



February 2010

When God Becomes Goddess: The Transformation of American Religion by Richard Grigg

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Judith Davis (2010) "When God Becomes Goddess: The Transformation of American Religion by Richard Grigg," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol16/iss1/7>

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Richard Grigg, *When God Becomes Goddess: The Transformation of American Religion*. New York: Continuum, 1995. 155 pp. \$22.95.

by Judith Davis Miller

"The Western notion of God is in desperate need of transformation." These words may strike the reader accustomed to questions framed in the context of traditional religion with the force of a dive into the icy Atlantic on a hot summer's day; they may strike the feminist reader who has been ill at ease in a more traditional, hierarchical religious setting with a sense almost of necessity, a great "of course." Whatever their orientation, readers will find that in *When God Becomes Goddess* Richard Grigg has written a text that makes a contribution to contemporary theological discussion while remaining accessible to the lay reader with a less academic (but fully engaged) interest in its subject.

At the beginning of the book Grigg establishes the thesis that the core notion associating God with a transcendence and meaning that inform our thought and action remains intact, but he goes on to suggest that the ideas surrounding this core are undergoing metamorphosis. In particular, he argues that the God of traditional theism has become privatized; that is, fragmented by the forces of fundamentalism and by a postmodern sensibility that "rejects the possibility of an overarching 'metanarrative'" (p. 19). Grigg adds that contemporary religion is also often tied to the private sphere in its concern for personal rather than public issues of morality and in its focus on morality alone rather than on the larger intellectual issues of our time. Thus, religion has lost its public power in contemporary society. Even more important, he suggests, the traditional idea of God is unequal to the task of theodicy in modern culture; our communication technologies and medical technologies create the image of a God who is powerless in the face of evil that on the one hand is terrifyingly vast and widespread and on the other hand yields to man's medical solutions.

In search of a contemporary approach that sustains the core notion of God, Grigg finds it in feminist enactment theology. Synthesizing the writings of the major contemporary feminist thinkers, he describes a concept in which "God is a relation that human beings

choose to enact" (pp. 51-52). In other words, as Grigg quotes Dorothy Solle, the difference lies in "whether God can be thought of beyond us as resting in himself and unrelated, or whether God is the relationship itself and can be thought of only as relationship" (p. 66). This theology answers the challenge of communication technologies with a theology whose context emphasizes the relation of self to the spheres of society and history, not the private relationship between self and God. And it answers the challenge of medical technology by being inherently of nature rather than separate from it. At this point, Grigg departs from the use of God as the name of a more product-oriented divinity and opts for the use of "Goddess" as an indicator of "a particular transformative relationship between the self and nature, the power of being, and other selves" (p. 52).

Having laid this foundation, Grigg discusses the changes feminist enactment theology implies, putting it to the test and arguing that it involves both change and continuities with respect to traditional theologies. Most importantly, this theology is, indeed, genuinely religious in character, dealing with key religious issues. It defines Goddess as a transcendent source of life and meaning, emphasizing that Goddess is not supernatural but rather is immanent throughout the created world. The idea of the Goddess, he asserts, also answers the human need for the worship and ritual that serve our deeper need to adore, petition, and communicate with deity. Finally, he suggests that the concept of the Goddess can satisfy our deepest anxieties about the human condition and its finitude in its emphasis on moving beyond the self to a sense of one's place in the larger natural scheme of things, the broad sweep of time and place that constitutes the human experience. Most significantly, perhaps, Grigg departs here from the traditional notion of the human being as "an artifact with a telos that can be perfectly fulfilled by proper relation to the divine artificer" (p. 92) and moves toward a definition of the human being as consistently relational and potential.

In his final chapters Grigg turns to consider the implications for change that result from the transformation he has described. He is honest about its limitations: there is no necessity involved and no telos, so people can simply choose not to "believe" in the enacted Goddess, one born, after all, out of our relationship with "other" rather than being a "first cause." As it does not comfort with certainties and a

promise of salvation, it might appeal only to what he calls a "spiritual elite." Finally, it has no institutional structure to provide it with a solid social base. Still, Grigg argues that there is a spiritual strength to be derived from the energy of the relation back and forth with otherness in the world, and that this also can become a source for reinforcing an ethical life, two requisite qualities for continuity with western religion. Perhaps most important of all, he asserts that feminist enactment theology can address the key issue of theodicy, addressing the problem of evil as a "disrelation" in the world around us and encouraging us to act in relief of suffering without the necessity of answering the vexed question of "why."

While attempting to convey the broad outlines of Grigg's work, the above summary does not do justice to the strengths of his style as he develops his thesis. On the one hand, he develops his argument with all of the rigor that is required of an academic text: his erudition is unquestionable, and he locates his discussion firmly in the context of traditional and contemporary theological thinking. The logic of his development is clear and precise, and he does full justice to the weaknesses in the theology he describes, the disagreements some readers may have with it, and the other possible directions feminist enactment theology might take. He has balanced this rigor most admirably with a tone and attitude that is ruminative, exploratory, open to the vast possibility inherent in his subject, a tone and attitude in keeping with the feminist theology he describes. For instance, he often uses the term "theologies" in discussing feminist enactment theology, which he describes as a "radically polysymbolic monotheism," always refusing the kind of closure and limitation of definition he associates more specifically with the traditional theism from which it is a departure. Some readers might be uncomfortable with his title; after all, just as the use of the pronoun "he" in religious ritual alienates some women, the use of the feminine could be equally alienating to male readers and those women who are comfortable with the traditional nomenclature. However, Grigg manages to build up to his use of "Goddess" in a way that attempts to defuse the word of the unsettling impact it might have on some readers and to prepare readers for its new significance in the theological context he outlines.

At the conclusion of his work, Grigg alludes to the "practical realization" of the theological task that can be implemented by the

theology under discussion. This adumbration is at once tantalizing and possibly frustrating. Having followed the development of his thesis and been brought to a level of positive curiosity about its potential as a belief system, the reader is ready for a fuller discussion of its practical implications and applications. This awaits, perhaps, a book whose import is less avowedly theoretical, one that can build on Grigg's philosophical foundation and bring it to the phase of application and implementation. This reader looks forward to such a work with great interest.