religions?*

Barbara: The essays in *Man Made God* were written as sermons and lectures. As the author of many myth-and-history books, I was invited to speak at numerous meetings of Unitarian, Humanist and Freethinker groups over the course of several decades, and this book is a collection of those talks.

My research actually began more than fifty years ago, when I graduated from college still wondering why the Inquisition had never been mentioned in my medieval and renaissance history courses, even in an Ivy League liberal arts university. I later found out about the perfidy of the Catholic church in its extensive rewriting of its own history. I read Henry Charles Lea's monumental study of the Inquisition (*A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, 1888), taken a century ago from original documents preserved in the Vatican library. Even in his time, Lea said, Vatican authorities were already beginning secretly to destroy most of these damning records.

The Inquisition was the worst holocaust in European history; it lasted nearly five centuries; and yet the church was succeeding in misrepresenting its extent and its impact in their official histories. This was my earliest realization of patriarchy's propensity to lie itself into respectability. Afterward, I studied more than four hundred reference books before putting together my *Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, the first in a series of a dozen related works.

Joan: *In your chapter entitled “Logos: The Magic Word,” you explain that the Neolithic family was matrilineal—based on the mother’s bloodline—and that primitive peoples **did not connect sexual activity with childbirth**. Therefore, the earliest deity was the Great Goddess,*

*whose womb gave birth to everything in the world including animals, **without a male partner.** Why is this basic fact key to understanding the pre-Christian religious world?*

Barbara: The world of prehistoric humanity has been misunderstood in many ways, one of them being the absurd mythology presented in the Bible, which was written by patriarchal revisionists with very little genuine knowledge of their own recent past, let alone the remote past. Prehistoric people couldn't witness conception, of course, but they could see that women ceased to discard their monthly "moon blood" during a pregnancy. So they logically reasoned that the baby within was being made out of this blood, which was retained in the womb for the purpose. Consequently, all original family ties were based on "blood," because blood was believed to be the female-given element of which all life was made.

Menstrual blood was universally regarded as a substance of enormous magic: awesome, taboo, sacred to women and scary to men. Fear of the mystical substance was greatly enhanced under patriarchy, which tended to foster suspicion of female physicality in general. The Bible calls menstrual blood "unclean," which is actually an inaccurate translation of words meaning taboo, untouchable, sacred, or dangerous. The Bible also refers to it as the "flower" of the womb, forerunner of the "fruit" of the womb: a child. Throughout most of the Christian era, menstruating women were forbidden to enter a church. This taboo is still in effect under Islam. It seems that even God (or Allah) is powerless against this dread magic.

We still speak of "blood" ties, having forgotten that there were never any obvious "blood" connections involving men. Even after fatherhood was recognized, classical writers continued to insist that woman's lunar blood is the life essence. Pliny the Elder taught that every human life is formed of a "curd" of menstrual blood. Aristotle said a baby is made of a "coagulum" of menstrual blood. The ancients also believed that a postmenopausal woman became very wise as a result of keeping her "wise blood" within. Extensive documentation on this subject can be found in my book, *Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, which has a ten-page article on "Menstrual Blood."

Since, it was believed, women produced their magic blood and their children without male assistance, reproduction was considered a female-only function for most of humanity's existence on earth. Permanent male-female partnerships for reproductive purposes did not appear until quite late in human history. The practice of a binding marriage came about only after men became aware of fatherhood and wanted to claim paternal ownership of children. Early writings from Phoenicia, Sumeria and Babylon speak of past times when people didn't know their fathers, and there was no official marriage. In fact, the literature says that the elder Goddess was very much opposed to marriage.

The primacy of blood in ancient religions everywhere also led to later sacrificial practices aimed at feeding the gods on blood, to keep them alive and happy. Blood sacrifice became the standard means for appeasing a deity and averting possible divine wrath. The biblical God himself insisted in Hebrews 9:22 that "all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission." Consequently, sacrificial victims had

to shed their blood for the good of the community. Male victims had to suffer and die, of course; they couldn't shed blood without pain, as women did.

Joan: You refer to the modern idea of the caveman protecting “his” own mate and offspring as “patriarchal fiction.” Why is this scenario prehistorically inaccurate?

Barbara: Just as maternal blood bonds were the basis of clan and tribe among primitive humans, so the home place was defined and maintained by the mothers, and property ownership began in the hands of women. This system has been found among nearly all pre-civilized peoples. Usually, women did the fishing, planting, and gathering up to 85 % of the food, tended the hearth, built sleeping places, produced clothing and pottery, and generally took care of whatever the family called home: a cave, a hut, a tepee, a cliff dwelling, a longhouse, a whirly, or part of a village. Even the Bible speaks of houses belonging to "mothers" (Ruth 1:8) and alludes to matrilocal custom in the directive that a man must leave his parental home and "cleave unto his wife" (Genesis 2:24). Among desert Arabs even in comparatively recent times, women were the owners of the tents, and a husband would need his wife's permission to enter.

Certainly, primitive men were sons, brothers, lovers, workers; they helped to support and defend the home place when necessary; but they were family members, not family owners. Robert Briffault writes in his great three-volume work, *The Mothers* that: "As regards the social efficiency which depends upon solidarity [of] the primitive human group, the maternal totemic clan was by far the most successful form that human association has assumed—it may be said that it has been the only successful one." (v. 2, p. 491.

Joan: When did people begin to understand that the male “seed” had anything to do with how babies are made? Amongst which peoples did this understanding first arise and how was it promulgated? When was the concept of a male creator first introduced and where?

Barbara: There was nothing particularly new or radical about the idea of male divinity. The primal Mother Goddess always had divine sons and consorts, just as women had human sons and consorts. Often, there was a concept of the divine son/consort as the same entity, as when Isis gave birth to Horus who also became her consort Osiris, or Aphrodite gave birth to Eros who was reincarnated in her lover Adonis, or when the Virgin Mary was said to be both Mother of God and Bride of God. The female was seen as constant, the male as cyclic, alternately infantile and mature.

Such a god was frequently understood as a personification of the grain, which is born from Mother Earth and then ripens, is harvested and killed in the role of "savior," nourishing the people with his own substance. Typically, his blood is the wine and his flesh is the bread. This was said of Osiris, Orpheus, Attis, Adonis, Tammuz, Dionysus, and many other savior gods who served as models for the later Jesus.

The idea of a god who 'begot himself on his own mother' (who was both father and son) thus

grew out of agricultural religion, where it actually made metaphorical sense. The incestuous theme became very common in mythology, not only in the story of Oedipus but in many other contexts as well. Obviously, the crop (or the reaped god) produces its own seeds for the next year's planting in the womb of Earth: this is probably one of the earliest images of a begetting male deity, and it explains why the Bible always refers to semen as "seed." The image developed not from human physiology toward an agricultural metaphor, but rather the opposite way: from agricultural practice to a new understanding of human physiology.

I It is thought that this new understanding of fatherhood may have originated among Aryan tribes in Northern India about the fourth or fifth millennium BCE. (The Aryans were thought to have been the original Indo-Europeans, beginning westward migrations from a center in northern India. The name is from Sanskrit, and most modern European languages have roots in that culture, which seems to have been one of the primary forms of patriarchy.) The idea gradually penetrated into Egypt and the Middle East, along with migrations and trade, over the centuries. But as we have seen, even as late as the 18th and 19th centuries CE, there were indigenous peoples still ignorant of fatherhood until Christian missionaries arrived to "enlighten" them.

Joan: By what artificial means did the male god give birth to the first man, Adam, without owning the simplest thing to do the trick—a womb? Would you characterize this behavior as “womb envy”?

Barbara: Before the real secret of conception was fully understood, there were dozens of different ways in which men tried to invent a magical participation in the mysterious and dramatic process of life-giving, which they deeply envied. They knew that by reason of birth and nurture, offspring belonged to the mother in a way that men couldn't share. But men wanted very much to be deified as ancestors, just as the tribal ancestresses had been by their descendants. This craving on the part of men underlies God's promise to Abraham and other patriarchs that he would multiply their descendants as the sands of the seashore. It also underlies all our customs of paternal nomenclature and genealogy. So there were artificial womb imitations, often involving genital bloodletting, as in the adolescent circumcisions of early Egypt, for which ceremonies the boys were dressed as girls. Indigenous tribes of Australia performed penile subincision¹ on adolescent boys in imitation of menarche, and referred to the wound as a "vagina." The Mexican god Quetzalcoatl was said to have begotten life by cutting his penis and giving the blood to the Goddess. A number of gods were said to have castrated themselves in an attempt to make their own genitals fertile in the female manner. Some gods claimed to have given birth from their mouths, armpits, or thighs.

The numerous birth-imitations and genital mutilations of gods throughout mythology give a rough idea of how very long was the period of ignorance and how often men tried to "horn in" on the process by magical means. Eskimo peoples had a somewhat gentler approach: they said that while women did indeed form their own children internally out of their blood, men contributed semen as "food" for the growing fetus. But in the middle east and elsewhere, the idea of a food-producing penis led to the frightening vision of the *vagina*

dentata ("toothed vagina") that might bite off and devour a male organ: another image arising from the developing sexual fears of patriarchs.

The biblical concept of a god who could create life without any genitalia involvement at all, by means of breath instead of blood, was a very late idea and was related to the notion of the Logos.

Joan: *From where did the original idea of "Logos" derive and was it originally a female principle?*

Barbara: Logos is Greek for "Word." Its meanings in religion were various: it also meant soul, spirit, breath, spark of creation, or even savior. The Gospel of John describes Jesus as the Logos or Word of God incarnate. Pagans regarded Hermes, Osiris, Mithra and other gods as Logos figures. The concept is related to the human ability to verbalize, to create with language: the very process by which all deities and all religions are made in the first place. Words are indeed the genesis of gods, since every religion is embodied in and transmitted by speech.

With the rise of patriarchy, the idea of a creative Word served as a substitute for the creative blood-magic of the Goddess and of women. Men as well as women could breathe, and talk. Thus many patriarchal thinkers, including writers of the Bible, made their god a creator by way of his breath. He spoke the initial Word of creation, saying *fiat lux* (let there be light), and behold, there was light—three days before he created any source of light! (This mistake occurred because ancient people didn't know that daylight is the same as sunlight, because they could still see light at times when no sun was visible.) The initial creation of light was also copied from devotees of the Goddess, like Juno Lucina, who gave "first light" to every newborn baby when it opened its eyes upon the world.

So the biblical God "breathed" life into the inert clay of the first man, as an alternative to the magic of the Goddess who made the first man of clay and anointed him with her lunar blood to bring him to life. Her title Adamah gave rise to the name of Adam, which bible scholars delicately translate "red earth," but its literal meaning is "bloody clay."

Since death is the cessation of breathing, soul and breath came to be considered identical. Patriarchal thinkers sometimes claimed that even if a child is made of mother-blood, its soul must be made of father-breath. Brahman priests insisted that a father must give a soul to his newborn infant by breathing into its face. Early Christian writers extended this mythic ritual even to animals, claiming that all lion cubs are born dead, and remain so for three days until the father lion breathes on them.

However, the Logos doctrine too was borrowed from earlier cults of the Great Mother, who was said to have created language along with the rest of the world. In India, creation-magic was embodied in the letters of the sacred Sanskrit alphabet, inscribed on the necklace of the creation-and-destruction Goddess, Kali Ma, who brought all things into being

by naming them in her primordial language. Eventually, the standard procedures of all religions were based on mere words: invocation, prayer, blessing, conjuration, anathema, rituals, services, ordinations, absolutions, canonizations, extreme unction—every religious ceremony was, and is, founded on the speaking of magic words and holy names.

For Christians, "In the name of the Father," etc., was a charm that was supposed to command God's attention, since he would have to respond to the mention of his name, the very sound of which was thaumaturgic ("pertaining to miracles or magic") and must never be taken in vain. Some authorities claimed that God had seventy-two secret names, the speaking of which would absolutely compel him to do whatever the speaker wanted. These were sometimes found in medieval books of sorcery; and for anyone who cares to try them out, they are given on page 716 of *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. (Allah is even more lavishly equipped with ninety-nine secret names.)

Clearly, language is one of the primary distinguishing characteristics of humanity, a unique basis for social cohesion and interaction. The invention of nomenclature was probably even more important to the development of our species than the discovery of fire, or the wheel, or tools, or weapons. Long ago, name-giving was also the prerogative of mothers. In prehistoric cultures it was often the custom for a mother to baptize her infant with her own breast milk while giving it a name, which was identified with the soul. In Egypt a child's secret soul-name was the *ren*, provided by Renenet, the Goddess of lactation. In ancient Greece, infants that were unwanted and doomed to be "exposed" (left out in the woods to die) were not given names and so were considered soulless. Hindu writings speak of the gods themselves pleading with the Mother to give them names, for without a name even a god would die. Inevitably, the mystic power of names and words passed into the lore of magic, and the books of sorcery are full of titles, epithets, and secret names of deities drawn from every tradition.

Joan: Who wrote the earliest Old Testament references to the male "seed" and at around what time did this male domination begin its spread around the globe? Would you say the propaganda was spread as much with the "pen" as with the "sword"?

Barbara: We are never sure about any actual "who" among Bible writers. Even the synoptic gospels were not written by the apostles whose names they bear; the custom of those centuries was pseudepigraphy, or falsely attaching a famous name to one's writings, and the gospels were written much later than the apostles' alleged lifetimes. But religion is a phenomenon based on words, transmitted from generation to generation and from culture to culture by human speech and—after the invention of alphabets—by writing; its methods are proselytizing, propaganda, and often violent suppression of earlier concepts.

Male domination of religion has been spreading over our whole planet for about three or four thousand years, only a tiny fraction of the roughly two million years of human existence. The change has produced notably aggressive religious images, such as a vengeful God presiding over a cruel hell of eternal torture, the condemnation of dissidents, rampant sexism and suppression of women, the poisoning of sexuality (formerly considered a Goddess-given "pleasurable blessing"), and a prodigious variety of irrational fears to be

instilled into the young, frequently by harsh punishments. None of these characterized the earlier matrifocal religions.

Fully developed patriarchies such as Christianity and Islam have been spread not only by proselytizing but also by the sword, having maintained almost from the very beginning that the heathen must be either converted or killed. Historical mass genocides of indigenous peoples in Europe during the Dark Ages, and later in the Americas, the South Pacific, and Africa showed the process at work.

A violent and painful death is the core image of Christianity, even if it is fictitious. Christians are urged to contemplate in gruesome detail the ugly death of Jesus, as in Mel Gibson's super-bloody film *The Passion of the Christ*—a Jesus who probably never existed, as is demonstrated in my book, *Man Made God* (pp. 144-177). Yet the millions of real deaths caused by the church itself are not to be contemplated. Instead, serious efforts are made to see that they are forgotten.

The patriarchal world that the latest religions have given us is more violent, ascetic, and intolerant than the matrilineal one from which they grew. Even the scientific advances of the modern age have not been able to erase our violence; quite the contrary, for *homo sapiens* is not as sapient as he ought to be, and collectively seems to resemble a child who has been given lethal toys that he can't control. Moreover, modern Christianity insists that, as Jesus says, you must become like a little child to get into heaven. Jesus also says that men should castrate themselves to be absolutely sure of a place in heaven (Matthew 19:12), and several early church fathers, like Origen, took this advice literally.

In any event, it is clear that there is always an element of female-avoidance and female-denigration in a patriarchal faith, no matter how kindly condescending it supposes itself to be. When every image of divinity is supplied with a male gender, which means that by definition it must have male hormones and male genitalia, then the female is inevitably "different" and less than divine. It seems that we will never be free of religious sexism and the legacy of fear until we can, as John Lennon suggested, "imagine no religion."

Joan: How was the female creatress subverted and assimilated into the patriarchal religion? How was she trivialized as well as demonized? Can you explain this process and the effect it had on women and culture?

Barbara: Throughout its history the Catholic church has declared that all the "gods of the heathen" were actually devils; the Goddesses even more so. Lilith, Hecate, Persephone, and other earth-goddess images tended to morph into Night-Hags or "Queen of Witches" figures; but at the same time, some of them were even made into saints, because the common people were used to worshipping them and the conquering church needed to assimilate their shrines, holy days, and customs. There are many examples of the latter. St. Lucy was once Juno Lucina; St. Bridget was once the Druidic Goddess Brigit, or Bride; St. Barbara was the lightning-goddess whom the church fathers called Barbarian; almost all of the "Our Ladies of Such-and-Such" were local pagan deities adopted as incarnations of the Christian Virgin.

In addition to diabolizing and/or adopting the Goddess figures, patriarchal writers

also humanized many of them in order to trivialize their influence. For example, Pandora, meaning "All-Giver," was once a title of the Great Goddess in pre-Hellenic Greece, but she was re-visioned by patriarchal Hellenes as a mortal woman whose mischievous curiosity let loose all evils upon the world. "Pandora's Box" was originally not a box but a Holy Vase, representing the universal womb from which all things emanated.

Similarly, Eve, whose old title "Mother of All Living" appears even in the Bible, was once a divinity rather than a mere woman. She was variously known throughout middle-eastern lands as Eveh, Hewya, Hawwah or (in India) Adita Eva, "The Very Beginning." There are Gnostic scriptures claiming that Eve, not God, gave life to Adam, and that God himself was Eve's child and inferior: "It was because he was foolish and ignorant of his Mother that he said, 'I am God; there is none beside me.'" (See *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, article on "Eve.")

Christian authorities, however, made Eve the origin of all sin, and even blamed her for the existence of death, so that God would be freed from responsibility for it. The opprobrium that they shoveled onto women as "daughters of Eve" literally knew no bounds. Religious writers called Woman "a sack of dung," "a daily ruin," "an insatiable beast," "an incarnate demon," "dregs of the devil's dung hill," "intrinsically inferior in excellence, imbecile by sex and nature, weak in body, inconstant in mind, and imperfect and infirm in character." John Scotus Erigena declared that at the end of the world God would eliminate all women, because they embodied the sinful part of humanity while men embodied the sinless part. The handbook of the Inquisition said that "all wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman," and women may be tortured with impunity. Husbands were advised from the pulpit that beating their wives "for the good of their souls" would earn them points in heaven. Even in the late 1880s, Orestes Brownson wrote that every woman must be controlled by a man, otherwise she is "out of her element, and a social anomaly, sometimes a hideous monster, which men seldom are, except through a woman's influence." The president of a leading theological seminary wrote in 1890 that the Bible commands the subjection of all women forever. Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke the simple truth when she said, "The Church has done more to degrade women than all other adverse influences put together." Historian Arnold Toynbee agreed: "Religion and its practices have consistently been one of women's fiercest enemies... The fact that many women do not realize this shows how thorough the brainwashing and intimidation have been." (See *Man Made God*, pp. 227-229, 272).

In short, the arrogance, mendacity, and violence of patriarchal religions have been the major causes of sexism throughout the world, and we are by no means free of these influences today. They flourish under Islam and other varieties of fundamentalism, and will continue to flourish as long as women believe themselves forever in subjection to a masculine god created by men's words.

THE END

Footnote

1. Penile subincision is essentially a urethrotomy, in which the underside of the penis is incised and the urethra is slit open lengthwise. It is traditionally performed as a “coming of age” ritual around the world in various cultures, including Africa (in particular, Kenya), South America (the Amazon), Polynesia, and Melanesia. “A subincised penis is thought to resemble a vulva, and the bleeding is likened to menstruation.”—Wikipedia.

About the Author

Barbara G. Walker is the author of *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*, *The Crone*, *Feminist Fairy Tales*, and her latest, *Man Made God*, among other titles. She has received a Humanist Heroine of the Year award from the American Humanist Association, a Women Making Herstory award from New Jersey NOW, and the Olympia Brown award from the Unitarian Universalist Association. As an artist, she created original paintings for *The Barbara Walker Tarot Deck* and the *I Ching of the Goddess* cards. She is also a professional knitter and the author of a number of knitting books, including *A Treasury of Knitting Patterns*, *Mosaic Knitting*, *Knitting from the Top*, and *Barbara Walker's Learn-to-Knit Afghan Book*. Her new book, *Man Made God*, is published by Stellar House Publishing (www.stellarhousepublishing.com), the publisher of *Christ in Egypt*, *The Gospel According to Acharya S.*, and *Who Was Jesus?* by Acharya S. (D. Murdock).