Feminism and Ecology

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There have been many new developments in the area of Catholic theology in recent decades. Perhaps one of the most notable has been an increasing interest in adopting a “green agenda” and attending to pressing issues such as climate change, sustainable development, water shortages, or the spread of disease and its connection with care for the environment. The ways in which scholars have approached these issues are varied and oftentimes complex.

Despite competing claims about which method to use when discussing environmental ethics (such as virtue theory or utilitarianism, for example), one can say with some degree of certainty that significant strides have been made in Catholic environmental thought. For instance, scholars are now using terms such as “sacramental universe” to indicate a new or renewed relationship between the human community and the earth.¹ Such developments in language are important because theologically salient concepts make the call for care and cooperation with the earth’s natural rhythms more urgent and personal for Catholics.

The concept of stewardship has been criticized and refined. Increasingly, it is interpreted to express how being a Christian entails a responsibility to care for God’s creation.² In this and related endeavors, scholars have reread key texts from the biblical tradition and tried to balance the seemingly anthropocentric thrust with ecologically attentive exegesis. Others have looked to the texts of Vatican II and sought to draw attention to the need for an ecological consciousness when interpreting concepts such as the common good. Still others qualify historical church texts that express, in no uncertain terms, that “humankind can and should increasingly consolidate its control over creation,” since statements of this sort often allude to biblical texts that stipulate the need for humans to have dominion over the earth (Gaudium et Spes, no. 12). The incorporation of scientific and especially ecological paradigms has, in turn, caused another shift in method, toward a more relational model of understanding the interconnectivity of humans and the entire ecosystem.³

In addition to these developments, work is also being carried out on the links between environmental degradation and poverty. People are increasingly aware that, for instance, an environmental policy that might be viable in the First World might not be so in the Third World. Many scholars are keen to communicate how environmental concerns are linked with structures of injustice that force many people to eke out a living in ways that destroy natural habitats and their own immediate environment.

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All of the preceding developments signal positive advances in Catholic ecological awareness. However, there are other pressing areas that also need attention and are sometimes forgotten or merely mentioned in passing. One such area is the relationship between women and the environment. Christian feminist theology includes a wide variety of views and approaches and can often be a complex field of perspectives. And when one adds consideration of the earth into the equation, things might seem even more complex. Nevertheless, by sketching briefly what we mean by feminism in the area of theology, we can then outline what a feminist ecological ethics might look like, referring to some leading voices in the field.

After outlining what ecofeminism entails, this article will emphasize the need to deconstruct patterns of behavior and theological thinking that perpetuate structures of inequality between women and men that are subsequently reflected in the ways in which we relate to the environment. It will argue that the Catholic tradition must reconsider the ways in which currently it refers to and uses key theological concepts, in order to challenge rather than perpetuate issues of sexism, class, gender, and power. Using the Appalachian Bishops’ *At Home in the Web of Life: A Pastoral Message on Sustainable Communities in Appalachia Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of “This Land Is Home to Me”* as an illustrative example, the article will show how an attentive, listening magisterium at the local level can help address ecological issues from the grass roots as well as liberate women from the range of contexts that keep them in positions of inferiority and oppression.

Ecology and Women in the Christian Tradition

Christian feminist theology is a complex field that, generally speaking, involves a concern that Christian theology has been written in a way that privileges male experience and patriarchal patterns of thought as well as social and ecclesial systems. Indeed, God is often considered to be male if only in an implicit way through traditional language such as “Father”; so the question becomes, “Is there room for women in this model of theology?” Feminist theologians insist that theological formulations and epistemological baselines need to be addressed if women are to be given full consideration in all areas of theology and social life. Thus a major emphasis in most theological writings of our time includes the need to consider women’s experience and theological formulations within, as Celia Deane-Drummond puts it, “egalitarian social arrangements.” This approach indicates that feminist consciousness is not simply a question of replacing patriarchy with matriarchy but with replacing patriarchy with more just and egalitarian arrangements that benefit the full scope of humanity. Feminist theologians argue that this is both a practical and an epistemological issue, for traditional models of society and the methods of theology must be expanded.

Of course, what counts as “women’s experience” is a thorny issue. As Deane-Drummond points out, “A sharp critique by conservative women and men is that
feminists do not recognize the experience and views of ordinary women who are quite content to be part of social structures where males take responsibility and are dominant." Whatever one’s view on the matter, it is clear that women’s voices and experiences ought to be heard and considered in theological matters. Taken seriously, this will affect how we see and interpret theological concepts.

For example, if we are to take feminist theology seriously, we will need to think of Trinity in egalitarian and inclusive terms. We will need to stress the feminine images of God as well as the male so that the entire human community sees itself as bound up with the unending love of God. We will also need to reread the biblical texts with a view to unearthing more inclusive models that can assist our theological understanding and our search for truth. These endeavors have been taken up by many feminist theologians because, to put it simply, they are concerned that “Western culture has been dominated by male social structures and male values which encourage detachment and separation, rather than involvement and integration.”

Concern about domination and separation has led many writers to link the oppression of women with that of the earth. Many feminist writers maintain that the dominance in society of men over women is similar to the dominance of humanity over creation. The contention, therefore, is that in order to address the ecological crisis, we need also to address the inequality that exists between men and women. Many believe that attention to women’s experience can not only help create a more just society but can also provide a vital starting point for egalitarian responses to the ecological crisis.

In concrete terms, for example, in many countries around the globe, it is frequently women who farm the land but yet who lack input or control over environmental policies or strategies that affect their working life or on the ways in which they make a living from the land. Overcoming sexist attitudes toward women in society can help correct an overly narrow method of addressing environmental issues. The work of Rosemary Radford Ruether gives us much to think about in this regard.

Catholic Voices on Women and the Environment: Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether is a prolific scholar who has become known as an ecofeminist, the title affirmed and given to those who study the interconnectedness between the role and status of women and that of the environment. Central to ecofeminist concerns are four claims:

1. the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are interconnected;
2. these connections must be uncovered in order to understand both the oppression of women and the oppression of nature;
3. feminist analysis must include ecological insights; and
4. a feminist perspective must be part of any proposed ecological solutions.
Radford Ruether develops an account of how women’s roles have traditionally been to serve the needs of men, and she widens this concern to include a critique of deep ecology and other approaches to environmental consciousness. For Radford Ruether, ecofeminism is connected to the basic inequality that exists between men and women in patriarchal culture. Inequality exists on cultural, symbolic, and socioeconomic levels and is mirrored in the ways in which the environment has been considered and treated.

The connection between the status of women and the status of the environment is made first and foremost on a cultural symbolic level. For Radford Ruether, patriarchal culture has painted a picture of women as being more intrinsically connected to nature or as being on the “nature” side of the nature/culture binary. This is shown, she says, “in the way in which women have been identified with the body, earth, sex, the flesh in its mortality, weakness and ‘sin-proneness,’ vis-à-vis a construction of masculinity identified with spirit, mind, and sovereign power over both women and nature.”

The second level of ecofeminist considerations goes beyond the cultural symbolic level to include socioeconomic considerations. Domination of women’s bodies and work is believed to be interconnected with the exploitation of land, water, and animals: If societies justify the exploitation of women and their work, so too do they justify exploitation of land and the environment. Thus, these two become interiorized, and exploitation of women, animals, land, water, and resources becomes a normal part of patriarchal society and its “cosmovision.” As such, Radford Ruether believes that we ought not to maintain that “anthropocentrism” is a universalizable term. Instead, she maintains that the extent to which we may or may not be promoting anthropocentrism in our dealings with the cosmos depends on questions of class, gender, race, and culture.

Put simply, “All humans do not dominate nature equally, view themselves as over nature or benefit from such domination.” Rather, what tends to happen in society is that elite men dominate women and the environment in diverse ways and create hierarchies in different contexts depending on the circumstances. The result is that we find systems of domination in various parts of the world wherein whites are dominating blacks, landowners are dominating tenants, ruling classes are dominating slaves, men are dominating women, human nature is dominating nonhuman nature. This is the point at which ecofeminism begins to take shape. Hence, Radford Ruether argues strongly that ecofeminist analysis needs to be integrated with considerations of gender, class, race, and socioeconomic issues.

But there is a distinction to be made between feminists and how they link their agendas with ecology. According to Radford Ruether, there are two main branches of ecofeminism: social ecofeminists and essentialist ecofeminists. The former group maintains that the link between the status of women and the earth is the result of a social ideology constructed by patriarchal culture that justifies and corroborates the oppression of women and the earth. Both are seen as property or as something that is owned in some respect. The central aim and concern of ecofeminism,
therefore, is to deconstruct this dualism along with the tendency to treat women and the earth as property. For Radford Ruether, this view needs to be overcome not by separating women and the earth from men, but by calling “men as much as women to overcome the myth of separation and learn to commune with nature as our common biotic community.”

The second branch of ecofeminism identified by Radford Ruether is essentialist ecofeminism. This group maintains that there is a deep truth about women that must be recognized in society: namely, that women are life givers, birth givers, and sustainers of life. Some essentialist ecofeminists hold that the “sacred female,” the Goddess, must be revered; similarly, women are encouraged to connect with their innate, life-giving powers. Some feminists are skeptical of essentializing claims made in this manner, suggesting that maintaining a male/female binary does not mitigate the fundamental problems posed by dualistic ways of thinking.

Several insights can nonetheless be attributed to ecofeminist thought. First, it is clear that ecofeminism must be characterized by reflection not just on gender and sex but also with regard to class, social arrangements, and the poor. Second, there is also a need to recognize that there might be plural spiritualities at play in various concepts of ecofeminism. Furthermore, other traditions and methods of study need to be included in our ecological reflections so that a common response to the ecological crisis might be found, albeit using differing methodologies or pathways of analysis. Moreover, Radford Ruether points out how a central concern of ecofeminism must be the poor and the status of women in poorer regions of the globe—for ecofeminist considerations are not simply limited to Western conceptualizations. As she puts it,

“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 underlies and sustains natural processes and struggles against the excesses of the powerful while reaching out to the victimized to create communities of mutual flourishing.”

Still, finding this vision of divine presence will require careful analysis and consideration of how Catholic theology conceptualizes the divine being, spirituality, and Trinity. As Radford Ruether puts it, “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.” In this sense, “God is neither male nor anthropomorphic.”

Rather, God should be seen as an everlasting divine being from which diversity and coexistence flow. God is the great sustainer and life giver who shows us what life in communion is all about: interdependency, coexistence, mutual respect, and love. To use Radford Ruether’s words, God is the one that “enables us to overcome the distortions that threaten healthy relations.” Such an understanding of God
has led some ecofeminist theologians to reconsider how we view the Trinity as the eternal life-sustaining model of interdependence and relationality. Radford Ruether cites Ivone Gebara as a leading voice in this regard.

**Unity, Diversity, and Trinity: Ivone Gebara**

Although many Christians associate the Trinity with oneness, perfect harmony, and collaboration, the theologian and philosopher Ivone Gebara argues that our notions of Trinity have become hazy and distant. She suggests that we need to locate trinitarian thought more closely with our human experiences and existence. In other words, we need to see the Trinity as “diversity and unity, existing and interrelating in a unique and single movement of continual creativity.”

Gebara does not wish to deny the mystery of the Trinity but to bring it closer to our own experiences in the created world. For example, if we see ourselves as Trinity, we note that we are made up of the complexities of our individual stories and lives but we are also one with the created order: the earth. This is why ecological consciousness is so important. We exist within ourselves, but we also exist in relationship to the universe: plants, rivers, mountains, animals, and life processes. For Gebara, “This vision gives us a new worldview and a different anthropology, on the basis of which we see ourselves as persons who are of the earth and of the cosmos, participants in the extraordinary process of life’s evolution.” Such points have been echoed by ecological theologians and scholars of theology and science, including John Haught, Ilia Delio, and Elizabeth Johnson.

Furthermore, if we see the diversity in unity aspect of the Trinity as being an integral part of our lives and of our existence, we can also see that the subjugation of the earth, the poor, women, slaves, and those who are suffering in some way can no longer be justified because their experiences are part and parcel of the makeup of our shared human existence. In addition, we come to the view that the frailty of our human condition is also included in our struggle to be human in the fullest sense of the word. Gebara encourages us to look beyond a view of the Trinity that sees God as distant or remote, and instead to turn toward an image of God that is located within the very stuff of life and its complexities.

As a result, viewing the Trinity as part of our earthly relationships and experiences initiates an ethic that is aware of oppression and seeks to entice us along a path of faith to leave behind crude and highly patriarchal, hierarchical, materialistic, class-biased understandings of God. It locates the Trinity in the very fabric of society and refutes any attempt to make one set of experiences the norm for all of humanity. In this sense, dualisms that set women, the earth, or the poor apart from our ethical deliberations are not considered to be a part of faith in God or of the trinitarian vision of the world.

Critics might object that Gebara’s approach de-deifies the Trinity; to the contrary, Gebara’s approach is to bring us closer to the divine creativity and
diversity in unity that is reflected within the trinitarian life in order to promote an ecological ethic that challenges the structures that keep various groups, including women, in positions of inferiority or subjugation. Of course, listening to the stories of all oppressed groups in society makes the search for truth all the more difficult, but such listening enables a creativity that lies at the heart of the Trinity and at the heart of our human existence, which brings forth a fountain of knowledge about who we are and how we should live in harmony with all that exists. And this can only be a positive step forward in the search for what is truly human and just.

Similarly to the Trinity, therefore, our lives are made up of a shared nature that is often experienced differently depending on sex, social class, and other factors. This foundational complexity and diversity of experience explains why ecofeminism is so important: it seeks to relate the subjugation of women with that of the earth in order to create a dialogue that is based on equity, fairness, and justice in the fullest sense of the word—irrespective of, yet attentive to, the intricacies of social position, gender, class, and race.

**Engaging Ecofeminism within the Catholic Church**

Inclusive theological formulations are important for deconstructing the dualisms that are at play in our ecological consciousness. An additional, major concern for the continuation and potential success of ecofeminism is the need to integrate its agenda into the Church. How might this be possible, given the diversity of feminist ecological methods and approaches? Whose approach do we take as normative? Which approach represents women in a universalist sense? Who should compromise and, perhaps, change their approach? Is the Western model superior to that of the global South? These are important questions for discernment. Nevertheless, we can make some suggestions of how the Church might proceed to take ecofeminism seriously.

The first point to note is perhaps the need to move away from attempts to find a universalizable approach to ecofeminism or ecofeminist principles. The complexities and diversities of women’s experience and of course of ecological concerns are such that the task of finding a “one size fits all” principle is impossible. Instead, since ecofeminism focuses on the task of liberating women and the earth in specific contexts where oppression is experienced, we could begin by adopting a “hermeneutic of difference.”

Many feminist and liberation theologians have adopted an approach that does not rely merely on a theoretical epistemological base but rather incorporates theory into a praxis-based methodology. The advantage is that deliberations about women can be understood in relation to the actual experience of women in their specific historical contexts, while remaining open to the critique that traditional theories provide. In this way, many feminist theologians have succeeded in shifting theolog-
ical considerations from an imperialist approach or a universalist approach toward a more experienced-based approach, where the actual lives and experiences of women can be considered in diverse ways.

A theology that is based on experience and praxis must learn to value difference. This means that, for example, in terms of feminist theology, exclusively white feminist accounts cannot become the norm for understanding women’s experience. As Linda Hogan explains, “White women’s experience and praxis has [been] ‘honored’ with the badge of normativity, while women of colour have been further marginalized, in the name of justice. Such a whitewashing of experience has not gone unchallenged. Womanists have demanded that white feminists own this history of oppression.” Ecofeminism, including its social and essentialist formulations, must of necessity be a capacious endeavor.

Calling for a “hermeneutic of difference” need not necessarily threaten orthodoxy or objectivity, but such an approach values difference: it encourages people to begin to reflect morally from where they are, from the grass roots of their own experience. This approach cannot and does not begin with the assumption of sameness or uniformity. Instead, it embraces the complexities of diverse views and experiences of oppression, and it must respond to a plethora of diverging experiences. Ecclesially, one might ask, what would this look like within the church in practice? And where might such practices currently be found?

The Appalachian Bishops: An Example of Working from the Grass Roots

In 1995, the Bishops of Appalachia in the United States issued At Home in the Web of Life: A Pastoral Message on Sustainable Communities in Appalachia Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of “This Land Is Home to Me.” It is an example of how the ordinary magisterium has enabled the story of a community to be told and has then set about addressing some of its most pressing ecological, social, and political issues. Some of the most notable features of the document include its stress on viewing Appalachia—an area rich in coal deposits—not simply as a “deposit of resources” but as a community that is called to sustainable living in sacred cooperation with “land and forest and water and air, indeed with all Earth’s holy creatures.”

The bishops note in particular that they wish to address the “culture of death” that appears to be prevalent in Appalachia. They argue that industrialization and exploitation of their coal mines and natural resources have brought about a mentality that needs to be changed from a culture of death to a culture of life. The bishops outline how this transformation must take place at every level of their community, including ecological, political, social, and relational levels. In particular, they emphasize the need to address how social inequalities and the exploitation of land affects women and their intimate relationships, stating:
This same struggle of all society between a culture of death and a culture
of life is also played out at the intimate level in personal relationships.
Here the culture of death invades our very souls through addictions and
co-dependencies, often leading to abuse and violence, especially against
women and children.\textsuperscript{32}

The Appalachian bishops point out that in many cases the practical wisdom that
women possess in relation to farming the land and fostering the local economy must
be harnessed and disseminated locally in order to protect the dignity of women and
that of the environment from oppression and exploitation. By telling the story of
Appalachia and drawing principled conclusions, the bishops put forward a compelling case. The text is worth citing in its entirety here:

\begin{quote}
In the judgment of many people, a sustainable society would build primarily on the rooted local informal economy, all in communion with the local ecosystem.

Often this is called the “social economy,” in contrast to the global “market economy,” though the local economy is itself a market. Traditionally in most cultures, this local social market has been rooted in women’s economic activities.

There is a need, we believe, for various regions within Appalachia, perhaps on the county level, to begin exploring the alternative development of sustainable communities with emphasis on the social economy of women.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

In light of the stories and experiences of women in Appalachia, the bishops outline some of the ways in which the economy, land, and women can be liberated and encouraged to continue working in a sustainable and life-giving way. They stress the need for sustainable agriculture, forestry, ownership paradigms, technologies, cultures, families, and churches.\textsuperscript{34} In addition, they advocate microfinancing as a way of empowering local businesses that demonstrate ecological responsibility; and they note that many of these businesses are run locally by women who are poor.\textsuperscript{35}

This document shows us that teachings from the ordinary magisterium need not be focused solely on finding universal, timeless, essentialized principles that might make us more attuned to the needs of women and the environment. Rather, it demonstrates that listening and reflecting on local wisdom and experiences can provide us with a source of knowledge from which we can proceed to live thoughtfully—and perhaps even sustainably—in a plethora of contexts. This enables a diversity of views and experiences to be considered so that our ecological awareness and our treatment of women are attuned to the specific contexts in which women live and work.

The final sections of the document are also interesting, for the bishops thank all those who “took part in the listening sessions in preparation for the writing of
the pastoral document,” and they underline the fact that this listening experience has led them to hope and to believe in the “spiritual depth and creativity of the people of Appalachia.”

This process of listening at a local level is a prime example of ecofeminist epistemology. It is vital to achieving the kind of theological and ecological awareness that can concretely benefit communities. We need to foster dialogue and reciprocal exchange at the level of the local Church. We need, of course, also to make judgments and recommendations for action. But, as Kevin Kelly suggests, “They must be the best we can do at the time,” even if they are only provisional and “open to further dialogue and refinement.”

A key point here is that having an open mind and an awareness of the status of women and that of the environment does not mean a blank mind devoid of convictions, nor does it mean relativism. But, as Kelly notes, “we do need to see ourselves involved in an ongoing search for truth.”

In his view, that “does not mean jettisoning the truth as we currently see it but it might mean re-examining and re-thinking the truth so that we can appreciate its richness even more fully in the light of where we stand today in the ongoing story of human culture and civilization.” This is what is needed in the Church if we are to respond to and adequately consider the issues surrounding the degradation of the environment and the situations of women worldwide.

Of course, part of such an endeavor will be seen by some as a threat to the universal Church. Although in principle the Church acknowledges that the local Church is an expression of the universal Church, there continues to be a concern that when a local Church takes up local issues and addresses them under the supervision of ordinary magisterium that it might wish to become completely “self-sufficient.”

There might also be concern that such an epistemology challenges the teachings on conscience contained in *Veritatis Splendor*. However, in spite of these concerns, it is clear that the diversity of women’s experience is such that only a “creative hermeneutic” can adequately address the problem. This does not necessarily mean a rejection of principles; rather, it requires us to uncover in local domains a source of wisdom that can be used to liberate women and the earth from the destructive forces that keep both in positions of inferiority and subjugation.

We must also bear in mind that norms or principles formulated at the universal level within the Church will be general: their application requires imagination and creativity in order to be applied to and make sense in specific contexts, regions, geographical spheres, and locations. It is more accurate, therefore, to see ecofeminism not so much as a threat to orthodoxy or objectivity but to see it as an exercise of practical reason in the Thomistic sense: an attempt to locate connections between universal truths and local contexts.

What we aim to find, then, is not absolute truth but the best estimation of what is required in the situation given the context-specific information that we have. The content of the ethical criteria will subsequently be a constant dialogue between scripture, tradition, reason, theological interpretations, and experiences at...
all levels of society and in all disciplines. This makes the search for truth all the more difficult, of course, but it also makes it all the more authentic.

What we need now, however, is to convince Christians that ecofeminism is indeed a field worthy of our consideration and reflections and to enable the local Church to attempt to listen to the voices that are living within its domain in order to appreciate the connection between feminism and ecology more fully. We need to allow the creative Spirit of the Trinity to flow freely within our Church so that the marginalization of women and the earth can be adequately addressed and considered. If we attempt this, we might then be empowered to respond to the unanswered needs of the human and nonhuman communities of our time.

Notes


2. See Clare Palmer, “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,” in *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, ed. Ian Ball, Margaret Goodall, Clare Palmer, and John Reader (London: SPCK, 1992), 68ff. Palmer argues that the term “stewardship” does not feature consistently throughout the biblical texts. She also points out that where it is used in the Book of Daniel 1:11, for example, it gives us a less than benevolent view of the term “steward.” Here the term “steward” means “man over the household,” who answers only to his superior. Palmer argues that there is a problem here in the sense that anthropocentricism and male dominion seem to reemerge. See also Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics* (London: Polity Press, 2005), 28. Curry argues that “stewardship” implies that the earth needs humans to look after it.


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 54.

7. Ibid., 55.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 230.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 237.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid. Even within this genre of feminism there are those who emphasize the need to worship the Goddess as the sacred female and those who maintain that men need also to embrace the Goddess as "Divine Feminine." The central goal of the latter view is that men need to seek and to find the lost Goddess within themselves.
21. Ibid., 106.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 18.
26. Ibid., 20.
29. Ibid., 433.
30. The Appalachian Bishops, At Home in the Web of Life: A Pastoral Message on Sustainable Communities in Appalachia Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of “This Land Is Home to Me,” (Webster Springs, WV: Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 1995).
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., conclusion.
37. Kevin Kelly, 50 Years Receiving Vatican II: A Personal Odyssey (Dublin: Columba Press, 2012), 133.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
41. John Paul II, (1993), http://www.vatican.va, no. 55. The teachings on conscience contained in this document claim that a “creative hermeneutic” can lead to a rejection of negative precepts set out by the hierarchy of the Church.