



# The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image (Compass)

By Leonard Shlain

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## The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image (Compass) By Leonard Shlain

This groundbreaking book proposes that the rise of alphabetic literacy reconfigured the human brain and brought about profound changes in history, religion, and gender relations. Making remarkable connections across brain function, myth, and anthropology, **Dr. Shlain** shows why pre-literate cultures were principally informed by holistic, right-brain modes that venerated the Goddess, images, and feminine values. Writing drove cultures toward linear left-brain thinking and this shift upset the balance between men and women, initiating the decline of the feminine and ushering in patriarchal rule. Examining the cultures of the Israelites, Greeks, Christians, and Muslims, Shlain reinterprets ancient myths and parables in light of his theory. Provocative and inspiring, this book is a paradigm-shattering work that will transform your view of history and the mind.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

"Literacy has promoted the subjugation of women by men throughout all but the very recent history of the West," writes Leonard Shlain. "Misogyny and patriarchy rise and fall with the fortunes of the alphabetic written word."

That's a pretty audacious claim, one that *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* provides extensive historical and cultural correlations to support. Shlain's thesis takes readers from the evolutionary steps that distinguish the human brain from that of the primates to the development of the Internet. The very act of learning written language, he argues, exercises the human brain's left hemisphere--the half that handles linear, abstract thought--and enforces its dominance over the right hemisphere, which thinks holistically and visually. If you accept the idea that linear abstraction is a masculine trait, and that holistic visualization is feminine, the rest of the theory falls into place. The flip side is that as visual orientation returns to prominence within society through film, television, and cyberspace, the status of women increases, soon to return to the equilibrium of the earliest human cultures. Shlain wisely presents this view of history as plausible rather than definite, but whether you agree with his wide-ranging speculations or not, he provides readers eager to "understand it all" with much to consider. --Ron Hogan

#### From Library Journal

The advantages of a literate society are self-evident, but is there a dark side to language? In this extraordinary book, Shlain, a surgeon and the author of *Art and Physics* (LJ 9/1/91), argues that when cultures acquire literacy, the brain's left hemisphere dominates the right?with enormous consequences. Alphabetic writing, Shlain believes, "subliminally fosters a patriarchal outlook" at the expense of feminine values. Focusing on Western cultures, Shlain surveys world history and religion to illustrate how alphabet literacy fosters extremes of intolerance. Indeed, a subtheme of the book is that overreliance on the left hemisphere "initially leads a society through a period of demonstrable madness." Such aberrations as group suicide, religious persecution, and witch-hunting are the result of a dominant linear, reductionist, and abstract method of perception. While admitting that "correlation does not prove causality," Shlain presents a forceful case based on a wealth of circumstantial evidence. An absorbing, provocative, and, ironically, highly literate work that should receive considerable review attention; recommended for most public and academic libraries. Laurie Bartolini, MacMurray Coll. Lib., Springfield, IL

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#### About the Author

Leonard Shlain is the author of **Art & Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time & Light**, and **The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image**. He is the chief of laparoscopic surgery at California Medical Center in San Francisco.

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