

# THE INTERFACE OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

## The Ecofeminist Theology of Rosemary Ruether

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### 1. Introduction

In his book, *When Science Meets Religion*, Ian Barbour enumerates four typologies that demonstrate “the ways in which people have related science and religion.”<sup>1</sup> The following are the fourfold typology: (1) conflict typology argues that science and religion are two distinct fields that are incompatible and hostile (rhetoric of warfare) with one another. Hence, in this typology, scientific materialism (scientific knowledge alone is true knowledge and matter alone is the fundamental stuff of life) is irreconcilable with biblical literalism (the Word of God alone is the source of inerrant truth since it is God’s own words). As a consequence, scientific evolution is considered diametrically opposed to Biblical creation accounts; (2) independence typology holds that science and religion represent two different methods of inquiry, each with its own corresponding language and function in life yet at times they offer complementary views of the world. Both are autonomous field of inquiry and function independently to respond to particular sets of questions in life. For instance, science concerns itself with questions dealing with the “how” of things/what is (manner in which reality came about – e.g., evolution) whereas religion involves itself with questions pertaining to the “why” of things/what ought to be (ultimate meanings in life – why are we here,? what is the purpose of our life?); (3) dialogue typology seeks a conversation between science and religion on the level of methods, concepts and limit-questions. There is a possible avenue for dialogue for science and religion, it claims. For instance, on the level of methods, science (scientific data) and religion (religious experience) hold that knowledge is value-laden. Another avenue of dialogue is using similar themes to theorize on both fields such as the theme of communication. This theme can be theorized on both fields analogically. Science speaks of

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<sup>1</sup>Ian Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000, 1.

DNA as codes of information/communication in human beings while Christianity speaks of the biblical notion of the Incarnate Word (Logos) as God's communication. Still another possibility for dialogue ensues when "science raises at its boundaries limit questions that it cannot itself answer (for example, Why is the universe orderly and intelligible?)."<sup>2</sup> (4) Integration typology proposes a more extensive and systematic interchange between science and religion. Such integration happens in (1) natural theology (we can find proofs of God's existence in the created world), (2) theology of nature (through the new information and evidences provided for by scientific findings theological concepts are revised or reinterpreted), resulting to a possible (3) systematic integration of both science and religion that will serve as a common basis for reflection (a development of an inclusive metaphysics) in order to have a more holistic and comprehensive reading of reality.

This paper develops the integration typology of Barbour through Rosemary Radford Ruether's ecofeminist theology.<sup>3</sup> It will have three main parts. The first part describes in a general way the essential elements of ecofeminism. The second part, the heart of the paper, indicates the points of contact between science and religion in the context of Ruether's over-all ecofeminist theology. Finally, the third part, re-evaluates the traditional concept of God as a result of insights learned from the dialogue of science and religion.

## 2. Tenets of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism looks into the reasons for the interlocking oppression between women and nature. Central to ecofeminism, then, is the "unpacking of the connections between the twin oppressions of women and nature."<sup>4</sup> Karen Warren, an ecofeminist philosopher, provides the essential tenets of ecofeminism:

As I use the term, eco-feminism is a position based on the following claims: (i) there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (ii) understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (iii) feminist

<sup>2</sup>Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, 3.

<sup>3</sup>This exposition will depend mainly on the earlier works of Ruether that deal explicitly with her ecofeminist views. This article is expository in nature and not so much a critical assessment of Ruether's claims.

<sup>4</sup>Karen Warren, *Ecological Feminism*, London: Routledge, 1994, 106.

theory and practice must include an ecological perspective; and (iv) solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The ecofeminist project identifies structures, attitudes and situations that justify or sanction these two-fold oppressions. Essential to this task is recognizing the logic of domination that is inherent in an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework. A conceptual framework is

a set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions which shape and reflect how one views oneself and one's world. It is a socially constructed lens through which we perceive ourselves and others. It is affected by such factors as gender, race, class, age, affectional orientation, nationality, and religious background.<sup>6</sup>

A *conceptual framework* can be oppressive when it supports relationships of domination and subordination. Since patriarchy "explains, justifies and maintains the subordination of women by men,"<sup>7</sup> it is considered an oppressive conceptual framework. A conceptual framework is also oppressive when it aids (1) value-hierarchical thinking (up-down approach); (2) value-dualism (either or thinking, juxtaposition of two disjunct, oppositional and exclusive terms such as culture/nature, male/female, mind/body, science/religion, etc); (3) the logic of domination (a logic that gives the power and legitimation to supposedly superior humans to exploit those who are inferior to them); (4) power-over-conceptions of power (a threat or force, imposition of harms and sanctions, expressions of disapproval or displeasure or restriction of liberties of the inferior by the superior); (5) conceptions of privilege (the notion that those who are superior have special privilege and power over those who are inferior). While ecofeminism relies mainly on a conceptual device for its analysis, this does not mean, however, that the twin oppression of women and nature has no concrete manifestations in structures and attitudes in society. Rosemary Radford Ruether's ecofeminism demonstrates the interplay of the conceptual and the structural elements of ecofeminism. To this point, I now direct my exposition.

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<sup>5</sup>Karen Warren, "Feminism & Ecology: Making Connections," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds., Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre, Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1987, 106.

<sup>6</sup>Karen Warren, "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds., Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre, Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1987, 174.

<sup>7</sup>Warren, "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," 174.

### 3. Rosemary Radford Ruether's Unitary View of the Cosmos

Ruether's ecofeminism demands a unitary vision of the cosmos. Kathleen Sands has argued that "dualism is perhaps the last word Ruether herself would use to describe her position, since for her that term names the broken symbolic world she wants to mend."<sup>8</sup> For Ruether the crux of the ecological crisis lies in the dualistic view of the world. In fact, her whole theology is geared to a healing of our split world as a result of a dualistic worldview. Hence, she calls for a new consciousness/spirituality wherein healed relations can be established among men and women, humans and the earth, humans and the divine, the divine and the earth.<sup>9</sup>

A major aspect of Ruether's overall theological project is to point out how Christianity had been founded on a dualistic conception of reality. This dualistic way of thinking, she maintains, had been assimilated into Christianity through its encounter with the Hebraic and Greek cultures. Specifically, this is seen in Christianity's fling with the Greek (Platonic) dualism that divides reality into mind (higher and superior) and body (lower and inferior) and the Jewish apocalypticism that expects the destruction of the world for a new age to come.<sup>10</sup> The convergence of these different worldviews resulted into a creation of Christianity that is not only dualistic but also patriarchal. Moreover, the combination of these body/world-negating religious traditions in late antiquity bequeathed to Christianity an unfortunate legacy of dualisms: mind/body, intellect/emotion, spirit/matter, culture/nature, and male/female,<sup>11</sup> perhaps

<sup>8</sup>Kathleen Sand, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 89.

<sup>9</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, San Francisco: Harper and Collins, 1992, 4.

<sup>10</sup>Around the second century B.C.E. Ruether claims that there arose a different genre of narrativity of destruction. She calls this narrative apocalyptic. It came about in a period where Israel was experiencing a series of occupation by imperial powers starting with Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, and finally Hellenistic Greece. The Book of Daniel is an example of a Jewish apocalyptic writing found in the Old Testament. Ruether describes apocalyptic literature in the following way: "Israel is envisioned as languishing under a reign of evil brought about by its own sins. God allows the evil nations and demonic powers to triumph over them. In due time, however, God will bring an end to this reign of evil. He will intervene, judge and destroy the wicked nation and vindicate the righteous in a renovated earth, where peace and good times will prevail..." Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 67.

<sup>11</sup>Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler and Jürgen Moltmann*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 28.

even science/religion. This is to say that Christianity has become an instrument in legitimizing not only the marginalization of women but also has generated negative attitudes towards anything that had been associated with the body (e.g., women, blacks, nature).

It is made apparent by Ruether in her exposition in "Gaia and God," that the quest for healed relationships entails a *metanoi* – a conversion to the web of life. According to Ruether the "urgent task of ecological culture is to convert consciousness to the earth, so that we can use our minds to understand the web of life and to live in that web of life as sustainers, rather than destroyers of it."<sup>12</sup> Sifting through the Judaeo-Christian tradition, she advocates two traditions that can help humanity in this healing process – the covenantal and the sacramental/cosmological tradition. The former speaks of God's loving/intimate *involvement* in the history of God's chosen people and the corresponding ethical response, i.e., love, fidelity and justice that must come from them (intimate unity between justice and right relations to nature between God and Israel). Here the Jubilee Year vision of the Old Testament can provide a model for redemptive eco-justice. The latter, brings to attention the existing cosmological/sacramental spirituality in the Christian tradition that has been forgotten. Colossians 1:15-20 is an example of this tradition that needs to be retrieved. Here, Christ is seen as the cosmogonic Logos who creates (immanent divine source) and sustains (ground of creation) but also represents the goal of all things (the source of ultimate redemptive healing). These two "holy voices" must be heard, she intimates, in our search for a truly "biophilic living," i.e., being converted to the matrix of life that nourishes a basic attitude of respect and reverence for the earth.

### 3.1. Twin Domination of Women and Nature<sup>13</sup>

Early on in her works, Ruether already made a conscious attempt to link the women's movement with the ecological movement in bringing about a radical restructuring of Western society that is premised upon relationships of domination.<sup>14</sup> In my reading of Ruether, I think that what links the twin

<sup>12</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 250.

<sup>13</sup>There have been several senses in which nature is understood in Western thinking: (1) as the essence of a being; (2) the sum total of being which includes physical reality and humans; (3) the sum total of physical reality apart from humans; (4) the "created" world apart from God and the divine grace. In our case, we use the word nature to refer to the non-human nature which is dynamic and has its intrinsic value apart from humans. See Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, New York: Seabury Press, 1975, 204.

domination of women and nature is the ideology of transcendent dualism<sup>15</sup> which Christianity had inherited from the Greek culture. In this view, Ruether contends that “we are a dualism of eternal mind and mortal body.”<sup>16</sup> This is a way of looking at the world (patriarchal oppressive framework) in an either/or way – male/female, body/soul, culture/nature, etc. It is characteristic of the male ideology of dualism that it cannot enter into reciprocity with the “other”.<sup>17</sup> It is said that, since women and nature occupy the “other” in this scheme, this thinking or *logic of domination* in patriarchal Christianity legitimizes the view that women are objects at men’s disposal, whereas non-human nature becomes resources for men’s exploitation. Ruether contends that, “‘headship’ of men over women is seen as reflected in the ‘headship’ of God imaged as a patriarchal male, over creation and the church, imaged as female.”<sup>18</sup>

Ruether believes that transcendent dualism with its “descending levels of rationality and hence of fitness for servility” was appropriated by Christianity in the early centuries and shaped Western culture well into the modern period.<sup>19</sup> Ruether characterizes Augustine’s theology as a conservative fusion of Hellenistic Apocalypticism and Platonic dualism. This led Augustine to the view that patriarchy is the natural order of society. In addition, Augustine believed in “the innate inferiority of women, their lack of capacity for headship, their subjugation to the male as the representative of the ‘image of God.’”<sup>20</sup>

Transcendent dualism had strongly influenced our practice of asceticism leading consequently to attitudes of hostility towards women, sexuality, the body and had advanced a rather flight-from-the-world spirituality in Christianity. The demonizing of women as witches in the Middle Ages may be traced back to this influence. It may also explain St. Bonaventure’s ambivalent attitude to physical nature in his discussions on the different ladder of ascent to God in his ascetic spirituality. For him, the lowest and crudest stage of contemplation, (albeit also leading to God) is contemplating on material nature.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Ruether, *New Woman New Earth*, 195.

<sup>16</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 255.

<sup>17</sup>See Ruether, *New Woman New Earth*, 195.

<sup>18</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Development of My Theology,” *Religious Studies Review* 15, 1 (January 1989), 3.

<sup>19</sup>See Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 184.

<sup>20</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 186.

<sup>21</sup>Cited in Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 190.



A transcendent dualistic worldview has also its ramifications in the Christian view of sin and evil. In "Gaia and God," Ruether demonstrates how the Christian view of sin has been influenced by the Jewish (sin as historical) and Greek (sin as metaphysical) views.<sup>22</sup> As a result, in Christianity sin has been seen as that which we are culpable of but at the same time something that we are incapable of overcoming. "The notion that humanity is culpable for its own finitude has laid upon Christians an untenable burden of guilt. Although we may evaluate our mortality as tragic, or seek it as natural, what mortality is not is sin, or the fruit of sin."<sup>23</sup> Sin, she argues, has to do with injustice (broken, oppressive relationships) fostering socio-economic-political injustice as well as the destruction of nature.

Ruether maintains that the Calvinist Reformation (with its demonic view of nature and women, iconoclastic attitude to visual arts in churches, support for patriarchal family as key institution for church and family) and the Scientific Revolution (matter is for scientific and technological control) of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century further aggravated the negative views on women and nature.

According to Ruether, it is the common opinion in "Western intellectual history that one of the major factors in dispelling the kind of 'superstitious' views of nature that promoted the persecution of witches was the rise of sciences in the seventeenth century."<sup>24</sup> In the name of modern rationality witchcraft had to be terminated. However, she notes that, "this obsession with woman as witch was by no means confined to the Middle Ages or to Catholicism, but would be continued in Protestantism and provide major metaphors, both for early scientific investigation of nature and also European colonization of 'pagan' lands."<sup>25</sup>

Ruether observes this with respect to Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who is considered the father of the scientific method. In his *Novum Organum* (1620), Bacon allegedly described the scientific laboratory in a language taken from the Inquisitor's chamber, in which nature is "vexed" and put to the test and thereby "forced to yield her secrets." Ruether insists

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<sup>22</sup>For the Hebraic tradition, sin lies with the will to disobey God's covenantal commandment of justice. For the Greek tradition, however, sin is the soul's losing sight of the eternal essences thereby producing the body. See Ruether, *Gaia and God*, Chapter III.

<sup>23</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 141.

<sup>24</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 194.

<sup>25</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 190.

that this similarity of language should not be taken as a mere coincidence. She further notes that Bacon's works are replete with terms/images (coerced, penetrate, conquered) that show language of violence against women and nature. Bacon seems to have connected science with the Christian story of the fall and redemption. For Bacon, science will bring about redemption to the fallen world by subjecting it to its scrutiny and control in order to induce its fruition (progress).

René Descartes (1595-1650) has also contributed to the idea of physical nature as an object of scrutiny. Ruether claims in "Gaia and God" that Descartes is the originator of the use of the metaphor of a machine to describe material nature. "The result is a radical denial that material reality itself is capable of producing reason or any innate animation."<sup>26</sup> Descartes is also said to have reduced animals to "automata," i.e., mechanically powered life forms (just like clocks!). This gave justification for the use of animals for experimentation. Scientists were trained to think that it is okay to make use of them for experiments because they lack souls or feelings.

Ruether sees Isaac Newton (1642-1727) as the one who ultimately laid the foundations for a mechanistic worldview. This worldview exorcised the spirits (whether good or bad) that were believed to have resided in the world in the older worldview. Nature is left passive, static, malleable and neutral – to be used as resources. This mechanistic worldview gave the impetus to the ruling class of Europe to appropriate the world as a resource to build their power and wealth on. Ruether posits that this worldview led to the rise of colonization and all the evil things that are associated with it.

### 3.2. Understanding the Conceptual Connections

From the above discussions, we can conclude that the ideology of transcendent dualism has related "sexism and ecological destruction in the symbolic patterns of patriarchal consciousness."<sup>27</sup> In other words, in patriarchal Christianity, sexism and naturism are connected *conceptually* and is also manifested concretely in the ambivalent attitude of the church toward women and physical nature. Hence, Ruether strongly holds that "we cannot criticize the hierarchy of male over female without ultimately criticizing and overcoming the hierarchy of humans over nature."<sup>28</sup> This is

<sup>26</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 196.

<sup>27</sup>Ruether, *New Woman New Earth*, 196.

<sup>28</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, 73.



the reason Ruether proposes a reconstruction of theology that is free from dominating and hierarchical relations. Crucial part of this reconstruction of theology is listening to the stories coming from the sciences. This leads us to the heart of this article.

### 3.3. Feminist Analysis Must Include Scientific/Ecological Insights

Ruether asserts that the rise of the physical and the biological sciences in the 16th and 17th centuries, posed serious challenges to the creation narrative of Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Two crucial events were responsible for dislodging the Genesis One account of creation from the esteemed place it had occupied for years in society.

One of these events was the shift from a geocentric worldview (Ptolemy) to a heliocentric one (Copernicus). Copernicus (1473-1543) gave the impetus for this shift, but it was Galileo (1564-1642) who "popularized" this worldview. Ruether notes that the Catholic Church engaged herself in a fierce battle against this view which eventually led her to condemn Galileo. As Ruether clearly explains, the whole shift of worldview "destroyed a whole moral and spiritual system"<sup>30</sup> in which important claims of Christianity during those times were anchored.

A second event that threatened the adequacy and veracity of the church's view on creation happened in the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). These books contained the evolutionary view of Darwin. Darwin's view undermined presumably the Christian belief that humans were created separately from the rest of creation (as crown of creation). Rather, it held the view that

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<sup>29</sup>Ruether holds that creation stories are blue prints of societies, for they validate the particular worldview of a culture and legitimize its continued existence. Christianity for its part has canonized the Genesis One account in the Hebrew Bible (OT) as its official accepted creation narrative. Ruether posits that this Hebrew creation account was a product of various creation stories which themselves reflect varying worldviews. For example, the Hebrew account of creation was influenced by earlier Babylonian creation stories, notably the *Enuma Elish*. Moreover, the Genesis One account, Ruether claims, has been read through the eyes of Greek science of the sort reflected in Plato's *Timeaus*. In short, Western Christianity has been synthesizing different worldviews (Eastern, Hebrew, and Greek) and incorporating them into its own. As a result, Christianity reads the Hebraic account of creation differently. Put in a slightly different way, Christianity's understanding of the Hebraic account contains "foreign" ideas which strictly speaking were not to be found in the Hebrew worldview. This "different reading" accounts for certain ambiguities in Christianity vis-à-vis the God-cosmos relations. See Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 17-31.

<sup>30</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 33.

humans, animals and plants evolved one from the other through a long process of mutation. Human beings, then, are seen to have evolved from apes. This thinking puts seriously into question the whole notion of human consciousness (immortal soul) in Christianity that placed humans above animals. Furthermore, it gravely weakened the Christian belief that creation happened in six days.

These developments, Ruether maintains, resulted into a situation where science and religion were not in good speaking terms with one another anymore. This was highly reinforced by the Baconian scientific method of the split between the realm of the objective/scientific and the realm of subjective/religious. For years, this had been a convenient arrangement for both parties, until recently.

Ruether has noticed that the “cold war” or mutual insulation that existed for a long time between Christianity and science is beginning to crumble down. There are several factors to this. One is the growing realization that the “progress” which science had triumphalistically announced has not been achieved yet. Instead, this so-called progress brought about societal and environmental crises. Ruether claims that present day thinking has also begun to link the idea of progress to moral responsibility. Moreover, science seemingly does not satisfy fully human search for the ethical, aesthetic and the spiritual.

Another important change that signalled this emerging dialogue is the serious challenge put on the mechanistic/atomistic view of Newtonian physics. For Newton, an object remains inert as long as there is no object that makes it move. This implies a static, fixed framework of space and time. With the advent of the theory of relativity of Einstein and quantum physics, this static, objective worldview of Newton was seriously challenged. Quantum physics discovered that matter is not static but “fluid” like a light. This view resulted in the claim that the subatomic particles are undergoing a “dance” (energy fields). These minute particles are engaged in continuous interactions with those environments they were related to. These particles merged and coalesced with one another. Clear-cut distinctions among them became fluid. Ruether cites Fritjof Capra (1977) as an example of a thinker who tries to bridge the gap between science and religion. Presumably, Capra sees some common features between the new discoveries in the new physics (concept of dance of energy) and the traditional mysticism of Buddhism and Taoism.

With the new discoveries in quantum physics, what Ruether wishes to emphasize is the fact that they raise serious challenges to a dualistic

mentality. In quantum physics, mutual relationality among subatomic elements is emphasized. Ruether referring to the importance of the new physics expresses the following words:

With this merger of the two opposite poles of Classical Greek ontological dualism, spirit and matter, it was even less appropriate to continue to make a dualistic opposition between objective and subjective, fact and value. It became necessary to recognize that the world not only appears differently according to our standpoint toward it and methods of addressing it, but itself will be constituted differently by the stance assumed toward it. Rather than assuming a standpoint outside of and unrelated to reality, from which "objective" knowledge is possible, the observer is an integral part of the reality observed.<sup>31</sup>

The emphasis on mutual relationality is further developed in her ecofeminist theocosmology. Drawing from this scientific insight and combining it with that of Teilhard de Chardin and process theology, Ruether stresses the "coincidence of opposites." Subatomic particles are imbued with a "rationality." This "rationality" drives these minute particles to move into novel patterns to form higher stages of matter. This "concentrated" matter which also is involved in the dance of energy dissolves, further, into a wider web of relationship with others. So the process goes on and on until finally reality is able to reach its goal – the coming together of matter (dissolution into the many) and Spirit (the unifying whole). She argues:

This matrix of dancing energy operates with a "rationality," predictable patterns that result in fixed number of possibilities. Thus what we have traditionally called "God," the "mind," or rational pattern holding all things together, and what we have called "matter," the "ground" of physical objects, come together. The disintegration of the many into infinitely small "bits," and the One, or unifying whole that connects all things together, coincide.<sup>32</sup>

The astrophysical sciences have their own story to tell too. Their story of creation begins with the "Big Bang." 15 billion years ago, scientists have imagined a moment in time where there was an intense concentration of matter-energy into a single ball. This single ball of energy was so charged that suddenly it exploded, thereby producing/creating energy and matter (space and time) in the universe. For hundreds of years,

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<sup>31</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 39.

<sup>32</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 249.

these spaces where inhabited only by atomic structures and gasses which gave rise to the formation of galaxies – and thus the Solar System with its sun and planets.

Life seems to have begun on the earth nearly 4.5 billion years ago. According to scientists, life seems to have started in the seas in the form of photosynthesizing bacteria that later developed into aquatic animals and plants. Later on, other forms of life began to emerge on the land too. Ruether stresses that in this biological story, human beings came very late. “Within that history of land animals, humans occupy a fraction of time, a mere 400, 000 years, or less than one-tenth of 1 percent of earth’s history”.<sup>33</sup> Apparently, animal kingdoms and ecosystems have been existing for a long time without humans. Ruether notes, however, that in the very short history of human beings on earth, human population has grown in an amazingly rapid way. This growing population also corresponded to an accelerating human colonization of the earth. In Ruether’s opinion, the fact that “humans are mere latecomers on earth” is a reason enough to generate feelings of respect and a sense of reverence for the whole cosmos.

#### 3.4. Lessons from the Ecological Science

Ruether defines ecology as the biological science that studies the laws of how biotic communities, unaided by humans, generate and sustain life.<sup>34</sup> It also provides guidelines on how human beings can learn to be sustaining rather than destructive of their environment.

According to Ruether, there are important insights that we can learn from the way nature works. First and foremost of this is the interrelation of all things. Humans share a deep kinship with the whole of reality – from galaxies and stars (stars were the sources of planets of which earth is one of these planets) to the smallest bacteria (remember the photosynthesizing bacteria as the beginning of life) on earth. Ruether holds that a realization of our deep kinship with the whole of the cosmic reality can demolish the arrogance of human beings towards what humans consider lower forms of life. “Recognition of this profound kinship must bridge the arrogant barriers that humans have erected to wall themselves off, not only from other sentient animals, but also from simpler animals, plants, and the abiotic matrix of life in rocks and soils, air, and water.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 45.

<sup>34</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 47.

<sup>35</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 47.

Another important message one draws from ecological studies is the insight that plants, air, water and animals coevolved. This means to say that life continues to go on because of the symbiotic relationships among these factors in the universe. The food-chain, the cycle of production, consumption and decomposition in nature are evidence of the interdependency, cooperation that is present in our ecosystems. Related to this insight, is the fact that, nature appreciates diversity. Diversity is needed to sustain the ecosystems. Amidst the diversity in nature, the law that prevails is cooperation (among species or sub-species; for the rest they devour each other) and not so much about competition. Ruether alludes here to the false picture that the Darwinian evolutionary slogan of the "survival of the fittest" gives. It gives the impression that only the rich, strong and the powerful have the right to exist.

These are some of the insights she acquired from the sciences. Through them, Ruether became aware of the need to conceive new creation stories/narratives. She suggests that "[w]e need scientist-poets who can retell ... the story of the cosmos and the earth's history, in a way that can call us to wonder, to reverence for life, and to the vision of humanity living in community with all its sister and brother beings."<sup>36</sup> In these new stories, Ruether wishes to emphasize relationality, solidarity, mutuality, integrity, justice and responsibility. Moreover, they should recapture the "thou-ness" of the whole of reality. In addition, they have to emphasize the important role humans play because of their gift of reflective consciousness. They are to be stewards of the whole of cosmic reality. So, Ruether pleads: "Human consciousness, then, should not be what utterly separates us from the rest of 'nature.' Rather, consciousness is where this dance of energy organizes itself in increasing unified ways, until it reflects back on itself in self-awareness. Consciousness is and must be where we recognize our kinship with all other beings."<sup>37</sup> Learning from the stories of the quantum physics, astrophysics, biological sciences and the science of ecology, a genuine spirituality of creation and non-oppressive relationships can ensue.

### 3.5. Ecological Thinking Needs the Insights of Feminism

The ecological insights from the sciences are further enriched by a feminist perspective. One of the basic tenets of ecofeminism is the claim that ecological movements or thinking must embrace a feminist perspective. We see this present in Ruether's discussion of sexism as a

<sup>36</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 58.

<sup>37</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 250.

distortion of relationship between males and females. She identifies sexism as the most virulent form of sin or broken relationship. It represents the “psychic-model” for the other forms of oppression. She maintains:

Sexual symbolism is foundational to the perception of order and relationship that has been built up in cultures. The psychic organization of consciousness, the dualistic view of the self and the world, the hierarchical concept of society, the relation of humanity and nature, and of God and creation – all these relationships have been modeled on sexual dualism. Therefore the liberation of women attacks the basic stereotypes of authority, identity and the structural relations of ‘reality.’<sup>38</sup>

Any authentic environmental ethics and spirituality will have to take into consideration this insight. If sexual dualism forms the model for all other forms of oppressions, then the dynamics of sexism will be a crucial basis in trying to explain and combat naturism and other forms of oppressions. This implies the coordinated effort to root out different forms of oppressions. The call for all is to foster non-exploitative and non-dominating relationships.

#### **4. The Male Monotheistic God: Toward a Reinterpretation**

The insights from the sciences, ecological studies and feminism direct Ruether to a re-evaluation of traditional theological concepts. As indicated by Bouma-Prediger “Ruether’s entire discussion of ecojustice leads ultimately to the conclusion that some radical theological reconstruction is needed. Perhaps most especially, there is a need for a reconception of God.”<sup>39</sup>

##### **4.1. Male Monotheism: Legitimater of Transcendent Dualism**

Ruether maintains that the image of a male monotheistic God religiously legitimizes the social hierarchy of patriarchy and the hierarchical structuring of reality – God-male-female-nature through the practice of domination. Ruether elucidates her point:

... the idea of the male monotheistic God and the relation of this God to the Cosmos as its Creator, have reinforced symbolically the relations of domination of men over women, masters over slaves, and (male ruling class) humans over animals and over the earth. Domination of women has provided a key link, both socially and

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<sup>38</sup>Ruether, *New Woman New Earth*, 3-4.

<sup>39</sup>Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology*, 51.



symbolically, to the domination of earth, hence the tendency in patriarchal cultures to link women with earth, matter, and nature, while identifying males with sky, intellect, and transcendent spirit.<sup>40</sup>

This hierarchical order, contends Ruether, is evident in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, this is seen in the patriarchal system where women, children and servants are defined in reference to the patriarchs who "own" them. Ruether cites 1 Corinthians 11:3,7 as an example in the New Testament where this hierarchical "order" is also mandated.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the image of a male monotheistic God results in a dualistic conception of reality. In the ancient myths, however, the Gods and Goddesses sprung from the matrix of one physical-spiritual reality. In contrast, in male monotheism, nature is no longer the matrix where the gods and humans come to being. A male monotheistic God is seen to exist above his creation and is responsible for calling forth this creation in existence. A rapture in reality, therefore, is created – the transcendent Spirit (Male God) and the inferior and dependent physical nature (creation). In this scheme of perceiving reality, man becomes essentially the image of the male God, while women and physical nature become the images of material reality. Therefore, "the woman, the body and the world [plants, rocks, stars, etc.] were the lower half of a dualism that must be declared posterior to, created by, subject to, and ultimately alien to the nature of (male) consciousness, in whose image man made his God."<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.2 God/dess: The Divine as both Transcendent and Immanent

According to Ruether, the patriarchal Christian tradition has emphasized so much the transcendence of the divine (God "up there" above the sub-lunar spheres sealed from any tinge of materiality), at the expense of the divine's immanence. She, therefore, stresses the need to recover the immanence of the divine.<sup>43</sup> Her best attempt to recover the divine's immanence is through her concept of God/dess as the Primal matrix.

<sup>40</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 3.

<sup>41</sup>"But I want to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God... For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man" (1 Corinthians 11:3,7 NRSV).

<sup>42</sup>Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 195.

<sup>43</sup>It must be noted that Ruether does not only show us how God-talk has legitimized women's and nature's oppression. But she is also interested in finding an answer to the classic Christian question regarding God's transcendence and immanence.

We can speak of the root of human image of the divine as the Primal Matrix, the great womb within which all things, Gods, and humans, sky and earth, human and nonhuman beings, are generated. Here the divine is not abstracted into some other world beyond this earth but is the encompassing source of new life that surrounds the present world and assures its continuance.<sup>44</sup>

What this root image conjures about the Divine is that God is not only the source of life (Creator) but also is the one who continues to sustain and nourish the whole of the created world. It also speaks of the fact that because the whole of creation comes from the cosmic womb, then it shares the same “material stuff”, so to speak, as that of the Primal Matrix. Here then, the traditional theological expression – “created in the image and likeness of God” gains a deeper meaning. It no longer speaks only about a spiritual journey to holiness or simply expresses the divine spark in us but it articulates the lofty and the real condition of the created world- that is, it shares the same substance as that that of the Divine Creator and thus worthy of dignity and respect. Hence, the Primal Matrix is the most appropriate way of expressing both the transcendence and immanence of the divine. It rejects the dualism of matter and spirit. So, Ruether writes:

It [image of God as Primal Matrix] must reject both sides of the dualism: both of the image of mother-matter-matrix as ‘static immanence’ and as the ontological foundation of existing, oppressive social systems and also the concept of spirit and transcendence as rootless, antinatural, originating in an “other world” beyond the cosmos, ever repudiating and fleeing from nature, body and the visible way.<sup>45</sup>

This insight is important, according to her, if there is ever to be an authentic liberation for women and nature from exploitation. In this line of thought, liberation will not be conceived as “out of or against nature [immanence] into spirit [transcendence],”<sup>46</sup> but back into a proper relationship with nature (healing broken relationship with other people and with nature).

The God/dess concept, therefore, is not the divine that sanctions patriarchal hierarchy and oppressive relationships in society. Rather, God/dess liberates people from oppressive forces while leading them to new possibilities (transcendence). In doing so, it regrounds people in the

<sup>44</sup>Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 48.

<sup>45</sup>Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 70.

<sup>46</sup>Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 70.

world (nature). The God/dess is the one who embraces the material substratum of our existence. God as a Primal Matrix (cosmic womb) is merged with the creative processes of the world. Ruether avers:

God/dess who is the foundation (at one and the same time) of our being and our new being embraces both the roots of the material substratum of our existence (matter) and also the endlessly new creative potential (spirit). The God/dess who is the foundation of our being-new being does not lead us back to a stifled, dependent self or uproot us in a spirit-trip outside the earth. Rather it leads us to the converted center, the harmonization of self and body, self and other, self and world. It is the Shalom of our being.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, Ruether reinterprets the meaning of God's transcendence and immanence. On the one hand, by God's transcendence, she means, that God is the well-spring of new potentialities for creation. On the other hand, by God's immanence, she implies that God is the anchor, as well as, the source of our very being as creatures.

To conclude this section, I present here the challenge posed by Ruether's ecofeminist theology:

An ecological-feminist theology of nature must rethink the whole Western theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being and chain of command. This theology must question the hierarchy of human over nonhuman nature as a relationship of ontological and moral value. It must challenge the right of the human to treat the nonhuman as private property and material wealth to be exploited. It must unmask the structures of social domination, male over female, owner over worker that mediate this domination of nonhuman nature. Finally, it must question the model of hierarchy that starts with nonmaterial spirit (God) as the source of the chain of being and continues down to nonspiritual 'matter' as the bottom of the chain of being and the most inferior, valueless, and dominated point in the chain of command.<sup>48</sup>

In short, the chain of being, which emanated from an immaterial God – the immaterial One spreading into multiplicity (Nous, Psyche) to reach the realm of matter – is at the same time the chain of command and grounds the level of ontological difference among the realities in the chain of being. If Immaterial God occupies the highest level, the material world represents the most devalued level. Ruether propounds that this scheme of thinking has generated hierarchical oppressive relationships in society particularly in

<sup>47</sup>Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 71.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 85.

Christianity. Ruether's ecofeminism seeks, then, the eradication of such oppressive schemes of relationships that have plagued Christianity. Ruether's ecofeminism acknowledges the twin domination of women and nature. It insists on the significance of solving sexism and naturism within her vision of eco-justice. It relies not only on retrieving important biblical traditions but also depends on the ecological movements and the new physics. Finally, it seeks to demolish a hierarchical (Immaterial God vs. material beings) and dualistic conception of reality (spirit/matter).

### 5. Conclusion

A constructive dialogue between science and religion is indispensable especially in a world wrecked by the relentless disrespect for women and nature. These dual oppressions of women and nature have already taken a global scale such that they demand not only a personal or local response but also a global one. Independently from each other, neither science nor religion can claim that it has all the answers to these problems. Such fundamentalist tendencies or exclusive claims on both sides will only contribute to the worsening of the problem because of myopic and isolated responses, not to mention the general feeling of apathy it can generate. Thus, a concerted effort between science and religion to address sexism and the ecological crisis is urgently needed. If we have to make a new story of hope in our ravaged globalized village, it has to come from the wellsprings of religion and science. Each in respectful and constructive dialogue can share from its own competencies in coming up with a more comprehensive solution to our present daunting predicaments.

Let me summarize the major insights put forward in this exposition:

1. Using the integrative typology of Ian Barbour I have demonstrated how theology of nature in general and the ecofeminist theology of Ruether in particular have fostered a meaningful dialogue between science and religion.
2. Ecofeminist philosophy/theology examines critically the interlocking oppression between women and nature through the notions of oppressive conceptual framework and the logic of domination.
3. Ecofeminism advocates that for feminist theory and practice to be a powerful tool of analysis, it must include scientific/ecological perspectives. Solution to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective because sexism represents the "psychic-model" for all other forms of oppression.

4. Rosemary Radford Ruether's ecofeminism blames the ideology of transcendent dualism in Christianity as the reason for sexism and ecological disrespect. This ideology, supported by the image of a male monotheistic God, legitimizes patriarchy and the hierarchical structuring of reality where women and nature occupy the lowest rank. For her, to bring about a transformative praxis in our treatment of women and nature, there is a need to deconstruct prevailing sexist and anti-nature Christian narratives.
5. Ruether promotes the reconstruction of new creation stories/narratives that draws out from the well-spring of scientific discoveries. In these new stories, she hopes to recapture the "thou-ness" of the whole of reality and to emphasize the important role humans play because of their gift of reflective consciousness.

The task ahead in the reconstruction of theology and philosophy into a more gender and environmentally sensitive disciplines is first to have a robust awareness and understanding of the real pains and groaning of women and nature. Critical awareness of these issues will make us mindful of the kinds of ideas and values that we advocate so that they lead to the promotion of a more equitable and humane forms of relationships rather than oppressive and exploitative ones. That our changed perspectives and renewed relationships with women will take on a more just pattern of exchange. And that our restored connection with nature shall bring forth the flourishing of life and the protection of the delicate balance of our environment. In this reconstruction process, science is our natural ally.