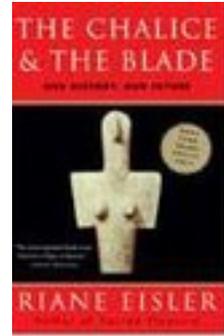


The Chalice and the Blade

Dr. Jan Garrett, Professor of Philosophy at Western Kentucky University, delivered this talk at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bowling Green, KY on March 28, 2010

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Since March is Women's History Month, it is fitting to devote a program to the ideas of Riane Eisler, one of the most important writers on women's oppression and human liberation. Eisler's best-known book is [*The Chalice and the Blade*](#). She has written other important books I may mention as needed. Several of them have "partnership" in the title, such as [*The Power of Partnership*](#).

All her books since 1987 have been anchored in the distinction between Dominator relationships and Partnership relationships, which provides a lens for viewing and understanding societies, intimate relationships within families, religions (relations between humans and the divine), and the relationship between humanity and the earth. Before turning to that idea, let me explain the title of Eisler's 1987 book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, which I borrowed as the title of this talk. Every Unitarian Universalist knows what a chalice is, and if you go to the [Unitarian Universalist Association website](#) you'll find an explanation of how this symbol became associated with our denomination. However, in choosing the chalice as a key word in the title of her book, Eisler probably did not have UUism in mind. For Eisler the chalice is associated with the goddess religions that existed in many places in the millennia leading up to about 1500 BCE. Yet this is a nice coincidence from our perspective, because Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism has nurtured feminists since the 19th century and has for several decades welcomed pagans, including those working to revive goddess-religion, into our broad tent.

1500 BCE is the approximate time when the last of the major goddess-worshipping culture, Minoan civilization centered on the Mediterranean island of Crete, ceased to exist. For Eisler, the chalice represents the peaceful gender-egalitarian societies, mostly horticultural, for whom the Goddess was the major object of religious devotion, although there were normally male and other female deities alongside her. Eisler's book relies on the research of archeologists who have distinguished this type of culture from the warlike, male-dominated cultures that seem to have supplanted them. Because these later societies were warlike, as proven by the prominence of weapons of war and fortifications in their archeological remains as compared with the absence of them in earlier, goddess-worshipping cultures, the appropriate symbol for them is the Blade. [1, 2]

Some of you have read Dan Brown's novel *The DaVinci Code*, or seen the movie of the same name starring Tom Hanks. In the novel some of Eisler's themes appear rearranged. The hero of the novel explains that V shape, which corresponds to the Cup part of the Chalice or Grail is an ancient symbol for the feminine. As you can see when you imagine a line drawing of a frontal view of a naked woman, and focus on the uniquely female part

of human anatomy, this place is where new life would be carried in a pregnant woman (about where the flame is in the flaming chalice). In Brown's novel the thesis is that the Holy Grail really refers to Mary Magdalene, who was actually married to Jesus Christ and who escaped, pregnant, after the crucifixion of Christ and somehow got to France, where her child was born and went on to have descendants, the latest of whom turns out to be a main character in the novel (and the movie).

One difference between Eisler's book and Brown's novel is that for Eisler, the chalice represents Goddess-worshipping egalitarian cultures that were overrun at least 1500 years earlier. On Eisler's account, it is not institutional Christianity that initiated the suppression of women. [3] That started much earlier, in Western Asia and India, probably with the invasion of Indo-European warrior-nomads. Goddess-worshipping cultures were defeated and their new rulers began subordinating goddesses to gods within the mythically portrayed society of deities. Homer's gods provide clear examples. So although Goddess worship did not at first disappear completely, it tended to take back seat to the worship of male war-gods. Pre-Christian Greek and Roman civilization is already patriarchal or male-dominated, although religiously it is still pagan. Even the earlier Mycenaean society, the society that produced the early Greeks who conquered Troy, was patriarchal. In other words, the end of gender-egalitarian, Goddess-worshipping civilization occurred more than 1500 years before Christianity appeared on the scene, although pockets of goddess-worship continued to exist here and there. By the time Christianity fused with the Roman Empire under Constantine, it had accepted the Dominator culture of classical pagan antiquity, and once fused with state power it helped to consolidate it.

The point of Eisler's study of prehistory and ancient history is to show that the domination of the male gender over the female gender is not an eternal and inevitable feature of human social organization, that another type of society, a Partnership society rooted in gender equality, is possible. This is something that almost completely escapes Dan Brown's novel.

It is useful to compare Eisler's perspective with two more familiar feminist perspectives. One is associated with Nel Noddings, whose care theory of ethics, has been called a feminine theory, to distinguish it from other feminist theories. According to Noddings, the key to moral thinking is the mother-child relationship. Caring is rooted in the feeling of compassion that comes natural to most mothers. Caring is about paying close attention to the needs of another person that one knows intimately. Noddings thinks this relationship can be extended to mutual care between siblings and between spouses, and perhaps between teachers and their pupils. Most feminists find her view lacking precisely because of [her] lack of concern for questions of social justice regarding broader social patterns.

Another feminist perspective, which has been around since the end of the 18th century, is liberal feminism. Liberal feminists work for equal opportunity for women alongside men in the economy, government, and public life. The problem with liberal feminists, from the perspective of care theory, is that they tend to adopt the abstract language of justice

and rights that prevails in already existing legal discourse, which misses the importance of caring and compassion in human relations.

Eisler's approach has the best of these worlds and then some. She has a place for Noddings' appreciation of the importance of caring without being indifferent to the patterns of human interaction that prevail in the larger society. Both caring and equality play a role in Eisler's conception of partnership relations. Social justice relates to partnership organization at the level of communities larger than the family. Her analysis of economics, carried out in her most recent book, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, makes the case that women's work is crucial for early education, language learning, survival, healing, Hospice care, and thriving of the human species in general. Yet in the United States and elsewhere it is often unpaid or poorly paid and therefore not socially valued by economists focused on money as a measuring device. We have only to think of how the work of homemakers and caregivers for sick and dying family members, childcare providers, primary school teachers and nurses, is barely recognized.

Let us now touch on the basic differences between the Dominator and Partnership Patterns of Organization. In *The Power of Partnership*, Eisler has described the basic patterns in terms of four dimensions: social structure; gender relations; the emotional dimension; and value beliefs.

1. In the domination model, social relations are typically characterized by hierarchies of domination, i.e., rankings that sharply distinguish between those who are controlled and those who control. In the partnership model, relationships tend to be egalitarian; hierarchies exist there but they are what Eisler calls hierarchies of actualization. A synonym for actualization here is empowerment. More experienced, wiser, and skilled persons try to enable the less experienced and skilled persons to acquire capacities they initially lack.
2. In the domination model, the male half of humanity is typically ranked over the female half. Traits and activities such as control and conquest are highly valued and associated with masculinity. Gender inequality is taught at an early age and becomes the model for other inequalities, expressed in terms of, say, religious or racial rankings. In the partnership model, males and females are ranked equally. Traits such as empathy, nonviolent interaction, and care giving are valued in women *and men* and expressed in social policy.
3. In the domination model the emotion of fear is prominent; violence is expected and to some extent encouraged, at least towards persons and groups considered to be inferior. In extreme forms, we see it in physical and emotional forms of spouse abuse and child abuse, and in abuse at work by superiors and even supposed peers. In the partnership model, trust is fostered. There is little emphasis on fear and little acceptance of violence against individuals or groups.
4. In the domination model, relations of control/domination are presented as good. In the partnership model, relations of partnership, mutual respect, and processes of negotiation are presented as good.

As Eisler indicates, these four features of the partnership model—social structure; gender relations; the emotional dimension; and value beliefs—tend to reinforce each other. That

makes the Partnership model a systematic reality. But there is also a contrary dynamic in which the corresponding four main features of the Domination model tend to reinforce each other. The real world of human relations over the last four millennia is one in which the Dominator model usually prevails, but it can rarely totally extinguish elements of the Partnership model. At certain times, the Partnership model makes significant inroads in society and the Dominator model must retreat, but then its devotees may regroup and beat back the progress made by the Partnership model. In certain places at certain times, whole societies may incline mostly toward Partnership relations, at least in contrast with other societies where Dominator relationships are more prominent. That is the case today with Scandinavian countries, characterized by advanced partnership patterns of social organization and gender relations, unlike, say, the U.S., not to mention Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan.

Eisler not only distinguishes these two models of relationships; she argues that they can be found at several levels:

1. Dominator and Partnership within the Family (or intimate relations): The relationship persons have with family members and potential spouses—intimate relations. She gives this a sort of primacy, because it is the basis for our understanding of all other relationships.
2. Dominator and Partnership Patterns within one's own life. Do you "beat yourself up" when you fall short of some ideal or do you work in a friendlier manner with your existing traits and try to improve them gradually?
3. Dominator and Partnership relationships within work settings and the local community.
4. Dominator and Partnership relations between citizens and government, at the city, state, or national levels.
5. Dominator and Partnership relations in the international community. The Bush Administration following September 2001 provides a model of Dominator thinking in the international community.
6. Dominator and Partnership visions of the proper relationship between human beings and nonhuman nature (the planet as a natural resource vs. a global ecological community including nonhuman species).
7. Even our relationship with the divine, with God, the Great Spirit, or the Goddess can be interpreted using this partnership vs. domination lens.

Her approach can help us recognize coherence and unity where otherwise a collection of items may appear to be randomly associated. As an illustration, let me use the seven Unitarian Universalist principles. These are, unless I am very mistaken, inspired by partnership principles, even if we don't always use explicit partnership vocabulary and don't often ask ourselves how they fit together. Let's consider the seven principles in order:

1) The inherent worth and dignity of every person

Partnership relations require as much equality as possible and therefore respect for others with whom we are in relationship. Surely that implies that we seek to recognize the

inherent dignity of other people whom we try to see as potential partners in one or another context.

2) Justice, equity and compassion in human relations

Compassion for our partners, whether they are intimate partners or partners in dialogue, or fellow citizens or fellow denizens of the planet, is necessary for the promotion of partnership, as distinct from dominator relationships.

Treating other people fairly, with justice, may seem a bit impartial, but it arguably depends upon seeing other human beings as members of the same family; we are all in the same boat or at least snared in the same network of relationships. There can be no real partnership if we do not first of all aim to treat others justly.

Equity refers to the moral sensitivity that accompanies and yet goes beyond formal justice. It takes into account, so far as possible, the unique situation of others and tries to empower them to be potential partners.

3) Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations

The Partnership way [4] starts out from concrete partnership relations, say, between men and men, women and women, friends and friends, and spouses. It moves outward to a vision of partnership in larger communities. Our congregations provide a space for practicing partnership that still involves face-to-face relations, but also defines a mission relating to larger communities or partnerships, not to mention humanity's partnership with the rest of the biosphere.

4) A free and responsible search for truth and meaning

The Dominator model of religion has always tended toward imposition of Truth with a capital T from outside, handing down the tablets from Mt. Sinai. Partnership leans toward dialogue, towards mutual stimulation to deeper thought. So the search must remain uncoerced. At the same time our conclusions must be at least partly sharable. One person's theology based on her experience will remain outside all partnerships unless she is responsible enough to express the nature of her insights in a communicable form (poetry, prose, art, music, or touch).

5) The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large

Democracy is the method whereby larger partnership organizations reach collective decisions. The right of conscience corresponds to the requirement of respect for individual paths and recognizes that a minority view now may provide a needed perspective to enrich the collective wisdom of the congregational partnership later.

6) The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all

This principle describes in outline the necessary conditions for global human partnership.

7) Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

This principle points to the need for right relations, including respect, for the life forms and ecosystems that make up a biologically diverse planet. Those who are on the

Partnership way, which include most UUs, aim to live in partnership with Nature, not as tyrant or monarch over it.

Notes

[1] The primary scholarly source for Eisler's views on the Goddess-centered civilizations of Old Europe is archeologist Marija Gimbutas, author of several books that have "goddess" in the title.

[2] I am now in the process of reading an apparently competent study that implicitly challenges the Eisler-Gimbutas claim that there was a period in human prehistory that was essentially peaceful. It's *Sex and War* (probably should have been called *Biology and War*, but the current title is more attention-grabbing), by Potts and Hayden. It seems to be based on a more thorough study of the archeological and anthropological evidence, which has increased considerably since the 1980's, when Eisler wrote her book. Potts and Hayden also make use of the research of evolutionary psychologists and observers of our primate cousins in a way Eisler did not. There's a danger, of course, that the sometimes subtle "Dominationist" bias of Western civilization has distorted the thinking of these academic researchers. I think it has distorted my own super-reflective discipline, academic philosophy. But I am also aware that one can be a bit uncritical about one's own favorite hypotheses, as were certain Marxist feminists in the early 1970's. Potts and Hayden are not anti-feminist, but they think the male predisposition to violence, especially when the males are youthful and band together in groups, is hardwired as a result of biological evolution. It's also their view that cultural changes and institutional changes can go a long way toward keeping this predisposition from expressing itself, which is something Eisler would approve of.

[3] The novel paints the Catholic Church as villains, as suppressors of women down through the ages. There is some evidence for this claim. The novel mentions the role the Church played in the torture and execution of millions of independent women healers, who were vilified as witches. In fairness to the Catholics, however, the Puritans who held the Salem Witch Trials were Protestants. And it is no doubt true that there have been Catholics in the past, as there are today, who prefer Partnership practices to Dominator ones.

[4] The phrase "Partnership Way" comes from the title of another of Eisler's books and is also the internet name for the Center for Partnership Studies website.