

# Section 4 – The Sacred Marriage

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## Changing Perceptions of Sex

Why do we think the way we do about various kinds of relationships? The fascinating answer to this question is closely connected to, in fact inseparable from, the gradual cultural development of our species, from the earliest hunter-gatherers to today's post-modern society.

Currently, same-sex relations have been documented in over 450 different animal species. They can result in superior care for offspring, and alleviate tensions within reproducing pairs. The existence of this behaviour is quite prevalent, and may confer certain evolutionary advantages.<sup>1</sup>

We saw amongst the hunter-gatherers that same-sex bonding is a natural and potentially beneficial part of the human condition as well. Sex fulfils a variety of roles including bonding, compassion, reward and simply pleasure, and the specific sex of the partners is not relevant for these interactions.

How then, did the prevailing attitudes about sex and partnering come to be?

At some point in our history the relationship between sex and conception became understood, not just as secret 'women's wisdom' but by everyone. This began a subtle transformation in the way we thought about sex.

Once sex was understood as the vehicle through which life was created, it came to be seen metaphorically as an essential factor in the annual regeneration of the seasons and thus the assurance of the fertility of the land and the ongoing passage of time. Natural events like the changing seasons and the rise and fall in the declination of the sun became connected in mythology to divine reproductive sex.

While Goddess cultures and those cultures based in them remain very tolerant of different expressions of gender and sexuality, the idea that the Goddess needed to have divine sex in order to assure the continuance of time meant that reproductive sex acquired special status.

One of the most interesting and culturally significant expressions of this is in hierogamy, or the Great Rite.

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<sup>1</sup> Comments by Arash Fereydooni referring to research by biologists Nathan W. Bailey and Marlene Zuk, University of California. (*Do Animals Exhibit Homosexuality?* *Yale Scientific*, March 14, 2012.)

In the earliest form, the Great Rite was an affirmation of female reproductive power. It was an act of sex consummated in public, in a place of devotion, by a female shaman and a male partner. The function of this rite was to cause the shaman to conceive. Because she was identified as the Goddess incarnate during the ritual, her conception meant that the Goddess also conceived and so would give birth to a new year and ensure the ongoing passage of time.

Conception of new life became the imperative that drove Goddess societies. They were not only birth-oriented, but also conception- oriented.

This is a subtle, but significant transition. Originally, the Goddess gave birth independently, so conception was not an issue. Now, sex that could lead to conception was venerated not just as a pleasure, reward or bond, but as a religious and culturally affirming act in itself. Reproductive sex, in other words, became an act of divine significance, of worship.