

Money, Gods, and Taboos: Re-sacralizing the Commons

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The Earth Goddess plant sculpture was created in 2013-2014 at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens' Cascades Garden by Mosaïcultures Internationales de Montréal. (Photo by Eric Yarnell / Wiki Commons CC 4.0)

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House founded by An, praised by Enlil, given an oracle by mother Nintud! A house, at its upper end a mountain, at its lower end a spring! A house, at its upper end threefold indeed. Whose well-founded storehouse is established as a household, whose terrace is supported by lahama deities; whose princely great wall, the shrine of Urim! (the [Kesh temple hymn](#), ca. 2600 BCE)

Not long ago, I found myself involved in a debate on Gaian religion convened by Erik Assadourian. For me, it was a little strange. For the people of my generation, religion is supposed to be a relic of the past, opium of the people, a mishmash of superstitions, something for old women mumbling ejaculatory prayers, things like that. But, here, a group of people who weren't religious in the traditional sense of the word, and who included at least two professional researchers in physics, were seriously discussing about how to best worship the Goddess of Earth, the mighty, the powerful, the divine, the (sometimes) benevolent Gaia, Shewho keeps the Earth alive.

It was not just unsettling, it was a deep rethinking of many things I had been thinking. I had been building models of how Gaia could function in terms of the physics and the biology we

know. But here, no, it was not Gaia the [holobiont](#), not Gaia the superorganism, not Gaia the homeostatic system. **It was Gaia the Goddess.**

And here I am, trying to explain to myself why I found this matter worth discussing. And trying to explain it to you, readers. After all, this is being written in a blog titled "[Chimeras](#)" -- and the ancient Chimera was a myth about a creature that, once, must have been a sky goddess. And I have been keeping this blog for several years, see? There is something in religion that remains interesting even for us, moderns. But, then, what is it, exactly?

I mulled over the question for a while and I came to the conclusion that, yes, Erik Assadourian and the others are onto something: it may be time for religion to return in some form. **And if religion returns, it may well be in the form of some kind of cult of the Goddess Gaia.** But let me try to explain

What is this thing called "religion," anyway?

Just as many other things in history that go in cycles, religion does that too. It is because religion serves a purpose, otherwise it wouldn't have existed and been so common in the past. So what is religion? It is a long story but let me start from the beginning -- the very beginning, when, as the Sumerians used to say, "bread was baked for the first time in the ovens".

A constant of all ancient religions is that they tell us that whatever humans learned to do -- from fishing to having kings -- **it was taught them by some God** who took the trouble to land down from heaven (or from wherever Gods come from) just for that purpose. Think of when the Sumerian Sea-God called *Aun* (also *Oannes* in later times) emerged out of the *Abzu* (that today we call the *abyss*) to teach people all the arts of civilization. It was in those ancient times that the Gods taught humans the arts and the skills that the ancient [Sumerians called "me,"](#) a bewildering variety of concepts, from "music" to "rejoicing of the heart." Or, in a more recent lore, how Prometheus defied the gods by stealing fire and gave it to humankind. This story has a twist of trickery, but it is the same concept: human civilization is a gift from the gods.

Now, surely our ancestors were not so naive that they believed in these silly legends, right? Did people really need a Fish-God to emerge out of the Persian Gulf to teach them how to make fish hooks and fishnets? But, as usual, **what looks absurd hides the meaning of complex questions.**

The people who described how the *me* came from the Gods were not naive, not at all. They had understood the essence of civilization, which is *sharing*. Nothing can be done without sharing something with others, not even rejoicing in your heart. Think of "music," one of the Sumerian *me*: can you play music by yourself and alone? Makes no sense, of course. Music is a skill that

needs to be learned. You need teachers, you need people who can make instruments, you need a public to listen to you and appreciate your music. And the same is for fishing, one of the skills that *Aun* taught to humans. Of course, you *could* fish by yourself and for your family only. Sure, and, in this way, **you ensure that you all will die of starvation as soon as you hit a bad period of low catches.** Fishing provides abundant food in good times, but fish spoils easily and those who live by fishing can survive only if they share their catch with those who live by cultivating grains. You can't live of fish alone, it is something that I and my colleague Ilaria Perissi describe in our book, "[The Empty Sea](#)." Those who tried, such as the Vikings of Greenland during the Middle Ages, were mercilessly wiped out of history.

Sharing solves the problems of the ups and downs of the supply of food and of all commodities. It is the essence of civilization, but it is not trivial: **who shares what with whom?** How do you ensure that everyone gets a fair share? How do you take care of tricksters, thieves, and parasites? It is a fascinating story that goes back to the very beginning of civilization, those times that the Sumerians were fond to tell with the beautiful image of "when bread was baked for the first time in the ovens," This is where religion came in, with temples, priest, Gods, and all the related stuff.

Let's make a practical example: suppose you are on an errand, it is a hot day, and you want a mug of beer. Today, you go to a pub, pay a few dollars for your pint, you drink it, and that's it. Now, move yourself to Sumerian times. The Sumerians had plenty of beer, even a specific goddess related to it, called *Ninkasi* (which means, as you may guess, "the lady of the beer"). But there were no pubs selling beer for the simple reason that you couldn't pay for it. Money hadn't been invented, yet. Could you barter for it? With what? **What could you carry around that would be worth just one beer?** No, there was a much better solution: the temple of the local God or Goddess.

We have beautiful descriptions of the Sumerian temples in the works of the priestess Enheduanna, among other things the first named author in history. From her and from other sources, we can understand how in Sumerian times, and for millennia afterward, temples were large storehouses of goods. They were markets, schools, libraries, manufacturing centers, and offered all sorts of services, including that of the hierodules (*karkid* in Sumerian), **girls who were not especially holy**, but who would engage in a very ancient profession that didn't always have the bad reputation it has today. If you were so inclined, you could also meet male prostitutes in the temple, probably called "*kurgarra*" in Sumerian. That's one task in which temples have been engaging for a long time, even though that looks a little weird to us. Incidentally, the Church of England [still managed prostitution](#) in Medieval times.

So, you go to the temple and you make an offer to the local God or Goddess. We may assume that this offer would be proportional to both your needs and your means. It could be a goat

that we know it was roughly proportional to [the services of a high-rank hierodule](#). But, if all you wanted was a beer, then you could limit your offer to something less valuable: depending on your job you could have offered fish, wheat, wool, metal, or whatever. Then, the God would be pleased and as a reward the alewives of the temple would give you all the beer you could drink. Seen as a restaurant, **the temple worked on the basis of what we call today an "all you can eat" menu** (or "the bottomless cup of coffee," as many refills as you want).

Note how the process of offering something to God was called *sacrifice*. The term comes from "sacred" which means "separated." The sacrifice is about separation. You separate from something that you perceived as yours which then becomes an offer to the God or to the community -- most often the same thing. The offerings to the temple could be something very simple. As you see in the images we have from Sumerian times, it didn't always involve the formal procedure of killing an animal. People were just bringing the goods they had to the temple. When animals were sacrificed to God(s) in the sense that they were ritually killed, they were normally eaten afterward. Only in rare cases (probably not in Sumeria) the sacrificed entity was burnt to ashes. **It was the "burnt sacrifice"** called *korban olah* in the Jewish tradition. In that case, the sacrifice was shared with God alone -- but it was something exceptional.

In any case, God was the supreme arbiter who insured that your sacrifice was appreciated -- actually not all sacrifices were appreciated. Some people might try to trick by offering low quality goods, but God is not easy to fool. In some cases, he didn't appreciate someone's sacrifices at all: do you remember the story of Cain and Abel? God rejected Cain's sacrifice, although we are not told exactly why. In any case, **the sacrifice was a way to attribute a certain "price" to the sacrificed goods.**

This method of commerce is not very different than the one we use today, it is just not so exactly quantified as when we use money to attach a value to everything. The ancient method works more closely to the principle that the Marxists had unsuccessfully tried to implement "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." But **don't think that the ancient Sumerian were communists**, it is just that the lack of method of quantification of the commercial transaction generated a certain leeway that could allow to the needy access to the surplus available, when it was available. This idea is still embedded in modern religions, think of how the holy Quran commands the believers to share the water of their wells with the needy, once they have satisfied their needs and those of their animals. Or the importance that the Christian tradition gives to gleaning as a redistribution of the products of the fields. Do you remember the story of Ruth the Moabite in the Bible? That important, indeed.

But there is more. In the case of a burnt sacrifices, **the value attributed to the goods was "infinite"** -- the goods consumed by the flames just couldn't be used again by human beings. It is the concept of *Taboo* used in Pacific cultures for something that cannot be touched, eaten, or used. We have no equivalent thing in the "market," where we instead suppose that everything has a price.

And then, there came money (the triumph of evil)

The world of the temples of the first 2-3 millennia of human civilizations in the Near East was in some ways alien to ours, and in others perfectly equivalent. But things keep changing and the temples were soon to face a competition in a new method of attributing value to goods: money. Coinage is a relatively modern invention, it goes back to mid 1st millennium BCE. But in very ancient times, people did exchange metals by weight -- mainly gold and silver. And these exchanges were normally carried out in temples -- the local God(s) ensured honest weighing. In more than one sense, in ancient times temples *were* banks and **it is no coincidence that our modern banks look like temples. They *are* temples to a God called "money."** By the way, you surely read in the Gospels how Jesus chased the money changers -- the *trapezitai* -- out of the temple of Jerusalem. Everyone knows that story, but what were the money changers doing in the temple? They were in the traditional place where they were expected to be, where they had been from when bread was baked in ovens for the first time.

So, religion and money evolved in parallel -- sometimes complementing each other, sometimes in competition with each other. But, in the long run, the temples seem to have been the losers in the competition. As currency became more and more commonplace, people started thinking that they didn't really need the cumbersome apparatus of religion, with its temples, priests, and hierodules (the last ones were still appreciated, but now were paid in cash). **A coin is a coin is a coin**, it is guaranteed by the gold it is made of -- gold is gold is gold. And if you want a good beer, you don't need to make an offer to some weird God or Goddess. Just pay a few coppers for it, and that's done.

The Roman state was among the first in history to be based nearly 100% on money. With the Romans, temples and priests had mainly a decorative role, let's say that they had to find a new market for their services. **Temples couldn't be anymore commercial centers, so they reinvented themselves as lofty place for the celebration of the greatness of the Roman empires.** There remained also a diffuse kind of religion in the countryside that had to do with fertility rites, curing sickness, and occasional cursing on one's enemies. That was the "pagan" religion, with the name "pagan" meaning, basically, "peasant."

Paganism would acquire a bad fame in Christian times, but already in Roman times peasant rites were seen with great suspicion. The Romans burned witches, oh, yes, they loved to burn

witches -- they burned many more than would ever be burned in medieval times. And the victims were most likely countryside enchanter and enchantresses. They were considered dangerous because **the real deity that the Romans worshiped was money**. An evil deity, perhaps, but it surely brought mighty power to the Romans, but their doom as well, as it is traditional for evil deities. Roman money was in the form of precious metals and when they ran out of gold and silver from their mines, the state just couldn't exist anymore: it vanished. No gold, no empire. It was as simple as that.

The disappearance of the Roman state saw a return of religion, this time in the form of Christianity. It is [a long story](#) that would need a lot of space to be written. Let's just say that the Middle Ages in Europe saw the rise of monasteries to play a role similar to that of temples in Sumerian times. Monasteries were storehouses, manufacturing centers, schools, libraries, and more -- they even had something to do with hierodules. During certain periods, Christian nuns [did seem to have played that role](#), although this is a controversial point. Commercial exchanging and sharing of goods again took a religious aspect, with the Catholic Church in Western Europe playing the role of a bank by guaranteeing that, for instance, [ancient relics were authentic](#). In part, **relics played the role that money had played during the Roman Empire**, although they couldn't be exchanged for other kinds of goods. The miracle of the Middle Ages in Europe was that this arrangement worked, and worked very well. That is, until someone started excavating silver from mines in Eastern Europe and another imperial cycle started. It is not over to this date, although it is clearly declining.

So, where do we stand now? Religion has clearly abandoned the role it had during medieval times and has re-invented itself as a support for the national state, just as the pagan temples had done in Roman times. One of the most tragic events of Western history is when in 1914, for some mysterious reasons, **young Europeans found themselves killing each other by the millions while staying in humid trenches**. On both sides of the trenches, Christian priests were blessing the soldiers of "their" side, exhorting them to kill those of the other side. How Christianity could reduce itself to such a low level is one of the mysteries of the Universe, but there are more things in heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. And it is here that we stand. Money rules the world and that's it.

The Problem With Money

Our society is perhaps the most monetized of history -- **money pervades every aspect of life for everyone**. The US is perhaps the most monetized society ever: for Europeans it is a shock to discover that many American families [pay their children](#) for doing household chores. For a European, it is like if your spouse were asking you to pay for his/her sexual services. But different epochs have different uses and surely it would be shocking for a Sumerian to see that

we can get a beer at the pub by just giving the alewives a curious flat object, a "card," that they then give back to us. Surely that card is a powerful amulet from a high-ranking God.

So, everything may be well in the best of worlds, notoriously represented by the Western version of liberal democracy. Powerful market forces, operated by the God (or perhaps Goddess) called Money or, sometimes, "the almighty dollar," ensure that exchanges are efficient, that scarce resources are optimally allocated, and that everyone has a chance in the search for maximizing his/her utility function.

Maybe. But **it may also be that something is rotten in the Great Columned Temple of Washington D.C.** What's rotten, exactly? Why can't this wonderful deity we call "money" work the way we would it like to, now that we even managed to decouple it from the precious metals it was made of in ancient times?

Well, there is a problem. A big problem. A gigantic problem. It is simply that **money is evil**. This is another complex story, but let's just say that **the problem with evil and good is that evil knows no limits**, while good does. In other words, evil is equivalent to chaos, good to order. It has something to do with the definition of "obscenity." There is nothing wrong in human sex, but an excess of sex in some forms becomes obscene. Money can become obscene for exactly this reason: too much of it overwhelms everything else. **Nothing is so expensive that it cannot be bought**; that's the result of the simple fact that you can attribute a price to everything.

Instead, God is good because She has limits: She is benevolent and merciful. You could see that as a limitation and theologians might discuss why a being that's all-powerful and all-encompassing cannot be *also* wicked and cruel. But there cannot be any good without an order of things. And order implies limits of some kind. God can do everything but He cannot do evil. That's a no-no. God cannot be evil. Period.

And here is why money is evil: **it has no limits, it keeps accumulating**. You know that accumulated money is called "capital," and it seems that many people realize that there is something wrong with that idea because "capitalism" is supposed to be something bad. Which may be but, really, *capital* is one of those polymorphic words that can describe many things, not all of them necessarily bad. In itself, capital is simply the accumulation of resources for future use -- and that has limits, of course. You can't accumulate more things than the things you have. But once you give a monetary value to this accumulated capital, things change. If money has no limits, capital doesn't, either.

Call it capital or call it money, it is shapeless, limitless, a blob that keeps growing and never shrinks. Especially nowadays that money has been decoupled from material goods (at least in

part, you might argue that money is linked to crude oil). **You could say that money is a disease:** it affects everything. Everything can be associated with a number, and that makes that thing part of the entity we call market. If destroying that thing can raise that number, somewhere, that thing will be destroyed. Think of a tree: for a modern economist, it has no monetary value until it is felled and the wood sold on the market. And that accumulates more money, somewhere. Monetary capital actually destroys natural capital. You may have heard of "Natural Capitalism" that's supposed to solve the problem by giving a price to trees even before they are felled. It could be a good idea, but it is still based on money so it may be the wrong tool to use even though for a good purpose..

The accumulation of money in the form of monetary capital has created something enormously different than something that was once supposed to help you get a good beer at a pub. **Money is not evil just in a metaphysical sense. Money is destroying everything.** It is destroying the very thing that makes humankind survive: the Earth's ecosystem. We call it "overexploitation," but it means simply killing and destroying everything as long as that can bring a monetary profit to someone.

Re-Sacralizing The Ecosystem (why some goods must have infinite prices)

There have been several proposals on how to reform the monetary system, from "local money" to "expiring money," and some have proposed to simply get rid of it. None of these schemes has worked, so far, and getting rid of money seems to be simply impossible in a society that's as complex as ours: **how do you pay the hierodules if money does not exist?** But from what I have been discussing so far, we could avoid the disaster that the evil deity calling money is bring to us simply by putting a limit to it. It is, after all, what the Almighty did with the devil: She didn't kill him, but confined him in a specific area that we call "Hell" -- maybe there is a need for hell to exist, we don't know. For sure, we don't want hell to grow and expand everywhere.

What does it mean a limit to money? It means that some things must be placed outside the monetary realm -- outside the market. If you want to use a metaphor based on economics, some goods must be declared to have an "infinite" monetary price -- nobody can buy them, not billionaires, not even trillionaires or any even more obscene levels of monetary accumulation. If you prefer, you may use the old Hawai'ian word: *Taboo*. Or, simply, you decide that **some things are sacred**, holy, they are beloved by the Goddess and even thinking of touching them is evil.

Once something is sacred, it cannot be destroyed in the name of profit. That could mean setting aside some areas of the planet, declaring them not open for human exploitation. Or setting limits to the exploitation, not with the idea of maximizing the output of the system for

human use, but with the idea to optimize the biodiversity of the area. These ideas are not farfetched. As an example, some areas of the sea have been declared "whale sanctuaries" -- places where whales cannot be hunted. That's not necessarily an all/zero choice. Some sanctuaries might allow human presence and a moderate exploitation of the resources of the system. The point is that as long as we monetize the exploitation, the we are back to monetary capitalism and the resource will be destroyed.

Do we need a religion to do that? Maybe there are other ways but, surely, we know that it is a task that religion is especially suitable for. **Religion is a form of communication that uses rituals as speech.** Rituals are all about sacralization: they define what's sacred by means of sacrifice. These concepts form the backbone of all religions, everything is neatly arranged under to concept of "sacredness" -- what's sacred is nobody's property. We know that it works. It has worked in the past. It still works today. You may be a trillionaire, but you are not allowed to do everything you want just because you can pay for it. You can't buy the right of killing people, for instance. Nor to destroy humankind's heritage. (So far, at least).

Then, do we need a new religion for that purpose? A Gaian religion?

Possibly yes, taking into account that Gaia is not "God" in the theological sense. **Gaia is not all-powerful, she didn't create the world, she is mortal.** She is akin to the *Demiurgoi*, the *Daimonoi*, the *Djinn*, and other similar figures that play a role in the Christian, Islamic and Indian mythologies. The point is that you don't necessarily need the intervention of the Almighty to sacralize something. Even just a lowly priest can do that, and surely it is possible for one of Her *Daimonoi*, and Gaia is one.

Supposing we could do something like that, then we would have the intellectual and cultural tools needed to re-sacralize the Earth. Then, whatever is declared sacred or taboo is spared by the destruction wrecked by the money based process: forests, lands, seas, creatures large and small. We could see this a as **a new alliance** between humans and Gaia. Maybe we could use an old fashioned term "**a New Covenant with Gaia.**" In the end, it doesn't matter. All the Earth is sacred to Gaia, we may just decide that some parts of it are especially sacred and cannot be touched by money. And not just the Earth, the poor, the weak, and the dispossessed among humans, they are just as sacred and must be respected.

All that is not just a question of "saving the Earth" -- it is a homage to the power of the Holy Creation that belongs to the Almighty, and to the power of maintenance of the Holy Creation that belongs to the Almighty's faithful servant, **the holy Gaia, mistress of the ecosystem.** And humans, as the ancient Sumerians had already understood, are left with the task of respecting,

admiring and appreciating what God has created. We do not worship Gaia, that would be silly, besides being blasphemous. But through her, we worship the higher power of God.

Is it possible? If history tells us something is that money tends to beat religion when conflict arises. Gaia is powerful, sure, but **can she slay the money dragon in single combat?** Difficult, yes, but we should remember that some 2000 years ago in Europe, a group of madmen fought and won against an evil empire in the name of an idea that most thought not just subversive at that time, but even beyond the thinkable. And they believed so much in that idea that they accepted to die for it

In the end, **there is more to religion than just fixing a broken economic system.** There is a fundamental reason why people do what they do: sometimes we call it with the anodyne name of "communication," sometimes we use the more sophisticated term of ["empathy,"](#) but when we really understand what we are talking about we may not be afraid to use the word "love" which, according to our Medieval ancestors, was the ultimate force that moves the universe. And when we deal with Gaia the Goddess, we may have this feeling of communication, empathy, and love. She may be defined as a planetary homeostatic system, but she is way more than that: it is a power of love that has no equals on this planet. But there are things that mere words cannot express.

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