

FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND ANTI-JUDAISM

The Status of the Discussion and the Context of the Problem in the Federal Republic of Germany

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You have come to a country from which, exactly fifty years ago, in the year 1939, the Second World War began—a war which affected nearly all the countries from which you come, and which, especially for those among you who are Jewish, is still vividly present as the ghastly horror ending in the Shoah.

This is the context of the anti-Judaism problem within feminist theology in the Federal Republic of Germany. It is a context that makes it impossible for us as women, especially perhaps as women who understand themselves as feminist theologians, to avoid the confrontation with anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. However, it is also a context in which there are only a very few Jews who can be helpful or corrective in our discussion. Therefore, it is especially important to us that Judith has come despite her reservations and has made us aware of our anti-judaistic prejudices, while at the same time giving us insight into the Jewish feminist discussion. The three areas of anti-Judaistic speech and thought she mentioned—I will simply call them the stereotypes of the Old Testament God of Vengeance, the Goddess murder and the “feminist” Jesus—these stereotypes have become basic themes in our self-critical feminist examination during recent years.

First, I would like to give a short outline of the evolution and status of the discussion regarding anti-Judaism and feminist theology in the Federal Republic of Germany. Then, I would like to discuss some aspects of the problem that seem central from my point of view, and clearly pertain to the situation in our country, although I hope they might be of general interest.

The Course of the Discussion

The year 1986 was a significant date for the confrontation with anti-Judaism in feminist theology. This was the year of the so-called *Historikerstreit* (a dispute among historians): it pertained to the discussion conducted by men with political power and especially scientific status with regard to the interpretation of the fascist German past. This discussion, in short, tended and intended to free Germans from the burden of a past that

can neither be forgotten nor made up for. In concrete terms, they tried to explain German fascism and particularly the incomparable mass murder of European Jews by Hitler's supposed fear of the Bolshevist class murders under Lenin. Furthermore, they wanted to make us understand that German soldiers on the Eastern front had to continue to fight even after Stalingrad, although precisely this allowed the continuation of murder in the death camps behind their backs. The rule was supposed to be that Germans should take care of Germans first. And were not, as they claimed, hundreds of thousands of German women and children who were left behind threatened by the vengeance of the Red Army?

By playing off the Shoah against the suffering of German women and children, the anti-Semitism still smoldering in our country was rekindled. One could no longer understand why an American president and a German chancellor should not celebrate reconciliation over the graves of soldiers (among them, SS members) and immediately afterward visit the site of a former concentration camp (Bitburg/Bergen-Belsen). Much less comprehensible was why precisely in Frankfurt the ruins of the former *Judengasse* (Jewish lane) should be preserved where they were uncovered (Börneplatz). Thus, with the public demand to forget, the new extreme right-wing was given a greater chance to be elected to parliament. Nineteen-eighty-six was also the year in which the discussion of anti-Judaism found broader response within feminist theology. Although Bernadette Brooten had already drawn attention to anti-judaistic tendencies in feminist interpretation of Jesus with her *Tübinger theologische Quartalschrift* essay in 1981 about Jewish women at the time of Jesus ("Jüdinnen zur Zeit Jesu"), and, although there were individual voices from within the Jewish-Christian dialogue warning about such growing tendencies, external events were obviously necessary to arouse more sensitivity. In the summer of 1986, again in Frankfurt, the Festival of a Thousand Women took place in order to help finance the exhibition of Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party." At this event fascist associations were stirred through colors and gestures—the colors black-white-red and the so-called Roman greeting are, in fact, no longer guilt-free in our country. After that, the demand arose among feminists that women finally direct their attention to this era of German history and its anti-Semitism.

In the spring of that year an important impetus was given to the feminist-theological discussion by Katharina von Kellenbach with her extremely critical reflections on anti-Judaism in biblical research on matriarchy ("Anti-judaismus in biblischer Matriarchatsforschung?") appearing in the *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift*. Here she dealt with unreflected German history (Nazism), the omission of the history of Christianity during the search for the lost goddess, and the associated accusation of goddess murder, the scapegoat mechanism feminists were using against the Jews. Many women were startled by Katharina's statements.

In November 1986, a conference took place in Arnoldshain intending to take the next step beyond Katharina's criticism. Its goal was to relate feminist theology to the long-established Jewish-Christian dialogue in a constructive manner. A large number of feminist theologians took part in this conference, a sign of the discussion which had since become established. We soon realized, however, that it was still too early for this step. We would first have to undertake the basic and painful task of recognizing Christian feminist anti-Judaism in its entire scope and working it through. This began at about the same time at the Tenth Jewish-Christian-Muslim Women's Conference in Bendorf near Koblenz, although not from a feminist perspective.

After the reports of these conferences in both the *Allgemeine Jüdische Wochenzeitung* and the feminist periodical *Schlangenbrut*, the discussion began to spread, but also to polarize in the following year (1987).

Outside the feminist movement, the accusation of anti-Judaism was taken up and directed against feminist theology in general by both men and women, without acknowledging that this discussion was being conducted within feminist theology itself. This led many feminist theologians to suspect that the intention of these reports was primarily to suppress the justified concerns of women in the realm of politics, especially church politics. It also reduced their willingness to confront this accusation at all. However, two of our feminist-theological networks—Netzwerk feministischer Theologie and Arbeitsgemeinschaft Frauen in den Kirchen—took up the problem and made it the subject of an elaborate joint declaration. In the press a number of reputable women theologians also distanced themselves from anti-judaistic tendencies in feminism and at the same time warned against using this accusation as a weapon against feminist theology.

Today, a good two years later, I think we can see an established sensitivity, or at least an attentiveness among feminist theologians to the problem of anti-Judaism. In the meantime there have been numerous seminars at the university level on this theme, conducted by female lecturers invited for one or two semesters but not permanently employed. The few women feminist theologians in university positions who have become actively engaged in the discussion incorporate this aspect in their teaching as a matter of course. The Evangelischer Kirchentag in Berlin in 1989 dealt expressly with feminist theology and anti-Judaism within the context of a podium discussion in the study group Jews and Christians. Moreover, there was a public discussion with Susannah Heschel about her critical analysis of German Christian feminist theology. At the level of Protestant and Catholic academies in the FRG (educational establishments supported by the Protestant Churches or Catholic dioceses), Arnoldshain deserves special mention because it has continuously offered seminars on feminist theology within the Jewish-Christian context. For example, Susannah Heschel and Eveline Goodman-Thau have been at several conferences since 1986. With its long

tradition of Jewish-Christian cooperation, Arnoldshain is an important place for women feminist theologians, who can acquire there the profound knowledge of Judaism which, as Judith implied, is the most effective measure against anti-Judaism.

Attempts were made in the Protestant academies at Tutzing (Starnberger See) and Hofgeismar (near Kassel) to bring together the researchers on patriarchy with both their Christian and Jewish critics. Above all, the difficulties of such discussions became obvious: the highly emotional involvement of all participants; the fear that the still fragile seedling of feminist theology in our country would be uprooted; but also, the simple refusal to communicate. On the Catholic side, the traditional Christian-Jewish vacation seminar of the Diocesan Academy Aachen took up the theme *The Woman in Judaism and Christianity* this year, and invited both a Jewish and a Christian feminist as speakers and discussion partners. Although I personally judged this conference a success, it demonstrated how little feminist questions are present or possible within the context of the so-called Jewish-Christian dialogue in the FRG. The numerous Jewish-Christian societies have, for the most part, still not acknowledged that there is a Jewish feminist theology, and consider Christian feminist theology without exception to be blasphemy or exalted and poorly reflected "emancipatedness." The coordinating committee of the Jewish-Christian societies in the FRG had, in fact, already dealt twice with the question of anti-Judaism in feminist theology. Instead of making an effort to recognize the inner-feminist self-criticism, however, they simply invited one of the most controversial feminists on each of the two occasions.

At the parish level the discussion still hardly exists, primarily because feminist theology has only recently entered consciousness there. We might hope that the many recent publications will further the discussion at all levels. I will not mention individual articles here, but merely the two collections of essays that have been published thus far. One was edited by Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz under the title *Verdrängte Vergangenheit, die uns bedrängt* ("the repressed past which oppresses us"), and contains seven essays, two by Jewish women, who approach the problem of Christian feminist anti-Judaism with its manifold aspects. The other was edited by Christine Schaumberger under the title *Weil wir nicht vergessen wollen* ("because we do not want to forget"), and sets the anti-Judaism debate in a broader German context, so that, for example, the questions of racism or German mother-ideology are also taken up in individual essays.

Central Issues in the Discussion

I come now to the central issues in the discussion of anti-Judaism in feminist theological perspective. After Judith's presentation, it is appropriate to refer to the three areas she mentioned: the Jew Jesus, the God of the

Hebrew Bible, and the Goddess question. I want to relate these three themes to each other and thereby make clear which problems we have already dealt with and which have only been outlined.

Let us begin with the specifically Christian problem of the person of Jesus Christ. The history of Christianity is the history of the religion that calls upon this person and in his name brought suffering and injustice to the Jews. Judith has shown very impressively how women who consider themselves feminist have not yet been able to avoid the basic Christian dilemma—that of maintaining the particularity of Jesus, but not at the expense of the Jews. She described this basic dilemma with thoughts and quotations from Rosemary Radford Ruether, whom she at the same time criticized for her “mythmaking.” This made clear to me once more how very necessary constant external correction is to us and how wrong it is to think we can finally rest at the present level of awareness.

I would evaluate the situation in our country as follows. With respect to the historical questions, feminist exegetes naturally make a serious effort to consider the Jesus movement as a *Jewish* movement within the diversity of Judaism at the time of the Second Temple and to describe it in its particularity while taking care not to degrade other groups. The christological consequences, on the other hand, have hardly been discussed, which might be due to the fact that there are almost no feminist theologians among us working in the field of systematic theology. Here I can touch on only a few aspects.

The basic problems of a feminist Christology, it seems to me, are concentrated around the incarnation of Christ. The concrete figure of the human Jesus is that of a man. As we all know, this is the reason given by the Roman Church for preventing the ordination of women as an act against the will of God. Thus, Mary Daly's dictum is confirmed: if God is male, the male is God. To contradict this, feminist theologians could emphasize the dogma's broader interpretation of Christ's *human* nature. However, the consequence of this is, that the concrete circumstances of this humanness become obscured. It is then easy to lose sight of the fact that Jesus was a Jew and that, therefore, Christianity as Judith implied, is inseparably connected to Judaism. When, on the other hand, feminist theologians try to take the human Jesus seriously as a Jewish man, they have to resist the temptation (and this does not happen consistently enough) to demean the Jewish man of his time—otherwise the criticism of patriarchy becomes a new version of anti-Judaism.

Perhaps there is a constructive way to approach the feminist annoyance at Jesus's masculinity and the stumbling block with regard to Judaism, Jesus's messiahship, as in the outline of Rosemary Radford Ruether. On the one hand, feminists, with their method of analyzing patriarchy, are confronted with the problem of an unredeemed world, a problem the Jews remind us of. On the other hand, the Christian concept of the Messiah's second coming

and of the yet unachieved completion of the world contains enough "eschatological reservation" to allow us to take other directions of thought besides those which are patriarchal and anti-judaistic with reference to the soteriological relevance of Jesus Christ. Here the feminist discussion is still, for the reasons already mentioned, at its very beginning.

The issue of the Hebrew Bible common to Christians and Jews, and the goddess question connected with it, are the subject of intense debate here. I have already mentioned several times that in the FRG, precisely those women have come under criticism as being anti-judaistic who have viewed biblical Israel from the perspective of feminist matriarchy research and have worked with the suspicion that the goddess was systematically eliminated from biblical writings. It is the basic assumption of this feminist line that universally at the beginning of human history there existed a goddess- or woman-centered society which was then suppressed or destroyed by patriarchal societies with their elevated male gods. I do not yet consider it to be anti-judaistic when this pattern of explanation is applied to biblical Israel among other societies, although I have the impression that it is regarded by some women as unquestionably certain and therefore almost dogmatic. It is anti-judaistic, however, when German feminists regard the radical changes in biblical Israel as the main or single reason for hatred of the goddess and for the patriarchal grievances in Christianity or in the entire Western European world (in which case the so-called goddess murder in Israel is identified with the origin of today's patriarchy). If we do this, we would successfully repress our own European-Christian and anti-Christian-atheistic history of oppression and make Judaism the scapegoat once again.

In my estimation, the goddess discussion in the FRG is hindered by a double deficit: on the one hand, we have only a few feminist scholars of ancient history or ethnology, even fewer in Near Eastern Studies or Egyptology, and we are hardly familiar with the feminist research on goddess worship and woman-centered societies which has been reached in the United States. On the other hand, those feminists among us who have taken on the goddess symbol for themselves are primarily oriented toward the search for a genuine feminine spirituality and its ritual actualization. For this reason, they set their critical gaze too narrowly on sexist distortions only and have too little regard for the variety of patriarchal oppression mechanisms related to them. Among these, anti-Judaism is apparently an especially effective form because it remains unrecognized.

I would like to mention a basic theological problem of goddess feminism in relation to Judaism. With regard to the proscription against creating images (the formulation of our conference topic seems to be rather daring in this respect), we feminists must make it much clearer that the image of the goddess also has to undergo religious criticism, that feminine discourse on God is preliminary and indirect. Perhaps it is exactly the problem of feminist

mythmaking—here as well as in the US—that the male-female images remain rather than being destroyed or abolished. In any case, the relationship between the prohibition of images and the necessity and inevitability of metaphors needs a thorough feminist theological reworking. I could imagine that this would be an intensely exciting topic of discourse among Jewish and Christian women from the most different denominations in both religions.

When I speak of metaphors as necessary and inevitable, I have arrived at the problem of defining what the goddess symbol does or does not represent. This means that I touch on the second issue: the dichotomy between the Old Testament God of Law and Vengeance and the New Testament God of Love. The symbol of the goddess very obviously expresses the longing of women to be allowed to live in a community of people who accept and love each other, in harmony with nature, on an earth that is not corroded by the destruction of the environment and rapidly increasing technology and armament. In juxtaposition to this, the symbol of the male God represents everything that precludes this kind of life. It stands for the destructive syndrome of “wanting to rule everything” and the creation of the basic dualism of above/below-over/under-upper/lower. This quickly gives rise to another anti-judaistic cliché: the God of the Hebrew Bible is nothing more than such a ruling God who favors the destructive rulership of men, from whom no impulse for women’s liberation can be expected.

The problem comes to a head in the theme of the relationship between divine reality and the world. The goddess symbol, not only for post-Christian feminists, stands for the merger of the divine and the cosmic, for the unity of goddess and world; it is supposed to affirm the protection and integrity of the cosmos and women with it. The biblical God symbol stands for the contrast between the worldly and the divine, for their distinction from but relation to each other. This, however, comes under feminist suspicion that it subtly stabilizes hierarchy and exercise of power, and is, therefore, rejected as a patriarchal symbol. Judith, on the other hand, pointed to the Jewish notion of God’s *responsibility* for the whole of creation, a notion that allows her to think of the distinction between God and world and their relation to each other in a nonhierarchical way.¹ In the Jewish tradition, at least, it is not at all assumed that creation presumes a patriarchal, ruling God. Is it not possible that this notion might have very much to do with our distorted way of reading the Hebrew Bible as a result of the history of Christianity? Hence should we not demand a nonpatriarchal Christian doctrine of creation? And precisely because we German women have such a dreadful anti-judaistic and anti-Semitic history behind us, it is difficult for us to accept the symbol of unification of the divine with the cosmic that the Goddess symbol repre-

¹ [This part of Plaskow’s original lecture is eliminated here.—eds.]

sents. It is truly a symbol that implies that we recognize everything that happens in the cosmos and in history as an expression of the divine—not only harmony, but horror and evil as well. However, I want to and have to analyze this history and its consequences for our present time in a critical way, that is, with distance. I have to and want to hope that the outrages committed in our country will not be repeated. And in as far as Christian churches have done nothing to prevent this, but rather have contributed daily to anti-Judaism in their sermons and religious instruction so that little resistance has arisen, I have the greatest interest in examining my own Christian tradition very critically, since Christianity has always allied itself quickly and gladly with the powers of the world and worldly power. I might add this association as a final reflection. Perhaps, for this reason, we German women with a Christian socialization should avoid the term *wholeness*—or at least not use it without differentiation, since we still have not escaped the *totalitarian* regime and Christianity still has not modified enough its claim to totality. Perhaps we have to endure cold analysis and criticism for quite a while before we may allow ourselves to enter the warmth of true, nonexploitative sisterhood.