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Reflections on Theology from an Anglo-Jewish Feminist
Perspective

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Culture

BOOKS

Reflections on Theology from an Anglo-Jewish Feminist Perspective

Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology
by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow

MELISSA RAPHAEL

WHEN ASKED IF I would review Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow's book *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology*, my first reason for agreeing to do so was one of gratitude. Quite apart from their respective books, Plaskow's classic article "The Right Question is Theological" (1983) and Christ's "Why Women Need the Goddess" (1978) laid the critical foundations of my academic career as a feminist theologian and scholar of religion..

I first came across these articles in 1990, close to a decade after I had finished my undergraduate studies. I was probably the first Jewish woman to be awarded a degree in Christian theology at Oxford, having applied in the hope that the course would be imbued with a sense of the numinous that had been notable only by its absence in my secular Jewish home. With a place at Trinity College, which had only begun to accept women a year before I arrived in 1980, I embarked on a degree that required me to read books about an exclusively male God, written only by men, and taught by exclusively male tutors. Despite occasional delicate references to my 'Jewish background' as if it were some obscurity of character that would be a kindness to overlook, it must be said that I usually felt genuinely welcome in the Faculty of Theology as a Jew and a young woman. It was only years later, after I began reading books and articles like those of Plaskow and Christ, that I began to realize why, throughout my three years at Oxford, I had

felt "spacey and slightly ill," as Plaskow, in *Goddess and God in the World*, describes her own state of mind as a student of theology and religious studies. It was because, intellectually speaking, I had spent day after day in the sepulchral basement library of the Radcliffe Camera, doing a fine job of being an honorary male student, in the unremitting absence of something for which I had no concept: my own female voice.

Unlike Plaskow, who had first challenged the masculinization of God as a child of about nine. I had at no stage of my undergraduate (or postgraduate) philosophical and religious studies even noticed that God was represented as exclusively male in character, or that not one of my tutors was female, and not one of the texts I had studied was written by a woman. I was, of course, aware of secular feminist agitation for equal rights and had written at least one essay on Latin American liberation theology, conscious that my Oxford tutors had given the topic only the most scant and wary attention. But at no point had I been introduced to the pioneering religious feminist turn that Plaskow, Christ, and others had initiated a year or so before I went up to Oxford.

It was a postdoctoral appointment to teach Jewish and Christian theology and religious studies in a South Midlands university where my all-male colleagues were visibly relieved to be able to assign to me any module with 'women' in the title that brought Christ and Plaskow's work into my life. From then on, they were foremost among the scholars who equipped me to awaken nearly three decades of undergraduate to the absence and silence of women in the Abrahamic religious canons. Yet, using gender as a category of analysis, as they had done, I was also able to suggest that while traditional religion may be a root oppressor of women, where only men are the full normative subjects of their own religious experience, prophetic religions also



countermand the status quo. It is an engine of liberation not just for women but also for a whole spectrum of people whose sexuality has left them estranged from the patriarchal divine. This understanding of religion was Christ and Plaskow's genius and the gift that they and the other religious feminists of their generation bequeathed to all students of theology and religious studies.

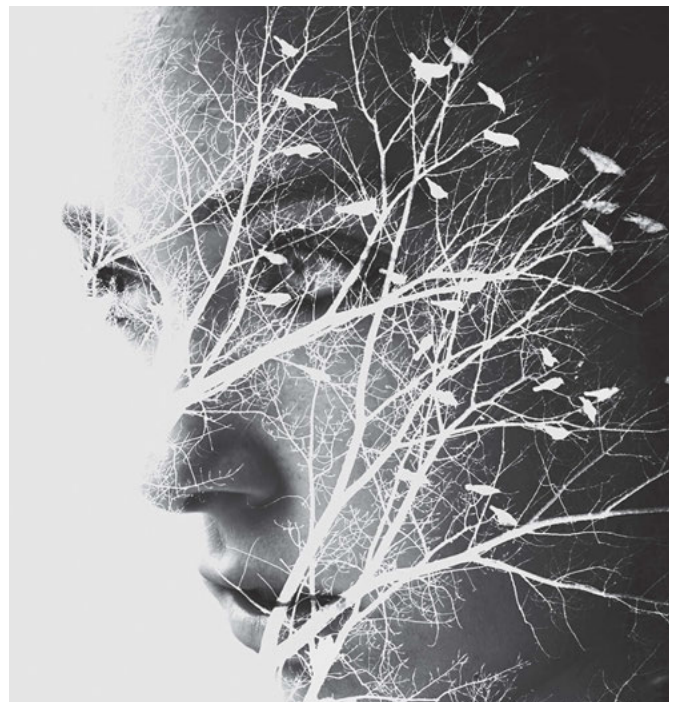
My only reservation about Christ and Plaskow's present conversations in embodied theology is that they are, perhaps, more self-contained than they need to be. Granted, the book cites many influential twentieth-century names, second wave American feminists among them. Regretfully, the ground laying first wave religious feminist foremothers are not much acknowledged. The same goes for the other radical theologians of the Sixties and early-Seventies who were also fighting for social justice, embracing immanence and natural finitude, and proclaiming the death of the omnipotent God of classical theism. While, like me, Christ and Plaskow studied at prestigious but conservative institutions, other institutions of the mid-1960s were changing: the reinvigoration of Catholicism under the liberalising auspices of Vatican II had a profound impact on some Catholic educational institutions. By the early 1970s, the renewal of Judaism was also underway in the egalitarian communities of B'nai Or, later P'nai Or, whose feminist members led, as much as they were led by, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Nor is the harvest whose seeds were sown by Plaskow and Christ ever really gathered in. British feminist theologians and scholars of religion like Lisa Isherwood, Asphodel Long, Daphne Hampson, myself, and others whose critical conversations in embodied theology have long been in dialogue were inspired by Plaskow and Christ are not featured.

But, in many ways, this just doesn't matter. *Goddess and God in the World* not a cross-referenced textbook. It is the story of a friendship between a Jewish feminist theologian and a post-Christian theologian [sic], both North American, which, with its (thankfully unedited) moments of mutual irritation, frustration, hurt and disappointment, played a pivotal role in the birth of religious feminism and the feminist study of religion.

This brings me to the second reason I agreed to review the book: it brings new feminist life to an old theological question: is God personal, intelligent, loving, and actively good (Christ's position), or non-personal and therefore inclusive of good and evil (Plaskow's)? By coincidence, I was reading *God and Goddess in the World* at the same time as I was teaching a course on Jewish responses to evil and suffering to progressive trainee rabbis at Leo Baeck College in London. It rarely happens that the contents of the book you are reading are being rehearsed by the people in front of you. But this last December, my students' often flammable debate precisely mirrored that of Christ and Plaskow.

Christ affirms the divine as the intelligent, loving personal presence that is as close to her as her own heartbeat and who wills the flourishing of all that lives. In many ways, Christ, a post-Christian profoundly influenced by neo-Paganism, is the more conventional a theist than Plaskow, a Jew. Christ is reluctant to dissolve any distinction between herself, the world, and the divine. At whatever cost to the intellectual coherence of her theological scheme, she cannot accept that the divine is, effectively, as much the rapist as the raped; that war is as much a manifestation of the divine as peace. She concludes that "if love is the highest value in the universe, then God must be love."

Plaskow argues more empirically and pragmatically that if what we experience is an ambiguous mix of pain and pleasure, nurture and neglect, illness and health, beauty and desolation, then we cannot but understand God or Goddess as the ground of *all* being — the one who makes weal and woe (Isaiah 45:7). Humanity, argues Plaskow, enjoys no cosmic privileges over those of other natural entities. No miraculous suspension of the laws of nature will save us from the effects of a natural order whose fabric is characterized neither by love nor hate. A truly monotheistic theology must embrace the pain and complexity of existence. Rejecting theological particularism of any kind, Plaskow celebrates God as the creative energy or Ground of Being that, for no extrinsic moral or historical purpose, sustains all life. Plaskow writes, "When I first realized that I had stopped believing in a personal, good and omnipotent God, I was delighted not to have to deal any longer with the classical problem of evil: with having to hold together



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God's goodness and omnipotence with the pervasiveness of evil." To believe anything else is pure wishful thinking. That we can imagine a perfectly good and loving God does not entail that she exists. We need, Plaskow says, to "let go of anger and stand before the mysterious complexity of the world and the boundless creative energy that births its myriad forms and to accept the reality that all is a mixture of good and evil." Ethics therefore only arises in the inherent interconnectedness of things which we have a natural interest to nurture and conserve. We are bound to one another only by the web of life and it is for the sake of the "continual unfolding of the adventure of creation [that we must] choose life."

No miraculous suspension of the laws of nature will save us from the effects of a natural order whose fabric is characterized neither by love nor hate.

By the end of the semester, over half of the students in my class had professed a position closely akin to Plaskow's.

A minority, including myself, were theological realists (though not literalists) committed to a theology more closely akin to Christ's. For us, evil, understood non-naturally as harmful human intent, has less metaphysical warrant than goodness and, as I argued passionately, the existence of human kindness is a far greater mystery than the existence of human cruelty.

We small band of theological personalists also wondered if the idea of God as 'Ground of Being' — one long-known to philosophers — would prove a sufficiently Jewish, warm, and purposive model of God to satisfy most people in most congregations, even liberal ones. The biblical God is, after all, personal; the commanded-ness of Jewish life may make best sense as a product of divine intelligence and intentionality. The postulation of a non-personal God may make it difficult to hang on to the idea that every human — not least girls and women — is uniquely made in the image of God. Crucially, for me, Plaskow's theology weakens, if not vanquishes, the Jewish hope of a historically interruptive messianic order of unprecedented peace and the restoration of original goodness or natural harmony.

Neither Plaskow and Christ in their book, nor anyone in our Monday morning class, "won" the argument. Irreconcilable theological differences remained healthily unresolved. The pathos, inconsistencies, and occasional anger of all these exchanges enacted a powerful example of *lived* religion, that is, religion that does not and should not police all its borders; that does not and should not fall into line with all of its own preconceptions. Refusing to be subject to the procedural deafness that helps people police the hostile boundaries erected between denominations and traditions, there was a healthy recognition in both the book and the class that theologies are conditioned not just by political affiliation but also by temperament, biographical circumstance — even different degrees of infantile attachment to mothers and fathers.

Plaskow and Christ's conversations will therefore be of keen interest to a wide range of contemporary religious progressives because they play out in the knowledge that good, as opposed to toxic, idolatrous, theology is transparent to the time, place, politics, poesis, and sheer mystery of its own process. My class of rabbinical ordinands greatly appreciated this book because they know that the rivers of ambiguity and polyphony in the oral and written traditions are essential to their irrigation of Jewish lives. But for people of any persuasion, this is a book that importantly decouples sacral power from dominance and helps us to find God in the stories of our becoming and loving relation to the other, rather than as the passive, to often intimidated recipients of a historical tradition.

There is, then, nothing dusty about these theological conversations. Christ and Plaskow's book narrates a lifetime of feminist activism — intellectual and practical. Our responses, right now, to the theological questions raised by the book: whether God/dess, immanent in the earth, will rise up against her ecological degradation; whether she listens to the petition of the oppressed and acts in love; and whether history plays out by sacred telos or mere chance, are crucial to how we imagine the future of our world. ■

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