

# If God is our Father, why cannot God be our Mother?

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## Introduction

If God is our Father, why cannot God be our Mother? If we are the children of our Heavenly Father, why cannot we be the children of our Heavenly Mother? This rhetorical question is the basis of this short essay.

Different religions provide different answers to the question posed here. Judaism and Christianity frequently refer to God as a male figure. Recall the Christian prayer, “Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.”

The Christian prayer is addressed to “Our Father.” In Islam, Allah is also conceived as a male figure, although Koran does not specify gender of God. Buddhists are silent with respect to the personhood of the Divine. Other religions, not described here, have different conceptions of God.

This short essay describes Hindu concept of Godhead. Hindus conceive of God both as father and mother. Lord Krishna declares in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:17):

*Pitaham asya jagato,  
Mata dhata pitamaha  
Vedyam pavitram omkara,  
Rik Sama Yajureva ca*

I am the Father and the Mother of the universe, I am the highest to be known, the Purifier, The Holy Om, and the three Vedas.

The doctrine of female divinity has established firm roots among the Hindus. The worship of the Divine as Mother evokes motherly traits of tenderness, generosity and love. An Indian saying goes: “Wife, children and friends may leave a man, but his mother, never.” See Bansi Pandit, *The Hindu Mind*, 1998.

God is beyond number, count and gender. God is one and more than one. God is both male and female as well as beyond the male-female dichotomy. We may worship the Divine in any form we choose and God responds in kind. Lord Krishna says: In whatever form people relate to Me, I respond in the same form.

*ye yathā mām prapadyante tāms tathaiva bhajāmy aham*  
*As men approach Me, so I accept them to My love. (Gita 4.11)*

Several types of relationships with the Divine are described in the scripture: the Divine as father, as mother, as friend, as husband or wife and as a child. The Divine is worshiped in all these forms in India. The worship of the Divine Mother is especially popular.

## Creation Stories

In the Biblical story of creation, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." . . . So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

In the Biblical story, the woman was created as man's helpmate.

**The Hindu Creation Story** is found in the *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* or the *Book of Forest Teaching*.

In the beginning was the *Purusha*, the Great Being. He looked around and found none else but himself. And, the Great Being said *Aham*, I AM. That is how the Self came to be known as 'I AM'.

But he had no delight, for one who is all alone does not rejoice. The Great Being desired a second. He caused himself to grow as big as a man and woman closely embracing. He then caused himself to fall into two parts, and from this a husband and wife were born. Sage Yagna-valkya says: "By oneself, one is like a half fragment, and this incompleteness is filled by a woman."

The Male half united with Her, and thus the human race was born.

But the woman reflected, "How can he unite with me after producing me from himself? For shame, I will conceal myself."

Thus followed the game of hide and seek between him and her. She hid herself becoming the cow. He became the bull and united with her; the bovine creation followed. She concealed herself as the mare; he became the stallion and the horse race ensued. She became a female-goat, and he a billy-goat, and from their union all goats were born. Thus followed several orders of creation, down even to the ants, says the scripture.

The Great Being then created the 5 elements: fire, wind, earth, water and space. He then created speech and names and forms to distinguish one from the other. God also created the fourfold order of society. Finally he created *Dharma*, the Law that holds together the whole Creation.

Once the creation was in place, He saw that He Himself was the creation for indeed He had released it from Himself. The creation is He Himself. He was joyful.

**Observation 1:** The whole existence is One, for it originates from the One. It is the One Self

that has entered into every object and into these bodies, down to the very tips of the fingernails. God therefore is not aloof from His/Her creation. The creation is a manifestation of the powers and potentialities of the Divine. Creation is not an illusion, or *Maya*. If God is real, then creation is real since it originates from God. For further discussion of this point, see my essay: "Hinduism: Its Essential Features in Brief" at the present site or at: [www.uwf.edu/lgoel](http://www.uwf.edu/lgoel) .

**Observation 2:** The Divine assumes a double form at the very moment of creation: male and female. God's dual form represents two sides of One Reality-- positive and negative, yin and yang, Him and Her.

**Observation 3:** The Divine couple plays a game of 'hide and seek.' She becomes the cow and he the bull, etc. etc. The act of creation is joyful and fun-filled.

### Shiva and Shakti

God's dual male-female form is given various names in Hindu tales: Shiva and Shakti, Ishwara and Devi, Purusha and Prakriti. The Shiva-Shakti couple is more popular and is rich in imagery.



### Shiva and Shakti

Shiva imagines; Shakti procreates.

He is the legislator, she the executer.

Shiva is the origin and birth of things, Shakti is the nurturer and preserver of things.

He casts his seed into woman; the woman cherishes the seed and brings it forth into life.

Shiva is the father of things, Shakti their mother.

He is imaged as the Sun, the father of life. She is imaged as the Earth, the one who bears, nurtures and sustains life.

### Three Forms of the Divine Mother

The Divine Mother is known by various names: Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Shakti, Devi, Uma, Parvati, and many other names. Three forms of the Mother are popular in India. One is her power of all embracing opulence and prosperity. A second is her profound capacity for knowledge and self expression. The third is her splendid strength, her warrior mood and her world-shaking force.

These three powers are named: Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Durga. The following description is summarized from Sri Aurobindo's short booklet, *The Mother*.



### **Lakshmi**

Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual. She is the queen of abundance. There is no meanness or smallness in her personality. She is wide, compassionate, and generous. Those who pray to her and seek her help receive in plenitude. She is the most beautiful of the goddesses.

Lakshmi is depicted as bearing four arms, suggesting omnipotence in the four directions. She wears a multicolor sari, symbolizing nature's abundance. She stands or is seated on a lotus flower, the symbol of spiritual knowledge. Gold coins drop from one of her hands.



### **Saraswati**

Saraswati manifests the Mother's power of perfection and harmony. Youngest of the three, she is nearest to the aesthetic part of our nature. The science and the craft are her province. She bestows on humanity the artistic talents in art, music, dance, drama and literature. She is the patron saint of the artists and poets.

Saraswati has four arms, wears a white sari, symbolizing purity. She is seated on a lotus flower, the symbol of spiritual knowledge. She holds a rosary and a book in her two rear hands. Her two front hands play the *Vina*, a stringed musical instrument. She rides a swan, the symbol of spiritual discrimination.



### **Durga**

Durga is of another nature. Durga is the fierce one. Not wideness or wisdom, but force and strength are her peculiar faculties. She exhibits a strong temper, a mighty passion, and a divine force. Her strength destroys and conquers evil.

She is shown here with eight arms rather than the usual four. She carries many different types of weapons. The color of her sari is red, suggesting vitality and passion. She rides the tiger.

**Kali** is a manifestation of Goddess Durga in her more destructive form (image not shown here). Kali is terrible in form: she wears a garland of human skulls; she holds a blood-

stained sword in her hand; her long tongue hangs out of her mouth. Kali is terrible and terrifying to look at. How can such a goddess command our reverence?

God is both benevolent Lakshmi and terrible Kali. God is both Vishnu who nurtures and Rudra who destroys. Abrahamic religions on the other hand often create a partial God--a God of Love and Harmony. The Devil is set up to explain the existence of evil. All that is base, low and ugly belongs to the Devil.

Sri Aurobindo observes that the religious thought of India has never taken refuge in a partial theory of creation. It accepts God and Nature as they are, both good and bad. God is both a god of creation and of destruction. There is no creation without destruction. For additional discussion of this point, see Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, chapter 5.

The English philosopher David Hume is credited for making the following observation: God cannot be both all good and all powerful. If God is all good and we see that evil exists, then we must conclude that God is not all powerful. On the other hand if God is all powerful and evil exists, we must conclude that God is not all good.

### **A Note on Hindu Iconography**

The Hindu Goddesses wear different color Saris.

- Green is the color of prosperity, abundant life, the green earth. Lakshmi often wears green.
- White suggests purity, serenity, calmness and wisdom. Goddess Saraswati often wears white.
- Red suggests passion, vitality, and the life force. Durga often wears red.

Hindu gods and goddesses usually are shown with four arms; they wear a crown with halo around it. They hold a lotus flower or are seated on a lotus flower. Four arms suggest strength and omnipotence in the four directions. The crown is the crown of majesty. The lotus flower suggests multi-colored beauty. It grows in mud and floats on water. One should live a life of beauty but rise above its messy underside.

A religious icon should not to be intellectually dissected or overly analyzed. An icon is to be imaged in the heart. An icon is not a photographic likeness; it is a symbol. In earlier times, the artist meditated before he sat down to draw or to cut into stone. The image appeared to him in meditation.

### **The Goddess in Ireland and Japan**

During a teaching sabbatical in Ireland, I studied aspects of the Celtic religion. Europe was Celtic before it was Christianized. The Celtic tradition is best preserved in Ireland, the European country that lies farthest from Rome.

Pre-Christian Celtic traditions of Europe and Hinduism share many traits in common. The Celtic people worshiped the female form of the Divine. The Celtic goddess was associated with water and fertility, much like Hindu goddesses. The Shannon River in Ireland is named after Goddess Sequanne. The river Boyne in Ireland is named after Goddess Boann. The Hindu goddess Lakshmi was born of the waters. The Celtic gods resided on hill tops and therefore the hills were sacred. Hindu Gods and Goddesses also reside on hill tops, which are sacred. Shiva and Parvati's abode is at Mount Kailash in the Himalayas.



The Celtic traditions were dubbed as paganism during the ascendancy of the Church. Celtic temples were destroyed and Celtic priests eliminated. For additional information, see Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 1997.

Image of Celtic Goddess Boann

During my semester-long stay in Ireland, I witnessed the revival of the Celtic pagan religion. There is renewed interest in learning the old Irish Gaelic language; it is being taught at colleges and universities. European pagans gather annually at Stone Henge in Britain. Some people are of the view that Celtic pagans are a European branch of Hinduism.

The pagan tradition is also being revived in parts of the United States. Some years ago, a pagan festival was held annually at the University of West Florida, Pensacola, Fl. My lectures on the Hindu Goddess at the festival were well received.



In Japan, Benten (or Bensaitensama) is a popular goddess of music, art and literature. The beautiful Benten dresses in silk, plays a biwa or lute and wears a jeweled crown. Like the Indian goddess, she has four arms.

### **A New Interest in the Sacred Feminine**

Interest in the Sacred Feminine has resurged in the West in recent decades. How many of the readers have heard of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown? It was No. 1 on the New York Times bestseller list for months when first published in 2003. *The Da Vinci Code* focuses on the Sacred Feminine. It suggests a close relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Could they have been married? Was Mary Magdalene really a prostitute, or is that a trumped-up charge? Dan Brown makes the following points:

- Early Christianity entailed "the cult of the Great Mother".

- Mary Magdalene represented the feminine cult and the Holy Grail of traditional lore.
- She was also Jesus' wife and the mother of his children.
- Magdalene's womb, carrying Jesus offspring, was the legendary Holy Grail.
- The "truth" about Christ and Mary Magdalene has been kept alive by a secret society named "the Priory of Sion." The Priory was lead by great men like Leonardo Da Vinci and Isaac Newton. **Dan Brown writes:**

“When Christianity came along, the old pagan religions did not die easily. Legends of chivalric quests for the Holy Grail were in fact stories of forbidden quests to find the lost sacred feminine. Knights who claimed to be “searching for the chalice” were speaking in code as a way to protect themselves from a Church that had subjugated women, banished the Goddess, burned non-believers, and forbidden the pagan reverence for the sacred feminine.”-- *The Da Vinci Code*, pages 238-39.

In a similar fashion, Margaret Starbird refutes the myth of Jesus being a celibate god. See her *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* (1998). Margaret calls Mary Magdalene as “the Lost Bride” of Jesus. Margaret perceives something troubling about a religion based on “a virgin mother and a celibate son.” The labeling of sex as sinful and the emphasis on celibacy among the clergy results in a distortion of our basic nature.

She observes that the consequences are played out in the Catholic clergy sex scandals.

The Black Madonna in certain chapels in Europe may actually represent Mary Magdalene. After Jesus was crucified, Mary Magdalene traveled for her safety to Marseilles in southern France. It was reported to me that the gypsies gather annually for their celebration of the Black Madonna in late May in southern France. Interestingly, the gypsies call the black Madonna by the Indian name “Kali.” What does this suggest?

During the Inquisition, the herbal and wise women of Europe were condemned as consorts of the Devil and were burned at the stake. Some have opined that the old witches of Halloween were actually the wise-women of their communities.

### **Concluding Thought**

We can only be truly human through our connection to the Sacred Feminine. She is part of us and we are part of Her. If we deny our feminine aspect, we lead incomplete lives. She helps us to integrate our body, mind and soul. It is the integration of our masculine and feminine aspects which makes us whole and holy. We can be gentle and strong, intuitive and intellectual, inward and outward, reflective and active. We can love one another and care for each as brothers and sisters, as husbands and wives.

We need the Goddess in our lives to repair, to nurture and to heal.