FROM BROKENNESS TO PLANETARY WHOLENESS:
EMERGING THEMES IN ECOFEMINIST INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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The Ecological Charge Against Religion

Four decades ago Lynn White charged Christianity with culpability in the ecological crisis. In his scathing article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” White argued that religious texts, particularly the Genesis 1 exhortation to human dominion over the natural world, incited unrestrained mastery over creation. Although there have been attempts to “depose man from his monarchy over creation,” for example by St. Francis of Assisi, White saw the modern Western world as imbued with an “arrogance toward nature.”

As Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the first ecofeminist theologians, recalls, “This article sent theologians scrambling to defend their traditions from what seemed like an unequivocal condemnation.” White’s indictment raised serious questions for scholars of religion: Is religion solely or even primarily the culprit of the ecological crisis? Is there anything retrievable in the sacred texts of world religions for an ecological ethic? Responding to these questions, Gary Gardner argues that, indeed, the religions are a vital resource for creating a just, peaceful and sustainable world since they offer helpful religious teachings, moral authority, human and capital resources, and a community-building capacity. But one might ask a related question of the world’s religions as well: Do our sacred traditions possess resources for seeking not only the wellbeing of the natural world but also the flourishing of women, who have been

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oppressed by the same logic of domination?

CHAPTER ONE

RESPONSES TO GLOBALIZATION

Ecofeminist Proposals

Ecofeminism emerged in the late twentieth century as the multifarious forms of feminist and environmental discourse and activism intersected. The word was coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, in which she argued that, “the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motif inherent in male power.”4 Ecofeminists perceive a connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of the rest of the natural world.

These twin dominations have been traced as far back as the *Enuma Elish* creation story of the third millennium B.C.E.5 In this ancient Babylonian myth, Marduk, the warrior god, creates the cosmos by conquering his mother, Tiamat, the goddess of chaos. Upon killing her, Marduk “stood upon Tiamat's hinder parts,” “smashed her skull,” and “cut through the channels of her blood.”6 Tearing her body in half, he then fashioned the heavens and the earth from the pieces of her corpse. Only by sublimation of her wild “chaos,” could she be used as matter from which Marduk formed the natural world including the human race. It is no surprise, then, that the

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words *mother* and *matter* come from the same etymological roots, and that the *tehom* (deep, or chaos) in Genesis 1:2 is a linguistic cognate of *Tiamat*, the conquered woman from which the earth was made.

Fear of the matrix of originary chaos, of wild earthly matter, and of the powerful feminine is inscribed on Judeo-Christian identity as well. In the Genesis account God, often perceived as single, transcendent male, is prior to nature.\(^7\) The earth is fashioned in this “male” consciousness and formed and ordered under his control. In the second creation story (Genesis 2), woman proceeds not from another female who begets her, but from male, out of whom she is made and under whom she serves as a “helper.”

The ideological and theological derivation of sexual and ecological subordination can be discerned in these ancient mythic constructions. However, the actual, historic roots of our current ecological crisis are traced to a more recent past. In the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries nature became increasingly perceived of as “matter in motion, dead stuff moving obediently, according to mathematical laws knowable to a new male elite of scientists.”\(^8\) As such, non-human matter was an object to be expropriated and reconstructed for human benefit. With the colonialism of the Americas, Asia, and Africa, native human and animal populations were displaced. Land and labor were appropriated for a technological revolution that promised efficiency, knowledge, and control of disease.

But in the last century this dream of flourishing and perpetual progress has become a nightmare fraught with population explosion, depletion of resources, extinction, an ever-

\(^8\) Ibid, 20.
increasing gap between the rich and the poor, pollution, and global warming. With the
development of international agribusiness, women have increasingly and disproportionately become victims of global impoverishment. As Rosemary Radford Ruether has noted,

In Africa local farming has traditionally been done by women, but international promotion of agriculture goes entirely to male farmers with large land holdings that are able to make use of the seeds, pesticides, petroleum-based fertilizers, and mechanized machinery from international agribusiness. As ecofeminist Vandana Shiva has shown, in India women traditionally integrated the relation of animals and plants, feeding the animals from the greens left over from the harvest and using their dung for fertilizer and fuel. This sector of agriculture is devastated by the mechanized farming promoted by the Green Revolution, resulting in both further impoverishment of women and their families and also falling water tables and polluted soil and water created by petroleum-based fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery. The impoverishment of women and the pollution of the earth go hand in hand.

Wars over land, water, and other natural resources also intensify gender-based violence that takes the form of rape, torture, mutilation, sexual slavery, forced impregnation, early or forced marriage, infanticide, enforced sterilization, domestic violence, coerced prostitution, and murder. As Brazilian ecofeminist Ivone Gebara points out,

We do not often carry out this sort of historical analysis… We usually count the dead in war, but we almost never mention the destruction of the environment, the death of the animals, the poisoning of natural springs, and the destruction of the present and future means of those who have not died… The starry sky, obscured by poisonous clouds of war, is forgotten. The air, which has been made almost unbreathable by gases used in chemical

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9 Ibid.
To make matters more difficult, the consumers whose habits support such violence are usually far-removed from the war-torn worlds in which women, children, and the environment suffer. Young couples shopping for engagement rings in North America are often unconscious of the bloody wars raged in Sierra Leone to provide diamonds for the jewelry industry. Similarly, consumers in the North are largely unaware of the fact that the bananas they enjoy are often products of slash-and-burn agricultural techniques and exploitative labor practices in which women and children are paid only $3-5 an hour.13

These examples demonstrate that systems of oppression are often characterized by multi-layered matrices of power. In 1974, Sheila Collins identified “racism, sexism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction” as the “four interlocking pillars upon which the structure of patriarchy rests.”14 Thus, ecofeminists often locate their projects within the third wave of feminism, which affirms that women are of “many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds.”15 The ecofeminist movement does not purport univocity; rather, ecofeminists favor deconstructing metanarratives, which tend to be replete with oppressive, patriarchal conceptions of reality. Like other forms of feminism, praxis is central to ecofeminist proposals. They are often shaped by personal, social, and historical experience, informed by theoretical analysis, and in turn offer new ways of conceptualizing and effecting change.

The specter of gender essentialism that characterized much of the second wave lurks in

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the shadows of ecofeminist discourse. There are those, such Aruna Gnandason, Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Starhawk, and Charlene Spretnak, who insist upon an intrinsic, or essential, affinity between women and nature. Most ecofeminists, however, reject an essentializing of women as more akin to the natural world. The twin oppression of women and nature persists because of conceptual dualisms and patriarchal schemas not because there is a natural affinity between the female body and the earth. As Karen Warren points out, “The idea that one group of persons is, or is not, closer to nature than another group assumes the very nature-culture split that eco-feminism denies.” As ecofeminists have taken pains to demonstrate, there is no essential binary between humans and nature. Rather, humans live and move in an interconnected web of creation, a more-than-human community that consists of all organic things. Any methodological preoccupation with women’s connection to creation (versus men’s) is therefore “unwitting complicity in the patriarchal mind set,” participation in the very ideological distortion that it seeks to overcome.

**Dialogue Between World Religions**

Recognizing the many-layered and multivalent complexities of the field, ecofeminist anthologies have intentionally included the voices of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, post-Christians,

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18 Ibid.
Christians, Muslims, and those from within tribal traditions. In these collections of many voices, there are divergent expressions of the sacred and an irreducible diversity of cultural contexts and experiences. That said, there is one situation that is common to them all: the reality of globalization and the ecological crisis that accompanies it.

In this globalized world, there are new possibilities: ease of communication, international travel, and increasing religious and cultural diversity, especially in urban communities. But there are also common problems—such as maldistribution, hyperconsumption, depletion of natural resources, war and violence—that demand a collective and cooperative response. Hans Küng posits that there can be no peace in the world unless there is peace among the world’s religions. What then are religions called to do? “This question is dangerous,” warns Jay McDaniel, “if it suggests that there is one—and only one—direction in which all religions should develop.”

McDaniel’s word of caution should be a vital concern for theologies of religion today. At the heart of each of the three classical responses to the religious other—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—lies a universalizing tendency. The Christian exclusivist’s singular goal for the world is eternal life with Christ. For the inclusivist, the universal end is that other religions will be saved through the one superior religion. And, pluralist proposals seek a universal principle between all religions—such as John Hick’s identification of “the Real.” Regrettably, even this proposal ends up “melting down the religions to a bland common denominator.” Such

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rejection, triumph, and dissolution of particularity renders the classical typology inadequate for contemporary discourse.

Conversely, Mark Heim’s theology of religions goes beyond the traditional categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in its suggestion that there may be multiple salvations. This view, he claims, does justice to the particularity and even incommensurability of religions. Furthermore, it does not demand an abnegation of one’s own religious commitments in favor of radical plurality that eventuates in relativism. Heim’s “orientational pluralism” recognizes the diversity of discordant perspectives and concludes that, “we cannot act on two different orientations at once, even if we understand both are defensible.”24 The “universal” for Heim is that “there is only one reality.”25 What is fragmented then is not the truth, but the justification or “warranted assertability” of it. Thus, orientational pluralism does not seek to reconcile disparate views or regard all religious as equally valid. Rather, it asserts both the distinctiveness of religious claims and their “impulse to witness to others… with sensitive appreciation for different commitments.”26

The weakness of Heim’s proposal, however, is that in its attempt to uphold difference, any talk of universality is pushed to background. As such, this response has the potential to be too individualistic. One might ask if dialogue is possible in Heim’s framework. I believe that it is, but would add that this is a dimension that Heim needs to further develop.

I would like to suggest that Kwok Pui-Lan’s proposal of a “dialogical imagination” strengthens Heim’s “orientational particularism” by more deftly negotiating the dialectical tension between religious particularities and universality. Inspired by Foucault’s interrogation of

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25 Ibid, 137.
26 Ibid, 144.
power mechanisms and truth, Kwok Pui-Lan deliberates the meaning of truth, the source of truth, and the powers that have assumed the authority to interpret truth. Speaking from a hermeneutical framework that has been shaped by experiences of subjugation, Kwok criticizes a “so-called ‘universal gospel,’” which “not only claims to provide the answer but defines the question too!” Not only does she reject a “universal gospel” or Christian metanarrative, but Kwok also calls into question Christian claims to superiority among other religions. In her estimation, interpretations that affirm the special revelation of Christ imply a “discontinuity with all cultures and judge all religions.”

Kwok’s alternative approach is one characterized by reciprocity—an invitation to conversation between one’s own context and tradition and those of one’s sacred text. In this hermeneutical approach, which she calls “Dialogical Imagination,” the stories of the oppressed, the narratives of other cultural and faith traditions, and the Bible mutually inform each other. There is kind of Ricouerian orientation-disorientation-reorientation that takes place in the reader when biblical interpretation is so imbued with imagination and discourse.

While Kwok’s proposal is directed at biblical hermeneutics in a pluralist age, it also has relevance for ecofeminist interreligious dialogue. As such, dialogical imagination suggests that interreligious discourse start with the particularity of experience—for Kwok it begins with her experience of being an Asian woman. In engaging the stories of others, it promotes mutuality, active listening, openness, imagination, and reorientation.

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28 Ibid, 28.
29 Ibid, 27.
30 In her most recent book, Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Kwok Pui-Lan revisits her earlier article and suggests that dialogical imagination as an interpretive strategy might be useful “in its emphasis on dialogue with other religious traditions and interpretation as a critical process, but it does call for a more explicit discussion of its theoretical grounding and a deepened engagement with postcolonial theories and cultural studies,” 42. Her book, however, does not take up this enterprise.
This methodological approach does not dissolve particularity, but affirms it by mutual exchange with the religious “other” and a return to one’s own tradition to discover what it says about the wellbeing of the earth and women. It also insists that the many religions cannot be reduced to a “universal” or metanarrative. At the same time, it allows for the possibility that even among an irreducible diversity there are traces of similarities, shared themes and similar goals that bring people together in the struggle for a just, peaceable, and sustainable world. It is to these similar responses that I now turn.

Toward an Interreligious Ecofeminism

My own theological explication in the pages that follow originates as a response to the current ecological crisis. This may seem self-evident. Clearly, critical times demand significant reflection. However, beginning with an analysis of the human situation is not simply a logical response. Rather, it represents a decisive, widespread methodological shift in theology. To be brief, this trend in contemporary theology is characterized by a turn from a classical method of starting with grand theological concepts to an inductive approach that begins with the human experience. This theology from below draws upon Paul Tillich’s method of correlation, which conducts “an analysis of the human situation out of which existential questions arise.” It is also inspired by liberation theology and its ethic of solidarity with and advocacy for the oppressed.

In my listening to the myriad voices of the ecofeminist religious other, I have become aware of five common themes, or virtues, that call forth a change in theological expressions of

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31 Tillich describes his correlational method as the juxtaposition of existential questions and religious symbols which answer them. His project constructs “an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to the questions.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 62.
the earth and our relationship to it. These shared “themes” emerge from the diverse experiences of North American Protestant, Latin American Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Native American, African tribal, and Buddhist ecofeminists. Each contributes something unique to the common struggles for social and ecological justice and well-being. Because I write as a Christian ecofeminists in dialogue with ecofeminists of other faith traditions, I have included at least one Christian articulation and one explication from another religion under each heading. My hope is that this dialogue promotes a deeper understanding of the universality and particularities of interreligious, ecofeminist proposals as well as solidarity in grappling with ecological and social injustices.
CHAPTER TWO
ECOFEMINIST THEMES IN THE DIALOGUE OF WORLD RELIGIONS

Hospitality and Attention to a Diversity of Perspectives

In her article on feminist theological methodology Gloria Schaab derides methodolatry and parochialism, arguing instead for the engagement of multiple sources and serious consideration of their diverse angles of reflection in order to disclose the pluriformity and complexity of the theological enterprise. The kaleidoscope (Greek for beautiful form to see), she suggests, can “provide the schema to consider the complexity of the subject, the multiplicity of approaches, the variety of sources, and the diversity of norms through which the mystery of God and the God-world relationship are studied, understood, and articulated in dialogue with the unity and diversity of women’s experiences.”

Similarly, ecofeminism does not select one, consistent construal to the exclusion of others; but rather critically analyzes the complementarities as well as divergences of diverse expressions of the earth and the sacred in order to bring into view a multifaceted, “beautiful form to see.”

Other feminists find resources within their sacred texts that seem to advocate hospitality to the religious other. Reading the biblical story of Ruth from a Jewish perspective, Cynthia Ozick highlights Naomi’s hospitality to the Moabite Ruth, and conversely, Ruth’s decision to love and stay with her mother-in-law in foreign land. While Ozick rightly observes a theme of loyalty in the Ruth narrative, she overlooks the powerful ideology of assimilation that

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characterizes Ruth’s capitulation to Naomi’s religion. In Bonnie Honig’s assessment, Ozick neglects the exclusion of Orpah, who chooses to return to her own gods. Honig remarks that the contrast between Orpah and Ruth demonstrates that Israel does not welcome “idolatrous” strangers, but rather “is open only to the Moabite who is exceptionally virtuous [and willing to change her religious commitment], to Ruth but not to Orpah.”34

True hospitality does not require assimilation but rather invokes a mutual vulnerability and openness between “strangers.” In his recent monograph on Hospitality and the Other, Amos Yong proposes a “stranger-centered” hospitality for interreligious dialogue that,

opens up a ‘free space,’ where people of other faiths can enter, where strangers, even enemies, might be transformed into friends, where hosts do not dictate how guests must change but rather provide a safe forum for changes to occurs. Focus here is not on whom the host is or what the host has to offer, but on the relationship with guests and on respecting the integrity of the guests.35

Feminist theologian Letty Russell pushes the concept of hospitality even further. Rather than employing a hermeneutic of the “stranger,” or “other,” she argues that a postcolonial notion of hospitality must take into account the “hybridity, or mix, of the familial, cultural, political, and economic contexts, in which each of us lives out roles simultaneously as a member of both colonizer and colonized groups.”36 In other words, in postcolonial interreligious dialogue, we are all hosts and guests, colonizer and colonized. Therefore, our conversations among various traditions should be characterized not just by respect and openness, but also by attention to what

Russell calls the “power quotient,” that is, the varied levels of power that people possess based on their gender, social location, economic status, or religion. The goal is to bring about a balance by sharing power and empowering those who are without it.

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37 Russell, 44.
Relationality and Interdependence

A second theme that emerges from ecofeminist religious discourse is the rejection of dualistic ideologies and reconstruction of relationality and interdependence between the human and the more-than-human world. Ecofeminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague have long attributed Christianity’s ecological ignorance to perduring dualisms in traditional theological thought. A Platonist hangover, exacerbated by lascivious Enlightenment zeal and Cartesian hierarchies of value, the theological dualist motif sets reason above nature, spirit above body, culture above earth, and males above females. In short, this worldview has perpetuated if not incited domination and disaster in the name of God. Alternatively, in her ecofeminist theological project, Sallie McFague abandons outmoded dualistic models and presents new paradigms in their stead. In an ecological age, she argues, patriarchal, deterministic language is meaningless. Conversely, “appropriate language for our time… would support ways of understanding the God-world and human-world relationships as open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual, and creative.” Rather than stressing hierarchy and transcendence—which has historically led to disaster—McFague introduces a language of holism, integration, and interrelationality in order to reconstruct theology with an evolutionary, ecological sensibility.

In McFague’s paradigm of the world as God’s body, divine immanence is radicalized: “The model suggests that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves, for God is breath or spirit that gives life to the billions of different bodies that make up God’s body”—the world.

McFague begins her project with the conviction that the body is central to Christianity,

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39 McFague, Models of God, xi.
feminism, and ecology. Drawing heavily on the “common creation story” of the world—
evolutionary biology—she critiques the classic model, which is most aptly expressed in the
phrase “the church as the body of Christ.” The model of the body in this form was spiritualistic,
patriarchal, and universalistic. In contrast, the common evolution story underscores
embodiment, interrelationship, interdependence, unity and differentiation. Through the
evolutionary narrative and the reimagining of the world as God’s body, we discover that we are
all—human and non-human nature—inhabitants of one great oikos or eco/home.

Whereas Western societies have long perpetuated dualistic cosmologies—God vs.
humans, men vs. women, humans vs. nature, culture vs. nature—African tribal religions embrace
cosmological fluidity, relationality, and interpermeation. “For traditional Africans,” J.S. Mbiti
writes, “religion permeates into all departments of life because to live is to be religious.”

Every human activity of the African is interpreted in regard to the sacred. As three African
feminists—Eunice Kamaara, Gilbert Mbaka, and Naomi Shitemi—note:

It follows therefore that the African conception of the environment
is holistic and inclusive… The traditional African community is not
just made up of human beings, both living and dead. It is also made
up of spirits, animals of the air, land, and sea, plants of the land and
sea, and of inanimate objects such as rivers, lakes, mountains, soil,
and rocks which as natural… Reality is holistic and communalistic
in the sense that all the elements of the created order are
intrinsically connected. Any attempt to interfere with their
interconnectedness would be considered sacrilegious and extremely
dangerous… Traditional Africans understand that if they engage in
unethical relationships with any of the other elements of creation,
the elements are capable of responding in a negative way since they
have a ‘vital force’ within them. Hence the concept and practice of
communitarianism is not merely and obligation especially for
human beings but absolutely necessary for their own survival and
wellbeing.41

40 Quoted in Eunice K. Kamaara, Gilbert N. Mbaka, and Naomi L. Shitemi, “Religion, Culture, and Environment:
41 Kamaara, Mbaka, and Shitemi, 170, 171, 177.
African tribal religions possess a radical sense of relationality and interdependence with the earth. Such an affirmation of the earth’s own power challenges traditional notions of the earth as an object to be used by humans.

**Subjectivity of All Human and Non-human Entities**

In *Super, Natural Christians*, Sallie McFague engages insights from process philosophy, feminist epistemology, and ecological science as she presents a new model of nature. Subtitled *How We Should Love Nature*, her project proposes that we extend our love for God and humans as subjects to *all* forms of life. This way of knowing, being, and doing entails loving nature for *itself*, as an end and not a mean. The subject-subjects model is not an entirely novel idea, McFague suggests. Rather, it is a re-appropriation of the functional cosmology of medieval Christianity, in which “medievals saw a rich, incredibly complex world outside of themselves, every fragment of which was a significant symbol or allegory of God.”

McFague cites Hildegard of Bingen’s visions, developments in botany during the Middle Ages, emblemism, the life and writings of Francis of Assisi, and the “horizontal” theology of Thomas Aquinas as exemplars of the medieval subject-subjects cosmology.

The rich meaning and interconnectedness of the natural and human world in the medieval model were lost in the Enlightenment. The Cartesian dictum “I think, therefore I am” placed the individual human at the center of the universe. The rich tapestry of color and harmony in cosmologies like those of Dante and Milton was tossed asunder for utilitarian, mathematical,

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43 Ibid., 53-58. McFague defines emblemism as: “the widespread practice of seeing animals and flowers as allegories for human enlightenment and betterment” (55).
modern, Newtonian views of reality.\textsuperscript{44} McFague labels this lens, or epistemology, the “arrogant eye,” a worldview that sees the other as object.\textsuperscript{45} It is a “distancing, objectifying, controlling knowledge that issues from the arrogant eye in such media as camera, film, television and advertising.”\textsuperscript{46} The deleterious effects of this model are broad in scope, including the oppression of vulnerable plants and animals, women, and other subjugated people.

The alternative subject-subjects model views all life with a “loving eye,” respecting the other’s own integrity and purpose. This sensibility—involving who we are, what we know, and how we act—necessarily involves a relationship with creation, for “What is the extinction of a condor to a child who has never known a wren?”\textsuperscript{47} McFague proposes two ways of forging a Christian nature spirituality: through direct encounters (especially for city dwellers and children) and indirect encounters (through the works of nature writers).\textsuperscript{48} She introduces the reader to Sharon Butala, Sue Hubbell, and Annie Dillard as three examples of nature writing.

Jay McDaniel calls this being “sensitive to the horizontal sacred,” that is, recognizing and affirming “the intrinsic value of each and every living being on earth, understood as a subject of its own life and not simply and object for others.”\textsuperscript{49} McDaniel notes that the notion of the “horizontal sacred” does not necessarily preclude a “vertical sacred”—God as holy other. Rather, it complements it by insisting that God is both truly God and truly in the earth. In the Abrahamic traditions, for example, God is both the Creator and the life-breath of each being.

\textsuperscript{44} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 59.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 67.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 3.
\textsuperscript{47} A quotation from naturalist Robert Pyle in McFague’s \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 118.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 4.
\textsuperscript{49} McDaniel, 29.
From within the Hindu tradition, ecofeminist Vasudha Narayanan identifies the immanent divine as central to the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the sacred texts, the universe, composed of sentient beings (*chit*) and nonsentient matter (*achit*), constitutes the body (*sharira*) of Vishnu and Shri. Just as a human soul (*chit*) pervades a nonsentient body (*achit*), so also do Vishnu and Shri pervade the material universe. This theological conviction is lived out in a Hindu pilgrim ritual. Narayanan explains, “Whenever a pilgrim visits a temple in India, s/he is given a piece of blessed fruit or food to take home. This gift from the earth is called a *prasada* or ‘favor’ of the deity… Ingesting *prasada* is a devotional practice and mandatory ritual; by eating what is favored and blessed by the deity, divine grace is said to course through one’s body.”

In response to the ecological crisis in India, one temple has established a large nursery and encourages pilgrims to take home tree saplings as *prasada*. By planting and tending to the trees at home, one brings with them a piece of the sacred. These trees convey the immanent divine, and in doing so, are made valuable themselves. They are so valuable, in fact, that the Hindu *Purana* scriptures declare: “One tree is equal to ten sons.”

**A Worldly Soteriology**

In addition to re-envisioning the divine as radically immanent in the natural world, many ecofeminists maintain that soteriology must be more worldly as well. Traditionally, the world’s major religions have envisaged salvation as liberation from this world to the next. With Heaven, Nirvana, and Moksha—separate, superior, spiritual realms—as primary, emphasis is placed on

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51 Ibid, 113.
52 Ibid, 114.
individual salvation. This salvific orientation feeds conceptual dualisms that privilege the spirit over body and matter. But as Mary Evelyn Tucker points out, there are also worldly iterations of salvation in these traditions.\textsuperscript{53} In Christianity, the motif of the reign of God emphasizes justice in the here and now. In Buddhism and Daoism, practices such as healthy diet, meditation, and breathing promote balance and compassion in this world.

Grounding her work firmly in this world, Latin American ecofeminist Ivone Gebara speaks of constructing her theology “between noise and garbage.”\textsuperscript{54} Beginning with women’s experiences of poverty, earthly toxicity, and disease, she concludes that salvation for these women “will not be something outside the fabric of life but will take place in the heart of it. It springs from the unexpected, from the near and the far, from the known and the unknown. It can last a short or long time. It comes and goes, following the swing of life. Salvation has different origins and occurs at different times, intermingled with the confusion of life.”\textsuperscript{55} Gebara’s lived theology emerges “out of the depths” of the unimaginable violence and suffering that surrounds her in her native Brazil. In such a place, she finds salvation in “little joys,” “one moment of peace and tenderness in the midst of daily violence.”\textsuperscript{56} It is frail, fleeting, and fragmented. But it also grounded in relatedness—that common reality of humans and all species. In this inclusive, worldly vision of salvation, the goal is not a heavenly utopia, but rather moments of justice, beauty, and love in the here and now, and in our relation to this whole natural world.

Similarly, Vasudha Narayanan urges a shift in emphasis in Hinduism from the \textit{tattva/moksha} texts, which are dogmatic and otherworldly, to the religious/\textit{dharma} texts and

\textsuperscript{53} Mary Evelyn Tucker, \textit{Worldly Wonder; Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase} (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 44-49.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 121.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 122-124.
“practice embodied in the dharmic cumulative tradition.”57 From the dharmic literature (such as the *Mahabharata*), she recovers the principles of compassion and giving, “non-malice to all beings in thought, word, and deed.”58 Narayanan uses this value to critique overpopulation and overconsumption in India and the role these factors play in resource depletion, pollution, famines, epidemics, etc. Such devaluations of life are counter to the dharmic principles, she argues, which affirm the earth as a sacred place.

**The Need for an Ecospirituality**

Thus far this project has been primarily *theological*. But one’s conversion to the earth is incomplete without consideration also of the spiritual and vocational implications of a revised theology. Drawing on the insights of Balinese shamanism, David Abram contends that one’s ecospirituality should begin with the practice of listening to the voices of our earthly kin.59 In placing ourselves in the midst of a natural environment and being silent, we open ourselves to hearing the divine breath in creation. Thomas Merton reminds us of the significance of this simple act in his own reflection on the language of the earth:

> The rain surrounded the cabin… with a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of rumor. Think of it all: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside… Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, the rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.60

57 Narayanan, 114.
58 From the *Mahabharata* (Shanti Parvan 162.21) quoted in Narayanan, 126.
60 Quoted by Abram, 73.
We listen to the birds, and they teach us about communication and care. Their nests show us how to strengthen our own dwellings. Their return in the spring informs us of the change of the seasons. Their death teaches us of our own. Yet we do not know, with full clarity their desires or motivations.61 “We cannot know, with the same familiarity and intimacy [as we know our own bodies], the lived experience of a grass snake or a snapping turtle; we cannot readily experience the precise sensations of a hummingbird sipping nectar from a flower or a rubber tree soaking up sunlight.”62 To humankind, the non-human is still other. Other species are purveyors of secrets. From them we learn about changes in the weather or imminent eruptions, tsunamis, and earthquakes. In them, there is a “whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of rumor.”63

The act of listening to, or observing, nature draws together three virtues of an ecospirituality: mindfulness, humility, and compassion. As Buddhist feminists Rita Gross and Stephanie Kaza have pointed out, the practice of meditation also fosters mindfulness, humility, and compassion: “Meditation aims to quiet and stabilize the mind so it is capable of observing thought, sensations, and actions… [and] develop an awareness of need and greed, the suffering of pleasure and pain, and the impermanent nature of things.”64 The “experiential knowing,” or mindfulness, that is nurtured in meditation can act as a foundation for social action and insight.65 It is through one’s meditative practice, Gross suggests, that intellectual ideas are transformed “into a visceral reality.”66

61 Abram, 14.
63 Ibid, 73.
64 Stephanie Kaza, “Acting with Compassion: Buddhism, Feminism, and the Environmental Crisis,” in Ecofeminism and the Sacred, 53-54.
65 Ibid.
Similarly, in the Jewish ritual life, *Shabbat* is a day reserved for honoring creation and enjoying one’s relationships with other persons and the earth. As such, Judith Plaskow argues, it can foster an “ethic of connection”—that is, solidarity with creation that is characterized by resting, noticing the earth as a “fragile mystery,” and “examining the meaning and direction of our ceaseless production and consumption.”

Muslim feminist Nawal Ammar perceives a similar insight in the Arabic principle of *ha’ya*. This term, which is virtually untranslatable into English, denotes “dignified reserve.” Behavior that reflects *ha’ya* is characterized by reverence, respect, balance, and protection for humans and the natural world. Conversely, a livelihood that lacks *ha’ya* contributes to the ecological crisis, dehumanizes women, and leads to maldistribution, overpopulation, pollution, disease, and crime. Ammar suggests that nature is given to humankind as a trust, and that how we treat it will be judged in the hereafter. To ensure that nature and its resources are well managed and used in “dignified reserve,” she delineates five imperatives of an ecological ethic: First, we must use nature and its resources in a balanced non-excessive way. Second, we must treat nature and its resources with kindness. Third, we shall not damage, abuse, or exploit nature. Fourth, we shall share natural resources with others living in the habitat. Fifth, we must conserve.

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69 Ibid, 144.
Conclusions

It is common to hear the ancient Greek word *oikoumene* in Christian discourse. In “ecumenical” matters, it refers to the one household of believers—the Church. Prior to its appropriation by Christian theology, however, the concept *oikoumene* was employed by Homer to refer to the whole inhabited world.\(^{70}\) I would like to suggest that Homer’s cosmic sense of the term provides a helpful way of thinking about the plurality of religions and the universality of our ecological situation.

Consider any multi-member household. Inevitably, it consists of individuals who are bound together—for example, by kinship, purpose, or location—and yet are unique in each one’s own right. In the *oikoumene*, there is a constant negotiating of disparate goals, values, and individualities. The ideal, however, is genuine community and flourishing. Similarly, in the whole cosmic *oikoumene*, there are shared habitats and similar goals, such as the preservation of life. On the other hand, there is also an indissoluble particularity—between religious traditions, cultural rituals and values, individual experiences, the uniqueness of species, and urgency of needs.

An ecofeminist interreligious dialogue guided by the interpretative principle of “dialogical imagination” negotiates the dialectical tension between religious particularities and universality in a way that is neither myopic or hyperopic. Without requiring assimilation or the identification of a false universal, the dialogical imagination encourages mutuality, active listening, openness, imagination, and reorientation as one engages the stories of the religious other. This methodological approach does not dissolve particularity, but affirms it by mutual exchange and a return to one’s own tradition to discover what it says about the wellbeing of the

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earth and women. It also insists that the many religions cannot be reduced to a “universal” or metanarrative. At the same time, it allows for the possibility that even among an irreducible diversity there are traces of similarities, shared themes and similar goals that bring people together in the struggle for a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

In dialogical exchange with ecofeminists, five common themes emerge that call forth a change in theological expressions of the earth and our relationship to it. Arising from a myriad of different cultures, religions, and races, these principles, or “house rules” for living in the cosmic *oikoumene* are: 71

1. A Practice of Hospitality and Attention to a Diversity of Perspectives
2. An Emphasis on Relationality and Interdependence
3. An Affirmation of the Subjectivity of All Human and Non-human Entities
4. A Shift to a Worldly Soteriology
5. The Need for an Ecospirituality

Great disparities in wellbeing and resources afflict our global household. These are not the problems of one race, one religion, or one culture. Rather, they are the responsibility of the whole human and more-than-human *oikoumene*. “We have,” as Martin Luther King, Jr. noted in the midst of the civil rights struggle, “inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westener, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu. Because we can never again live apart, we must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.” 72 Although King’s words depict a global human family, his values of compassion, humility, and interdependence guide the way for incorporating an ecological ethic into the entire “world house.” An apposite place to begin this enterprise is with

71 In her *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 53, Sallie McFague delineates three “house rules”: 1) Take only your share. 2) Clean up after yourself. 3) Keep the house in good repair for others.
72 Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 167.
the interreligious conversations of ecofeminists and their shared concern for the liberation of women and the earth.

**Bibliography**


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