

The Teachers' File

ECOFEMINISM: WHAT ONE NEEDS TO KNOW

by Nancy R. Howell

Abstract. Ecofeminism refers to feminist theory and activism informed by ecology. Ecofeminism is concerned with connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. Although ecofeminism is a diverse movement, ecofeminist theorists share the presuppositions that social transformation is necessary for ecological survival, that intellectual transformation of dominant modes of thought must accompany social transformation, that nature teaches nondualistic and nonhierarchical systems of relation that are models for social transformation of values, and that human and cultural diversity are values in social transformation. Ecofeminist theology, ethics, and religious perspectives are particularly concerned with the integration of science and religion. Examples of religious or spiritual ecofeminisms are North American Christian ecofeminism, North American womanist Christian theology, neopagan Wiccan ecofeminism, Native American ecofeminism, and Third World ecofeminism.

Keywords: animal rights; common creation story; diversity; dualism; ecofeminism; ecology; epistemology; feminism; hierarchy; patriarchy; religious pluralism; womanism.

Ecofeminism emerged as part of the 1970s feminist movement and took its name from Françoise d'Eaubonne's term *ecofeminisme*, which appeared in 1974 in *Le féminisme ou la mort*, where d'Eaubonne calls for a feminist revolution to assure global ecological survival. Writing in outspoken French feminist style, d'Eaubonne holds patriarchal systems and male power responsible for "the destruction of the environment and for

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the accelerated pollution that accompanies this madness, bequeathing an uninhabitable planet for posterity" (1981, 64). The ecological revolution that d'Eaubonne charges to lead the opposition requires destruction of male power to make way, not for female power or matriarchy, but for new egalitarian gender relations between men and women and between humans and nature (d'Eaubonne 1981, 66–67; Merchant 1990, 100).

Definitions of ecofeminism suggest not only that ecology and feminism can be profitably linked for the sake of analysis and activism but that integrative thinking about ecology and feminism requires supporting political, economic, social, and cultural analysis. Rosemary Radford Ruether, an ecofeminist theologian, features the interplay of feminism and ecology in her definition of ecofeminism: "Ecofeminism brings together these two explorations of ecology and feminism, in their full, or deep forms, and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures" (Ruether 1992, 2). Ruether's ecofeminism approaches ecological issues through analytical frames provided by cultural, historical, religious, and social studies. Janis Birkeland, an ecofeminist environmental planner, sees ecofeminism as the logical conclusion of feminism that "theorizes the interrelations among self, societies, and nature" (Birkeland 1993, 17–18). Birkeland's definition of ecofeminism stresses the importance of the analytic frame provided by politics for investigating gender power dynamics at play in ecological disaster: "Ecofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentricism and environmental destruction" (Birkeland 1993, 18).

As Ruether's and Birkeland's definitions of ecofeminism indicate, *ecofeminism* refers to an interconnection between women and nature, as in Ruether's reference to the interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature. The interconnection between women and nature, for Ruether and others, leverages a critique of systems hostile to women and nature. Carol J. Adams, an ecofeminist animal rights and antiracist activist, locates a critique of oppression in her description of ecofeminism: "Ecofeminism identifies the twin dominations of women and the rest of nature. To the issues of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism that concern feminism, ecofeminism adds naturism—the oppression of the rest of nature. Ecofeminism argues that the connections between the oppression of women and nature must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions" (Adams 1993, 1).

Ecofeminism recognizes that historical ideological association of women and nature has not been advantageous for either women or nature. Ecofeminist theologian Anne Primavesi describes ecofeminism with reference to how ideological association of women and nature is

harmful: "Ecofeminism stresses the connections between woman and Nature on the grounds that Nature, in our distanced, masculine-scientific culture, has also been made 'other,' something essentially different from the dominant human male who has an unlimited right to exploit 'mother' earth" (Primavesi 1991, 42). Primavesi claims that male domination of women is a pattern repeated in scientific and technological concepts of "absolute mastery over matter" (Primavesi 1991, 42).

Whereas ecofeminist critique of the disastrous consequences of ideological connection of women and nature is common in definitions of ecofeminism, descriptions of ecofeminism that focus on constructive ecofeminist thought retain the connection of women and nature on different terms. Women's biology and subjectivity as values suggest an analogy or premise that supports the intrinsic value of nature. Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein, editors of an ecofeminist anthology, describe the constructive task of ecofeminism as seeking to "reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life" (Diamond and Orenstein 1990, xi).

ECOFEMINIST PRESUPPOSITIONS

Although ecofeminists are quite diverse in their approaches to ecology and feminism, it may be possible to identify some common presuppositions, principles, precepts, or beliefs that shape ecofeminist thought. Some ecofeminist presuppositions are given in analyses by Janis Birkeland and by Ynestra King, who developed ecofeminism in the mid-seventies at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont. A first presupposition and expectation of ecofeminism is that social transformation is necessary for the sake of survival and justice. Social transformation must reassess and reconstruct values and relations toward equality, cultural diversity, and nonviolence in associations that are nonhierarchical, non-competitive, and fully participatory (Birkeland 1993, 20). Ecofeminism imagines and requires that power-based, hierarchical relationships must be replaced with reciprocity and mutuality. The goals for social transformation cannot override the values stressed by ecofeminists; therefore, process is as important as goals, and patriarchal or hierarchical power tactics are excluded as means to enable survival and justice. Without compromising commitment to cultural diversity, social transformation must be part of a decentered global movement that advances common goals and opposes all forms of oppression and domination (King 1989, 20). Recalling feminist arguments that all theory is value laden and perspectival, ecofeminism is praxis, the integration of theory and action. Ecofeminist thinking about domination of persons and nature requires activism consistent with analysis and ecofeminist movement toward social transformation.

A second presupposition and expectation of ecofeminism is that social transformation must include an intellectual transformation. Whereas normative logic relies on formulaic dualism and hierarchy, ecofeminism urges nondualistic and nonhierarchical forms of thought. Ecofeminism questions fundamental assumptions about dualisms of culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion, human/animal, subjectivity/object, individuality/interconnection, and public-male/private-female (Birkeland 1993, 20; King 1989, 19–20). When coupled with a value hierarchy, the dualisms translate into attitudes and behaviors that privilege certain civilizations, intellectual worldviews, and human persons over persons who are identified with the body, emotions, nonnormative worldviews, and animals—even privileging intelligent animals, such as the great apes and dolphins, over other animals. These dualist and hierarchical habits of mind negatively associate women with nature. Because dualist and hierarchical thinking justifies devaluation and domination, opposition to this negative association of women and nature is the basis of ecofeminist criticism and activism that argue that the struggles of nature are, in fact, the struggles of women (King 1989, 19). Ecofeminism calls for new intellectual frames of reference that integrate the false dualisms that function divisively to separate male and female, privileged persons from “others,” and humanity from “environment” (Birkeland 1993, 20).

A third presupposition of ecofeminism is that reforming the way that nature is valued should transform human relationships with nature. Ecofeminism calls for a shift from instrumental value to intrinsic value in assessing nature (Birkeland 1993, 20). There must be a corresponding shift from treating nature as commodity and object to respecting nature in itself rather than for its usefulness to humans. Valuing nature entails valuing the wisdom intrinsic to nature. Ecofeminism borrows from the science of ecology, itself a theoretical construction and interpretation of nature’s wisdom. Ecology teaches that life comprises interconnected and interdependent processes. An ecological perspective makes it difficult to maintain with certainty that nature is organized hierarchically; ecofeminism claims that hierarchy is projected onto nature from the perspective of human social models (King 1989, 24). A biocentric view rejects hierarchy and the human illusion that it is possible to manage or control nature and instead favors reciprocity in relationship with nature. Biology further teaches the importance of diversity for survival. Simplification of the gene pool limits the capacity for adaptation and survival. Ecofeminists value biological diversity within nature and among humans, resisting inordinate interference with biological speciation and classist and racist genocide among humans (King 1989, 20).

A fourth ecofeminist presupposition is that what ecology teaches about nature is equally relevant to humans, since humans are part of

nature and participants in ecological processes. Biological diversity suggests to ecofeminists that human diversity is valuable. Under this principle, women, persons of color, and the poor should be recognized for their intrinsic value and subjectivity. Some ecofeminists are careful to mention the value of diverse human expressions of sexuality, religion, ability, and nationality, as well as the diversity within constructed categories of humans. Within power-based hierarchies, domination and exploitation of humans along the lines of class, race, gender, religion, nationality, or sexuality jeopardize ecological survival and human well-being. Human and ecological survival and justice are linked with nurturing the interdependence of diverse humans.

ECOFEMINISM, SCIENCE, AND RELIGION

Ecofeminism, as both a theoretical and an activist movement, is an innovative player in the dialogue between and integration of science and religion—this claim is the central contention of my commentary on ecofeminism. In particular, ecofeminist theology, ethics, and spirituality or religious perspectives are engaged in the critical and constructive tasks of integrating science and religion toward ecofeminist praxis: activist theorizing or reflective activism.

Ian Barbour, who prepared the 1989–1991 Gifford Lectures, makes a case for the value of ecofeminism within the field of science and religion. In Barbour's *Religion in an Age of Science*, the first volume of his Gifford Lectures, he points out the challenges that three often marginalized perspectives pose for science and religion. Third World and feminist perspectives pose the problem that both science and religion are embedded in cultural-historical contexts that privilege Western economic and gender biases (Barbour 1990, 76–81). Religious pluralism poses the challenge and complexity of cross-cultural perspectives for the integration of science and religion, since religion is more problematic for consensus than science (Barbour 1990, 81). The advantage of ecofeminism, where there is no absolute consensus, is that it is a cross-cultural and plural movement inclusive of Third World, feminist, and plural religious perspectives.

Ecofeminism as a Critical Perspective. Ecofeminism draws from feminist critical perspectives on science and on religion. Both science and religion are held accountable by feminism for limiting access to the professions for women. In the absence of women's voices, science and religion suffer from androcentric methodological biases, language, and models.

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) exemplifies a feminist analysis and critique.

Her historical analysis examines the rise of modern science within the context of an overarching paradigm shift in Western European images shared by women and nature. Her historical review demonstrates that science and religion (Christianity), as well as philosophy, art, literature, economics, medicine, politics, and society, incorporated values that emerged in the paradigm shift from organicism to a mechanical worldview. In sixteenth-century Europe, organism was the central metaphor representing a worldview that understood self, society, and the cosmos as interdependent, that attributed vitality to all things in the cosmos, and that subordinated individuals to the purposes of communities (Merchant 1980, 1). Organismic theory used the metaphor *nurturing mother* to describe orderly earth as beneficent provider. Relating to the earth as nurturing mother served as “a cultural constraint restricting the types of socially and morally sanctioned human actions allowable with respect to the earth” (Merchant 1980, 2). Simultaneously in the sixteenth century, a second image of the earth as wild and uncontrollable female described nature as violent and chaotic. With the rise of modern science and the emergence of a mechanical model that interpreted the cosmos as a machine, the wild, uncontrollable woman gradually gained prominence as the dominant metaphor. Mastery and control of nature replaced respect for nature, since the appropriate response to the wild woman was to tame and control her (Merchant 1980, 2). The religious image of dominion was adopted in the political and social sphere (Merchant 1980, 3). The scientific revolution submerged organic, animistic assumptions about nature and replaced them with the assumption that nature was constituted by dead, inert particles that could be manipulated externally (Merchant 1980, 193). The death of nature accompanied the metaphorical shift from nature as nurturing mother to wild woman, as the scientific revolution addressed the seventeenth-century struggle for order and stability. Merchant’s historical analysis, then, demonstrates how the organic and mechanical models entailed images associating women and nature and how the paradigm shift to mechanism resulted in the death of nature and altered roles for women in science, production, and society (which I have not discussed here).

Ecofeminism as a Constructive Religious Perspective. Since the focus of this introduction to ecofeminism is the constructive work of ecofeminism in integrating science and religion, I now give examples of ecofeminist models from North American Christian ecofeminism, North American womanist Christian theology, neopagan Wiccan ecofeminism, Native American ecofeminism, and Third World ecofeminism and religion.

Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague construct Christian ecofeminist models from the perspective of North American educated

women privileged by education, class, and race in the United States. Their models have in common a holistic view of the cosmos rather than a focus upon particularity or species. Ruether's constructive ecofeminist theology recently has been developed in her *Gaia and God* (1992), where she proposes a theocosmology. *Gaia and God* reflects upon creation and destruction stories that were formative of a Christian synthesis and upon scientific creation and destruction stories, as well as the origins of domination. Just as early Christianity emerged from and responded to Greek, Babylonian, and Hebraic traditions, contemporary Christianity is poised to respond to emerging scientific discovery and the ecological crisis. Ruether's theocosmology sketches an ecofeminist theology of nature indebted to the creation spirituality of Matthew Fox, the cosmological theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. Ruether's theocosmology affirms three principles: that we must accept the integrity and transience of our personal centers and the personal centers of all beings, that we must affirm the value and interdependence of all living things, and that we must act upon the value of communion and kinship with other personal centers (Ruether 1992, 251–52). In Ruether's theocosmology, God and Gaia are commingled. Christians encounter Gaia as

the wellspring of life and creativity from which all things have sprung and into which they return, only to well up again in new forms. . . . the great Thou, the personal center of the universal process, with which all the small centers of personal being dialogue in the conversation that continually creates and recreates the world. The small selves and the Great Self are finally one, for as She bodies forth in us, all the beings respond in the bodying forth of their diverse creative work that makes the world (Ruether 1992, 253).

McFague, first in *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987), and more recently in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993), pursues ecofeminist metaphorical theology in search of new images and models of God and the God-world relationship. *The Body of God* proposes that the Big Bang theory (and the theory of evolution) might function as a Common Creation Story enabling a religiously plural world to remythologize the scientific story in particular religious contexts for the sake of a common global point of contact. The common creation story expresses the common origin of all bodies in stardust and the evolution of a diversity of bodies (McFague 1993, 38–47). The model of the world as the body of God breaks down the spirit/body dualism, values the body, and expresses divine concern that the basic human needs of all bodies be met. Continuing the work of Teilhard de Chardin and Whitehead, McFague describes her model as agential-organic and panentheist. These labels are shorthand for a theology of nature that affirms divine purpose in the universe, God as the spirit (life)

of the body (cosmos), God as transcendent and immanent, God and the world as interdependent, and all bodies (living and nonliving) as interconnected, interdependent, and valuable in the divine body (McFague 1993, 140–41).

Whereas Ruether and McFague construct holistic theological cosmologies, Carol J. Adams constructs an ecofeminist perspective concerned with particular animals rather than the whole cosmic matrix. As an animal rights activist also engaged in feminist and antiracist activism, Adams, in *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism in Defense of Animals* (1994), uses science critically to examine the technology and sexual politics of meat eating, the fur industry, and animal experimentation. Although the bulk of her analysis is a critique of the dualism and objectification that support the masculine domination of animals, women, and persons of color in interlocking systems of domination, Adams's collection of essays also suggests how feminist theology can transform "bestly theology." Bestly theology is patriarchal, absolutist, hierarchical, and dualistic and thus supports domination in its logic and language (Adams 1994, 179–85). Feminist theology offers an epistemological shift to experience as a corrective to bestly authority and ontology (Adams 1994, 194). Adams's proposal is a "second-person" theology. Just as human personhood is formed in relationship and interdependence with other humans who teach us the arts of personhood, God, too, is known and unfolds in relationships with humans. Because commoditized animals are caged and isolated from relationships with animals and humans, animals are excluded from experiencing the relational God (Adams 1994, 195). Adams raises two transforming theological questions: "Does the creation of some beings solely for the purpose of being objects make sense in the face of an intrinsically and radically relational divinity? If God is process, *being*, and revealed through relationship should we not situate all beings within that divine relationship, seeing with loving eyes?" (Adams 1994, 195). Second-person theology restores subjectivity of animals and human relationship with animals (Adams 1994, 197.)

Womanist theology has emerged recently as an African-American ecofeminist theology. It is not that African-American women have followed the course of white ecofeminist theologians, but intrinsic to a theology that objects to racist dehumanization of African-Americans is awareness that there is an analogy between assault upon the earth and assault upon black women's bodies. Delores S. Williams describes the "sin of defilement" as "human attack upon creation so as to ravish, violate, and destroy creation: to exploit and control the production and reproduction capacities of nature, to destroy the unity in nature's placements, to obliterate the spirit of the created" (Williams 1993a, 25). The sin of defilement applies to nature and black women's bodies, and Wil-

Williams argues that Christianity, science, and politics conspire to render the defilement invisible by associating permanent negative valuation to the color black (Williams 1993a, 28). Williams's constructive theology *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993b) uses the biblical story of Hagar, Abraham and Sarah's Egyptian slave, as a literary frame to interpret a womanist theological motif of survival and quality of life. Wilderness has spiritual and political significance as a symbol of resistance to and freedom from enslavement; encounter with God, who is not liberator but participant in survival, visionary, and source of promise; and black women's liberating power and resourcefulness (Williams 1993b, 20–22, 120–30). Nature as wilderness is not romantically associated with women's embodiment but ambivalently symbolizes hope and risk (Williams 1993b, 29–31.)

Neopagan ecofeminism and Native American ecofeminism are categories of earth-based spirituality. The Wiccan ecofeminism of Starhawk is an example of neopagan ecofeminist spirituality. Assisted by Ruether's and Merchant's historical analyses of the persecution of witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Starhawk offers an ecofeminist criticism of how established Christianity and science usurped the power, healing, and spiritual wisdom of women who practiced the Old Religion (Starhawk 1982, 183–219). Starhawk's constructive ecofeminist reflection names three roots of earth-based spirituality: the immanence of spirit (god, goddess) in the living cosmos (which could be referred to as pantheism), the interconnection of everything in the living earth, and the community of beings who are part of the living cosmos (Starhawk 1990, 73–74). Neopagan earth-based spirituality requires integrity and activism, and in particular, Starhawk writes about both antinuclear and environmental activism (Starhawk 1982; 1990).

Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo/Sioux, provides one example of Native American ecofeminism. Allen's novel, poetry, and essays speak to the North American cultural assault on Native American traditions about nature, women, and spirit, but above all, Allen recovers Native American traditions and myths that speak to women, nature, and creation. Allen recovers diverse stories of Thought Woman, Old Spider Woman, Earth Woman, Corn Woman, and Serpent Woman—all names for the quintessential spirit who pervades everything, bestows sacredness with her blessing, and informs right balance and harmony (Allen 1992, 13–14). What these female spirits make is the earth, creation, and creatures. Quite distinct from images of reproduction used to describe creation, the spirit Creatrix thinks or names beings into life (Allen 1992, 15–16). Native American mythology entails understanding the earth as female, Grandmother Earth, a physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional

being (Allen 1990, 52). Myth, ritual, and tradition support reciprocity with nature and between women and men.

One example of Third World ecofeminism is Vandana Shiva's critical reflection on Indian Hindu cosmology and women's work in food production, water management, and silviculture. Shiva uses ecological science to corroborate the sound ancient practices of women whose care for land, water, and forests was supported culturally and religiously by the notion of Shakti as dynamic energy, the feminine principle, and of Prakriti as nature, the manifestation of Shakti (Shiva 1989, 38). Shiva contrasts Indian cosmology with a Cartesian concept of nature and Indian ethnoscience with reductionist Western science, and she argues that Western science, technology, politics, and economic development have exploited nature and marginalized women (Shiva 1989, 40, 219). Her constructive Indian ecofeminism calls for the recovery of Indian cosmology and ethnoscience to replace Western maldevelopment and to restore cultural harmony for women, men, and nature, ecological sustainability, and biological diversity (Shiva 1989, 223).

Ecofeminism that reflects upon both science and religion is not a single theoretical or activist movement but represents historical, contextual, and plural approaches to the integration of ecology and feminist religious perspectives. Diverse ecofeminist alternatives are not intent upon consensus but engage in coalition toward common goals ending domination of women and nature and ensuring ecological survival with human justice and ecojustice.

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