

Images of the Sacred: Cultural Symbols, Evolution and Diffusion
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I. Slide #1: Images of the Sacred: Cultural Symbols, Evolution and Diffusion

- A. People around the world throughout time have socially constructed what they identify as sacred. They do so to explain the unknown and unknowable, to honor ancestors and to connect the universal energy to their daily realities. I became interested in this social construction of religion, religious practices and religious symbols in graduate school.
- B. Then, almost 30 years ago I happened to find this reproduction goddess figurine in one of those funky shops near the University of Minnesota. She spoke me, figuratively, not literally. So I bought her and set her among my houseplants reflecting my developing interest in nature-based spirituality. She was the beginning of my collection of sacred images from different cultures.

II. Slide #2: Venus of Pazardzik: 4500 BCE Bulgaria

- A. She was found near Pazardzik, Bulgaria and thus labeled “Venus of Pazardzik.”
- B. She is one of many pregnant vegetation or earth goddesses found in prehistoric Europe.
- C. Archeologist Maria Gimbutas, in fact, calls the lines, symbols, and circles often found on such figurines, rocks, or graves the language of the goddess.

III. Slide #3: “In Neolithic Europe ...

- A. She comments that ... “In Neolithic Europe ... religion focused on the wheel of life and its cyclical turning ... Birth, nurturing, growth, death, and regeneration, as well as crop cultivation and raising of animals, the people of this era pondered untamed natural forces, as well as wild plant and animal cycles, and they worshipped goddesses, or a goddess, in many forms.”
- B. Anthropologists have found similar spirituality among indigenous peoples around the world. It frequently includes immanent Goddess worship focused on fertility, creation, and regeneration of life.

IV. Slide #4: Snake Goddesses at the Heraclion Museum in Crete

- A. The evolution of this concept can be seen in these two snake goddesses from Crete. Reverence for snakes either as representing the regeneration of life through shedding their skin or protecting the granaries from rodents is another theme found around the world.

V. Slide #5: Minoan Snake Goddess

- A. The Minoan snake goddess is from Knossos, Crete, Europe's oldest City and the social and political center of Minoan Crete, considered the cradle of European civilization.
- B. She is a precursor of Greek goddess Athena who is also associated with snakes. In fact, a great snake was said to guard the Acropolis in Athens, the city-state named for Athena.

VI. Slide #6: Lakshmi

- A. Lakshmi is the Hindu Goddess of wealth, fortune, and prosperity.
- B. Her four hands represent the four goals of human life: more simply listed as
 - 1. Duties,
 - 2. Desires,
 - 3. Prosperity,
 - 4. Freedom

VII. Slide #7: Ganesha

- A. Ganesha, the Hindu God of beginnings, is a
 - 1. Remover of obstacles and the
 - 2. Patron of arts and sciences, intellect and wisdom, letters and learning

VIII. Slide #8: Kuan-Yin

- A. Kuan Yin, Goddess of Mercy and Compassion, is found throughout Asia.
- B. People reflect on or pray to her for comfort, healing, guidance, and forgiveness.

IX. Slide #9: Parallels of Divine Energy: Divine Mothers or Mother Goddesses

- A. Many cultures around the world revere a divine mother image,
- B. sometimes referred to as Earth Mother or Mother Earth.
- C. These deities often represent a personification of nature, motherhood, fertility, creation, destruction, or embody the bounty of the earth.

X. Slide #10: Ixchel: Ixchel or Ix Chel:

- A. One of my favorite mother images is the Mayan Ix Chel from Cozumel, Mexico
 - 1. "Ix Chel": translates as "She of the Pale Face," referring to the Moon.
 - 2. She is goddess of the moon, fertility, life, death, rain, childbirth, water, creation, destruction.
- B. As the goddess of midwifery and medicine, she makes children and gives them their faces before they are born.
- C. She holds a jar pouring water representing life-giving rain or destructive floods or hurricanes.
- D. It also represents the amniotic fluid of childbirth. Turning the jar represents giving birth.
- E. Women
 - 1. made pilgrimages to temples on Cozumel and
 - 2. placed her idols under their beds, asking for her help.

XI. Slide #11: Chinese Dragon Bell

- A. Dragons in the Chinese culture symbolize prosperity, good luck, power and strength.
 - 1. Ancient Chinese considered themselves to be “the descendants of the dragon.”
 - 2. Dragons were associated with water and weather as a rain deity. Religious rites were directed to appease the dragon either to ask for rain or ask for the end of the rains causing floods.
 - 3. Today in China, references to dragons refer to excellence. A parent wishing a child to be like a dragon before examinations, for example, is urging the child to be excellent as we would wish a child “Good luck!”

XII. Slide #12: Native American Pipestone Turtle

- A. This turtle was made of pipestone by a Native American artist
- B. Pipestone or Catlinite refers to the
 - 1. Sacred red clay stone used by American Indians for prayer and ceremonial pipes.
 - 2. It is found in only a few places in the world. The Pipestone National Monument in Southwest Minnesota is considered to have best quality. Only enrolled Native Americans may quarry it and they may only use hand tools.
- C. Turtles are an important symbol in many Native American cultures
 - 1. Their ancestors believed that the Earth rests on the back of a giant turtle
 - 2. Some still refer to North America as Turtle Island
 - 3. Various tribes associate turtles with long life, protection and fertility
 - 4. Or with healing, wisdom, and spirituality.
 - 5. Turtles are also used as clan animals in some Native American cultures.

XIII. Slide #13: Mary Mother of Jesus and Pensive Christ from Lithuania

- A. It took me a long time to find a Mary image without a veil with its patriarchal implications of obedience, submissiveness and male ownership. I like this image because it focuses on her mother role. We need to remember that the historical Mary was probably not a white, blue-eyed blonde! This image is a cultural adaptation so that the people of northern Europe could image her as their mother.
- B. A carved, wooden image of Jesus with his head in hand is referred to as “The Pensive Christ” and is popular in Eastern Europe and especially iconic in Lithuania.

XIV. Slide 14: Pachas & Demeter Persephone

- A. **Pachamama & Pachapapa** come from Incas of Peru, the indigenous of the Andes mountains.
 - 1. They are also called Mama Pacha and Papa Pacha or Mother Earth and Father Earth and
 - 2. Represent the Feminine and Masculine elements of the Divine
 - 3. Pachamama is the fertility goddess that presides over planting and harvesting. She embodies the mountains and causes earthquakes.
- B. **Persephone & Demeter**
 - 1. Several variations of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone explain the cycle of the seasons: Demeter, the goddess of the harvest and agriculture, presided over grains and the fertility of the earth. Her daughter, Persephone, was abducted to the underworld by Hades. Demeter’s preoccupation with her loss and searching for her daughter caused her to stop nurturing the earth so living things stopped growing and started to die. The ruler god Zeus required Hades to allow Persephone to return to her mother for part of the year. When

Persephone returns, Demeter's joy produces Spring and Summer. When Persephone returns to Hades, however, Demeter's sadness causes Fall and Winter.

XV. Slide #15: Chalchiuhtlicue and Lady of Guadalupe

- A. The Aztec Chalchiuhtlicue was a precursor to Mexico's Christian Lady of Guadalupe
 - 1. Chalchiuhtlicue is the Aztec goddess of waters, rivers, seas, streams, storms.
 - 2. When 52 years of rain produced a giant flood destroying the world, Chalchiuhtlicue built a bridge between earth and heaven for good people to cross.
 - 3. She is the patron of childbirth and is associated with serpents and with the moon.
 - 4. In fact the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan outside of Mexico City was built for Chalchiuhtlicue
- B. Our Lady of Guadalupe is Mexico's popular religious and cultural symbol today. Catholic legend tells us that she appeared to Juan Diego in 1531 asking for a church to be built in her honor on that spot. Sister Cecelia of the Catholic Sisters of Perpetual Adoration has another theory. She thinks that when Juan Diego told the Spanish bishop about his vision, he may have said that he had seen "Chalchiuhtlicue." The Spanish, however, heard "Guadalupe" that they had known in Spain. Another icon was born. Sister Cecelia points out that
 - a. Chalchiuhtlicue wore a jade-colored skirt with stars and moons.
 - b. Our Lady of Guadalupe has jade-colored cloak with stars and has the moon at her feet.
 - c. I think this is an excellent example of cultural diffusion and evolution

XVI. Slide #16: Inuit Happy Spirit and Hopi Kachina Spirit

- A. This Inuit Happy Spirit is a carved Walrus Tooth. This spirit's job is to bring happiness to homes in which it is displayed. I cannot help but smile whenever I look at it so I think it works.
- B. The Hopi culture in Arizona emphasizes the importance of harmony and cooperation. A variety of over 400 Kachina spirits help the Hopi by representing elements of the natural world such as wind and rain, ancestors, or concepts like fertility, healing or protection. Not all Kachinas are good, however. Some are ogres or demons that could cause harm.
 - 1. My favorite assistance from the Kachinas involves parenting and discipline but it is more complicated than it first appears.
 - 2. The Hopi, like many indigenous peoples, do NOT hit, spank or swat their children with the empty excuses that such violence is discipline. Instead they encourage and role model helpfulness, mutual aid, non-competition, supportive teamwork and cooperation.
 - 3. If a child, however, becomes problematic, is persistently cranky or difficult or irresponsible, parents can arrange for a Kachina Ogre to visit their home after dark and threaten to take away the naughty child. Some of the Ogre are even reputed to eat naughty children.
 - 4. The purpose, however, is NOT to scare the children into good or submissive behavior. Parents never threaten to give children away. The Kachina's arrival, instead, gives parents the opportunity to always defend the child and demonstrate unconditional love. No matter what, a child cannot be so naughty that his or her parents would even consider handing a child over to a Kachina.
 - 5. Imagine being four or five years old and having a cranky, frustrating, nothing-goes-right week; this spirit shows up at your door wanting to take you away; and your parents defend and protect you. Such love goes a lot farther in encouraging cooperative and good behavior than threats or violence ever could.

XVII. Slide #17: Buddha and Saraswati

- A. The Buddha, of course, represents the ongoing search for enlightenment and wisdom
- B. Hindu Saraswati: Goddess of knowledge, music, arts, wisdom and learning

XVIII. Slide # 18: Tibetan Buddhist Prayer Wheel and Peruvian Amazon Rainforest Indigenous Rattles

- A. This Tibetan Buddhist Prayer Wheel was sent to me by a former student after I supervised his independent study when he traveled in China and Tibet.

- B. I think I traded T-shirt and a couple of pencils for these Rattles made by the indigenous people in the Peruvian Amazon Rainforest. I traveled with Women in the Wilderness travel group to camp in the rainforest for two weeks in 1993. We had been advised that clothing and school supplies would be very popular trading items.

XIX. Slide #19: Sun and Moon from Mexico Teotihuacan Pyramids of Sun and Moon

- A. The Sun and Moon are important sacred images among many people. These come from the Mexico Teotihuacan Pyramids of Sun and Moon

XX. Slide #20: Labyrinth and Spiral

- A. And lastly, reflecting on this labyrinth and spiral remind me that life get complicated but moves on and is wonderous.

- B. Labyrinths are used for a meditative walks. Some of our UU members considered building one here after we acquired this property. But other things like the lift required priority.
 - 1. Though found as early as the 4th century, labyrinths became popular in Europe in the 12th century as they were considered representing pilgrimages to the Holy Land.
 - 2. They are often found in Cathedrals and in Gardens.
 - a. The most famous labyrinth, in Chartres Cathedral in France, was built in the 13th century.
 - b. There are two replicas of it at the Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco: one inside, one outside

C. Spirals: Celtic:

- 1. Life is a spiral; we return to similar things, issues or the life lessons or events, but hopefully learn with greater depth and understanding growing spiritually.

- 2. Spirals are found in:
 - a. Nature from sea nautilus in the oceans to galaxies in the universe
 - b. Spirals are also found in many ancient Irish stone carvings; most famous of which is the triple spiral at Newgrange that dates back to 2500 BCE

- 3. Spirals may represent:
 - a. The path of life including life, death, and rebirth ... or ...
 - b. The path leading from outer consciousness to inner soul.

Thank you for allowing me to share my images of the sacred with you. I had to omit many and cut down on the detail for others but I will be glad to answer questions or converse about them.