The Contribution of Eco-feminism and Indigenous Religions to a Theology of the Environment

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Introduction

In the mid-Twentieth Century in the West, the first warnings of an impending environmental crisis went unheeded. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, and I remember finding the title so chilling that I avoided reading the book. Denial was rife, and denial increased as the Information Age [1] provided us with all that we did not want to know.

In this article, I will begin with another writer’s bid to sound a warning, Lynn White’s essay on the origins of environmental destruction, a thought-provoking indictment of Christian theology in relation to the natural world. I will discuss the ideas of two Christian thinkers who previously tried and failed to change the human-centeredness of Western Christianity and consider possible reasons that developed, showing that a male-centred, anti-God and anti-culture theology existed for many of the same reasons. I will describe the views of feminist environmentalists and their critical deconstruction of classical theology and examine their search for an alternative cosmology of creation and theology of justice.

Primal/indigenous creation traditions will be considered and I will attempt to relate them to eco-feminism, firstly to demonstrate that both seek justice, and secondly to show that eco-theology is liberationist. Finally, I will make the case for the potential of radical, holistic and populist movements to revitalise worldviews and create bridges where theology as a discipline has failed both in its premises and its capacity to respond to the environment and the marginalised.

White’s ‘Historical Roots’ of the Environmental Crisis

Lynn White, a professor of medieval history, shook the academic world in 1966 with his address, later published (1967), entitled ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’. His sweeping historical analysis of Christian thought attracted an enormous and sustained response that established a discourse on Christianity and the environment. Affirmations and rebuttals, in fact, never subsided because White, instead of presenting science to discuss ecology, called into question the very values and religious traditions upon which our society is based.

White argued that the central teachings of the church gave way in the Middle Ages to what became an unholy alliance between science and technology [2]. The biblical mandate of Genesis 1:28 (man’s dominion over creation) became an ethic of power and control over nature that replaced respect and protection. The human animal became ‘owner’ and exploiter, guilty of systematically dispatching the resources of the earth for his own selfish ends. Western Christianity de-sacralised and instrumentalised nature (Szerszynski, 1991 p...
and bears a substantial ‘burden of guilt’ for the environmental crisis that resulted (White 1967, p 1206). White predicted a ‘worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man’ (White 1967 p 1207).

The conversation continues. White’s thesis is picked over, discussed, supported and rebutted. It is business as usual for creation, too, as the natural world continues to be degraded in spite of Carson’s data warnings, White’s reasoning and the alarming expositions of countless scientists, thinkers and writers. Nevertheless, instead of turning the juggernaut, we continue to equivocate. The half-century we had in hand is gone, but we have at least begun to look for solutions in a mood of collective concern. Even opponents of White have agreed that if there is any means of drawing back from the abyss, it will have to be through change in attitude and worldview. White himself says, that because the roots of the dilemma are religious, ‘the remedy must also be essentially religious’ (White 1967 p 1207).

Ecologist Mary Evelyn Tucker agrees that “the values that mold” our perspective of nature “come primarily from religious worldviews” (Gardner 2003 p 1, citing Tucker), but world religions are generally unready to meet the demands of a new ecological awareness, not least Christianity. John Grim, Tucker’s associate, takes the position that religion in our own culture retreated centuries ago from much consideration of nature and the universe; our cosmology needs to be checked for relevance and adjusted (Tucker and Grim 2009 pp 2,3). That there is little time for re-alignment simply increases the urgency.

**Creation Theologians Unheeded**

St Francis of Assisi, with his gift for communicating with wild creatures, encouraged the animals to glorify their Creator [3]. White recognised Francis as a radical environmentalist; the Church marked him out as a heretic. By the Twelfth Century, humans had already overstepped their rank in creation, so Francis tried to depose them from ‘monarchy’ and direct them toward a ‘democracy of all God’s creatures’ (White 1967, p 1207) [4]. He did not succeed. St. Mark’s parallel narrative, of Jesus in the wilderness with the wild creatures (Mark 1: 12, 13), was simultaneously ebbing from of our tradition.

There have been other voices that have spoken of our relationship with the earth. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, theologian and palaeontologist, integrated a Christian worldview with evolutionary biology to correct the Christian assumption of separateness in the creation. But palaeontology never shook off the prejudices that grew around Darwin’s theory of evolution and de Chardin’s thesis was disregarded. Other disciplines prevailed, including the post-Enlightenment science that ‘enabled Western societies to exponentially amplify both their domination and its effects’ (Bonk 2008 p 1).

On this foundation, an ecological crisis grew, as described by Jürgen Moltmann, who focused his study of Christian theology on human history until the 1980s (Neal 2009 p 12, citing Moltmann 1985 31 pp 137-8). He then moved his effort into explaining God’s deep compulsion to create, out of love (Neal 2009 p 13, citing Moltmann 1985 p 75). The creation narrative in Gen. 1:26-28 (especially *subdue and rule*) had been wrongly interpreted, he believed, as having emphasised not God’s love for the order and stewardship He created, but the superiority of humans by virtue of their being made in *His image*. Like White, he
believed this caused a distortion that led to the human pursuit of power, material gain and an erroneous conception of ‘progress’.

‘God was increasingly excluded... displaced from the central goals and ethical values of the civilisation which succeeded medieval Christendom’ (Northcott 1996, p 85). The so-called Protestant work ethic (that had little to do with religion and more to do with wealth and the marginalisation of the destitute, landless and unskilled) legitimated profits at the expense of the poor, and industrialisation at the expense of the environment. Creation was seen as fallen, so human beings could disengage from the divine plan to create an ordered world through science and technology. Trust in God receded.

The world was being reduced to raw materials and people to agents in control of consumption. The ensuing crisis has set for Moltmann the most urgent task a theologian can adopt; to rediscover God’s intentions for His creation. His prophetic voice can be heard calling attention to pollution, extinctions, desertification, resource depletion, hunger, climate change, commodification of everything, and wealth for the already-wealthy. Moltmann’s indictment of the human impact on the natural world is devastating in itself, but he has added a further dimension, ‘Environmental problems are ... signs of the sickness of our whole culture and the human “sickness unto death”’ (Berry, 2000, p 109). Our Hebraic tradition, of a covenant with God and a Sabbath rest for the land, is endangered as the natural environment is endangered. Relentless destruction has become an allegorical lesson from which humanity does not learn, ““when weak creatures die... the whole creation-community suffers” (Berry 2000 p 110).

Before turning to eco-feminism, I will consider Matthew Fox briefly; Catholic, modern, as much on the wrong side of Church authority as St. Francis and equally in the avant garde of creation spirituality as de Chardin. Fox calls attention to a particular dualism in Christian theology, ‘divorcing as it does God and humanity and reducing religion to a childish state of pleasing and pleading’ (Fox 1983 p 89). Fox appeals for rediscovery of a holistic, creation-centred spirituality, as expressed by Julian of Norwich who called attention to the Motherhood of God as a place of safety and enclosure, of Meister Eckhart, who also stressed the enveloping of God, and of Jesus, for whom a favourite theme was Luke 17:21: ““The kingdom/queendom of God is within us all”’ (Fox 1988 p 91, rendering Luke 17:21). Fox has called attention to a need in Christian theology to move from The Fall and Redemption to a panentheism in which we are part of the fabric of creation. He makes his point with urgency, ‘we are living in the best of times and the worst of times. We can run but not hide; so much has to change’ (Croucher 2003).

Eco-feminist Voices

The eco-feminist ‘movement’ is more a diverse association of feminists, environmentalists and theologians with concern for the effects of power, privilege and patriarchy on people and the environment. Specifically, ecological feminism ‘examines the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature’ (Ruether 2000 in Hessel et al p 97). In defending their position, eco-feminists may draw attention, for example, to the correlation
Rosemary Ruether, a key thinker in feminism and the environment, says that eco-feminism is now so large a gathering of small gatherings, so diverse and global, that only the movement’s ethos and shared aims hold it together; to recognise and change the power dynamic of male-oriented privilege, highlight connections and work for liberation and the healing of theo-cultural distortions. For the last of these Ruether is well-prepared. With a background in Classics, Patristics and Theology, she has prepared a trenchant critique of the Christian creation narrative. In Genesis, the female was created out of the male and handed over to be a wife-servant, forever associated with ‘sin, seduction and the secondary nature of woman’ (Meyers et al 2000 p 79), blamed in ‘causing evil to come into the world’ (Ruether 1989 p 32; See also Ruether 2002 pp 94-99) and considered to be in perpetual need of subjugation lest her ‘evil’ break forth [5]. She was made a scapegoat [6].

In the New Covenant, there was new hope. Jesus said there was ‘neither Jew nor Greek… male nor female’ (Gal. 3:28). But his new ethic did not prevail. The Early Church moved swiftly to institutionalise and establish the Canon, a canon of vested interests regaining cultural ground against Jesus’ radical vision [7]. It did not take long to accomplish. Even in the teachings of 1 Timothy ‘women were created second and sinned first’ (Ruether 1988 p 2); they were to keep silent and have no authority over men.

Anthropology and the feminist movement, for all their achievements, have failed to correct an anthropocentrism of the environment and androcentrism of the human race. ‘It is only with the deepening of feminist theology that there has been a…recognition of the need to grapple with the whole structure of the Christian story’ (Johnson 2000 in Hessel et al p 13). ‘Since biblical times, men have been viewed as having “domain” over the earth’ (Johnson 2008 citing Knight). It is against perceived falsification of the biblical narrative that eco-feminism seeks to challenge Christian theology [8]. Ruether believes that Jesus the Liberator should now take precedence over Jesus the Messiah.

Eco-feminist literature often provides a poignant insight into the lives of women on the margins [9]. Some writers believe there is a mothering instinct in women that means they are more able than men to nurture and sustain the land and human needs. Others disparage gender-difference arguments [10]. Ivone Gebara, a Brazilian theologian, says ‘when it comes to gender, sex, and race, there are no immutable essences’ (Gebara 1999 p 11). Certainly, in my opinion, women with their experience of marginalisation and mistreatment can offer the greatest understanding, of marginalisation and mistreatment, but most gender differentiation is unjustified.

Gebara is aware of the pitfalls in treating women as ‘undifferentiated “victims” rather than people shaped by “a complex matrix” of influences (McClaurin and Mclvaine-Newsad 1999). There are women, as well as men, who are rich and insensitive to the poor, female despoilers of the environment and people of both genders who ignore the rights of others. Her solution is to be inclusive, and she welcomes men to the ecology effort. She has expanded on the ideas of Ruether, her teacher, and now leads a movement for justice in Latin America, the world’s poorest continent. It is not the poor, she says, who are ‘most
responsible for the catastrophic destruction of the eco-system', who 'destroy natural springs or watersheds', or who 'use electric saws to cut hundred-year-old trees, because they don’t own chainsaws' (Gebara 1999 p 5). It is no coincidence that eco-feminism and liberation theology emanate from Latin America. Together, they compose a 'Christianity of planetary awareness' (Rockefeller, S. in Hassel and Rasmussen 2001 p. 121).

Gebara asserts that the primal sin committed by creation's most advanced creature is not disobedience in Eden, but 'an effort to escape from mortality' (Ruether 2000 in Hessel et al, p 105). I suggest that this can be extended to incorporate the androcentrism associated with it; in assuming power not given by God, men typically choose to dominate women, the poor and vulnerable, animals and nature. In the process, they reduce their capacity to endure want and death because they have forgone reliance on the Creator. Gebara confirms this, in saying that men exert increasing control in order to achieve a sense of safety in their godless world. They engage in wanton destruction of resources as they 'play God', and the resulting wastage and imbalances threaten the earth and their lives. I question Ruether’s reasoning that the male impulse is to ‘transcend finite limitations’ (Ruether 1992, p 105), but I recognise greed as an impetus, which is linked with Gebara’s notion that the male makes a bid for control to create for himself a semblance of safety.

Gebara’s writing has the power to draw pictures of the plight of the earth, with women at the centre of the tragedy. She knows the barrios of Latin America. Those who live there are not the owners of the industries or power stations or the consumers of factory goods. They are poor people who endure the filth of garbage that is not theirs and the danger of industrial waste that is unregulated. She speaks not only of the people but the land beneath their feet, ‘the sacred body of the earth, which is bought and sold and prostituted for the sake of easy profit and the accumulation of wealth by a minority’ (Gebara 1999 p 18).

Men get things dirty; women clean them up [11]. It is women who clean the spaces called home between the garbage mountains. It is they who take the city’s low-paid jobs of clearing paths and roads [12]. It is they who leave the slums for a few hours of invisibility among the rich, where they clean their clothes, toilets, hair, children, pets, cars and swimming pools. The discourse of women and the environment has teased out the metaphors and imagery of domination: the rape of the earth; a violated landscape; the cutting of virgin forest (see for example Johnson 2000 in Hassel et al p 17).

Many environmental movements are led by women; the Chipko Movement to protect forests in India, in which women had only their bodies to put between the trees and machines driven by men (Samartha 1990 p 258) and the Green Belt Movement to reforest ruined land in Kenya, where women planted hundreds of thousands of trees by hand (Women Aid International). The healing of the land, in their view, is the healing of female bodies worn by work and misused and abused by men [13].

Gebara says that the Church appears to have distanced itself from power and oppression, giving a semblance of purity, goodness and freedom (Gebara 1999 p 6). It has originated injustice and then perpetuated an illusion. Power structures form a continuum that begins with male domination and extends to the commodification of all things. Humans, animals, minerals, trees, mountains and the seas, and their contents, are brought under control and
used, or used up, with the same justification given to both male supremacy and human *dominion*. A theology of eco-feminism offers an alternative continuity that is benign, extending from the individual, to the community, to the biosphere. Where there is no domination, a sustaining interdependency grows and healing begins; of the parts and the whole, of women and the natural world.

The most moral role humans can assume would appear to be that of *steward* over the non-human creation (Gen. 1:26-29). Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff agrees, saying ‘we are here to serve as shepherds’ (Boff 1995 pp 86, 87). Eco-feminists, however, reject the model outright; God is not a Sovereign overseeing a world in which humans act as vice-gerents because that god would be male, hierarchical and detached. Instead, Ruether and some others conceptualise *Gaia*, a female Earth Mother who gently guides humans to well-being. It is a relational and interactive base with many attractions. But re-interpretation and re-discovery are required in our theology, in my view, not re-invention. Acts 17:24-28, [14] for example, holds all the immanence and gentleness of a God who is mother as well as father and unwilling to relinquish the loved Creation to that of an incompetent steward.

Some eco-feminists (Gebara, McKinnon) and those who support them (Rasmussen) will try to re-balance theology. In the meantime, eco-feminist thinking is radical and, by its very nature, disparate. Some might conclude that it appears as quixotic as the Greenham Common Peace Camp in its early days *(Guardian* 05.09.2000); others, that one needs to focus on the outcome of both campaigns. I believe we need to look beyond the demand for movements to produce defined and quantifiable results. Awareness is being raised by eco-feminists on a set of inter-related justice issues. Stereotypes and dualisms are being eroded; confidence is returning to the marginalised. It remains to be seen whether improvement can be achieved for the beleaguered environment.

If anything is being lost, Ruether writes, it may be the poetry in the great creation myth. To regain it, ‘we need scientist-poets who can retell ... the story of the cosmos and the earth’s history in a way that can call us to wonder, to reverence for life, and to the vision of humanity living in community with all its sister and brother beings’ *(Ruether 1992, p58)*.

**Indigenous Voices**

Aboriginal peoples, indigenes on every continent who retain their ancient traditions, have this same reverence for life and vision of humanity enclosed in nature. They often refer to their sisters and brothers among the wild creatures [15]. The needs and understandings of indigenous people groups and environmental concern go together. Paul Hawken gave credit to a Native American for helping him to understand that ‘the environment and social justice movements addressed two sides of a single, larger dilemma. How we treat one another is reflected in how we treat the earth *(Hawken 2007 p 2)*.

Christian missionaries from the 17th Century suppressed primal beliefs. Few had the wisdom of missionary Marthinus Daneel who, in recent years, helped to create a coalition of traditional religious practitioners and African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Zimbabwe. As they
mounted a tree-sustainability project, they consulted the oracle of the *Mwari* rain shrine for her wisdom (Daneel 2001 p 79). African *Earthkeeping* Churches are expanding.

There is hope that the influence of indigenous groups, like that of eco-feminists, can reverse Christianity's anthropocentrism. They apply ancient cosmologies, knowing better than most what results from a failure to respect the land. They have much in common with the impoverished and powerless women of Latin America. The Navajo in Western U.S.A. have high rates of cancer (Brown and Lambert 2010 *passim* from uranium mining, and their forests have been cleared for profit (Gottlieb 2006 p 139). The Inuit, who have hunted on foot, are losing their way of life to climate change (Krause 2000) because millions of ‘modern’ people travel by car.

Stan McKay is an ecologist of Algonquian heritage who says that indigenous groups, in the Americas, Australasia, Africa and elsewhere, are like ‘Old Testament’ people with a profound oral tradition of the creation (McKay 1994 in Hallman ed p 214). ‘Land does not belong to the indigenous peoples, rather they belong to the land’ and it is sacred (Tapia 2002). ‘Advanced civilizations’ are the poorer for having lost this view [16]. But now, as human beings face suffering like the creatures whose habitats have been destroyed, there may be more willingness to learn from indigenous peoples; of biodiversity, sustainability, medicines, relationships, praise and thanksgiving, space and silence. What is needed, according to one writer, ‘is an American Indian theology coupled with an American Indian reading of the gospel’ (Tinker, G. 1994 in Hallman ed p 223). Elizabeth Tapia points out that indigenous worldviews also have things to teach us about communities and valuing and strengthening women. There are points at which the eco-feminist ethos and the indigenous one intersect, carrying the same themes, from the same human experience.

**Conclusion - Justice for the Earth and its People**

Naturalist R.J. Berry, in agreement with many eco-feminists, rejects the theology of human stewardship of the environment because he reasons that God cannot be the absentee landlord, transcendent and uninvolved. That view left nature de-sacralised and open to exploitation, as White demonstrated in his seminal essay. Instead, God is present and working *with* his people. Theologian Brigitte Kahl sees him as ‘taking the spade and planting the trees’ (Kahl 2001 in Hessel and Rasmussen p 55).

Eco-feminism, indigenous earth spiritualities and liberation theology naturally stand together in recognising that God suffers and works with his people and all of his loved creation. Those who struggle re-sacralise nature through daily lived experience that becomes the well-spring of a theology that can no longer be written from patriarchy [17]. For Moltmann, this is the ground of scripture and of hope, that it establishes a vector of God's intentions for His new creation (Law, J. 2010 in Horrell *et al*, p 238) [18].
References


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Notes


[2] Northcott added to the historical indictment against Christians in their relation to the environment by pointing out that Charlemagne destroyed the sacred groves of the Saxons, and European colonisers relentlessly extracted raw materials from their empires. See *e.g.*, Northcott (1996 p 45).
[3] ‘Our sisters the birds are praising their Creator; so we should go in among them’ (Francis in a legend from the 13th Century.), Bonaventure, Cousins, E. (ed.) (1978), p. 258.


[5] Ruether writes that the human ‘lower nature demands that women be subordinated’ though assumed to be ‘prone to insubordination’; thus, ‘the male was seduced into sin in the beginning and paradise was lost’ (in Hessel et al 2000 p 99). She cites Augustine’s Fourth-Century commentaries on Genesis as shaping ‘theological rationale for women’s subordination’ (2000 p 101). Luther and Calvin reinforced the doctrine (2000 p 102).

[6] Manlowe (1995 p 192, Note 55) writes that ‘according to Aristotle the woman, by nature, was “inferior in her capacity for thought, will, and physical activity.”’ Aristotle wrote that women were “natural slaves”; See Barnes, J. (ed.), The Complete Works of Aristotle 1.1-2.

[7] Ruether (2002 p 14) discusses the process of canonisation, involving acceptance, exclusion and inevitably suppression of ‘other ... texts and lines of interpretation’. She points to the ‘radical egalitarianism’ (2000, p 102) of early Christianity that was swept aside and recovered only centuries later with the Quakers.

[8] E.g., Ruether believes it necessary to ‘give up the presuppositions of an original paradise’ to look more closely at ‘distortion of our relation to one another and to the earth’ (in Hessel et al 2000 p 105). In the same article, she considers what she believes are misinterpretations of the Trinity, cosmology and the concept of sin.


[11] Gebara writes, ‘more and more often, it is women who are hired for certain public clean-up jobs, so they clean not only private space but also public space. At the same time, men are most adept at getting things dirty and failing to clean them up. This includes the production of nuclear waste’ (1999, p 2).

[12] The author saw this in ‘townships’ of the Northwest Province of South Africa. Rubbish collection was intended as paid work for men, but when there were no trucks but only brooms and burning to clear mountains of waste, women did the work on very low pay, saying they would maintain their communities.


The land is being ravished, and so are we as women.
The land is being overworked, and so are we as women.
...Let the land and women ... rest...

[14] ‘... in him we live and move and have our being’ ...‘we are his offspring.’ (New International Version).

[15] Mother earth, sister bear and brother eagle form a family in which man is a member (George, 1979).

[16] The primal religion of the Celts enhanced early Christianity with a panentheism that disappeared in the Medieval Period. E.g., Celtic tradition tells of a tree, with ‘white birds listening to the melodies of the ages. The tree is Jesus Christ ... who came forth from the earth... We implore God that we may dwell among the branches of the tree’. (Low 1996 pp 102, 103, abridged, citing Stokes, W. (1890), Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore, citing Ms Light of Bridget).

[17] Moltmann and Segundo agree on the value of women’s revelation through life experience; scriptural interpretation changes as the needs of humanity change. It is ‘the task of theology to “designate as the Word of God, that part of divine revelation which... is most useful for the liberation to which God summons us”’ (Law, J. 2010 citing Segunda, J. 1998 [1975] The Liberation of Theology, in Horrell et al, p 237).

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