

Renaissance Lectures

Visual Words & Worded Images by Lanier Graham



Plate One: "The Burning Bolt of Intention"

PAGAN METAPHYSICS OF THE RENAISSANCE

The Genealogy of Botticelli's Venus

Philosophical Venus

Venus, Mars, & Wisdom

The Metaphysical Union of Venus & Mars



Plate Two: "The Ultimate Sacrifice"

CHRISTIAN METAPHYSICS OF THE RENAISSANCE

The Crucifixion of Christ

Sophia, "Holy Spirit" of Loving Wisdom

The Kingdom of God



THE GENEALOGY OF BOTTICELLI'S VENUS

A Neoplatonic Interpretation

c 2007 by Lanier Graham

Out of Chaos, the formless Void, came GAIA. She emerged on her own. She was the Great Goddess of Stone Age Greece, long before ZEUS who came two generations later. Gaia, essence of Earth, gave birth to OURANOS (Uranus) without male help. He grew up and became her mate. His name means endless time, eternity. Uranus also means heaven, and he was pictured as the dome of the sky. This first King & Queen of the universe had no anthropomorphic form.

From GAIA & URANUS came CRONUS (Saturn) whose name means time -- measurable time. These Pre-Olympic deities have bodily forms. They co-generate Creation. In Orphic mythology (which was sacred to Neoplatonists), Cronus and his mate in the form of serpents wind around the primal egg from which springs radiant Winged Eros who animates all that is. At the request of his mother, who was being poorly treated by her mate, Cronus castrates Uranus and throws his testicles into the sea. Thus Cronus became King of the Gods. Later, his son ZEUS (Jupiter) overthrew Cronus and became King of the Gods ruling the universe from his heavenly home atop Mt. Olympus.

That is the usual narrative, but from the perspective of philosophical mythology the story is a metaphysical tale of Measured Time acting on Measureless Time in such a way that the seed of divine thought enters the realm of space-time. Intent or will descends from above, through time, into the sea of ever-changing energy. Resolution or desire activates the energy, which can be anything that thought makes of it, into something quite particular.

That something was Botticelli's VENUS (Aphrodite). Her name means born of the foam, foam from the union of heavenly seed and earthly sea. This is a Sacred Marriage of a type common throughout World Mythology. The offspring is endless abundance. Venus is the Goddess of Fertility, of Generation, here on earth. She personifies the force that gives form to all that is, when penetrated by the active arrow of intention. Her energy fills all that is matter. She *IS* all that matters, all that materializes. She is loving energy, the Motherly Matrix of the material world. Winged Eros, her son, transmits her love everywhere.

The Neoplatonists tell us we can love her with our senses, on a sensual level, the level of ordinary erotic love, where we respond to the beauty of her body and the body of her daughters. Or we can move beyond that to a higher level of consciousness where what we love is her divinity. That is Wisdom. One is reminded of Maya in Asian mythology. All we see with ordinary eyes are passing illusions her energy activates to dance in sensuous clothing before our lusting eyes. Those who elevate their awareness she guides past the shadowy membranes of half-truths into the Light of Wisdom. Wise Maya was the Mother of Buddha, and she can still guide everyone toward transcendence.

Philosophical Venus is the Goddess of Fertility, of Generation.

She personifies the force that gives form to all that is,
when her blue fluidity is penetrated by the burning bolt of intention.

Her energy fills all that is matter. She *IS* all that matters,
all that materializes.

She is loving energy, Motherly Matrix of the world.

Winged Eros, her son, with arrows much stronger than reason,
transmits her love everywhere.

Philosophical Venus

Philosophical Venus is the Goddess of Fertility, of Generation.

She personifies the force that gives form to all that is,
when her blue fluidity is penetrated by the burning bolt of intention.

Her energy fills all that is matter. She *IS* all that matters,
all that materializes.

She is loving energy, Motherly Matrix of the world.
Winged Eros, her son, with arrows much stronger than reason,
transmits her love everywhere.

Venus, Mars, & Wisdom

The history of art and the history of philosophy parallel one another. The philosophical thread has been well documented in Eugene F. Rice, The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom, Harvard, 1958. During the Early Renaissance of the 15th century, the highest goal was wisdom - true *virtu*. During the Late Renaissance of the 16th century this ideal of *virtu* gradually devolved into mere virtuosity and skillfully greedy thoughts. This opened the way for the less than wise moral code of "enlightened self-interest," a polite and socially acceptable mode of selfishness which has come to dominate modern society.

For the first time in the history of humanity a society has developed that does not hold transcendent values to be the supreme values. For centuries the tallest structures were sacred. Now the tallest structures are skyscrapers, cathedrals of commerce, inside of which what is worshipped is the ego and its materialistic matters.

When Botticelli and other early Renaissance painters rendered images of "Venus & Mars" they had virtuous values in mind. Sexual union was a metaphor for the unification of the two sides of consciousness, a unity called Enlightenment.

Later painters from the 16th century to the 19th century, (from the oily bodies of the Northern Mannerists to the porcelain-smooth skin of Boucher and David), usually left the philosophical metaphor behind and only looked at the sexuality. That is all they could think about, so that is all they could see.

The Metaphysical Union of Venus & Mars

Why do Renaissance painters show so frequently
Venus & Mars together and in love? They were not married,
but they were in love, a love that shocked the whole of Mt. Olympus.
It was such a profound love that it produced extraordinary children -
a boy named Eros who activates Love,
his brother Anteros who punishes those who resist Love,
and a girl named Harmonia which means harmony and peace.

Let's start at the top of the many levels of associated symbolism.
In the realm of metaphysics, Venus & Mars cannot be separated,
that is to say they represent two sides or dimensions of consciousness.

He activates; she receives and manifests.
In terms of time and space, one formulates a thought, an intention,
from outside of time, and then injects that mental impulse
into the energy-field of the material plane.
Mars is the will to be. Venus receives that impulse to be
and brings it into being within the realm of space-time.
In Asia the same physical/metaphysical relationship
is associated with Shiva & Shakti.

In terms of values, love and peace (symbolized by Venus)
is superior to anger, hate, and the violence
these feelings of perverted love engender (symbolized by Mars).
The traditional spiritual goal for Mars is to surrender to Venus
after the internal conquest of selfish passions.
In terms of the relative value of intellect and intuition,
there is really no comparison.
Rational analysis is useful, very helpful in many ways;
but it can only guide us here and there
on the crusty surface of material reality.
Reason cannot take us to the transcendent.
Only intuition can take us to that heavenly paradise,
which is the home of Venus,
the eternal home of Love.

The Crucifixion of Christ

Jesus was asked
when The Kingdom would come.

He said that it is here and now,
but our eyes are blind
and our mind is numb.

What was Jesus teaching us
when he died upon the Cross?

In addition to the physical facts
what is the metaphor? Why?

This is the door to the Kingdom,
our passport to the Sky.

We must sacrifice our selfishness
for our souls to fly.

We must give up everything.
Our egos must actually die.

What was Jesus
teaching us
when he died upon the Cross? In addition to the physical facts
what is the metaphor? Why?
This is the door
to the Kingdom,
our passport
to the Sky.
We must sacrifice
our selfishness
for our souls to fly.
We must give up
everything.
Our egos must
actually
die.

Sophia, “Holy Spirit” of Loving Wisdom

Sophia means wisdom.
What kind of wisdom?
The Wisdom of God.
What is Divine Wisdom?
Infinite Love.

Some speak of “knowing” God.
Some speak of the “experience” of God.
What is it that they know?
What is it that they experience?

How is the mode of transmission pictured
in Medieval and Renaissance Christianity?
Sometimes as a sound.
Sometimes as light.
Sometimes as a dove.
Most often the pure white dove
descending from Heaven to Earth
as the “Holy Spirit,”
is God’s way of communicating His Love.

What was it the Virgin Mary experienced
at the moment of Annunciation?
The opening of her heart
to the Dove’s descent,
the arrival of Infinite Love.
What was it that Jesus experienced
at the moment of Baptism?
The opening of his heart
to the Dove’s descent,
the arrival of Infinite Love.

So it was that they
were united with Infinite Love,
that they became Wise,
that they became Love.

The Kingdom of God

At the core of the Christian faith is this key phrase, this blessed place, "The Kingdom of God."

Over a hundred passages in The New Testament point to The Kingdom. The whole of the New Testament has properly described as the gospel of The Kingdom. Many have described The Kingdom as the main message in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The promise is that The Kingdom will come. That is what is prayed for regularly by billions of Christians: "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done."

What exactly is it that will come? And when will it come?

Some think The Kingdom will come only after we die, or when Jesus returns a second time. These are common beliefs.

But do we really have to die for The Kingdom to come?

This is not what we read in The Bible.

Here we read that The Kingdom is here and now.

John the Baptist said it this way:

"... the Kingdom of God is at hand." (MATTHEW 3:2-3).

Jesus repeated these very words (MATTHEW 4:17).

Jesus continued this teaching of present-ness, adding more about its location saying:

"The Kingdom of God is within you." (LUKE 17:21).

In this course we have been comparing traditional scripture with parallel teachings of the Gnostics, Neoplatonists, and Alchemists.

Let's focus on the most discussed of the many Gnostic gospels.

Jesus says more about The Kingdom in the Gnostic GOSPEL OF THOMAS 3: "The Kingdom of God is within you and outside of you."

In other words, it is everywhere. So what's the problem?

Jesus answers in THOMAS 113: "The Kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, but people do not see it."

So the problem is not with the Kingdom but with us. We must change. How do we do that? The Bible provides many clues including child-like innocence and trust, prayer, faith, fasting and other forms of sacrifice, especially the critical sacrifice of ego's selfishness.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS begins with an Introduction quite possibly written by Solomon, wisest of the Hebrew sages, who offers words "for acquiring an enlightened attitude of mind." (PROVERBS 1:3) Then we are given information about the nature of Wisdom (Hokhmah), a traditional name for the feminine aspect of the Divine. We are told that She points the way into the Kingdom of God. But She can only speak words of truth. She cannot make us listen. Each of us must listen well and then act accordingly.

A central aspect of Wisdom's truth is in the teaching of Androgyny. This teaching appears in various parts of The Bible. Her mere presence at the moment of Creation, as stated in PROVERBS (8:23-31), implies a male/female unity at the highest level:

"From everlasting I was...
The deep was not when I was born...
When He fixed the stars I was there...
when He laid down the foundations of the earth,
I was at His side...ever in his presence...
everywhere in His world."

GENESIS tells another story that implies Androgyny at the highest level. We are told in GENESIS (1:27) that God created Adam in a special way: "... male and female He created him."

And we are told God created Adam in His own image (GENESIS 1:26). Therefore, the implication is that God is "male and female."

These are subtle arguments that most Christians do not think about. Many Bible-reading Christians first hear of the teaching of Androgyny in Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:28), when he writes that after Baptism, "There is neither...male nor female, for ye are all one in Jesus Christ." Androgyny is not merely implied here; it is clearly stated.

More about the Wisdom that transcends ingrained ideas about male/female gender, and all other forms of dualistic thinking, and the very specific goal of spiritual Androgyny is given by Jesus in THOMAS 113: "Every female who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of God."

Jesus says even more in THOMAS 22:

“When you make the two into one, and the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female female... then you will enter the Kingdom of God.”

Almost identical words from Jesus are found in *The Second Epistle of Clement* which is translated from Latin into English in The Two and the One, a masterful monograph by Mircea Eliade, the 20th century's most widely respected authority on comparative religions.

In this course we have been examining the central position of the image of the Androgyne in all World Religions, and especially in the sacred art of Renaissance and Baroque Europe. We have seen the mythic image of the Divine Androgyne as symbolic of a high goal of the spiritual journey in Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Let's review the general picture.

From the “David” of Donatello, the “Last Supper” and the “Baptist” of Leonardo, to the Alchemical emblem books of the 17th century, we have traced the image of the Androgyne as a visual teaching, a way that artists have attempted to evoke the transcendent as it can be seen here on earth. The Christ in Leonardo's “Last Supper” is iconic in a profound way. It is still the way most Christians today visualize Christ - gentle, peaceful, Androgynous, not unlike parallel images of the Buddha.

As we have discussed, Ficino and Pico learned from Plotinus and others that we cannot talk about the transcendent as such; it is beyond words. But we can (as Plotinus said) “circle around it.” That is what metaphors are for. That is what the parables of Jesus do, and that is what Renaissance Androgynes do. They evoke. They suggest the mysterious unity of heart and mind which is “devoutly to be wished.”

Wisdom is not about intelligence, but about love.
Intelligence can be measured on an IQ test. Love cannot be.
We have discussed the role of *Binah* (intelligence) and *Hokhma* (Wisdom) in the Hebrew *Kabbalah*. When they have been truly united, one attains the *Keter*, the Crown of Consciousness.

We also have discussed the concept of Yab and Yum in Tibet.
When they have been truly united, one attains "Enlightened Mind".

In Alchemical Christianity, the parallel condition of heart/mind
is often called Golden Consciousness.

In traditional Christianity, the parallel condition of heart/mind
is often called Christ Consciousness, or the State-of-Grace.
The resulting radiance is what puts halos around the heads of saints.

Let's listen once more to Wisdom words from PROVERBS (3: 13-17):

"Happy are those who discover Wisdom,
who gain discernment.
Gaining her is more rewarding than silver,
more profitable than gold.
She is beyond the price of pearls. ...
Her paths all lead to contentment."

And in PROVERBS 4:8-9:
"Hold her close...embrace her...
she will set a crown of grace on your head."

Perhaps the Second Coming is not a physical event
in the outside world after all,
but rather something that takes place inside each of us
when our hearts open wide enough
that there is room for the Holy Spirit
(which is Wisdom) to descend "like a dove"
and thus transform us in such a way
that we are able to enter The Kingdom of God.