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# WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING - FROM THE LENSE OF POST-COLONIAL THEOLOGICAL ECOFEMINISM

N a d j a F u r l a n Š t a n t e

## Introduction

The moral values and interpretive systems of religions play a critical role in how people envision the challenges of sustainability and how societies mobilize to improve ecosystem resilience and human well-being. Over the past 50 years, significant progress has been made in the ecologically-aware reorientation and reinterpretation of Christian theology, particularly Protestant and Catholic theology. In this process, the theological critique of anthropocentrism and the instrumentalization of nature within Christianity, as well as the practical and liturgical reorientation of Christian practice and worship, have become major features of Christian theology through the work of theologians such as Sallie McFague, Paul Santmire, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ernst Conradie, and Andrew Linzie. An excellent example of interreligious dialogue that emphasizes the ecological component is the international ECOTHEE network. ECOTHEE (Ecological Theology and Environmental Ethics) is an international interreligious network that has been organizing symposia for two decades under the patronage of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Orthodox Academy of Crete (OAC) to bring together people of different religions with scholars to form an eco-justice community to address the environmental crisis.

However, there are several critical issues that remain to be explored. Two are as follows: the need to consider the active participation of women in the process of interreligious dialogue and environmental peacebuilding; and the need to pay attention to the relationship between the theological reflection of the Global North and that of the Global South.

Although women's voices and participation in interreligious dialogue and religious ecological peacebuilding are often overlooked and ignored, particularly at the visible, formal level, they are very much alive and present at the informal level in the form of concrete actions and deeds. However, these contributions remain insufficiently analyzed and scientifically evaluated.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it should be noted that the issue of equal gender recognition, or the recognition of women and their visible roles, even at the formal level, is very closely linked to the issue of understanding and positioning the religious Other. Therefore, the key to the equal recognition of women's voices is one of the most important components of effective interreligious dialogue, and the key to the equal recognition of the religious Other. Both are crucial for the ecologically affirming transformation of human consciousness at both the individual and collective levels. Thus, the need to address environmental issues and include women's voices and actions in the context of interreligious dialogue – more specifically, to create a venue for women's engagement in environmental peacebuilding through interreligious encounters and dialogue – could be understood as the next step in the evolution of environmental, feminist, and interreligious meetings.

The challenge of an ecumenical response to current ecological challenges for Christian theology and practice is not only a matter of interfaith theological dialogue and cooperation, but also of a fully cross-cultural theology and encounters involving cultures with different histories, traditions, and values. While women are (or have

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers, *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010); Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall, *Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015); Atalia Omer, Scott R. Appleby and David Little, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

been) marginalized within different religious systems because formal religious authority in most religious traditions is primarily held by men, many women are actively working for peace both inside and outside religious institutions. Examples of such efforts include women such as the Kenyan peace activist Dekha Ibrahim Abdi; the Buddhist spiritual leader Venerable Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta of Thailand; Sister Mary-Bernard Alima Mbalula, Secretary of the Commission Justice and Peace, National Episcopal Conference of Congo; the African ecofeminist activist Wangari Maathai; and the Indian scholar Vandana Shiva, a leading environmental activist and feminist.

In a sense, the marginalization of women by institutional religious and political elites paradoxically strengthens and empowers women in their (eco)peacebuilding efforts beyond the hierarchical religious frameworks. Being less visible, they are less constrained and burdened by institutional commitments and are consequently freer to take actions that would otherwise be considered politically, religiously, or socially risky. For many of the women involved in (environmental) peacebuilding processes, the relationships they build are crucial and transformative. Indeed, we find that women's peace work focuses on the importance and deepening of interpersonal relationships, which are consequently individually and socially transformative. From the perspective of women's peacebuilding, the opposite of war or violence is not peace but creativity, which is created, co-created, and co-engaged precisely through and after the definition of relationships. Creativity in the form of women's empowered, embodied experiences moving from the background of the passive role of invisibility to the foreground of daily life, decision-making, and visible spaces represents the power of transformation and healing.

Starting from these premises, the main objective of this paper is to highlight the importance of women's active participation in the process of ecological peace-making/environmental peacebuilding, including through interreligious and intercultural encounters, and especially through the active sharing of good practices in ecological peacebuilding by women from both the North and the South. It is precisely the diverse cultural-religious traditions and examples of good practices in women's ecological peacebuilding that can contribute enormously to

overcoming androcentrism and anthropocentrism, and bridging the gap between Western Christian ecotheology and the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South. In this paper, women's interreligious dialogue is seen as a bridge that can enrich Western Christian ecotheologies and ecological perspectives. Through women's interreligious dialogue, a safe space for the respectful enrichment of diverse ecological peace efforts could be created.

More specifically, the paper has three main objectives: 1.) to emphasize the need to include environmental issues comprehensively in shaping interreligious dialogue; 2.) following the ecofeminist thesis that the exploitation of the earth (ecological crisis) is closely linked to the marginalization, exploitation and abuse of women, to discuss the importance of paying attention to women's voices and actions (religious and spiritual ecofeminist perspectives) – including in the form of (eco)religious peacebuilding – in the context of interreligious dialogue. The paper also stresses the need to apply a gender dimension in interreligious dialogue and environmental/ecological peacebuilding; 3.) to connect–by using an intersectional perspective – the issue of women in environmental/ecological peace-building with the question of environmental (in)justice, and further on, to show the power of women's ecological peacebuilding and how different religions and cultural understandings and good practices can enrich each other.

The paper will first highlight the various dimensions of women's interreligious dialogue. Although much has already been written about the importance and forms of women's interreligious dialogue and women's participation in such dialogue (e.g., by authors such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ursula King, Rita Gross, Jenny Daggars, Maura O'Neill, etc.), the topic of women's ecological/environmental peacebuilding is only a pioneering field. This pioneering field of study has its focus in the theoretical work of the Christian ecofeminist Rosemary Radford Ruether (author of the book *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*),<sup>2</sup> and especially in the work of Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva. Through a brief

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<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

analysis of Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement founded in 1977 and Vandana Shiva's Navdanya – an Earth-centric, women-centric and farmer-led movement for the protection of biological and cultural diversity launched in 1987 – we attempt to show the power of women's ecological peacebuilding and how different religions and cultural understandings and good practices can enrich each other.

Further on, the paper will then discuss the need to address environmental issues by including women's voices and actions in the context of interreligious dialogue. Finally, the paper will attempt to answer a key question: is Western Christian ecotheology listening to the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South?

As regards the methodological choices, the paper will primarily use methods from prevalent religious studies (emphasising the hermeneutical keys of Christian feminist theology) and working methods that involve conceptual analyses that demonstrate the connection between the basic concepts and anthropological-theological considerations. This is to explore the potential of women's active participation in the ecological/environmental peacebuilding process and its involvement in interreligious dialogue. From this point of view, perceptions and critical perspectives on ecological injustice, and the importance of women's participation in ecological (interreligious) peacebuilding, are brought together.

### Bringing the Gender Dimension into Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental / Ecological Peace-Building

When we talk about interreligious dialogue and the inclusion of women's voices and the gender dimension in that dialogue, we first need to point out two levels of epistemological definition of this dialogue. The first level is about the inclusion of women's voices and the gender dimension in interreligious dialogue. The second level is about the interreligious dialogue of women and feminism, in which the experiences of individual women are confronted with the fundamental experience of subordination and otherness within the framework of individual socio-religious realities. Rosemary Radford Ruether assumes three levels of interreligious and intercultural feminist dialogue: 1.)

Feminist dialogue with patriarchal Christianity; 2.) Dialogue between Christian, Jewish, and Islamic feminism and other religious feminisms; 3.) Dialogue between feminisms that seek to transcend or transform historical religious traditions and Theology, or Goddess worship and Wiccan traditions.<sup>3</sup>

By including the voices of women or the gender dimension in inter-religious dialogue, the concept of the Other and Otherness takes on a broader dimension. Jenny Dagers calls this process "Gendering Interfaith Dialogue," or perhaps more accurately, gender empowerment in and through interfaith dialogue.<sup>4</sup> The key to this process is the effort to build a positive self-image and identity for women. This is based on the assumption that an empowered individual is a liberated individual who lives her power that comes from her uniqueness and inimitability. It is based on the construction of one's identity, potentials, qualities, and talents. Accordingly, the individual discovers his/her diversity, uniqueness, multi-faceted self, different life path, and role. The process of empowering an individual necessarily involves intense processes of comprehensive personal transformation. The word empowerment, therefore, describes the comprehensive life development process of a person transforming all external conditions and expressing his or herself in all its potentials. It is a process in which the individual realizes himself/herself in life and thereby fulfills one's role in the context of the community and society, thereby empowering others. The process of empowering the individual is therefore inextricably linked to the process of empowering the community and society. Empowered women thus have a significant impact on the development of a healthier and more humane religion and society.

Within a certain framework, the phenomenon of feminist theology can be understood as a form of interreligious dialogue. Feminist theology became a global and pan-religious movement in response to women's experiences of the patriarchal domination that has regulated

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Antisemitism* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1974), 141.

<sup>4</sup> Jenny Dagers, *Gendering Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 51.

and determined their religious and secular lives. Just as the experiences of individual women, and thus the efforts of women within Christianity, differ, so do the experiences (of subordination) of religious women in other world religions. Common to all, however, is the subordination and patriarchal violence that has been and continues to be perpetrated against them. Although the forms of subordination and patriarchy are expressed and experienced differently in different cultural and religious circles, the desire and need to speak about women's experiences and to awaken women's voices are universal. In this sense, we can say that feminist theology and religious feminism have become an intercultural and interreligious phenomenon. It calls on all women to free themselves from the yoke of religious-patriarchal violence, and at the same time unites them in their quest. This is like the struggle against slavery, racial discrimination, or other genocides. Women's liberation movements vary across religions. In any case, feminist theology is considered a pluralistic and diverse phenomenon rooted in the religious experience of women, full of hopes and unfulfilled dreams, striving for liberation and equality.

Christian feminist theologians are increasingly seeking mutual cooperation among the various strands of Christian feminist theology. They are aware that Christian feminist theology is an intercultural phenomenon that differs in terms of cultural diversity and coloration, but at the same time it is also an intercultural phenomenon for these different cultures are not isolated from each other but instead cooperate and interact. Given this cooperation and interconnection, Christian feminist theology faces new challenges. One of the most recent is certainly the challenge of cooperation and dialogue both within Christian feminist theology and between Christian feminist theology and the feminist theologies of other religions and the secular world.

Feminist theologians are engaged in interreligious dialogue in which they are particularly concerned with the various experiences of the historical and contemporary subordination of women in religion and society, as well as with the specific issues and challenges involved. In *Mending a Torn World, Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, Maura O'Neill suggests the following issues that women's interreligious dialogue should include and address: women's spirituality, the issue of gender equality and gen-

der roles, the reconstruction of the past and its impact and resonance in the present, and the issue of religious authority and hierarchies.<sup>5</sup>

A very important topic that has been included in (women's) inter-religious dialogue in recent decades is the issue of ecofeminism and the relationship with nature and the environment. In this context, various feminist theologies and religious feminist movements around the world address the importance of ecological solidarity in terms of planetary solidarity in the face of ecological destruction and the climate crisis we face today. Ecofeminist theology and spirituality offer a reassessment of our troubled relationship with nature. It is about the sacredness of nature and its intrinsic value, as well as nature-affirming theology. Sally McFague, for example, argues that we should view the whole world and nature as the body of God, which we pollute and thus desecrate through inappropriate behavior and conduct. This view is also held by Aruna Gnanadason, who urges all women in India to strive for a holistic ecological and spiritual theological vision that should be indulgent to nature and all the oppressed.<sup>6</sup>

(Eco)feminist theology, confronted with cultural and religious pluralism, seeks to develop an appropriate key, a methodology for understanding the Other (including nature and all naturally created living beings), and strives for solidarity and interreligious tolerance and respect. Ursula King also points to the importance and necessity of developing a critical approach and methodology that enables feminist theology to truly engage with religious pluralism.<sup>7</sup> Like Rita Gross, Rosemary Radford Ruether criticizes the superiority of Christian universalism and patriarchal supremacy, as well as the taken-for-granted primacy over other religious traditions. The critique of this taken-for-granted Christian superiority over other religions and the question of transreligious

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<sup>5</sup> Maura O'Neill, *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Orbis, 2007), 114.

<sup>6</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, "Feminist theology as intercultural discourse," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ursula King, *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age* (London/New York: Continuum, 1998), 40.



identity (Katarina von Kellenbach) are important aspects of feminist interreligious dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

### Women in Environmental / Ecological Peacebuilding and Environmental Justice

The entire theoretical framework that has been pointed out in relation to women's involvement in interreligious dialogue and women's interreligious dialogue could easily be applied to women's engagement in ecological or environmental peacebuilding.

Women's efforts at religious environmental (eco)peacebuilding are largely linked to women's interreligious dialogue and should be seen as an important starting point for the need to transform violent, misogynistic, and ecologically destructive theologies and lived everyday religious practices.

The Environmental Peace-building Association uses the following definition of environmental peacebuilding:

Environmental peacebuilding integrates natural resource management in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery to build resilience in communities affected by conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Environmental peacebuilding is both the theory and practice of identifying the conditions that can lead to a sustainable peace between past, current, or potential future adversaries.

The phenomenon of environmental religious peacebuilding is an emerging field that views conflicts over environmental resources (environmental injustice) as an opportunity for the conflicting parties to cooperate with each other and ultimately work toward lasting and sustainable peace. It derives from an Earth-centered theological perspective in terms of ecotheological implications. As such, ecotheology

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<sup>8</sup> Nadja Furlan Štante, "Strengths and weaknesses of women's religious peace-building (in Slovenia)," *Annales: anali za istrske in mediteranske študije. Series historia et sociologia* 30, no. 3 (2020): 347, <https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.21>.

<sup>9</sup> Environmental Peacebuilding, accessed November 15, 2022, <https://www.environmental-peacebuilding.org/>.

implies “comprehensive reform, new interpretations, and transformed practices of Christian traditions.”<sup>10</sup>

Ecotheologians (including ecofeminists) are in search of new narratives in terms of an ecologically affirming theology that is aware of the negative consequences of the anthropocentric worldview that has strongly shaped Christianity. Heather Eaton clearly points out the strong expression of anthropocentrism in Christianity and, consequently, its strong impact on our perception of nature. She states:

Anthropocentrism differs across Christian traditions yet unites in claiming that humans are the sole or essential *imago Dei*. Humans are spiritually superior to, and transcend, the natural world. It cannot be overstated how powerfully anthropocentrism functions. It is emphasized explicitly in Christian doctrines and operates insidiously throughout Euro-Western world views and practices. Christianity separated the natural world from spiritual imagery, religious experiences, and sacred places. Anthropocentrism precludes planetary solidarity.<sup>11</sup>

She further elaborates that the antidote is an Earth-centric approach, which does not diminish *Homo sapiens*’ uniqueness and superiority. It does however, at a minimum, impose good stewardship and an ethic of living within the rhythm and limits of the natural world.

Ecotheologians and women in the process of environmental peace-building are striving for planetary solidarity, which requires a larger framework than rights, justice, and the equitable sharing of resources. It requires ecological and evolutionary literacy to inform the notice of solidarity that comes from an understanding of human belonging in a planetary sense more than just a political sense. From the perspective of Christian ecofeminism, the concept of ecological justice is necessarily linked to the concept of interdependence, ecospiritual unity, and the interconnectedness of all ecosystems and sentient beings. Ecofeminism therefore fights for a new consciousness that would teach humanity to live and work in harmony with one another and with nature. The members of Christian theological ecofeminism (Rosemary Radford Ruether,

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<sup>10</sup> Eaton Heather, *An Earth-Centric Theological Framing for Planetary Solidarity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 19–33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

Sallie McFague, Cynthia Eller, Ivone Gebara, etc.) are based on a Christian tradition that, in their opinion, contains the above concept of the unity and union of all God's creations.

Climate change is perceived differently according to race, gender, class, and income level. For this reason, solutions to climate change must take an intersectional approach that prioritizes and integrates the voices of advocates of other platforms for social justice, including the reproductive justice movement. Even though women, girls, and gender minorities are uniquely and disproportionately affected by the damaging environmental impacts of conflict, while lacking and demanding access to shape the necessary decision-making in environmental governance and peacebuilding structures. Nonetheless, women activists are fashioning innovative ways to turn around the negative impacts of conflict-linked environmental damage and climate risks impacting their communities, in effect preventing future conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Julie Sze also recently noted that, from a feminist perspective, it stands to reason that gender also plays an important role in causing and perpetuating environmental injustice. She also points out that most of the scholarly work on environmental justice does not take gender seriously as a category, despite evidence that men and women are affected differently by toxics and that women have played a central role in environmental justice movements. She concludes that gender has always been part of the history of environmental justice activism, regardless of whether it has been recognized as such.<sup>13</sup>

What can women contribute to this male-dominated field? It has been scientifically proven that gender equality in conflict resolution contributes to long-term peace. According to many researchers, promoting and achieving gender equality not only significantly reduces conflict, but also increases the likelihood of eliminating violence by a

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<sup>12</sup> Nadja Furlan Štante, "(Eco)Peace-building a venue for women's inter-religious action," in *Contemporary ecotheology, climate justice and environmental stewardship in world religions: Ecothee volume 6 Orthodox Academy of Crete Publication: [The 6th International Conference on Ecological Theology and Environmental Ethics ECOTHEE-19], Chania, Crete, Orthodox Academy of Crete (OAC) from 23rd to 27th of September, 2019]* (Steinkjer: Embla Akademisk, 2021), 118–31.

<sup>13</sup> Julie Sze, "Gender and Environmental Justice," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, ed. Sherilyn MacGregor (New York: Routledge, 2017), 161–166.

large extent. Thus, when women play an active role in peacemaking, the likelihood of achieving peace and resilience increases. Despite all these facts, women are still underrepresented in politics when it comes to decision-making. Although women are 35% more likely to participate in peace agreements that last at least 15 years, the sad truth is that most peace agreements do not include female signatories. So, world leaders will not be able to achieve lasting peace if they do not include women in the process. Moreover, if lasting peace is not achieved, it will hinder sustainable development. Therefore, it is important to think about what would happen if women were an active part of environmental peacebuilding.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the call for women's voices and action in the interreligious environmental peacebuilding and awareness-raising process of religious individuals and religious communities needs to become louder, both in everyday life and at the hierarchical level. The discussions and joint interreligious actions and dialog should include issues of ecological awareness and environmental justice.

There is no viable future for human beings on an ecologically degraded planet. This fact penetrates with difficulty into the European-Western worldview, which sees identity as individual, familial, ethical, or national. As Heather Eaton noted, there needs to be a shift from personal and political identity formations to planetary citizenship.<sup>15</sup> The realization of planetary solidarity is crucial for a viable future. The paradigm of planetary solidarity could easily intersect with Vandana Shiva's vision of one Earth, one humanity, reflected in a set of principles based on inclusion, nonviolence, reclaiming the commons, and sharing the Earth's resources freely. These ideals, which she calls Earth Democracy, are an urgent call for peace and a foundation for a just and sustainable future. In our pursuit of planetary solidarity and ecologically affirming theologies and everyday practices, we need to address the issue of cross-cultural communication and solidarity between women and the eco-theologies of the Global North and Global South. It is necessary that

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<sup>14</sup> Rita Theresa El Kahi, "Are Women the Future of Environmental Peacebuilding?," accessed on 9 September 2022, [https://www.aub.edu.lb/mouzakarajandariya/articles/Pages/Are\\_Women\\_the\\_Future\\_of\\_Environmental\\_Peacebuilding.aspx](https://www.aub.edu.lb/mouzakarajandariya/articles/Pages/Are_Women_the_Future_of_Environmental_Peacebuilding.aspx).

<sup>15</sup> Heather, *An Earth-Centric Theological Framing for Planetary Solidarity*, 43.

(women) in the Global North hear the voices and wisdom of (women) in the Global South.

### Is Western Christian Ecotheology Listening to the Ecotheological Perspectives and Practices of the Global South?

In 1996, Rosemary Radford Ruether edited the volume *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, in which essays by women from Latin America, Asia, and Africa represent an attempt at cross-cultural communication and solidarity between women in the so-called First World – the Global North – and those in the Third World – the Global South – who are struggling against the effects of Western colonization and its consequences.

The connections between economic development, environmental change, and gender politics are an important topic in feminist scholarship. Research on the role of women in resource-based economic development and their work as environmental stewards began in the 1980s. Inspired by rural women who actively resisted deforestation in the Global South, scholars theorized about the relationship between people's gender roles and identities and their attitudes toward nature. Feminist political ecology has also emerged from the connections between gender and the environment as a loose platform of ideas that seek to theorize differential forms of power and resource access, primarily but not exclusively, in developing countries. It grew out of a desire to analyze the increasing neoliberalization of nature in capitalist development processes. It draws on feminist poststructuralist theory to critique the predominance of techno-scientific solutions to environmental change that override more holistic and grounded approaches.

Early work on women, environment, and development included compelling narratives of poor rural and indigenous women (mainly but not only in the Global South) and claims that they are among those most affected by environmental degradation and most active in trying to combat it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bernadette P. Resurreccion, "Gender and Environment in the Global South," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, ed. Sherilyn MacGregor (New York: Routledge 2017), 71–72.

An important voice in women's development and the environment is the Indian ecofeminist scholar and activist Vandana Shiva. In her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1989), she draws a stark contrast between the dominant forces of science, development, colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism that destroy life and threaten survival, and the suffering and insights of those women who work to preserve and protect life. In her view, indigenous rural women are the original givers of life and therefore the rightful guardians of nature. In her book *Ecofeminism* (1993), Shiva argues that Western patriarchal development strategies and Western science have displaced the feminine principle, victimizing women, non-Western peoples, and nature. The logical response, for Shiva, was to learn from the special knowledge of Global South women.

Vandana Shiva also points to the paradigm of separation as a view embedded and imprinted in our society and its subsystems, in notions of knowledge and the constitution of science and technology, and even in our conception of democracy. According to her, the separation of humans and nature leads to eco-apartheid. Colonialism led to the violent separation of people from their land, natural resources, and habitat. This is still the case today. Colonization turns abundance into scarcity. In her opinion, the arrogance of colonialism and industrialism lies in the assumption that only the colonizer is intelligent. She claims that while true intelligence manifests itself in developmental and ecological intelligence, this, like everything else, has been reduced to a mechanical and analytical intelligence and is now becoming even more distant from nature and ourselves with the advent of artificial intelligence.<sup>17</sup>

From the eco-womanist perspective of African American women, using a womanist, black, feminist, racial-classist, and gendered analysis as part of the critical deconstructive aspect means applying a womanist intersectional analysis to environmental issues to explore the complex ways racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism operate in situations of environmental injustice. From this perspective, Melanie L. Harris contends that ecofeminism highlights the particularities of the relationship

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<sup>17</sup> Vandana Shiva, *One Earth, One Humanity vs. the 1%* (PM Press, 2019), 26.

between women of African descent and the earth, rather than universalizing the human experience with the earth or relating basic human-earth interactions to the experience of middle- and upper-class white women and men.<sup>18</sup>

Eco-womanism exposes the effects of structural racism and systemic oppression assumed in many traditional environmental movement pathways and articulates a corrective that demonstrates the connection between social injustice and environmental injustice. Beyond explaining the basic frameworks of an eco-womanist approach, it is also important to recognize that the adoption of the womanist black feminist method for eco-womanism establishes an intellectual lineage of African, African, and Black thought. Womanism is heavily influenced by African cosmology, which informs the moral and ethical worldviews of many African peoples and communities. In African cosmology, spirit, nature, and humanity are connected in an interdependent web of life. Therefore, any ethical or unethical human behavior positively or negatively affects other aspects of the cosmological order. This African cosmological vision, infused into the eco-womanic paradigm, provides a foundation from which an ethical mandate for earth justice can be derived. Interreligious dialogue as a venue for women's ecological peacebuilding should provide a safe space for intercultural communication and mutual enrichment. Within this safe space, issues of bridging the existing gap between the ecotheological perspectives of the Global North (especially Western Christian theology) and the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South, the mutual enrichment that could take place and the theoretical framework could be integrated and transferred into practice and fieldwork.

Here, we will briefly examine two examples of good practice in women's ecological peacebuilding that have become movements with a global influence: the *Navdanya* and the *Green Belt* movements. By presenting both of these movements, which originated in the so-called Global South, I will outline the main challenges and positive contributions of both, as well as their impact on the enrichment of the so-called Global North. Both movements were founded by powerful women

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<sup>18</sup> Melanie, L. Harris, *Ecowomanism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2021), 18.

who embodied an inclusive, critical, and ecologically affirmative theological framework (Vandana Shiva, rooted in the Hindu tradition, and Wangari Maathai, rooted in Roman Catholicism with a strong influence of Latin American liberation theology).

*Navdanya* (Nine Seeds) – an India-based nongovernmental organization that promotes biodiversity conservation, organic farming, farmers' rights, and seed saving – was founded in 1987 by Vandana Shiva, a quantum physicist, philosopher, ecofeminist, ecologist, and activist. It began as a program of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology (RFSTE), a participatory research initiative designed to provide direction and support to environmental activism.

The *Navdanya* movement is an excellent example of an ecofeminist, ecological peacebuilding movement that advocates for Earth democracy and its ethics rooted in the ancient Indian concept of *Vasudhaiva kutumkam*, the Earth family.

It is a movement “that enables us to move from the prevailing and pervasive culture of violence, destruction, and death to one of non-violence, creative peace, and life. For this reason, Navdanya has launched the Earth Democracy Movement in India, which offers an alternative worldview in which human beings are embedded in the Earth family and connected through love and compassion rather than hate and violence, and ecological responsibility and economic justice replace greed, consumerism, and competition as the goals of human life. As one family, all beings have an equal right to nourishment through the gifts of the earth. Navdanya is part of the movement for the recognition of the Rights of Mother Earth.”<sup>19</sup>

In the 1970s, Vandana Shiva participated in the *Chipko* movement, in which mostly women participated. The Chipko movement began in 1973 when a group of women farmers in the Himalayan mountains of northern India wrapped their arms around trees that were about to be cut down. Within a few years, this tactic, also known as tree satyagraha, spread throughout India and led to forestry reform and a moratorium on logging in the Himalayan regions. Vandana Shiva integrated

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<sup>19</sup> Navdanya, accessed May 20, 2023, <http://www.navdanya.org/earth-university/earth-democracy>.



ecofeminist advocacy for the rights of farmers, women, and indigenous peoples into *Navdanya* ethics and advocacy work to preserve the diversity and integrity of living resources, especially indigenous seeds, and to promote organic agriculture and fair trade. It addresses issues of food security and seed conservation, soil conservation, and genetic resource protection, and is also a fierce critic of industrial agriculture, etc.

The impact of the *Navdanya* movement and Vandana Shiva's involvement can be traced in grassroots Green Movement organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Ireland, Switzerland, and Austria with campaigns against genetic engineering.

Shiva has also worked as an adviser to governments in India and abroad, as well as to non-governmental organizations, including the International Forum on Globalization, the Women's Environment and Development Organization, the Third World Network, and the Asia Pacific People's Environment Network. Vandana Shiva's influence is also felt in the Commission on the Future of Food established by the Tuscany Region of Italy (she is chair of that commission) and she is a member of the scientific committee that advised former Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero. Shiva is a member of the steering committee of the Indian People's Campaign Against the WTO. She is a council member of the World Future Council. Shiva is also a member of the Indian government's committees on organic agriculture. In 2021, she advised the government of Sri Lanka to ban inorganic fertilizers and pesticides.<sup>20</sup>

The above examples of the work of Vandana Shiva and *Navdanya* demonstrate the powerful influence they have on the process of ecologically affirming the transformation of both the Global South and the Global North. Vandana Shiva draws on the wisdom of indigenous peoples and is a key spokesperson against the negative impacts of colonialism on the environment and environmental ethics.

Another example of women's (religious) environmental peacebuilding advocating for ecologically affirming everyday practices is the Green Belt Movement (GBM), which was founded in 1977 as a non-governmental organization with the goal of developing the country (Kenya) through environmental protection, community development, and capacity-building. The Green Belt Movement was founded by Wangari

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<sup>20</sup> Vandana Shiva, Wikipedia, accessed May 15, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandana\\_Shiva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandana_Shiva).

Maathai (1940–2011), a Kenyan activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, and “under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk farther and farther to get firewood for fuel and fences. GBM encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and receive a small monetary gift for their work.”<sup>21</sup>

The practical movement was to fight deforestation and soil erosion caused by the over-exploitation of timber. The destruction of forests leads to desertification and the loss of forest land. Since 1977, the movement has planted over 51 million trees in Kenya alone.

In addition, the Green Belt Movement began advocating for greater democratic freedoms and greater accountability of national leaders. Wangari Maathai was “the first woman to earn a doctorate (in veterinary anatomy) in East and Central Africa, and the first woman to hold a chair at the University of Nairobi. In 1982, she was forced to leave the university. It was only toward the end of her life that she was readmitted and appointed chair of the newly established Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies”.<sup>22</sup>

Maathai criticized Christianity for its association with colonialism and for its continuing negative impact on the environment. The Christian mission, Maathai said, has committed “acts of sacred vandalism”<sup>23</sup> that have desecrated the sacred groves and trees of African communities. This has enabled a culture of natural resource exploitation that has led to soil erosion and environmental degradation. Maathai sought to reclaim and promote the worldview and spirituality of her own Kikuyu people and other indigenous African traditions in which nature is considered sacred. From this vantage point, she has

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<sup>21</sup> The Green Belt Movement, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are>.

<sup>22</sup> Faith and Activism, “F&A Series: Wangari Maathai, the Bible, and Environmental Activism,” accessed April 25, 2023, <https://religioninpublic.leeds.ac.uk/2021/03/03/wangari-maathais-environmental-bible/>.

<sup>23</sup> Faith and Activism.

contributed important insights to current debates about the decolonization of Christianity in Africa.

### Conclusions

The times we live in demand resolute, radical changes that strike at the heart of our paradigmatic frameworks of theologizing, as well as our lived everyday practices. Religious hierarchy systems should strive for and realize the concretization of change in ecologically affirming theologies and their translation into practice. The time of misogynistic and exploitative theological, religious, and social worldviews and attitudes is over. The recognition and promotion of gender equality and the intrinsic value of nature, as well as ecologically affirming theologies, are the next step in the evolution of relationships (between peoples, cultures, within species, etc.). Religions, as messengers and catalysts of peace, are called on to create safe spaces for inclusive interreligious dialog that incorporates ecological paradigms and issues, as well as the gender dimension. At its core, the search for a hermeneutical key to ecologically affirming spiritualities and practices involves the inclusion of gender recognition as an indispensable prerequisite, and women play a crucial role in this. Consequently, the active inclusion of women in environmental interreligious peacebuilding enables the dismantling and transformation of eco-apartheid and neocolonial mentality and bridges the ecotheological perspectives of the Global North (especially Western Christian theology) and the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South.

Various examples of good practices of women's religious environmental peacebuilding (such as *Navdanya* and the *Green Belt Movement*) can be understood as a venue for cultural and religious mutual enrichment in the search for earth-healing and ecologically affirming theologies and everyday practices.

## Acknowledgements

This article was co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS) through the research programme *Constructive Theology in the Age of Digital Culture and Anthropocene* (P6-0434).

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