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Ecofeminism: Intersection for
Christian-Buddhist Dialogue

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Abstract: Feminist theology has done much in its attempts to recover the hidden contributions of women to the religions of Christianity and Buddhism, critiquing both the absence of women’s voices and experiences and helping to re-construct and re-articulate religious traditions that are more inclusive of the experiences of both women and men. Ecofeminism brings feminist analysis to the current ecological crises and sees connections between the economic and political oppression of people and the oppression of the environment. Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose work has applied a feminist theological critique and retrieval to Christianity, sees the need to address the ecological crises as one of justice. Rita M. Gross, who brings a feminist theological critique to Buddhism, examines the crises through the Buddhist insight that suffering is caused by insatiable cravings for more and more things. The contributions of each author will be examined and the potential arena for constructive interreligious dialogue in the area of the ecological crises will be addressed.

Introduction

The title of my paper, “Ecofeminism: Intersection for Christian-Buddhist Dialogue,” indicates three main words or phrases that provide the scaffolding around which I have built this presentation: *ecofeminism*, *intersection* and *dialogue*. I will begin first by breaking open the word ecofeminism and briefly examining such things as ecology, deep ecology and feminism. I will then look at what contributions feminist theology has brought to the discussion, specifically through the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether in Christianity and Rita Gross in Buddhism to see how each has addressed the ecological crises from within her own religious tradition as feminist theologian or, as Gross refers to herself, as “scholar-practitioner.”¹ Finally, I will look at ecofeminism as the intersection, the meeting place, for interreligious dialogue.

Ecofeminism: Definitions and Parameters

The early roots of the term “ecofeminism” can be found in the work of Francoise d’Eaubonne who used the term *ecofeminisme* [eco-feminism] in her 1974 book *Le Feminisme ou La Mort* [Feminism or Death]² in an attempt to express her belief that “the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motive inherent in male power” and that the

¹ Rita M. Gross, *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues*, (NY: Continuum, 1998), pp. 3-5.

² Carol J. Adams, Ed., *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, (NY: Continuum, 1993), p.xi.

earth could only be saved through feminism.³ To understand the term ecofeminism, then, we need to examine the meanings of the words ecology and feminism.

Taken from the Greek *oikos*, “house,” and *logos*, “description”⁴ or “talk,” ecology is primarily a study of interrelationships: of the members of a species with each other, of species with other species, and of species with the non-living aspects of their environment, such as climate and geography. Different species living and interacting within the same space are said to form an ecosystem. An ecosystem is considered healthy when there is a variety of organisms within it, each of which plays its role in the food web to help sustain life and keep the ecosystem in balance. An unhealthy ecosystem is one that has imbalances, such as overpopulation or underpopulation of plant or animal species, which may be due to such things as changes in weather patterns, or, increasingly since the mid-twentieth century, to human intervention.⁵

Deep ecology sees the earth as not only made up of many ecosystems but as one whole ecosystem within which there are many varied and interdependent species. Since humans are but one species in this ecosystem, deep ecology calls for a radical shift in our attitudes away from anthropocentrism and toward an attitude that embraces biological diversity. In fact, in its analysis, deep ecology sees Christianity and western culture as responsible for developing and teaching attitudes which pit humans against the environment and which continue to encourage the environment’s destruction.⁶ It

³ Ibid.

⁴ *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, Second ed. (2004), s.v. “ecology.”

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature,,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Edited by Carol Adams, (NY: Continuum, 1993), p. 13.

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 2.

therefore calls for us to live lives that will bring healing to, instead of destruction of, the earth.

Feminism, in its broadest sense, according to Anne Clifford, is “a social vision, rooted in women’s experience of sexually based discrimination and oppression”⁷ that seeks to liberate both women and men from gender-based discrimination. It recognizes sex as biologically determined but it rejects assigning social roles based on that biological determinism. Instead, it recognizes that gender is a social construct, i.e., cultures designate and assign roles and behaviors to males and females.⁸ Feminism raises questions about how and why those roles and behaviors are assigned and it challenges societal structures that perpetuate the bias that defines the male as normative and as superior. Feminism also recognizes connections between oppression of women and oppression of non-white and non-Western men and women and of the earth.

Ecofeminism brings together the insights of ecology, deep ecology and feminism. From ecology, it takes the understanding of the earth and its systems as a network of interdependent relationships; from deep ecology, it takes the insight that humans are not the hierarchical apex of the entire ecosystem but are one of its many integral parts; from feminism it takes the insight that the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment are connected.

Rosemary Radford Ruether: Covenantal Ethic and Sacramental Tradition

As a Christian ecofeminist, Rosemary Radford Ruether takes the charges of both feminism and deep ecology seriously. As a Christian feminist theologian, she has examined how the “classical Western cultural traditions, which were codified between

⁷ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 17.

500 B.C.E. and 800 C.E., and of which Christianity is a major expression, have justified and sacralized . . . relationships of domination.”⁹ She believes that these cultural traditions have taught us to accept that domination as both “the natural order” and as God’s own will.¹⁰ God, in this configuration, is construed as male, as monotheistic and as creator of the cosmos¹¹ and as separate, distinct and removed from it. This symbolic depiction of a male God who rules over the world has reinforced the patriarchal system of “the relations of domination of men over women, masters over slaves, and (male ruling-class) humans over animals and over the earth.”¹² The depiction of God as separate and removed from the cosmos has led to the belief that, for humans to be “like God” or to be “with God,” they must not only flee their created bodies but ultimately, they must flee the earth.

Radford Ruether acknowledges that there is some validity to deep ecology’s critique of Christianity as perpetuating the image of humans as pitted against nature through its interpretation that dominion, as found in Genesis 1:28, means to conquer and subdue it. She finds this anti-nature teaching is not biblical but is grounded in the dualistic understanding of nineteenth century western Protestantism which understood nature and history as sharply divided.¹³ History was seen as not only the realm of humans but as the arena into which God stepped to act on behalf of humans. The biblical God was seen as Lord over creation, as superior to it and as controlling it; humans, understood as created in the image of this God, also believed themselves to be superior to nature and thus able to do the same. Yet biblical scholars who have more recently

⁹ Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, p. 207.

responded to this ecological critique find that the Hebraic understanding of God was not an “either-or” one – God was to be found in either history or nature – but was a “both-and” understanding. God was found in both historical events, such as when Pharaoh and his army were swept into the Red Sea (Psalm 136:15), and in natural events, such as in thunderstorms (Psalm 29) and rain showers (Psalm 65).¹⁴

The God experienced by the ancient Hebrews was a covenantal God of “right relationships,” a covenant that was extended not only to humans but to all of creation as well as seen in the covenant that is made with Noah, Noah’s descendants and the rest of creation. (Genesis 9: 8-10) Radford Ruether points out that the commandment proclaiming rest on the Sabbath and the sabbatical legislation, found in Leviticus 25, reflect the extension of covenant to creation.

The sabbatical emphasis, found in the third commandment as well as in Leviticus 25, recognizes God’s direct relationship with creation. Notice that the commandment about keeping the Sabbath is not just for humans; it also extends to the ox and the ass and to “any of the beasts.” (Ex. 20: 8-10; Dt. 5:14) All living beings deserve to rest in imitation of God. On every seventh day, all relationships are made equal: those between master and slave, between neighbor and alien and between humans and creation.

It is in the seventh year, known as the Sabbatical Year, that the land is given the opportunity to rest. It, too, is no longer enslaved but is free from human control, is allowed to rest and to be restored.

The Year of Jubilee, calculated by “count[ing] off seven Sabbaths of years, seven times seven years” (Lev. 25: 8), takes place in the fiftieth year. It, too, extends to both humans and the land. This was a year of liberty for humans and for the land: slaves were

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 208-9.

set free, debts were cancelled, property was restored to original owners and the land was also freed from human control. Just as laborers were to rest in the Jubilee Year, so the animals and the land were to rest. Allowing the land to rest served as a reminder that the land ultimately belonged to God and “the humans were but aliens and tenants.” (Lev. 25: 23)¹⁵

Radford Ruether reminds us that the biblical texts do reflect the anthropocentric, androcentric and ethnocentric view of the ancient Hebrews¹⁶ and that it would therefore be inappropriate to simply retrieve them without critically reinterpreting them in a more inclusive way for our time. Yet the texts do give us glimpses of how an ancient people experienced God as one of “right relationships” with humanity and with all of creation and who then set forth sabbatical legislation to help them be in right relationship with each other and creation as well.

Radford Ruether acknowledges that these Jubilee laws were only partially applied but her point in raising them here is that they serve as a model of eco-justice in which all of creation, human, animal and land, are freed from overwork and exploitation.¹⁷ These Sabbath cycles remind us that humans are neither creators nor owners of the rest of creation but are its caretakers and are accountable for its welfare.¹⁸ It is her hope that retrieval of this covenantal understanding will help us to come to see that like us, all of creation has its own distinct relationship with God and that therefore we need to

¹⁵ Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 212.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 208.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 213.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 227.

recognize it not as our property but as our kin. In such an ecological understanding, we are one, interdependent community.¹⁹

A second element of the Christian tradition that Radford Ruether retrieves and rearticulates to help us develop a spirituality that is more ecologically sensitive is the sacramental tradition. This tradition stresses God's immanence, God's closeness, to humanity and to all of creation. God is present in and throughout the cosmos, bringing redemption and healing not just to humanity but to all of creation. She draws our attention first to the New Testament where such things as Paul's letter to the Colossians and the Gospel of John give evidence that the early Christians associated the God whom they experienced in Jesus not just as redeemer but as creator and as being with creation from the beginning. Both the prologue of John's gospel and Colossians 1:16 describes Christ as being present from the beginning of creation, even preexistent to it; Colossians then extends this understanding by saying that "in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17) and that Christ brought reconciliation to both "those on earth" and "those in heaven." (Col. 1:20)²⁰ Drawing on Jewish Wisdom literature which speaks of Divine Wisdom as both God's agent in creating the universe and as the immanent power which sustains it,²¹ they came to recognize the God they experienced in Jesus as one who is creator, redeemer and sustainer of the cosmos.

Radford Ruether also finds this sacramental understanding in the writings of such people as Bonaventure, who speaks of creation as showing signs of God's presence, and Francis of Assisi, whose "Canticle to the Sun" clearly envisions us as in relationship with

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 232.

²¹ Ibid, p. 231.

the rest of creation and envisions God as present in and through creation.²² Against the Cartesian dualistic and Newtonian mechanistic view of the cosmos, which sees matter as dead and merely to be manipulated by God, and by extension by humans, this sacramental strand of the Christian tradition sees the cosmos as living, as animated and sustained by God's own presence, which gives lifeblood to the interconnected relationships between God, humans and nature.²³

Rita Gross: Interdependence, Detachment and The Middle Path

Rita Gross approaches the environmental crises as a Western Buddhist feminist. She sees Buddhism as “an evolving spiritual discipline and worldview that is shaped by modernity and, especially in its Western forms, by the concerns that are particularly urgent to Westerners, such as feminism, ecology, and social activism.”²⁴ While she sometimes describes herself as a “theologian,” such as when she works creatively within Buddhism to suggest modifications of it,²⁵ more often she refers to herself as a “scholar-practitioner.” This “both-and” proposition is one in which she recognizes herself as an academic who pursues rigorous scholarship and as one who engages in Buddhist meditation and spiritual disciplines.²⁶ By calling herself a scholar-practitioner, Gross recognizes and accepts the feminist insight that our ways of knowing are always shaped by our experiences and that reflecting on our specific situatedness makes us more aware of the limits of our knowledge and insights.²⁷ By coupling the two terms together, she not only challenges the accepted “norm” in the academy, that one's work must not be

²² Gross and Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism*, p. 192.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 190.

²⁴ Rita M. Gross, *Soaring and Settling*, p. ix.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 4.

“tainted” by one’s personal experience, but brings to light the Buddhist emphasis that knowledge and insights come only through both studying and spiritual discipline and practice. It is this approach which Gross advocates in addressing the environment.

In dealing with the environmental crises, Gross brings the Buddhist insight that to bring about social change, we must first “pay attention to internal, individual states of mind and emotion.”²⁸ Her approach, therefore, is to highlight some of the basic teachings of Buddhism and to then apply those insights to social conditions which she sees as impacting our attitude toward the environment. Although she identifies herself as a practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism, a form of Tibetan Buddhism, she addresses what she calls “pan-Buddhist” teachings with which all Buddhists can identify: the Four Noble Truths, detachment, interdependence and the Middle Path.

Gross points out that the first two Noble Truths, that all of life is pervaded with suffering and that suffering is caused by desire rooted in ignorance,²⁹ can easily be connected to environmental issues. Because we get caught up in the desire to accumulate more and more things, our focus is on possessions and the hope that having more and more things will fill the void in our lives and our relationships. In connecting this with capitalism, which focuses on the individual, and advertising, which encourages us to buy more things, she points out that our lifestyles of overconsumption and overindulgence have resulted in suffering for both ourselves and for the planet.³⁰

Key to the Second Noble Truth is the Sanskrit word *trishna* or the Pali word *tanha* which has been translated into English as “desire.” Gross points out that a better translation would be “addiction” or “compulsion” which connote such things as grasping,

²⁸ Ibid, xi.

²⁹ Gross, *Soaring and Settling*, pp. 83-84.

³⁰ Ibid.

fixation and craving.³¹ The object of desire is more powerful than we are; we pursue it out of compulsion with the mistaken belief that it will bring us the happiness we crave. Thus, the Third Noble Truth, that suffering, *dukkha*, will end when we can end the craving, and the Fourth Noble Truth, that following the Eightfold Path will bring an end to the craving, both focus on detachment.

Here, Gross brings in a threefold approach that she draws from Tibetan Buddhism: that of “view, practice, result.”³² “View” refers to the theoretical analysis, where one comes to “right understanding,” the first step on the Eightfold Path. This “right understanding,” that my unhappiness and suffering are the result of craving things which cannot bring me happiness, must then be followed up with spiritual “practices” that will help me to internalize the “view.” Those practices incorporate other steps on the Eightfold Path, such as developing “nonharming” thoughts, and contemplation and meditation. In meditation, *samatha*, one sits in silence and focuses on one’s breathing. In contemplation, one is not grasping after knowledge; one visits and re-visits ideas and teachings, spends time with them and patiently waits for insights to arise.³³

Finally, “result” refers to what actions I will now take to show I have internalized both this “right understanding” and spiritual practices. Here, my “nonharming thoughts” will be reflected in right speech, right actions and right livelihood, all of which are also nonharming, and all of which are fed by the disciplined practice of contemplation and meditation.

³¹ Ibid, p. 84

³² Ibid, p. 78.

³³ Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation*, (NY and London: Continuum, 2001), p. 107.

In applying these insights to an environmental ethic, Gross incorporates the Buddhist notion of interdependence that stresses the interconnectedness of all life forms and the belief that all beings have the Buddha-nature. Supported by the doctrine of rebirth, which teaches that it is possible to be re-born in any life form, interdependence recognizes that all forms of life in an ecosystem are affected by the actions of all other life forms. As humans come to understand this sense of interdependence, they need to see that their actions of excessive consumption impact all other life forms and they must therefore choose to practice self-restraint out of compassion.

Gross also applies this sense of interdependence to human communities. She believes that an emphasis on the nuclear family has resulted in isolating people from one another. Developing a sense of interdependence can help to build a communal life and can help people to detach themselves from meaningless things and instead find enrichment in relationships.

Finally, Gross applies the Middle Path, cautioning against too strict an asceticism. She notes that to progress spiritually, Buddhism teaches that one must have moderate levels of physical and emotional security. Being mindful of this, she encourages sharing of food, of food preparation, even sharing possessions among neighbors. Such an approach encourages detachment and builds interdependence.³⁴

Dialogue: An Intersection

The interreligious dialogue of which I am speaking here is not theoretical nor am I conjecturing on what I think each person, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rita Gross, might say to the other. Each of them has already participated in interreligious dialogue through the International Buddhist Christian Theological Encounter. In addition, both

³⁴ Ibid, p. 82.

women co-presented a workshop in October, 1999 at Grailville in Loveland, Ohio.³⁵

Here, I have focused on the part of their conversation in which they explored aspects of their respective religious tradition that could be employed in developing an environmental ethic.

Having already addressed the aspects of their religious traditions that each brings to the conversation, let me also share with you the parameters that they place on interreligious dialogue.

Gross sees interreligious dialogue as a tool that can be used to increase religious understanding and tolerance and to thereby decrease tensions between religions.³⁶ Yet, she also acknowledges that this is a tool that requires sophistication: dialogue participants must be knowledgeable about their own religious tradition and must also be accepting and tolerant of other religions. It is Gross' belief that by encountering each other in this way, we not only learn about other religious traditions but we can come to reflect more deeply on our own religious tradition.

Gross is clear in asserting what dialogue is not: it is not missionary activity nor debate. She finds that missionary activity has tended to be more about conversions. In debates, the other is viewed as an opponent and one's focus is to outscore one's opponent; thus debates are not about increasing understanding.³⁷

Both Gross and Radford Ruether believe that authentic dialogue should promote mutual respect, understanding and tolerance. The goal of dialogue is not to change others but to change one's own outlook: of oneself and of one's own religious tradition as well

³⁵ See Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation*, (NY and London: Continuum, 2001).

³⁶ Ibid, p. 5.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 10-11.

as to gain insight into one's dialogue partner and her religious tradition. If one enters into dialogue in such an open-minded way, one is more able to move to a deeper understanding of the religious truth present in other traditions and to uncover aspects of one's own tradition that might have previously gone unnoticed.³⁸

Conclusion

I come full circle, then, back to the title of this conference, "Engaging Particularities" and to the title of this paper "Ecofeminism: Intersection for Christian-Buddhist Dialogue." Each of these women has modeled for us how to dialogue and how to do so from within the particularity of her own tradition.

Radford Ruether delves into Judeo-Christian scripture and draws forth the covenantal emphasis on right relationships and sabbatical legislation that encourages cyclic rest and restoration for individuals, communities and all of creation. She also retrieves scriptural and traditional understandings of the sacramental nature of the cosmos, reminding us that not only does the Judeo-Christian God maintain relationships with all of creation but that this God can be encountered in and through all aspects of creation. By retrieving these elements, she helps us to re-imagine the cosmos and all of creation as sacred and to re-cognize our encounter with creation as relational. The non-human aspects of creation, plant and animal, are now recognized not as other but as kin, as that which was created by the same God who shaped all parts of creation "out of the ground." (Genesis 2: 7, 9, 19)

Within the Buddhist tradition, Gross focuses on practices. She draws out the concept of interdependence and of the interconnectedness of all life forms. She speaks of the importance of compassion and of developing nonharming habits of thought, speech

³⁸ Ibid, p. 3-4.

and action. She reminds us to practice self-restraint and detachment and to ground those practices in the spiritual disciplines of contemplation and meditation.

Both authors stress cessation of activity and the need to re-cognize interdependence and ways of experiencing the Sacred in and through humans and creation. Each has done so through her own religious tradition. They not only model for us how interreligious dialogue can take place but that such concrete encounters are imperative to help bring healing to the earth.