

1-1-2012

# On being in relation with all created things (an ecofeminist, evangelical, theological anthropology)

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## Recommended Citation

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

ON BEING IN RELATION WITH ALL CREATED THINGS

(AN ECOFEMINIST, EVANGELICAL, THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY)

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTERS OF DIVINITY

DEPARTMENT OF CHURCH HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

BY

JENNIFER L. BUTLER

PORTLAND, OREGON

APRIL 2012

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# THESIS ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

**JENNIFER L. BUTLER**

**DATE: APRIL 2012**

**TITLE:**

**ON BEING IN RELATION WITH ALL CREATED THINGS  
(AN ECOFEMINIST, EVANGELICAL, THEOLOGICAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY)**

**WE THE UNDERSIGNED CERTIFY THAT WE HAVE READ  
THIS PROJECT AND APPROVE IT AS ADEQUATE IN  
SCOPE AND QUALITY TO COMPLETE THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS,  
THEOLOGICAL STUDIES**

*Daniel Zimm*

SIGNATURE

5/24/12

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*Laura Gunnors*

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5.24.12

DATE



**GEORGE FOX  
EVANGELICAL  
SEMINARY**

She who reconciles the ill-matched threads of her life  
And weaves them gratefully into a single cloth ...

—Rainer Maria Rilke

God is our refuge and strength,  
A very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the  
earth should change,  
Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
Though its waters roar and foam,  
Though the mountains tremble with its tumult.  
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;  
God will help her when the morning dawns.

—Psalm 46:1-5

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## PREFACE

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This paper examines the possibility of an ecofeminist evangelicalism. It is an attempt to show the potential of ecofeminist theology in re-orienting certain Christian doctrines that are supported by and used to perpetuate andro- and anthropocentric theologies. It is also a critique of the areas in which ecofeminist theology fails to remain in conversation with orthodoxy and where it falls victim to the same kind of exclusion it claims to work against, namely in areas of universalizing the subject and essentializing experience. For purposes of working within the boundaries of space, I have chosen theological anthropology as my significant area of focus. Through a careful examination, I conclude that one is not diametrically opposed to the other; an ecofeminist can indeed find a home in the evangelical tradition and an evangelical need not be afraid of heresy in embracing an ecofeminist perspective.

## INTRODUCTION

My particular social location between the worlds of liberal, progressive Christianity and a more conservative evangelicalism informs my attempt to weave together a feminist theological anthropology, informed by the ecological conversation of ecofeminism, and critiqued by traditional theology that evangelicals are conversant with. This exploration is necessarily rooted in an eschatological orientation both for purposes of dialogue and because of the transformative power of eschatological goals. Through this orientation, conversation about religious and social change becomes possible.

Beginning with the doctrine of creation, this paper will use feminist and ecofeminist theology to critique the andro- and anthropocentrism inherent in the creation stories.<sup>1</sup> Chapter One grounds the exploration in the methods of ecofeminist theology. In Chapter Two, I examine how the stories of creation legitimize the way we understand humanity's orientation to God, each other, and the earth. Because of this, a conversation regarding anthropology is intimately connected to how we read the text concerning the creation of the earth and all its creatures, and where God is found within that world. From here, an exploration of single and dual-nature anthropology becomes necessary. Traditional theology critiques the feminist categories of both positions and a third understanding will have to be explored—a position conversant with both feminist and traditional theology. Because the doctrinal home of theological anthropology has

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropocentrism refers to the belief that human beings are the most significant entity of the universe as well as the tendency to interpret the world in terms of human values and experiences. Androcentrism refers to the tendency of history, systems, and institutions to regard the male sex as primary and the male perspective as universal, to the exclusion and/or neglect of women.

migrated from creation to eschatology to pneumatology, those three categories will inhabit significant space in the conversation. Eschatology is the focus of Chapter Three, while pneumatology becomes a part of the theological anthropology discussion in Chapter Four.

Within the categories mentioned, there are areas where ecofeminism is in sharp discord with traditional theology. I contend that ecofeminism's un-nuanced commitment to experience borders on essentialism, that the tendency to reduce God to something less than Other and a misguided appeal to dual-nature anthropology are unhelpful to those who wish to maintain dialogue with evangelical Christians. To this end, I believe ecofeminism must be willing to rework the way it talks about God, experience, and anthropology.

This is a constructive piece—my aim is neither to completely deconstruct paradigms nor to offer new ideas. Rather, I hope to question theology that is no longer life-giving, ask where the center of gravity has shifted, and mine the tradition for theology that has been overlooked or forgotten. At the same time, my perspective is rooted in a position that acknowledges Christian theology has played an active role in legitimating and perpetuating sexism and naturism. Therefore, as Fernandez notes, “theological deconstruction...and reconstruction of an alternative theological position is an important part of our struggle.”<sup>2</sup> I willingly acknowledge my own self-interest in this theological endeavor; this is my personal attempt to bridge the worlds I exist within.

I will propose that one can hold ecofeminism and traditional Christian theology in healthy and constructive tension with each other. An ecofeminist need not leave Christianity behind. We are more creative and tenacious than that. We need not abandon traditional elements of faith and conceptions of God. Some of the old ways may require transformation, but healthy

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<sup>2</sup> Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 111.

theology is always in a process of evolution, re-evaluating what will sustain our communities today. While I agree with theologians like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who argue that biblical texts and interpretations inevitably serve patriarchal interests, I believe that with Christianity we have a “fish whose bones we can pick out before swallowing” and therefore, rejection of reinterpretation or recovery work is an unhelpful strategy.<sup>3</sup> Ecofeminist theologians must be involved in reframing efforts. As Camilla Campling writes, “A leap out of Christianity is not necessary to rescue the world from destruction. There is already a tradition within Christianity which, if allowed to flourish, could itself break down the patriarchy within it...[F]eminism both can and must transform Christianity not only into a liberating religion for women but also into a religion that demands that we care for and nurture the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, for better and for worse, I believe that theology can only be done contextually. I am compelled that our work as theologians is to understand and communicate the Gospel in our own cultural context, guided by the words of Edward Schillebeeckx:

I don't write for eternity, but for men and women of today who are in a particular historical situation. I try to respond to their questions. So my theology has a date; it is contextual, but at the same time I want to go beyond the situation as such. That is a universal aim of my works because I try to take into account the questions of all men and women. Otherwise it wouldn't be a good theology. The relevance of a theology is not an ephemeral relevance. Other theologians will see to other times.<sup>5</sup>

It is through this grounding in the contextual relevance of theology and belief in the capacity of those who have been excluded to reframe and reappropriate that I embark on this journey.

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<sup>3</sup> Camilla Campling articulates such an idea in “Leap into Space? Must a Feminist Leave Christianity Behind?” *Modern Believing* 41, no. 3 (2000): 32-42.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx and Francesco Strazzari, *I am a Happy Theologian: Conversations with Francesco Strazzari* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1994), 80.

CHAPTER 1  
ECOFEMINISM AND THEOLOGY

*Defining Ecofeminist Theology*

The scholarship of ecotheology, and ecofeminism in particular, has unique potential to speak to the current crisis of the planet. As a woman, it is not without ambiguity and hesitance that I approach the tradition of Christian theology. I recognize “the role that theology has played in perpetuating various forms of dehumanization [therefore], theology is an arena of struggle.”<sup>1</sup> As Catherine Keller writes, “If I do Christian theology, I do it in penance for the effects of Christendom. Yet at the same time, many of the most marginalized of the planet, with scriptural legitimacy, claim Christianity as theirs—and as their inspiration for liberation and decolonization.”<sup>2</sup> Appealing to the compelling threads of liberation, justice, and equality found within the text, I embrace Christianity as a tradition capable of mobilizing people of faith to care for the most oppressed members of creation.

Within the particular space of ecotheology resides a tangible hopefulness for the oppressed, specifically, women and the earth. Ecotheology rests in hopefulness regarding the human capacity to change our orientation toward the earth. Hopefulness concerning this change requires belief in divine conversion, a conversion to and on behalf of the earth. The social justice

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<sup>1</sup> Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Keller, “The Lost Fragrance: Protestantism and the Nature of What Matters,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 2 (Summer, 1997): 366.

tradition of the biblical witness is a strong foundation on which to build ecological activism, and the witness of the text to the goodness of creation cannot be taken lightly. While the focus of this paper is on theology rooted in ecofeminism, I do not deny the mobilizing capacity of other Christian ecological ethics such as the model of Christian stewardship or creation spirituality. I respect the model of Christian stewardship for its capacity to resonate with evangelicals, and I agree with the reorienting work of creation spirituality toward a more integrated and interdependent ethos. Ecofeminists must make space for a broad spectrum of theological perspectives different (and even more conservative) than their own, expecting and anticipating to learn and grow from those diverse perspectives. At the same time, theology must be willing to question perceived notions of truth, seek justice indiscriminately, and translate into viable action in a lived world where transformative praxis means everything and theoretical mind games are the luxury of the elite. Ecofeminist theologians embody the mentality that we must be more concerned with changing the world than interpreting it—too much time has been wasted already.<sup>3</sup>

While many in the progressive church have no difficulty embracing the theology of ecofeminism, evangelicals have a harder time resonating with the framework. This exploration is not intended to persuade those individuals who reject the scientific data pointing to a planet in crisis. Nor is it written to Christians who believe gender hierarchy is part of a divinely appointed order or who deny the sexism of the tradition. It is directed toward evangelical Christians who are being compelled by belief toward a framework that acknowledges the non-human world was not created simply for the purposes of humanity, that it is ‘good’ apart from its usefulness for the

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<sup>3</sup> Many of my thoughts here have been influenced by Sallie McFague and her comments on praxis and commitment, as well as a “cosmological Christian theology characterized by collegiality, diversity, and advocacy” in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 69.

human species, and who embrace a paradigm of equality (modeled by Jesus) that rejects classism, sexism, racism, and naturism, acknowledging that class, race, gender, and the ecosystem are interconnected in systems of oppression and cannot be isolated from one another.<sup>4</sup>

### *Feminist Hermeneutics*

In one of the now classic texts on feminist theology, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza articulates the necessity of feminist interpretation of theological texts beginning with a hermeneutic of suspicion. She argues, “Since all biblical texts are formulated in androcentric language and reflect patriarchal social structures, a feminist critical interpretation begins with a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than with a hermeneutics of consent and affirmation.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, “a hermeneutics of suspicion does not presuppose the feminist authority and truth of the Bible, but takes as its starting point the assumption that biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions.”<sup>6</sup> Reclaiming positive and empowering truth for women from androcentric texts involves a process of remembering, “moving from biblical texts about women to the reconstruction of women’s history.”<sup>7</sup> This process involves both the rejection of texts that serve to perpetuate oppression as well as the recovery of texts that provide elements of liberation and subvert the “oppressive cultural contexts even though they are embedded in patriarchal culture.”<sup>8</sup> Because the biblical text so consistently “ignores women’s experience,” a feminist hermeneutic must place intentional focus on the lived reality of women—

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<sup>4</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 35. Fernandez points out that it would be imprecise to isolate one dimension as if it could be free from contamination by the others.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, MD: Beacon Press, 1984), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 61.

past and present.<sup>9</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “[A] feminist evaluative exploration is rooted in the personal experience of women and utilizes feminist scholarship and scientific theoretical discussion.”<sup>10</sup> Contrary to the opinion of some, “feminist theology...is not simply a theology done by and for women, but a theology articulated from the perspective of women’s experience for the well-being of all.”<sup>11</sup> Focusing on the experience of women proceeds not from a belief that the marginalized are innocent, but that “they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> Phyllis Trible characterizes the biblical text as a pilgrim wandering through history to merge past and present. She writes, “The meaning and function of biblical materials is fluid. As Scripture moves through history, it is appropriated for new settings.”<sup>13</sup> We cannot reject the pilgrim for being a relic of its own place and time. Neither can we allow the cultural norms of the past to hold the text captive and dictate our present understanding of the text, since “theology divorced from social ethics is bound to be erroneous.”<sup>14</sup> While the Bible is indeed sacred text, we must resist interpreting it through a hermeneutical model that views interpretation as timeless and transcultural truth.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 84.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89. For exemplary work on Western science’s commodification, domination, and destruction of both women and nature, see Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant. Shiva argues in Ruether that the concepts of modernization and development in the Western world are the “false assumption that nature and women are mere passive objects that are unproductive in themselves” in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 105.

<sup>11</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 1 (March 1973): 48.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 260.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

## *Ecofeminism Defined*

While feminist and other forms of liberation theology are concerned with the marginalization of humans based on gender, race, and class, ecofeminism expands to include concern for the marginalization of non-human as well as human life forms. The term ecofeminism was coined in 1972 by Francoise d'Eaubonne, who wrote, "the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motif inherent in male power."<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether defines ecofeminism simply as an "interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature."<sup>17</sup> She identifies two levels in which this interconnection is typically seen: ideological-cultural and socioeconomic. Women have historically been associated with the bodily and thereby with nature, "more aligned with body, matter, emotions, and the animal world."<sup>18</sup> Anne Primavesi writes, "The conjunction between the impulse toward domination and effective domination both of the female and of Nature as female is well documented."<sup>19</sup> The realm of women's work is typically associated with the home (private sphere), which is "devalued in relation to the public sphere of male power and culture."<sup>20</sup> Ecofeminists extrapolate this analysis from gender to class, race, and ethnic hierarchies, thereby encompassing a broad group of marginalized peoples. Some feminists reject the connection between women and nature that ecofeminism sees as foundational. The feminist rejection of such a claim occurs because certain feminists see the connection as mere reduplication of "the basic patriarchal fallacy that

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<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 91.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Primavesi, "A Tide in the Affairs of Women?" *Ecofeminism and Theology* 2 (1994): 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*, 91.

women are closer to and more like nonhuman nature than men. They believe that women need to claim their equal humanity with male humans, their parallel capacity for rationality and leadership.’<sup>21</sup> The problem with this traditional feminist position, however, is that only a few of the most elite women are able to gain membership in the “male master class,” resulting in no change to the hierarchical system of domination and oppression, only the assimilation of a privileged few.<sup>22</sup> Those privileged few end up functioning as token figures; “this show of ‘equality’ thus masks the reality of a system in which the super wealth and power of a few depends on the exploitation of the many.”<sup>23</sup>

Most ecofeminists, however, do not see the connection between women and nature as anything more than social construction. Ruether describes this connection as the result of a particular social location that both naturalizes women and feminizes nonhuman nature. By “socially locating women in the sphere of bodily and material support for society, women may also suffer more due to the abuse of the natural world and hence also become more aware of this abuse. But this is a matter of their experience in their particular social location, not due to a different ‘nature’ than males.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Why an Ecofeminist Model?*

Feminist theology is only one form of liberation theology—a model of biblical interpretation that challenges traditional academic theology by claiming, “that all theology,

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<sup>21</sup> Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

willingly or not, is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed.”<sup>25</sup> The academy, dominated by males and their interests, often produces theology that serves their own “political interests...which not only makes males normative subjects of scholarship but also serves theoretically to legitimize societal structures of oppression.”<sup>26</sup> But recently, some Third-Wave scholars accuse feminist theology of using the same language and categories as traditional androcentric theology.<sup>27</sup>

Ivone Gebara is one such critic. A Latin American ecofeminist scholar, she considers most forms of feminist criticism to be fundamentally anthropocentric and androcentric “expressions of patriarchal feminism.”<sup>28</sup> Essentializing the experiences of any broad category of people collapses the many into a universal definition, ignoring the profound differences among women.<sup>29</sup> Such an approach “fail[s] to expose the way in which subjectivity and gender are themselves constructed. This failure...leads to the reinscription of the very structures and categories that are oppressive to women.”<sup>30</sup> While feminist scholars critique the androcentrism of the universal subject embedded in patriarchal anthropologies, their development of the universal

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<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Krollokke, Sage Pub, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/6236\\_Chapter\\_1\\_Krollokke\\_2nd\\_Rev\\_Final\\_Pdf.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/6236_Chapter_1_Krollokke_2nd_Rev_Final_Pdf.pdf) (accessed 15 January 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> For purposes of this discussion, essentialism is defined as “an understanding that one can get into the essence of things that is free from interpretation or the non-interpreted essence.” From Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Linell Elizabeth Cady, “Identity, Feminist Theory, and Theology,” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 18.

woman falls captive to the same kind of essentializing.<sup>31</sup> In reality, there is a radical difference in power, experience, and commitments among women. Therefore, one always risks exclusion and partiality in being committed to the accounts of certain women.

Gebara turns to ecofeminism as a framework that broadens the conversation and allows for a diversity of experience. For Gebara, “ecofeminism seeks to dismantle the whole paradigm of male over female, mind over body, heaven over earth, transcendent over immanent, the male God outside of and ruling over the created world, and to imagine an alternative to it.”<sup>32</sup>

Ecofeminism calls for radical change that goes far beyond adding women to the pot and stirring.

According to Ruether, the model calls for transformed societies:

Ecofeminist hope for an alternative society calls for a double conversion or transformation. Social hierarchies of men over women, white elites over subordinated classes and races, need to be transformed into egalitarian societies which recognize the fullness of humanity of each human person. But if greater racial and gender equality is not to be mere tokenism which does not change the deep hierarchies of wealth and power of the few over the many, there must be both a major restructuring of the relations of humans and the nonhuman world.<sup>33</sup>

### *An Ecofeminist Hermeneutic*

Scripturally, ecotheology rests in a re-reading of scripture, incorporating both text-negating and text-affirming critics. With Phyllis Trible, most ecofeminists agree that certain strands of the text can be re-read as affirming and liberational for the oppressed.<sup>34</sup> Elisabeth

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<sup>31</sup> Serene Jones is a feminist scholar who has done significant work on the dangers of phenomenological universalizing. She writes, “As an extremely open-ended category, women’s experience serves as a useful starting place for mapping the theologies in question because it functions as a theological flash point where one can see clearly both the similarities and the differences which mark their emergent perspectives.” From “Identity, Feminist Theory, and Theology” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Linell Elizabeth Cady, “Identity, Feminist Theory, and Theology,” 33.

<sup>33</sup> Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*, 94.

<sup>34</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984).

Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion is valuable for ecofeminists whose work involves reframing scripture, and questioning traditional scriptural authority, while believing that Christianity and people of faith are capable of being transformed.<sup>35</sup> Traditions that point toward transformation are located within the text itself and within interpretations of text that take into consideration cultural context; the idea that good theology adapts to changes in context; is born in individual and collective experience; and recognizes that scripture provides no singular answer to *all* ethical dilemmas in *all* places, times, and cultures. Ecofeminist theology is contextualist theology that is unafraid to re-read scripture, engaging in a type of midrash as the text is recontextualized in ways that are life-giving for both human and non-human nature.<sup>36</sup>

For example, while Genesis 1 and 2 provide differing but similar creation accounts, it is difficult to disentangle either story from a tradition that has leveraged these foundational texts to marginalize women and nature. The Priestly (P) version of creation can be read as less patriarchal than the Yahwist (J) account, but P clearly privileges humanity over the rest of creation. The J narrative is more overtly agrarian than P, but it too has points of ambiguity involving dominion and hierarchy, specifically the creation and naming of woman. In this (J) narrative, "the hierarchical relationship between humans and other creatures is signified in the act of naming, which culminates in the naming of the female counterpart."<sup>37</sup> There is no question that the story of Genesis 2 has functioned to serve as mandate—enforcing the patriarchal relationship of man to women, husband to wife, and man as collective person, woman as

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<sup>35</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> The tradition of midrash was used by rabbis to explain problems such as inconsistency in biblical texts. Rabbinic midrash is most commonly used to reconcile contradictions or fill in missing dialogue. In 1972 the feminist theologian Judith Plaskow wrote, "The Coming of Lillith," a feminist midrash of the Garden of Eden account in Genesis; a retelling of the story from the perspective of female characters.

<sup>37</sup> Hava Tirosh Samuelson, "Judaism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 34.

derivative.<sup>38</sup> The text and tradition it engendered cannot be depatriarchalized, but the reader can choose a method of interpretation that is life-giving, rather than continuing to read the creation stories as divine hierarchical mandate. A life-giving method of reading demands that these texts be read as liturgical poetry within their own literary traditions and context.<sup>39</sup> While re-reading is a way of maneuvering through difficult texts—what Phyllis Trible refers to as “texts of terror”—many scholars also demand the privileged view of texts like the Noachic covenant and the covenantal strand of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>40</sup> The Noachic covenant speaks to nothing if not to the inclusive nature of God’s love and justice. The covenant is made not only with Israel, but also with all of humanity. It is made not only with humanity, but also with non-human life (Genesis 9:15) and the earth itself (Genesis 9:13). It is a covenant with implications for global ethics, demanding an orientation of interdependence and non-hierarchical relationships.

The process of re-reading and privileging certain texts leads away from the kinds of narrative that have dominated history for centuries, what Ursula LeGuin refers to when she writes, “Civilised Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other—

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<sup>38</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 21.

<sup>39</sup> In his book, *The Ethos of the Cosmos*, William P. Brown works through the creation traditions of the Hebrew scriptures identifying the life-giving elements of each narrative. For example, he identifies themes of self and other-relatedness in the Priestly account, shalom and mutuality of power in the Yahwist account, an ecology of community in Second Isaiah, and a rejection of patriarchy in the cosmology of Job. For more see William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether is one such scholar, as are Ellen Davis and John Goldingay. For more, see Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and wilderness, to be used as I see fit.”<sup>41</sup>

I utilize a broad range of ecofeminist scholars in this thesis—both in praise and critique. Sallie McFague’s work on the embrace of experience and rejection of dualism in relationship to nature is located squarely in her critique of Christianity as a tool of patriarchy and as guilty of perpetuating a logic of domination.<sup>42</sup> Yet she is unwilling to reject the value of a Christian worldview for relating to nature. McFague argues that Christians ought to extend the concept of how we relate to others and God (as subjects) to nature. She writes that if we were to “relate to the entities in nature in the same basic way that we are supposed to relate to God and other people—as ends, not means, as subjects valuable in themselves, for themselves...we would simply be extending Christianity’s own most basic model, the subject-subjects one, to nature.”<sup>43</sup> Ivone Gebara’s work in ecofeminism is especially important in my exploration of how a relational anthropology informs action. Her praxis is rooted in the concrete experience of the marginalized and her theology is eminently practical—God found on earth, in relationships among people and culture, in human relationships, and in every part of creation.<sup>44</sup> Because her focus is practical and rooted in the present, she is able to focus her restoration efforts on the

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<sup>41</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, “Women/Wilderness” in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia, PA: New Society, 1989), 45-47.

<sup>42</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether has done considerable work on the rejection of dualism as well, and the problems of seeing reality as a chain of dualistic relations where the “second half of each pair is seen as alien and subject to the first” (male/female, culture/nature). From *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975), 34.

<sup>43</sup> Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

current oppression of women and the earth, rather than be distracted by the historical connection between the twin oppressions that distract many academics and would-be activists.

It is through this theological, biblical, and practical grounding that ecofeminism has the potential to impact every area of life and mind, evolving the collective Christian conscious into an orientation of hopefulness that practically informs what it means to live as human beings in this particular moment in time, in this place, as a people of faith, in relationship with all of creation past, present, and yet to come.

There is no question that the Christian scripture and tradition have perpetuated the oppression of women and the non-human world. The question that remains is if text and tradition can be recovered to reveal life-giving theology for our current historical moment. If there are theologians doing work that is applicable to the social context of humans and the crisis of the planet, they must be ecotheologians. Because the marginalization and abuse of the earth is intrinsically connected to the marginalization and abuse of women, ecofeminists seem most poised to recycle theological perspectives that are neither life-giving nor affirming and create radical transformation in the church and world.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> My use of the term “recycle” in relationship to theological perspectives throughout this paper functions as a double entendre. I use the term both for its semantic significance to the ecological conversation in general, and as a third way for ecofeminists to engage biblical text. Rather than rejecting or redeeming, recycling theology does not undermine the agency of the marginalized to subvert and reclaim doctrine that has been leveraged by the powerful as a tool of oppression, reinterpreting the text to support the value and goodness of all creation (including women and wilderness).

## CHAPTER 2

### CREATION: A STORY OF BEGINNING

For better and for worse, interpretation of the accounts of creation in the Hebrew Bible has been foundational to the development of theological anthropology and the view of the self adopted by the Christian tradition. An examination of the two versions of the creation story reveals an ambiguity in the meaning of the *imago Dei* for both genders, and for non-human creation.<sup>1</sup>

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” (Genesis 2:21-23)<sup>2</sup>

These two accounts narrate the story of creation in the Hebrew tradition in slightly different, though not necessarily contradicting, voices. While the Priestly (P) version of humankind’s creation (Genesis 1) may seem less patriarchal in tone than the Yahwist (J) account (Genesis 2), both have been used as foundational texts in the oppression of both women and the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether describes this ambiguity as dual structure in the way Christian theology understands humanity, from *Sexism & God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MD: Beacon Press, 1983), 93.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references from the NRSV.

According to Ruether, the feminine and nature are profoundly interconnected and “the domination of women’s bodies and women’s work interconnect with the exploitation of land, water and animals.”<sup>3</sup> My own theological standpoint, like Michelle Gonzalez, approaches the text as stories “written by a particular community to explain the human condition and humanity’s relationship with the divine;” however, it is critical to recognize that “throughout Christian history... a patriarchal exegesis of the Genesis accounts has been canonized to legitimize women’s secondary status within the Christian tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Christian theology, while making universal truth claims, has been almost exclusively androcentric: “Males’ experiences, values and images of God have been, and for the most part continue to be, elevated over females’ experiences, values, and images of God.”<sup>5</sup>

The historical association of women with nature is well documented, and liberation movements for both have overlapping and interactive language. As culture and history have defined nature as something that must be controlled, tamed, and dominated, so has it defined women.<sup>6</sup> Following Plato’s lead, Christianity enshrined a view of the self that “imaged the soul in relation to the body as male controlling power over female-identified body and passions that

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women,” *Ecotheology* 11 (2007): 73.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God’s Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Anne M. Clifford, “When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly: An Ecofeminist Proposal for Solidarity” in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 177.

<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether writes, “Women are symbolized as ‘closer to nature’ than men and thus fall in an intermediate position between culture as the male sphere and uncontrolled nature. This is due both to woman’s physiological investment in the biological processes that reproduce the species rather than in processes that enhance her as an individual and to the ability of male collective power to extend women’s physiological role into social roles confined to child nurture and domestic labor.” From *Sexism and God Talk*, 72.

are to be controlled.”<sup>7</sup> This dualistic anthropology served as the bedrock for religious and cultural oppression of women. In *Super, Natural Christians* Sallie McFague writes that nature has suffered the same inferior status as women, even as it has also been used as a norm to suppress women. *Naturism*, the domination of nature, is a lifelong partner to sexism:

The feminization of nature and the naturalization of women have been crucial to the historically successful subordination of both. One common legacy of this old partnership is our scolding of Mother Nature’s fury whenever earthquakes, torrential rains, or hurricanes occur. They angry, out-of-control feminized nature gets back at her human tormentors through unleashing some solid strikes now and then. It is, sadly, one of the few times in our culture that we address nature as subject.<sup>8</sup>

Rosemary Radford Ruether writes, “The basic assumption of ecofeminist theology (although seldom clearly articulated) is that the dualism of soul and body must be rejected, as well as the assumptions of the priority and controlling role of male-identified mind over female-identified body.”<sup>9</sup> The liberation of one marginalized category is interrelated to the liberation of the other. Thus, women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination.<sup>10</sup>

Because creation theology so concretely impacts our theological beliefs about anthropology, we turn now to a detailed examination of the accounts of creation in the Hebrew Scripture. Beginning with the place of the earth in the context of the story of creation, Hava

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 99.

<sup>8</sup> Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ruether, “Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology” in *Christianity and Ecology*, 103.

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975).

Tirosh-Sameulson writes, “The doctrine of creation is the theological basis for Jewish conceptions of nature,” suggesting that while the accounts of J and P are undeniably different, they are not contradictory in their description of the relationship between humanity and the natural world.<sup>11</sup>

### *Examining Patriarchal Texts*

The Priestly account identifies humankind with the creator through the divine image, the *imago Dei*. Nature is not identified with the divine. Nature, in fact, is unquestionably lower than humankind in the hierarchy of created order. As Tirosh-Samuelson argues, “The commandment clearly privileges the human species over others and calls the human to rule over other living creatures.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, this privilege does not provide the human with “license to exploit the earth’s resources, since the earth does not belong to the humans but to God.”<sup>13</sup> Ecotheologian Ellen Davis argues that a proper exegesis of the Priestly narrative unearths an account “not far removed from the overtly agrarian character” of the Yahwist narrative.<sup>14</sup> If ecology is the science of relationships, the Priestly narrative supports “a harmonious web of relationships, infinitely complex in their intersections that have in God their origin and their point of cohesion.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hava Tirosh Samuelson, “Judaism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 50. Davis argues that Genesis 1 should be read as liturgical poetry, not that creation is “ruptured by an overtly hierarchical human story” but that “life created in God’s image is meant to conform, with other forms of life, into a single harmonious order,” 57.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. For more on an agrarian reading of Genesis 1, see chapter 3 of Davis’s *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*.

The Yahwist narrative portrays the first man as a kind of farmer, placing him in the garden to “till it and keep it.”<sup>16</sup> This account is more overtly agrarian, but it too has points of ambiguity involving dominion and hierarchy, specifically the creation and naming of woman. In this narrative, notes Tirosh-Samuels, “The hierarchical relationship between humans and other creatures is signified in the act of naming, which culminates in the naming of the female counterpart.”<sup>17</sup> It is the male character in the story that is given the task of naming both woman and created nature.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, “although the language of the Second Genesis story is by no means as misogynist as the later rabbinic and Christian commentaries on it, we cannot escape the conclusion that the structuring of the story as a male reversal of birth carries an intention to make the male the primary human being and then to locate the female as secondary and auxiliary to him” argues Ruether.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of whether or not the Priestly narrative of creation “imputes no inferiority to the woman,” it is not the account that culture remembered and recounted as history shaped its relationship with women and the earth.<sup>20</sup> Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan write, “It is no surprise that under male monotheism the story suggesting equal creation under God was quickly forgotten. It would have served no useful purpose for patriarchy to remember it.”<sup>21</sup> And

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<sup>16</sup> Genesis 2:15.

<sup>17</sup> Tirosh-Samuels, “Judaism,” 34.

<sup>18</sup> “In this story God is modeled after the intellectual power of the priestly class, who calls all things into being through ritual naming” from Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 62-63.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

ultimately, despite the tone of equality present in the Priestly narrative, neither version of the creation story requires “the participation of the female in order to create.”<sup>22</sup>

This is of particular interest given the presence of the feminine divine in other ancient creation narratives. Parallel creation myths contain the presence of both masculine and feminine deities, while the Judeo-Christian myth not only removes the multiplicity of the deities, but “in the Genesis story the female agency is redacted out.”<sup>23</sup> The Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish* (the particular myth behind the Hebrew creation story), portrays a matriarchal world, eventually subdued by a masculine deity.<sup>24</sup> Shaped by the Babylonian narrative, Ruether says:

The Hebrew creation story has both continuities with and important differences from the Babylonian story. In the Hebrew story the Creator coexists with the primal “stuff” of the cosmos and is in serene control of the process. Strife between Creator and the primal Mother has been eliminated. Instead the Mother has already been reduced to formlessness but also malleable “stuff” that responds instantly to the Creator’s command.<sup>25</sup>

So even pre-existent matter was stripped of any feminine agency. But traces of feminine presence remain in both the text and history. Archaeological studies indicate that outside of Israel, Jewish colonies worshipped Anath, the consort of Yahweh, and Jeremiah 7:18 reveals worship of a mother goddess in Canaan. Yet most of the traces of the feminine “have been edited out in the process of the formation of the scriptural tradition.”<sup>26</sup> And, according to Bernhard

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<sup>22</sup> Isherwood and McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963). Marduk’s model of power replaces the goddess, Tiamat, by extinguishing her life.

<sup>25</sup> Ruether, *Gaia & God*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 68-69.

Anderson, relating to the Genesis narrative, the dominating masculinity of the text overpowers any potentially equalizing language of creating humankind “in the image of God”:

The maleness of the pronouns for God and for Adam already suggests that males are the appropriate collective representatives of this God, females sharing in the benefits of corporate “human” sovereignty, but also falling under the rule of the male head of family. Lest there be any doubt about this, the priestly authors appropriated an earlier folk story about the creation of male and female, and attached it to their account of creation.<sup>27</sup>

This kind of “selective memory” should come as no surprise. Both Hebrew and Christian traditions boast a history of suppressing the memory of women altogether.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the more liberational narrative of the Priestly text is not the story remembered historically, neither has the biblical text been remembered or interpreted in a way as to inspire care for the earth. Conversely, evangelicals have used the text (specifically Genesis 1:28) to support humanity’s right to wreak havoc on the earth. Regardless of what

[M]arginalized ecological voices or texts may be found now, it is also true that the Judeo-Christian tradition was taken by its leading authorities to have a predominant meaning over the centuries, and especially during the modern age. And this meaning was typically concerned (at best) with the “wise use” of the earth and its creatures, and not with any notion of their inherent value.<sup>29</sup>

In the Jewish tradition, since nature is part of the created order, outside of that which was created in the image of God, Judaism has not historically supported a belief in the inherent sanctity of nature. Christianity, likewise, adopted the belief in the low status of nature relative to the divine, and perpetuated the anthropocentric worldview, teaching that “human beings are

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<sup>27</sup> Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> The exclusion of any reference to the birthing mother as source of life is exemplified in the Adam and Eve story; later God will require Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, denying Sarah’s right to her own child; see Radford Ruether’s *Gaia & God*, 179, as well as Phyllis A. Bird’s *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Roger S. Gottlieb, ed. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 9.

divinely ordained to rule over and dominate all other species and nature generally.”<sup>30</sup> Because of the historical connection of the female with matter and nature (the roots of which lie in Judeo-Christian sacred texts), the implication of the views of nature in the Hebrew Scripture is troubling. Rachel Carson comments on this connection:

The view of human nature found in Hebrew Scripture has several cultural layers. But the overall tendency is to see the natural world, together with human society, as something created, shaped, and controlled by God, a God imaged after the patriarchal ruling class. The patriarchal male is entrusted with being the steward and caretaker of nature...yet the symbolization of God as a patriarchal male and Israel as wife, son, and servant of God, creates a basic analogy of woman and nature. God is the ultimate patriarchal Lord, under whom the human patriarchal lord rules over women, children, slaves, and land.<sup>31</sup>

The text and tradition it engendered cannot be depatriarchalized. The Hebrew religion is highly androcentric and anthropocentric, and has been rightly “faulted as a prime source of the cultural-symbolic patterns which have inferiorized women and nature.”<sup>32</sup> Patriarchy rigorously excludes women and nature; Elizabeth Johnson writes, “within a sexist system the true identity of both women and the earth are skewed. Both are commonly excluded from the sphere of the sacred; both are routinely taken for granted and ignored, used and discarded, even battered and ‘raped,’ while nevertheless they do not cease to give birth and sustain life.”<sup>33</sup>

Neither does the truth of the divine cease to speak. Strands of an inclusive narrative can be found amid the patriarchy and anthropocentrism; Ruether cites “a God who related directly to women without intermediaries, and a God who relates to nature apart from human mediation.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> David Kinsley, “Christianity as Ecologically Harmful and Christianity as Ecologically Responsible” in *This Sacred Earth*, 104.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women,” *Ecotheology* 2 (1997): 74.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ruether, *Gaia & God*, 208.

These are the kinds of examples ecotheologians point to as they mine the text for new narratives and reinterpret old traditions.<sup>35</sup>

Ecofeminist theologians point to the historic link between the domination of nature by men and the “social” domination of women by men as evidence that if one oppressed party is ever to be liberated, so must the other; Steven Bouma-Prediger emphasizes that “the success of one is a necessary condition for the success of the other, and both require an overthrow of the current social structure of domination.”<sup>36</sup> Ecofeminism involves a systemic movement, what Ruether calls a “conversion from alienated, hierarchical dualism to life-sustaining mutuality.”<sup>37</sup> In this paradigm, structures of power and influence recognize relationships between both nature and humanity as a web of interdependent relationship. Ecofeminist ethic replaces relationships of domination between men and women, humans and non-human life with mutuality and interdependence. The values championed by ecofeminists (love, justice, and care of the earth) “have been proclaimed by patriarchal religion, yet contradicted by patriarchal symbolic and social patterns.”<sup>38</sup> Adherence to a theology of liberation (for both women and nature), notes McFague, would, in fact, “be a return to the roots of both Hebrew and Christian traditions.”<sup>39</sup> Because the powerful (patriarchy) have so consistently manipulated and marginalized the ethics of love, justice, and mutuality to serve its own purposes, these scriptural roots “appear novel due

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<sup>35</sup> Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jurgen Moltmann* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>37</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature” in *This Sacred Earth*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 331.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 34.

to centuries of focus on human well-being alone, and especially inner human well-being.”<sup>40</sup> I would argue that this focus on human well being actually has meant male well-being, thus the woman—as the oppressed party both because of her lower status relative to man and her intrinsic connection with nature—became the subject of double domination. Still, where there is hope for nature in the text of the Hebrew Bible, there is hope for women, and conversely.

### *Re-reading the Text*

Few ecofeminists see the connections between the Hebrew text and both oppression and liberation as clearly as Rosemary Radford Ruether. Ruether forcefully indicts the Genesis story as patriarchal propaganda for both its redaction of the feminine element of the divine, and its use as a text of patriarchy that undergirds an “economic system of exploitative individual and state capitalism, [which] thrives on dominance and...is extended to the earth and its resources. Patriarchy will take what it wants, because it considers its needs supreme.”<sup>41</sup> And even as Ruether refuses to make concessions for the overt patriarchy of the biblical text, she demands privileging the view of texts like the Noachic covenant and the covenantal strand of the Hebrew Bible, rejecting the patriarchal aspects of covenantal tradition “while reclaiming the vision of community sustained by processes which continually righted the distorted relationships created by unjust domination and exploitation.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Isherwood and McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 126-127. The phrase “to subdue” in the Genesis text has (original intention aside) been used as divine command to exploit, and not to “restrain in order to cultivate.”

<sup>42</sup> Ruether, “Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women,” 81. Ruether posits that the tradition of equating women with nature and the resulting domination of the two is not due simply to religious tradition, but is more complex and ambiguous. There is no doubt, however, that Hebrew and Graeco-Roman worlds were powerful players in the shaping of patriarchy.

The Noachic covenant (Genesis 9:1-17) is a universal and everlasting covenant in the Priestly narrative. It is a global and ecological covenant, notes Anderson:

The Noachic covenant then, is a covenant of creation. First, it is universal. The storyteller indicates this by saying that God made this covenant with the family of Noah, regarded as representatives of humankind. Moreover, it is ecological. The narrator indicates this by saying that God made this covenant with the earth, pledging to preserve the constancies of nature as long as the earth lasts.<sup>43</sup>

This covenant speaks to nothing if not to the inclusive nature of God's love and justice. God makes this covenant not only with Israel, but also with all of humanity. The covenant embraces not only humanity, but also non-human life (Genesis 9:15), and the earth itself (Genesis 9:13). It is a covenant with "tremendous implications for global ethics."<sup>44</sup> Ruether views the covenant vision of humanity in relationship to the earth as caretakers who recognize that all forms of life exist in a web of interdependence. She adopts the stance of "an ultimate thouness at the heart of every other living being," which informs her belief that "the covenantal relation between humans and all other life forms, as one family united by one source of life, forbids this otherness from being translated into destructive hostility. We have no right to wipe out any other life form because it is different from us."<sup>45</sup> Ruether's emphasis of the universal covenant tradition demands a restructured worldview. According to one of her interpreters, it "speaks of the finitude of creaturely reality and the limits of human power, and thus engenders humility and a sense of place in the face of the arrogant grasping for More. This tradition reminds us that we are but stewards, not owners, of the land and are called to be a just community, attentive to the needs of strangers, animals, and the poor."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>45</sup> Ruether, *Gaia & God*, 227.

<sup>46</sup> Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology*, 57.

Neither the created world nor the created female is easily accommodated in the Hebrew tradition. The liberation of both requires a privileged reading of certain texts over the texts historically used to perpetuate oppression. And neither will be fully liberated without the liberation of the other. We must approach these texts the way Phyllis Trible does when she writes, “The Bible is a pilgrim wandering through history to merge past and present. Composed of diverse traditions that span centuries, it embraces claims and counterclaims in witness to the complexities and ambiguities of existence.”<sup>47</sup> Most of theology has failed to recognize the counterclaims that reside next to the claims about what it means to be human, or the relationship between humanity and the earth. Christianity has failed to remember that good theology is always shifting and reacting to culture in order to be continually life giving, and thus properly reveal the truth of God. In this historical moment, our theology must recognize that the integration of ecofeminism with ecojustice is necessary for the healing of the earth and the healing of women. Only when we acknowledge that each and every form of life has its own unique place, purpose, and right to exist in relationship to God and other beings, and when justice and love characterize the relationships between men and women, humanity and the earth, will we begin to move toward the global ethic of non-hierarchical relationships and interdependency imagined by the covenant trajectory of the Hebrew Bible. According to Anne Clifford, this movement toward holism is demanded by an ecofeminist position, which

[G]ives direction to the process of bringing faith in God to understanding in a manner that calls for a radical conversion of mind and heart from hierarchical dualism to egalitarian holism. Such a conversion is required of us if we are to succeed in developing a conceptual framework for articulating what it means to be females and males in relationship to God, to one another, and to the nonhuman natural world in ways that mutually enhance these relationships.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Clifford, “When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly: An Ecofeminist Proposal for Solidarity,” 177.

## *The Imago Dei Problem*

It becomes necessary, because of its place in the creation story, and the historical development of theological anthropology around the inclusion of the *imago Dei* in the creation narrative, to explore in some detail the implication of humanity created in the image of God. Christianity has used the doctrine of *imago Dei* in all kinds of manners, to sanction the god-like status of men over creation in a manipulated understanding of being called God's representatives on earth, to justify dominion over the earth (which all too often looks like rape and plunder), and to elevate the male gender to a position of power and authority over the female. Carter Heyward writes, "Theological narcissism, the preoccupation with oneself and one's god in one's image—or in the image of one's racial, gender, cultural, or religious roots—is a foundational component of the theological structure of ruling class (read white affluent Christian male) privilege."<sup>49</sup>

If we are going to move toward a more holistic understanding of theological anthropology, it will mean reworking the typical interpretation of *imago Dei*. Simple as it may sound, understanding the image-of-God clause as applying to both male and female creatures already radically changes the conversation that Christianity has been engaged in for centuries regarding the nature of the human being. Gonzalez writes that feminist theology "is rooted in a conviction that women are made in God's image and called to participation in the project of building up the reign of God. Thus, the well-being of women—understood not in isolation but in relation to God, and other human beings, and the earth—serves as a goal and criterion of adequacy."<sup>50</sup> When feminist theologians talk about reclaiming the equal possession of the *imago*

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<sup>49</sup> Carter Heyward, "Christology," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 197.

<sup>50</sup> Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, xxiv.

*Dei* for all members of humanity, they often refer to the necessity of "grounding" the concept of God: "feminist theologians, along with others, sense that it is imperative for God to be wrestled to the ground from the above and the beyond, to be much more within, infusing everyday life with the presence of the sacred."<sup>51</sup> Claiming the equal possession of *imago Dei* for all members of humanity is the foundation of egalitarian theology.

What does being created in the image of God mean for humanity in relationship to the rest of creation? Anthropocentric theology interprets the earth as being created expressly for the benefit of humanity, but more and more often the theological trend has been to question this assumption. Fergusson states that the cosmic implications of the day of rest for all of creation suggest that "the life of the planet and its manifold species belong to God's good creation; these have a divinely appointed place not reducible to the service of human interests."<sup>52</sup> The divine affirmation of the goodness of the world does not "allow a denigration of the material world or a dualism that depicts the world as a battleground between rival cosmic powers. Even while it is the arena of decay, suffering, conflict, and sin, this world remains God's good creation."<sup>53</sup> Kathryn Tanner writes, "Creation in God's image is not a way of saying something special about human beings as such; it is a way of pointing out a special relation between them and God."<sup>54</sup> De-centering man as the apex and pinnacle of creation reorients focus from humanity to all of the created order.

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<sup>51</sup> Lucy Larkin, "The Relationship Quilt" in *Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 149.

<sup>52</sup> David Fergusson, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>54</sup> Kathryn Tanner, "The Difference Theological Anthropology Makes," *Theology Today* 50, no. 4 (January 1, 1994): 573.

One attempt to straddle the space between ecotheology and an environmentally concerned yet conservative theology is through a theology of stewardship, which frames creation for the express benefit of humanity. While a stewardship typology utilizes an ethos of caretaking under which humanity, representing God in and through the *imago Dei* as divinely appointed trustees, acts as steward attending benevolently to God's property, it still "interprets the garden of Eden as made for human use (and) implies a divinely sanctioned instrumental management of nonhuman nature for human benefit."<sup>55</sup> A typology of stewardship neglects the emphasis on holism and the interconnectedness of all creation. Instead, it succumbs to the temptation of hierarchy, perpetuating a claim of mastery and logic of domination. It simply fails as an adequate interpretation of the text or response to the ecological crisis we find ourselves in. Anne M. Clifford suggests we turn to a typology of solidarity with creation, "predicated on a unified effort of distinct groups to achieve a common good, a healthy planet on which all life forms can flourish. The unified effort that solidarity seeks does not erase difference, be that the difference among peoples of different cultures, races and classes or the differences between humans and other life forms."<sup>56</sup> The implication of solidarity on the concept of *imago Dei* is radical and diametrically opposed to the anthropocentric application of *imago Dei*.

While the stories of creation in Genesis cannot be divorced from their patriarchal undertones and hierarchical ordering of creation, exegetes must read the text in its own cultural and historical context, choosing to privilege more hopeful and liberative strands of text to shape a reading that responds to our present time and place. Because how we read the creation story influences how we think about God, prioritizing an ecofeminist emphasis on holistic and

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<sup>55</sup> Clifford, "When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly: An Ecofeminist Proposal for Solidarity," in *In the Embrace of God*, 184.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

inclusive elements of the text directs us toward understanding the concept of *imago Dei* not as something that privileges humanity above creation, but as that capacity which allows us to engage in our own transcendent journey toward mutuality and relationship with all of creation.

## CHAPTER 3

### ESCHATOLOGY: A CONVERSATION ON HOPE AND THE FUTURE

One cannot ignore the doctrine of eschatology in an exploration of theological anthropology. In fact, it is my contention that feminist theology is fundamentally eschatological, although not in the same dimensions or under the same rubric that has traditionally dominated the interpretation of the final Christian doctrine.

The current problem with Christian eschatology is the way in which those on the winning side of history (the majority) have shaped the dominant interpretation. What began as resistance literature symbolizing hope for an oppressed people was all too quickly subverted and manipulated by the dominant. The Christian tradition (especially the tradition of the white, Western world) has been interpreting eschatological texts egregiously for centuries. Read in context, these texts can only be understood as texts written by the marginalized, for the marginalized and oppressed. For example, the Apocalypse of John (the great text of eschatology)

...emerged out of the experience of the persecuted, the outcasts, and the powerless...out of the experience of people whose expectations did not match with existing realities; people who were living on the brink of despair; people who believed in the ultimate and sovereign power of an ultimately good God, but experienced in their daily lives the oppression of idolatrous power.<sup>1</sup>

Obsession with the individual self, subscription to dualism between the physical and the spiritual, and a preoccupation with escapism affect all of Christian theology—why would we assume they have not also impacted the doctrine of eschatology? Catherine Keller calls

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<sup>1</sup> Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 213.

traditional doctrine associated with eschatology “unearthly.”<sup>2</sup> She writes, “At their best they sin by omission: by draining energy away from our earth-home, by encouraging us to live in orientation toward a many-mansioned heavenly home. But at a certain point, the indifference toward nature implied in traditional eschatology becomes lethal. That is, its distraction from the earth complies with the destruction of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> For centuries, Christian theologians have reflected on the necessity and importance of a physical afterlife, resulting in disregard and disdain for the present life. That sordid history is at least in part (or even mostly) responsible for the current situation we find ourselves in—an environmental apocalypse is indeed upon us, and it is of our own making. For the doctrine of eschatology to be relevant, it must be re-constructed through recycling of tired, anthropocentric theology that proves very useless to us now. While feminist and ecofeminist theology has a long tradition of rearticulating texts and fundamental doctrines that are more harmful than life giving, there has been very little momentum surrounding the reconstruction of an eschatological vision. This is unfortunate, since the eschatological message, interpreted through a lens that does not represent the dominant and powerful, can emerge as a dimension of primary importance in the reconstruction of anthropology.

We must begin by releasing any baggage that surrounds Armageddon, the lake of fire, and the burning earth. Historically, the interpretive tendency has been to regard the eschatological discourse as “an advance report of the end time or...a blueprint for the end time.”<sup>4</sup> But an alternative understanding of eschatology, according to Peter Phan, is as “an aetiological

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Keller, “Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy,” *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature, & the Environment* 5, no. 2 (January 1997): 330.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 212.

account from the present situation of sin and grace forward into its future stage of final fulfillment and not an anticipatory description of what will happen at the end of time and beyond.”<sup>5</sup> In this articulation, while eschatology remains defined primarily as a doctrine of last things, it is rooted not just in the future but in the present, in the already *and* not-yet, embedded with the possibility for transformation, which results in hope. The goal of eschatological hope is toward the transformation of the present to a more liberative future. This definition easily resonates with ecofeminist theology, and vice versa. When ecofeminist theology is defined according to its transformative goals, it exposes deeply rooted eschatological implications.

Similarly, theology not rooted in an ethic of ecofeminism can engender a focus on the present. Systematic theology tends to push eschatology toward the end of the narrative, but when eschatology is the centerpiece, the result is a theology that prioritizes life in the present.<sup>6</sup>

Some ecofeminist theologians address the eschaton—Rosemary Radford Ruether and Catherine Keller do so at great length. But many ecofeminists dismiss the Christian doctrine of eschatology in favor of focusing on the present, and on bodiliness. Their contention is that the tradition of eschatology offers us little more than an escapist route into eternal paradise and is altogether unhelpful (even harmful) to the necessary focus of the world presented threatened and tyrannized by death.

While the tradition of the Apocalypse certainly has been used to dismiss the responsibility of humanity toward the earth, interpretations of the last things are diverse and derived from mostly anthropocentric perspectives. Yet, there are interpretations that question the

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Phan, “Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 515. Phan concludes, “Eschatology is anthropology conjugated in the future tense on the basis of Christology.”

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann writes, “Eschatology is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such” in *The Theology of Hope* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 16. See also *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

historical trend toward anthropocentric readings. For example, Barbara Rossing examines the use of the disappearance of the sea as a literary device in Revelation 21:1, representing the economic ethos of the Roman Empire. The New Jerusalem of John's apocalypse is set over and against Babylon, juxtaposing the city of God with the "ecological imperialism, violence, unfettered commerce, idolatry and injustice...of the toxic Babylon."<sup>7</sup> In the city of Babylon, as in the Roman Empire, those who were involved in maritime trade grew wealthy at the expense of the poor. Rossing's interpretation forces the reader to examine the metaphor from a primarily economic perspective. If the sea is no more in the New Jerusalem, its nonexistence points toward a radically different economy than that of the Roman Empire.

John Stanley contends that a political reading of the text and imagery of the natural world exposes "Revelation as a document of resistance literature that calls the church to resist the Roman Empire."<sup>8</sup> In this interpretation, the Roman Empire is in direct conflict with the throne of God, and John's eschatological vision "addresses the political, social, economic, and religious stress his readers endured during the final years of Domitian's reign."<sup>9</sup> For example, if the sea represents the Roman Empire at large, the disappearance of that great body of water is reward for the people of the new creation who were not only faithful to the throne of God, but who put themselves in conflict with Empire by refusing assimilation.<sup>10</sup> The political body of the Roman Empire has not only disappeared, the social body of the Roman Empire has been destroyed: "But

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Rossing, "River of Life in God's New Jerusalem: An Eschatological Vision for Earth's Future" in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of the Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 212.

<sup>8</sup> John E. Stanley, "The New Creation as a People and City in Revelation 21:1-22:5: An Alternative to Despair," *Asbury Theological Journal* 60 no. 2 (2005): 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers; the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8). Should that piece of text seem violent and uncompassionate, we must remember the historic and political context of the early Christians in the Roman Empire. The text served the needs of an oppressed community looking toward a future hope and, as Keller notes, “reveals not a divine investment in catastrophe but a hermeneutic of crisis enabling a beleaguered community to interpret its place within historical crisis meaningfully.”<sup>11</sup> Political interpretations of the new heaven and the new earth argue that “properly understood, the biblical apocalypse, whatever else it may be, is one long act of protest against the power of the state.”<sup>12</sup>

Jonathan Moo (an evangelical theologian) draws on mythology and the image of the sea as abyss and the origin of the beast as one possibility for interpreting the implications of the sea’s disappearance. In ancient myth, the sea represents not only chaos, but also the dwelling place of cosmic evil.<sup>13</sup> One who reads in this context can only interpret the absence of the sea as blessing. Moo writes, “The end of the sea cannot be construed as a further punishment of humankind or even of evil nations, but rather its absence is an integral part of what makes the new creation a place of joy, without evil, death, pain or sorrow.”<sup>14</sup> In Moo’s reading, the sea ultimately represents broken creation; however good it might have been created to be, sin caused the sea to become “a thing of terror, an abode of evil and an instrument of judgment.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Keller, “Why Apocalypse, Now,” *Theology Today* 49, no. 2 (July 1, 1992): 189.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the sea as the dwelling place of cosmic evil and the parallelism between the divine warrior motif in the biblical text and other ancient creation/annihilation narratives, see Jonathan Moo’s article, “The Sea That is No More” in *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 2 (January 2009): 148-167.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

absence of the sea represents the new creation as being thoroughly removed from any threat of chaos or judgment. The blessing of the new cosmos is the annihilation of uncontrollable nature. The problem with Moo's position is that the sea (and by implication, all of non-human creation) is forced into a very narrow either-or categorization. The sea is *either* a natural part of the created order *or* a sign of judgment. This dichotomy exasperates the us-vs. -them narrative that has historically exalted humanity over nature. Christianity is already well versed in supporting this hierarchical, anthropocentric understanding of the created world, and the domino effect of oppression and marginalization it creates can no longer be supported by the ecologically aware people of God.

Catherine Keller examines the Revelation text in an analysis that is sharply critical of traditional Christian interpretation and symbol. She argues that the imagery of the sea (or chaos) “long ago fell victim to an in-house tradition demonizing it as evil disobedience.”<sup>16</sup> She coins the term *tehomophobia*, encapsulating the ways in which the sea was identified with death, evil, and chaos, and she suggests that without “the healing of this ‘tehomophobia,’ our ecological efforts—our efforts toward a green eschatology, toward the renewal of the creation—may remain self-defeating.”<sup>17</sup> Keller's overarching question is whether the apocalyptic text can be recycled in a way that “neither demonizes nor annihilates the deep.”<sup>18</sup> In the end, Keller seems unable to rescue this particular text from construing the wild and chaotic sea as a place of horror.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine Keller, “No More Sea: The Lost Chaos of the Eschaton” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 183.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>19</sup> Keller does not concede the metaphorical emptying of the sea as meaningful in the social justice tradition of liberation from oppressive Empire—Keller stresses that when the liberating warrior motif is employed, “biblical

Ultimately, she must look at other texts and utilize other disciplines to find a re-envisioned eschatology that does not result in commodification of the nonhuman.

Keller's criticism of the text and the tradition it engendered is well put. However, if we are able to remember that the story of the apocalypse represents timely, but not timeless, truth, we will be able to resist interpretations that support fleeing or being rescued from the earth and chaotic nature, focusing instead on what it means to be earth-bound Christians. Reading the text as promise of supernatural rescue allows us to continue interpreting Scripture in such a way that encourages dualism, divorces humanity from the natural world, and removes our responsibility toward the rest of creation, disregarding the environmental mandate of the text and instead finding permission to exploit the earth and her resources. Being attentive to our own historical moment, rather than reading an ancient text written for oppressed Christians in the Roman Empire as literally and universally true, places emphases on how eschatology provokes transformative hope in the present. Catherine Keller writes that our responsibility as creatures of the earth is to "participate in our finite, interconnected creatureliness with 'metanoic' consciousness: that is, facing up to the 'manmade' apocalypse."<sup>20</sup> Combining the doctrine of eschatology with an ecological orientation forces us out of "econumbness."<sup>21</sup>

As we have seen, eschatology is primarily about providing a hopeful orientation in the midst of suffering. Those for whom suffering is not a primary orientation (not even as an action of solidarity) will never be able to engage in eschatological imagination. At worst, those who are the furthest removed from suffering and the neglected use eschatology as an "ideological tool ...

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eschatology loses its edge, its very *eschaton*: the focus shifts from the human systems of domination and destruction about which the people of God might do something, to natural systems of mortality, requiring a supernatural solution. The possibility of prolonged activism in history thus becomes moot." From "No More Sea," 187-188.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Keller, "Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy," 97-98.

<sup>21</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 213.

to control not only the earth but even the heavenly abode.”<sup>22</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether addresses the Hebraic concept of resurrection, not “intending to support immortality, but to bridge the gap between the present suffering and the future vindication of those who have suffered unjustly.”<sup>23</sup> It is almost impossible for those of us who exist comfortably with some degree of power in the First World to imagine how necessary the concept of the eschaton is to the survival of hope among the oppressed. Moltmann writes that “eschatology is an offspring of those who have suffered most in life but have not been numbed or calloused by their suffering...those who are enjoying themselves under the present arrangement are not capable of real eschatological imagination, for they are only predisposed to maintaining or extending the present.”<sup>24</sup> Interpreting the apocalypse as divine rescue and imagined paradise, then, can be nothing more than a privilege of the elite. And this particular interpretation, notes Fernandez, has no capacity for transformative change in the present, “in the midst of a world threatened and tyrannized by death.”<sup>25</sup> The discourse of eschatology serves those who suffer but “who have refused to be caged by the past and the present, or to be trapped by an inevitably cruel future.”<sup>26</sup>

The concept of an inevitably cruel future implies a closed future, which nurses security because it speaks of nothing more than what is already known. Under this framework, the future is simply an extended time of sameness that has not yet arrived. Such a framework is problematic because it relieves humanity of any responsibility toward the present or the future.

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<sup>22</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 214.

<sup>23</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism & God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983), 243.

<sup>24</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 215.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

The alternative (the ontological belief that history is open) forces us to live “as if the future were present or as if the vision informed by our eschatological imagination were already a present reality.”<sup>27</sup> This belief is not dissimilar to Paul Tillich’s concept of “transformative waiting.” That is, the denunciation of “what is” must be coupled with the annunciation of “what might be.”<sup>28</sup>

Ecofeminist theology cannot afford to ignore the doctrine of eschatology, but rather must recognize how powerful the embrace of the transformative goal of eschatology is for the ecological agenda. Eleazar Fernandez writes “eschatological sensibility does not take us away from our earthiness, our bodiliness, and our senses. Instead, it enables us to feel and think through our bodies. Eschatological sensibility makes us thoroughly embodied subjects.”<sup>29</sup>

While there is no question that the divine rescue motifs of traditional eschatological doctrines have something to learn from the element of liberationist eschatology present in ecofeminism, ecofeminism must be careful not to shortchange the “not-yet” quality in their own conceptions of the eschaton. The profession of faith in the hope of future communion gives us access to a God and tradition capable of ultimate reconciliation. This paradigm does not exonerate us from our present responsibility to the earth and all of creation. Living on the edge of the chaos of eschaton, says Keller, anchors us in “an ecosystemic rather than a merely systemic theology [which] neither repeats nor shuns but rather recycles, grounds, and deepens eschatology.”<sup>30</sup> When ecofeminism rearticulates eschatology, the center shifts from the individual to the collective. Sallie McFague states that ecofeminism forces us to abandon dualism in favor of more holistic concepts, to resist the death-defying culture of the West, to

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<sup>27</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 225.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>30</sup> Keller, “No More Sea,” 192.

recognize that while eschatology “can and did mean a reflection on death and the afterlife, the ‘last things’...it can also mean the breaking in of new possibilities, of hope for a new creation. It can mean living from a vision for a different present based upon a new future.”<sup>31</sup> Ecofeminism has a capacity to re-conceptualize eschatology in a way that is hopeful and creates present change; to this end, theologians working in ecofeminism must take the doctrine of eschatology seriously—not abandoning the interpretations of the past, but acting as a corrective to them.

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<sup>31</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 198.

## CHAPTER 4

### THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: A DIALOGUE ON BEING

The way theological anthropology is addressed within Christianity can be considered the lynchpin for all other Christian doctrines. If anthropology is the way humans understand who they are and their relationship to other life forms, theological anthropology is the way we understand ourselves (and all of life) in relationship to God. Classical theological anthropology has centered the conversation around the *imago Dei* principle: What does it mean to be a human created in the image and likeness of God and thus, capable of relationship with God? Anne M. Clifford comments that “theologians have directed their attention almost exclusively to human existence or human history...and have implicitly treated nature as a timeless and static backdrop.”<sup>1</sup> Because most of theology is also androcentric, the dialogue around theological anthropology has not only excluded nature, it has excluded women by privileging male experience and claiming a universality which elevates male over female “experiences, values and images of God.”<sup>2</sup> Clifford argues that this privileging of the male experience as paradigmatic must change “if we are to succeed in developing a conceptual framework for articulating what it means to be females and males in relationship to God, to one another, and to the nonhuman natural world in ways that mutually enhance these relationships.”<sup>3</sup> It follows that the way we

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<sup>1</sup> Anne M. Clifford, “When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly: An Ecofeminist Proposal for Solidarity,” in *In the Embrace of God*, Ann O’Hara Graff, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 177.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

understand human beings in relationship to God affects the way we understand concepts such as pneumatology, creation, and eschatology. If these doctrines reflect only the experience and perspective of the human male, a radical conversion to the world of women and nature is necessary to rethink theology in a holistic and inclusive way. Beyond the work of theological musings in the academy, the way we understand anthropology “bears upon how we live, organize our societal dwelling, and relate to other creatures.”<sup>4</sup> Because of this, the question of theological anthropology is an imminently practical question and affects the way we presently live and interact. As Eleazar Fernandez writes, anthropology is a “critical and strategic” approach to theological questions.<sup>5</sup> What follows is an exploration of theological anthropology both informed by ecofeminist thought, and in criticism of certain ecofeminist positions.

What would it look like to reinterpret theological anthropology in response to sexism and naturism? To begin with, one must acknowledge that theology (in various areas) has been a part of “perpetuating various forms of dehumanization.”<sup>6</sup> Theology has never been practiced in a vacuum or in the arena of neutrality, and thus, classism, sexism, racism, and naturism have always influenced it. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes, “Christian theological anthropology is an interactive artifact of culture.”<sup>7</sup>

It is impossible to enter into this conversation without engaging in some deconstruction. It is necessary to question universal experience, disembodied knowing, dualism, and

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<sup>4</sup> Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>7</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 152.

essentialism. This deconstruction is complex and difficult work, and I embark on this journey with the conviction that we ought not deconstruct without offering a constructive vision.

An exploration of an ecofeminist perspective on pneumatology most clearly deconstructs traditional theological presuppositions regarding disembodied knowing and dualism. Viewing pneumatology through the lens of an ecofeminist hermeneutic aids us in engaging “theological construction for our own time.”<sup>8</sup> Sallie McFague argues that “this is what theology has always been when it has made sense to people and when it has helped them to love the world.”<sup>9</sup>

### *An Ecofeminist Pneumatology*

Ecofeminist pneumatology is rooted in the historical reality of the feminine connection with the bodily. Sharon Betcher writes, "Falling in love with the mortal life has not been on the top of our sociopolitical, economic, or religious agendas. Because it has not, bodies and those that remind us of the grounding and heaviness of all incarnate life—women and the rest of nature—suffer battering and poverty, as well as the more subtle digs of psychic degradation."<sup>10</sup> While the concept of Spirit elicits connections with the natural world (even the adjectives used to describe the Spirit in the Hebrew Testaments are oriented toward nature—fire, air, water, earth) the way Spirit is used in Western Christianity is as wholly other than nature. In fact, Western Christianity’s view of Spirit is anti-matter. Betcher regards this as a reflection of our perversion of Spirit; “in presuming to keep Spirit pure and uncompromised by the recalcitrant nature of matter, we have, I would suggest, sacralized an abhorrence of humus—of earth, our own bodies,

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<sup>8</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Betcher, “Grounding the Spirit: An Ecofeminist Pneumatology,” *EcoSpirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kerns and Catherine Keller (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007), 316.

of women, and of other earth-related persons.”<sup>11</sup> The emphasis of the patristic fathers on Spirit over humanity and the natural world works in such a way as to suggest that Spirit redeems that which is earthly. By creating and perpetuating dualism, Christianity successfully separated the soul from the body, and defined Spirit as that which has the power to liberate from the natural world.<sup>12</sup> No wonder the Western world has raped and pillaged the earth without so much as an afterthought; no wonder the Holy Spirit has literally disappeared from theological conversation. The analysis extends into gender categories due to the connection of the mind and the male, the body and the female; “one gender enjoys the ungrounded mind, while the other the labor, now become suffering, of sentience. Women and body, earth and earth-keeping peoples serve as buffers for this ideality of the pneumatic body, as the dumping ground for the abject excess of this pneumatic economy.”<sup>13</sup> Spirit serves to transcend the bodily, the human experience. While Western Christianity has set aside women, the earth, and the body, all the corporeal elements, it has also repressed and forgotten the Spirit. Ecofeminist pneumatology suggests that Spirit is much more immanent than transcendent; that Spirit is found within the earth itself, and exists in a series of interconnected relationships (between the divine, human, and non-human) rather than in dualistic categories. Betcher writes, “God’s passion is for mortal, corporeal, material, and sentient life...Spirit isn’t so much interested in extricating souls from the world milieu as in rooting life in the material world.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Betcher, *Grounding the Spirit*, 318.

<sup>12</sup> These dualisms are most commonly seen in categories like soul/body, spirit/matter, male/female, human/non-human life; the second category in each pair serves the first.

<sup>13</sup> Betcher, *Grounding the Spirit*, 328.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

Ecofeminist Ivone Gebara advocates for the interdependence among all the elements that are related to the human world. While Gebara finds the Christian tradition rooted in androcentrism, she believes ecofeminist epistemology can conceive of Christianity's story outside of traditional, oppressive frameworks. Some of the key elements in Gebara's articulation of an ecofeminist epistemology include: an emphasis on knowing (apart from the patriarchal emphasis on linear rationality), the unity of spirit/mind and body/matter (an ecofeminist model rejects categories of dualism), and the concept of gender and ecology as mediations (ways of knowing).<sup>15</sup> Gebara issues strong critiques of the social move from promoting the autonomy of individuals to "the unrestrained exercise of our passion for possessing, for self-assertion, and for power."<sup>16</sup> She argues, "The notion of a free and autonomous person has been co-opted by the ruling classes, by colonialism, and by neocolonialism, by the capitalist free market, by contemporary wars, by advanced technology, by ideologies, and by religions utilized in promoting rivalries and eliminating poor peoples...in order to uphold a power elite as it takes advantage of all the good things of the earth."<sup>17</sup> Gebara's pneumatology follows the framework of an ecofeminist epistemology: She embraces an ecofeminist way of knowing, and seeks to de-theologize the concept of Trinity—rooting it in life and relevance "above and beyond a theology based on eternal substances and essences."<sup>18</sup> Gebara defines Holy Spirit as an unhelpful (and even harmful) image for humanity today.<sup>19</sup> She declares that the symbol of Holy Spirit, as well

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<sup>15</sup> For a concise and readable summary on ecofeminist epistemology, see the first chapter of Ivone Gebara's book, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>19</sup> Beyond identifying the concept of Trinity as unhelpful, Gebara argues that it is a symbol of the elite; creating more division among humanity. See *Longing for Running Water*, 147-151.

as other language about Trinity and the divine, is “obscure” and “refers to traditional, arcane notions unrelated to everyday life.”<sup>20</sup> In place of traditional doctrine which has lost its symbolism and been absolutized by a patriarchal system that privileges men and the male experience, she advocates for a theological framework and language that is responsive to the historical moment. Gebara’s Spirit can most concretely be characterized as a metaphor for relationship. Rather than a concrete being, Spirit exists as a relationship participated in by individuals and the community. She sees the Trinity, “not as a separate, self-enclosed relation of two divine males with each other, mediated by the Spirit, but as the symbolic expression of the basic dynamic of life itself as a process of vital interrelational creativity.”<sup>21</sup> Spirit is intimately linked with the liberation of the marginalized, for it reveals our interconnectedness with all that exists and through this relational energy source we “are able to stand in solidarity and be merciful, tender, just, impassioned.”<sup>22</sup> As Gebara reconstructs Trinity, she sees it revealed on earth, in relationships among people and cultures, in human relationships, and in every person.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, Gebara posits that a post-dogmatic, post-patriarchal ecofeminist ethos of the divine must allow itself to be reshaped under categories of democratic inclusion: “Today, we are called to refashion the meanings of our lives: to simplify them, democratize them, and allow them to be pluralistic.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 138.

<sup>21</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology,” *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 107.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>23</sup> For detailed information on how the Spirit exists in each category, see the section entitled “Reconstructing Meaning” in Gebara’s work, *Longing For Running Water*, 155-162.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

While Gebara operates outside the categories of traditional Christian theology, Elizabeth Johnson explores ecojustice through integration of the formal theological tradition.<sup>25</sup> Johnson rejects the androcentric characterization of God as sharply as Gebara does. She is critical of the attempt to add feminine attributes to the divine, arguing that, “There is real danger that simply identifying the Spirit with ‘feminine’ reality leaves the overall symbol of God fundamentally unreformed and boxes actual women into a stereotypical ideal.”<sup>26</sup> Johnson is critical of traditional liberation theologians, taking issue with Leonardo Boff’s attempt to identify the Virgin Mary as the “maternal” face of God. In the name of liberation, Boff perpetuates narrow definitions of womanhood. Johnson writes, “The simplest feminist analysis makes clear that in the case of actual women in all their historical concreteness, the categories of virgin and mother come nowhere near summing up the totality of what is possible for women’s self-realization.”<sup>27</sup> While Johnson develops imagery of Spirit based in the Wisdom/Sophia tradition, she clearly denounces the idea that God has either a female or masculine tradition.<sup>28</sup> Words are metaphors only, and to the extent that language about God must be used to invoke wholeness, feminine metaphor must be included in our vocabulary. However, “understanding the Holy Spirit as the feminine dimension of the divine within a patriarchal framework is no solution. Even at its best,

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<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is another feminist theologian, who, like Johnson, places emphasis on the Spirit as the manifestation of Divine Wisdom (Sophia), and focuses on embodiment as central to the feminist concern for the discipleship of equals in the body of Christ. For more, see *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 51.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> The work of the mystic Hildegard of Bingen is foundational to the understanding of the Sophia tradition. For an excellent account of Hildegard’s theology, see Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

it does not liberate.”<sup>29</sup> Anchoring the concept of Spirit to the Wisdom/Sophia tradition "builds relationships of solidarity, not antithesis, between God and human beings and among human beings with each other and the earth. Held in her affection, human beings are called to be genuine companions of all creatures, advocating justice and partnering life, while not being diminished or overpowering by a dominating will."<sup>30</sup>

Because the Sophia tradition emphasizes the incarnational aspect of Christ found in the whole earth (including nature) as opposed to the Logos tradition, the concept of Spirit as Wisdom gives postpatriarchal pneumatology both a feminist and ecological grounding. Viewing the incarnation throughout the material world also places emphasis on the immanence of the divine: "while a narrow incarnational Christology—Jesus alone as embodying divine presence—is anthropocentric, a wider incarnational interpretation is very hospitable to ecological concerns: God is in nature as well as in Jesus. And all of nature, human beings included, is knit together organically."<sup>31</sup>

Another option for understanding Spirit from an ecofeminist perspective can be found in the work of Sallie McFague who speaks of the world as God’s body, and articulates a panentheistic approach to pneumatology. Writing with an ecological agenda, McFague argues that “the model of the body of God is only one model, but one that is neglected, essential, illuminating, and helpful both to Christian doctrinal reformulation and to planetary well-

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<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>31</sup> Sallie McFague, “An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It,” *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 31.

being.”<sup>32</sup> McFague’s conviction is that all persons have a role to play in the current planetary crisis—theologians included.

Working from the perspective of a feminist theologian who cares deeply about the planet, McFague finds that focus on the body is central to all three realms: Christianity, feminism, and the earth.<sup>33</sup> She writes, “The organic model suggests...a possible way to rethink humanity’s place in the scheme of things: a postpatriarchal, Christian theology for the twenty-first century.”<sup>34</sup> Under this model, God is incarnated in the earth itself, through all matter; Jesus of Nazareth was one but not the only example of incarnation.<sup>35</sup> McFague moves beyond the criticism of other ecofeminist scholars who focus on the historical connection of the oppression of nature with the oppression of the female to focus on the current oppression of women and ecology by the dominant white male:

To put the matter in a nutshell, a third-world woman of color (as well as her first-world sister in the ghettos of major cities) is the most impacted person on the planet. Her greatest ecological sin is probably ravaging denuded forests to gather firewood to cook her family’s dinner. The most responsible person is a first-world, usually white, usually male, entrepreneur involved in a high-energy, high-profit business...As more of the earth becomes desert, water scarcer, air more polluted, food less plentiful, the lines between the “haves” and the “have nots” will become even more sharply drawn.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), viii.

<sup>33</sup> McFague considers Christianity the “religion of the incarnation *par excellence*. Its earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment: from the incarnation (the Word made flesh) and Christology (Christ was fully human) to the eucharist (this is my body, this is my blood), the resurrection of the body, and the church (the body of Christ who is its head), Christianity has been a religion of the body.” From McFague, *The Body of God*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>35</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether articulates something similar in her ecological theology, suggesting that Christ is not confined to the historical Jesus, nor related only to human souls. Christ is the immanent wisdom of God present in the whole cosmos. See *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 4.

McFague's epistemological framework is clearly located in concern for the ecological crisis (which she calls the moral issue of our day), and those most impacted (the marginalized, often female members of the human population).

McFague's pneumatology begins with the model that the universe as God's body is "enlivened and empowered by divine spirit."<sup>37</sup> Spirit in this model refers not to the disembodied Holy Ghost, nor the Holy Spirit who traditionally is conceived of as helper to the followers of Christian tradition, but to the Spirit that hovered over the face of the waters in the beginning. McFague describes the preference of Spirit theology for its re-orienting capacity: allowing humanity "to see ourselves united with all other living creatures through the breath that moves through all parts of the body, rather than as the demilords who order and control nature."<sup>38</sup> McFague acknowledges that within the Christian tradition, Spirit also refers to the Holy Spirit, who qualifies and gives shape to the Spirit of God. She incorporates both the concept of Spirit and Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition by saying, "The spirit is the source of life, the breath of creation; at the same time, the Holy Spirit is the source of the renewal of life, the direction or purpose for all the bodies of the world—a goal characterized by inclusive love."<sup>39</sup> In her panentheistic model, God is neither necessarily embodied or disembodied but rather, "sacramentally embodied; God is mediated, expressed, in and through embodiment, but not necessarily or totally."<sup>40</sup>

Criticizing Christian trinitarianism, which expresses neither the radical transcendence nor immanence of God, McFague expresses a re-envisioned concept of Trinity operating around the

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<sup>37</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 142.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>40</sup> For more, see McFague's discussion in *The Body of God*, 149-150.

mystery of God, the physicality of God, and the mediation of the visible and invisible.

McFague's model moves beyond the "need" for gendered categories to describe God, and holds together both transcendence and immanence, suggesting their joining place is in the body of Christ, itself. Or, put more plainly, "The radicalization of transcendence in the Christic paradigm is the incognito appearance of Christ wherever we see human compassion for the outcast and the vulnerable."<sup>41</sup> For ecofeminist theologians, the "outcast and vulnerable" refer not only to human members of the universe, but to non-human creatures, and the earth itself.

Ecofeminists call for radical social change, restructuring of relationships between human groups, the nonhuman world, and the divine. Ecofeminist epistemology revolves around the core concepts of liberation, equality, mutuality, and empowerment, and dares to envision the universe as a series of interconnected relationships. It abolishes imagery of patriarchy, androcentrism, and hierarchy, historically perpetuated by the Christian religion. The ecofeminist vision of Christianity is, in many ways, rooted in the concept of Spirit as the relationship coursing through the veins of time, space, history, and the earth, connecting all of humanity with the living earth: the body of God. This particular articulation of pneumatology may be preferred to other conceptions of Spirit for the way in which it truly encompasses the entire marginalized world, views the whole universe as sacrament, and calls for radical transformation rather than subtle change. Thus, examining pneumatology through the lens of ecofeminism deconstructs paradigms of dualism and disembodied knowing, while offering an alternative construction in the place of an andro- and anthropocentric understanding of Spirit. It also assists us in grounding theology in a particular world, a concrete interpretation of the world as a series of interconnected relationships that invites the perspective and experience of the marginalized.

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<sup>41</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 195.

While Gebara, Johnson, and McFague are helpful in deconstructing dualism and disembodied knowing, particularly through their pneumatological conversation, ecofeminism often treads dangerously upon the ground of essentializing experience—leading to “the reinscription of the very structures and categories that are oppressive to women.”<sup>42</sup> As feminists themselves argue, it is impossible and dangerous to universalize experience, yet they often fail to exercise their own hermeneutics of suspicion internally when they write about experience. The universal subject, whether male or female, should always be suspect since we know that there are radical differences in power, experience, and commitments among individuals. Likewise, narratives must always be considered suspect as well. For example, McFague argues for a particular framework (the earth as the body of God) without acknowledging that universalizing frameworks are “a site where culture wars are inevitably fought and relations of power always renegotiated.”<sup>43</sup> According to Serene Jones, McFague’s framework “appears as a universally intelligible and static site where global images express basic themes held by religions around the world.”<sup>44</sup> Privileging certain experiences and certain frameworks will always lead to exclusion. Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes,

A commitment to women or to any group brings assumptions that cannot be avoided. Social constructionism, which is emancipating for feminists, implies that it is impossible to provide liberating discourse without particularity, which is necessarily a choosing of this and not that—a kind of exclusion. By virtue of being historical and contextual, the

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<sup>42</sup> Linell Elizabeth Cady, “Identity, Feminist Theory, and Theology” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 18.

<sup>43</sup> Serene Jones, “Women’s Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 46.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

particular is finite and partial. There is, then, a risk entailed in any feminist commitment to particular accounts of women, at least the risk of partiality.<sup>45</sup>

Admitting partiality is not the problem—such a bias cannot be avoided. The problem arises when one perspective is elevated to a universal and imposed on others. Meta-narratives cannot be avoided—whether the narrative is patriarchal or ecofeminist. At issue is what occurs when a master narrative “employ[s] a sole standard and claim[s] to embody a universal experience while muting other narratives.”<sup>46</sup> Ecofeminists must be honest with themselves in admitting that truth and power co-produce one another, and “counter-hegemonic movements, like feminism, do create their own regimes of truth; hence, they must be vigilant of the regimes of truth they establish.”<sup>47</sup> My embrace of partiality toward an ecofeminist perspective is not because I believe in the universal truth of such a framework or because I choose to disregard other meta-narratives, but because along with Eleazar Fernandez, I believe the marginalized “are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge.”<sup>48</sup> When ecofeminism avoids essentializing and universalizing experience it has the capacity to transcend its perception as “a theology done by and for women, but [rather as] a theology articulated from the perspective of women’s experience for the well-being of all.”<sup>49</sup> Audre Lorde’s famous remark about being unable to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools is a prophetic word to ecofeminists who would fall into the trap of essentialisms and reinscription of patriarchal strategies.

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<sup>45</sup> Fulkerson, “Contesting the Gendered Subject” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

*Constructing a Paradigm that Holds Tension: Informed by Karl Rahner*

While Karl Rahner is neither a feminist nor ecofeminist theologian, his work on theological anthropology formed outside of essentializing experience is helpful for reconstructing this particular paradigm. Rahner rejects the concept that human nature is a static element, formed outside of history or cultural context. He roots knowledge of God in embodied experience and argues that the reason anthropology is critical to any kind of God-talk is because everything must be understood in its orientation toward God. Thus, understanding humans in relationship to God is foundational to all areas of transcendence and immanence.

It is no new insight to suggest that classical Christian theology is over-focused on the concept of transcendence, while feminist and eco-feminist theologies lean too heavily toward immanence. While each offers helpful balance to the extremism of the other, neither is satisfactory in isolation from each other. Focusing on the transcendence of God obscures the importance of Jesus as the immanent Christ and the doctrine of embodiment. Focusing on the immanence of God has the potential to reduce God to much less than mystery. Trends in theology indicate the center of gravity is shifting toward the unhelpfulness of comprehending God as wholly Other and over-emphasizing the “aseity, omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, and impassivity” of God, while imaging God solely as that which we experience concretely removes the necessity of Divinity altogether.<sup>50</sup> A more holistic approach to the issue of transcendence vs. immanence is necessary. An ecological strategy may inform our work in this area. If systematic theology took a cue from the definition of ecosystems (natural systems composed of regularly interacting and semi-independent parts which form integrated wholes dependent on and sustained by the biodiversity within them), we might encounter a more holistic

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<sup>50</sup> Anne E. Carr, “The God Who Is Involved,” *Theology Today* 38 no. 3 (1981): 314.

and non-dualistic concept of divine transcendence and immanence. It is helpful to think through the orientation of eco-feminist theologian Catherine Keller who champions an ecosystemic rather than systemic theology, which “neither repeats nor shuns but rather recycles, grounds, and deepens.”<sup>51</sup>

The work of German Jesuit theologian Rahner is just such an orientation and is extremely helpful in redefining what we mean by the transcendence and immanence of God. Rahner rejects neither characteristic, but holds them together in stunning tension. His work on theological anthropology offers a helpful bridge between classical theology and the eco-feminist conversation. According to Carr, Rahner articulates a concept which, “without denying the transcendence of God, clearly affirms God as involved in this world’s human experience.”<sup>52</sup> A brief exploration of Rahner’s theology unveils important emphases on ecology, eschatology, the Nearness and the Otherness of God. Rahner’s ability to hold theological tension is especially important to this conversation. Unlike most Catholic theologians, Rahner avoids “elevating the powers of the creature at the expense of God’s sovereignty.”<sup>53</sup> Nor can he be accused of that which Catholic theologians often charge Protestant theologians with: “emphasizing the sovereignty of divine agency to the extent of denigrating the creature and its capacities.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Catherine Keller, “No More Sea: The Lost Chaos of the Eschaton” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 192.

<sup>52</sup> Carr, “The God Who Is Involved,” 314.

<sup>53</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *God & Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Oxford: Basil E. Blackwell Ltd., 1988), 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

The foundational belief of Rahner's theological anthropology is that "all human beings are essentially oriented to the infinite."<sup>55</sup> Other times, he expresses this presupposition as "positively oriented to the infinite."<sup>56</sup> Such an orientation is inherently eschatological in the sense that the eschaton symbolizes hope toward the transformation of the present to a more liberative future. Rahner's theological anthropology, like certain ecofeminist theologies, reveals deeply rooted eschatological implications when defined according to its transformative goals. Rahner sees the act of creation from "the very beginning oriented toward and fulfilled in God's self-communication or self-bestowal in the incarnation. Grace and the incarnation are neither God's afterthoughts to creation nor God's ad-hoc solution to human sinfulness."<sup>57</sup> Under this rubric, incarnation is built into God's very decision to create.

If we are searching for a model that does not deny the transcendence of God while simultaneously locating God as involved in our embodied human experience, Rahner provides us with a helpful conceptuality. He does not dispose of traditional theological notions of God's transcendence, but he interprets the absolute transcendence of God "as radical immediacy, an inner moment of the personal self-gift of God in incarnation and grace."<sup>58</sup> In Rahner's model, the implicitly known presence of God is experienced as the horizon of human transcendence. This horizon remains unknowable, affirming the orthodox belief that God is utterly other than humanity and creation. Rahner conceives of God as incomprehensible and absolute mystery, beyond the grasp of human knowledge but present in immediacy. In other words, "as absolute

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<sup>55</sup> James J. Bacik, "Rahner's Anthropology: The Basis for a Dialectical Spirituality," in *Being and Truth* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 169.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Peter C. Phan, "Cosmology, Ecology, Pneumatology: A Reading of Denis Edwards's Interpretation of Karl Rahner's Eschatology," *Philosophy & Theology* 18, no. 2: 386.

<sup>58</sup> Carr, "The God Who is Involved," 318.

mystery, God is understood not as that which human persons do not [yet] completely know, but is rather the inexhaustibly intelligible, experienced only as the horizon and goal of human transcendence in knowledge and freedom.”<sup>59</sup> According to Rahner, one cannot love God without concretely loving one's neighbor. It is not enough to say that love of God is inseparable from the love of one's neighbor; God is loved in the neighbor. Loving the neighbor “not only leads to knowledge of God and of Christ, but it has the ability to move us toward God in this very activity.”<sup>60</sup>

For Rahner, the Other is both God and neighbor, not an object but subject. Rahner's subject is not isolated, but relational, permeable, dynamic and responsible. Ultimately, “any understanding of self-presence is contingent upon relationship with others.”<sup>61</sup> Because God's self-bestowal is embedded in creation itself, knowing God is dependent on interacting with creation (human and non). Conceiving of God in this way necessitates an embodied faith.

Much of ecofeminist theology, in an attempt to reject the dualism of body and spirit, humanity and nature, emphasizes immanence over transcendence, embracing the concept of God as embodied in creation and dismissing the theology of God as Other.<sup>62</sup> Carter Heyward addresses the problem of identifying God as Other when she writes:

Dualism is steeped in an assumption of opposition: whether in relation to the knowledge of God or Christ, of ourselves or the world, we can know something only insofar as we are unlike it. Man is unlike woman. Spirit is unlike flesh. Light is unlike darkness. Heaven is unlike earth. God is unlike humanity. In a dualistic praxis, “the other” is always better or worse, more, or less, than oneself or one's people. Identity is forged and

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<sup>59</sup> Carr, “The God Who is Involved,” 319.

<sup>60</sup> Paul D. Molnar, “Love of God and Love of Neighbor in the Theology of Karl Rahner and Karl Barth,” *Modern Theology* 20, no. 4 (October 2004): 575.

<sup>61</sup> Theodore Kepes, Jr. “Toward a Unified Vision: The Integration of Christian Theology and Evolution in Karl Rahner's Understanding of Matter and Spirit,” *Philosophy & Theology* 20, no. 1-2 (2008): 293.

<sup>62</sup> Karen Warren and Val Plumwood are examples of this kind of ecofeminist theologian.

known by contrast and competition, not by cooperative relation. Dualism is cultivated in a praxis of alienation between men and women, rich and poor, light and dark, and, in the image of such oppositions, divinity and humanity.<sup>63</sup>

While it is clear that abandoning the concept of a transcendent God strengthens the ecofeminist argument for personal piety or moral agency, it relinquishes the opportunity to critique patriarchal theology from an orthodox perspective. To the extent that the ideology of God as Other has been used doctrinally and historically to define certain aspects of the created world as like-God (namely, humanity and the male gender in particular) and other aspects as not-God (namely, that which we call “other”—non-human life and the feminine), it follows that in a theology focused on the interconnectedness of all life with the Creator, God as Other be dismissed as an unhelpful conceptualization.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps Edward Schillebeeckx offers a more life-giving metaphor when he suggests “[F]ormerly thought of as the wholly Other, God must be re-conceived as the wholly New.”<sup>65</sup> Ecofeminist theology need not dismiss the orthodox belief in God as Other to embrace a paradigm that reorders dualistic categories in more life-affirming ways. To believe in a temporal space where the Other is a non-existent category is to live in fantasy. Our human tendency is to separate and categorize by what is similar or different. It is not a part of our historical past or our present that we can escape. What we are capable of is reading the Gospel in a new way, a way that creates solidarity between God and that which is Other while acknowledging our human tendency to reduce both language and thought about the divine and non-human life to our own narrative. Perhaps the power of retaining the concept of

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<sup>63</sup> Carter Heyward, “Christology,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 196.

<sup>64</sup> Ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara writes, “I am suspicious of this omnipotent god, this self-sufficient god, this god beyond the earth and the cosmos ... the celestial ‘double’ of powerful men” in “The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993), 175.

<sup>65</sup> Carr, “The God Who is Involved,” 320.

God as Other is the transformation inherent in believing that if God is truly Other, God is most closely encountered in what we have called “Other.” In our current social and historical location, this would mean the marginalized person, and the marginalized earth. In this way, the idea of God as Other becomes critical for the solidarity it reflects, as does our embrace of God via the Other. As Rahner writes, “To speak to tomorrow’s generation it is not enough that Christianity be true. It must find a convincing way to proclaim the central gospel truth: love of neighbor. Love could be the key concept for the future only if love of God and neighbor can be seen as identical.”<sup>66</sup> Essential to this concept is recognizing both God and neighbor as Other.

This commitment to understanding God as neighbor informs Rahner’s understanding of the experience of God, which “is no private mood or interior feeling. It is full of social and public significance.”<sup>67</sup> Because of this commitment, Rahner’s theology is one oriented toward social justice and God’s active work on behalf of the Other in the world. His commitment toward encountering God in the Other could be read as inherently ecologically-aware, since ecotheology is “an attempt to do theology from the perspective of the earth and is based on the premise that all of creation reveals the divine.”<sup>68</sup> In this way, transcendence can regain its ground as a critical doctrine of the divine, and perhaps we have found that what ecofeminism ought to call into question is not so much the doctrine of transcendence as “the separate sensibility at work in

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<sup>66</sup> Daniel T. Pekarske, *Abstracts of Karl Rahner’s Theological Investigations 1-23* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press (2002), 194.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>68</sup> Patricia A. Fox, “God’s Shattering Otherness” in *Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 86.

many conceptions of transcendence.”<sup>69</sup> While ecofeminists may be correct in questioning certain doctrines, I find the rejection of orthodox beliefs disquieting. Kathryn Tanner writes,

If those with no compelling sentiment of allegiance to past traditions of Christian theology—Christians and secular philosophers alike—find credible only radical revisionist understandings of God and God’s relation to the world, this may well be due, then, to the lack of clear witness to the coherence of traditional Christian theology within the church itself.<sup>70</sup>

The problem is not so much with traditional Christian theology as it is with theological interpretation and the leveraging of certain interpretations by those in power to maintain their positions. There has been a lack of clear witness to the person of Jesus Christ within the history of the church. In fact, truth has been co-opted, damaged, and perverted by power for so long that it is unclear just how long it will take to disentangle that truth from the lies. What is compelling about interpreting Rahner’s traditional theology through an ecofeminist lens is the way in which doing so allows Christians to recover theological truth through the lens of the truly Other, the neighbor, the marginalized, through Christ. This approach neither rejects nor requires radical revision but utilizes the Gospel itself in interpreting text and doctrine.

### *The Sacramental Principle*

A piece of Catholic theology that no doubt guided Rahner’s understanding of the Divine in relationship to the created world is the sacramental principle which affirms the belief that “everything is capable of manifesting and communicating the divine.”<sup>71</sup> The logical outcome of this principle is seeing all life, human and non, as embedded with the sacred. Ecotheologian Denis Edwards suggests that “an important foundation for ecological theology is the conviction

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<sup>69</sup> Lucy Larkin, “The Relationship Quilt” in *Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 149.

<sup>70</sup> Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Stephen Downs, “The Landscape Tradition” in *Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 13.

that the Spirit of God is creatively and lovingly present to all creatures and present to the whole of planetary life. The earth, then, has a sacramental character.”<sup>72</sup> As Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ enfleshed among us, why would we not accept the possibility of the Spirit manifesting in any “countless ways that are far beyond the limits of the human?”<sup>73</sup> In a theological retrieval of ecological themes, the earth can be understood as the place of encounter with the Holy Spirit which transcends humanity and embraces all of God’s creatures. Is it really coincidence that the history of theology has obscured the doctrine of the Holy Spirit—the face of God revealed in water, fire, and doves? This perspective dovetails nicely with an ecofeminist understanding that all of creation is imbued with the presence of God, that God is experienced through interconnected relationship with one another, and with an ecofeminist pneumatology.

#### *Rahner on God*

While Rahner conceives of God as wholly Other and radical Mystery, he favors experience in the same way ecofeminism emphasizes the category. According to Rahner experience of God “is present everywhere in everyday life.”<sup>74</sup> Rahner affirms the possibility of experiencing God in the same way we experience other sensory objects, as well as through interaction with the Other.<sup>75</sup> In fact, the “experience” of God becoming human is a critical doctrine since it was through the incarnation that the Logos reveals an ultimate self-expression of love through the emptying of self and the taking on of human form. Finally, the resurrection of Christ represents not a final Christological event, but the beginning of the transformation of the

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<sup>72</sup> Denis Edwards, “For Your Immortal Spirit Is in All Things,” in *Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>74</sup> Carr, “The God Who is Involved,” 316.

<sup>75</sup> Kepes, “Toward a Unified Vision,” 271.

divinization of the universe. For Rahner, “these two events do not occur merely synchronically or successively, but rather our bodily resurrection and the transformation of the cosmos are brought about-ontologically-together by what occurred in Jesus’ resurrection.”<sup>76</sup> Only through this framework is it possible for the nature of reality to be known as an integrated union of humanity, the universe, and God. Rahner’s insistence on the “ontological unity of Jesus’ resurrection with our own resurrection and the transformation of the cosmos, and his understanding of the eternal validity of human actions through death and of hope...have profoundly positive implications of Christian eschatology.”<sup>77</sup>

### *Rahner on the Future*

Rahner’s focus on transformation that begins with resurrection gives his theology a thoroughly eschatological orientation. Followers of Christ are people who look at the world as “the future already begun.”<sup>78</sup> This orientation does not give us permission to practice escapism from the earth, but rather makes us earth-bound creatures whose every action has implications. Therefore, “what human beings do in the world and with the world has eschatological significance. Eschatology does not dissolve human responsibility but rather radicalizes it. Human beings have the capacity and the responsibility of enabling the world to be more open to its absolute future.”<sup>79</sup> If we allow the principles of eschatology to guide us, ecological theology must be “grounded in hope for the future” and we must understand Christianity through an

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<sup>76</sup> Phan, “Cosmology, Ecology, Pneumatology,” 387.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

<sup>78</sup> Pekarske, *Abstracts of Karl Rahner’s Theological Investigations*, 144.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory Brett, C.M., “A Timely Reminder” in *Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 167.

orientation to the future and the “promise laden character of Christian faith.”<sup>80</sup> Rahner’s insistence on conceiving God as absolute Mystery and the unpredictability of the future forces us to reside in a posture of hopefulness and possibility, even in our orientation to the present. We shall soon see in depth how this radical arrangement toward the eschaton is characteristic of ecofeminist theology.

Through this brief exploration, we have discovered that Rahner interprets orthodox Christian doctrine in ways that overlap with an ecofeminist ethic, including the ideas that knowledge is rooted in finite experience, a commitment to interconnection and community, the Other as Subject rather than object and the foundational insight that one cannot love God without concretely loving one's neighbor, and finally, an eschatological orientation toward hopefulness. Rahner’s work on God as Other, the incomprehensibility of God, and Holy Mystery is more helpful than the position of those ecofeminists who reject the concept of God as Other and the transcendence of God. If ecofeminists allowed their work to be informed by Rahner’s categories for God-talk, they would not have to abandon the feminist commitment to Other as Subject and the doctrine of immanence, yet this expansion of belief and language would allow for conversation to take place with those Christians who subscribe to orthodox and traditional beliefs.

#### *A New Model: Relational Anthropology*

Feminist and ecofeminist anthropology finds itself in a difficult position when it must choose between single and dual-nature anthropology. Single-nature anthropology argues that both genders share the same nature, and express it differently. Such a theory may sound egalitarian in theory, but in reality it serves to collapse the nature of women into the experience

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<sup>80</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions,” in *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967), 323-346.

and values of men who represent the universal norm, thus relegating women to the realm of invisibility. Dual-nature anthropology may seem like a more holistic choice—proposing that women and men are essentially different and do not share the same nature. Yet, this concept has been used to link women with cultural stereotypes that ignore the broadness of women’s experiences, and serves to perpetuate division between the genders—presupposing that humans embody essentially different natures. Rosemary Carbine proposes that in the area of anthropology, “feminist theologies appear to stand idling in gridlock traffic.”<sup>81</sup> She accurately asserts “[T]hey cannot pursue an overarching transformative agenda because they cannot move from women’s particular experiences toward universal categories that in turn help feminists advocate for human well-being in general.”<sup>82</sup> The dilemma, then, is the necessity of grounding anthropology in a single-nature model that does not create division between humans or fall prey to the falsehood that women and men do not share positions of marginality, but makes room for women as well as men within its universalizing narrative. Carbine suggests that a relational anthropology is one way to ground human anthropology, because it “move(s) through situatedness and particularity in order to throw light on the constants that make up a portrait of what it means to be human, and likewise embrace an all-inclusive vision of those constants that permeate women’s and men’s experiences without losing an emphasis on the radically particular nature of their situations.”<sup>83</sup>

Carter Heyward proposes the same kind of anthropological model when she writes, “what has been missing in the dominant structures of Christian faith and discourse has been a praxis of

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<sup>81</sup> Rosemary Polanin Carbine, “Becoming Persons of Accountability: A Feminist Theological Anthropology for Theological Education” (PhD diss, The University of Chicago, 2001), 4.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 5.

relational particularity and cooperation.”<sup>84</sup> A model that acknowledges similarity and difference, situatedness and particularity, is the only model that is able to address anthropology in a holistic and non-oppressive way. Such an anthropology rejects the tendency that many feminist and ecofeminist theologians lean toward when their inclusion of women’s voices and experiences excludes men from the conversation.<sup>85</sup> Such a theology is neither life-giving nor inclusive. Rooting theology (in this case, theological anthropology) in particular, embodied experiences “ushers in both possibilities and impediments.”<sup>86</sup> Where feminist paradigms of theological anthropology fail is when “rather than moving from particularity toward universality and back again, they firmly anchor their theological projects in a criterion drawn from one of these two poles.”<sup>87</sup> Such a paradigm falls short of the transformative goals by which feminist theology claims to be defined. The answer cannot be to advocate one over another—as single-nature anthropology privileges universality and dual-nature anthropology, particularity—but to employ a both/and approach. Feminist theological anthropology can indeed broaden the conversation to include the concrete lived experience of women without eclipsing male experience in the process. The relational anthropology Carbine develops “encompasses the complexity of women’s experiences, enfolds men, and consequently pilots feminist theology toward its universally transformative goal.”<sup>88</sup> This dialectic not only widens the conversation to include male experience, but also understands that sexism is only one of the interlocking structures that

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<sup>84</sup> Heyward, “Christology,” 198.

<sup>85</sup> Carbine carefully exegetes how Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and others support this exclusionary viewpoint because their dialectic fails to move from particularity to universality.

<sup>86</sup> Carbine, “Becoming Persons of Accountability,” 22

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

perpetuate oppression. Thus, it makes space for the experiences of those who are marginalized by classism, racism, and naturism as well as women suffering under sexist systems, while not reducing oppression to a singular ‘ism.’ In summary, feminist theologians “cannot emphasize women’s uniqueness as an exclusive vantage point on existence, because in doing so they lose sight of how humans universally share receptivity to oppressive conditions.”<sup>89</sup> Neither can they obscure the complexity of women’s experience into a universal, because in doing so, they strip individual women of agency, masking the many ways in which women resist, renegotiate, rearrange, and reorder as they seek liberation.

Such a dialectic informs an ecofeminist view of theological anthropology in the way it insists on inclusion and relationship. When one defines the self in relationship to others, that individual is accountable to the others with whom she is in relationship. Such an orientation may be called a conversion to the Other. In this case, the Other we wish to address is the earth and its creatures. Our earlier exploration has brought us to this final point. We have examined at length the socially constructed connection between women and nature, looked at the doctrine of creation through an ecofeminist lens and seen how the text serves to oppress and marginalize women and nonhuman creation, while recovering a more liberative strand of the text. We have seen how ecofeminism can be defined by its orientation toward eschatology and transformative goals. We have noted the ecofeminist perspective of God as embodied in all of creation through a pneumatological discussion. We have considered how traditional theology such as that of Karl Rahner is in agreement with the focus of ecofeminism on the embrace and care of the Other (as neighbor), and how Rahner’s theology could expand ecofeminist theology by holding transcendence in tension with immanence and criticized ecofeminism’s un-nuanced commitment

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<sup>89</sup> Carbine, “Becoming Persons of Accountability,” 42.

to experience and essentializing tendencies. At this point, I have suggested that a relational way of being human is a fitting answer to the dilemma of theological anthropology—providing feminists with a paradigm that embraces particularity but expands to become a truly universal dialectic. I want to suggest that a relational theological anthropology is also ecofeminist in nature for its focus on individuals as persons in community, held to accountability with other humans and the earth itself.

The final ribbon to weave into the conversation is how humanity ought to exist in a relationship of accountability with the earth. I propose an ethic of solidarity is the only way to do so.

#### *A New Model: Solidarity*

A relational anthropology functions as a destabilizing method to deconstruct dualism between genders and between humans and the earth. A relational theological anthropology destabilizes the concept that God is utterly removed from the embodied earth, while not denying that God is both Other and Absolute Mystery. This theological position is guided by the pneumatological work that asserts that the Spirit of God dwells within, delights in, and sustains the order and flourishing of creation.<sup>90</sup> Drawing on Sallie McFague's "body of God" metaphor, this incarnational model prioritizes embodiment, and challenges any model that "idealizes particular bodies, male or female, human or nonhuman."<sup>91</sup> Working from this place, human accountability in relationship with nature cannot be called stewardship, for such a model continues to uphold hierarchical structures. Anne M. Clifford critiques the stewardship typology by writing, "Human mastery of nonhuman nature, whether it is destructive or benevolent, is still

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<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Woman, Earth, and Creator Spirit*. Mandelewa Lecture in Spirituality (New York & Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993), 5-9.

<sup>91</sup> Carbine, "Becoming Persons of Accountability," 137.

a claim for mastery. Stewardship falls into the conceptual trap of the hierarchical otherness of humans vis-à-vis nonhuman creation.”<sup>92</sup> Such a model by its very definition does not support a framework of interrelated, communal relationships. Clifford proposes a model of solidarity with creation that “affirms the solidarity of humans with God, the Earth, and all its life forms. This solidarity calls for an ongoing discernment that embodies empathy in connectedness with the earth in ways that are responsive to the many manifestations of our ecological crisis and appropriate to biblically rooted creation faith.”<sup>93</sup> Letty Russell approaches the typology of solidarity through a reconceptualized understanding of transcendence. She writes, “[T]he human ability to go beyond ourselves toward others in order to realize our own being may be described as self-transcendence or transeunce.”<sup>94</sup> Not unlike Rahner’s reorienting work with the concept of transcendence, Russell says that the definition of transcendence is when we move toward others in community, just as God moves toward all of creation in an act of transeunce.

Like the relational anthropology that led us to consider solidarity, a position of solidarity does not mask difference or attempt to universalize experience, but rather it makes room for the flourishing of all while claiming that individual selves cannot exist holistically in dualism or opposition, but in relationship with each other. The end game of solidarity is not “simply a generalized feeling of good will and benevolent care of the Earth,” but it is a position that necessitates action.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Clifford, “When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly: An Ecofeminist Proposal for Solidarity,” in *In the Embrace of God*, 184.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>94</sup> Letty M. Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1979), 48.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

### *A Praxis-Oriented Outcome*

Most of the ecotheological conversations I have been involved with in seminary classrooms and in academic settings have very little to do with praxis. The dialogue usually revolves around ideology, ethics and scriptural authority. Only tangentially does concrete action come into play, and often near the end of the conversation. This pattern disturbs me, because I very much doubt I could justify spending time philosophizing and arguing about theology to the people or nonhuman life most affected by the planetary crisis. Unless ecotheological work leads to praxis, I question its actual usefulness and validity. Because ecofeminism prioritizes experience and is grounded in the concept of action, I think it has potential to orient the ecotheological conversation toward praxis. Anna L. Peterson rightly notices that ideas, “of environmental ethics and ecotheology, of biocentrism and stewardship and intrinsic values— have been [so] singularly ineffective.”<sup>96</sup> She proposes, “[A]t this historical moment, perhaps the most vital task of ecotheologians and environmental ethicists should be not to come up with better knowledge or values, but rather to figure out how to get people to live according to the good ideas we already have.”<sup>97</sup> Like Peterson, I am weary of spending so much time crafting new and better ideas. I am interested in mining our existing knowledge and values for the concepts that create action. Part of the legacy of patriarchy has been placing emphasis on theories and ideas, the academy, rather than grassroots efforts. Continuing to prioritize intellectual conversation over action serves only to perpetuate the crisis we find ourselves in.

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<sup>96</sup> Anna L. Peterson, “Talking the Walk: A Practice-Based Environmental Ethic as Grounds for Hope,” *EcoSpirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth* ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007), 50.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

Appealing to theology and ideology is not a bad thing—but we ought to appeal to the theologies and frameworks most likely to inspire a shift in practice. Again, Peterson argues:

[F]ailure stems, in part, from the widely shared, rarely examined, and often related assumptions that theorizing by itself is adequate practice and/or that the right theories will lead automatically to effective forms of practice. Despite the evident lack of empirical and historical data supporting these assumptions, they remain largely unquestioned—precisely because of their own idealist logic. The role of philosophers, including ethicists, stops with the elaboration of the proper ideas; what happens to these ideas out in the world is too often someone else’s concern.<sup>98</sup>

We must cease perpetuating the belief that theology ought only be oriented toward the development of ideas. Instead, we must seek out theology which makes practice our concern. If practice does not follow value in a straightforward way, we must consider creating experiences in which values are forced to emerge in practice. One way to do this might be to “create conditions in which we experience the interdependence, fragility, and humility taught by evolution and ecology...the way to a morally, not just intellectually, better understanding of humanness might be by opening ourselves to the nonhuman world, reaching out, making room and conditions for new possibilities in terms of both thought and practice.”<sup>99</sup> What if we began with experience rather than beginning with an ethical framework? If we were interested in living a practice-based, ecologically oriented ethic, might we be open to examining experiences that display interconnected relationship and care toward the planet and asking what frameworks and structures undergird those practices? For example, if daily practices like drying laundry on a line, gardening, composting, living in community, commuting by bicycle, etc. are actions that are capable of creating change, why not ask questions of the people already engaging in those actions—not only of the values that lead them to their particular forms of praxis but also what

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<sup>98</sup> Peterson, “Talking the Walk,” 52.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 53.

conditions make it possible to sustain practice? Working backwards in this way will feel alien to us, but if we are to succeed in a true conversion of mind and action to the earth, new ways of being and thinking will be necessary. Some critics will argue that these small acts of change are not enough to shift the tide of ecological destruction approaching us. Patricia M. Mishe comments, “While more people have taken some modest steps, such as recycling, changes in peoples’ worldviews, attitudes, and behavior have not been commensurate to the gravity and global scale of the problems. The integrity of creation is not yet a true priority for most people, including Christians.”<sup>100</sup> While I agree with Mishe’s assessment, I will continue to argue for beginning with the category of experience and prioritizing practice over theory. Clearly, beginning with theory has been quite ineffective in leading to change. A new approach must be undertaken to guide evangelical communities toward living in holistic relationship with the earth and all of its creatures. Prioritizing experience and practical change over rhetoric is ecofeminist in orientation, a movement away from perpetuating the mind-body dualism and pontificating in the comfort of elitism rather than creating change in the real world. Beginning with praxis might also be a helpful strategy for engaging evangelicals who already express an interest in being good stewards of creation. In a text comparing and contrasting the belief systems of evangelical and liberal Christians, James K. Wellman Jr. writes, “[B]oth groups express an obligation to be good stewards of the environment. Each of the moral worldviews interprets the natural world as God’s creation and argues the need and obligation to be its caretaker.”<sup>101</sup> Perhaps a more strategic approach to bridge building would be to start with action and the practices with which

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<sup>100</sup> Patricia M. Mishe, “The Integrity of Creation: Challenges and Opportunities for Praxis,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, 592.

<sup>101</sup> James K. Wellman, Jr. *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 249.

both groups are already engaged, and then, over time, move toward re-examining the theology that creates differences between the way evangelicals and ecofeminists understand their connection to or separation from the rest of creation.

A Christian ecofeminist theology has the potential to do this re-orienting work, crafting a living theology that truly embraces the well being of life as a whole. Additionally, it has the capacity to bridge the gap between environmental ideas and religious ideals by appealing to a conversion of intelligence to one another and the earth in an embrace of the understanding that all of creation depends on an ecological community that makes existence possible. Approaching life through the sacramental matrix of relational anthropology reveals the importance of living in relationships of accountability and shalom with one another and the nonhuman world.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983), 72-92.

One day you finally knew  
What you had to do, and began,  
Though the voices around you  
Kept shouting  
Their bad advice—  
Though the whole house  
Began to tremble  
And you felt the old tug  
At your ankles.

...  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
Though the wind pried  
With its stiff fingers  
At the very foundations,  
Though their melancholy  
Was terrible.

It was already late  
Enough, and a wild night,  
And the road full of fallen  
Branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
As you left their voices behind,  
The stars began to burn  
Through the sheets of clouds  
And there was a new voice  
Which you slowly  
Recognized as your own,  
That kept you company  
As you strode deeper and deeper  
Into the world,  
Determined to do the only thing you could do—  
Determined to save the only life you could save.

—Mary Oliver

It is not upon us to finish the work. Neither are we free to desist from it.

—Rabbi Tarfon

Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

—Rumi

## CONCLUSION:

### AN EVANGELICAL ECOFEMINISM

Theological anthropology has a great deal to do with the way Christians respond to the entirety of creation. The way we understand our relationship to each other, the planet, and to God informs the way we engage the world around us. Logically, it seems that the converse is true too: actions reveal theology.

Much of evangelical theology exposes a framework that privileges certain humans, disregards other humans, and can completely obscure the importance of non-human life. The argument could be made that this is informed in large part by a misinterpretation of the *imago Dei* doctrine, and results in an orientation that perpetuates a harmful hierarchy between human and non-human creation.

Evangelical theologian Steven Bouma-Prediger writes that caring for the earth is required of authentic Christian faith, and in our care of the earth and all its creatures we not only “bear witness to the good news of the gospel,” but our very lives “proclaim the hope that lies within us—the hope of God’s good future of shalom.”<sup>1</sup> As Bouma-Prediger argues, evangelicals must be willing to re-examine where traditional theology has led them in relationship to the planet and to its most marginalized members. I have suggested that ecofeminism is a helpful paradigm within which to begin that re-orienting work. Ecofeminism views all of life in interrelated relationship, valuing all created things as equally imbued with the image of God and mutually

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 183.

valuable. Ecofeminism rejects the idea that the earth and non-human creation exists expressly for the use of humanity, but embraces the paradigm that creation is good in and of itself.

For ecofeminism to be a helpful conversation partner to evangelicals in the ecotheology conversation, it too must be willing to re-examine some of its tenets and principles. I have criticized ecofeminism for its tendency toward universalizing experience, devaluing the category of God as Other, and its reliance on dual-nature anthropology. Yet, in spite of these critiques, I find ecofeminism to be a helpful model, through which to recycle those tired doctrines that support a hierarchy of life and are proving insufficient for the current planetary crisis.

I have suggested that adopting a model of relational anthropology allows for a diversity of experience and perspective rather than collapsing into dangerous and false essentialisms. Viewing the self in a relationship of accountability with all of creation creates a dynamic of care and solidarity that is the only appropriate Christian model of engagement with all of life.

An ecofeminist need not leave evangelicalism behind. To embrace the good news of Jesus of Nazareth is to experience a conversion to the least of these, in our context, the marginalized planet and those humans most affected by environmental degradation. Conversely, evangelicals can embrace an ecofeminist paradigm as they seek to contextualize the gospel of Christ into our current place and time. Good theology is always shifting to respond to culture. If we are to continue constructing theology that is healthy and life-giving, we must be informed by new paradigms that expand to truly embrace that which has been excluded (for purposes of this paper, women and wilderness), de-center man as the apex of creation, and prioritize praxis in a way that informs actual change. When Christians embrace caring for the earth, they are simply making manifest the most basic principle of the economy of Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer

wrote, “Only the one who loves God and the earth in one breath, can hope for the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

I am persuaded that the very best way to engage in the ecological conversation and to create dialogue between hesitant earthkeepers and environmental advocates is through praxis. Once again, it is my own experience and where I am situated in this conversation that brings me to this conclusion. I was born to evangelical parents, in the rural Pacific Northwest. I have always been less certain of what being evangelical means to my father than my mother. My dad is a cultural evangelical, I think. He grew up in an evangelical Baptist church and being an evangelical Christian means more about hard work and honest living and American identity than God and salvation. He could not care less about what the *imago Dei* doctrine is or how it informs an orientation of humanity to God and the earth. He would fall asleep reading this paper.

My mom is a born-again evangelical. She experienced a powerful conversion in her late teenage years and testifies to the saving love of Jesus. For her, being an evangelical Christian has less to do with this world and everything to do with the world to come. If she were less shy, she would probably be a door-to-door evangelist, but her proselytizing comes mostly in the form of letter writing. I saw the first of these evangelism letters when I was in the first or second grade. We were spending the Christmas holiday in the town my parents had grown up in, at my mother’s parent’s home. One night, I woke up and wandered into the living room after everyone had gone to bed. I noticed a crumpled up piece of paper next to a half-empty glass of whiskey on the television tray by my grandfather’s armchair. I crawled up into the chair and smoothed out the paper. It was a letter from my mother. In it, she wrote how much she loved him and how fearful she was for his eternal salvation. She laid out the steps for inviting Jesus into his heart

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dein Reich komme. Das Gebet der Gemeinde um das Reich Gootes aur Erden* (Hanburg: Furche-Verlag, 1958), 12.

and wrote that she would be praying for him. Over the years, I have seen several more of these letters. My mother has paid attention to the theology she has been taught from the pulpit. In terms of eschatology, that theology is largely escapist. In terms of creation and the doctrine of *imago Dei*, she subscribes to an ethic of hierarchy and dominion, a belief that humanity has a divinely appointed responsibility to manage and use the earth and its resources for the sake of human welfare.

Yet, in spite of foundational theology I disagree with, my parents are some of the most ecologically responsible, agrarian people I know. We moved a lot when I was a kid, but we always lived on wide stretches of land that had space for gardens and animals. Depending on where we were, it was sometimes just a dog and cat and a couple of chickens. Other times it was cattle, horses, and maybe a sheep. My mom spent most of her time outside—planting or harvesting in the garden, climbing apple trees in the orchard, or in the middle of a blackberry thicket. She spent autumn canning and pickling everything in sight and we lived off what she harvested all winter. When our family ate meat, it was from a cow we owned and had butchered or fish my dad caught in the river. We cut our own firewood and never turned on the electric furnace. If we were too hot in the summer, my parents would tell my sisters and me to go jump in the lake. Using air-conditioning was never an option. When we lived close enough to town, we biked everywhere. If we lived too far in the country, my mom would drive the diesel truck into town once a week to go to the market, pay bills, and stop by the library.

These days, my parents turn on the air-conditioning in the summer but my mom cringes every time it clicks on. I do not think they have butchered their own cow in years, and they drive to town more often than biking, but ecological care is deeply rooted in their personhood. My mom still spends the majority of her time in the garden or picking huckleberries on the side of a

mountain. My dad is never happier than when he is tilling something or walking through the woods looking for elk or quail. Although neither one of them would articulate encountering God in nature, I am certain they do. They would roll their eyes if I tried to explain the difference between an ethic of stewardship and one of solidarity, yet I think the way they live speaks to a relationship of accountability and even mutuality between humanity and the earth. And to be frank, they enact this better than I or any of my liberal, progressive friends do. So what has our theology done for us? Not much, it seems to me, in either world. If my progressive theology rarely results in concrete action, what does that mean? If the escapist or apathetic theology of evangelicals like my parents is actually at odds with the way they engage the world, what does that mean? Does theology actually inform praxis? Does praxis always reveal the theology we claim to subscribe to? I think it reveals a hopeful cognitive dissonance. Maybe beginning with practice and working backwards could actually be a significant step toward bridge building.

This is profoundly personal work for me, and I have not embarked on this journey without an agenda. It is a strangely lonely place to be—straddling the worlds of ecofeminism and evangelicalism, unable to find a true home in either world as they currently exist but hopeful that the gap is capable of shrinking. I hope that sometime soon ecofeminist and evangelical are not oxymoronic terms. I am not optimistic that the whole of evangelicalism will acknowledge the planetary crisis and the sinful ways in which humanity has created and perpetuates this apocalypse. I am not optimistic that their focus will shift toward organizing and funding environmental efforts, engaging sustainable ways of living gently and in relationship with the marginalized world. Neither am I optimistic that the whole of ecofeminism will be willing to admit the ways in which their theology fails to remain orthodox, nor how they fall victim to reinscription of the practices that create and perpetuate oppression. But I am hopeful. I am

hopeful that there are individuals in both worlds who long to find better ways and representations of the holistic, inclusive, radical love of God, whether they use those words to articulate it or not. I am hopeful that there are individuals who are more interested in enacting change than arguing over theological doctrine. Hopeful that these people will plant gardens together, learn to compost together, oppose over-consumption and encourage conservationism, and that these actions will speak more profoundly to their own hearts about the nature of God and the relationship of the Divine to the Earth than any kind of hierarchical or divisive theology ever could. And maybe, these actions will save us from ourselves.

In his 1993 commencement speech at Wesleyan University, Cornel West said, “I cannot be optimistic, but I am a prisoner of hope.” So am I. It is the only way I know how to exist in these worlds.

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