

Why Women, Men and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later

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Abstract

Carol P. Christ reflects on her influential essay ‘Why Women Need the Goddess,’ responding to misinterpretations and arguing that women, men, and other living things still need the symbol of Goddess. As long as ‘Goddess’ and ‘God-She,’ like the word ‘feminist’ are controversial, we still have a long way to go before we as a culture can fully accept female power as a beneficent and independent power.

Keywords

Goddess, God, feminist theology, feminist movement, ecofeminism

I first presented ‘Why Women Need the Goddess’ in a seminar at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion in the fall of 1977. Aware of the controversy the image of the Goddess as a contemporary western religious possibility was likely to present in a university context, Naomi Goldenberg and I purposely chose the venue of a small closed seminar in the Women and Religion section where we, along with Starhawk and Z Budapest, whom we had invited, made presentations.¹ A few months later, in the spring of

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- 1 ‘Why women need the Goddess’ was first published in *Heresies (The Great Goddess Issue)* (Spring, 1978): 8–13; it was reprinted for the first of many times in Christ CP, Plaskow J (eds) (1979) *Womanspirit Rising*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 273–87; Naomi’s presentation became part of her book, see Goldenberg N (1979) *The Changing of the Gods*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press; Starhawk’s was published as ‘Witchcraft and women’s culture,’ in: Christ CP, Plaskow J (eds) (1979) *Womanspirit Rising*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 259–68, and its ideas incorporated into her *The Spiral Dance* (1979) San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row; Zsuzsanna Budapest’s ideas were presented in Budapest ZE (1979) *The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries (Part One)*. In: Beardwoman H (ed.) Los Angeles, CA: Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1.

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1978 I delivered 'Why Women Need the Goddess' as the keynote address at the conference 'The Great Goddess Re-emerging' to a wildly ecstatic audience of more than 500 women and a few men at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Following that, it was published in 1978 in *The Great Goddess Issue* of the feminist journal *Heresies* and a year later as the concluding essay in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* which I co-edited with Judith Plaskow. This book sold over 100,000 copies and has been widely used in classes in colleges, universities, and seminaries, as well as in study groups in churches and synagogues. In these venues alone 'Why Women Need the Goddess' had an impact beyond anything the young woman who wrote it could have imagined. It has also been included in numerous other readers in Religious Studies, Women's Studies, and Women's Spirituality, introducing many to the Goddess for the first time. Because of its clear and logically structured argument, it was even included in a reader on critical thinking.² In the past 35 years interest in the Goddess has grown by leaps and bounds. I am proud that my essay was one catalyst in a great movement of religious cultural change.

It is interesting to recall the situation of the young woman who wrote that essay in 1977 and to juxtapose it with the situations of today. In the winter of 1975-1976 my friend Naomi Goldenberg whom I had met in the Religious Studies program at Yale University and I registered for an Open University class on witchcraft taught by a young and then unknown woman named Starhawk. A few months earlier, Naomi had heard Z Budapest speak about witchcraft as women's religion at a conference in Boston and this influenced her choice of the class on witchcraft.

When we entered the class, Naomi and I had both been active feminists for a number of years – for me, since the spring of 1969. Naomi was an atheist who found the symbol of the Goddess inspiring. I would have said that I was a Christian, but I had become increasingly alienated from Christian practice. Though raised as a Protestant, I had grandmothers who were Christian Science and Catholic. While a graduate student at Yale, I regularly attended the Vatican II-inspired Roman Catholic folk mass on campus for four years. During my final year, I attended more sporadically. The reasons for this were several.

I was vehemently opposed to the Vietnam War and at the same time was practicing a Christianity that was deeply influenced by my study of the Hebrew Bible. I was aware that many Americans believed that it was somehow 'the will of God' that Americans bring democracy by force to Vietnam. I traced the roots of this view to the Exodus traditions of the Hebrew Bible in which God called a 'man of war' who delivered the Hebrew people from their oppression in Egypt. I began to find invocations of Exodus traditions and the prophets who followed in their stead increasingly problematic.³

As I immersed myself deeply in Elie Wiesel's stories which were the subject of my dissertation,⁴ I learned that the Christian celebration of Easter with its reading of biblical

2 Barnet S, Bedau H (eds) (1993) *Current Issues and Enduring Questions*. Boston, MA: St Martin's Press, 700-13.

3 I wrote about this later in 'Yahweh as holy warrior,' published in my (1987) *Laughter of Aphrodite*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 73-81.

4 Christ CP (1974) *Elie Wiesel's Stories: Still the Dialogue*. New Haven, CT: Yale University, Department of Religious Studies.

texts and performance of liturgies in which 'the Jews' were blamed for 'the death of Christ' had inspired violence against Jews in Christian Europe and was one of the factors that led to the Nazi holocaust.⁵ I personally had found the Easter liturgy with its themes of life, death, and resurrection to be deeply meaningful. But after reading Wiesel, I could no longer participate in the liturgy whole-heartedly. Moreover, identifying with Wiesel's characters, I began to question how God could have allowed 'his chosen people' to be killed in the concentration camps. I could not reconcile a good and powerful God with the fact of the holocaust.⁶

In addition, as a feminist aware of the power of cultural symbols, language, and stereotypes, I was increasingly sensitive to the image of God as male. I found it deeply unsettling to realize that the God to whom I prayed – whether symbolized as loving or judgmental or some combination of the two – was always imaged as a male who presided over traditions in which I, as a woman, was deemed unfit for leadership and thought to be less rational and more bodily than men. I was convinced that God must be imaged as 'Mother' as well as 'Father' and as 'She' as well as 'He.' However, I found very little support for this view – even among feminists in religion. At the first Conference of Women Theologians in Alverno in 1971, another woman and I wrote a paper arguing that God could be prayed to as Mother as well as Father; our argument was dismissed by the other participants and was not included in the packet of position papers distributed by the conference organizers. In 1973, after reading Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*,⁷ in which she argued powerfully that the symbol of God the Father was the ultimate symbol of male dominance in patriarchy, I found myself increasingly unable to participate in the male dominant language of Christian worship.

In the winter of 1973-74, I had a deeply transformative experience.⁸ While working on my dissertation late one night, I began to connect my own experience of abandonment by God to Wiesel's. I did not stop asking God how he could have let so many Jews be killed by the Nazis. But I added my own questions: 'What happened to the mothers, the daughters, and the sisters? How can we give allegiance to a tradition of fathers and sons? Where is the woman of God who could aid our quest? Where are the Goddesses? You, God, with the aid of your patriarchs and prophets, destroyed the powerful Goddesses of the ancient Near East as you continue to destroy us. By your very existence as male, you

5 See my 'On not blaming Jews for the death of the Goddess.' In: Christ CP (1987) *Laughter of Aphrodite*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 83-84.

6 In Christ CP (2003) *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World*. New York: Palgrave, I return to this question in the context of process philosophy, see chapter 4. Also see, Christ CP (1998) *Rebirth of the Goddess*. New York: Routledge, 104-109.

7 Daly M (1973) *Beyond God the Father*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

8 I first discussed this in 'Women's Liberation and the Liberation of God' which was originally published in Koltun E (ed.) (1976) *The Jewish Woman*. New York: Schocken Books, which shows how closely I identified with Judaism at the time; subsequently, it was reprinted in my *Laughter of Aphrodite*; see, Christ CP (1987) *Laughter of Aphrodite*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 20-26, where I understood it as a stage in my journey to the Goddess. At first I did not publicly identify myself as the woman who expressed her anger at God in this telling of the story. I 'heard' the voice in my mind, but it felt like a revelation.

legitimize the patriarchal order in which I cannot fully exist. How could you, God? You promise to abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land, and yet you yourself are called a man of war. How can you ever fulfill the promises you have made to us?'⁹ In the silence that followed the storm, I heard a voice saying 'God is a woman like yourself; she too has suffered and ceased to exist through long years of patriarchal history.'¹⁰

Some months later, in the fall of 1974, I attended the service at Riverside Church in New York City celebrating the 'irregular' ordination of the first women priests in the Episcopal Church. As they walked in singing 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,' a song that portrayed God as male, dominant, and warlike, I walked out. I felt very isolated and alone spiritually at that time. When I spoke to one of the woman priests about my feelings, she professed not to understand why I was so upset about language when the question of ordination was so much more pressing. In vain I tried to convince her that women's ordination should not eclipse basic questions about the deeply patriarchal nature of Christianity.

Other factors as well made me open to the vision and experience of the Goddess offered in Starhawk's class. My interest in religion and spirituality had been sparked by the death of my baby brother in my early teenage years. I was seeking a spirituality that could embrace death and tragedy without sugar-coating them. Growing up in southern California, many of my earliest spiritual experiences had occurred in nature – while swimming in the sea, climbing grandmother's peach tree, or hiking in the mountains. In nature I often felt connected to a power larger than myself. In my mid- and later twenties, through gestalt therapy I was opened to my body's feelings and to a perception of life energy in bodies that I felt was somehow related to my spiritual experiences in nature. In the summer of 1975, I began to learn about a fledgling Womanspirit Movement in which women's spiritual experiences including those in nature were validated outside of traditional religions.¹¹

Thus, though I would not have said that I was not a Christian on the day I stepped into Starhawk's living room, I was deeply disaffected, open to trusting my own feelings and intuitions, and looking for a worldview that could answer more of my questions and incorporate more of my experiences than the Christianity I knew had been able to do. What I discovered in Starhawk's class was a spirituality that named Goddess as female, affirmed the body and its connection to nature as spiritual, recognized death as a part of life, and worked with energy. I remember discussing the first class with Naomi and another friend in the car as we crossed back over the San Francisco Bay Bridge. They were questioning some of the things Starhawk had said, but I felt I had 'come home.'

The rebirth of the religion of the Great Goddess¹² that Starhawk described that night affirmed my spiritual experiences and offered ways of answering the questions I had.

9 Koltun E (ed.) (1976) *The Jewish Woman*. New York: Schocken Books, 24.

10 Koltun E (ed.) (1976) *The Jewish Woman*. New York: Schocken Books, 25-26.

11 In workshops with Hallie Mountainwing [Iglehart] and through reading *WomanSpirit* magazine.

12 This is the subtitle of Starhawk's first book. See, Starhawk (1979) *The Spiral Dance* San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, which was published 5 years later, due, by the way, to my having introduced her to the editors at Harper and Row during the American Academy of Religion meetings.

Though I had left Christianity by the time I wrote 'Why Women Need the Goddess' I was still very much in dialogue with Jewish and Christian feminists, and I assumed that what I had to say would be relevant to them.¹³

'Why Women Need the Goddess' was originally titled 'Why Women and Other Living Things Need the Goddess.' The reference to 'Other Living Things' in the title alluded to the anti-war slogan of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom: 'War is Harmful to Children and Other Living Things.' As the essay developed, I was forced by time and space to limit my discussion to women. However, I later addressed the relation of symbols of Goddess and God to issues including war and ecology that affect women, men, and other living things in *Laughter of Aphrodite*, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, and *She Who Changes*. I will discuss these issues below, but first I want to discuss my essay.

In 'Why Women Need the Goddess' I used sociologist of religion Clifford Geertz's definition of 'Religion as a Cultural System'¹⁴ to elucidate the effects of symbols of God and Goddess on persons and cultures. Geertz stated that a religion is a 'system of symbols' that shapes the 'ethos' of a culture, defining its deepest values. He said that symbols 'produce powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations' in the people influenced by them. 'Moods' refer to deep-seated attitudes – both conscious and unconscious about what is true, right, and valuable. 'Motivations' lead to the actions of individuals and groups based upon their sense of what is true, right, and valuable.

Using Geertz's theory, I argued that in cultures where God is symbolized exclusively or primarily as male, maleness is consciously and unconsciously understood to be divine. In such cultures it feels true, right, and just for females to be subordinated to male power. In such cultures, no one questions the right of fathers and husbands to demand obedience from wives and daughters, nor do people find it remarkable that religious and political leaders are male or that men make laws that women must obey. 'Religions centered on the worship of a male God create "moods" and "motivations" that keep women in a state of *psychological* dependence on men and male authority, while at the same time legitimating the *political* and *social* authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society.'¹⁵

It is important to underscore that I said that symbols of God as male lead not only to women's psychological dependence on men, but also to societies based upon the political and social authority of men. Some feminists, some Christian feminist theologians among them, have caricatured the Goddess movement as a group of privileged women who

13 The division of feminists in religion, according to their affiliations with patriarchal religions and the uneasiness that Goddess feminism provokes among some feminist adherents of Abrahamic traditions, was not something I expected. I have also been surprised that female language for God is still anathema to most churches and synagogues. See Christ CP (2010) 'Whatever happened to Goddess and God-she? Why do Jews and Christians still pray to a male God?' In: *European Society of Women in Theological Research Journal* 18: 43-60.

14 In: Lessa WL, Vogt EV (eds.) Religion as a cultural system, *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 2nd edn. New York: Harper & Row, 206.

15 See, Christ CP (1979) Why women need the Goddess. In: Christ CP, Plaskow J (eds) (1979) *Womanspirit Rising*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 275.

meet in private to meditate on psychological issues. This caricature is wrong on several counts. For one thing, it ignores the feminist insight that 'the personal is the political.' In relating the personal and the political, feminists did not assert that change on the personal level would automatically produce change on the political level. Rather they were saying that feminists must work simultaneously on the two levels of the personal and the political – because they are co-created, intertwined, and mutually reinforcing. In articulating the relationship of the 'personal' and the 'political,' feminists challenged cultural stereotyping that identified 'the personal' with women and left 'the political' to men. They asserted that women must deconstruct and transform both. Feminists thus came to an insight similar to that expressed by Geertz when he spoke of the interrelation of 'moods' or cultural beliefs and attitudes and 'motivations' leading to actions that create social institutions.

The notion that Goddess feminists are interested only in personal psychological issues ignores that fact that Goddess feminists have been involved in a wide variety of political and social causes, including the specifically feminist issues of equal rights and equal pay, reproductive choice, and violence against women, as well as the wider issues of racism, war, nuclear power, global capitalism, colonialism, and environmentalism. The caricature of Goddess feminists as privileged white women erases the participation of non-white and non-privileged women in the Goddess movement, and seems to assume (wrongly!) that non-white and non-privileged women are unaffected by powerful cultural symbols that encourage women to depend upon and subordinate themselves to men.¹⁶ To reiterate, the feminist Goddess movement is based upon the insight that the personal and the political are intertwined. The symbol of the Goddess empowers women on the personal, psychological level, and it calls women to transform all of the institutions of culture.

In 'Why Women Need the Goddess' I discussed four ways the symbol of the Goddess could transform women and culture: 1) the symbol of the Goddess affirms the legitimacy of female power as beneficent and independent; 2) it affirms the female body and its cycles; 3) it affirms female will; and 4) it affirms women's bonds and heritage. When I said that 'The simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of the Goddess is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power,'¹⁷ I was often asked if I believed that women's power is always good. Actually, I was making the radical proposal that independent female power is not always bad! The

16 Indeed, it was in large part from Ntozake Shange. See, Shange N (1976) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. New York: Macmillian, which I saw both off- and later on-Broadway and taught for many years that I learned to find and love God in myself. My first ritual group was co-founded by a Latina woman and had a black ecofeminist member. Alice Walker has written openly about her allegiance to Goddess and Mother Earth, see, Walker A (1991) We have a beautiful mother. In: *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 459-60; and Walker A (1997) 'The only reason you want to go to heaven. . .' In: Walker A (1997) *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*. New York: Ballantine Books, 3-26.

17 Christ CP (1979) Why women need the Goddess. In: Christ CP, Plaskow J (eds) *Womanspirit Rising*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 277.

symbol of the Goddess means that female power can be good and in and of itself – it does not have to be controlled or reined in by male power. ‘Psychologically, it [the symbol of the Goddess] means the defeat of the view engendered by patriarchy that women’s power is inferior and dangerous.’¹⁸ This stands in stark contrast to deeply engrained symbols such as Eve and Pandora which suggest that unrestrained female power unleashes sin and death, evil and chaos, into the world.

The second meaning of the symbol of the Goddess is the affirmation of the female body and its cycles. ‘[T]he Goddess symbol represents the birth, death, and rebirth processes of the natural and human worlds. The female body is viewed as the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death, cycles in the universe.’¹⁹ This stands in contrast to Christian interpretations of the sin of Eve that suggest that the naked female body or female sexuality is the source of all evil. It also counteracts widespread cultural and religious taboos surrounding menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. If I were writing the essay today, I would also mention that the symbol of the Goddess calls us to transform the pornographic images of women so readily available on the internet and the advertising images of female bodies that lead women to attempt to redefine their bodies through anorexia, bulimia, and cosmetic surgery.

The third meaning of the Goddess symbol is the positive valuing of female will. In patriarchal cultures women have been taught to subordinate their own wills and initiatives to those of men. *Ask your father...Wait until you get married. . .Wait until you find a partner...Keep your man happy...Let him decide.* The symbol of the Goddess as an independent power suggests that women have the right to make their own decisions. Women can reflect and envision, set goals and attempt to achieve them – without checking first with male authority figures. Again, this does not mean that the female will is always good. But it does mean that women’s will and initiative are as valid and valuable as those of men.

The fourth meaning of the Goddess symbol I discussed is valuing women’s bonds and heritage, especially the mother-daughter bond. While religions and cultures have often celebrated the bonds between fathers and sons, the bonds of mothers and daughters have less frequently been honored. In patriarchal cultures the relationships of mothers and daughters are distorted and poisoned when mothers are given the role of teaching their daughters to accept subordination to men. The story of Demeter and Persephone suggests that mothers and daughters can maintain and celebrate their bonds to each other and reject the notion that marriage means that daughters must be ‘taken’ away from loving relationships with their mothers. I believe it is important for women to heal the mother-daughter relationship. Many women do choose different lives than our mothers had, but we are on firmer ground if we can weave the nurturing and care our mothers or other women gave to us into new ways of being for ourselves and our daughters, ourselves and our friends, ourselves and our lovers.

18 Christ CP (1979) Why women need the Goddess. In: Christ CP, Plaskow J (eds) *Womanspirit Rising*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 278.

19 Christ CP (1979) Why women need the Goddess. In: Christ CP, Plaskow J (eds) *Womanspirit Rising*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 281.

The reason women need the Goddess is summed up in the words of Ntozake Shange 'i found god in myself and i loved her fiercely'²⁰ which I quoted in the first sentence of the essay. More than anything else the Goddess symbolizes a new and fierce love of women for ourselves that has the power to change the world. Because I did not mention men or God in the essay, it is sometimes assumed that I was saying that the divine power should only and always be imaged as female, that both men and women should pray exclusively to Goddess, or that there is no need for liberating male images of God. This reading suggests that I am simply reversing the status quo as found in Judaism and Christianity. 'Why Women Need the Goddess' was addressed to women and situated in the context of women's space. The fact that I did not address the question of men and God should not be read to mean that I was suggesting that divine power is only or ontologically female. As I wrote in *Rebirth of the Goddess*, men can also benefit from imaging divine power as Goddess; doing so can help them to respect and honor women, nature, the female body, and all bodies. There is also a need for non-dominating images of God. Some in the Goddess movement invoke the Lady and the Lord as lovers. But what about gay men and lesbians and everyone who is single? Some return to the Greek or Celtic Gods. But these are steeped in patriarchy and war. Some propose the Horned God or the Green Man. These images seem more promising. But even here stereotypes often crop up. I have found that it is not easy to unearth images of God that are not entwined with notions of power as domination. However, I support efforts to create and recreate positive non-dominating images of male divinity.

Although the first and most important meaning of the rebirth of the Goddess is the affirmation of female power, it is important to recognize that the Goddess also calls us to transform other aspects of our image and understanding of divine power, most especially the modeling of divine power on power over or domination and the understanding that divine power is totally transcendent of the body and nature. It has often been said that the Goddess is not God in a skirt and that it is not enough to take the Bible or a traditional liturgy and to change He to She and Him to Her. Making these initial changes often serves to point out the problems with modeling divine power on power over and domination.

My first stirrings of unease with the image of God stemmed from my recognition that the God who was portrayed as a warrior in the foundational story of Exodus was at odds with my own deeply spiritual and political desire for peace on earth. Though I could rejoice in the freeing of the Hebrew slaves, I could not worship God as 'a man of war' who throws the Pharaoh's horsemen and riders into the sea. To call the God of Exodus a 'woman of war' would not have been an improvement. I had to agree with Mary Daly wrote that God the Father has all too often presided over an Unholy Trinity of Rape, Genocide, and War.²¹ Having studied the Hebrew Bible intensively, I knew that the

20 Christ CP (1979) Why women need the Goddess. In: Christ CP, Plaskow J (eds) *Womanspirit Rising*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 273. Though I was labeled as 'racist' by a white feminist Christian theologian for allegedly quoting Shange out of context, in fact, I wrote the first full-length literary critical essay of *For Colored Girls*. See Christ CP (1980) *Diving Deep and Surfacing*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 97-117, and I was personally thanked for that by a number of leading black feminist literary critics.

21 Daly M (1973) *Beyond God the Father*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 114.

biblical God countenanced the killing of men, the rape of women, and the enslavement of women and children as part of the Hebrew conquest of the promised land. I knew that this pattern had continued in Christianity's rise to primacy in the Holy Roman Empire; Constantine's conversion came as he saw the image of the cross on a battle flag with message 'in this sign conquer.' Violence was part of the Christian colonial conquest of Europe and later Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

I wrote about the problem with modeling divine power on the violence of the warrior in *Laughter of Aphrodite*.²² As one who came of age during the US-Vietnam and Nigeria-Biafra wars, I understood that biblical images of God as a dominating and warlike other not only support the notion that warfare is inevitable but also encourage nations to imagine that they go to war with God on their side. Therefore, I wrote that I could 'not find the threatening warrior God ... a liberating vision of the divine power.'²³ However, many feminists ignored the issue of divine power as domination expressed through violence when they embraced a Christian liberation theology which based its claim for God's 'preferential option for the poor' in the Exodus story and in the prophets. They did not seem to notice that the God of liberation theology is modeled on the warrior God of Exodus.²⁴ I have also challenged my Goddess sisters to think carefully before appropriating images of warrior Goddesses from warrior traditions.²⁵ I believe that all images of divine power as domination must be questioned. Thus I prefer to use the rich visual symbolism of the Goddess in the Neolithic – a time before warfare became a way of life – as my Goddess imaginary.²⁶

In *Laughter of Aphrodite*, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, and *She Who Changes* I addressed the question of why 'other living things' need the Goddess. The answer to this question is the connection of the Goddess to nature, in other words the 'immanence' of the Goddess in all living things.²⁷ Goddess is intimately connected to the seasons and cycles of the changing world. Because Goddess symbolism affirms the changing world of nature, the Goddess can help us to understand that 'the earth is holy and our true home.'²⁸ Our culture's inability view the earth as holy and our true home can be traced back to Plato whose views were incorporated into Christian theologies.²⁹

22 See, 'Yahweh as holy warrior.' In: Christ CP (1987) *Laughter of Aphrodite*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row.

23 Christ CP (1987) *Laughter of Aphrodite*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 78.

24 See, Christ CP (2003) *She Who Changes*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 221-23.

25 Christ CP (2003) *She Who Changes*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 232-33.

26 See, Gimbutas M (1989) *The Language of the Goddess*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.

27 For me, the Goddess is immanent and more than immanent. Philosophically speaking, my view is Hartshornian panentheism, in which the world is the body of Goddess/God.

28 Christ CP (1987) *Laughter of Aphrodite*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, ix; also see, Christ CP (1998) *Rebirth of the Goddess*. New York: Routledge.

29 The role of Platonic dualism in shaping classical theology also discussed in *Rebirth of the Goddess* and *She Who Changes*. I also refer the reader to these books for more detailed discussion of the issues surrounding dualism and its transformation that I touch on in the remainder of this essay.

Plato considered the changing world in which every individual is subject to death to be imperfect. He imagined an unchanging realm in which the rational soul communicated with immortal truth. He argued that the soul is imprisoned in the body and that the physical world is but a dim reflection of the immortal world. In Platonic dualism mind or soul is separated from body, and divinity and truth are separated from the material world. Declaring the world to be imperfect, Plato implicitly rejected the earth mother Goddesses and the human mothers who were their reflections. For Plato, birth into the material world through a female body was no longer a gift to be celebrated, but rather a fall to be risen above.

Theology adopted Platonic dualism and used it to shape theological understandings of God, humanity, and the world. The God of Christianity and Judaism is generally understood to be transcendent of the natural world. This God is said to be unchanging, rational, and immortal. From this perspective the changing world that is subject to death is said to be chaotic, irrational, and imperfect. Christian theologians argued that because of the sin of Eve death entered into the world as punishment. Theologians viewed woman as more of the flesh and less rational than man to whom, they said, she must therefore submit her will.

In *Rebirth of the Goddess* I wrote that ‘Goddess calls us to transform powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting images and ideas about God. We have been taught that God is male, that he transcends the earth and the body, that he is the light shining in the chaotic darkness of the natural world. Yet the Goddess is female; the earth, the body, and nature are her image; the darkness as well as the light are metaphors of her power. . . we [must] question dualistic and hierarchical assumptions about God’s relation to the changing world that arose in the wake of the slaying of the Goddesses of earth. Reflecting on the limitations of the God we have known, we can begin to envision more holistic ways of thinking about the Goddess, the earth, and our place in it.’³⁰

Because dualistic thinking is so deeply engrained, so powerful and pervasive, it is tempting simply to retain it while reversing the valuation put on the pairs of opposites: in other words to value the female, the earth, the body, feeling, and nature, while devaluing the male, the spirit, the mind, and rationality. In some visions of the Goddess, especially those influenced by Jung, the Goddess and women are identified with the earth, the body, and the unconscious. This vision can be nourishing insofar as it validates women’s intuitions and feelings and sense of connection to the natural world. However, it is important to recall that Jungian Erich Neumann whose classic work *The Great Mother* inspired many feminists, believed that it was necessary that the unconscious realm of the Great Mother be overthrown by rational and patriarchal males.³¹ This should give any feminist pause. I ask: Why does Neumann characterize the age of the Goddess as ‘unconscious’? Did women’s inventions in the Neolithic epoch including agriculture, pottery-making, and weaving arise from the unconscious mind without any input of rational reflection? I doubt it! Moreover, in a feminist context, to continue to identify the female with the

30 Christ CP (1998) *Rebirth of the Goddess*. New York: Routledge, 89.

31 Neumann E, Manheim R (trans.) (1955, 2nd edn 1963) *The Great Mother*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; also see, Neumann E, Hull RFC (trans.) (1954) *The Origins and History of Consciousness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

earth, the body, and nature, and men with the spirit, the mind, and rationality is an inadequate solution to the problem posed by dualism.

As a feminist, I value my mind and my body and the body-mind continuum. While I value other than rational ways of knowing, I do not consider intellect, reflection, and rational thinking to be in any way alien to my woman-self. I believe that intelligence is found to varying degrees in all living things and in all individuals in the web of life. Intelligence does not separate 'man' from 'nature' because intelligence is found within nature. Reflecting further it is clear that men are just as much a part of nature as women are. Their bodies have their own seasons and cycles and they too are subject to death. What is needed is not a reversal of the valuations of the polar opposites of the dualisms, but rather a transformation of the way we think about divinity, humanity, and nature. We need to stop thinking in terms of the pairs of so-called opposites that dualism has provided.

In *Rebirth of the Goddess* I defined Goddess as the intelligent embodied love that is the ground of all being.³² Intelligence. Embodiment. Love. In relating these three, I suggested that intelligence arises out of the body and nature and is found in all individuals in the web of life in different degrees. I also said that deep feelings of relationship expressed as love are not irrational but are fully part of an intelligent response to the world. In *Rebirth of the Goddess* I argued that ethics arise from deep feelings of connection to others in the web of life.³³ These proposals may seem uncontroversial to feminist theologians and ethicists, but they represent a radical departure from the views more commonly expressed in the theology and ethics in the Western tradition. To give just one example, ethics is usually said to be based in rational principles, purged of all feeling. Feeling is said to be irrational and uncontrollable and to lead to favoring those closest to oneself. From this perspective, to say that ethics arises from deep feeling is anathema. This is why I have said that the symbol of the Goddess calls us to transform deeply held or powerful and pervasive ways of thinking in which God is separated from nature, man is separated from woman and nature, and rationality is separated from feeling.

If you have followed my train of thought this far, you will have noticed that I began by discussing the Goddess as an image that calls us to affirm femaleness and independent female power but that I am now addressing more abstract theological questions about the nature of divine power. You might be asking whether questions about the nature of God can be separated from questions about the gender of God. Have we come full circle? Are we now at the point where we can say that we – women, men, and all living things – no longer need the Goddess? Can we give up the divisive issue of gender and get down to the serious questions of theology?

My answer to this question is a resounding and decisive no. It is tempting to believe that we live in a post-feminist world where all the basic demands of feminism have been met. Women have made enormous strides in the past 35 years and have entered many professions including law, medicine, and the university that previously were largely closed to them. On the other hand, the glass ceiling still exists. In the United States in 2006 women held 15.2 percent of the seats in the House and 14 percent of those in the

32 Christ CP (1998) *Rebirth of the Goddess*. New York: Routledge, 107-109.

33 Christ CP (1998) *Rebirth of the Goddess*, New York: Routledge, 160-77.

Senate.³⁴ In 2006, women as a group earned 77 cents to every dollar earned by men; black women earned 66 cents and Hispanic women 52 cents. In 2007, women financial advisors' wages were 53.7 percent of their male counterparts, while women in sales earned 64.8 percent of the wages paid to men.³⁵ Internet pornography is widely viewed by men and it is increasingly violent and degrading to women. International trafficking in girls and women is on the increase. One measure of women's continuing lack of acceptance of their bodies is the shocking statistic that cosmetic surgery has increased 457 percent since 1997 in the United States, with 31 percent of women saying they would consider cosmetic surgery for themselves.³⁶ Married women still devote two to three times more hours to housework than married men.³⁷ A significant number of Americans wish to deny women the right to control their bodies. Very little headway has been made on the early feminist proposal that work should be restructured so that both men and women can work and have time with their families; the result of this is that most women still struggle with the double day of work, while some women who can afford it quit work to take care of children, refuse promotions that would result in more stress, or shift to part-time work. All of this suggests that we do not yet live in a post-feminist world and that women still need the Goddess as a symbol of female power.

In addition, the symbol of Goddess has a metaphoric power to call forth basic changes in the way we understand divinity, humanity, and nature. Yes, we can work to change dominator images of God without invoking Goddess or God-She. Yes, we can work to transform dualisms without invoking the Goddess. But as I argued in great detail in *She Who Changes*, the origins of these and other theological mistakes are deeply entwined with the suppression of the earth mother Goddesses of the ancient world and the material world of body and nature they symbolized. The success of dualism entailed the disparagement of the earth, the body, nature, woman, and Goddesses. In a feminist context the Goddess symbol calls us to rejoin the spirit with nature, the body with the mind, feeling with thinking. I suspect that in our culture this reintegration will not happen until and unless we can reclaim the Goddesses who were deposed by the God who was set above nature and whose power was conceived as domination.

In this regard too, we have made significant progress. In many parts of North America and Europe, Goddess is no longer an unknown word. Hundreds of books, thousands of articles, and hundreds of thousands of rituals have been written or created in Her name. Some consider Wicca to be the fastest growing religion in America today.³⁸ For me and many others Goddess is no longer an exciting new idea; She has taken root in our bodies and become part of the fabric of our lives. Yet the Goddess movement remains

34 Women in National Parliaments (30 September 2006), <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif300906.htm>

35 The Wage Gap, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0763170.html>

36 Plastic Surgery Research. Info, <http://www.cosmeticplasticsurgerystatistics.com/statistics.html#2007-ATTITUDES>

37 Chore Wars: Men, Women, and Housework, http://www.nsf.gov/discoveries/disc_summ.jsp?cntn_id=111458

38 Wicca Experts Encourage Christians to Engage America's Fastest Growing Religion, http://wiccanet.com/goddess/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=174&Itemid=1

countercultural and is considered to be outside the mainstream of American religious life – The United States' President meets with conservative Christians, but he does not meet with Wiccans. In some quarters the Goddess has lost her radical feminist edge and has been absorbed into New Age feel-good commercialism. And there are still many women and men who have not yet heard of the rebirth of Goddess in contemporary culture.

Thirty-five years ago I imagined that God-She and God the Mother would by now have been fully incorporated into the language of Christian and Jewish worship in liberal congregations. First steps to counter the male image of God were taken with the publication of Protestant *Inclusive Language Lectionary* in which God was called our Father [and Mother] and Ruler rather than King and the offensive He was removed by rephrasing or repeating the word God. Several Jewish denominations followed suit. However, the movement to change the image of and language for God pretty much stopped there. Despite a few pockets of change and transformation including the Jewish Renewal, Re-Imagining, the WomanChurch movement, and HerChurch in San Francisco, traditional congregations found that trying to include female language and imagery for God as part of Jewish and Christian worship was upsetting and divisive. Part of the reason for this is that worshipping Goddesses was condemned by the prophets and final editors of the Hebrew Bible: the reintroduction of God-She smacked of paganism and idolatry to some. Another reason is that many of the women who would have welcomed the return of God-She are no longer participating in traditional worship services. Still, it is distressing that so little progress has been made. The resistance to female language for God in traditional congregations suggests that the issue is not dead, but only buried. If God-She made no difference to the way we understand divinity, humanity, and the world, re-introducing female language and imagery would not have caused such a stir.³⁹

In her popular book *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert dismissed the question of God language, saying, ‘“God” is the name that feels the most warm to me, so that’s what I use. I should confess that I generally refer to “God” as “Him,” which doesn’t bother me because, to my mind, it’s just a convenient personalizing pronoun, not a precise anatomical description or a cause for revolution.’⁴⁰ I find Gilbert’s breezy post-feminist dismissal of the revolutionary work so many of us have been doing to change the image and understanding of divine power disconcerting. Referring to ‘God’ as ‘Him’ might seem like a simple ‘personal’ choice to Gilbert, but this ignores the history – which includes the subordination of women within Christian churches for centuries – in which it is rooted. Does Gilbert really believe that she can dissociate her ‘choice’ from that of the many Christians who would deny an unmarried woman like herself the freedom to explore the world on her own and the birth control that allows her to sleep with whomever she wants whenever she wants? I also wonder whether Gilbert’s struggle with dependence on men – which she so insightfully describes – could have had anything to do with her sense that

39 I discuss these issues more fully in Christ CP (2010) Whatever happened to Goddess and God-she? Why do Jews and Christians still pray to a male God? In: *European Society of Women in Theological Research Journal* 18: 43-60.

40 Gilbert E (2006) *Eat, Pray, Love*. New York: Viking Press, 13.

God is something like the ultimate male lover-protector? Why did she end her book with the fantasy of the perfect heterosexual romance? I was sorry that she did not at least reflect on these questions. When Gilbert wrote that calling God 'Him' is not a 'cause for revolution,' I could not stop myself from asking: Does she protest too much? Does she feel that to question the culturally comfortable 'choice' of referring to God as male is to risk being called a 'revolutionary'? Maybe even a 'wild-eyed radical feminist'?

And this is precisely the point. We are still in a place where Goddess and God-She like the word feminist are controversial. We still live in a world where a clever woman like Gilbert finds the image of a male God more comforting than the idea of a Goddess and where she intuitively understands – perhaps even without bringing the issue fully to her consciousness – that to refer to the divine power as Goddess in her book would have marked her as 'revolutionary' and limited her audience. This for me is a strong argument that women, men, and other living things still need the Goddess. We still have a long way to go before we as a culture will be comfortable with thinking of God as Goddess. In other words, we still have a long way to go before we can fully accept female power as a beneficent and independent power. And I would add, we have only begun to address the disparagement of nature, the body, and feeling encoded in the Platonic dualism through which God transcendent of the world has been understood.