

Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow “became feminists together” having been involved in the Yale Women’s Alliance (53). Despite their different backgrounds, both gradually came to share a similar sense of alienation. Christ became disillusioned with “Christian and Jewish theology.” (87) Indeed, in her own words, Christ did “not believe in the doctrines of incarnation, original sin, or salvation through Christ.” (87) Instead, Christ would eventually “celebrate the Goddess in nature.” (101) Likewise, Plaskow, initially raised in a “Reform” context, (35) came to identify the “synagogue” as a place where, in her own words, she used a “prayer book with which I was unfamiliar in a language I did not understand saying words I did not believe.” (109) Plaskow therefore came to reject the “transcendent and omnipotent God” of her childhood in favour of a “God(dess) all around and in me.” (115) In short, Plaskow struggles with the “androcentric” elements of Jewish tradition. But despite studying “Protestant theology,” (50) Plaskow maintains a “Jewish identity” grounded in not only her “experiences of feminist community,” (116) but in her identification with a “network of symbols” essential to an “evolving tradition” (“Judaism”) that in no way can be diminished by “the problematic nature of many images of God” in the classical texts. (269-270) These authors identify how they “developed … feminist perspectives in conversation with each other” (xii) and acknowledge agreement in “that the world is the body of Goddess or God,” that the “sacred” is experienced “in our bodies,” and in a shared belief in “divine immanence and inclusive monotheism.” (206) The authors converge in their acceptance that “panentheism” – “God is in the world and the world is in God” – is a useful theoretical perspective that overcomes transcendence and “exclusive male monotheism.” (295) The authors however openly concede: “we disagree about the nature of Goddess and God.”

This collection of essays by two foundational architects of Goddess and Jewish feminist theologies begins with a simple dichotomy. Christ, on the one hand, subscribes to the “Goddess as an intelligent embodied love that is in all being, a personal presence who cares about the world,” (xiv) while Plaskow, on the other, “views God as an impersonal
power of creativity that is the ground of all being and becoming, including all good and all evil.” (xiv) In short, Christ claims the “Goddess must have a mind as well as a body, a conscience akin to our own, if She is to feel the feelings of the world that is her body.” (156) Plaskow however identifies “God as … nonpersonal,” (181) claiming to have “felt the experience of God most fully in community with other women.” (126) But this is not a new debate.

Indeed, in a chapter for The Jewish Woman (1976) Christ claimed “it seems natural that the Goddess would reemerge as symbol of the newfound beauty, strength, and power of women.” Likewise, in the same volume Plaskow pointed to the necessity of a “theological process” capturing “all of feminist experience” based on both “our present history” and “certain … elements of our religious traditions.” Similarly, in Womanspirit Rising (1979) Christ identified that “‘God is a woman like yourself; she too, has suffered’ … With that sister God, … women will perhaps make a new covenant: promising to liberate her and the earth as they liberate themselves.” Comparably, in the same collection Plaskow pointed to “Eve and Lilith” returning “to the Garden, bursting with possibilities,” while “God and Adam” wait expectantly “and afraid.” Additionally, in Weaving the Visions (1989) Christ referred to “God/Goddess/Earth/Life/It” as vital to “ecological” and “social” concerns. Equally, in the same collection, Plaskow talked about the recovery of the “God-wrestling of women” and the necessity of restoring “primordial Torah” based on “their vision and experience.”

Accordingly, their claim, “we disagree about the nature of Goddess and God” and that this came as “quite a shock” (xiii) seems a little overstated. Indeed, whilst bits and pieces have changed over the years, Plaskow, despite claiming “The Right Question is Theological” (albeit in response to Cynthia Ozick’s claim about “an assault on monotheism,”) has consistently pointed to an “impersonal” (xiv) “God who sustains the world” and is “experienced … in the coming together of human beings” / “community.” In this way, “community” is the “‘primary vehicle and place of religious experience;’” therefore, “The divine presence rests in community.” In one of her earliest publications, Plaskow identified the value of “common experience,” “sense of community,” and the necessity of creating “our peculiar forms of celebration.” In Christ’s words, for Plaskow “feminist theology is foremost the process of women becoming selves in religious communities.”
continuity, Christ has always pointed to the necessity of utilising “images from feminine experience,”\(^{12}\) including “the symbol of the Goddess” as a counter response to “the psychological and political effects of God religion.”\(^{13}\) The majority of Christ’s corpus is therefore styled as “thea-logy” – “thea” being “‘Goddess’” and “logos” signifying “‘meaning.’”\(^{14}\) For Christ, the “Goddess symbolizes a new and fierce love of women.”\(^{15}\) “Goddess” is thus “relational”; “Goddess … did not create suffering”; “Goddess … will always and everywhere relate to the world with … sympathy and love.”\(^{16}\) Moreover, Christ argues, “feminist mysticism can be an embodied embedded mysticism that affirms the presence of the divine in physical and material reality and in selves.”\(^{17}\) For Christ, “This divine power [is] understood as with us in our lives.”\(^{18}\)

In sum, the dichotomy between Christ and Plaskow’s theological conceptions is traceable even in their earliest publications. These “differences” include, in their own words, Christ’s definition of “Goddess” as “‘the intelligent embodied love that is the power of all being,’” while for Plaskow “God is neither personal nor loving.”\(^{19}\) Likewise, Christ suggests “divinity is omnipresent, not omnipotent: Goddess is the love … immanent in the joy and suffering of all individuals in the world,” although Plaskow, albeit agreeing with Christ’s rejection of the “omnipotent God,” alternatively argues that “God is inclusive of good and evil” and is the “power of creativity that undergirds all life processes.”\(^{20}\) Both Plaskow and Christ are clear however that “while we continue to argue,” the two diverging perspectives “will help others make sense of this world.”\(^{21}\) This is perhaps the key point which Plaskow and Christ make – “these two views are not ours alone, but reflect significant divides in the ways people have imagined and thought about divinity.”\(^{xiv}\) In this way the book negotiates the issues and divergences inherent to most feminist theologies, in particular the debate over whether “Goddess or God” is “personal” or “impersonal,” (206) the role of “Goddess”/“God” in “good and evil,” (xiv) and the difference between “personal experiences” (xv) and the “traditional concept of God.” (126)\(^{22}\)

The value then of *Goddess and God in the World*, and indeed the “contiguities,” “contacts,” “relatedness,” and “tangentialities” between Christ and Plaskow’s corpuses,\(^{23}\) is aptly symbolised by a Zoharic quote attributed to Shekhinah: “From Me your fruit appears.”\(^{24}\) Of course, Plaskow argues that “Shekhinah is a usable image … only if it is wrenched free from its original context” lest it preserve “intact the traditional image of Ha-Kadosh Barukh
Likewise, for Christ Shekhinah should be applied along with “other female names … to break the hold of ‘God’ as masculine and male on the human mind.” The point is however that the “fruit” inculcated by both authors has created an unassailable “doxa” to which all liberal Goddess and Jewish feminists must necessarily respond (whether in agreement or in the negative). This “doxa” comprises “rejection of an “all-powerful God” who is “dominating (male)” and the requirement for a theology that is “immanent,” “relational,” and located in “alternatives to the traditional image of God as an old white man.” These prescriptions reject the “power” of a biblical tradition that “produces reality” in the form of “women’s oppression.” Yet most of all, Plaskow and Christ have placed “experience” at the centre of Goddess and Jewish feminist theologies. Both are clear that “all thinking about God and Goddess is situated in embodied human experience.” Accordingly, Christ and Plaskow, whatever their differences, identify “women’s experience” as the “central focus and concern” of Goddess and Jewish feminist theologies. The authors are clear that their “understandings of God” are the product of “personal experiences.”

Indeed, Goddess and God in the World begins and ends with “experience.” For the authors “theology begins with experience”; it is “individuals in communities” who decide “which aspects of tradition to affirm or reject.” Therefore, the book commences with separate and frequently moving autobiographical accounts, followed by two co-written chapters which contextualise the “theological environment of the mid-twentieth century” and the “themes of feminist theology,” culminating with responses to “each other’s questions,” while the final chapter examines “common ground.” The question throughout is whether the authors can reconcile their differences vis-à-vis feminist theology.

The points of contention include Christ’s claim that “Goddess is love,” “personal,” and a source “solely of good,” while Plaskow rejects these premises. For Christ, Plaskow does “not believe a personal deity exists,” nor does she believe that the “personal God is … ultimately real.” Plaskow, for her own part, identifies association with a “nonpersonal reality” and prefers the notion of a “transgender deity” to the “Goddess.” Moreover, Plaskow advocates the use of “nonpersonal language” and the application of a “full range of female and personal but nongendered images for God.” Christ instead advocates the use of “female imagery” given it provides “women and girls”

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with “concrete evidence that we too are ‘in the image of God.’” (249) Unlike Christ, Plaskow understands “God” not only as a source of “love” but also “evil” (278-79). Indeed, Christ herself does not see the “Goddess as the creator or metaphysical cause of evil.” (254) This is because, Christ claims, the “Goddess” does not possess “all-power” and “Individuals other than the Goddess really do have the power to choose.” (255) In “process theology,” “good” and “evil” are “not metaphysical principles,” but the product of “individuals and groups.” (260) This is problematic for Plaskow who asks: “How can the Goddess be the ground of all being if She is not equally supportive of good and evil?” (251)

However, the authors’ approach lends itself to disagreement, which is valued. Christ and Plaskow accept there is no “single arbiter of theological truth” and there might not be any “final answers.” (288) In summarising Goddess and God in the World the authors acknowledge that “Theologically, we disagree on two fundamental issues: whether divinity is personal or impersonal; and whether divinity is good or inclusive of good and evil.” (299) The disagreement however does not matter given the claim, echoed throughout the book, that “all theologies … are relative to experience.” (301) Moreover, the authors are clear about the necessity of accepting that “every standpoint including our own” has its “limitation[s].” (302)

In conclusion, while the authors of this book draw on an “assemblage” of “personal” and “revelatory experiences,” (291) “histories,” “specific situations,” (71) “bodies,” “cultures,” “communities,” (139) “feelings,” (151) “moments,” (292) “texts,” (13) and “events” (108) in defining their theologies, the debate, conducted between a “Goddess” theologian and a “Jewish feminist” theologian, is just that, a debate between two individuals. This fits the model of “postmodern” theologies rooted in what Melissa Raphael calls “refusal of normativity.” Indeed, both authors locate their theologies in the context of their own “lives” (198) and situatedness within “small visionary groups.” (205) This does make, to quote Raphael, any “systematic exposition of faith” or “discourse on … God’s relationship with the world” a difficult process. The lengthy debate engendered by the authors substantiates Raphael’s claim, but of course, only if something “systematic” or “prescriptive” is the desired outcome. Clearly, in this instance, the authors are more concerned with individual “spiritual journeys” and identifying “new insights” through “theological conversations.” (302) The two key points are, first, Plaskow’s claim that “theology plays an
important role in prodding feminist thinking in new directions,“\(^3\)\(^5\) and second, Christ’s point that “an experientially-based and inherently open-ended philosophical system such as process philosophy can be shared across religious boundaries.”\(^3\)\(^6\) The value therefore of *Goddess and God in the World* is that it demonstrates “fertile grounds for dialogue,” whatever the theological differences of opinion between the authors.\(^3\)\(^7\) Indeed, since the 1970s Christ and Plaskow, in Foucaultian terms, have supplied an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” that question “androcentric,” (116) “sexist,” (132) exclusionary discourses, (xii) traditions, and practices.\(^3\)\(^8\) In the process, the authors have consistently demonstrated “new meanings and images of deity” (xi) relative to “experience in daily life.” (xii) These “images” are not intended to be “universal,” (136) but reveal “‘new possibilities’” and “‘new hopes’” (294) for those on a “‘spiritual quest.’” (95)

ENDNOTES

Goddess and God in the World

15 Carol Christ, “Why Women, Men and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later,” Feminist Theology 20, no. 3 (April 2012): 249.
16 Carol Christ, “Theological and Political Implications of Re-Imagining the Divine as Female,” Political Theology 8, no. 2 (April 2007): 165. The quotes I have used here refer merely to discussion of the “Goddess,” but in this article Christ actually uses the term, “Goddess/God,” to reflect that “divine power” is “inclusive of both male and female” (164).
21 Plaskow and Christ, “Two Feminist Views,” 34.
22 Ellen Umansky identified this issue in her classic, “Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology: Possibilities and Problems,” in Weaving the Visions, eds. Plaskow and Christ, 186-98. In this chapter, Umansky argues that “One major problem, I believe, in creating any Jewish feminist theology reflects the inherent tension between personal experience and tradition” (189).
23 Dan Miron, From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward A New Jewish Literary Thinking (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 305-306.
24 The Zohar: Pritzker: Volume Two, trans. Daniel Matt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 47; see n. 363. I appreciate the quotation has its roots in an “androcentric” text, but even Gershom Scholem acknowledged that Jewish mysticism “is a masculine doctrine, made for men and by men” and devoid of “feminine influence” (see his Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 37).
25 Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 140.
29 Plaskow and Christ, “Two Feminist Views,” 29; I have employed Michel Foucault’s terminology here to emphasise the way in which Christ and Plaskow attempt to overturn “rituals of truth” (see his Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (London: Penguin, 1991), 194).
30 Raphael argues that “Jewish feminist theology is barely or not at all founded in the transcendent obligations to the unheimlich dimension of the holy and the supernatural” (“Standing at a Demythologized Sinai,” 200).
33 Raphael, “Standing at a Demythologized Sinai,” 201.
37 Carol Christ, “Musings on the Goddess and Her Cultured Despisers, Provoked by Naomi Goldenberg,” Feminist Theology 13, no. 2 (January 2005): 149.
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