Re-imagining the divine in the world *as* she who changes

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My work in feminism and religion has been shaped by the conviction that we—women, men, and all living things—need the Goddess. I believe that the word "Goddess" can and must be spoken wherever feminists engage in re-imagining religion. In their most radical forms, feminist re-imaginings of God as She and as Sophia and Shekhina in Jewish and Christian contexts have much in common with feminist re-imaginings of Goddess in the Goddess movement. Yet when the word "Goddess" cannot be spoken, the Biblical and traditional condemnations of Goddesses and paganism are left intact and uncriticized[1]. And thus the full power of the divine as female will not be expressed.

The Goddess is a symbol of the divine as female and therefore of femaleness as divine or in the image of divinity. As I have argued in my widely reprinted essay, "Why Women Need the Goddess" and later in *Rebirth of the Goddess* re-imagining divine power as Goddess has important psychological *and* political consequences[2]. The first and most important of these is that the symbol of Goddess affirms the legitimacy and beneficence of female power – including the female will and the female body. This is psychologically and politically critical for women who have been raised in cultures where we have been taught that we must always be subservient to male power– in the family, in society, in the world. As Mary Daly so aptly noted, when God is imaged exclusively as male, then the male is God[3]. If women are to gain the power to resist our oppression, then we need, as Walker (1983, 1997) put it, to get the old white man off our eyeballs – and out of our body-minds. The uncritical hagiographizing provoked by the death of John Paul II in both religious and secular quarters testifies to the fact that the mystification of dominant male power continues to shape the societies in which we live[4].

To re-imagine the divine as female does not simply replace the exclusively male God with an exclusively female one, nor patriarchy with matriarchy. Feminist re-imaginings of God challenge all images and understandings of divine power as domination or power over, renaming divine power as power with – inspiration, sympathy, and love. This means that we must question the ways in which divine power has traditionally been understood as omnipotent, omniscient, unchanging, and unsympathetic or nonrelational power. In addition, traditional images of God as male have been understood through dualisms in which

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1. In March 2005, I was banned from speaking by Cardinal Pell of Sydney, Australia who stated it was not appropriate speak of "goddesses and paganism" on Catholic ground. See Sydney Morning Herald, "Pell Put Muzzle on Scholar, Say Feminists, March 9, 2005, 3.
2. "Why Women Need the Goddess" was originally presented to a small seminar at the American Academy of Religion meetings in 1977 and then presented to a crowd of more than 500 at the Great Goddess Re-emerging Conference at the University of Santa Cruz in the spring of 1978. It was first published in *Heresies* 5 (1978), and reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 279-300, which sold over 100,000 copies, in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* which has probably sold at least as many copies, and in scores of other anthologies. Given that this essay and others are readily available, there is no valid intellectual reason for the repeated statement that the Goddess movement is apolitical. Also see *Rebirth of the Goddess* (New York: Rout ledge, 1998 [1997]).
3. See (Daly: 1973).
4. In Greece, where I live, television news covered the dying, death, lying-in-state, and burial of the pope in excruciating detail, always followed by someone speaking of what a great pope he was, never mentioning that it was under his leadership that the question of women priests was dismissed, that he stifled dissent and packed the house of cardinals with yes-men, or that he opposed homosexuality etc.

a male God is identified with the unchanging, the rational, the conscious, the soul, the absolute, and the infinite, while femaleness (and sin) have been identified with the changing, the irrational, the unconscious, the body, finitude, and nature. Thus when we re-imagine the divine as female we begin to re-imagine the "despised other"– not only the female, but also the changing, the nonrational, the body, finitude, and nature as part of the divine. This does not mean that the old dualisms are simply inverted, and thus that any positive values associated with maleness or rationality are denied. Nor does advocating female images for divine power mean that there is no place for (non-dominant) images of God as male in prayer and worship in mixed gender communities. In my recent book *She Who Changes* (Christ: 2003), I show how a feminist process paradigm – based on the insights of process philosophy – can help us in the task of re-imagining the divine in the female body and in the world. But before I turn to that subject it is important to clear up a number of misunderstandings that seem to crop up whenever Goddess spirituality is discussed.

It is often said that focusing attention on changing our images of divine power is the privilege of elite white women who have the time and energy to deal with so-called "psychological" issues. Poor women and women of color, it is sometimes said, do not have the time to devote to "psychological" issues, but must focus on survival and "political" resistance to more obvious sources of oppression. Yet I first heard God imaged as female in the words of a black woman in Ntozake Shange's play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.* This woman had just narrated the murder of her children by their father who held them out the window and threatened to drop them if she did not take him back. Ntozake Shange was criticized for bringing up issues that could divide the black community at a time when (it was said) it needed to hold together against the racism of white society. I suspect that Shange was not unaware of this potential criticism of her work when she chose to tell a "black girl's story" as truthfully as she could. Shange felt that black women's liberation depended on freeing black women from the mystification of male power that made it seem right for them to suffer abuse from men. She also felt that re-imagining the divine in a black female body - in her words, *"I found god in myself and I loved her/I loved her fiercely"* – would help black women to gain power and control over their own bodies and their own lives. Audre Lorde invoked African Goddesses in her poetry as symbols of black female power[5]. Walker (1997: 25-26) has identified herself as a pagan who worships Mother Earth.

Like Shange, Walker was accused of dividing the race by mentioning black men's abuse of black women. Alice Walker's gutsy definition of womanism inspires womanist theology, yet Walker's embrace of a female God and paganism is erased when it is stated that "the Goddess" is a "psychological" issue exclusively relevant to white women.

In a world where women and girls of every color and in almost every culture suffer incest, battery, rape, involuntary infection with AIDS, and murder at the hands of men every minute of every day, can challenging the mystification of male power be only a white women's issue? In a world where a born-again white male Christian president of the United States collaborates with the male hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and traditional male Muslim clerics to withhold birth control and access to abortion from poor women around the world, can challenging the mystification of male power inherent in images of God be only a psychological issue? In a world where Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders raise the call to war "in the name of God," can challenging the mystification of power as domination inherent in images of God be of

5. See (Veaux: 2004).

concern only to white women? In a world that stands on the brink of nuclear and ecological destruction, can re-imagining the divine in the world be only a psychological issue?

Re-imagining the male image of God as female is to challenge the hegemony of male power as domination or power over – power which is exercised over women, men, and other beings in the web of life. To create alternatives to the image of male power as domination is a deeply political issue – one that is relevant to all women of every color and of every culture – and to men and to all living things. The image of God as a dominant male other functions to make male domination seem to be the most natural form of power. Thus it is not surprising that feminist images of Goddess and God-She provoke resistance within every community where they are introduced. To question God-He is to remove the veil that shrouds the mystification of male power. For most people, both women and men, rich and poor, this will be deeply threatening.

Indeed, for all that Goddess has been said to be a white women's issue, in white churches and synagogues in the US, Canada, England, Australia, and New Zealand – including most of those with female ministers and rabbis – God continues to be invoked as male, as Father, Lord, and King[6]. In the most liberal of churches and synagogues the ubiquitous "God-He" may be avoided where possible, but there are few congregations in which positive images of the divine as female – God-She, God-Sophia, God-Shekhina, God the Mother, God the Daughter, God the Sister, let alone Goddess – can be regularly invoked. Why is this? I suggest that it is because images of God-She and Goddess are deeply upsetting to a status quo of male dominance that is still alive and well in religious institutions and in the larger societies in which they are situated. Men who are comfortable with the mystification of male power that justifies their own regular or occasional assumption of dominant roles and behaviors in family and in society will of course feel an immediate challenge. But so will women who live within relationships that depend on not challenging – or not openly challenging – the mystification of male power in family and society that allows them to "keep their men" and "keep them happy." In addition, and perhaps even more upsetting to traditional habits of thought, once we begin to imagine alternatives to God as a dominating other, we begin to question assumptions about divine omnipotence[7]. But if God is not omnipotent, then is any one individual "in control" of the world? And if not, who will save us from ourselves – or more to the point perhaps, from George Bush and his cronies? Yet if God-She and Goddess cannot be invoked in Christian and Jewish worship for these and other reasons, then, I suggest, these religions continue to perpetuate the mystification of dominant male power.

The idea that Goddess is a white women's issue may have its source in sociological fact. The Goddess movement began as and by default has remained – because its insights have not been accepted in religious institutions or in the academy – a grassroots and countercultural feminist movement. Images of Goddess have taken root in the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of women and some men who have read books in feminist theology and theology (published primarily but not exclusively in English in the past twenty-five years) and who have participated in the Goddess movement inspired by them (which is strongest in English-speaking countries, including the United States, Canada, England, Australia, and New Zealand). It is true that the women who consider themselves

6. "*Most female rabbis and priests . . . for the sake of peace within their congregations, find themselves able to make only minor adjustments to the received patriarchal model of God held by the majority of their congregants*" My discussions with Jewish and Christian women confirm this. (RAPHAEL:1999, 52).

7. I discuss omnipotence as a theological mistake inspired by the notion of God as a male dominant other in *She Who Changes.*

part of these movements tend to be fairly well-educated and are primarily – but not exclusively – white. To say that the Goddess movement is only white ignores the participation of nonwhite women in it from its beginnings[8]. The greater numbers of white women in the movement may have more to do with conditions of access than anything else. Goddess feminists are not necessarily middle class, if this means they all have careers in which they can make a lot of money, though most are living above the poverty level[9].

Because it celebrates female power, the Goddess movement is attractive to lesbians, but also to other women both married and single, to all who have freed or are freeing themselves from the mystification of male power.

Contemporary Goddess spirituality is often criticized for not providing roles for men or male imagery of the divine. Yet there are feminist Goddess groups – including the Reclaiming movement founded by Starhawk and others – that are open to men and that have re-imagined male imagery for the divine[10].

On the other hand, many women practice feminist Goddess spirituality in groups that are for women only and that use exclusively or primarily female imagery for the divine power. Yet most of the women in such groups have no particular antipathy for men as such – many of them are or were married or have male lovers or male children. Nor do they believe that Goddess worship should always and everywhere exclude men. In the best of all possible worlds, we would all be feminists and images of Goddess as well as non-dominating images of God would be widely accepted. Like the Womanchurch movement, the Goddess movement's separatism is for the most part practical rather than ideological: women often find it easier to explore and express their emerging spiritualities with other feminist women.

It is not true (as is so often said) that the largely white women members of the Goddess movement are apolitical – content to reap (shall we say) the rewards of white supremacy and colonialism. To the contrary, Starhawk, the most well-known twentieth century advocate of the Goddess is also a leader in the anti-globalization movement, while Charlene Spretnak is a leader in the Green political movement in the United States[11].

Other members of the Goddess movement are active in a wide variety of feminist, ecological, and social justice causes[12].

Nor is it true (as is sometimes stated) that the "Goddess is white." Though some members of the Goddess movement have focused on Celtic, Greek, or Old European Goddesses, Goddess traditions can be found in every land—Goddesses are white, black, brown, yellow, and red. Many white women have been exploring non-white Goddesses or traditions, while others, wary of colonial appropriation, support and seek to learn from non-white women who reclaim Goddess traditions rooted in their own cultures.

8. The Goddess group I participated in for a decade in the late seventies and eighties was co-led by E. Carmen Torres and often visited by a well-known black ecofeminist. Also see, Sabrina Sojourner, "In the House of Yemanja: The Goddess Heritage of Black Women," in Gloria Wade-Gales, ed. *My Soul is a Witness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985) and *Carnival of the Spirit* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) and Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Tracey E. Hucks, "'Burning with a Flame in America': African American Women in African-Derived Traditions," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17/2 (fall 2001), 89-106, Arisika Razak, "'I Found God in Myself': Sacred Images of African and African-American Women" and Miri Hunter Haruach, "'You Acting Womanish': The Queen of Sheba as an Ancestral Grandmother," both presented at the 2002 meetings of the American Academy of Religion; the founding of a Goddess movement in Korea by Chung Hyun Kyung following the publication of several books on the Goddess published in Korean, also discussed at the 2002 AAR, the new column in *SageWoman* magazine by Stephanie Rose Bird; artists such as Earthlyn Manuel and AfraShe Asungi.
9. Starhawk asserts that many members of the Reclaiming movement should be considered lower middle class, Marguerite Rigoliosso, "Interview with Starhawk," *Feminist Theology* 13/2, 178.
10. See www.reclaiming.org.
11. See (Starhawk: 2003; Capra & Spretnak: 1984).
12. See (Rountree: 2003).

The *sociological fact* that the members of the Goddess movement are primarily white, educated, and not living below the poverty level should not be taken to mean that Goddess can have no relevance to poor women or to women of color. Why has this sociological fact so often been interpreted to suggest that Goddesses are exclusively "a white woman's thing"? Could it be that as Judith Plaskow wrote, "The deep resistance called forth by her [the Goddess's] naming indicates that the needs that she answered are still with us" (PLASKOW: 1983, 230).

In other words, is dismissing the Goddess movement as white and middle class, a way to avoid the challenge that the image of the Goddess represents to the mystifications of male power that *continue to function* in recognized and unrecognized ways within Christianities and Judaisms? And if so, is a radical dimension of the feminist challenge to traditional religions being sidestepped? At what cost?

Within Western frameworks influenced by patriarchy in late antiquity and in Christianity, Goddesses were identified exclusively with fertility and reproduction. It is hard to get beyond this mindset, because it is so deeply engrained. Yet it diminishes the powers that Goddesses once had. In prepatriarchal cultures, as Marija Gimbutas has shown, Goddesses were symbolic of all the creative powers in the universe, not only the power to give birth to children and crops, but also the creativity that led to the invention of agriculture, weaving, pottery-making, poetry, song, and writing itself[13].

Some non-feminist advocates of the re-emergence of the Goddess (including Jung and some of his followers) identify the Goddess primarily with the "negative" or despised side of the classical dualisms such as the body, nature, and the unconscious. Some Jungians still consider rational consciousness to be "male" and the unconscious to be "female." In contrast, Goddess feminists call for a transformation of dualistic habits of thought, critique any and all understandings of divine power as power over, and advocate embodied thinking (which includes both rational and other than rational elements)[14].

Unfortunately, these arguments (which I and many others have been making for over twenty-five years) still need to be reiterated nearly every time we speak to other feminists about Goddess. Many criticisms of the Goddess movement are repeated again and again by Christian, Jewish, and secular feminists with no recognition or apparent knowledge that some of them are factually untrue (for example that Goddess feminists are not political) or that others have been responded to time and again (for example that Goddess feminism replaces a male dominant God with a female dominant Goddess). That these misunderstandings are not cleared up once and for all is one indication of the deep and sometimes unrecognized powers of dominant ideologies to (de) form understanding and to shape our feminist conversations.

In *She Who Changes,* I explore the deeper implications of re-imagining God-He as God-She and Goddess through a feminist process paradigm. Process philosophy, associated with Alfred North Whitehead and Hartshorne (1987, 168), is a philosophy of relationship and changing life that provides an attractive alternative to ways of thinking rooted in classical dualism. The re-emergence of Goddess and God-She present a radical challenge to what Hartshorne called the six theological errors of classical theism. I believe that one of the reasons that theologians and philosophers have for the most part not questioned notions of male power as domination inherent the images of God as a Lord, a King, or a patriarchal Father is because the tradition known as classical theism provides philosophical justification for understanding divine power as unlimited, which in turn makes dominant male images of God seem natural and inevitable.

13. See (Gimbutas: 1989).

14. See (Christ: 1998).

In "classical theism," so named because its ideas of perfection are taken from "classical" philosophy (especially from Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists), perfect power is imagined as absolute and unlimited power. That which is perfect must also be unchanging because to change is to become more or less than perfect. That which is unchanging also cannot be related to anything else, because to be related is to change and to change is to be imperfect. Therefore, God cannot be related (in any way that would limit God's power) to the world or its creatures. Therefore, as Charles Hartshorne put it succinctly, God's power is envisioned as that of a tyrant who is not required to take any account of the needs of his subjects.

Most Christian and many Jewish theologies can be viewed as attempting to interpret the God of the Bible as Lord, King, and Father through the lens of classical understandings of power and perfection[15].

Indeed elements of this kind of thinking are found most theologies. This does not mean that theologians in the classical tradition do not also speak of God as love. However, for them the love of God is more difficult to explain than his power, and God's love for the world is always subordinated to his awesome and unlimited power.

Hartshorne identifies the six common theological mistakes of classical theism as: God is perfect and therefore unchangeable, omnipotence, omniscience, God's unsympathetic goodness, immortality as a career after death, and revelation as infallible. These theological mistakes derived from classical philosophy are incorporated into the common image of God as an old white man sitting on a throne. Notions of God's omnipotence and omniscience are presumed to be part of the common picture, as are belief in immortality and infallible revelation. Indeed, these ideas are widely accepted and uncriticized. However, the idea of God's unsympathetic goodness, the idea that God is not truly related to the world or affected by it, will probably seem foreign, for God is traditionally understood to care about the world. Incredibly, though, theologians past and present have argued that God cannot really love the world because any form of relationship would inevitably limit his power. The notion that God is more powerful than good is so taken for granted by so many people that it can even work its way into feminist conceptions of divinity[16]. Only clarity and vigilance will protect us from unconsciously or unwittingly slipping back into familiar patterns as we re-imagine God.

In my book I re-imagine the divine in the world as She Who Changes:

> She changes everything She touches and everything She touches changes. The world is Her body. The world is in Her and She is in the world. She surrounds us like the air we breathe. She is as close to us as our own breath. She is energy, movement, life, and change. She is the ground of freedom, creativity, sympathy, understanding, and love. In Her we live, and move, and co-create our being. She is always there for each and every one of us, particles of atoms, cells, animals, and human animals. We are all precious in Her sight. She understands and remembers us with unending sympathy. She inspires us to live creatively, joyfully, and in harmony with others in the web of life. Yet choice is ours. The world that is Her body is co-created. The choices of every individual particle of an atom, every individual cell, every individual animal, every individual human animal play a part. The adventure of life on planet earth and in the universe as a whole will be enhanced or diminished by the choices we make. She hears the cries of the world, sharing our sorrows with infinite compassion.

15. Hartshorne (1987, 168) names the following theologians as among those exemplifying this trend: Philo Judaeus, a Jewish theologian of the first century CE, early Christian theologians Augustine and Anselm, Islamic theologian al-Ghazali (1058-1111 c.e), medieval Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas, Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin, and more recently, the philosophers Descartes, Leibniz, Kant (in his *Ethics*), and the American theologian Jonathan Edwards. He adds, "the list could be very long." See Hartshorne, "Pantheism and Panentheism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 11, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillian, 1987), 168.

16. Some understandings of liberation theology perpetuate the notion of God as a dominating (and warlike) other. Some conceptions of the Goddess imagine Her as having determined everything that happens in the world, i.e., as a dominant other and as omnipotent.

> In a still, small voice, She whispers the desire of Her heart: Life is meant to be enjoyed. She sets before us life and death. We can choose life. Change is. Touch is. Everything we touch can change (CHRIST: 2003)[17].

This image of She Who Changes is an invocation, a prayer consciously informed by the feminist process paradigm, just as traditional images of God are informed by the assumptions of classical dualism and classical theism. I prefer to invoke and pray to the divine power as "She" or "Goddess" in order to break the hold of the images of God-He in individuals (myself included) and cultures shaped by the Bible. But when speaking philosophically about the divine power as I understand it, I use the inclusive term "Goddess/God" because I know divine power to be inclusive of both male and female – and everything else that exists.

The image of She Who Changes challenges traditional piety and the philosophical traditions used to explain and justify it. Whereas classical theism begins with a denial of the value of changing life, process philosophy affirms that change is the inherent in every individual life in the universe at every moment and that change is the nature of the evolutionary process of life as a whole. Human beings were not created half way between animals and angels, as classical theism asserts. We evolved through a process of change within the web of life, sharing the capacity to feel and feel the feelings of others and to exercise creative freedom with all other individuals – divine, human, and other than human[18]. Goddess/God changes with the experiences of every individual in the changing world that is the divine body, while remaining unchangeable only in one respect: Goddess/God will always and everywhere relate to the world with creativity, sympathy, and love.

Classical theism considered relationship to be a limitation and envisioned living alone or apart from others to be the most perfect state for both divinity and humanity. Process philosophy affirms touch or relationship as fundamental for all life, including divine life. Process philosophy understands Goddess/God to be the most relational of all relational beings, the most sympathetic of all sympathetic powers in the universe. In classical theism, divine power is unlimited. An omnipotent God is in control of the world; everything – even what appears to be evil – happens according to divine will and purpose. Process philosophy says that the power of Goddess/God is power with, not power over. The assertion of God's absolute and unlimited power creates the problem of evil: How could a good and loving God allow so much suffering to exist? Process philosophy answers that Goddess/God did not create suffering. The world is co-created by every individual in it. Death is part of life, but much of what we know as suffering is created by human beings. Goddess/God is with us in our suffering and inspires our efforts to lessen or transform it. Classical theism states that the goal of human life is to rise above the changing body and to share in the immortal life of God. Process philosophy asks us to enjoy finite and changing life that ends in death.

The omnipotent God of classical theism is said to be the author of infallible revelation, given in the form of texts, teachings, traditions, or inspired individuals. Process philosophy counters that all human knowing is embodied and embedded in the world – and that it will always be fragmentary and in process. Classical theism asserts that an omniscient God already knows the fate of the universe. Process philosophy asks us to consider that the future of the universe is unknown even to Goddess/God. Though shaped by the past, the future will also be shaped by the

17. This description of She Who Changes is created in contrast to the picture of God as an Old White Man in chapter one. Echoes from the Bible, a Christian Sunday school hymn, the invocation to Kwan Yin, and the Reclaiming chant are intended.

18. The notion that the ability to feel and feel the feelings of others in some sense can be found throughout the web of life down to the smallest particles of an atom is central in process philosophy.

choices of a myriad of individual wills. This means that the outcome of human moral efforts to save or improve the world cannot be assured. The reason for hope is the open-ended creative process of life itself, which is supported and sustained by Goddess/God.

Process philosophy thus offers feminists a well-thought out metaphysical alternative to dualistic thinking and classical theism. Many feminists have already been moving in the direction of affirming the process values of relationship and mutuality and like process philosophy affirm bodies – human, divine, and all others – and the presence of the divine in the world. Process philosophy shares with feminist theology and thealogy a common interest in restoring the body and the world body, disparaged and denied in classical theism. What process philosophy has frequently failed to recognize is that restoring the body and the world body has enormous consequences for women. A feminist process paradigm will make feminist insight an integral part of process thinking, ensuring that process philosophers understand the body, the world body, and the divine body in physical terms and not simply as metaphysical concepts.

While some feminists are content to work out new ways of re-imagining the divine in the world without resorting to metaphysics, I believe that feminists need metaphysics—comprehensive feminist understandings of the world and our human place in it. Otherwise, our insights run the risk of being simply a collection of (more or less easily) refuted intuitions and assertions. Process philosophy can help us to see that our intuitions and assertions are interconnected and that they hold together in a worldview. Moreover, if we do not create well thought-out alternatives to the longstanding assumptions of classical dualism and classical theism, we will have to reinvent the world every time we open our mouths. Unlike many other metaphysical systems, process philosophy affirms finitude, change, and the fragmentariness of every human vision—thus it is inherently open to correction from a variety of perspectives, including those of feminists.

But what does process philosophy have to offer the poor who have placed their hope in the power of God to vanquish their oppressors? This hope is realistic only if we understand the power of God as power over rather than power with. As I discuss in my book, the power to intervene in history with a mighty arm is not the kind of power Goddess/God has. Goddess/God is with the poor and the oppressed in their suffering. Goddess/God wants all of us to enjoy life and to increase the possibilities of enjoyment for others. Goddess/God is always persuading us to co-create a more joyful for world for all people and all beings in the web of life. This is the liberating power of Goddess/God. Goddess/God can empower us to change the world, but Goddess/God cannot change it for us. In the long run, understanding divine power as power with may be more liberating than the hope that a dominating other will come in glory to destroy the wicked and vindicate the oppressed.

Building on biblical stories in which God acts to punish the wicked and liberate the oppressed, some liberation theologians speak of God's concern for those who are suffering as a "preferential option" for the poor. Many Christian feminists speak of God's "preferential option" for women, especially for poor women, the poorest of the poor[19]. Can process philosophy affirm God's preferential option for poor women? The answer to this question is "yes" and "no." Goddess/God shares the suffering of poor women and profoundly desires their liberation. However, the idea that God has a preferential option for the poor is an extension of the biblical idea of "chosenness." This idea is expressed in the Bible as the notion that God chose the Hebrew nation out of all the nations in the world to be his

19. This view is widespread and can be found in the works of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, among many others.

special people. In the understanding of many Christians, God then chose the Christian people to carry out his mission in the world. For many Americans, God next chose the American people to bring freedom and democracy to the world. Traditional Islam alleges that the followers of the Koran are God's chosen ones.

The notion of chosenness has been criticized in many contexts – and the use that is being made of it by Christians, Jews, and Moslems in the Middle East today should lead us to question it again. Viewing one's own group as chosen by God creates feelings of national, ethnic, and religious superiority, fuels ignorance and intolerance, and stifles criticism and self-criticism. Yet it has not been adequately understood that the notion of God's "preferential" option for the poor arises from and perpetuates the idea of chosenness. Naomi Goldenberg has pointed out that Christian feminists sometimes use the notion of God's preferential option for the poor to assert the moral and intellectual superiority of their own versions of Christian feminism[20].

I do not believe we need to speak of divine preference of any kind in order to assert that Goddess/God cares deeply about those who are suffering and profoundly desires their liberation. Process philosophy understands the sympathy of Goddess/God to be wide and deep enough to take in the whole world. The notion that God prefers one group to others has gotten us into enough trouble already. I cannot imagine why feminists would want to perpetuate it.

In this case, a feminist process paradigm cautions feminists to be more careful when using biblical metaphors and habits of thinking. In a feminist process ethics of liberation, ethical action would be inspired by feeling the feelings of others and based in an understanding that life in the body and the world is meant to be enjoyed by all individuals in the world. It would take account of the social construction of reality and the institutional character of oppression. It would name human beings as responsible for creating structures of justice and injustice. Yet it would also recognize that we are not alone in our suffering, our joy, and our struggles to create a better world. The divine power is always present, sharing our suffering, helping us to find a way through it, and encouraging us to co-create a more joy-filled world. I believe this is the only firm basis for spiritual feminist ethics.

Process philosophy's understanding of divine power as power with not power over makes it clear that symbols of God as a male dominating other are not appropriate. New symbols of the divine as female and the divine as male must be created or discovered. Process philosophy can help us here as well. Process philosophy understands every moment as a new creative synthesis of the past. This insight can help us to see that the feminist process of "re-imagining," shaping new symbols using the resources of traditions, is not new. Ancient Hebrew, early Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious traditions were formed through a process of creative re-imagining of existing religious symbols from new standpoints. Feminist re-imagining is not a departure from the way symbols have always been created, but a continuation of it. What may be different is that we are conscious of our part in the process of symbol creation. While we may say that new symbols are inspired by our experiences of Goddess/God, feminists also acknowledge that symbols are created by human beings. Because we know the potential of religious symbols to heal and harm, we recognize the need to ensure that the symbols that we create enhance and affirm life.

Process philosophy also provides a framework that can be useful as we re-imagine symbols. For example, process philosophy understands divine power to be relational. The divine power responds to the lives of all individuals in the world with perfect sympathy. This understanding suggests the appropriateness

20. See (Goldenberg: [s.d.], 203-211).

of personal imagery of divine power as caring about the fate of the world and of prayer directed to a divine power understood as "with us" in our lives. Process philosophy's insight that the world is the body of divinity shows that it fitting to use female, male, and other than human imagery – including animal, cellular, mineral imagery – to express the understanding that all is "in" Goddess/God and that Goddess/God is fully present in "in" the world. Process philosophy's understanding of divine power as power with, not power over, can help us to guard against unconsciously re-introducing images of domination, including those derived from any hierarchical or violent tradition, into feminist re-imaginings of the divine in the world. As we plumb traditions and tap our creative powers, it is useful to have a framework that can help us to recognize life-affirming imagery and to explain (or defend) its use to others. Process philosophy can also help us to bring the underlying philosophical implications of re-imagining the divine in the world to consciousness.

As part of the process of re-imaging the divine in the world as Goddess, I have rewritten the traditional Roman Catholic prayer known as the "Hail Mary." As I am quite certain that many of the prayers we identify as Christian or Jewish are re-imaginings of pagan traditions, I find it natural to continue the process of re-imagining. Rewriting traditional songs and prayers is not a solely intellectual exercise, though the intellect does play a role. Sometimes new words come to me while taking a bath or in the course of a ritual. At other times, I live in the process of re-imagining for weeks or months before the words feel right to me. I re-imagined the "Hail Mary" prayer after it entered my mind when I was standing in front of an icon of the Panagia (a Greek title for Mary that I translate as She Who Is All Holy) in Crete. I sensed that it would be good to have all-purpose prayer memorized so that I could use it when I need it. Yet the words of the traditional "Hail Mary" prayer no longer expressed my understanding. Thus I re-imagined it as "Hail Goddess"[21].

> Others might prefer to say "Hail Sophia" or "Hail Shekhina."
> Hail Goddess full of grace!
> Blessed are you,
> and blessed are all the fruits of your womb.
> All Holy Mother of All!
> Be with us now and in the hour of our need.
> Blessed be. (or: Amen)

As I have re-imagined it, this prayer expresses the idea that the divine power is "in" the whole world and "with us" in our daily lives. In the traditional prayer Mary is the mediator between human beings and a distant in judgmental God. In my prayer the Goddess herself is understood to be present in and to care about our lives. In the Hail Mary prayer Mary is blessed for the one unique and special fruit of her womb, Jesus. In my prayer all the fruits of the womb of the Goddess, all individuals in the world, human and nonhuman, are equally blessed. Instead of asking Mary to "pray for us sinners," I ask Goddess to "be with us." According to process understanding the divine power is always "with us," yet the purpose of prayer is to bring us consciously into relationship with divinity. I omitted the word "sinners" which implies that the divine power's primary relation to our lives is judgment: reward in heaven or punishment in hell. I changed the last words of the prayer from "in the hour of our death" to "in the hour of our need" in order to underscore the fact that in feminist and process understanding death is not, as classical traditions imagined, the enemy of life.

Another prayer that I have rewritten is the traditional benediction. I re-imagined it as the

21. I am happy for others to use this prayer in rituals or liturgies, if it is attributed to Carol P. Christ when printed. The original words of the prayer are: Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

United States was preparing to invade Iraq, envisioning it as a call to resist war and to work to create peace on earth. In the original blessing, the priest or minister asks the Lord to bless us and keep us, the light of His countenance to shine upon us, and Him to give us peace. It reflects the traditional understanding of divine power as power over, "out there," like the light of the sun illuminating a dark planet. Identifying divine power with light but not darkness, the blessing enshrines racist habits of thinking. Attributing the power to give peace to God, it denies the roles played by human choice in the creation of both war and peace. In the re-imagined benediction, the community asks the divine power as Wisdom (Sophia) to dwell within us. It understands divine power as power with, inspiring us to co-create peace on earth.

May Goddess bless us and keep us.
May Wisdom dwell within us.
May we create peace[22].
Blessed be.

In conclusion, I urge women and men everywhere to seek the Goddess in their own experiences and traditions, to speak her name boldly and widely, and to explore the possibilities inherent in a feminist process paradigm for articulating a radically new understanding of divine and human power in the web of life.

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22. My version can be used if credited to Carol P. Christ when printed. Shekhina or Sophia may be substituted for Goddess in the first line. A version of the traditional benediction is as follows: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.