

# Conservative Judaism

Vol. XLIV, No. 1

Fall 1991

A Publication of The Rabbinical Assembly

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and The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

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## ON OUR COVER

*Minhagim Book*, printed in Amsterdam in 1723, features this woodcut for *Tu Bishvat* (Arbor Day).

*Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.*

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# Western Christianity in Ecofeminist Perspective

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*Janet Conway*

Janet Conway's paper links environmental issues, women's issues and the history and evolution of Western religion. Though her religious base is within the Roman Catholic Church, the key concepts she presents are equally challenging to Jews and Judaism. Eco-feminists view both Judaism and Christianity as patriarchal traditions which pose important questions for women and for environment. (See Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai* for a current Jewish statement.)

Women scholars have been writing about women, environment and religion for well over ten years. They assert that "eco-theology", meshing concern for the earth with concern for human well-being, requires a substantial transformation in traditional religion. Most Jewish readers may not accept the descriptions of Western religion—and the implications for Judaism—presented here, but the eco-feminist view is moving into the mainstream of current religious discussion. Jewish theology is obligated to confront and to respond to it.

*The Editorial Board*

Our current ecological crisis is of global dimensions, with unprecedented impact. Never before in Earth's history has the environment been changing at such an alarming rate. The dark prospect of planetary death casts its shadow over all lives lived in this last decade of the twentieth century. As moderns,<sup>1</sup> we are unaccustomed to being confronted so clearly with the limits of our control over the world. We are experiencing a cosmic anxiety, as a

<sup>1</sup>I use the term "modern" intentionally, conscious of the ideological critique that has emerged from the third world. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, has pointed out that although "modern" is widely used to designate a universal reality rooted in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, it is in fact a description of Western consciousness, located in the first world, in regions of enormous economic and political power. The characteristics of a modern

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weary and abused planet becomes alarmingly sluggish in rebounding from the effects of human exploitation.

The global threat to the environment is a deeply religious issue. In its impact on the life of the world, on human and non-human existence as we know it, the crisis confronts the community of faith with deeply disturbing questions about life and death, meaning, hope, salvation and redemption. It raises questions about the existence, nature and power of God, and the relationship of God to the created world, and to human beings as part of that order. It also begs questions of the nature of salvation: From what are we saved or to be saved? Do we need saving? Who does the saving, and how? Who gets saved, and why? What does salvation look like? What does its absence look like? How are human beings involved?

As ecologists study the crisis, another set of disturbing questions emerges to confront Christians. The current environmental crisis, although global in scope, is deeply rooted in the values and beliefs undergirding Western civilization. Christianity, through its unparalleled role in the historical development of this civilization and its ethos, bears ominous, although not exclusive, responsibility for the threat to planetary survival. For this reason too, the ecological crisis demands critical theological reflection. The implications of this assertion for Christianity are immense. If Christian faith has implicitly or explicitly sanctioned the destruction of the world, grave questions are raised as to the adequacy of that belief-system.

### Why a Feminist Perspective?

In developing an ecologically-informed critique of Christianity, I depend upon critical feminist theory in ecology, theology, christology, ethics and the social sciences. There are several compelling reasons for this approach. The first and most obvious is that I am a feminist, clearly and painfully aware of the reality and power of patriarchy and its unholy permeation of human life, including religious life. I am a woman with a fervent desire for the divine, and profoundly steeped in the language, stories, signs and symbols of my religious tradition. As an equally impassioned feminist seeking just inclusion in my community of faith, I am extremely uncomfortable with many of the dominant modes of thought and practice in traditional Christianity. Nevertheless, I place myself firmly within the tradition as a committed Roman Catholic Christian, simply because its stories have power for me and I am hungry for

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world-view, then, are more precisely attributed to most residents of the Western world and small (but powerful) elites in non-Western nations who share in the economic privilege and cultural ideology of Western civilization. My statement here of modern mentality does not presume universal significance, but describes a consciousness born and bred in North America and Europe. This discussion reflects my rootedness in Western culture and my concern with the pathologies and promise of that tradition. Given the power of Western civilization over the current world order, however, and the near universal presence of Christianity, I think connections can be postulated that might have relevance beyond the European-North American context. Conclusions, however, remain the prerogative of theorists committed in those contexts.

life in the community that has so contributed to my personhood. Distorted by patriarchy and used shamelessly to legitimate the oppression of women, there remain within the stories and the ongoing life of the church glimpses of the gracious God/ess<sup>2</sup> of life, passionately engaged in the creative unfolding of the universe, in the communal struggle for redemption and in the wonder and suffering of my own life.

While the stories of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have revelatory significance for me and for the faith community of which I am a member, the activity of the divine is not limited to these stories or their largely male heroes. Neither is the creative and redemptive work of God/ess limited to the stories of women within or outside this tradition, as important as the recovery of those stories is. An ecological consciousness demands that we affirm the entire cosmos, human and non-human life, animate and inanimate existence, as the proper location of divine presence, passionate concern and source of theological insight. In some tension with this often ambiguous non-anthropocentric holism, a feminist commitment insists on attention to particularity, especially as experienced by women as particular, embodied human beings existing in particular socio-historical contexts under particular material conditions.

### Ecology and Feminism in Critical Partnership: Ecofeminism

Feminists and many ecologists<sup>3</sup> identify the sources of both environmental destruction and the oppression of women as rooted in the global phenomenon known as patriarchy. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has defined patriarchy as "a socio-cultural system in which a few men have power over other men, women, children, slaves and colonized people".<sup>4</sup> Fiorenza's definition is useful in drawing attention to the race and class hierarchies that are part of the patriarchal infrastructure. This understanding of patriarchy informs this paper. It is not an exhaustive definition descriptive of every cultural experience. Without saying so, Fiorenza's definition is descriptive of Western patriarchy. I would suggest that there are many patriarchies which look different in particular cultures and polities, socio-economic, ethnic, racial and religious groups, and in different historical epochs. But an essential and ubiquitous pattern transcending the particularities of time and place has been

<sup>2</sup>I am following Rosemary Radford Reuther's use of this unpronounceable term for the divine in an effort to employ gender-inclusive God language.

<sup>3</sup>There are many schools of ecological thought. I would draw the reader's attention to two whose analyses of the ecological crisis are more broadly inclusive and, in my view, more adequate in their understanding of the social and ideological context that has produced and that is perpetuating the modern ecological crisis. They are "deep ecology" and "social ecology". See Bill Devall and George Sessions, editors, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith, 1985), and Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p. 29.

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the domination of women by men. Although this common theme manifests itself distinctly in diverse sociological contexts, the exploitation of women and their productive and reproductive labor by a male-dominated social order fundamentally undergirds the patriarchal project in all places and periods currently accessible to us.<sup>5</sup>

Both women and the natural world are victims of patriarchal patterns of domination. In order to understand the genesis, development and ongoing legitimating of the current geocide, one must acknowledge and understand the dynamics of patriarchy. In this, feminist analysis is crucial. Insofar as those who wish to protect the earth from further destruction and those who wish to enhance the lived experience of women both aim to dismantle structures of patriarchal oppression, the political agenda of deep ecologists and feminists converge.

Patriarchal thought patterns are characterized by a pervasive dualism that creates and sustains a series of false dichotomies which are ranked hierarchically. Among the oppositions deeply embedded in Western thought are the male/female and the culture/nature dualisms, with the former being superior to the latter and, by virtue of divine or natural law, destined to rule over and control the latter. Women and nature have been closely identified as part of the underside of the same dualism. The exploitation of each has been legitimated by the same line of argument within the same absolute hierarchy of values. The destruction of the environment is a feminist issue because the same forces that legitimate and enforce the domination of women have validated the unlimited exploitation of nature, and are now of such demonic proportion that they threaten the very continuation of life on this planet. The transformation of patriarchy is crucial to the survival of the planet, and is at the heart of the feminist project.

Ecology and feminism need each other, politically, practically and theoretically. The powers invested in the exploitation of the earth and in the continued repression of women are mighty and wealthy. Short- and long-term alliances among counter-cultural, grassroots organizations are essential for any impact on the social order. Ecologists and feminists need one another to

<sup>5</sup>Although much has been said and written about a pre-patriarchal matriarchal social order, scholars remain divided about its existence. Certainly there have been small groups within various patriarchal cultures that have sought to live alternatively with varying degrees of success and survival. Among the groups that come to mind are some of the Christian communities that sprung up in the first few decades following Jesus' death. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has done ground-breaking work in her exploration of early Christian origins. See note 3. Current historical research of goddess worship and earth religions is uncovering a largely unknown underside of dominant patriarchal cultures, as is the burgeoning interest in tribal societies and indigenous peoples. While it is counter-productive and naive to romanticize these peoples or movements as "feminist" in the modern sense of the term, it is important to reclaim such stories as part of an expanding canon of women's liberation. Acknowledging the presence of such trajectories does not undermine the feminist understanding of the patriarchy as an insidious and ubiquitous phenomenon deeply destructive to all of life and particularly the lives of women, the poor, non-white peoples, indigenous peoples, physically challenged persons, children, and those "others" beyond the pale of ruling class males.

develop strategies, propose solutions and dream alternatives that are both ecologically sustainable and respectful of the integrity of the whole of creation, as well as explicitly attentive to the liberationist agenda within the human community that concerns itself with restructuring reality in favor of women, the poor, people of color, indigenous peoples, gays and lesbians, and other oppressed and marginalized groups. Ecological analysis without a feminist hermeneutic, and feminist theory without an ecological consciousness, are both bound to be inadequate as understandings of reality. Worse, they will be working at cross purposes at a time when the state of the world demands solidarity, albeit a solidarity often rife with political tensions and internal inconsistencies.

For the same reasons, theology needs to be informed by both feminist and ecological analyses. While not exclusively responsible for patriarchy, Christianity in its unparalleled influence over the shape of Western civilization has been an enormous force in its legitimation and amazing resilience. Christianity and patriarchy have been in a mutually reinforcing relationship for these twenty long centuries, and the combination that has proven so destructive to women (and others) now threatens the entire biotic community with annihilation. Christian theologians cannot afford to cover their ears and repeat the time-honored litanies lest those very litanies tip the precarious balance and end the life of the world.

### Women and Nature Under Western Patriarchy

Women and the natural world have been powerfully linked in the Western patriarchal imagination. Despite widely divergent views on women's supposed innate closeness to nature, feminists agree that historically women and nature have been the objects of a similar exploitation due to the pervasive power of dominant patriarchal ideology. The domination of women and earth is connected and mutually reinforcing. It is conceptually embedded in the patriarchal framework of our culture. Marilyn French suggests that male aversion to women and earth can be understood as part of a millennia-long process in which the male has come to understand himself as the true and normative human. This was in opposition to the female whom he came to perceive as a lesser breed of human insofar as she was closely identified with "natural processes" of pregnancy, birth, lactation, menstruation and child-rearing.<sup>6</sup> Women's bodily functions were regarded with suspicion and fear as polluting. Her role in the bearing, rearing and sustaining of the species was judged inferior to the hunting, war-making and political functions of the male. Inherent in this thinking is the subordination of "the natural" (seen as something base) to "the cultural" (seen as the elevated and more truly

<sup>6</sup>Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: Women, Men and Mortality* (New York: Summit Books, 1985). Paraphrased in Michael Zimmerman, "Feminism, Deep Ecology and Environmental Ethics," pp. 24-25.

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human realm). The close identification of woman with nature was convergent with the assumption that her biology made her less than fully human.

In Western civilization, the nature-culture dichotomy and its implications for gender relations can be located within a philosophical tradition in which women and nature have shared the underside of a pervasive hierarchical dualism. This dualism is characterized by the ordering of reality into oppositions, one of which is judged "good," normative and preferable, and the other of which is perceived as lower, inferior, even evil. This kind of thinking has legitimated the hierarchical ordering of society and has determined relations between the sexes and between the human and non-human worlds for the last several millennia. Although conscious commitment to a dualistic philosophy did not flourish in all sectors of Western society throughout its history, it was the dominant paradigm shaping the thought of the educated and powerful, and has been popularized over the last twenty centuries by the Christian church.

Many theorists locate the origins of Western dualistic thinking in late Greek philosophy. Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that after the fourth century B.C.E., a philosophy suspicious of and alienated from the material world began to displace a more optimistic, less conflictual world view. Late Classical thought split reality into aggressive oppositions, rejecting the phenomenal sphere as corrupt and limiting, and identifying the noumenal realm as the real and proper home of the human. The embodied human was regarded as temporarily estranged from "his" more natural environment.<sup>7</sup> The proper object of human existence was to transcend the vile corruption of the flesh, to fix one's visions on that which was beyond and above earthly reality. The spiritual, rational and heavenly as good were defined over against the sominal, emotional and earthly as less-than-good, even evil. This hierarchical ranking of reality found parallel expression in the subordination of women as somehow more bodily, more emotional and more earth-bound than men who by their nature were spiritual, rational and only temporarily alienated from their heavenly home.

The philosophical debasement of the material world (in which nature and the body are prominently included) to the mental, spiritual and/or cultural spheres reflects and legitimates patterns of social domination within the human community.<sup>8</sup> Women as the mediators of embodied human life become the primary symbol of this interface between social domination and the domination of nature. Feminine characteristics are projected onto nature,

<sup>7</sup>My usage of the masculine pronoun is intentional. I wish to highlight the fact that these philosophies of the human were actually philosophies of male humanness that presumed maleness was normative and femaleness was derivative and deformative.

<sup>8</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1988), p. 60, referring to Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1f.: "This (thinking) not only divides the individual into a dualism in which the ruling mind is seen as engaged in struggle to subdue a recalcitrant body, but it also divides society into the same dualism. According to Aristotle's *Politics*, ruling-class Greek males are the natural exemplars of mind or reason, while women, slaves, and barbarians are the naturally servile people who must be subdued and ruled by their 'head'." See also *New Woman New Earth* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1975), pp. 61, 189.



and nature is imaged as female; conversely, women are identified with nature and subject to the exploitation and domination that dualistic thought makes righteous.<sup>9</sup> Woman as the “missing link” between human and non-human, animate and inanimate, becomes the primary representative of “the other,” the antithesis, or the lower principle in patriarchal consciousness. The alienation within the self between body and spirit, between the self and the world, inherent in the hierarchical ordering of society and the subordination of nature to culture, is modelled on a dualistic appropriation of binary sexuality.<sup>10</sup>

### The Anti-Ecological Character of Core Christian Ideas

Although dualism was not originally generated by Christian thinkers, the Church’s commitment to a dualistic understanding of the world, disseminated through its unique broad-based transcultural networks, and made authoritative through its proclaimed power of salvation or damnation over human beings, has had unparalleled impact on the shape of Western consciousness and the structures of Western civilization. In developing a theological position on the ecological crisis, it is imperative that we unpack religion’s role in the degradation of women and earth.

Human attitudes about ecology depend on what human beings think of themselves in relation to the things around them. It is deeply conditioned by beliefs about human destiny and nature, that is, by religion. The broad generalizations which follow do not tell the full story of a two-thousand-year history of Christian attitudes toward the natural world. There are countervailing trends and an ever-present ambiguity even within dominant patterns. These other voices, however, remain peripheral. They do not represent the prevailing theory or practice for most of Christian history, although they do provide a powerful subversive memory for Christians seeking to redeem their tradition. This attempt to name the trajectories within Christianity that have contributed to the modern ecological crisis will help identify the deep theological issues raised by the prospect of planetary death.

Such trajectories are central to the Christian understanding of the nature of God and of humanity, and the relationship that is understood to exist between them. Christianity inherited from Hellenized Judaism a creator God who transcends the world. Unlike the gods of the animistic religions that flourished in the ancient world, this divinity held Himself above and beyond the earth, somehow in charge of the natural processes but aloof from them. In defining themselves over against the religious competition, both Judaism and Christianity at this point in their common history downplayed the natu-

<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth Dodson Gray, “Nature as an Act of Imagination,” in *Woman of Power: A Magazine of Feminism, Spirituality, and Politics* 9 (1988), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>Rcuther and others have maintained that personal and social alienation have been modelled on the sexual dualism. I am not sure we can say, with authority, where the primary dualism resides or if we can so clearly separate it from its tertiary manifestations. My own hunch is that the alienation from the material world is primary, and finds particular socio-cultural expression in the repression of women who have become the living symbols of matter.

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ral world as the focus of divine concern and activity. When the divine is identified as transcendent to the natural world, the natural world is negated as the locus for the divine-human encounter. The natural world becomes less capable of communicating the divine presence, which then makes possible the conception of the non-human world as a merely external and rather superfluous object.<sup>11</sup> In its desire to root out pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the survival of non-human life and inanimate earth. It established the human's monopoly on spirit in this world and abolished the ancient inhibitions governing treatment of the natural world.<sup>12</sup>

Made in the divine image, human beings with their eternal soul shared in the transcendence of God. In keeping with the tenets of Greek humanism, the true home of the Christian soul was in heaven, in the company of God, bodiless and earthless. In imagining the human as primarily a spiritual being with an eternal destiny, Christian anthropology placed the human above all other forms of created life. In this, Christianity reinforced a hierarchical notion of reality inherited from late Greek philosophy. Similar themes are found running throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, beginning with the Creation epic of Genesis 1 in which the human is the climax of God's creative activity. Similarly, having humanity linked to a transcendent divinity in an exclusive covenantal relationship erodes the self-identity of human beings as integral members of the earth community with a primary commitment to their earthly home. In the words of Thomas Berry: "We thought we were elevating the human when in reality we were alienating ourselves from the only context in which human life has any satisfying meaning."<sup>13</sup>

The Greek definition of man as a rational animal implied the inherent superiority of humans. The animal nature of human beings was identified as brutish, and in need of conquest by reason. Rationality was enshrined as the key to human superiority over animals, and the measurement of human nobility. These arguments often implicitly ground the thought of those who hold to a human-centered universe. Rationality is rarely acknowledged as only one capacity of many characterizing life on the planet. Rationality may be important to human life, but other species get along fine without it.<sup>14</sup>

An extension of this dualistic hierarchical anthropology was the systematic organization of reality into "the great chain of being." This deeply ingrained world view held persuasive power over Western consciousness for most of its history. It is rooted in the Christian imaging of reality as a vast all-embracing cosmological pyramid with a transcendent God at the apex and inanimate

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988), pp. 113-114, 149.

<sup>12</sup>Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, edited by Ian G. Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973), pp. 24-25.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Berry, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>14</sup>Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature", *Environmental Ethics* 3/3 (Fall 1981), p. 215.

matter at the base. Rising above dead matter were the plants, animals, generic Man and the angels who, like God, were incorporeal. Within these broad strata, further distinctions were drawn so that within "Man" children ranked below adults, and women below men. Pagans and Jews ranked below "believers," poor and illiterate below wealthy and educated, and so on, with details adapted to reflect the social order in any given historical setting and period. Elizabeth Dodson Gray claims that all of us raised in this civilization have unavoidably been socialized into this perception of reality.<sup>15</sup> Even when God was displaced with the Enlightenment, and the schema challenged by the theory of evolution, "man" remained at the apex as the most "evolved" of species, and is unquestioningly accepted as the teleological culmination of the whole process of evolution.<sup>16</sup> The great chain of being, far from being an immutable description of a divinely ordained social order, is a social construct legitimating time-honored patterns of domination organized hierarchically.

Consistent with this dualistic hierarchical anthropology were the traditional Christian affirmations of salvation as other-worldly and out-of-body. The purpose of Christian life, then, was to endure this bodily, earth-bound life in hopeful anticipation of the life that was to come, a life in the spirit in heaven. Within Christianity, locating the salvific process within the human person was concomitant with these trends. The great acts of redemption happened internally, between God and the soul.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the political machinations of various churchmen, there was little consideration of the socio-political realm as the locus of salvation or proper focus of Christian energy. Even less was the biotic community thought to be worthy of theological reflection.

Even in Judaism, where the focus of salvation lay much more with the people Israel than with any one individual, the locus of God's redemptive activity was human history. The natural world simply provided a stage on which God performed His mighty acts and the salvation history of Israel was worked out. In history's displacement of nature as the primary concern of God, the Jewish-Christian tradition became deeply anthropocentric. Human beings were of value to God the Creator over and above inert earth and dumb animals. This tendency is seen to its natural conclusion in the incarnation of God in a human male. The central drama of salvation became a person-centered event in Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>Mainstream Christianity never went to the extreme of officially sanctioning such individualized, internalized religion at the expense of the faith community. However, continual emphasis on the heroic struggles of such lionized individuals as Paul, Augustine and Luther, as well as the Ascetics and Saints, served to reinforce the notion that the primary activity of the divine occurred within the human person. In addition, the internal conflicts of key Christian thinkers have deeply affected the tone and content of Christian attitudes toward embodied, earthly existence and, by extension, toward the natural world.

<sup>18</sup>William Thompson, "Dappled and Deep-Down Things: Meditation on Christian Ecological Trends", *Horizons*, 14 (Spring, 1987), p. 67.

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Traditional Christian notions of creation have functioned to demean the natural world; dominant images and theologies of redemption have been no better. One significant theme throughout Christian reflection on salvation is that of apocalyptic millennialism. This Christian doctrine of an infrahistorical millennial age of peace, justice and prosperity envisioned the final deliverance of humanity in a great cosmic cataclysm. The apocalyptic millennialism of Biblical religion created hope for future fulfillment beyond the human, earth-bound condition. It distracted human attention from the present, from the real joys and suffering of embodied, human and non-human experience on earth. Berry argues that millennial expectations have contributed substantially to the destruction of the planet:

Just as the doctrine of divine transcendence took away the pervasive divine presence to the natural world, so the millennial vision of a blessed future left all present modes of existence in a degraded status. All things were in an unholy condition. Everything needed to be transformed.<sup>19</sup>

Visions of apocalyptic deliverance absolved the human community from any concern for their earthly home. It was theirs to exploit until Judgment Day. As the earth and its non-human residents did not figure in the plan of salvation, humans did not consider themselves accountable for the tattered condition of the natural world.

In keeping with the conviction that the natural world was in a state of corruption and needful of transformation was the Western church's early embrace of technology. Lynn White holds that, in contrast to Eastern Christianity, Latin Christianity held technological advance to be morally good and evidence of a sophisticated spirituality. "Man" had been given the earth to dominate, and technological advancement was perceived as part of an effort to make an unruly world more orderly and therefore pleasing to God, the Cosmic Organizer. Christian presuppositions favored human efforts to manipulate the natural order for human gain. This tendency was present from the early middle ages, although only recently has it been critiqued as a major ideological root of the modern ecological crisis.<sup>20</sup>

### Christian Roots of Women's Domination

As with the natural world, attitudes toward women were rife with ambiguity and paradox. The natural world was revered as God's creation and therefore "good" and the obvious source of life and sustenance. At the same time, however, it was feared as chaotic and demonic or exploited and demeaned as inert matter. Women were subject to a similar psychic schism in a number of ways.

In the dualistic thinking of the Greco-Roman world into which Christiani-

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Berry, *op cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup>Lynn White, "Continuing the Conversation," pp. 58-59.

ty was born, women were identified with the lower sphere in opposition to the normative human male. As discussed above, this placed women in the company of matter, flesh, nature and the emotions, over against spirit, soul, culture and rationality. The paradox within this system was that woman, for all her fleshliness, remained human with the capacity to rationalize. Likewise, for all his soulfulness and intellect, man remained embodied. Woman was never denied a soul (although the matter was debated!) and therefore, in some ways, shared the grandiosity of being human. The notion of humanity itself was radically split into a hierarchy of warring opposites, and woman invariably came to be identified with the lower duality, despite the obvious contradictions introduced by her rationality. Both men and women, inescapably, are of nature and of culture. "Culture" itself is a cultural category and cannot be thought of as existing separately from "nature". Yet, despite such internal incoherence, these gendered dichotomies became entrenched as authoritative expressions of reality.

Essential to this schizophrenic anthropology was a rejection of the body and its functions. Embodiment was regarded as an unfortunate and temporary condition that would eventually be sloughed off as the human ascended to "his" more "natural" sphere. Singled out for particular contempt was the sexual, as that which was especially bestial and in fundamental conflict with full humanness. This radical rejection of a single bodily function or characteristic made little sense: the body's needs to sleep, eat, drink, defecate and exercise were left unexamined while the sexual was isolated as somehow "closer" to the earth and to the human's unmanageable "animal nature". By association, women's capacity to menstruate, give birth, and lactate were subject to the same fear and suspicion, while men's sleeping, eating and defecating were non-issues. Women's "more overt" sexuality aligned them with nature despite their evident humanness and capacity for rationality.

This radically dualistic, sexist and internally incoherent anthropology undergirded traditional Christianity's assertions about life and death, good and evil, creation and redemption. It informed the church's articulation of God and Christ, of theology and ethics, and contributed to a world view that was to shape Western civilization for many centuries. More particularly, it found historical expression in specific social structures. The subordination of the body and the suppression of sexuality offered philosophical legitimacy for the social subordination of women. However, the acknowledgment of women's rationality and, in Christian terms, ensoulment, seemed to demand some historical space. These contradictions were somewhat reconciled in the development of the ascetic ideal. In celibacy, self-denial, mortification and strict discipline, the body's baser urges could be kept at bay. In the institutionalized suppression of sexuality, it became possible for women to attain equal spiritual status with men. Rosemary Ruether maintains that beneath the rejection of corporeality lies the fear of mortality. Western attempts to subdue the body reveal a deep fear of its

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revolt, and its power to corrupt the soul. The Christian project, at least in the West, has been an attempt to sever the soul's connection with biological existence, and all that engenders and sustains that existence came to be viewed as suspect.<sup>21</sup> This has obvious implications for attitudes toward the natural world as the source, sustenance and setting of embodied human life.

Christian attitudes towards the body and sex have an "ecological edge" to them.<sup>22</sup> The concept of the body and its functions, particularly those connected with the sexual, as polluting, is grounded in the more radical rejection of matter as antithetical to the divine and to the Christian pursuit of holiness. Christian repugnance of the body and sexuality breeds fear and hatred of women, which finds historical expression in patriarchal social structures. The rejection of the body, rooted in the abhorrence of vile, irrational and inert matter, is intimately connected to a deep hostility for the earth and disdain for non-human life forms. Women are no more intrinsically connected to the earth than are men, but the oppression of women and the exploitation of earth are truly intertwined phenomena throughout the history of Western civilization and its ascendent religion, Christianity. In a culture and religion which denigrates earthliness and bodiliness, women will be perceived as lower and treated as such. Consequently, any attempt to redeem a religious system in favor of women must make pivotal the redemption of the body, sexuality and the earth. Although by now this may seem a self-evident statement, it has wide-ranging implications for how we think about life and death, good and evil, sin and grace, and how we might imagine the Christian project in the world.

This discussion does not pretend to be exhaustive; it merely names some powerful trends within the heart of Christianity that have contributed to Western civilization's exploitative attitudes toward both women and the natural world. Powerful cultural attitudes, rooted in antiquity and given incredible bouyancy and authority by Christendom, outlived both progenitors. With the European Enlightenment and the emergence of modernity, many of these concepts and trajectories would be re-interpreted and integrated into the emergent structures of Western industrial capitalism, where they would find new and increasingly pathological expression. Understanding modernity's transformation of nature and gender are huge topics, beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the emergence of modern science and tech-

<sup>21</sup>Rosmary Reuther, *New Woman New Earth*, pp. 194-195; *To Change the World*, p. 61. The ascetic ideal was not unambiguous, however. While clearly damaging for women in its rejection of the body, particularly female bodies, it paradoxically provided a politically- and socially-significant alternative to patriarchal marriage. For an interesting discussion, see Reuther's "Virginal Feminism" in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), and "Mothers of the Church" in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, editors Reuther and MacLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

<sup>22</sup>Thompson, "Deep-Down and Dappled Things," pp. 66, 69-70.

nology, as well as a capitalist economic order, have unleashed in unprecedented ways the destructive power latent in these ancient sensibilities. This combination of dynamics has spawned the current global ecological crisis.<sup>23</sup>

### Towards an Ecofeminist Theology

Having argued for the historical connections between the domination of women and the exploitation of the natural world, and having noted Christianity's substantial contribution to that tradition, what possibilities, if any, remain for a repentant and radicalized Christianity? At this point, let us make explicit some possible directions indicated by the foregoing discussion.

The depth and breadth of the modern ecological crisis obliges us to reflect on what Western notions of humanness have meant for the world. Such fundamental rethinking of what it is to be human, our being, our meaning, our destiny, necessarily shapes our views of and responses to the non-human: women, nature, God. Changing views of the human affect views of what the human has been defined over against in any particular time and place in history: the "other," woman, nature, people of color, indigents, non-Christians, and (ironically) the divine. The task has been called utopian: of reinventing the human, since none of traditional concepts seem adequate to meet this grave new challenge to our identity and our future.<sup>24</sup> It also implies the need for a new cosmology: a new way of understanding the universe. We need a new story or, minimally, a radical re-telling of the old story to explain the cosmos, our place in it, the divine and our relationship to it. This is a deeply theological undertaking.

Ecological consciousness is reminding us that the human is rooted in and continuous with the natural world. In the most fundamental way, human life depends upon the life of the ecosystem, and cannot be understood apart from it. No longer can human life be understood atomistically. All of life, in its essence, is interdependent, collective, communal. Individual meaning and destiny is nonsensical. Faithfulness to the well-being of the entire biotic community, human and non-human, is the criterion for ethical behavior and the way of holiness.

Within the particular philosophical and cultural context of Christianity, this emerging consciousness carries immense implications. It demands that we reconceive the natural world as fundamentally holy, and revelatory of the divine. This world which we say is created by God/ess must be known as an extension of the divine presence. To destroy it is to commit deicide. To

<sup>23</sup>For a thorough and convincing discussion of modernity's transformation of nature and gender, and the connections between them, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980). See also Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (London: Zed, 1988) for a critical study of these themes from a Third World perspective as part of the global Westernization project.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, p. 82.

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destroy parts of it is often to commit genocide, as whole peoples and species are wiped out. This is the annihilation of primary Words of God/ess, revelations of God/ess. It is to exterminate incarnations of the Living One. It is the radically anti-life: radically evil.

Human destiny ("salvation" in Christian terms) cannot be separated from the ongoing, dynamic life of the cosmos, and the good and evil made manifest there. There is no proper locus for human meaning but our unique, achingly beautiful planetary home. It is *here* that we participate in the creative-redemptive process, or not. It is *here* that we know we are actors in salvation history, or not. It is in our earth-bound, embodied, sexual, gendered selves that we know the surging, nurturing power of God enfleshed, or not. If we do not know these things *on earth, in our bodies*, we do not know them at all. If we do not know them in our living and believing, we are not people of the Creation-Redemption.

As part of this project, it is imperative that Christian theology begin the redemption of the body and sexuality, for women and for earth. In a profound poetic insight, Matthew Fox writes:

Sexuality was a creative act of the universe that has made our marvelous planet possible. Every flower and blossom is a reproductive organ. Sexuality is at the heart of the creative power of the universe.<sup>25</sup>

To recover the sacred nature of the body, of sexuality in its multiplicity of expressions, is to erode the hierarchical dualisms on which Western thought is founded. It is to challenge the patriarchal ranking of logos and eros, mind and body, spirit and flesh, rationality and lust, and to question dominant definitions of sacred and profane, good and evil, grace and sin, redeemed and unredeemed. Because women have been so closely identified with the body and sexuality, the redemption of these is central to any feminist theology. Likewise, the association between nature and the body compels eco-conscious theology to critique the profound anti-body, anti-sex bias pervading Western religion.

Redeeming sexuality, the body, women and earth means re-examining the dwelling place of the divine. God/ess can no longer be thought of as resident in the mind or the soul as opposed to the body, or in heaven as opposed to earth. By extension, the salvific work of God/ess must be regrounded on the earth in cosmic history. We humans must reconceive our notions of the after-life as that which really matters. The promise of extra-historical deliverance will forever prevent us from whole-hearted faith-filled commitment to this earth, in this time, with these people. Similarly, our traditional dependence on an omnipotent saving deity needs reconsideration. This notion of the divine has functioned to minimize the destructive power of humanity and provide a guaranteed escape from "man-made" calamities. What it has not

<sup>25</sup>Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1988), p. 173.



fostered is any divinely-mandated responsibility in humans for the care of the earth and its residents.<sup>26</sup>

The immanence of God/ess in creation, the whole of creation—human in continuity with nature—must be reaffirmed, and non-anthropocentric images of God/ess be recovered or created anew and given a place of prominence in the life of the church. Likewise, God/ess imaged exclusively, or even predominantly as a male human must be subject to question.

Such a profound theological reconstruction with its deep fidelity to the entire biotic community must find concrete social and political expression. An ecofeminist Christianity must critique the global worship of the patriarchal gods of science, technology, militarism and industrialization. It must radically question the dominant notions of progress, productivity, and “rational economic practices” and their accompanying ideology of limitless expansion. The earth and its beings, human and non-human, cannot sustain the cost of military-industrial capitalism much longer. It is no longer a question of choice but of survival. Economics is a profoundly religious issue, and Christians can no longer afford to leave the ordering of life on the planet to the keepers and manipulators of capital. Christianity has to offer an alternative vision and program to modernity’s messianic project of mass domination and commodification, or risk being consigned to the garbage heap of history. We need to radically re-imagine redemption and our participation in it. This is the task and these are the stakes.

<sup>26</sup>Gordon Kaufman, “Nuclear Eschatology and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (1983), cited in Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. x.

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