IS DIALOGUE BETWEEN RELIGION AND SCIENCE POSSIBLE? THE CASE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE GODDESS MOVEMENT

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Introduction

The particular instance of the ‘religion versus science’ phenomenon examined in this chapter is the ongoing debate between followers of contemporary Goddess spirituality—who form one section of the global Neo-Pagan movement—and archaeologists who excavate sites associated with possible Goddess veneration in the distant past. Despite modern Goddess followers’ avid interest in places where Goddesses were (perhaps) once worshipped and some archaeologists’ declared interest in creating multivocal interpretations of sites alongside other stakeholders who have an interest in the past, attempts at dialogue between these two groups have often foundered, to the disappointment of both.

We might pause briefly at the outset to consider the meaning of ‘dialogue’ in this context. Essentially—and this is a personal take—I understand it to be a conversation in which ideas and opinions are exchanged between parties where the progress of the conversation—its direction and content—takes into account what has been said previously by participants. This does not mean the participants will necessarily agree before, during or after the conversation, but that dialogue proceeds as a result of participants considering and responding to what the other has said. A genuine interest in, and openness toward, what the other has to say are helpful for this to happen. Some conditions make it difficult for dialogue to occur: a lack of mutual respect or good-will; where one or both parties are sufficiently ill-disposed to the other’s perspective that they are disinclined to listen to and try to understand it; where the gulf between participants’ views is vast; or where, despite all the good-will in the world, the participants’ ways

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1 In this chapter I capitalize Goddess in the way that I would capitalize God.
of knowing, thinking and debating—their epistemological foundations and discursive practices—are so different from one another that participants may not know when genuine dialogue has stopped or failed to occur, or what to do to improve things should they want to try. Further conditions make dialogue problematic: the different motives of participants, differential access to information, power differentials and other structural dimensions of their relationships.

The chapter begins with a background to the dialogue between archaeologists and followers of Goddess religion, and then proceeds to focus on the high-profile Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey as a case in point. Problems associated with attempts to interlace scientific and religious discourses which draw on different epistemologies, languages and values are highlighted, along with structural obstacles to creating a democratically-constituted forum in a context where archaeologists are authorized as the official, legitimate interpreters of evidence from the past, while Goddess followers are regarded as, at best, naïve lay enthusiasts, and at worst, a lunatic fringe. The dialogue centred on Çatalhöyük, which got off to a good start, has become characterized by the politics of polarity, tokenism, utopianism, misrepresentation and caricature. The relationship improved in 2005 with generous and optimistic input from both sides (see below), but has since slumped. However Goddess tours and individual Goddess pilgrims still visit Çatalhöyük. In July 2010 Reşit Ergener (a Turkish tour guide and author of Anatolia: Land of Mother Goddess) and Lydia Ruyle (an American artist and prominent figure in the Goddess movement) will lead a group to the site on a tour titled ‘On the Trail of the Mother Goddess in Anatolia’. Both have led many sacred tours within Turkey; 2010 represents the twentieth anniversary of Ergener’s first Goddess tour.

Background

Archaeologists were not always averse to interpreting the material remains of the past, especially in Europe, as evidence of religious

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3 Details of the tour can be found at http://rashidsturkey.com/?nav=g&dir=30&a_dir=&g=134, accessed 9 April 2010.