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BELIEFS

Blazing a Trail for Followers of the 'Divine Feminine'

# A Venice woman's new book is a guide to sacred sites around the world related to goddesses.

By Lisa Richardson, Times Staff Writer

Entering author Karen Tate's Venice apartment is like discovering an intact pyramid. On the walls, in curio cabinets — everywhere — are Egyptian-style artifacts and goddesses large and small, in headdresses and gold leaf. A 6-foot statue of Sekhmet sits guard in the entry (although Tate says the lion-headed goddess on the throne is temporary, soon to be moved to her garden in the desert). As an advocate of goddess spirituality, Tate has traveled much of the world to visit places where figures from ancient mythology, such as Isis, Astarte, Artemis and Diana, were venerated. Much of her art was brought back from these trips.

Now she has written a book, "Sacred Places of Goddess: 108 Destinations," to help other seekers of the "divine feminine" to journey along the same paths. Interest in the divine feminine has soared in modern times. No one keeps count of how many goddess believers there are in the United States, but an industry has arisen to accommodate them. There are goddess books and newsletters, websites and specialty stores. There is also a booming business in goddess travel tours.

The intense interest, Tate believes, has arisen in part because the world is out of balance. Wars, violence and a disdain for nature are the result of patriarchy suppressing the more feminine spiritual values of healing, sustaining and nurturing, she says. Goddess veneration works to restore a balance that Tate writes existed thousands of years ago.

"In the beginning, God was a woman, and from her womb she created all that is; thus she is all things and all things are her.... That was true 30,000 years ago, and for millions it is still true today," she writes in her book. Seated in an armchair with one of her two cats on her lap, she adds, "If you do believe in a god that is someone who's going to give birth, isn't that going to be a female and not a male — or at least a couple?"

Tate, who was born in New Orleans, calls herself a disconnected Catholic. "I didn't ever feel very passionate about it; it wasn't a very warm, embracing faith — at least not as I was brought up in it," she said. She moved to Los Angeles at age 30 and on a whim took a class through the learning Annex called "Finding the Feminine Face of God." It was a revelation. "I felt angry," she recalled. "I felt like I had been duped for the first three decades of my life." But even before she began studying feminine spirituality, Tate had been drawn to goddess imagery. Instead of reading Dr. Seuss books as a child, she pored over Egyptian mythology. "I can remember as a kid sitting there in awe, looking at these ancient relics," she said.

"Sacred Places," published by the Consortium of Collective Consciousness in San Francisco, is part of a series of travel guides focusing on spiritual journeys. "People who frequently travel are looking for a little more in their journeys, rather than sitting around the pools sipping mai tais," said founder Brad Olsen. His market research showed that most travelers will buy 2.4 travel books per vacation: an overall travel guide and a book that focuses on art or history or some other niche. "That means they buy their 'Lonely Planet' or 'Let's Go' and then something else. That's who we're targeting," he said.

Lydia Ruile of Goddess Tours in Denver takes travelers in groups of 10 to 40 to divine feminine sites in England; Florence, Italy; Turkey; and elsewhere. "There's a hunger in women to find different stories and ways of connecting to the spirit," she said. Ruile has been to many of the places in Tate's book, as a guide or as a pilgrim. "I think she's done a great job of describing the stories surrounding these sites, how to get there and how to approach the sites," Ruile said. "It's a good guidebook."

"Sacred Places" starts in Europe and Asia Minor and moves through the world to the Americas. Tate chose sites based on their historical, spiritual and cultural significance or for their physical richness. The book is a user-friendly guide that provides background information on a site's ancient or new importance. Some sections have warnings about deterioration at some sites; these are called "Gaia alerts," after the Greek goddess personifying Earth. Some associations are expected — Cyprus with Aphrodite, the Parthenon with Athena and Egypt with Isis. Others are sites where Christianity, Judaism or Islam has long overtaken pagan worship and the divine feminine has been absorbed or supplanted by those traditions, Tate said. "It's not a feminist thing where women want to take over," she said. "It's about bringing the world back into balance, because the feminine has been lost and subjugated. If women were just equal partners, how different the world might be."

The interest in the divine feminine is the outgrowth of two women's movements that swept the United States, said Sabina Magliocco, an anthropology and folklore expert at Cal State Northridge. The first culminated in the early 20th century, when women achieved suffrage, and the second emerged in the 1960s and '70s, when women sought political and economic parity with men. Spiritual parity is the natural next step, she said, adding that the movement is not limited to pagan circles. "There are women within mainstream

religions, Catholicism and Judaism, who are working very hard to imbue traditional religions as encompassing both masculine and feminine. It's true that when the Bible is translated into English, God is 'he,' "she said. "In Hebrew it's neither he nor she. God is beyond masculinity and femininity."

The Protestant Reformation discouraged the worship of Mary and female saints, Magliocco said. "But the fallout was [that] any feminine way of relating to the divine was stripped and was coupled with a religious philosophy that mirrored a male-centered society," she said. The runaway bestseller "The Da Vinci Code" turned a swell of interest in the divine feminine into a tidal wave with its theory about Mary Magdalene's true identity, she said. While calling the book a "wistful recasting of history," it nonetheless demonstrates the powerful yearning for the divine feminine, Magliocco said.

However, she cautions against equating worship of the feminine divine with social parity for women. "We have plenty of evidence of societies in which the divine feminine was venerated but in which women did not have access to power — like modern India, ancient Greece and Rome," she said. For Tate, widespread observance of goddess spirituality would restore a missing piece of the religious puzzle — not overriding other religions, but adding to them. For her, goddess worship is archetypal, not specific. So Kali of Hindu tradition is revered, as is St. Brigid of Ireland. Isis is venerated, as is Jesus' mother, Mary. Indeed, Tate writes that in some places the latter two images have merged: In France, where centuries-old black Madonnas are found in some cathedrals, research on the icons has shown that they were originally figures of Isis, refashioned to suit Christianity.

Some sites are in unexpected places, such as an industrial park in Irvine, home to the Goddess Temple of Orange County. It was founded in 2002 with six members and is now nearing 100, said founder Ava Park. To those who say that Christianity, Judaism and Islam do honor women and that God has no gender, Park says those faiths are merely paying lip service to the divine feminine. "If you call God a 'he' and 'him' all the time, then how can women feel divinity inside themselves when they know they are not a he?"