



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest by Carol P. Christ

Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion by Carol P. Christ; Judith Plaskow

The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions by Naomi Goldenberg

Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models by Madonna Kolbenschlag

Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich by Judith Plaskow

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cludes methodological papers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America on such issues as the measurement of household patterns of labor allocation and the sexual division of labor, time use, household decision making, individual perceptions of reproductive physiology, knowledge and practices of crop processing, and livestock care. These fascinating studies are unfortunately too numerous and complex to discuss here. The innovative approaches to data collection include oral histories (India, Mexico), direct observation of community gathering places such as markets (Indonesia), measurement of time use by direct observation of individuals and households (Nicaragua, Indonesia) or by repeated interviews of household members over time (Indonesia) or by single interviews relying on recall (Iran, Kenya, Peru), or illustrated activity charts for illiterate women who record for each household member (including children) their daily contribution to household income in cash or kind and their participation in rice production and processing (India).

The authors offer timely advice on research problems such as overly ambitious data-collection plans, difficulties of classifying shifting economic activities or indigenous work arrangements such as labor exchanges, and the precarious reliability of answers to questions requiring counts of hours, distances, acreages, chickens, or even children. Taken as a whole, the collection represents a major attempt to make visible and explicit aspects of rural women's lives that have previously remained invisible to many scholars, development planners, and sometimes to the women themselves.

Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest. By Carol P. Christ. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion. Edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions. By Naomi Goldenberg. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models. By Madonna Kolbenschlag. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1979.

Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. By Judith Plaskow. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979.

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How could feminist consciousness have developed without anger? Anger growing with the realization of the psychological and cultural manipula-

tion of women; anger at the tremendous power men have had over women's lives to induce feelings of dependence and powerlessness, discouraging growth, independence, and individuation; anger at those religions which claim to provide moral guidance and liberation, but instead amplify this sexist oppression. Women turning to these religions find heaven a male domain, God and Jesus male deities, and theology built upon and presupposing the experience of male theologians. Women's experience is denied, not even recognized in this religious cosmos. For those feminists concerned with the religious dimension of life, the absence of any spiritual tradition which resonates with their experience and which grounds women in a religious cosmos is one of the most insidious aspects of Western culture. To submit to the guidance of traditional religion is to become vulnerable to a kind of spiritual rape; to reject it is to fall prey to a powerful spiritual loneliness.

The five books on feminist theology reviewed here represent the response of feminists to this dilemma. Common themes contour all these works. All start from the premise that the maleness of the traditional God renders traditional religion unacceptable to the feminist. In the void left by this rejection of the patriarchal deity, the feminist must create a new religious universe, articulated by women from women's experience. Patriarchal culture cannot provide symbols by which to construct this universe; their source, rather, is found in the (mostly recent) literary creations of female novelists and poets. And at the center of this new religious world is no longer the "transcendent, spiritualized, radically Other" God the Father, but the "immanent, incarnate, introjected or internalized" God the Mother: the Goddess.

Though each of these books makes its argument with these common points, each emphasizes different elements. Thus Judith Plaskow, in *Sex, Sin and Grace*, analyzes the work of two of the century's major theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, and criticizes it from the point of view of the experience of the female believer. Carol Christ in *Diving Deep and Surfacing* and Madonna Kolbenschlag in *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye* scrutinize contemporary and traditional literature for positive and negative images of female power. And, finally, Naomi Goldenberg in *Changing of the Gods* and the contributors to the later sections of Christ and Plaskow's anthology *Womanspirit Rising*—standing on the critique of patriarchy and employing the feminist symbolism and language made available to them by women writers—forge with these symbols a new feminist religious cosmos, the domain of the Goddess.

Plaskow's book is the most tightly organized, the least flamboyantly written, and the most carefully argued—perhaps because it closely follows her 1975 dissertation for Yale. Her aim is modest: not to attempt a systematic theology from a feminist perspective, but through her criticism of Niebuhr and Tillich to stimulate discussion of the nature and possibility of such a theology (p. vii). Basing her argument on the claim that constructive theology must consider both female and male experi-

ence (pp. 9–11), she moves through an ordered analysis and criticism of the doctrines of sin and grace as Niebuhr and Tillich present them (pp. 51–148). Pride as the prime sin, for example, is probably true only from the male perspective; for females, the prime sin is more like self-abnegation (e.g., p. 2). She concludes with some suggestions for reshaping these theological concepts and urges that women's experience be considered in order to make theology reflective of fully human experience (p. 173).

Kolbenschlag turns her critical skills to a consideration of those "prisms of the self . . . [the] metaphors of the human personality," the fairy tale (p. 3) as vehicle of pervasive (i.e., sexist) cultural mythology (p. xiv). *Sleeping Beauty* thus is seen as "most of all a symbol of passivity, and by extension a metaphor for the spiritual condition of women" (p. 5), and *Snow White* as a parable of narcissism and women's estrangement from each other (pp. 42, 48). *Cinderella* bespeaks the low valuation of "women's work" (chap. 3); *Goldilocks*, the female search for the perfect family (chap. 4); *Beauty and the Beast*, the process of exorcising patriarchal images (p. 161). Moving from fairy tale to religious mythology, Kolbenschlag argues that the affinity of the biblical image of God with male experience cannot but drive the sensitive religious woman to atheism (pp. 183–84). As a spiritually sustaining option to this atheism, Kolbenschlag proposes the "provisional stage" of the Goddess (p. 188). Women, in reclaiming their experience, rename the divine in feminist (hear "female") terms, and so "rediscover and revalue themselves and the ground of their being" (p. 188). Kolbenschlag closes her book with an open letter to the Frog Prince from all the fairy tale heroines who now, with consciousness raised, invite him to "walk out of the fairy tale" into a nonsexist future together (pp. 209–16).

Christ makes her case against sexist spirituality constructively. Making the argument that women's spiritual quest must begin with an articulation of women's experience (pp. xi–xiii), and claiming that there can be no experience without stories (p. 4), Christ culls symbols and spiritual patterns from the writings of women on women—Chopin, Atwood, Lessing, Rich, and Shange. (These writers represent something of a canon in all five books.) The first spiritual experience of a woman on a spiritual quest, Christ argues, is that of nothingness—the reaction of alienation to conventional religious answers (p. 13). An experience close in kind to conversion, which Christ terms "awakening," follows this alienation, through which the woman comes to ground herself in the powers of being through a mystical identification with nature, "which women's traditional attunement to the body and mothering processes have prepared them for." This insight in turn leads to a new naming of her world, giving form to her experience through the creation of a new language (pp. 23–24). By so doing, women will question their historic

subordination; challenge the adequacy of the male dualistic, hierarchical, and oppositional ways of viewing the world (p. 25); and achieve that wholeness which is the goal of the spiritual quest.

Christ's book, too, ends by proposing the Goddess as a near necessary religious focus for the feminist. Goddess worship celebrates women's bodies and their connection to nature and to each other (p. 126); it minimizes the "hierarchicalism" identified with traditional religions (p. 128); it puts the body on a more equal footing with the intellect (p. 129). But most important, the Goddess helps enable women "to recognize the grounding of their lives in the ground of being," and thus adds a vital spiritual dimension to women's quest for social freedom.

Goldenberg's book recapitulates the themes of Plaskow's, Kolbenschlag's, and Christ's, but seeks to go further. Her tone is flamboyantly (and, I imagine, deliberately) aggressive as she enjoys the spectacle of God's cultural demise and the feminists' "slow execution of Christ and Yahweh" (pp. 3-4). Rejecting the reformist attempts of feminists less radical than she, using Freudian and Jungian insights, Goldenberg energetically advocates Goddess worship, laissez-faire sexuality (pp. 104, 114), and witchcraft. Closing with a report of three of her dreams, she urges that friends form "dream groups" in order to participate within a small supportive community in the process of symbol formation (p. 140), which Goldenberg sees as a central aspect of religion formation (e.g., p. 5). "I look forward to the work that excursions into the psychic interior are bound to produce" (p. 140).

All of these attempts to find a solution to the spiritual dilemma of feminism bear witness to the passionate commitment and sincerity surely necessary to such an effort. But if the tension between traditional religion and women's experience defines this project, the tension between the chiefly academic nature of their criticism and the avowedly nonacademic, "religious" nature of their prescriptions confuses it. Neither pole of this latter tension receives conscientious treatment in its own terms. Indeed, each seems to undermine the other.

For example, consider the academic dimension of these works, the attempted systematic critique of traditional religions. Throughout, the crucial terms "religion" and "experience" are repeatedly used but never satisfactorily defined. But their constant use here demands, if not scientifically precise definitions, then at least an explicit treatment of their meaning and an attempt at consistent usage. "Religion" is variously used as a synonym for symbol system, for psychology (e.g., Goldenberg, p. 25), or more generally for the male cultural conspiracy (e.g., Kolbenschlag, p. 180; see also her quotation from Davis, p. 198). "Women's experience," the foundation of feminist consciousness and feminist theology, to which Plaskow devotes an entire chapter, never achieves coherence as a concept. Even within the movement, feminist scholars debate

seriously whether women's experience is fundamentally and essentially different from men's.¹ To use both these terms as the foundation of a complex system without consideration of their ambiguities, obscurities, and implications deprives the discussion of the clarity it strives for.

Further, these books rely consistently on such terms as "power," "inauthentic," "reality," and "ground of being," but we are never offered a definition of these. It is easy to assume one simply knows what they mean, in part because of the aura of familiarity their invocation of Tillich inspires. But Tillich's theological vocabulary is itself notoriously murky, and these writers, by appropriating it, fall heir to many of the Tillichian semantic confusions.

Another academic difficulty derives from the curious treatment of the "father God." This god, whose cultural demise Goldenberg cheerily predicts in the opening pages of *Changing of the Gods*, and whose cultural hegemony Plaskow, Christ, and Kolbenschlag all deplore, has been dead and quite irrelevant for some time now. In intellectual circles (ecclesiastic and academic) he has never really recovered from his encounter with the radical skepticism and secular science of several centuries ago. What of him lingered to be mocked by Kierkegaard and dismissed by Nietzsche is now regarded with a deep indifference, and the theist/atheist debate itself has become in our culture intellectually marginal.² The prerequisite to our executing this god is not raising feminist consciousness, but erecting a straw man.

But these authors are not primarily concerned with the academic aspect of their works. Instead, they seek to create a new religion through a concentration on precisely the emotional and the intuitive as opposed to the intellectual and academic (see, e.g., Goldenberg's remarks on academic observers in her chapter on magic and witchcraft). Ironically, however, the success of their effort is mitigated by their inability to deintellectualize their concept of religion. Despite disclaimers, the very way they construct their religion is determined by their academic predispositions.

In their advocacy of the Goddess cult, these women proceed as if religions could be self-consciously generated by individuals with particular political commitments. They urge worship of the Goddess with arguments from utility of belief (e.g., Goldenberg, p. 91, on the benefits for the ERA; Christ, p. 52, on the benefits for ecology).³ Because of their appreciation of the power of religious symbols to organize social life—an appreciation derived from careful readings of Jung and Geertz—they

1. See, e.g., Michelle Z. Rosaldo's discussion in "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 3 (1980): 389–417. I would like to thank her here for sharing an advance copy of her paper with me.

2. See on this point the fine essay by Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 22 ff., on the status of arguments from utility of belief.

set about to construct their own religious symbols drawn from feminist literature. Indeed, the template for their program depends to no small degree on Jung and Geertz (e.g., Christ, p. 2; Goldenberg, p. 49).

But neither Jung nor Geertz would ever say that religious symbols can be self-consciously generated. Jung specifically distinguishes in this connection between a consciously generated sign (e.g., a logo) and a religious symbol arising from the unconscious (e.g., the uroborous).⁴ Geertz says first of all that religion is a steadfast attachment to some transtemporal concept of reality, a reality in which the Goddess as a synonym for "womanenergy" (Christ, p. 128) or psychology (Goldenberg) seems not to participate.⁵ But, furthermore, religion for Geertz is not the result of ideological commitments, conclusions from experience, or deepened social awareness. It is not spun by the individual as a spider spins its web. Religion is granted within the historical context of culture; it stands in relation to tradition; it is received, not constituted. What these women actually offer, in Geertz's terms, is not religion but ideology.⁶

But finally, and most disturbingly, in their efforts to repudiate male religiosity these women paradoxically recapitulate patterns they condemn in men. For example: (1) They specifically characterize male spirituality as hierarchical, female as egalitarian (Christ, p. 25; Goldenberg, p. 63). Yet how can we square this with a claim that the "overarching divine principle" is more appropriately symbolized in female terms, and that the male within the Goddess cult can only be a son or a lover, but not an equal? (See Christ quoting Budapest, high priestess of the Susan B. Anthony coven no. 1, in *Womanspirit Rising*, p. 14; see also Goldenberg, p. 103.) (2) They emphasize the nurturant maternal nature of women as a central aspect of the feminine experience (e.g., Christ, p. 85, also p. 24). Yet the heroines of the novels they treat as religious texts all in some way turn their backs to their own children—Edna and Martha both leave theirs, and Atwood's heroine's abortion is viewed negatively chiefly because her lover imposed it on her. Such a lack of attachment in the first two cases, or vague attachment in the third, would surely be condemned in male characters: here it is held up as a step on the road to liberation. (3) Christ views favorably the role of the male in the act of love and conception as "incidental" (p. 47). Goldenberg argues, à la inverse Stokely Carmichael, that the correct position for men in the cult of the Goddess is prone.⁷ This hardly strikes a blow against sexism.

4. C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971). See Definitions at end under "Symbols."

5. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 2.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99.

7. "In witchcraft, the Horned God's duty is to make love to the goddess and delight her. . . . He is sexual energy personified—the one who . . . 'makes one night stands delightful.' Many witches feel that women should relate to men in life the way the Goddess relates to Pan in myth. She enjoys temporary alliances with him but neither expects nor needs him for long-term sustenance" (Goldenberg, p. 104; see also p. 114).

These women have set themselves the difficult task of constructing a religious universe in which the feminist can intelligibly place herself. My uneasiness with their proposals stems from my sense that, in so incarnating their anger in the systems they propose, they advocate as policy what they rightly criticize and condemn in traditional religions. My sense that their energetic effort at feminist individuation could lead to a deliberate narcissism was confirmed as I read the suggested lay-out for the home altar of the Goddess: a simple table, some candles, and in the center of the table, as a medium for worship—a mirror (Goldenberg, p. 93). And finally, given their obvious expertise as students of religion, I find the naiveté of their proposal to construct consciously a set of feminist symbols qua religious symbols almost inexplicable. These scholars surely understand the crucial differences, as well as the striking similarities, that mark the generation of ideology, on the one hand, and religion on the other.

Religious myths appear to have a sort of life cycle. They emerge, they flourish, they wane. Eventually they die the death of unintelligibility or irrelevance once their relation to changing social circumstances can no longer be negotiated through reinterpretation.⁸ These sociohistorical vicissitudes long ago affected the father God of traditional Judaism and Christianity. But if, as MacIntyre argues, it is too late to be medieval and too empty and too easy to be Kierkegaardian,⁹ then surely it is both too late and too empty to worship a recycled agricultural Earth goddess, no matter how strong an argument from utility of belief feminist critics of religion would make. For the spiritually sensitive late-twentieth-century feminist, no such posthumous deity will do. Her spiritual quest continues.

The Black Women's Issue. Coedited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith. *Conditions*: 5, vol. 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1979). Pp. 187.

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Writings by and about black lesbians are badly needed. This black women's issue of *Conditions*, despite its uneven quality, is a small beginning in the right direction. It is not nearly enough.

That black lesbians are oppressed is a constant theme borne out by this volume, which leans heavily toward poetry with a smattering of essays, fiction, autobiography, and journal entries. Rage, pain, fear, alienation, disaffection, dissatisfaction, and anger emerge from these

8. Jeffrey Stout, "MacIntyre's Dramatic Narratives" (paper delivered at the American Academy of Religions, New Orleans, 1978).

9. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?" in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).