

Feminists, Ecology, And the Sabbath

An Adventist pastor believes ecofeminism “enlivens and challenges Adventist spirituality.”

by Sheryll Prinz-McMillan

RECENTLY, ADVENTISTS, AT BOTH THE ACADEMIC and lay levels, have begun to recognize the lack of an integrated approach to spiritual life. Many (particularly women and African-Americans) have begun to struggle with liberation models, seeking to experience not only the God of truth, but also to participate in the life of a God of justice. Others have begun experimenting with contemplative models of prayer and spiritual journeying, seeking a deeper union with Christ at a personal level.

What Is Ecofeminism?

Ecofeminism presents fresh wellsprings for Adventist spirituality. It combines concerns for ecology and divisions between people (feminism). The term “ecofeminism” was first

used in 1974 by Françoise d’Eaubonne¹ (*ecofeminisme*), to represent women’s potential for bringing about an ecological revolution that would ensure human survival.² In his view, such a revolution would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature. More recently, “ecofeminism” has been utilized by feminists, men and women, who seek to explore how the male domination of women and the domination of nature are interconnected, both in ideology and in social structures.³ Ecofeminism notes the important connections (historical, empirical, symbolic, conceptual, and theoretical) between the domination of women and the domination of nature.⁴

The term *feminist* has been used in many ways, but for the purposes of this article, the term refers to a critique of abusive hierarchy and the attempt to construct a theological model that breaks down barriers.

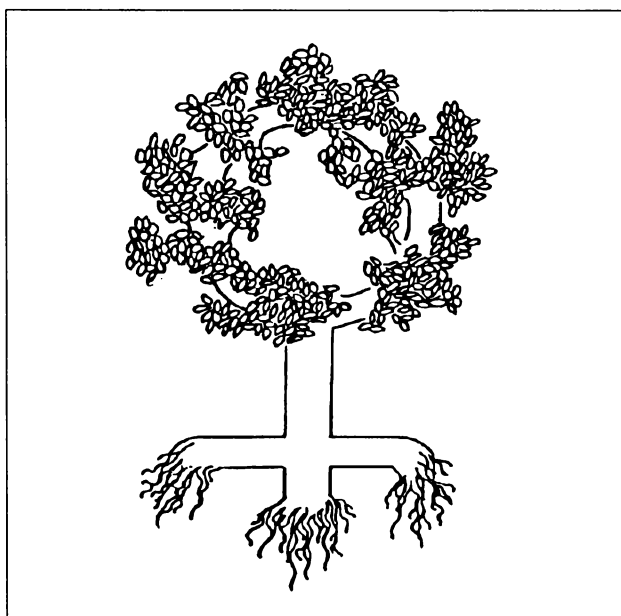
Ecology is the branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments.⁵ Ecology literally could be

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“the science of the housed,” taken from the Greek word *oikos*; and, thus, by extension, the space in which we live.⁶

Ecofeminism critiques other ecologically oriented philosophies. Reform environmentalists such as the Audubon Society, The National Wildlife Federation, and the Sierra Club want to preserve and manage natural resources. Deep ecologists accuse these organizations of being anthropocentric, valuing human “quality of life” over the welfare of the entire ecosystem. Ecofeminists accuse the deep ecologists of failing to acknowledge that the problem is not anthropocentrism, but androcentrism: a masculine alignment of men with culture and women with nature, with men dominating both women and nature.⁷ Christian ecofeminists would read Colossians 1:20 ([God]. . . “reconcile[d] to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven”) as hope for all of creation’s reconciliation: including men to women and humanity to the earth.

Ecofeminist theology consistently reverberates with the themes of connectedness and relationality, two themes touching on the nature of humanity and the nature of God, as well as on areas of specific Adventist thought, such as the Sabbath, the Second Coming, the



“soul,” inspiration, and perfection. Similarly, the ecofeminist emphasis on the integrity of all creation presents interesting challenges to Adventism’s health message and the “use” of creation, versus living in relation to creation. Eschatology is also addressed by an ecofeminist theology, offering Adventism’s own perspectives on this subject some unique difficulties.

In ecofeminist theology it is difficult to separate thought and service to God from service to humanity and nature. In fact, attempting to see life or thought in this way is deemed dualistic. Therefore, spirituality cannot be mere reflection, feeling, or thought; but, as with all other dualisms, must contain reconciling action. An ecofeminist spirituality encompasses not only service to humanity as service to God, but service to all of creation as well.

Sallie McFague sees this relationship of God to creation as necessitating a revision of our thinking about the Holy Spirit. In exploring this theme, she utilizes the construct of *pneuma*, or breath, to be God (the spirit) embodying and enlivening the very air that is breathed to maintain life; and since all of creation shares in the very breath of God (*pneuma*, or the “soul”), all of creation shares in the very soul of God.⁸ Anne Primavesi suggests that the hierarchical ranking of those with a “soul” (i.e. saved humanity over creation) operates as another mechanism for exclusion and separation.

Ecofeminists agree with him [Buber], that a false notion of transcendence limited to a divine “up there” cannot be upheld. It seems to call for a different kind of response from God and from us to certain objects supposedly set aside as ‘not God.’ Schweitzer denounced the same kind of split consciousness when he called for an ethical relationship with the world, entailing reverence for all life not just certain forms of it. . . . The division can only be healed by regaining respect for things we have downgraded as mere means.⁹

Carol Johnston, another ecofeminist theologian, argues for God’s relationality as well. She

suggests that a powerful and transcendent image of a God who is able to destroy humanity at any time, but “chooses” not to, is equal to a theory of “nuclear deterrence.” Johnston suggests that a theory that postulates that God has the right and power to do as God pleases, but chooses not to exercise that right out of love, is not a God in relationship with creation. Instead, Johnston suggests that although God has the ability for ultimate destruction, God does not “choose” to refrain; but, rather, it is God’s inherent relatedness to the world that recognizes the good of creation, and allows God to refrain from destruction. Due to this relationship, God “. . . works to preserve, liberate, and empower all life, so the whole creation can flourish together.”¹⁰ God is not interested in holding power, but in empowering all.

Ecofeminism, the Sabbath, and Vegetarianism

In Adventist thought, accepting a view of the soul as God’s breath is a simple step to take. It is the larger ramifications of an increased relationality that begins to challenge a cognitive understanding of conditional immortality. In fact, in a review of Adventist history, Russell Staples suggest that the doctrine of “soul sleep” was developed as an issue of theodicy, rather than rethinking of Platonic dualism.¹¹ If Adventist thought begins to move toward this rethinking, Adventist doctrine might maintain the same position on the soul, but with greater consistency and an awareness of eco-justice. This rethinking also begins a move beyond doctrine to an empowering contemplative and active spirituality. It also calls for service to creation—the earth itself or other life—as we attempt to offer our service to God, much as Adventists have offered service to humanity through organizations like ADRA. Extending such service to the rest of creation simply lends greater consistency and justice to belief.

The very approach to “soul” as the breath of God opens Adventist thinking to ecofeminist theology in an unusual way. Due to Kellogg’s early dabble with pantheism, we have hesitated to explore the degrees to which God’s breath is in and around us and enlivening all of creation. Even if Adventist thought is hesitant to embrace pantheism, it is important that Adventists explore the full significance of a pneumatology based on the concept of God’s *ruach*. The Johannine gospel freely utilizes this language in describing God’s active presence in the world. This paradigm, based on the concept of God’s omnipresent *ruach*, suggests a moving away from language of instrumentality (God “using” us), to relationality (participating with God). This relational language is consistent with our traditional understanding of the Great Controversy, where God calls for our participation in the conflict with evil. An ecofeminist spirituality would simply extend the concept of the controversy with evil to include a nature that needs our protection, empowerment, and co-participation.

Adventists have often employed relational God-language when speaking of prophetic inspiration, particularly the gift of prophecy as experienced by Ellen G. White. Moving away from an instrumental view of God might alleviate tensions experienced in the understanding of prophetic inspiration, for both the Scriptures and Ellen White: if God is interconnected with creation, and works *with* prophets, rather than *through* them, then assuming verbal inspiration would be difficult.

Adopting some of the underlying presuppositions of an ecofeminist spirituality could heal the dualism among us as well. For instance, the dichotomy between those advocating grace and those maintaining a position on perfection might be seen as another example of alienation resulting from a mind/matter dualism. Perhaps, if interconnectedness were emphasized, perfection might not be seen in individualistic terms. Rather, any ethi-

cal righteousness could only be experienced in relationship with the other. Similarly, grace could not be experienced only cognitively or individually, but as it is enlivened by the breath of God and shared in an application of empowerment and justice with the other (perfection?).

Even the historical Adventist emphasis on the “simple” life-style, such as gardening and minimal adornment, could be used as reminders that our actions affect others: the gardening reminds us of our connection to the earth, and minimal adornment our solidarity with those who are poor and oppressed; and the adornment we choose remains as a reminder of the beauties of God’s good creation.

Ecofeminists see creation as good and as continuing to participate in the life of God. Sin, then, affects creation along with humanity and is most often seen in terms of social structures, hierarchies that abuse, and a disrespect for life, rather than in equating sin with matter (i.e., creation).

In the *Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams examines the connection between language that places animals on a lower hierarchical rung and the abuse of women. She suggests that the abuse of women and the abuse of animals are intricately connected, and that the revaluing of animal life (and thus, vegetarianism) acknowledges their worth, and simultaneously, women’s worth.¹²

With this high regard for creation and animal life, many ecofeminists support a vegetarian life-style: as recognition of the value of life,¹³ a commitment to non-violence,¹⁴ valuing the intrinsic worth of animals,¹⁵ as well as a commitment to sharing the world’s resources.

Adams suggests that “Our dietary choices reflect and reinforce our cosmology, our politics.”¹⁶ She goes on to detail the connection between the vegetarian movement of the early 20th century with the women’s rights movement, the women’s peace conventions,

dress reform, and the early temperance reform movement. Each of these movements led by women strove for not only the emancipation of women, but also the health and well-being of all. Adams even notes the involvement of Ellen G. White, listing her among the “feminist” reformers who later adopted a vegetarian life-style to be in harmony with her other acts of reformation and women’s liberation! Adams suggests a direct link between the history of feminism and vegetarianism:

Both experienced a rebirth through the books in the years after the French Revolution. Each considers a meeting held in the 1840s as very important: the 1847 Ramsgate meeting at which the term vegetarianism was either coined or ratified; the 1848 meeting at Seneca Falls in which American women’s rights demands were outlined . . . [and] each has been viewed as lapsing into obscurity. . . .¹⁷

An emphasis on creation’s worth fits well within Adventism’s rubrics, which emphasize the Creation event, the Creation and earth cycles (Sabbath), and look to the restoration of a pre-Edenic creation. In fact, Sabbath itself reminds our very bodies of daily rhythms and the larger context of the month:

The turning of the earth on its axis gives us the basic two-beat rhythm, evening/morning. The moon in its orbit introduces another rhythm, the twenty-eight-day month, marked by the four phases of seven days each. . . . Every seventh day a deeper note is struck, . . . creation honored and contemplated, redemption remembered and shared.¹⁸

These rhythms of Sabbath act to remind humanity of the connection to all of creation, and God’s participation in all of the earth. It also serves as a reminder of the grace that is experienced each week, and the ability to relax in the fact that God continues to be connected to the cycles of life. Sabbath, then, calls humanity to nature. Not simply for its instrumental

value, or as a call to see God's greatness, but to recognize creation's intrinsic worth.

Sabbath also functions as a reminder of humanity's call to reflect God's glory through enabling the rest of creation to function as God has designed. This means Sabbath activities would include not only this contemplation, but service to the earth as well. It also should be a time to foster awareness of ecological problems and the contemplation of the beauty and fragility of the planet, while living in the solidarity, and working for justice of all living and non-living beings.¹⁹ Celebrating Sabbath allows all of humanity to join with the entire cosmos in celebrating its Creator, a time for both men and women to reclaim their relationship to God and creation.²⁰

An ecofeminist spirituality also calls Adventists to re-examine some of the early history of "health reform" and its possible ramifications for an eco-based health message of the 20th century.

Early Adventists accepted health reform as part of their religious experience and theology, not simply as a way to improve personal health.²¹

Health reform, specifically vegetarianism, was seen to be connected to the three angels' messages, and as a method of reconciliation to creation and a return to the original relationship to creatures of the earth. James White, in advocating a vegetarian diet, saw meat-eating as connected with pain, death, the killing of God's creatures, and as a result of sin.²²

Re-evaluating the rationale for health reform also leads an ecofeminist spirituality to emphasize vegetarianism as an issue of solidarity with the world's poor and hungry and

as a wise utilization of the world's resources,²³ rather than an egocentric desire to increase one's individual health. Thus, re-evaluating creation out of an ecofeminist paradigm creates a richer understanding of an Adventist heritage and encourages a healing relationship with all of creation.

Ecofeminist Eschatology

Many ecofeminists view the current ecological crisis as the "apocalypse" itself, where the word is taken literally: "to unveil."²⁴

Here the unveiling is humanity's disconnection from the earth, and the earth's deep travail because of it. Endtime prophesies, such as Revelation 22:2, where the leaves of trees are for the healing of the nations, are taken as a summons to an earth-centered spirituality. Most Christian ecofeminists are optimistic about the eschaton,

with the future open rather than predetermined.²⁵

Other ecofeminists look to the biblical image for other ways of dealing with eschatological issues connected to creation. Ruether suggests the possibility that the concept of Jubilee years²⁶ is indicative of God's concern for the earth's renewal and celebration. The year of Jubilee is centered on the same concern as Sabbath restoration, where both function to restore the proper balance to the earth and its inhabitants. Furthermore, Jesus' inaugural speech of Luke 4, taken from Isaiah 61, indicates that redemption is not to be limited to only the spiritual realm. Even the Lord's prayer of Matthew 6:10 asks for God's will to

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be done on earth as well as in heaven.

Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel suggests that the image of a land flowing with milk and honey can be redemptive:

Milk is connected to nourishment that comes from the mother and is believed to give both physical and spiritual life. Honey denotes good fortune. The bees that produce it are the perfect example of the first human association based on gynaeocracy and motherhood.²⁷

Lettie Russell posits “householding” as an image that can help mend creation; and Bev Harrison calls for movement beyond analysis and the need to engage in “utopic envisagement.”²⁸

Ruether, in *Gaia and God*, suggests that apocalypticism is based on the fantasy of escape from mortality:

The foundation of this fantasy of escape from the body, earth, and evil is a certain model of God, a God unrelated to earth, body, or mortality. A God who is absolute good against absolute evil in a way that is unrelational. It is this kind of concept of a transcendent, unrelational God, and the identification of themselves with this God, which allows apocalypticists to imagine themselves to be safe from world destruction. . . . Indeed world destruction is the means by which they can escape.²⁹

This catastrophic school, as Ruether terms it, is typified in American Christianity by Seventh-day Adventism.³⁰ Her indictment does not stand alone. In a recent issue of *Spectrum*, it was suggested that an understanding of time (as “endtime”) seems to exempt Adventists from responsibility for the earth and all of creation.³¹

Yet Adventism’s presentation of the Second Coming, where humanity is called upon to participate in a significant way in the upcoming God-event, is consistent with an ecofeminist emphasis on God’s interconnectedness with creation. The third angel’s message of a call to faithfulness, could also

be extended to creation, as demonstrated in Hosea 4:1-3: “There is no faithfulness. . . . Therefore the land mourns . . . together with the wild animals” (NRSV). Similarly, the traditional presentation of the heavenly sanctuary embodies the very image of a God continually active in the life of creation and the covenant; a covenant that the Hebrew Scriptures indicate was made with all of creation.³²

Adventists who note the powerful presence of God now in the forest, lakes, mountains, desert, ocean, and garden, look forward to the garden in the hereafter, the new heaven and the New Earth. This expectation should be seen not to weaken, but rather to stimulate a concern for cultivating this garden, which is not entirely separable from the garden hereafter, even though it is correct to distinguish between them.³³

A renewed, ecofeminist eschatology calls for the re-examination of the doctrine of the resurrection as well:

Easter could hardly have been an isolated past event, as it has been the center of Christian worship and hope throughout the history of the church. Therefore, Easter describes the ongoing activity of god to save the world. The presence of god’s spirit is real. It is a redemptive gift that transforms our ordinary lives and ordinary experiences in a world of darkness.³⁴

Then, just as there is hope for the presence of God in our lives, there is hope for God’s presence to be active in the world. Just as an Adventist eschatology looks toward vindication for humanity, so too the eschaton should be viewed as a time for the vindication of all of creation. The Scripture records creation’s mourning when sin entered,³⁵ and its rejoicing when sin is destroyed.³⁶ Even the early Millerites, with their otherworldly focus, quickly realized a call to care for themselves and humanity. An ecofeminist spirituality is a call for Adventism to re-examine eschatology, bringing into its scope all of creation.

An ecofeminist theology challenges not only doctrinal consistency, but personal spirituality as well:

Basic moral questions are involved in the continuing abuse of the environment. Humankind is so interconnected with the earth so that environmental irresponsibility quickly touches human rights and human life. . . . The deeper causes of the environmental problems we face lie in the human heart: the pathologies of fear, greed, selfishness, arrogance.

Eco-spirituality knows there will be no healing of the earth unless there is a healing and conversion of hearts.³⁷

Ecofeminism enlivens and challenges Adventist spirituality to embody justice and empower others; challenge dualism and recenter humanity within creation and God's presence. An ecofeminist theology is needed to challenge Adventist thinking and revitalize Adventist spirituality.

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