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Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation

Ivone Gebara

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Book Review

Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation. By Ivone Gebara. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999. Pages, ix + 230. Cloth, \$22.00.

In her book, Latin American theologian Ivone Gebara brings together two contemporary strands of theological thought: Latin American liberation and ecofeminist theologies. Both engaging and critiquing her fellow Latin American colleagues, Gebara offers a critical assessment of the androcentrism and anthropocentrism of contemporary and historical theologies through an ecofeminist hermeneutic. One of the first monographs to extensively treat ecofeminism from a Latin American perspective, Gebara is influenced by her North American counterparts, especially Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague.

As a theological reflection that emerges from a commitment to the struggles of poor women, the author links humanity's objectification and exploitation of nature with that of women, who are symbolically identified with nature. Using a multi-tiered analysis that takes account of gender, race, class, and ethnicity, Gebara offers a significant contribution to the predominantly North American field of ecofeminist theology, while simultaneously fulfilling a void within Latin American theology surrounding ecological and feminist issues.

While not claiming to reinterpret a traditional theology, through what she names as "a philosophical perspective as it is related to Christian religious experience," Gebara addresses various key theological loci in her work: epistemology, anthropology, concept of God, the Trinity, and Jesus Christ. Relatedness is a pervasive theme throughout the text, and Gebara, through chapter treatments, focuses on the above-mentioned loci in the light of this theme. The structure of each chapter is similar: Gebara begins with a presentation, analysis, and critique of traditional Christian theological constructions surrounding each area followed by her own ecofeminist contribution.

In an interesting twist, considering that this is a text whose major intention is to foreground a less anthropocentric theological reflection, Gebara begins with the human person. Chapter 1 looks at issues of epistemology. Far from seeing epistemology as abstract philosophical discourse, Gebara emphasizes its practical dimension. "Working on epistemology is not just a matter of trying to influence the process of transmitting knowledge; it is working toward changing the hierarchical power structure itself, which continues to propagate itself in the

underlying structures of our society and, in consequence, of our knowing." (21) As an alternative to the hierarchical, anthropocentric and androcentric epistemologies of Western tradition, Gebara proposes an affective, non-dualistic, and inter-connected epistemological theory. The theme of inter-connectedness also dominates chapter two, where Gebara offers a cosmic and collective vision of the human. For humanity, relatedness is constitutive of who we are, in communion with all beings.

The contextuality and provisionality of human discourse about the divine is a key thrust in chapters 3–5. Gebara calls for an analogical understanding of human concepts of God. Building on the work of Sallie McFague, Gebara offers an ecofeminist "model" of God as Mystery and human hope. In the following chapter, Gebara moves to examine specifically a Trinitarian understanding of God, where she downplays the ontological nature of trinitarian affirmations. "The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not of divine stuff as opposed to our human stuff; rather, they are relationships—relationships we human beings experience and express in metaphorical rather than metaphysical terms." (153) In a similar vein, Gebara counters both metaphysical Christologies and the unique ontological character of Jesus. Instead, the author offers vision of Jesus as the ethical and aesthetic perfection of humanity. The book concludes with the image of religious bio-diversity, a process-oriented vision where plurality is respected and the inter-connectedness of the cosmic web is foundational.

While this book offers the reader a creative and thought-provoking ecofeminist analysis, there are various significant issues that hinder the text. Though not denying the dualistic and patriarchal elements of the Christian tradition, Gebara's failure to provide sufficient concrete examples of the very tradition she critiques often reduces her analysis to caricatures. In a similar vein, as this work is highly constructive, the reader is left to wonder if Gebara finds anything affirming and salvageable within the history of Christian thought for ecofeminist theology. Last, while supporting Gebara's emphasis on the contextual nature of all theological reflection, one may wonder if Gebara pushes the point too far, leaving one to question the role or very existence of revelation within Christianity. For Gebara, all theological language is pure human construction.

There is much in this book to be commended. Gebara's foregrounding and critique of the inherently dualistic nature of traditional Western philosophical and theological reflection is a key insight that, though not unique to her work, is framed in a provocative and original manner through her ecofeminist liberatory lens. In addition, the author's emphasis on relatedness, not only in light of the interconnectedness of

humanity and nature, but also with regard to a relational understanding of the Trinity, offers us an avenue for overcoming the very dualistic and hierarchical thought systems Gebara critiques. Her initial chapter critically engages various patriarchal and dualistic underpinnings of traditional epistemological theories that often go unnoticed and unaddressed. Most importantly, however, in an era of ecological devastation, where an anthropocentric understanding of the world and cosmos continues to thrive, theology must turn from an anthropological to a cosmological vision. In light of the scarce amount of writings that look at ecology and feminism from a Latin American context, Gebara offers a groundbreaking contribution.

Michelle A. González