

---

# BIOTIC INTERDEPENDENCE: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECOFEMINIST THEOLOGY

Nadja Furlan Štante

“Human beings are a part of the whole we call the Universe, a small region in time and space. They regard themselves, their ideas and their feelings as separate and apart from all the rest. It is something like an optical illusion in their consciousness. This illusion is a sort of prison; it restricts us to our personal aspirations and limits our affective life to a few people very close to us. Our task should be to free ourselves from this prison, opening up our circle of compassion in order to embrace all living creatures and all of nature in its beauty.”<sup>1</sup>

In line with this thought from Albert Einstein, modern western individualised society is trying to take the next step in the evolution of interpersonal relations and gradually transcend the optical illusion in our consciousness about the radical separateness between all human and nonhuman living beings, between man and nature in the space of life. Interdependence, connectedness and the integral, holistic principle is practically the sales package of contemporariness echoing in the political, economic, as well as religious and social spheres. Everything is mutually dependent and connected ... are the slogans of global (western new-age) society looking for new forms of higher-quality relations amidst an economic crisis. The focus is thus the relationship of interdependence.

The purpose of this article is to study the ecofeminist paradigm of the ecological ethics of interdependence of all human and nonhuman living beings, of man and nature in the web of life.

In light of the discrimination and subordination of women and nature by the patriarchal system, ecofeminism critically points out the hierarchical evaluation and construction of certain dualities: culture/nature; male/female; me/other; reason/emotion; human/animal. In line

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. I. Gebara, “The Trinity and Human Experience. An Ecofeminist Approach,” in: R. Radford Ruether (ed.), *Women Healing Earth*, Maryknoll, New York 1996, p. 13.

with ecofeminist theory, nature is dominated by culture, woman by man, emotion by reason, and animals by man. This hierarchical structure of relationships is, according to ecofeminist theory, ordered and created by the patriarchal system. But before we examine in detail the relationship of interdependence between man and nature, let us first take a brief look into the term “ecofeminism.”

### What Is Ecofeminism?

Ecological feminism or ecofeminism is a feminist perspective based on the premise that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are two interconnected phenomena and two categories that are subjugated and discriminated against by the patriarchal system. Essentially, ecofeminism is based on the premise that what leads to the oppression of women and to the exploitation of nature is one and the same thing: the patriarchal system, dualistic thinking, the system of dominance, global capitalism. The common denominator of all forms of violence is the patriarchal system, understood as a source of violence. Ecofeminism thus experiences the patriarchal system as a conflictual system building on an exploitative hierarchical relationship, unaware of the equality, unity and connectedness of all living beings in the space of life. This is the reason why the patriarchal system is ruining the harmonic connection of man and woman, man and nature ... It is a pest with a destructive effect on nature, as well as people.

Ecofeminism emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a great school of philosophical and theological thoughts and social analyses. The legendary founder of ecofeminism is considered to be the French author Françoise D'Eaubonne, who in 1974, with her newly coined term ecofeminism defined the political opinion that women (as a subordinate species in the social order) possess greater potential for actualising the political change that is indispensable for the preservation of life on our planet. In her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death)* D'Eaubonne designated woman as the key agent in the process of ecological revolution. In 1972, Mary Daly adopted this term and integrated it, just like

Christian feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, into the context of Christian theological ecofeminism.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the huge variety of forms and orientations of ecofeminism<sup>3</sup> it would perhaps be better for us to speak about a plurality of ecofeminisms. Heather Eaton compares this wide diversity of ecofeminisms to “an intersection point of multiple pathways” for “[P]eople come to ecofeminism from many directions and have taken it to other places, disciplines and actions”<sup>4</sup> But regardless of the wide variety of individual types and forms of ecofeminism, which result from the many disciplines and approaches to it (from humanities, social and natural sciences, environmental studies and technology to political activism . . .), they all have in common the awareness of the fact that it is impossible to solve the ecological issue without at the same time including the feminist question and vice versa. The common element of feminism and ecology is therefore the battle for liberation from the shackles of cultural and economic oppression and exploitation. The connection between the abuse of the natural world and the oppression of women is thus the key and common point of all types of ecofeminism.<sup>5</sup>

Ecofeminism thus sees the basic interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature. This connection is displayed in two levels: the ideological-cultural and socioeconomic. The ideological-cultural level is based on the premise or prejudice that women are closer to nature than men, more in tune with their own bodies, the emotional and animal worlds. The socioeconomic level, on the other hand, confines women to the field of reproduction, education and care of children, cooking, cleaning, tidying up – in short, the woman is here confined and limited to the mere household, and her chores are devalued in comparison with the public tasks falling into the domain of men

---

<sup>2</sup> A. Primavesi, “Ecofeminism,” in: L. Isherwood, D. McEwan (eds.), *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1996, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Heather Eaton divides the different forms of ecofeminism into four models: the ecofeminist model of activism and social movements, the academic ecofeminism model, religious ecofeminism model and global ecofeminism model (see Eaton 2005, p. 23).

<sup>4</sup> H. Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, T&T Clark International, New York 2005, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> A. Baugh, *Gender*, in: A.W. Bauman et al. (eds.), *Grounding Religion*, Routledge, London, New York 2011, p. 131.

and with the power of modern culture. Rosemary Radford Ruether, a pioneer in Christian theological ecofeminism assumes that the first level acts as an ideological basis to the second.<sup>6</sup>

Ecofeminism also touches the spiritual-religious dimension, but assigns it to the field of critical views of a determinate religious tradition and its patriarchal stamp.

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in fact, all major world religions started to contend with the possible damage that their traditions had caused to the understanding of the environment, of nature and non-human beings, and began searching in their traditions for positive elements for an ecologically validating spirituality and everyday practice. In their third development phase, feminist theologies expanded their criticism of determinate theologies also in relation to their attitudes towards nature and nonhuman beings. Thus the various ecofeminisms or ecofeminist theologies critically question the correlation between gender hierarchies in an individual religion and culture and the hierarchical establishment of the value of man to be above that of nature. All types of theological ecofeminism thus strive for a deconstruction of the patriarchal paradigm, its hierarchical structure, methodology and thought. They try to deconstruct the entire paradigm of man's supremacy over woman, of mind over body, Heaven over Earth, of the transcendent over the immanent, of the male God, alienated and ruling over all Creation, and replace all this with new alternatives. All major world religions are in this sense challenged to self-questioning and self-criticism in their judgement of the possible negative patterns that contribute to the destruction of the environment, and to restoring environmentally-friendly traditions. From an ecofeminist and environmentally fair perspective, it is essential that religions do away with the negative stereotyped prejudices which strengthen the domination over nature and social domination.<sup>7</sup> The Christian tradition, for instance, has (from an ecofeminist point of view) contributed several problematic images and symbols that have consolidated and survived in form of stereotypes and

---

<sup>6</sup> R. Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism Globalization and World Religions*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, New York 2005, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Radford Ruether, *op. cit.*, p. XI.

prejudices and taken root in the legacy of the western philosophical-religious thought. Ecofeminist Christian theologies thus seek to revive the lost images and the symbol of understanding the universe as the body of God (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague). This used to be a typical metaphor (albeit present in various forms) and the focal image of the sensibility of the western (Mediterranean) world, but was replaced by a mechanistic worldview model in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Carol Merchant and Vandana Shiva). In 1972, the radical feminist theologian Mary Daly drew a link between the ecological crisis, social domination and the Christian doctrine. As an antithesis to the Christian ethics of missionary work in the sense of uncompromising Christianising (converting at any cost all pagans, who were considered barbarians) she offered a vision of a cosmic commitment to sisterhood that envelops our sister Earth and all its human and nonhuman inhabitants and elements. That would, in Daly's opinion, enable a potentially positive change in the ecological awareness and environmental ethics and lead us from the culture of predators and desecrators into a culture of reciprocity, where we would look upon the earth and other planets as individual parts of a whole, as being with us, not for us.<sup>8</sup>

Some ecofeminist theologians have, in their criticism of patriarchal hierarchical subordination of women and nature, remained with Christianity and offered a vision of Christian woman- and nature-friendly theology that acts as a determined co-shaper of better-quality relations in the web of interdependent life. Other ecofeminist theologians, on the other hand, have come to the realisation that the Christian doctrine is incurably patriarchal and as such incapable of radical reform necessary for an inclusive ethics of responsibility towards all living beings. These have turned towards radical feminism or neo-pagan ecofeminism.

In 1972, theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether lent the first ecofeminist voice within Christianity. Through the eyes of the theology of liberation, or more precisely, from a feminist somatic and ecological perspective, she called attention to the basic dualisms – the origin of which she ascribed to the apocalyptic-Platonic regional legacy of classical Christianity. These include the alienation of the mind from the body; of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Primavesi, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

subjective self from the objective world; the subjective withdrawal and alienation of the individual from the wider human and social network; the domination of the spirit over nature. For Ruether, in order to transcend these dualisms, we should first shape a new self-understanding of our own identity in relation to all other relationships within the web of life. In *New Woman, New Earth* Ruether strongly opposes the model of relations based on the logic of domination, stating:

“(W)omen must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination of one over another.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Ruether, to transcend this logic of domination over women and nature, (western) society and (Christian) religion should reconstruct at their very foundations. Ruether developed this hypothesis in practically all her later works dealing with ecofeminist topics. She also stressed the need to change the symbols and “reshape our dualistic concept of reality as split between soulless matter and transcendent male consciousness,” and the need to reshape the alienated male-centred image of God from “a (humanly) modelled God constructed after male consciousness and represented as ruling over nature” into “an immanent source of life that sustains the whole planetary community.”<sup>10</sup>

Sallie McFague is another of the various feminist theologians offering a vision of God who supports the equality of women and men, nature and all nonhuman beings. In *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* she also criticised the legitimated image of God as a distant, superior king reigning and commanding over all Creation. Her criticism is based on two arguments: (1) This image has supposedly contributed considerably to the construction of the concept of dualistic division between the kingdom of God and Earth, and (2) This image is supposed to have robbed humanity of its primary responsibility, which is the concern for nature, the Earth, nonhuman beings ... As an alternative, she calls on all Christians to symbolically imagine the entire universe as the body of God instead of viewing God as an external, separate monarch ruling over the world. Or in her words: “It is [more] appropriate to see God as

<sup>9</sup> R. Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, Seabury Press, New York 1975, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> R. Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God*, HarperOne, New York 1992, p. 21.

in, with, and under the entire evolutionary process.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to the mentioned transformation of the symbol of God, McFague proposes the Big Bang theory as the focal creation story. This would in her opinion unite the people in the awareness of fundamental interconnectedness and interdependence.

While Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague try to reform Christianity, pagan ecofeminists turn to the so-called feminist spirituality, which celebrates and unites women and earth. Cynthia Eller has identified five main characteristics of the different feminist spirituality practices: 1. significantly valuing women’s empowerment; 2. practicing ritual practices and/or magic; 3. revering nature; 4. using the feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis; 5. espousing a revisionist version of Western history favoured by individual movements.<sup>12</sup>

Individual religious feminisms have formed various, their own distinctive models of theological ecofeminism. Judith Plaskow (1993), for instance, has created a vision of Jewish theological ecofeminism, while Johanna Macy (1991) developed a Buddhist ecofeminist perspective centred on the concept of dependent co-arising or mutual causality.<sup>13</sup>

The mentioned common point apart, the various types of ecofeminism offer very different views and perspectives on certain issues. It seems that the greatest dissent among them was caused by the question of the woman/nature connection, or better, the question whether the woman is closer to nature than man due to her ability to bear life.

### Conceptual and Cultural-Symbolic Connection between Women and Nature in Ecofeminism<sup>14</sup>

Some ecofeminists acknowledge that there is some truth to the ideology of women being closer to nature, but recognise in it traces of a

<sup>11</sup> S. McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> C. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, Crossroads, New York 1993, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Baugh, op. cit., p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Anton Milnar stresses three series of links between woman and nature: the empirical, conceptual and cultural-symbolic, and epistemological. Since the present article focuses on the conceptual and the cultural-symbolic connections, let me briefly sum up the other two: the em-

skewed and distorted belief pushed by a patriarchy which wants to dominate women as well as nature and sets both in an inferior position. It is this very ideology that, according to them, remains firmly rooted in the essential truth claiming that women are more in harmony with nature, more in tune with their own bodies by virtue of their probity and their ability to bear life. From the pagan ecofeminist viewpoint, women are more in harmony with nature and should therefore strive for a life in tune with nature and Earth, for establishing new environmental ethics and ecological spirituality, and for asserting active ecological life practices.<sup>15</sup>

Still, most ecofeminists reject or oppose the hypothesis of women being more connected with nature due to their ability to give birth and engage in motherhood. They understand the concept of affinity between woman and the natural environment as a social construct naturalising women and feminising nature with the purpose of making them look more similar or cognate. At the same time, owing to the social determination of their position in the field of physical and material support of society, women are more exposed to the exploitation of nature and more aware of it.

The issue of women and their harmony with nature is thus more a question of female experience in a determinate social ideological perception than a question of a different nature when compared to men.<sup>16</sup> In the opinion of ecofeminists opposing the myth of substantial female likeness to nature, the domination and exploitation of nature and women by western industrial society is strengthening on account of this very prejudice or myth (of women's likeness or closeness to nature).

The stereotype of a deeper woman/nature connection and a marked separateness of men from nature in modern western society is one of

---

pirical premise claims that women (and children) are more exposed to environmental problems than men, because women have been burdened not only by the deteriorating environmental conditions, but also gender discrimination in society, manifested primarily in the depreciation of women's work. The epistemological link between woman and nature, on the other hand, is displayed more in a higher ability of women in designating problems – the advantage of women in creating an ecological or sustainable paradigm (in connection to the first two links). (See Mlinar 2011, p. 208).

<sup>15</sup> Radford Ruether, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 95.



the topics also dealt with by feminist writer Susan Griffin, who in her book *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1987) problematizes the negative stigmatisation of women, femininity and nature by the western theological and philosophical paradigms. Griffin builds on the stereotyped assumption that men perceive themselves and their identities as markedly separate from nature:

“He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature.”<sup>17</sup>

Griffin also introduces a female interpretation of self-identification with the world, which presupposes a deep interdependency of all (women as well as men) with the Earth, contrasting the male ‘distorted’ idea of their radical separateness from all others and from any other form of life. Griffin concludes with the concept of a fundamental, intuitive understanding of the connectedness of all human and nonhuman living beings within nature’s harmony and the entire web of life:

“I know in this earth, the body of the bird, this pen, this paper, these hands, this tongue speaking, all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long to tell you, you who are earth too ...”<sup>18</sup>

Ecofeminist academic activists Carolyn Merchant and Vandana Shiva represent similar ideas on the female understanding of interconnectedness of everything and everyone in the web of life. In *The Death of Nature* (1980) Merchant advocates the hypothesis about a gradual decline of the image of organically connected cosmos and the cult of virtuous femininity of Mother Earth from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, since it was replaced by the mechanistic world ethos and the perspective of world and nature. The latter, viewed through the eyes of technological revolution, was to be controlled and dominated by culture and man from then on. Nature is thus completely subjugated by culture; man fully (over)rules nature, the latter only serving him as a means to reach a goal. This new world paradigm has – as Carolyn Merchant wrote – “resulted in the death of nature as a living being and the accelerating exploitation of both human

---

<sup>17</sup> S. Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco 1978, p.3.

<sup>18</sup> Griffin, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

and natural resources in the name of culture and progress”.<sup>19</sup> According to Merchant, the death of nature also reinforced the negative stamp and the negatively stigmatised legacy both on the environment and the social status of women throughout the following history of western society. This is, in her opinion, the very point where the dual concept of understanding nature and woman consolidated: of women as attentive mothers and of nature as wild and untameable. The latter stereotype has prevailed in the technocratic patriarchal culture, which is more comfortable seeing nature (and women) as something that needs to be tamed and restricted at any cost, rather than living in harmony with it and its natural laws.

Vandana Shiva similarly supports the hypothesis of the mechanistic paradigm of understanding the world being the main culprit for the contemporary ecological crisis, degradation of the environment and nature, and asserts that women are the ones to possess the gift and wisdom for living sustainably, in harmony with nature. Shiva thus, somewhat ironically, comments on the development measures and practices of western society. While the women of the Third World have been mastering efficient farming and feeding their families and communities for centuries, the so called green revolution of fertilizers and genetically modified crops instantly turned everything upside down:

“...Forty years of knowledge of agriculture began to be eroded and erased as the green revolution, designed by multinational corporations and western male experts, homogenised nature’s diversity and the diversity of human knowledge on a reductionist pattern of agriculture”.<sup>20</sup>

Carolyn Merchant and Vandana Shiva thus appeal to the integration of women’s voices and wisdom into the paradigm of western science and development practices, as they see in them a counterweight to environmentally-harmful practices and habits.

---

<sup>19</sup> C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Harper San Francisco, San Francisco 1980, p. xxii.

<sup>20</sup> V. Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Zed Books Ltd, London 1988, pp. 89–99.

## Understanding the Interdependency in Ecofeminism

The significance of creation stories or accounts on the beginning of the world is described by Rosemary Radford Ruether as follows:

“Creation stories not only reflect current science, that is, the assumptions about the nature of the world, physical processes, and their relationships; but they are also blueprints for society. They reflect the assumptions about how the divine and the mortal, the mental and the physical, humans and other humans, male and female, humans, plants, animals, land, waters, and stars are related to each other. They both reflect the worldview of the culture and mandate that worldview to its ongoing heirs.”<sup>21</sup>

The Hebrew creation story written in the Old Testament of the Bible (Gn 1:1–2:3) thus describes the making of the cosmos as a seven-day creative process by the great Creator God. One particular characteristic of this text is that God creates with his word and within the time frame of one week. The whole world is thus God’s work. God is not only the regulator of a given matter (chaos), but the creator of all that emerges “out of nothing” (cf. 2 Macc 7:28). The Maker thus first created light. With his word, God invoked light and thereby started regulating the world (cf. Ps 104:2). The separation of light from darkness, day from night, denotes the beginning of time. The separation and denomination are two characteristics of organising the world; the first separation started up time, the following ones shaped space. On the second day, God created the firmament and separated the waters from the sky. On the third day he created dry ground and the earth started producing greenery, plants, grain and fruit trees. On the fourth day, the Maker created the stars, the Sun and the Moon to rule day and night and separate light from darkness. On the fifth day he created fish and birds. On the sixth day he gave life to terrestrial animals and humans. Man is distinguished from animals by the fact that he was created ‘in God’s image.’ He is let to rule over plants, animals, earth ... While here (in Gn 1:1–2:3) God only gives man plants for food, he later, after the Flood (in Gen 9:3), explicitly allows him to eat meat. To feed on animals is, according to exegetes, to shed blood, which is in opposition to God’s original plan

---

<sup>21</sup> Radford Ruether, 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

(see note no. 29 in Gn 1). In his creation plan God dedicated plants as the only food for animals, too, which indicates an ideal world without violence; people and animals live together in harmony; violence among people is the beginning of chaos in the Creation (cf. Gn 6:11–12). On the seventh day the divine Creator rested. Work and rest ...

From this creation story it is possible to discern the basic model that God conferred to humans, animals and plants. Adam as the first human is the collective caretaker of God's image, the image of God's kingdom on earth, ruling all living beings ...

This creation story leaves room for discussion in relation to the issue of equivalence or equality between men and women. Although humanity was according to the basic creation plan in Gen 1: 26–27 intended as a united joint entity created in God's image, later on, the passage Gen 2: 22–23 emphasises male dominance, which is supposed to reflect the image of God's sovereignty. From the viewpoint of critical exegesis of feminist theologians (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ...) the stressing of the male primacy in Gen 1: 26–27 is in the service of advocating the agenda of the patriarchy. Similarly, environmentalists and supporters of the green agenda (ecofeminism, environmental ethics, deep ecology etc.) criticise the idea of the 'dominion' over the rest of creation given to Adam in this story. Rosemary Radford Ruether provides her critique of the anthropocentric model of animal, plant and environmental exploitation ensuing Adam's (human) domination over nature with the following words:

"There is no doubt that the account is anthropocentric. Although created last, the human is the crown of creation, given sovereignty over it. However, an exploitative or destructive rule over earth is certainly not intended. Humans are not given ownership or possession of the earth, which remains "the Lord's." God, finally, is the one who possesses the earth as his creation. Humans are given usufruct of it. Their rule is the secondary one of care for it as a royal steward, not as an owner who can do with it what he wills."<sup>22</sup>

According to this interpretation people should be God's guardians of nature preventing its exploitation and destruction. Actually, even the word for the first man – *Adam* (in Hebrew *Adamah*) means soil and in-

---

<sup>22</sup> Radford Ruether 1989, op. cit., p. 21.

dicates the matter from which (so the creation story goes) he was made. The fact that humans share with the other mammals the same kind of warm blood is supposed to be the reason why according to the creation story they would not be allowed to eat meat.<sup>23</sup> All this presupposes a deep interconnectedness between man and earth or nature, as well as man and nonhuman beings.

The understanding of women's (and human's) identity in the context of theological ecofeminism is therefore focussed along the ethical principle of the fundamental interconnectedness of equal human beings and nature in the web of life. Mercedes Canas describes this fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness like this:

“The life of the earth is an interconnected web, and no privileged hierarchy of the human over nature, justifying its domination, exists. A healthy, balanced ecosystem, which includes human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain its equal diversity.”<sup>24</sup>

One of the common characteristics of the various forms of ecofeminism is that they all perceive the patriarchal system as a conflictive system building on a hierarchical relationship and unaware of the unity and connectedness of living beings. From an ecofeminist point of view, the patriarchal system destroys the harmonic connectedness between man and woman, man and nature. It is therefore a pest, with an injurious effect both on nature and women. Ecofeminism thus fights for a new awareness that could teach both sexes to live and operate in coexistence with each other and with nature. Members of Christian theological ecofeminism (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Cynthia Eller etc.) draw from the Christian tradition, for which they are convinced that it includes the mentioned concept of oneness and interconnectedness of all God's creations. The interrelationship between woman and man, humans and nature, should be freed from all forms of violence and subordination, as only in the light of mutual respect and respect for nature can the harmony of God's love fully come to life. The

---

<sup>23</sup> J. Schochet, *Animal Life in Jewish Tradition: Attitudes and Relationships*, KTAV, New York 1984, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> M. Canas, “In Us Life Grows”, in: R. Radford Ruether (ed.): *Women Healing Earth*, Maryknoll, New York 1996, p. 27.

world is in this sense the body of God, whose limbs function in harmony and health.<sup>25</sup>

The connection between God and the world is represented by various symbols. Some resort to female personifications of nature and the divine (particularly the representatives of pagan ecofeminism or eco-theology), recognising the divine principle in the term *Gaia* and therefore naming it Goddess, Mother Earth. They see the Creation as one body incorporating different ecosystems; a multitude of diversity united and connected in coexistence and oneness. In such Creation, each woman and each man is first a human, and in the light of equal humanity and interdependent connectedness lie the beauty and greatness of this community that ecofeminists define as *biotic community*.<sup>26</sup>

From this standpoint, ecofeminism promotes global movement based on common interests and respect towards diversity as opposed to all forms of domination and violence. The continuation of life on this planet requires, from an ecofeminist point of view, a new understanding of our attitude towards ourselves, our bodies, towards the other, towards nature and nonhuman beings. For the majority of representatives of theological (Christian) ecofeminism this means a thorough study, deconstruction and criticism of androcentric models of theology, particularly in relation to the image of God and his relationship with the entire cosmos. Mere inclusion of the female element into the existing theological agenda is not enough. According to ecofeminists, it is necessary to radically deconstruct the patriarchal theological frame of mind and the hierarchical structure. Ivone Gebara thus says:

“Changing the patriarchal paradigm for an ecofeminist one starts with epistemology, with transforming the way one thinks. Patriarchal epistemology bases itself on eternal unchangeable ‘truths’ that are the presuppositions for knowing what truly ‘is.’ In the Platonic-Aristotelian epistemology that shaped Catholic Christianity, this epistemology takes the form of eternal ideas that exist a priori, of which physical things are pale and partial expressions. Catholicism added to this the hierarchy of revelation over reason; revealed ideas

---

<sup>25</sup> Gebara, op. cit., pp. 76–78.

<sup>26</sup> M. Franzmann, *Women and Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000, pp. 156–157.

come directly from God and thus are unchangeable and unquestionable in comparison to ideas derived from reason."<sup>27</sup>

Gebara's ecofeminist perspective is revealed in her understanding of the intimate link between feminist ideas and ecology that should, as a consequence, lead the individual not only to the possibility of true equality between men and women and between different cultures, but also open the individual to a different relationship with ourselves, the earth and the entire universe. For Ivone Gebara the personal embodied experience is the central premise for understanding the relationships in the web of life.<sup>28</sup>

From this perspective the female identity is understood in the context of transcendent interconnectedness with all living beings in the web of life.

Similarly, Rosemary Radford Ruether understands ecological interdependence in the sense of a life-giving web as a pantheistic or transcendently immanent web of life. This common source in her opinion fuels and maintains a continual renewal of the natural life cycle and at the same time allows and binds us to fight the exploitative forms of hierarchical relationships and strive for the establishment of renewed relations of mutual acknowledgement.<sup>29</sup>

For ecofeminists, the awareness of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all human and nonhuman beings, nature, environment etc. sets ecocentric egalitarianism as the fundamental and starting point of the ethics of interpersonal relationships.

For Karen J. Warren, the ecofeminist criticism of the patriarchy is contained in the principles of ecology:

"Everything is interconnected with everything else; all parts of an ecosystem have equal value; there is no free lunch; 'nature knows best'; healthy, balanced ecosystems must maintain diversity; there is unity in diversity."<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> I. Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1999, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> The web of life is a quite widespread metaphor originating in ecofeminism and poetically denoting the dynamics of the collective female view of a world of interconnected subjectivity.

<sup>29</sup> Radford Ruether 1992, op. cit., p. 260.

<sup>30</sup> K. J. Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections", *Environmental Ethics*, 9, 1987, pp. 3–20.

A similar ecofeminist thought on the basic reciprocal connectedness and dependence of everyone in the web of life is also advocated by Thomas Berry, who introduced the vision of ecospirituality. Berry understands this connectedness as if “each individual being is supported by every other being in the Earth community. In turn, each being contributes to the well-being of every other being in the community.”<sup>31</sup>

From the standpoint of theological ecofeminism (Ivone Gebara, in particular) the understanding of human identity is ingrained in a prism of viewing the individual in the web of relationships. The individual therefore does not exist outside a relationship. He or she is constituted in and through the relationship. The conclusion is that an individual’s autonomy does not mean exclusion from the web of life. That would be illusory from the point of view of ecofeminism. Here the attempt at separating man from the cosmic entirety does not entail autonomy and individuality, but illusion. The individuality of a human being is understood in the perspective of connectedness of individualities into a whole. A single person as an individual is immersed in this entirety, is part of it and at the same time autonomous. His autonomy should be reflected in reciprocal responsibility and respect for the integrity of an individual, of the other, of the different ... Critically, the ethical goal of theological ecofeminism is therefore to improve the quality of relationships.

Into this harmony Ivone Gebara echoes the trinitarian understanding of God. In her interpretation, the concept of Holy Trinity does not translate as a revelation from above that should be understood as an eternal, unquestionable truth, incompatible with the experience of everyday life, but as that which is continually constructed anew through everyday experiences of relations within the web of life, and as such keeps acquiring new looks and new faces.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Within the context of theological ecofeminism the individual’s identity is faced with the model of fundamental interconnection of all beings

---

<sup>31</sup> T. Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Bell Tower, New York 1999, p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> Radford Ruether 2005, op. cit., p. 113.



in the web of life. The awareness of the fundamental interconnectedness, of the consequent interdependence and joint responsibility in the ethical-moral sense therefore represents the next step in the evolution of interpersonal relationships and all relations within the web of life. The conceptualization of women's identity and the identity of an individual in postmodernity, through the perspective of theological ecofeminism, sets, above all, an ethical imperative of responsibility that the awareness of the fundamental interconnection presupposes.

### B i b l i o g r a p h y

1. Baugh, A. (2011), "Gender", in: Bauman, A.W. et al. (eds.): *Grounding Religion*, London, New York, Routledge, 130–146.
2. Berry, T. (1999), *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. New York, Bell Tower.
3. Canas, M. (1996), "In Us Life Grows", in: Radford Ruether, R (ed.): *Women Healing Earth*. New York, Maryknoll, 24–28.
4. Eaton, H. (2005), *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, New York, T&T Clark International.
5. Eller, C. (1993), *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, New York, Crossroads.
6. Franzmann, M. (2000), *Women and Religion*. New York, Oxford University Press.
7. Gebara, I. (1996), "The Trinity and Human Experience. An Ecofeminist Approach", in: Radford Ruether, R (ed.): *Women Healing Earth*. New York, Maryknoll, 13–23.
8. Gebara, I. (1999), *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, Fortress Press, Mineapolis.
9. Griffin, S. (1978), *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, San Francisco, Sierra Club Books.
10. McFague, S. (1993), *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press.
11. Merchant, C. (1980), *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco, Harper San Francisco.
12. Mlinar, A. (2011), *Trajnost in univerza: možnosti, retorika, resničnost*, Koper, Annales.
13. Primavesi, A. (1996), "Ecofeminism", in: Isherwood, L. et al. (eds.): *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*. Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 45–48.

14. Radford Ruether, R. (1975), *New Woman, New Earth*, New York, Seabury Press.
15. Radford Ruether, R. (1992), *Gaia and God*. New York, HarperOne.
16. Radford Ruether, R. (2005), *Integrating Ecofeminism Globalization and World Religions*. New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
17. Schochet, J. (1984), *Animal Life in Jewish Tradition: Attitudes and Relationships*, New York, KTAV.
18. Shiva, V. (1988), *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, London: Zed Books Ltd.
19. *The Bible* (1999), Contemporary English Version, American Bible Society.
20. Warren, K. J. (1987), "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9, 3–20.