And the truth comes out of the Earth

By Chaplain Norbert Karava

On the northern edge of what we know as the Fertile Crescent in southern and obscure Turkey, archaeologists have been uncovering, layer after layer, the most remarkable structure thus far in the known history of the human race.

Gobekli Tepe is a temple, vaguely reminiscent of Stonehenge but incomparably more advanced architecturally, made not of roughly cut blocks but cleanly hewn and carved limestone pillars, 18 feet high, weighing 16 tons, 5 times as wide as they are deep, with menageries of elegantly carved animal bas-reliefs of foxes, scorpions, gazelles, snakes, boars, and numerous other guardians of the spirit world.

The astonishing significance of this begins to unfold in the dating: At present, we know that the temple goes back 11,600 years, although there are yet deeper levels to be excavated.

This is 7,000 years before the Great Pyramid of Giza, built during a time when the only known structures of hunting-foraging homo sapient nomads were huts and tents. This is the first artifact of monumental architecture known to man. In the words of Charles C. Mann: "Discovering that hunter-gatherers had constructed Gobekli Tepe was like finding that someone built a 747 in a basement with an X-Acto knife."

The builders of this temple, not organized into cities and villages, ignorant of the art and technology of agriculture, before what we know as "civilization" existed, were able to hew, shape, and transport 16-ton stones hundreds of feet and then elegantly carve them, in spite of the fact that the wheel was yet to be discovered, in a world that yet did not know pottery, metal or writing. This temple functioned as a center for pilgrimage, a point of gathering for otherwise socially unorganized "pre-civilization" illiterate nomads.

The upshot of this flies in the face of what at least for some, is archaeological dogma: Following the emergence of homo sapiens about 200,000 years ago, little changed with human beings living as wandering hunter-forager-gatherers until the climate-induced Neolithic Revolution. With the warming of the earth in the favorable conditions of the Fertile Crescent, humans turned away from hunting-foraging to agriculture, which occasioned fundamental and revolutionary changes: No longer nomads, they began to live in permanent habitations, developed tools for agricultural technology and architecture and harnessed fire. But most importantly, agriculture supported a dramatic rise in population which occasioned a need for social organization. And so, according to many anthropologists, religion began as something to fill the need of unifying an expanded and more diverse society by providing a common vision of a divine order in which everyone had their appointed place and shared common purposes. Religion was also necessary to support and justify a social hierarchy of bearers of power, designating them as having a special connection to the gods or somehow imbued with divinity. The Marxist and generally materialist sequence of events runs thus: climate-change affects agriculture; agriculture affects technology; technology affects increased population; increased populations affects social order; social order affects religion.

Gobekli Tepe turns this all on its head: This is a temple, a dramatic expression of religiosity, which precedes the dawning of agriculture, the formation of groups of permanent habitation-dwellers, large complex societies and other common characteristics of civilization. Hunter-gatherers congregated here to build a temple and pursue specifically religious activity and experience. Here, religion was not one of the net products of an ecologically driven process but was the driver of the process: Here, it motivated hunter-gathering nomads to perfect and discover tools (a Neolithic warehouse of flint tools was found on the site of the temple). Probably, the need for sufficient amounts of food for both the builders and pilgrims of Gobekli Tepe lead to the creation of agricultural techniques, the cultivation of wild cereals and the creation of some of the first domestic strains.

Most importantly, Gobekli Tepe is telling us that at least in this case, it was a religious need, and then common religious experience, or religion that drew people together, before the beginning of permanent habitations, contradicting the dogma that religion emerged after human nomads had formed permanent habitations in the wake of the agricultural revolution as a necessary facilitator of social organization and validation of political power.

And the truth emerges from out of the earth: More than 11,600 years ago, our hunting-gathering ancestors, living in tents and huts, built this, not as a barn or warehouse to store anything, nor as a fortress or citadel to protect themselves against their enemies, nor even as a place to live in (after their pilgrimages and religious festivals they returned to their hovels) or for any practical purpose whatsoever. They certainly did not come here because they needed a temple and a religion to prop up the body politic of a complex society that as yet did not exist.

Could it be that that however and whenever homo sapiens happened, he was innately and inexorably religious in nature?

That he discovered himself as something not reducible to the unfolding cosmic process and painfully distinct or "other than" than the natural world around him?

That he could not simply be happy going about the business of the gazelles, foxes, snakes and boars and lions he so beautifully engraved on the bass reliefs of his temple, that is, grazing here, breeding there?

That, for him, filling evolutionary needs of consumption, perpetuating his blood line, defeating his competitors for the local resources was simply not enough?

That, before he built a barn, a house or a fortress, he actually built this?

That in his primitive and some might argue, purest state, before he marched under flags and pledged his allegiance to chiefs, kings, princes, parliaments and presidents, he was wondering about and drawn to a majesty not of this world? Could it be that the truth "Let Us make man in our own image and likeness" emerges from out of the very earth whence Adam was, according to another account, taken?