

Christian Goddess Spirituality: Enchanting Christianity by Mary Ann Beavis. New York, USA: Routledge, 2016. 204 pp. ISBN-10: 113893688X

Christian Goddess Spirituality is a very good example of community-engaged scholarship, illustrating the blend or fusion of versions of Christianity with versions of Goddess, Wiccan, or female divine spiritual practices. The author, Mary Ann Beavis, is well placed to explore and understand the topic, with both personal and academic knowledge of this creative, spiritual, and symbolic intersection. The book reveals the benefits and challenges of participatory research within multiple and surprising faith contexts. It is an ethnographic study, conducted by Beavis, based on interviews from spiritual practitioners who see themselves, in many different variations, as moving within and between both Christian and Goddess traditions. The word 'traditions' is used with caution, and will be explained shortly.

Interest in and invigoration of Goddess or feminine/feminist religiosity, symbolism, and practices were part of feminist spirituality trends. While some feminists were busily deconstructing, confronting or reinterpreting mainstream religious traditions - usually varieties of Christianity and Judaism - others were retrieving and reinventing what can loosely be described as Goddess religions. The purpose of Beavis's work is to indicate to what degree many have either held on to both, are enriched by both, or flow between the two belief systems. She shows, through many examples and within the comments of the interviewees, how these women and men manage to abide in this overlapping space. Included in the appendix is the questionnaire used to gather the information. The chapters are divided among topics about the participant's profiles, their navigation techniques, their imagery and spiritual paths, Christian theology, and some further reflections on the interface and future of these hybrids. The stories contained within this book illuminate how people will manage their own spiritual imagery and journeys. Some of the participants are ordained and practicing leadership in a Christian tradition, while covertly or overtly adding Goddess imagery to rituals, or performing Goddess rituals in these Christian-designated spaces. Others mix and match according to habit, need, desire, or exploration. A recurrent emphasis seems to be about feminism, female empowerment, and an explicit opposition to patriarchy.

Upon reading, three issues are raised for me. First, many of the participants in the study seem to know little about the 'traditions' they practice. Some practices are not 'traditions' at all, and so the term can lose meaning. Of course, the same can be said of adherents who abide within presented parameters of a religion: they also pick and choose, and can often know little about the history, transformations, intellectual themes and social influences and impacts of their 'traditions'. Beavis's writing certainly shows that people can fuse their own spiritualities together, and I am not certain this is unusual in general. It is clear that those who desire a bridge or synthesis between Christianity, Goddess and/or theology are simply making it happen. In many ways this is also the history of religions: amalgamations, fusions, styles and symbols that go in and out of favour, and some religions going extinct and into the realm of

mythology. Thus whatever we refer to in using the terms religion, traditions, spiritualities or faith, these are fluid realities in personal, social, and historical forms.

Second - it is rarely mentioned how these practices hold meaning to those doing them, apart from comments that rituals are performed regularly: daily, weekly, when needed. I could not glean from the stories the quality of the engagement. The questionnaire itself asks mainly about content, asking practitioners to label their beliefs as Christian feminist, Goddess Christian, Gnostic, ecofeminist, or “other”. Additional questions include: *Where do you practice? How regularly? Are you comfortable sharing this with others?* There are twenty-four questions in all. These are, in some respects, externalities about beliefs, content, and practices and the meaning, depth of engagement, interior dynamics, or potency of these spiritual forms are not mentioned. I experience a similar frustration with most theology: beliefs don’t necessarily reveal any significant information. To say one believes in Jesus or Shekinah does not really say much.

The third issue raised is that of the contemporary relevance of these mergers, and how many people they may actually represent. For example, of the many references used, a good percentage are between ten and twenty years old, or more. These are writings I myself read while studying feminist theology, ages ago. The groundwork for theology was also laid years ago, as were the revivals and reinterpretations of the Goddess, Wicca, the Divine feminine, and other similar beliefs. These were moments of radical empowerment for many women, but the stories collected in this book seem dated and anecdotal. It felt as if these were the remnants of the heady days of feminist pushback and spiritual creativity.

Regardless, Beavis is faithful in her methodology to the end. She draws directly from the participants’ comments, which are not uniform, and paints a picture of the importance of one’s alliance between Goddess and Christian spiritualities. Some say that the Goddess is rising, and others see this as a re-enchantment of mainline Christian denominations. Only time, and further studies, will reveal if either, or both, will occur.

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