

Riane Eisler
The Chalice & the Blade
Published September 1988
HarperCollins Publishers
Paperback , 304 pages

Review of Riane Eisler's The Chalice & the Blade

Claire Fletcher

Riane Eisler's The Chalice & the Blade is an intriguing examination of the human race's abrupt shift from an agrarian, Goddess-centered, egalitarian state to a patriarchal and war-like existence. Eisler cites the work of eminent feminist archeologists and historians in her assessment of the human race's prehistory, providing compelling evidence indicating that previous evaluations of man's existence as a whole have, in fact, been entirely flawed. Eisler encourages the reader to realize that it is not "human nature" to conquer, pillage and destroy, and that it is quite possible for society and civilization to be egalitarian, and to value all life, not just that which is "male."

As a young girl, Riane Eisler escaped from Nazi-occupied Vienna with her Jewish parents. After enduring Kristallnacht, the family fled to Cuba. After some years, they then moved to the United States. Rather than let her traumatic past hinder her, Eisler instead proceeded to study sociology and law at the University of California. After obtaining her doctorate, she has since taught law and gender studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, and is currently a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, a liberal and fine arts university that focuses on holistic multidisciplinary methods of learning and teaching.

Eisler is most famous for her publically-acclaimed and international best-seller, The Chalice & the Blade. The book was initially published in 1988, and has subsequently been translated into 22 languages and published throughout the world. Publishing of The Chalice & the Blade was met with mixed reviews; though Eisler's book is considered groundbreaking by large numbers of social

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scientists, many historians have found fault with Eisler's research methods, thusly leading to their dismissal of her findings, whether archaeological or historical.

The Chalice & the Blade offers a somewhat controversial explanation of the history of humankind, and in seeking to lend credence to her theories, Eisler often cites feminist archeologists and anthropologists in her book. She notes that many incredibly important archeological discoveries have been either dismissed or ignored entirely because they haven't fit the traditional patriarchal paradigm. As with women's studies and gender studies as a whole, the feminist perspective in archeology and anthropology is gaining credibility and acceptance into the mainstream, though the feminist movement has been active in both fields.

Riane Eisler approaches history from a feminist perspective in her re-evaluation of prehistoric archeology, anthropology and religion. She asserts that early human civilizations were originally egalitarian and largely peaceful, rather than how we as a society view them today, as primitive and violent caveman cultures. Eisler gives extensive examples of the sophisticated Goddess-worshipping cultures of Europe and the Near and Middle East, where women were important and valued members of society. Eisler notes that these societies such as Minoa, in Crete, existed peacefully for many generations until the rampaging Kurgan hordes from the Far East swept down from the arid hills, burning and destroying homesteads and Goddess temples in their paths.

Eisler writes that the worship of the nature Goddess was methodically stamped out, and replaced by a war-like and vengeful series of gods, eventually being replaced by a single powerful and ruthless God. Eisler asserts that, rather than valuing cooperation with nature, as represented by the life-giving Goddess and Her priestesses, soon power and domination became the societal norm, as

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represented by the singular God and His priests. Eisler writes that women, who were initially so powerful within the egalitarian Goddess-worshipping system, became systematically oppressed as patriarchal, androcratic societal systems became the norm throughout Europe and the Middle East.

After Eisler's in-depth discussion of the treatment of women in the Bible, she then discusses the gylanic, or peaceful, and androcratic, or war-like, patterns of history. She believes that history does not consist of pattern-less movement, but instead oscillates between times of peace and times of war. She also cites several scientists such as Isabel Stengers, Edward Lorenz, and Ralph Abraham, who all believe that there are actual bifurcation points in history, when "the system can 'choose' between more than one possible future."

Eisler suggests there is another path for humanity to follow. She advocates the questioning of our current patriarchal state and says, "Perhaps most important is that women and men are increasingly questioning the most basic assumption of androcratic society: that both male dominance and the male violence of warfare are inevitable" (Eisler 1987:188). She encourages us as a society to attempt to make the shift from dominating to actualization, as defined by the noted psychologist Abraham Maslow. Eisler writes that society must realize that we must realize our interconnectedness with each other and Earth, and that shifting our focus from aggression and domination to cooperation and communication is the only sustainable way for our survival.