

Introduction: Goddess and God in Our Lives

People who reject the popular image of God as an old white man who rules the world from outside it often find themselves at a loss for words when they try to articulate new meanings and images of divinity.¹ Speaking about God or Goddess is no longer as simple as it once was. Given the variety of spiritual paths and practices people follow today, theological discussions do not always begin with shared assumptions about the nature of ultimate reality. In the United States, the intrusion of religion into politics has led many people to avoid the subject of religion altogether. In families and among friends, discussions of religion often culminate in judgment, anger, or tears. Sometimes the conversation is halted before it even begins when someone voices the opinion that anyone who is interested in religion or spirituality is naive, unthinking, or backward—or, alternatively, that religious views are matters of personal preference and not worth discussing at all.

Talking about divinity is also surprisingly intimate. Unless we simply repeat what we have been taught, it is not possible to speak about what we believe about Goddess or God without saying something important about ourselves. Revealing our deepest convictions can leave us feeling vulnerable and exposed. Moreover, many otherwise well-informed adults whose religious educations were nonexistent or stopped with

1. Though educated people might say that they do not think of God in this way, the combination of traditional imagery and classical metaphysics in this picture, along with its equation of power with masculinity and masculine power with transcendence and omnipotence, continues to influence the theological imagination in both direct and subtle ways.

Sunday school lack a vocabulary for intelligent discussion of religion. Without new theological language, we are likely to be hesitant, reluctant, or unable to speak about the divinity we struggle with, reject, call upon in times of need, or experience in daily life. Yet ideas about the sacred are one of the ways we orient ourselves in the world, express the values we consider most important, and envision the kind of world we would like to bring into being. Our ideas about divinity are also intimately connected to questions that trouble us in the night about whether life has purpose and what that purpose might be.

Theology and Women

Theology is an important way to address these questions and this why we are drawn to it. We began our graduate studies in theology in an era when theologians and theology students were almost all men. We had been taught that the sex and gender of a theologian—or for that matter of any other writer—was irrelevant. But we came to understand that the exclusion of female voices does make a difference, not only on questions about women, but on other questions as well. As we developed our feminist perspectives in conversation with each other, we became instrumental in founding the feminist study of women and religion.

Our book *Womanspirit Rising* was the first collection of readings in the emerging field of feminist theology.² It included contributions from Christians, Jews, and Goddess feminists and has been widely used in university and graduate courses, as well as in church, synagogue, and unaffiliated study groups. “Why Women Need the Goddess,” Carol’s keynote address at the Great Goddess Re-Emerging Conference at the University of Santa Cruz, was influential in launching the Goddess movement, while Judith’s speech, “The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities,” at the first national Jewish feminist conference helped to catalyze the transformation of Judaism.³ Our second coedited book,

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

3. Carol P. Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” was first published in *Heresies* (Spring, 1978) and is the final chapter in *Womanspirit Rising*, 273–87; Judith Plaskow, “The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in

Weaving the Visions, brought together a growing chorus of diverse voices and shaped yet another decade of the study of women and religion.⁴ Carol supported Judith when she undertook the daunting task of writing *Standing Again at Sinai*,⁵ the first Jewish feminist theology, while Judith supported Carol when she later began, with even fewer resources to draw upon, to conceive *Rebirth of the Goddess*, the first feminist theology.⁶ It would be an understatement to say that our friendship sustained us through many difficult and rewarding times.

An Important Disagreement

We began working on this book because—although we agree about many things—we disagree about the nature of Goddess and God. After working together for decades, we found it quite a shock to come face-to-face with a difference on such a major theological issue as the nature of divinity. Our theological conversations have long been rooted in a critique of the God of biblical traditions as a dominating male other. This God has traditionally been understood to transcend the world: to reside above, beyond, or outside of nature and finite embodied life. The transcendent God has been seen as omnipotent: to be in control of everything that happens in the world. We believe that this God has justified not only the domination of women but other forms of domination as well, including slavery, colonialism, war, and environmental degradation. We have both rejected traditional views of divine transcendence and omnipotence. *We find divinity in the world, in*

Identities,” in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken, 1976), 3–10; reprinted in Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972–2003*, ed. with Donna Berman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 31–32, 35–39.

4. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).
5. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).
6. Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1998 [1997]). Carol used the term “theology” from *thea*, “Goddess,” and *logos*, “meaning,” to refer to reflection on the meaning of the Goddess in *Rebirth of the Goddess*. “Theology,” from *theos* or God, is a male generic. She did not insist on the use of dual terms to refer to the *thea*-*theo*-logical enterprise in this book, because, here, she wanted to underscore the fact that she and Judith share a commitment to a common enterprise of *feminist* theology.

finite, embodied life. This insight means that our embodied lives matter. Understanding that God is not in control of everything means that our choices contribute to the future of life on earth. Given that we agree on so much, we were surprised to find that as we thought further about the nature of divinity, our views diverged.

Judith views God as an impersonal power of creativity that is the ground of all being and becoming, including all good and all evil.

Carol understands Goddess as the intelligent embodied love that is in all being, a personal presence who cares about the world.⁷

There are two major differences between us. First, Judith thinks of divinity as an impersonal creative power, while Carol thinks of divinity as an individual who cares about and loves the world. Second, Carol thinks of divinity as intelligent, loving, and good, while Judith thinks of divinity as encompassing all that is, including and supporting both good and evil. As we will discuss, these two views are not ours alone, but reflect significant divides in the ways people have imagined and thought about divinity in both the East and the West.

Embodied Theological Method

We both can give reasons for our views, and in the course of these chapters, we discuss many of them. But the fact that neither of us has been able to persuade the other to change her mind led us to conclude that the philosophical, theological, and moral reasons we offer in justification of our views are only part of the story. All of the reasons we give are situated in our individual bodies and in our communities, societies, and histories. Different kinds of experiences do not lead directly or necessarily to different theological positions, but experiences are the matrix from which we all begin to think theologically. As we develop our theological perspectives, we

7. Carol arrived at this wording of her definition of the nature of divinity in the course of writing this book, as she discusses in chapters 9 and 11.

constantly test them against our experiences, asking if they ring true, if they help us make sense of our personal, communal, and social lives.

Recognizing that our experiences have contributed to our different understandings of the nature of God, we decided to write in a hybrid form that combines theological autobiography with rigorous philosophical, theological, and ethical reflection. This book is an experiment in *embodied theology* that seeks both to demonstrate the connection of theology to experience and to show the complexity of the relationship between them. Combining theology and autobiography is not easy. On the one hand, it has become common for theological others (but not for those who are white and male) to name the social locations from which we write. Situating theology is important, but sometimes it becomes a formulaic preface not explicitly connected to theological methods and conclusions. On the other hand, when personal experiences are shared, they often become primary and theology secondary. We have tried to achieve a balance. We reveal and discuss many intimate aspects of our own stories, but always with a focus on their theological implications. Our intention is to give our theologies flesh, to show how they emerge out of and in turn shape the embodied realities of our lives. We hope this approach will help readers more easily navigate the difficult waters of theological concepts and language.

While we connect our theologies to our stories, we do not intend to reduce theology to autobiography. Ideas that are rooted in experience can be discussed, queried, and defended on rational and moral grounds. This is possible because, though experience is always personal, it is also situated in a world that is shared. Our ideas about divinity must make sense not only of our personal experiences, but also of the world. The ethical implications of our views of Goddess and God can and must be considered because our understandings of divinity shape our understandings of what is right, just, and possible in the world. Not all theological ideas are equal. Thinking through our different perspectives, questioning each other's ideas, and trying to

defend our own has been one of the central—and exciting—challenges in writing this book.

We approached the second part of the book, where we take issue with each other's views, with some trepidation because we have been taught that there are always winners and losers in arguments about ideas. Yet, as we articulated our theologies and reflected on them together, we found that we could probe and question each other's deeply held convictions without losing respect for each other. We discovered that, as we thought deeply about how we differed, our own views became clearer. At the outset, we each believed that ours was the best solution to the problems created by traditional views of God. In the process of conversing with each other, we concluded that more than one—but not every—view of the nature of divinity can provide a theological foundation for the more just and harmonious world we envision.

Our Book

In the chapters that follow, we begin with experience, move on to theological reflection, proceed through dialogue and questioning, and return to experience. The first part of the book (chapters 1–2, 4–5, 7–8) describes our journeys toward our views of Goddess and God, beginning with our childhoods, moving through early adulthood, up to the present day.⁸ In two jointly written chapters (chapters 3 and 6), we set our positions in larger theological contexts: in relation to the history of theology and to the theological environment of the mid-twentieth century in which we began our studies (chapter 3); and in relation to major themes in feminist theology that have shaped our work (chapter 6). In the second part of the book (chapters 9–10, 11–12), we challenge each other's perspectives and respond to each other's questions. We wrote our individual chapters in pairs: thus chapter 2 is not a response to chapter 1, nor is chapter 10 a response to chapter 9; however, in chapters 9 and 10 each of us responds to issues raised in

8. The order of the chapters and of our names on the cover and title page were decided by a toss of a coin.

the first part of the book, while in chapters 11 and 12, we each respond to questions posed by the other in chapters 9 and 10. In the final chapter (chapter 13), we call attention to the common ground that underlies our theological differences, suggesting that it could provide the starting point for wider conversations about the nature of divine power both within and across religious boundaries. These conversations are important because, as we show, the ways we think and speak about divine power have implications for the way we imagine the future of our world.

Questions to Ponder

We hope this book will stimulate others to think and speak about divinity in their lives and provide a vocabulary for doing so. We invite our readers to embark with us on a theological journey: asking what you believe about the nature of Goddess or God; pondering the relation of theology to your own experiences; reflecting on how theologies make sense of our common world; asking which theologies provide the orientation we need as we seek to create a more just and harmonious world. Before you continue, you might like to reflect on the questions that lie at the heart of our book.

Is God or Goddess to be found outside the world, or within it?

Are we called to a life beyond the body and nature, or is this world our home and our bodily life the only life we have?

Is there someone listening to us when we worship, pray, or meditate, or is addressing Goddess or God a metaphoric way of speaking?

Is everything that happens in the world the will of Goddess or God, or is the world shaped by chance and a multiplicity of wills?

Is Goddess or God good, or does the divine power include both good and evil?

Does the idea that divinity loves the world inspire us to promote the flourishing of all, or does the notion that divine power includes both good and evil encourage greater human responsibility for the fate of the earth?

GODDESS AND GOD IN THE WORLD

Should we speak of Goddess, God, neither, or both?

Is what each of us believes about divine power a personal choice with only private meaning, or do our beliefs matter because they shape the world we share?

You might want to answer these questions again after you read our book, reflect on your own theology, and enter with us into a wider conversation about divinity and the world.