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Whatever happened to Goddess and God-She? Why do Jews and Christians still pray to a male God?

The topic of my essay is: Why do Jews and Christians still pray to a male God? Some might say that this is a question that should be addressed by Jewish and Christian feminists rather than by me, a well-known “pagan” Goddess-worshipper – and to some idolater! On the other hand, I think that having participated for roughly half my life in Biblical religions and having earned a Ph.D. in Jewish and Christian theologies probably qualifies me for the task. When I wrote *Why Women Need the Goddess* more than thirty years ago,¹ I was very much in dialogue with Christian and Jewish feminists. I felt a great kinship with all feminists who were working to change the image of God as a dominating male other. As a former Christian with a strong connection to the Hebrew Bible and Judaism, I thought that the incorporation of female language and symbolism into Judaism and Christianity was a no-brainer. I understood the God of Christianity and Judaism to be a God of love and justice. I considered sexism, like racism, to be unjust. I assumed that once Christians and Jews understood that sexism was unjust, they would set about rewriting traditional prayers and liturgies and the portions of the Bible that were to be read in worship services.

I was well aware that this task would not be simple. I understood (long before the *Inclusive Language Lectionary*² was published) that it was not simply a matter of fiddling with pronouns and changing titles like Lord, King, and Father to more neutral terms. I argued early on that the task of re-imagining Biblical religion would have to include the positive incorporation of female language and imagery. Given the long history of thinking of God as male in Biblical traditions, it seemed to me that when neutral terms were used, most

¹ See Carol P. Christ / Judith Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (Harper & Row: San Francisco 1979).

² See Victor Ronald Gold et.al, *An Inclusive Language Lectionary, 3 volumes* (Westminster Press: Philadelphia 1983, 1984, 1985).

people would still think of God as male, at least unconsciously. Only the positive introduction of God-She and Goddess could shatter powerful and pervasive and long-lasting assumptions about God.³ I understood that the ways in which the Bible portrayed God as a dominating other could not be resolved with a sex-change. Calling the God of Exodus a “woman of war” and imaging “Her” throwing the horses and riders of the Pharaoh into the sea was not a satisfactory solution for me.

I was gratified by Rita Gross’ argument for “Female God Language in a Jewish Context” (which was reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising*) in which she argued that “Beginning to address God as ‘She’ in addition to ‘He’ is a powerful reflection and indication of the ‘becoming of women’ in the Jewish context. The ultimate symbol of our degradation, of our essential non-Jewishness – which finds expression all forms of Jewish life – is our *inability* to say ‘God-She’ or to create female imagery of God.”⁴ I believed that prayers like those of Maggie Wenig and Naomi Janowitz (also reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising*) would soon become standard fare in Jewish and Christian worship. One of the re-imagined prayers says, “Magnified and sanctified is the great name of G-d throughout the world that She created according to Her will. ... Let Her great Name be blessed for ever and ever and to all eternity.”⁵ Such rewriting of traditional prayers in inclusively female language seemed at once profoundly healing and theologically valid. If the God of the Jewish and Christian traditions really was a God of love and justice then it seemed to me that this was the way forward.

I even imagined that Jewish and Christian feminists would revisit the history of the Hebrew Goddess that was so admirably documented by Raphael Patai.⁶ Though the prophets castigated the Hebrew people for worshipping Goddesses and Gods other than Yahweh “on every high hill and under every green tree,” Patai argued that theirs was a minority view at the time. He suggested that for many centuries the majority of the Hebrew people – women, men, children, and kings, queens, and priests – did not see a contradiction between worshipping Yahweh alongside Goddesses such as Asherah and Astarte. I thought that Jewish and Christian feminists would identify with the Hebrew women who “baked cakes to the Queen of Heaven.”⁷ I thought feminists would rewrite the

³ See Carol P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite* (Harper & Row: San Francisco 1987), 134-161.

⁴ See Christ / Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, 172.

⁵ Christ / Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, 175.

⁶ Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (KTAV: New York 1967).

⁷ Jeremiah 44:17

history codified in Deuteronomy that branded those who worshipped Goddesses as whores and idolaters. In so doing Jewish and Christian women would reclaim ancestors who honored the Goddess and justify their own desires to reincorporate the God-She and Goddess into Judaism and Christianity.

Before considering the reasons why this did not happen or is happening only in small pockets of resistance, I would like to offer one of my own re-imaginings of a traditional Christian prayer, the Doxology. In this case I chose to rewrite a traditional prayer rather than writing a new one because I loved the melody of the Doxology and the feelings evoked by singing it; I wanted to create a bridge between current re-imaginings and the faith of my ancestors. Here is how I rewrote the Doxology:⁸

Praise Her from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Her all creatures here below,
Praise Her above in wings of flight,
Praise Her in darkness and in light.

Traditionally this prayer begins:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him all creatures here below.

The change that I made in these lines was simply to change God and Him to Her. I have no problem with imagining God-She as the Source from whom all blessings flow. The imagery of flowing suggests a spring, a well, and even a womb. Having always been a nature mystic, I liked the idea that “all creatures here below” or all creatures on earth including human beings sing a common song of praise to the Source of Life. So in these lines I only changed the pronoun.

It might be objected that to incorporate positively female language as I did is unnecessarily provocative. Wouldn't positively female language offend men as much as traditional language has offended some women? Couldn't we just change the Him to God in the second line? In answering this question, I remind you that simply neutralizing male God language runs the risk of leaving the image of a male God that has formed in the minds of worshippers intact. Neutral language removes the offense to women who feel excluded by male language. But it does not have the metaphoric power that positively female language has to shout our inclusion from the rooftops. In response to

⁸ See Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2004), 238.

the question of men feeling excluded, I suggest that female, male, and neutral language for God be used interchangeably. If men can't deal with that, then they need to examine why they need a worship service that makes one-half of humanity feel less valuable than they other and women need to examine why they accept this state of affairs. My rewritten Doxology could sometimes be sung with male pronouns or with the word God taking the place of all pronouns, or the traditional version could also be used (this might be a necessary transitional step) while being relativized by other versions.

In the traditional Doxology the third line is follows:

Praise Him above ye heavenly host.

Here I found the notion of simply changing the pronoun problematic. Most Christians probably imagine the heavenly host as a choir of winged angels holding harps and sitting on clouds while singing before the throne of a white-bearded God in a long blue robe. This image comes out of the tradition which perceives God as a King who lives in a transcendent realm known as heaven. This is bad enough, for the images called to mind by the invocation of the heavenly host reinforce not only the maleness of God and his power as a dominating other, but also his transcendence of the natural world. Worse still, the heavenly host originally referred to the army of God the King that would descend to earth to fight the final battle against evil. So changing the words to "Praise Her above ye heavenly host" will not do from a feminist perspective. On the other hand, I did like the feeling of movement from below to above in the traditional prayer. Above does not have to refer to the transcendent world of heaven, it can also evoke the sky. Angels are not the only ones with wings; indeed their wings are modeled on those of birds. Here was my solution. I would carry on the idea of the entire creation praising the Source of Life with the image of birds praising her with the sounds made by the flapping of their wings: "Praise Her above in wings of flight." That left one more line.

The final line of the Doxology is:

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

In my own re-imagining I sometimes pray to the Mother and Daughter and the spirits of all living things. I do not believe in a Trinitarian God, but I do believe in the circle of life that flows from mother to daughter to daughter again and through all living things. However, this phrase was too cumbersome

here. I also needed a word that would rhyme with flight and I thought of light. One of the things my participation in the language and symbolism of the Goddess has taught me is that both light and darkness are part of the cycle of day and night, summer and winter. Our culture has taught us to value the light. Plato envisioned the prison of the material world as a dark cave in which only a few shafts of light shined. The prisoners struggled toward the light of reason and immortality. Similar symbolism associating light with good and darkness with evil is found in the Bible. In our common language darkness connotes ignorance and evil, as opposed to the light of knowledge (en-light-enment) and goodness. This symbolism has also been used to reinforce racism, making it seem “logical” that light-skinned people should be allowed to enslave those with darker skins. Here I must also add that in the Goddess religions of ancient Greece that were still functioning in Plato’s time caves were imagined to be the womb of the Great Mother. Entering into the darkness of a cave, pilgrims sought to be reunited with the Source of Life. Plato’s imagery was not value neutral; I believe that he understood that the success of the dualistic worldview depended upon the suppression of the image of Earth and as Mother the devaluing of human mothers. Just as the authors of Genesis reversed the meanings of the sacred tree, the sacred snake, and the sacred female body as found in Goddess religions of the ancient Near East, so Plato reversed the symbolism of the sacred cave as the womb of the Goddess in his parable of the cave. With these thoughts in mind, I returned to the question of the last line of the Doxology. My verse would have to celebrate both darkness and light: Praise Her in darkness and in light.

The entire prayer again:

Praise Her from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Her all creatures here below,
Praise Her above in wings of flight,
Praise Her in darkness and in light.

For me it is a joyous song celebrating embodied life in the natural world and the divine power as the Source from whom all blessings of life flow. I have sung it with groups of women in the Trapeza cave in Crete. This re-imagined Doxology echoes the Psalms in which all creation sings the praises of God. It does not seem to me to be inappropriate in Christian worship and, leaving the associations with Christianity aside, the words also seem appropriate in Jewish worship. Let me reiterate, using female language for God does not mean that

we do not also need transformed male language. Re-imagining is about inclusiveness not exclusion. Re-imagining traditional hymns and prayers is enjoyable and it can feel life-saving to those who feel the sting of exclusion in traditional language and imagery. Why aren't more people in congregations doing it?

To my great surprise, despite some notable exceptions, including the Jewish Renewal Movement, the Protestant Re-Imagining Community, the Roman Catholic Women Church movement, and the Ebenezer Lutheran HerChurch congregation in San Francisco, Christian and Jewish groups in North America have not have moved to creatively re-imagine the traditional language of prayer using inclusively female language and transforming the images of God as a dominating other. What has impeded changing the image of God in liberal churches and synagogues?

Mary Daly once famously said that if someone were to cut up the Bible and take out all the passages where God was referred to as a male, the result would be a small pamphlet. She argued that in the case of Christianity and by analogy Judaism, the medium is the message.⁹ She stated that attempts to disengage the God of the Bible from the male dominant imagery through which He had been known could not succeed because the weight of traditional language and imagery was just too great. Jewish and Christian feminists have argued to the contrary that traditions can change. Some have found a kernel of nonsexist truth in selected passages on which they hang their hopes – for example the prophets' injunctions to care for widow at the gate or the much quoted Galatians 3:28: "In Christ there is no more slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female." They view such passages as the essential [unadulterated] revelation intended by God and argue that such passages can become the authority to move the entire Christian community away from sexism.¹⁰ Others argue that while there may be no "kernel" of truth untainted by sexism in the Bible or traditions, communities can still change. For them the authority for changing Biblical language is not a selection of non-sexist passages from the canon, but rather the will and desire of the community of the present.¹¹

Yet neither of these arguments has yet moved the liberal segments of Jewish or Christian communities to wholeheartedly embrace the project of

⁹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Beacon Press: Boston 1973).

¹⁰ This view has been stated by liberation theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, and others.

¹¹ This view is well-articulated by Judith Plaskow and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

re-imagining the image God as a male dominating other. Why? A simple answer might be that making fundamental changes in the ways in which the Bible and traditions have imaged and understood God has not been encouraged and sometimes has been positively discouraged by those who hold the power in religious institutions. In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI stated that baptisms must be “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” declaring that baptisms in non-genderized language, for example, “in the name of the Creator, and of the Redeemer, and of the Sanctifier” or “in the name of the Creator, and of the Liberator, and of the Sustainer” to be invalid.¹² The committee appointed by the National Council of Churches to create *The Inclusive Language Lectionary* for liberal Protestant denominations in the United States for the most part limited its task to removing or providing alternatives to blatantly non-inclusive language for God. “Lord” became “God” or “Sovereign,” “Son” became “Child,” and “His creation” became “God’s creation.” Only in relation to the word “Father” was inclusively female language suggested: here the words “[and Mother]” or “[Mother and]” were inserted with brackets indicating an addition to the text. Other inclusively female language, for example “Lady” or “Queen,” “Daughter,” or “Her creation,” was not suggested.¹³ Even the small steps toward inclusively female language made in the *Inclusive Language Lectionary* were controversial. When the time came to revise the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, the committee’s chair stated, “The changes introduced [by *The Inclusive Language Lectionary*] in language relating to the Deity are tantamount to rewriting the Bible.”¹⁴ Revising committees in other liberal Jewish and Christian denominations have not used inclusively female language or have used it only sparingly. Perhaps without intending to, the revising committees may have sent the message to religious communities that the question of language has been resolved or that it cannot be resolved and that any attempts to go further than they did are not Biblically or theologically warranted.

Still, there were many Christian and Jewish women who continued to press for female-inclusive language. The 1993 Re-Imagining Conference held in Minneapolis, Minnesota and sponsored by the World Council of Churches in

¹² “Vatican Rules Some Baptisms Invalid,” *Daily News/US/World News*, 5 March 2008, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/us_world/2008/03/01/2008-03-01_vatican_rules_some_baptisms_invalid.html.

¹³ See Gold et.al, *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*.

¹⁴ Bruce Metzger, quoted in “An Inclusive Language Lectionary,” <http://www.bible-researcher.com/ill.html>.

celebration of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women drew 2200 women scholars, clergy, and laity from around the world concerned with the question of how we speak about and imagine God. Not satisfied with a simple change in pronouns, they raised theological questions and encouraged dialogue and experimentation. At the conclusion of the conference they invoked the divine power as Sophia. Sophia is the word for Wisdom in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was widely used in the Hellenistic world. The Septuagint included a book called the Wisdom of Solomon in which Sophia is invoked as a female hypostasis or face of God. At the Re-Imagining Conference, Sophia was invoked, not only a female image of God, but also as a symbol affirming female embodiment and courage. The women prayed to Her as:

*Our mother Sophia, we are women in your image:
With the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life.
With the courage of our convictions, we pour out our life blood for justice.
Sophia-God, Creator-God,
let your milk and honey pour out,
showering us with your nourishment.*

...

*Our sweet Sophia, we are women in your image:
With nectar between our thighs, we invite a lover, we birth a child;
With our warm body fluids, we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations.¹⁵*

Widely reported in the press, this prayer galvanized conservative opposition, especially in the Presbyterian and Methodist denominations.¹⁶ These groups publicized names of women employed in their denominations who attended the conference and demanded that governing bodies of their denominations denounce the conference's allegedly "pagan," "blasphemous," "heretical" theology.¹⁷ While attempts to create new theological orthodoxies failed, the divisions in the churches were deep. As a result of her support of the

¹⁵ Hilda A. Kuester, "Creating the Sophia Ritual," in: Nancy J. Berneking / Pamela Carter Joern (eds), *Re-membering and Re-Imagining* (Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, Ohio 1995), 19.

¹⁶ See "A Controverted Conference," in: *Christian Century*, February 16, 1994, 160-162.

¹⁷ See Berneking / Joern, *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining*, 129; also see Allen O. Morris, "The Church in Bondage: Appendix G: Timeline of the Sophia/'goddess' Theologies," in: <http://www.cmpage.org/bondage/appendixd.html>; and "The Heirs of Sophia," in: *One World 195*, May 1994, 16-18.

Re-Imagining Conference, Mary Ann W. Lundy was forced out of her position as Associate Director of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA.¹⁸ While the loss of a single job might be considered trivial, the firing of even one woman incites a climate of fear and sends a warning to other women in the church not to go too far in re-imagining God.¹⁹ Moreover, the very public controversy over Lundy's support of the re-imagining has been played out on a smaller scale in many churches and synagogues where clergy or congregants have experimented with female language for God. Recently Ruth Kolpack, a female pastoral associate with more than a decade of service in a Catholic church in Beloit, Wisconsin was fired by her bishop when she refused to renounce her Masters' thesis in which she advocated that the church "free God language from captivity."²⁰ Deeply disappointed by negative responses to re-imagining, many women have left the church or synagogue, resigned from or been forced out of positions in it. Some have learned to keep silent about God. Others continue the struggle against opposition to re-imagine God.

Contributing to the failure of Christian and Jewish congregations as a whole to take up the challenge of changing imagery and language about God is the fact that the religious landscape has changed dramatically in the past thirty or forty years. In the 1950s and 1960s most people in the United States belonged to a church or synagogue. Today fewer people identify with traditional religions. Evangelical and fundamental Christianity continue to grow, while liberal Christianity, among both Protestants and Catholics is in decline.²¹ Many liberal Jews have ceased to practice Judaism due to intermarriage and other factors. Liberal denominations are the natural home for feminist re-imagining. In order to consider re-imagining images that have been passed down through tradition, a community must have a "liberal" theology in which the authority of tradition is relativized. This means accepting some form of the view that

¹⁸ See Berneking / Joern, *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining*, 121-123.

¹⁹ See Berneking / Joern, *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining*, 125-128.

²⁰ "Wisconsin Parish Worker Fired for Feminist Views," in: *National Catholic Reporter*, 17 March 2009, <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/wisconsin-parish-worker-fired-feminist-views>.

²¹ The PEW Forum Survey posted on 22 October 2008 lists the following: Evangelical Protestant 26.3%; Mainline Protestant 18.1%; Historically Black Churches 6.9%; Catholic 23.9%; Unaffiliated 16.1%; New Age Religions including Wiccan, Pagan, and Other 4%. See <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>. PEW has also found that 44% of Americans have left the faith of their families of origin. See Michael Paulson, "US Religious Identity is Rapidly Changing," in: *The Boston Globe*, 26 February 2008, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/02/26/us_religious_identity_is_rapidly_changing/?page=1.

while God may have inspired the Bible and the traditions that followed it, both Bible and traditions were created by fallible human beings who expressed the divine will in the language and concepts of their own times. If this is so, then contemporary communities have the right to express the divine will in terms that are appropriate to them. But if liberal forms of Christianity and Judaism are declining, the home for feminist re-imagining is being emptied.

The fact that it is now socially acceptable to leave the faith of one's natal family means that many of those who otherwise would have welcomed and fought for feminist re-imaginings of God are no longer in the pews. Most of the first generation of the feminist Goddess movement were raised in churches and synagogues. Had they and others not left Judaism and Christianity, things might be different. Today many liberal congregations are made up primarily of the elderly. Most of them came of age and married before the second wave of feminism and some of them feel threatened by changes that could disrupt traditional sex role arrangements. The generation of feminist women ministers and rabbis who were educated in the 1970s and 1980s and who had hoped to change God language found that the loudest voices in their congregations were those "against." Some of them left the ministry or rabbinate and most of those who stayed were forced to compromise with their congregations over questions of language and imagery for God.

Today, the issue of God language may not even be part of the seminary curriculum. With liberal congregations in decline, seminarians and theological students are told that they cannot rock the boat too much if they want to get jobs. In addition there is little on-going dialogue between Christian, Jewish, and Goddess feminists in North America. Goddess feminism is not part of the curriculum of most seminaries and Ph.D. programs in the field of Religious Studies – indeed it is often caricatured if mentioned at all – and those who wish to teach or study it are not welcomed, further limiting opportunities for dialogue and mutual inspiration. Recent inter-faith dialogue among Christian, Jewish, and Muslim feminists does not include Goddess feminists. I consider this a crying shame. As feminists engaged in re-imagining God and the world, we have a great deal to learn from each other.

Other reasons for the current stalemate in the religious congregations regarding re-imagining God are theological. For the most part they have not been openly addressed. Here I will call attention to two major theological reasons that feminist re-imagining has not moved forward. The first theological question has to do with the authority of the Bible and the traditions inspired by it. People who acknowledge that God is not really male still find it difficult to

change traditional God language. Male God language is so pervasive in the Bible and in the language of worship that to question it is to question everything. Can traditions in which God has been imaged primarily as male for thousands of years be changed to include female language and imagery? If they are changed, would they be the same traditions? The second theological question is whether Christians and Jews really want to give up the idea of God as a dominating other with the ability to enforce his will, or whether despite theological problems with this idea, they want to believe that someone is in charge. To put it bluntly: Do people feel comfortable with images of God as a dominating other because they want to believe that God has the power to destroy evil?

Many Jews and Christians would state that they simply feel more comfortable with male images of God. These same people would say that they do not really think of God as male, but neither do they feel the need to change the male imagery they feel comfortable with. When asked to worship God as female, some would go a step farther and say that thinking of God as a woman just doesn't feel right. What is going on here? Clifford Geertz told us that the symbols of religion act to create powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations.²² I suspect that having come down through thousands of years of tradition, the Biblical image of God as male has created powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting and often unconscious moods about how God should be addressed and thought about. Many people are simply unaware of how deeply images of God have shaped our perceptions of male power and authority and female submission and inferiority. It is possible that women say they don't see the need to change male God language because on some level they still believe that male power is the highest power. Perhaps some fear that they will lose male approval if they openly challenge the ways in which God language has authorized male dominance for men. Or maybe they just cannot imagine the difference female God language could make over time to the way women and girls think about themselves and to the ways men and boys think about girls and women.

There is also the question of continuity and community. Would it really be the faith of our fathers if a new generation rejected the language that our fathers used? Or more personally, would it be the faith of my childhood if in adulthood I were to switch from calling God "Father" to calling Her "Mother?"

²² Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in: William L. Lessa / Evon V. Vogt (eds.), *Reader in Comparative Religion* (Harper & Row: New York, 2nd ed, 1972), 206.

The sense of continuity and connection with the past and across generations is one of the benefits offered by traditional religions. Changing language for God could threaten that. Underlying some women's willingness not to press the question of God language is a further fear that to do so would destroy communities in the present. Some Goddess feminists are comfortable with a solitary spiritual path or with uncertainties of commitment in non-institutionalized Goddess circles. But those who want to be part of a community that links men, women, and children in the present to a wider community of ancestors in the past and future may fear that pressing the issue of changing God language could break or split contemporary communities. It is a well-known fact that women are usually the glue of communities, including religious congregations. Women may feel that men – husbands, fathers, sons – will be so uncomfortable praying to God as female that they will simply stay home. They may feel that whatever price women and girls pay in not having their femaleness affirmed in the image of God is worth it if it keeps men and boys in the community. Many women secretly feel that women are psychologically stronger than men. Perhaps they feel that they and their daughters don't need to feel affirmed by the image of God as much as men and boys do.

Moreover, it can be difficult to judge the effect of God language on one's own or someone else's psyche. Does praying to God as male mean that the woman doing it surrenders to male power and authority in other aspects of her life? What about lesbian feminists who say they feel comfortable with male God language? Or Goddess feminists who get involved in obsessive relationships with men? Clearly there is not a simple one-to-one relationship between a person's image of God and her behavior. I suspect that the effects of God language are so deep and long-lasting, so powerful and pervasive that it would be difficult ever to find a direct causal relationship between an image of God and a specific act or behavior. This is why Geertz spoke of "moods" and "motivations" as a general framework in which people choose and cultures structure their choices. But if the effects of God language cannot be easily measured, it becomes easier to say that maybe after all it does not really matter, that it does not matter enough to make a fuss about, or that it does not matter enough to make a fuss that could threaten community. In my own case and in the case of many other women who left Judaism or Christianity, language for God did matter enough – it caused us to leave our faith communities. I had a visceral reaction to the male dominant God language of the Bible. My muscles tensed, my stomach churned, and I felt like I was going to throw up. But some of my feminist friends have told me that God language never

affected them that way. I am tempted to say that these friends are not as in touch with the feelings of their bodies as I am, but this may be unfair.

Another impediment to incorporating female language into traditions based upon the authority of the Bible is the question of the prophets. Jews and Christians have repeatedly heard the words of the prophets that condemned the people of Israel and Judah for “whoring” after idols. Indeed the effect of the language of the prophets is so powerful and pervasive that many Christians and Jews use the word “idolatry” for all kinds of sins – for example worshipping money or power – that have nothing to do with worshipping a golden calf or an image of a Goddess. Yet the prophets’ championing of the poor is also the reason many stay in the church or synagogue. I suspect that many Christians and Jews have been so carefully taught by hearing the words of the prophets again and again that they cannot think of a female divinity without immediately conjuring up the word “idolatry.” For many people the idea of holding any sort of religious service in nature (except the Christian Easter sunrise service or the Jewish Festival of Booths) smacks of “paganism.” I wonder if any real progress can be made in introducing God-She and Goddess into Christianity and Judaism without first addressing the prophets’ condemnation of idolatry. Perhaps *The Hebrew Goddess* should be taught in adult education and Sunday schools classes alongside the prophets. Then children could learn to appreciate their ancestors who worshipped Asherah on high hills and under green trees and baked cakes to the Queen of Heaven in good faith. These ancestors felt the divine power in nature and thought of God as woman. Revisiting this history could help congregations to become open to reintroducing female language for God.

All of the reasons for not moving to change male God language that I have just discussed coalesce around the issue of the authority of traditions. Even though liberal Jews and Christians would agree that God really is not male, most of them are unwilling to undertake the major transformation of tradition that changing God language would require. They do not recognize or are willing to live with the injustice that male God language creates because they cannot imagine that their traditions would be the same if widespread re-imagining of God were to occur. If these attitudes about the authority of the language of the Bible and tradition continue to prevail, the outlook for re-imagining God is not hopeful.

Moreover, there are other and potentially more serious theological issues raised by the question of re-imagining God. If the feminist God is not Yahweh in a skirt and if changing pronouns is not enough, then we are face to face with

age-old questions about the nature of God. Feminist theologians as a group have not systematically addressed questions about the nature of God. Most have focused on more practical or justice issues and have shied away from abstract theological discussions. However, I do not think feminists can avoid theological questions about the nature of God because many of them are in fact relevant to our struggle to transform the world. I have already mentioned the God of Exodus several times. I suggested that it will not do to change the image of God as a “man of war” to a “woman of war.” Individuals and communities may be able to gloss over the militarism in familiar images from the Bible but when the language is changed to female, the image jars. We are forced to ask ourselves whether we really want to continue to think of God as a warrior and to understand God’s power as being implemented through force and violence. Some might answer yes to this question, but those of us who do not must place a question mark over the Exodus story as a whole, asking if this is the story we wish to tell when talking about the nature of God. What seemed like a relatively simple matter of changing pronouns to She and Her turns out to release a whole theological can of worms. Recognizing how deeply Christian and Jewish images and understandings of God are intertwined with images of domination some feminists left the church or synagogue. Many of those who stayed swept the whole matter under the rug.

Some Christians might say the issue of the God of Exodus is of no concern to them because the New Testament revealed a God of love. It has long been Christian practice to state that the Jewish God as a God of judgment was replaced by a Christian God of love. However, Jews point out that this ignores the images of a loving God in Jewish tradition and the images of a judging and vengeful God in Christian tradition. Christians have a long history of conceiving of God as a warrior and of using violence to enforce their views, from the wars of Constantine to the Crusades all the way up to recent times when George Bush told the world his heavenly Father wanted him to invade Iraq.

In recent times many feminists have embraced liberation theology. Liberation theology is rooted in the Exodus story which is said to be the model for the prophet’s concern for the poor and for Jesus’ preaching to them. Liberation theology states that these texts and traditions show God’s “preferential option” for the poor. Feminist liberation theologians named women “the poorest of the poor” (worldwide statistics show this is true) and argued that God’s preferential option today is for poor women. Feminist liberation theology has focused on praxis (the struggle for liberation) rather than theory

(abstract questions of theology). Thus they have rarely commented on the fact that the God who liberated the Hebrew slaves and who inspired the prophetic voice is modeled on images of male power as domination. Nor have they insisted on re-imagining God as female. I suspect that on some level feminist liberation theologians are not uncomfortable with the idea of a dominant [male] God who exercises [His] power through force, as long as he exercises that power on behalf of poor women. I think that many of those sitting in the pews in Jewish and Christian congregations feel similarly comforted by the notion of a male God who has the power to make things right in the world using force and violence if necessary. Yet this God did not raise his mighty arm to stop slavery in the United States, to end the killing of Jews in the concentration camps, nor to end the long and on-going history of female subordination.²³ I suggest that feminists ought to conclude that power-over, power as domination, power to single-handedly stop evil in the world simply is not the kind of power God has.

In *Rebirth of the Goddess* I suggested that the feminist project of re-imagining calls us to reconsider not only images and but also conceptions of divine power handed down through traditions. I argued that divine power is a power of persuasion not coercion.²⁴ In *She Who Changes* I argued further that the process of re-imagining God must lead us to question the theological mistakes of classical theologies,²⁵ including the notion of God's omnipotence. I suggested that feminists must rethink the ways in which divine power has been modeled on power over, the power of the warrior, the king, and the tyrant. I concluded that divine power is power with – sympathy, empathy,

²³ Delores Williams argued in *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY 1993) that God did not liberate Hagar and Afro-American women, but rather showed them how to “make a way out of no way.” In *Making a Way out of No Way* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2008) Monica Coleman argues that God's power is not power as domination but rather is a “call” to co-create a more just and harmonious world. Melissa Raphael in *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz* (Routledge: London 2003) argued that the Jewish conception of an omnipotent [Father] God died in Auschwitz but that the omnipresent [Mother] God was with the Jews in their suffering and attempts to ameliorate it with love and care. My first experience of God-She came after I “accused” God of not sending a prophet or a savior to liberate women from patriarchy. See *Laughter of Aphrodite* (Harper and Row: San Francisco 1987), 20-26.

²⁴ Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess* (Routledge: New York 1998), 105.

²⁵ I am referring here to the theological mistakes identified by Charles Hartshorne in *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (State University of New York Press: Albany, NY 1984), including God is unchanging, omnipotence, omniscience, infallible revelation, and immortality as a career after death.

and inspiration, a power of to co-create but not to coerce. This is a long discussion involving process philosophy that I can only allude to here.²⁶

In conclusion, let me underscore the point I have been making throughout this essay. The process of re-imagining God as female is not simple. It is not about making a few minor changes in lectionaries and worship services. Rather it involves a transformation in the way most of us have been taught to think of God and the world. If Jews and Christians wish to take up this challenge, they will have to recognize that they are embarking on a journey of discovery the outcome of which is unknown. Questions about authority, tradition, community, and finally the nature of God will all have to be addressed. There was a time when I thought the question of whether Jewish and Christian traditions can change could be answered yes or no by a simple weighing of evidence from the past. And based on the long histories of imaging God as a dominant male other in Judaism and Christianity, I would have concluded that the answer is no. But communities can change. Liberal Christians and Jews know that God is not really male. They know that God is a God of love and justice. They know that sexism is unjust. They know that all forms of domination are unjust. Will they continue to countenance the injustice done when they worship God as a dominant male other? Or will they commit their communities to the job of re-imagining? It really is their choice.

I will close by invoking a description of the power of God-She or Goddess from *She Who Changes*. The power of this God stands in sharp contrast to the omnipotent power of the God of classical theology and suggests the enormity of the project of re-imagining God in the world, a project that I long to address together as feminists in engaged in theological research.

She changes everything She touches and everything She touches changes. The world is Her body. The world is in Her and She is in the world. She surrounds us like the air we breathe. She is as close to us as our own breath. She is energy, movement, life, and change. She is the ground of freedom, creativity, sympathy, understanding, and love. In Her we live, and move, and co-create our being. She is always there for each and every one of us, particles of atoms, cells, animals, and human animals. We are precious in Her sight. She understands and remembers us with unending sympathy. She inspires us to live creatively, joyfully, and in harmony with others in

²⁶ In *She Who Changes*, I discuss the congruence of feminist and process conceptions of God in detail and argue that feminists ought to resist the theological errors involved in classical theism, including divine omnipotence and omniscience, God's absolute difference from the finite world, and God's inability to feel or be affected by the world.

*the web of life. Yet choice is ours. The world that is Her body is co-created. The choices of every individual particle of an atom, every individual cell, every individual animal, every individual human animal play a part. The adventure of life on planet earth and in the universe as a whole will be enhanced or diminished by the choices we make. She hears the cries of the world, sharing our sorrows with infinite compassion. In a still, small voice, She whispers the desire of Her heart: Life is meant to be enjoyed. She sets before us life and death. We can choose life. Change is. Touch is. Everything we touch can change.*²⁷

Dieser Artikel stellt eine Aufforderung an feministisch-liberal denkende Juden/Jüdinnen und Christ/innen dar, indem er die Arbeit an einer neuen Vorstellung von Gott in weiblicher Sprache und Symbolik fortsetzt. Die Autorin schreibt als Göttin-Verehrerin und Theologin und ist eine jener Gründungspersönlichkeiten innerhalb der Gruppe amerikanischer Frauen, die die feministische Theologie in den 1970er Jahren eingeführt haben. Nur die positive Einführung von Gott-Sie und Göttin ist fähig die machtvolle, überzeugende und beharrliche Männlichkeitsvorstellung eines herrschenden und transzendenten Gottes aufzubrechen. Traditionelle christliche Doxologie wird aus der Göttinnen-Perspektive neu geschrieben und zwar als ein frühliches Lied, das das körperliche Leben in der natürlichen Welt und die göttliche Kraft, aus deren Quelle aller Segen fließt, feiert. Es stellt sich die Frage, warum liberale Gemeinschaften sich nicht vollumfänglich das Projekt einer veränderten Vorstellung von Gott – anstelle eines männlichen Herrschergottes – zu eigen gemacht haben. Der konservative Aufschrei, der auf die Veröffentlichung eines Gebets zu Gott als “Sophia” (als Weisheit) – das anlässlich der 1993 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, stattgefundenen Konferenz zu neuen Gottesvorstellungen geschrieben und gebetet wurde – folgte, machte die angezweifelnte Natur feministischer Neuvorstellungen sogar innerhalb des liberalen Flügels der Kirchen deutlich. Während viele Feministinnen/Frauen daraufhin die Kirchen verlassen haben, entschieden andere Frauen in kirchlichen Ämtern die Auseinandersetzung zu meiden. Den Kampf um Gerechtigkeit über die Frage des männlichen Symbolismus zu stellen, bringt die feministische Theologie in Gefahr, den männlichen Herrschergott der Propheten und der Befreiungstheologie weiter einzuschreiben – so lange die Option für die armen Frauen priorisiert wird. Der Artikel schließt mit einem nochmaligen Aufruf an jüdische und christliche Feministinnen, die Aufgabe, sich Gott weiblich vorzustellen, erneut aufzunehmen.

Este artículo es una poderosa exhortación a judías y cristianas liberales feministas a reasumir la tarea de reimaginarse a Dios en lenguaje y símbolos femeninos. La autora escribe como admiradora de la Diosa y teóloga; es una de las personalidades

²⁷ Christ, *She Who Changes*, 197.

fundadoras dentro del grupo de mujeres norteamericanas que introdujeron la teología feminista en los años 70. Sólo la introducción positiva de Dios-Ella y Diosa es capaz de romper con la asunción de una masculinidad poderosa, omnipresente y persistente de un Dios dominante y trascendente. Se escribe de nuevo una doxología cristiana tradicional desde la perspectiva de la Diosa como una canción jubilosa que celebra la vida corporal en el mundo natural y el poder divino como fuente de la que emana toda bendición. Surge la cuestión de por qué las congregaciones liberales no se dedicaron de lleno al proyecto de reimaginar la imagen de Dios y no verlo como un Dios dominante masculino. El grito conservador que siguió a la publicación de una oración invocando a Dios como Sofía, escrita y rezada en la Conferencia de Reimaginación de Minneapolis, Minnesota, en 1993, puso de manifiesto la contestada naturaleza de las reimaginaciones feministas incluso dentro de las alas liberales de las iglesias. Mientras que muchas feministas reaccionaron abandonando las iglesias, otras con cargos en la iglesia decidieron evitar tratar el asunto. Priorizar la lucha por la justicia frente a la cuestión del simbolismo masculino hace que la teología feminista sea vulnerable a reinscribir el Dios masculino dominante de los profetas y de la teología de la liberación mientras se priorice la opción para las mujeres pobres. El artículo concluye con un nuevo llamamiento a las feministas judías y cristianas a volver a tratar la cuestión de reimaginar a Dios como femenino.

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