
Ecofeminism – The Challenge to Theology

by

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Abstract: This article surveys the shaping of the theological system of Christianity, from its Ancient Middle East, Greek and Hebrew roots to its development in the West in Augustine, Luther and Calvin. It shows the challenge to the model of male domination in this theology from the 17th century Quaker and 19th century abolitionist feminism to contemporary feminism. It then discusses the reconstruction of this theology from an ecofeminist perspective. It concludes by examining the tension between two ethical imperatives: the call to sustainability and the call to preferential option of the poor and the need to balance these two imperatives.

Ecology poses a profound challenge to classical Christian theology and indeed all the classical religions shaped by the world view of patriarchy. But this paper will focus on Christianity, with its roots in the world views of Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman worlds. Let me start by a brief definition of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism or ecological feminism examines the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. It aims at strategies and world views to liberate or heal these interconnected dominations by better understanding of their aetiology and enforcement.

There are two levels on which this relation between sexism and ecological exploitation can be made: on the cultural-symbolic level and on the socio-economic level. My assumption is that the first is an ideological superstructure that reflects and ratifies the second. That is, social patterns developed, deeply rooted in the distortion of gender relations with the rise of patriarchal slavocracies in Ancient Near East that inferiorized women as a gender group. The system of domination of women itself was rooted in a larger patriarchal hierarchical system of priestly and warrior-king control over land, animals and slaves as property, to monopolize wealth, power and knowledge.

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As this system of domination is shaped socially, ideological tools were constructed to ratify it as a reflection of the “nature of things” and the “will of God/the gods”. Law codes were developed to define these relations of power of dominant men over women, slaves, animals and land as property¹. These law codes are depicted as handed down to an inspired lawgiver by God/the gods. Creation stories were spun out to depict this hierarchical social order as itself a reflection of the cosmic order.

In the Ancient Near East and classical Athens several creation stories were constructed to ratify this design of society. In the Babylonian creation story, that goes back to the third millennium B.C., the story of cosmogony is told as a theogony of the gods that culminates in an intergenerational conflict between the old earth mother, Tiamat and her great-grandson Marduk. A mother-dominated old world of primal energies is set against a new world order of city-states championed by Marduk².

Marduk is seen as conquering chaos and creating cosmos by conquering the primal mother, treading her body underfoot and splitting it in half, using one half to fashion the starry firmament above and the other half the earth below. Her subordinate male consort is then slain and from his blood, mixed with the earth, are fashioned human beings to be the slaves of the gods so the gods can be at leisure. The elemental mother is turned into “matter” which can then be used to shape a hierarchical cosmos. The creation of the human as slaves to the gods within this cosmos defines primary social relations as that of masters over slaves.

In both the Hebrew and the Greek creation stories this primal battle against the mother that suggested an earlier alternative world is concealed. These stories begin with the presupposition of patriarchal dualism as the foundational nature of things. For the Greek philosophical story, told by Plato, the primal dualism of mind divided from matter was the first state of things. On the one side stood Mind containing the archetypal ideas; on the other side, unformed matter, the receptacle or “nurse” of things to be. Between the two stands disembodied male agency as the divine architect or Creator, who shapes matter into a cosmos by fashioning it after the intellectual blueprint of the divine ideas³.

The Creator shapes a circular and hierarchically ordered cosmos with the fixed stars and the realm of the gods at the outer edge, the earth at the bottom and the planetary spheres ranged in between. He then fashions the world soul to set this cosmos in motion. Taking the residue of the world soul he cuts them into individual souls and places them in the stars. There they have a pre-incarnational vision of the eternal ideas. Then they are encased in bodies, fashioned by the planetary gods, and put on earth.

¹ For these relations of patriarchal domination in Ancient Near Eastern and Greek law codes, see R. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, Harper, San Francisco 1992, pp. 174-180.

² See *The Creation Epic* in I. Mendelson (ed.), *Religion in the Ancient Near East*, Liberal Arts Press, New York 1955, pp. 17-46.

³ Plato, *Timaeus* (49) from *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 2, B. Jowett (ed.), Random House, New York 1937, p. 29.

The task of the soul is to control the passions that arise from the body and to cultivate the intellect. If the soul succeeds in this task it will doff the body at death and return to its native star, there to live “a blessed and congenial existence”. But if it fails to control the body, it will enter a cycle of reincarnation, entering the bodies of lower beings, women, lower social classes and animals⁴. The fall into an animal is terminal for the soul, but from lower forms of humans, women and lower classes, the soul can rise through successive incarnations into the highest state, the elite Greek male, and be liberated into disembodied bliss.

Although Christianity would shed the ideas of the preexistence and reincarnation of the soul⁵, it followed key presuppositions of Plato’s cosmology, reading the Genesis story through the lens of the *Timaeus*. It continued the presuppositions that the soul is an ontological substance separable from the body, living in an alienated state on earth, whose true home lies in Heaven. It attempted to combine the Platonic eschatology of the soul’s return to the stars with the radically different Hebrew eschatology of the resurrected body on a millennial earth, by imagining a “spiritual body” stripped of its mortal components that would clothe the soul in its final heavenly state⁶.

Like Plato, Christianity imaged the soul in relation to the body as male controlling power over female-identified body and passions that are to be controlled. Although women are conceded also to possess a redeemable soul in God’s image, the classical Christian theological tradition sees this soul as non-gendered. A genderless soul that can be redeemed through baptism into Christ is distinguished from women as female who are seen as inherently closer to the sin-prone bodily tendencies. This lower nature demands that women be subordinated and kept under control by men, but it also means that women are prone to insubordination and subversion of male rational control. It is through this female tendency that the male was seduced into sin in the beginning and paradise lost, ushering humanity into a fallen world.

In this story of original paradise, sin and fall Christianity drew on a very different cosmology and earth story from the Hebrews. The Genesis story posits a patriarchal God who shapes an original chaotic matter into cosmos through his word-command during a six-day work week, culminating in sabbatical rest. The human, created male and female, on the sixth day and given the command to rule over the earth and its plants and animals, is not created as a slave, but as a royal servant or administrator of the earth as representative of God or “in God’s image”⁷.

⁴ Ibid. (42), p. 23; also Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where he adds the idea that the fallen soul will enter into various upper or lower class people depending on the extent of its fall into the passions: *Dialogues of Plato*, p. 248.

⁵ See Origen, *On First Principles* II, 2, 2, Harper and Row, New York 1966, pp. 81-82; also R. R. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, Harper, San Francisco 1992, p. 133.

⁶ Gregory Nyssa describes the risen body as stripping off all that has made it mortal: see his *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, vol. 5, Parker, New York 1893, pp. 464-465.

⁷ Genesis I.26-27.

There is no explicit mandate for the domination of some humans over others, as male over female, or master over slave, in the Hebrew story. This fact allowed the Genesis story to be used as a potent basis for an egalitarian view of all humans as equal in God's image in later Christian movements that sought to dismantle slavery and sexism. But this later Christian usage of Genesis overlooks what was implicit in the Hebrew story, and explicit in Hebrew law and exegesis. Adam is a generic human who is assumed to be embodied by the male patriarchal class who represent dependent humans, women, slaves and children, and rule over God's creation⁸.

Moreover, in Genesis 2-3, as if to make the gender assumptions explicit, the male is identified with the original male human being, out of which the female is created by the male God and handed over to him as his wife-servant. Contrary to modern feminist apologetics, this is not an egalitarian relation, but one in which the male is the normative human, and the female a derivative auxiliary⁹. Moreover this derivative female is then described as initiating disobedience to God's command and thus causing the pair to be thrown out of paradise to live an oppressive existence. He is punished by hard labor by the sweat of his brow, while she is punished by painful childbearing and subjugation to her husband.

Although the present fallen world is sunk in sin, Hebrew thought looks forward to a future time when paradise will be restored. When humans (Israel's patriarchal class) turn and obey God, God will restore them to an idyllic world where there will be no violence between man and man, alienation between man and nature will be overcome, harmonic relations will reign on a peaceful and prosperous earth. Originally this Hebrew future hope for a future paradise was earth and mortality-bound. It assumed that redeemed humans would live a long, healthy, but mortal life on a peaceful and bountiful but mortal earth¹⁰.

Later contact with Persian eschatology and Platonism would reshape Hebrew futurism into apocalyptic scenarios in which the dead of past generations rise, are judged by a messianic king and the whole earth transformed into immortal conditions. It is this apocalyptic eschatology that is received by the Christian movement and fused with elements of Platonic cosmology to create the classic Christian story of creation, fall and redemption.

Since Christianity dropped the ideas of the soul's pre-existence and reincarnation, it also lost the explanation for women's inferiority based on the view that women are born through the failure of souls in past male incarnations to control their bodily passions. Some early Christian movements suggested a subversive liberation in Christ, from all relations of subjugation, women to men, slaves to masters, subjugated to ruling nations. The original equality prior to sexual

⁸ See P. Bird, *Male and Female He Them, Gen 1:27b in the context of the priestly account of Creation*, in *Image of God and Gender Models in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, Edited K. Borresen (ed.), Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1994, pp. 11-34.

⁹ See P. Tribble, *Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation*, in "Journal of the American Academy of Religion", XLI/1, March, 1973, pp. 30-48.

¹⁰ See the doctoral thesis by R. Zohar Dulin, *Old Age in the Hebrew Scriptures*, Ph.D. Thesis, Northwestern University, 1982.

differentiation is seen as restored, drawing on the Galatians text, “In Christ there is no more male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free”¹¹.

But as Christianity was institutionalized in the patriarchal family and political order, it moved quickly to suppress these radical interpretations of redemption in Christ. Although equal access to heavenly redemption was conceded to women, this future hope was not allowed to subvert patriarchal relations on earth in the newly forming Christian church and society. This is already expressed in the post-Pauline dicta in I Timothy, which declared that women were created second and sinned first, and therefore are to keep silence and to have no authority over men in the Christian community¹².

Augustine, in his commentaries on Genesis in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, would shape the theological rationale for women’s subordination that would be followed by the dominant line of Christian theologians through the Reformation. For Augustine, woman, although given a non-gendered soul by the creator that enables her to be redeemed, was created in her female nature to be subordinate to the male in the sexual-social roles of wife and child-bearer. For Augustine, femaleness itself represents the inferior bodily nature, while the male represents the intellect which is to rule over both his body and hers. He is the collective Adam made in God’s image, while woman as woman does not possess the image of God in herself but images the subordinate body. She is “in the image of God” only when taken together with the male “who is her head”¹³.

Moreover, for Augustine, due to her inferior and more sin-prone nature, Eve initiated disobedience to God. The male in assenting to her prompting, thus conceded to his lower self. Only thus does the whole human fall into sin¹⁴. Although humans as a whole are punished by a loss of original immortality that was the gift of union with God and have lost the free will that allowed them to chose God over their sinful self-will, women are punished for their special fault by coercive subjugation¹⁵.

For Augustine, woman was created subordinate, but is now in a state of forced subjugation to punish her for her original insubordination and to keep her in her place. Redemption does not liberate her from this subordination. Rather, through voluntary acceptance of it, she makes herself obedient to God and a fit subject of heavenly bliss. Then finally there will be no hierarchy of male over female, but all the blessed will live in gloriously spiritualized bodies freed from sin and death.

¹¹ See R. R. Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1998, ch. 1.

¹² I Timothy I:11-15; see D. R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1983.

¹³ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 10,10,7; see Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, ch. 2.

¹⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 14:11.

¹⁵ Augustine, *On Genesis against the Manichaeans* II.19; R. J. Teske (ed). *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 84, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 1991; see Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, ch. 2.

These patriarchal patterns that fused Hebrew and Greek thought reigned in Christian cosmology, anthropology, Christology and soteriology until modern times, being taken up and renewed by the mainline Reformers, Luther and Calvin. In the 16th and 17th centuries a few maverick feminist humanists, and the Quakers challenged the doctrine of male domination as order of nature and punishment due women for their priority in sin. They picked up suppressed early Christian themes of radical egalitarianism and argued that all humans were made equal in the original creation¹⁶.

For these thinkers the domination of women, as well as other forms of domination, such as slavery, came about through sin; not women's sin, but the sin of dominant males who distorted the original harmony by usurping power over others. Christ came to overcome all such dominations and to restore the equality of women and men, but male church leaders have distorted the gospel into new rationales for sexism. Redemption means not just a promise of spiritual equality in heaven, but a social struggle to overcome unjust domination of men over women, masters over slaves, here on earth.

This theology of original and redeemed equality over against patriarchal slavocracy was picked up and developed by the abolitionist feminists of the 19th century, such as the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott. In the pithy words of Sarah Grimké, writing in 1837, "All I ask of my brethren is that they take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God designed us to occupy"¹⁷. Sarah Grimké had no doubt that that ground was one of an autonomous human being created to be man's peer and equal partner, not his subordinate.

This anthropology of original and restored equality was rediscovered by modern feminist theology and has been the basis for a critique of patriarchal anthropology in recent decades. But the 19th century feminists did not question an anthropocentric world view in which man and woman together were created to dominate and rule over the non-human creation. It is only with the deepening of feminist theology in ecofeminism that there has been a questioning of patriarchal cosmology and recognition of the need to grapple with the whole structure of the Christian story, and not just with gender relations in its anthropology.

When I speak about the challenge of ecofeminism to theology, it is in the context of radicalization that takes place as ecological consciousness is incorporated into feminist theology. One then realizes the need to question and reconstruct the cosmological framework out of which the Christian worldview grew from its ancient roots in the Hebrew and Greek worlds. A full treatment of the implications of these deeper questions is still very much in process. One awaits a full presentation of what an ecofeminist theology would look like. Here I will only

¹⁶ Particularly the tract of Agrippa von Nettesheim (1509) *De Nobilitate et Praecellentia foeminei Sexus*, ed. Charles Bene (Droz, Geneva 1990); see Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, ch. 4.

¹⁷ S. Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1837), in M. Schneir (ed.), *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, Vintage, New York 1992, p. 38.

attempt a few suggestions about how the self, sin and redemption, God, cosmology and eschatology are being rethought by ecofeminist theology.

I begin with a view of the self in ecofeminist theology as the starting point for a challenge to the Platonic construct of soul and body which still reigns officially in Christian thought, although with failing conviction. 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. This anthropology is at the heart of the distortion in Western thought of our relation to ourselves, as well as to our fellow earth creatures and the cosmos as a whole.

Humans are latecomers to the planet. The plants and animals existed billions of years before us. We are descendents of the long evolution of increasingly complex life forms on earth. Our consciousness does not set us radically apart from the rest of the life forms on earth, but is part of a continuity of matter-energy dynamics that bursts into life, awareness of life and self-reflecting consciousness in organisms with progressively more complex brains. We were not created to dominate and rule the earth, for it governed itself well and better for millions of years when we did not exist or existed as a non-dominant mammal. Only in very recent earth history, in the last few thousand years, has homo sapiens emerged as an increasingly dominant species using its special gifts for thinking and organizing to control and exploit the majority of humans and the non-human earth community. Stewardship is not a primal command, but an *ex post facto* effort of dominant males to correct overabuse and become better managers of what they have presumed to be their patrimony; namely, ownership of the rest of the world.

We need to recognize that our self-reflective consciousness is not a separable ontological substance, but our experience of our own interiority which is integral to our brain-body and dies with it. We are finite sparks of self-conscious life who arose from earth and return to it at death. Our consciousness did not fall from a heaven outside the earth and will not escape outside of it into an eternal life. Our destiny and calling is of and for this earth, our only and true home. Immortality does not lie in the preservation of our individual consciousness as a separate substance, but in the miracle and mystery of endlessly recycled matter-energy out of which we arose and into which we return. To better translate the Ash Wednesday proclamation, "we are earth; to earth we shall return".

This means we need to use our special capacities for thought, not to imagine ourselves as ruling over others, superior to them, and escaping our common mortality, but rather to celebrate the wonder of the whole cosmic process and to be the place where this cosmic process comes to celebrative consciousness. We also need to use our capacities to think and understand these processes to find how to harmonize our lives with the life of the whole earth community. This demands a spirituality and ethic of mutual limitation and nurture of reciprocal life-giving, the very opposite of the spirituality of separation and domination.

This ecological consciousness of self calls for a very different understanding of the nature of evil and its remedies. We need to give up the presuppositions of an original paradise when there was no evil and a future paradise when evil and death are overcome. Rather we need to look more closely at the aetiology of our

particular distortion of our relation to one another and to the earth through myths of separation and domination. Here I find myself particularly instructed by Brazilian ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara.

In Gebara's view, evil, in the sense of finitude and tragedy, have always been with us and all life forms on earth and will always be so. The primal sin is not a disobedience that caused us to fall into a mortality to which we were not originally subjected. Rather the primal sin lies in the effort to escape from mortality, finitude and vulnerability. The desire to escape from mortality may have long been a part of human awareness of the fear of death, but it took organized, pernicious forms with the rise of powerful males who sought to monopolize power over other humans, land and animals. For them the ultimate power over others was to rise superior to death itself, to organize their power to assure themselves of an invulnerability to that finitude that is the common lot of earth creatures¹⁸.

This very effort to secure its own invulnerability from want and death impelled an endless process of seeking to amass power at the expense of the rest of humans and the earth. Thus these dominant men, seeking ultimate salvation from vulnerability, constructed systems of abuse and exploitation of other human and the earth to amass overweening wealth and power. Women became the particular targets of this flight from vulnerability because they represented men's finite origins and the realities of earth-bound pain and limits. To rule over and to flee from woman, the body and the earth was to seek to conquer and flee from one's own denied finitude.

For Gebara it is this impulse to dominate and exploit in order to conquer want, imagining one's self to have transcended finite limitations, that has created the system of distortion that heaps excessive want and untimely death on the majority of humans. This system of exploitation threatens to undo the processes that maintain the lifecycle of all earth beings in relation to one another, crafted by the earth over billions of years. It is this system of domination and distortion which is sin, as distinct from tragedy and death which are natural and inevitable.

This understanding of the aetiology of sin and the fall into domination also dictates how Gebara understands salvation. Just as we must give up the original paradise where there was no tragedy or death, so we must give up the future paradise where tragedy and death are overcome¹⁹. We need to recognize that these myths of immortal and perfect beginnings and ends not only falsify our real possibilities, but are themselves the projection of the escape from vulnerability which is at the heart of sin.

The real salvation that is available to us is of much more modest dimensions, and yet nevertheless of world historic and global proportions. We need to dismantle the system of distortion that gives a privileged class overweening wealth and power at the expense of most humans and which is destroying the life-sustaining balances of the earth. In so doing we will not expect a paradise free from tragedy and death, but rather a community of mutual life-giving where we can hold

¹⁸ Ivone Gebara, *Teología a Ritmo de Mujer*, San Pablo, Madrid 1995, pp. 146-156. Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, ch. 8.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

one another in the celebrative as well as the tragic moments of our common life as earth creatures. This more modest redemptive hope was summed up in the conclusion of the women's creed written by Robin Morgan for the Women's Conference in Beijing, China²⁰:

Bread. A clean sky. Active peace. A woman's voice singing
somewhere. The army disbanded. The harvest abundant. The
wound healed. The child wanted. The prisoner freed. The
body's integrity honored. The lover returned...Labor equal,
fair and valued. No hand raised in any gesture but greeting.
Secure interiors – of heart, home and land – so firm as to
make secure borders irrelevant at last.

This is the vision of an ecological hope freed from false escapism and content to make common joys abundant and available to us all, in the midst of those tragedies of limits, failures and accidents that also should be equally shared, rather than heaped upon some in excess so a privileged few may imagine themselves immortal.

The dismantling of an escapist self and salvation history that is the root of human sin and *han*²¹ (victimization of others and the pain of victimization) also demands a dismantling of the view of cosmology, God and Christ that has sustained this distortion. Instead of modeling God after male ruling class consciousness, outside of and ruling over nature as its controlling immortal projection, God in ecofeminist spirituality is the immanent source of life and the renewal of life that sustains the whole planetary and cosmic community. God is neither male nor anthropomorphic. God is the font from which the variety of particular beings 'co-arise' in each generation, the matrix that sustains their life-giving interdependency with each other, and also the judging and renewing insurgency of life that enable us to overcome the distortions that threaten healthy relations.

This understanding of God is leading several ecofeminist theologians to reconstruct the understanding of the Trinity as the sustaining matrix of immanent relationality. Ivone Gebara sees the Trinity not as a separate, self-enclosed relation of two divine males with each other, mediated by the Spirit, but rather as the symbolic expression of the basic dynamic of life itself as a process of vital interrelational creativity. Life as inter-relational creativity exists on every level of reality. As cosmos it reveals itself as the whole process of cosmic unfolding and

²⁰ This women's creed, written by Robin Morgan for United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, China in September, 1995, was sent to me by Catherine Keller of Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey.

²¹ The term "han" comes from Korean Minjung theology that discusses the experience of victimization. For a theology that interconnects the Western Christian emphasis on sin with the Minjung emphasis on han, see A. Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Abingdon Press, Nashville TN 1993.

interrelation of planets and galaxies. As earth it shows us the dynamic interrelational process of life unfolding in the biosphere²².

Each species ramifies into many differences, including human beings with their many races and cultures. We should celebrate this diversity of humanness and affirm our interrelation with each other in one community on earth. Likewise interpersonal society and the person herself exists as a creative dynamic of expanding plurality and new interrelationality, of unity and diversity in interaction. The Trinitarian dynamic of life is both creational and salvational; it both creates new life and seeks to correct distorted relations and reestablish life-giving, loving relationality. The name of the Trinitarian God as sustaining, redeeming matrix of cosmic, planetary, social and personal life is Sophia: Holy Wisdom.

In the context of this understanding of the ecological self, good and evil and the Trinitarian God, what does it mean to speak of Jesus as Christ? Can we still affirm this one historical figure as the unique incarnation of God's creating Logos, even reinterpreted as Sophia? In what way is he both Sophia and Messiah? Gebara questions the messianic myth of a heroic warrior who will deliver victims from oppression, punish the oppressors and create an ideal earth freed from sin and want. She sees this myth as the counter-part, arising from victims, of the desire to escape from finitude, but now coupled with the thirst for revenge upon those who have secured their own privilege at the expense of others. Messianic myths, as revenge scenarios of victims, do not break, but reproduce the cycle of violence and create new victims and new victimizers.

Jesus, for Gebara, is a very different prophetic figure that sought to break through the cycle of violence. Taking the side of the victims, he also called those in power to repent and enter into a new community of mutual service. The dominant system could not tolerate his message and killed him to silence his counter vision. But his followers also betrayed him by turning his call to a community of shared love into a new messianism, making him into the warrior imperial Savior that would secure the Christian system of dominating power²³.

Thus to ask how Jesus is the Christ one must overturn the messianic myth. Jesus instead stands as an anti-messiah calling us to rediscover the community of equals that appears when the system of sin and hate, of victimizers and victims, of rich and poor, is dismantled. We enter then, not a community of immortal blessedness freed from finitude and limits, but a community of shared joys and sorrows as earth creatures, former Pharisees and prostitutes, the lame and the blind, women and men on the edges of the dominant system breaking bread together.

Likewise if Jesus reveals God, the God he reveals is not the split off, dominating Logos of immortalized male sovereignty, but the Holy Wisdom of mutual self-giving and life-sustaining love. He embodies the Holy Wisdom that creates and renews the creation, not as its exclusive and unique representative, but rather as a paradigm of her presence, one among many other sisters and brothers, to

²² I. Gebara, *The Trinity and Human Experience*, in R. Radford Ruether, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY 1996, pp. 13-23.

²³ I. Gebara, *Cristologia fundamental*, in *Teologia a Ritmo de Mujer*, pp. 146-156.

recall us to our true selves and relations from the madness of escapism and domination. These are the “temptations” from which we ask to be delivered, even as we pray for those conditions of daily bread and mutual forgiveness that recreate God’s will done on earth.

Gebara’s understanding of the immanent Trinitarian God of life’s dynamic relationality places revelation in our experience of nature. We read (and critique) our historical scriptures in the light of the book of nature. All life from the evolution of the galaxies to the dynamics of the self manifests the presence of God as sustaining Wisdom of creation. But this does not mean a blissful world of idyllic conditions. Nature reveals how life sustains its precarious balances by painful and tragic means. Lion and lamb do not lie down together, but keep one another’s population in sustainable limits by a bloody process of eating and being eaten.

We are tempted in speaking of nature as revelatory to see nature through paradisaic lens, ignoring its violent and tragic face. We imagine it as Eden only by removing ourselves from it and viewing it through the plate glass window of our momentary havens of invulnerability, purchased at the expense of many other humans. But a tornado can shatter this glass and sweep away this shelter at any moment.

Two revelatory words come, from “nature” and from “history”, that are not easy to reconcile. Some in Christian thought even saw them as revealing different gods opposed to one another. I call these two words, the call to sustainability and the call to preferential option for the poor. When I garden I would be foolish to make a preferential option for the weak and the diseased. I need to root out the excess growth of many plants so that a few, the healthiest, can grow well. In like manner, as Jay McDaniel agonized, nature gives the pelican two eggs so that one will survive, but if the first hatches well, the second will be pecked to death and thrown from the nest²⁴. This cruelty is necessary for a sustainable population of pelicans or tomatoes. Sentimentality for the second pelican or the excess plants would be misplaced. Likewise humans need to limit their own species proliferation at the expense of the other species of earth, as much as possible by decisions not to conceive, rather than to abort. But to deny the need for birth limitation in the name of life is no favor to children. It means that thousands die each day of malnutrition soon after birth. To refuse to limit ourselves rationally means that these limits are imposed cruelly and violently.

A different call comes from our history of sin and han, arising as a protest against the distortion of relations between humans and with other creatures into overweening wealth for a few and impoverishment for the many. This pattern is not, contrary to social Darwinism, an expression of a natural ethic of the survival of the fittest, for nature does not favor the large carnivore, precariously perched at the top of the food chain, over all the creatures on which it depends, but seeks dynamic balance through a combination of mutual limits and cooperation. The scurrying insects that compost the forest are far more important to its well-being than the lion.

²⁴ J. McDaniel, *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1989, pp. 19-21.

Preferential option for the poor seeks to correct the destructive option for the rich at the expense of the wellbeing of the whole community of life. The ethic of preferential option for the poor calls us to feed and nurture the child of the poor dying from malnutrition and unclean water and rectify the conditions that are causing this untimely death, while the ethic of sustainability calls us to help the mother of this child limit her childbearing.

The two ethics often stand in tragic tension, but they should not be allowed to fall into irreconcilable dualism; into a war God of victory of the strong over the weak, on the one hand, and, on the other, a God of compassion for the weak distorted into a defense of fetuses against women. We need to seek right balance between justice and sustainability. The challenge of ecological theology and ethics is to knit together, in the light of both earth knowledge and the crisis of human history, a vision of divine presence that both underlies and sustains natural processes and also struggles against the excesses of the powerful and reaches out to the victimized to create communities of mutual flourishing.