

Interreligious Dialogue:
Toward an Ecofeminist Spirituality of Openness

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The lack of feminist presence in interreligious dialogue is a widely acknowledged problem.¹ Many Christian feminists critique dialogue assumptions and methodologies which effectively close the process to feminist perspectives, while others focus upon convergences of feminist expression across religious difference in order to advance dialogue. After surveying major contributions in both of these approaches, I will suggest that a spirituality of openness emerges in four recurring themes across diverse Christian ecofeminist theologies. Exploring this spirituality of openness within intra-Christian diversity may contribute to the opening outward required in interreligious dialogue, since these themes and spiritual values are also present in other feminisms and religious traditions.²

Christian feminist theologians assert that much interreligious dialogue has been closed to feminist presence because of universalizing definitions and methodologies. Kwok Pui Lan argues that “religion,” as it has generally been defined in Western modernity, is inadequate to the experiences of “migration, exile, diaspora, and transnationalism,” all of which are intertwined with religious identity.³ Kwok identifies a problem deeper than whether or not women are included on interreligious discussion panels: lack of attention to power structures and differentials. Kwok, therefore, calls upon feminist thinkers not simply to add women and stir in interreligious exchange and theologizing.

Feminist absence in interreligious dialogue is one factor in a complex problem which includes lack of attention to differences within religious traditions as well as reification of

¹ Ursula King is generally acknowledged as having first pointed out feminist absence in interreligious dialogue. See her “Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions,” *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions* (London: Cassell, 1998), 40-55.

² I am grateful to Mary Potter Lane for her careful reading and response to a draft of this paper, which helped me to sharpen and develop my position.

³ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 206.

religions “as if they were distinct and insoluble entities.”⁴ Kwok writes that “[I]n most interreligious dialogues conducted in Western ecumenical or academic settings, a handful of Third World elites, usually all males, are invited to speak as representatives of their traditions to a largely white Christian audience.”⁵ The events thus present a false unity as uniformity. Kwok argues for a theology of religious difference which examines and challenges Western Christian domination of the very definitions of religion and religious identity.⁶

Jeanine Hill Fletcher agrees. She sees the lack of feminist presence as a symptom which leads to uncovering a deeper problem. She says, “[P]erhaps one reason feminists have been largely absent from the discourse on religious pluralism is that they don’t see *themselves* portrayed in the collective.”⁷ In her critique of the traditional logic of religious identity, Fletcher draws upon post colonial work on hybridity in order to challenge “the logic of singular belonging that creates divisions among religious traditions.”⁸ Dialogue constructed in inadequate and divisive premises concerning religion and religious belonging is not open to feminist presence and does not build unity.

Maura O’Neill’s critique shifts to an argument that interreligious dialogue has been founded upon and continues to reflect typically male rather than female goals, communication methods, and epistemologies.⁹ One of her contentions is that male theologians tend to “seek

⁴ Ibid, 203.

⁵ Ibid, 202. For an historical overview of interreligious dialogue, see Aasulv Lande, “Recent Developments in Interreligious Dialogue,” *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, eds Werner G. Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 32-47.

⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 201. A further critique Kwok raises is that African and Asian feminist theologians’ work on religious diversity over the past decade has been overlooked, even by other feminists, in theological reflection on religious difference

⁷ Jeanine Hill Fletcher, “Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19 (Fall 2003): 14.

⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹ Maura O’Neil, *Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 4-5.

some doctrine or unifying experience to provide a common ground . . . This search already presupposes an epistemology of distance between object and subject.”¹⁰

In her view, cultural conditioning shapes women’s communication methods to be personal and oriented to concrete issues. To the extent that differences between typically male and female goals and methods have been ignored, interreligious dialogue has been closed to women, for “a logical consequence when the personal is devalued has been the devaluation of those forms of thinking and speaking that communicate the personal.”¹¹

Echoing O’Neill, Helene Egnell also finds that when feminists participate in interreligious dialogue, their focus is less likely to be on doctrine or theory. Instead, feminist dialogue emphasizes identifying and tackling concrete oppressions and threats to survival and well being, what Egnell calls “a dialogue of life.”¹² In stark contrast, “interfaith dialogue is mostly, at least on the official level, carried out by men, and gender issues have rarely been on the agenda.”¹³ All of these feminist critiques stress that interreligious dialogue as generally practiced demonstrates false universalizing in assumption and practice. Unless inter-religious dialogues open to other methodologies and understandings of religious identity, they are not truly inclusive of feminist presence.

In addition to this foundational critique, Christian feminists also reflect on common patterns or themes that have emerged among feminists of differing religious traditions as a way of contributing to inter-religious work. Helene Egnell has studied similarities in experience

¹⁰ Ibid, 17.

¹¹ Ibid, 23. O’Neill’s work is not restricted to studying dialogue among women who identify as progressive or feminist. O’Neill specifically addresses the need for intrareligious dialogue and the perspectives of conservative women in *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).

¹² Helene Egnell, “Dialogue for Life: Feminist Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue” in Viggo Mortenson, ed. *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 256.

¹³ Helene Egnell, “The Messiness of Actual Existence: Feminist Contributions to Theology of Religions,” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 17 (2009): 14.

while Mary Ferrell Bednarowski has studied similarities in religious reflection. In her study of women's interreligious conferences, Egnell found that "close relations were built and cherished, and that a 'common we' very soon was established, which was felt to be stronger than the division caused by different religious belonging."¹⁴ The unity Egnell found was forged through both the participants' methods of communication and the sharing of personal narratives in small groups.¹⁵ In their exchanges, women discovered similar themes in their experiences. These included marginality, a stress on "lived faith rather than doctrine," and what Egnell calls "the messiness" of life, including participants' agreement on the inadequacy of understanding religious traditions as "clearly defined entities" with simple means of representation.¹⁶ In addition, Egnell argues that feminists need to address a profound lack of connection between feminist dialogue praxis and feminist theology of religions.¹⁷

Mary Farrell Bednarowski takes a different approach by focusing on patterns in women's religious thinking in the United States. Listening to a wide variety of religious feminist voices in *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, Bednarowski finds five recurring themes across diverse faith traditions: ambivalence, immanence of the sacred, the sacredness of the ordinary, relationality, and healing.¹⁸ In her assessment, these themes form "an interpretive orientation toward reality. . . that functions as a stimulus not to one but to multiple pieties and spiritualities."¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid, 15.

¹⁵ Ibid, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 14.

¹⁸ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1. I am thankful to Mary Potter Lane for bringing Bednarowski's work to my attention.

¹⁹ Ibid, 2

Bednarowski's work demonstrates not simply that these themes recur across feminist religious difference, but that they generate creative religious thinking in distinct ways, in various religious traditions. Furthermore, they not only inspire scholarly theological reflection but also are useful in non-academic contexts as well as outside religious institutions. These versatile themes, Bednarowski argues, "are much more evocative than propositional; they tend to open up the need for further exploration rather than close it down."²⁰

While Bednarowski studies religious thought, and O'Neill and Egnell study women's interreligious methods of communication and experience, all three point toward a unity across religious traditions which does not overlook or diminish vital differences. Bednarowski stresses that the similar interpretive framework she found generates multiplicity, not uniformity. O'Neill develops a conversationalist feminist epistemology, focusing on personal communication methods to build solidarity in difference. And Egnell argues there continues to be a glaring gap between the praxis of women who do find unity across difference in interreligious dialogue and the continuing lack of feminist theological reflection upon this experienced unity.

I agree that feminist theological exploration and reflection upon unity-in-difference would contribute significantly to interreligious dialogue. Following in the steps of feminists seeking to identify similar patterns across difference, I argue there is evidence for a shared spirituality of openness among diverse Christian ecofeminists. I propose that exploring this theme can open dialogue within Christian diversity and with ecofeminists of other or no religious tradition, since characteristics of a spirituality of openness are shared across many kinds of feminism and in ecofeminist thought of other religious traditions.

²⁰ Ibid, 3.

The spirituality of openness I find in Christian ecofeminist sources is an interpretive orientation and a way of being in relation which intentionally suspends closure as a spiritual practice, holding firmness of conviction without rigidity. In recognizing and interacting with difference, it is neither dogmatic nor a form of relativism. It holds open the possibility of new understandings which may be transformative.²¹

In contrast to closed systems of thought, an open orientation is deeply woven into the concern for justice at the heart of Christian ecofeminist thought, for without openness to the voices of difference, injustice cannot be recognized. Christian ecofeminist spirituality stresses justice since it “brings together the Christian doctrinal heritage of creation and redemption in prophetic protest of the disregard and damage of creation in commitment to an eco-justice of right relations with all creatures.”²² Openness is neither weakness nor lack of commitment. Instead, openness is the strength to trust in process as inseparable from and revelatory of the presence of Spirit.

After describing Christian ecofeminist spirituality in general terms, I will explore the thread of openness which I find running through four interrelated themes in Christian ecofeminist perspectives: the relational self, ways of knowing, an ethic of risk and discernment, and the power of beauty. I will extract each of these themes for particular focus and the connections among them will be evident as I develop my argument for a spirituality of openness.

²¹ For the value of openness in pragmatic feminist thought, see Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Emphasis upon openness as both a way of increasing social awareness and producing social change has deep resonances with the philosophical school of pragmatism which recognizes perspectivalism and advocates an open attitude “not in the sense of good-humored indifference” (228) but as a primary commitment to the particularity of people rather than a theory or institution. I am grateful to Mary Potter Lane for making me aware of this tradition and referring me to this source.

²² Anne M. Clifford, “Feminist Spirituality,” *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 301.

Christian ecofeminist spirituality

Ecofeminists charge that Western anthropocentrism has failed to see the human as a member of a complex ecological web, and has led to plundering the world as if it were simply a trove of resources to be used for convenience and gain. In addition, Western colonialism has objectified not only all non-human nature, but also all humans who have not fit the image of the Enlightenment European Man of Reason, including women and colonized peoples. Critique of this thought system is necessary not because it is the only view of the human/world relationship, but because it continues to have such devastating global consequences for human communities and for the Earth itself. Eco-social justice cannot be achieved without exposing the logic of current oppressions.

Acknowledging the fact of the interconnectedness of life is not enough.²³ Christian ecofeminist spirituality is rooted in a panentheistic understanding of the God/world/human relationship, which affirms divine immanence, the sacredness of the ordinary, and the relational nature of reality, three of the five themes Bednarowski found in women's religious thinking across diverse faith traditions. In contrast to much traditional theology, in which the nonhuman world simply sets the stage for human redemption, in Christian ecofeminist thought, the human is understood as earth creature become self-aware. "We must re-situate the human within—not above—the cosmos," says Brazilian ecofeminist Ivone Gebara.²⁴

²³ Mary Frolich makes the sobering point that Nazi ideology included ecological concerns. See "Studying Spirituality in a Time of Ecosystemic Crisis," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 9 (Spring 2009): 31.

²⁴ Ivone Gebara, "Ecofeminism and Panentheism," *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 211.

British theologian Ursula King argues that the re-situating of the human within the cosmos leads to a holistic understanding of spirituality as a dimension of life inseparable from our activity in the world.

Such a perspective leads to ecology as a philosophy, as a way of thinking about the world, which includes thinking about *spirituality* as our way of being in and part of the world as a whole, of our acting within and through it, and in connection with other people.²⁵

When the cosmos and its complexity is valued for its own sake, when it is regarded as created, beloved, and bespeaking the presence of God, not simply a collection of resources to be used by people, then, says Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, “[W]e begin to feel deep respect, even a sense of awe before the life-giving, yet fragile interwovenness of the earth. The earth becomes sacred.”²⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson argues that a theology of the Creator Spirit leads to a holistic view of the sacredness of the earth.²⁷ In her sacramental perspective, each ecosystem and life form has intrinsic value; when one is destroyed or driven into extinction, we lose “a manifestation of the goodness of God.”²⁸

Ecofeminists critique the Western model of development, which reduces non-human life to resources, as an extension of colonialization. The harmful effects of the Western logic of domination are neither randomly nor equally distributed, but are mapped in the geographies of imperialism, sexism, racism, and classism. As Grace Y. Kao reports, in 2004, the United Nations Environment Programme held a Women’s Environment Assembly “in part because of its recognition that women and children are often the first victims of environmental degradation,

²⁵ Ursula King, “Earthing Spiritual Literacy: How to Link Spiritual Development and Education to a New Earth Consciousness?” *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 31 (December 2010): 249.

²⁶ Chung Hyun Kyung, “Ecology, Feminism and African and Asian Spirituality: Towards a Spirituality of Eco-feminism,” *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 177.

²⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (NY:Paulist Press, 1993), 59-60.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 39.

poverty, and conflict.”²⁹ The least powerful and most vulnerable are those who continue to be most deeply harmed by the Western utilitarian view of the shared Earth home.

Kwok Pui-lan argues that “[W]hile colonization has always involved the exploitation of natural resources, the new form of green imperialism seeks to control and privatize basic necessities of life as well as to patent and monopolize life forms.”³⁰ Ecofeminists insist, therefore, that policies be evaluated with regard both for the natural world and the most vulnerable people, challenging dominant economic criteria of measurement as inadequate, if not oppressive. Indian theologian Aruna Gnanadason puts it succinctly: “Solidarity with the poor and solidarity with the earth must be seen as two sides of the same coin that need to be addressed together and not as competing concerns.”³¹

Since a Christian ecofeminist spirituality values life as sacred gift to be claimed and nourished, speaking for the voiceless Earth and work which empowers the least powerful in human communities are spiritual efforts. When spirituality is not divorced from the task of survival and flourishing, both for the oppressed Earth and for the human poor, the traditional divide in Western Christianity between interiority and action is transcended. As Ursula King argues

[L]ike ecofeminism itself, ecofeminist spirituality is a movement involved in global activism. It is committed to global planetary and social change. These cannot happen without a spiritual change nor without the indispensable, essential contribution of women from all parts of the world.³²

²⁹ Grace Y. Kao, “The Universal Versus the Particular in Ecofeminist Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38 (2010): 621.

³⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 215.

³¹ Aruna Gnanadason, *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 92-93.

³² Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life* (NY: Bluebridge, 2008), 137.

Globally, women have been victimized, but they are also sources of wisdom, strength, and change.³³ Speaking out of the context of Dalit women, Gnanadason says, “[S]uch a spirituality of struggle is not an ephemeral [sic], other worldly, private, esoteric reality. It is earthy, grounded in the grim realities of living and surviving.”³⁴

Ecofeminist spirituality will necessarily manifest differently in various concrete struggles, and in differing forms of responsibility across widely divergent power differentials. In her description of an ecofeminist spirituality, Gnanadason says that it fosters self-definition of very different communities and the on-going reach toward unity, not uniformity.³⁵ For white women in the so-called developed nations, the challenge must include working to change conceptions and systems of power from which we benefit.³⁶

The rich resources of Christian ecofeminist spirituality as framed here yield four recurring themes: relationality and the self, relational ways of knowing, an ethic of risk and discernment, and the power of beauty. Each of these themes will be explored in turn for its place in shaping a spirituality of openness found across diverse Christian ecofeminist perspectives.

Relationality and the Self

Views of the self as relationally constituted are intimately connected to the ecological understanding just framed. As Catherine Keller puts it: “We are, as is everything that is, an instance of becoming-in-relation. Nothing is independent of anything else. This is the

³³ It is becoming widely recognized that women are integral to solutions and especially that educating women effectively reduces poverty across cultural contexts. See Nicholas D. Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

³⁴ Aruna Gnanadason, “A Spirituality That Sustains Us in Our Struggles,” *International Review of Mission* 80 (Jan. 1991): 37-38.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women,” *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, eds. Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, J. Shannon Clarkson, Mary C. Grey, Letty Russell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 31.

fundamental ecological vision, applicable to human culture as well as to nonhuman communities.”³⁷ Many feminists argue that women are particularly attuned to the effects and experience of their networks of human connection. As Elizabeth A. Johnson summarizes, “[O]ne of the clearest insights emerging to date is that women tend to experience themselves as a self in fundamental embodied connection with others.”³⁸

Rita Nakashima Brock names “interstitial integrity” that process by which we build identities out of the givenness of all aspects of historical particularities and our responses to them. Formative relationships in our early years, whether nurturing, harmful or a complex mix, become part of who we are and who we choose to become. Our relationality is the source of both injury and healing. “Injustice, pain, and suffering are not the opposite of connection, but are manifestations of it. And without our relationships, the brokenness of oppression cannot be healed.”³⁹ Thus, openness is needed both to recognize harm done to oneself and to others, and to participate in work for change and healing. Being a self is a process demanding awareness and responsible choices of interior and exterior plurality and interaction.

Brock argues that this relational understanding provides for a transcendence which is immanent, embodied, and open to change through encounter with others. “This transcendence

³⁷ Catherine Keller, “Women Against Wasting the World: Notes on Eschatology and Ecology,” *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 289.

³⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 25. I am aware of the charge that relational anthropologies essentialize women and dangerously risk personal autonomy in emphasizing connection as constitutive of self. I believe, however, that entering into that debate here would digress, since my goal is to frame the ecological context of this relational anthropological approach in a general manner, without attempting to resolve these necessary, on-going examinations.

³⁹ Rita Nakashima Brock, “Interstitial Integrity: Reflections Toward an Asian American Woman’s Theology,” ed. Roger A. Badham, *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 193.

involves both participation in a world and the bringing of critical judgment from a consciousness of other worlds one knows.”⁴⁰ In interstitial integrity, openness and discernment go hand in hand

In her theorizing of a “female diasporic subject,” Kwok Pui-lan describes a self which is “multiply located, always doubly displaced, and having to negotiate an ambivalent past, while holding on to fragments of memories, cultures, and histories in order to dream of a different future.”⁴¹ This self is also open, discerning, and creative in weaving a life story, connected to but not closed in by tradition. The fluid and multiple self described by Brock and Kwok is always in process, continually negotiating boundaries and openness.

Without arguing that the experience of diaspora is universal, Jeannine Hill Fletcher draws on postcolonial theory of the hybrid self to say “each of us is formed by a web of identity.”⁴² None of us is reducible to one identifier, including affiliation to a faith tradition. Fletcher argues “[T]here is no ‘Christian’ identity, only Christian identities impacted by race, gender, class, ethnicity, profession, and so on.”⁴³ We weave the strands of our identities, forming unique webs, even as some strands are shared.

In relational anthropology, being a self is an ongoing task of integration, navigating complexities of inner and outer terrains, making judgments and connections within, without, and among multiple connections. This anthropology recognizes particular locations within social and systemic structures of domination and the complex internalization of such structures which make us, in vastly varying degrees, those who have been harmed and those responsible for others’

⁴⁰ Ibid, 191.

⁴¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 46.

⁴² Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Shifting Identity: The Contribution of feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19 (Fall 2003): 18.

⁴³ Ibid, 18.

harm. In this view, humanity is not easily divided into two simple groups of oppressors and victims, though in particular circumstances, those labels clearly are appropriate.⁴⁴

While in some situations we may be nearly powerless, in other contexts, we may be quite powerful. As a result, this model of self stresses the need for on-going self-awareness, which requires openness. Self-awareness includes valuing the authority of one's own experience, that is, being open to oneself, without which one cannot develop personal autonomy. Self-awareness also develops the openness needed to listen to perspectives of others, including the willingness to hear how our actions may have harmed others.

A relational anthropology functions well across differences and is able to recognize that in both interpersonal and systemic ways, persons have varying degrees of responsibility for harm done to themselves, others and the Earth. This model of self contributes to an ecofeminist spirituality of openness as it delineates being changed by encounters with others while also caring for one's own survival, well being and integrity. Affirming personal responsibility without being individualistic, in this view building self occurs in a communal context of power differentials. Constructing identity is a relational skill and a spiritual task requiring practical wisdom and ethical discernment. It is never closed because it is an on-going process of integrating interactions of self, others, and the Earth.

Relational Ways of Knowing

⁴⁴ A theme of Brock's work has been identifying the harm done by the passive and powerless concepts of innocence and purity, which romanticize victimization. See Rita Nakashima Brock, "Losing Your Innocence But Not Your Hope," *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (NY: Paulist Press, 1993), 30-53; "Dusting the Bible on the Floor: A Hermeneutics of Wisdom," *Searching the Scriptures Vol I: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (NY: Crossroad, 1993), 64-75; "Ending Innocence and Nurturing Willfulness," *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, eds. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (NY: Continuum, 1995), 71-84; and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

Our ways of knowing cannot be divorced from our particularity. As Catherine Keller has put it, “There is no epistemic process to which we have access that is not a matter of embodiment within an ecological niche.”⁴⁵ Ecofeminist relational theories of self radically challenge “traditional approaches to knowledge-building, in which the activity of ‘knowing’ centres [sic] on the knowing subject conceived of as a ‘pure’ entity in the sense that it is essentially unimpeded by biological or environmental conditions, that is, by personal context.”⁴⁶ Although some feminists argue that women and men differ innately in their ways of knowing, a broad feminist convergence on this point does not rely on gender essentializing for its constructivist position, two themes of which are knowing as embodied and transformative.

Beverly Wildung Harrison writes, “[W]ithout exception, knowledge is relational . . . We narrate—that is, we order our experience as subjects—in order to situate our agency, shape it in relationship to others, and to become *subjects to ourselves*.”⁴⁷ One specific method of embodied, transformative knowing understood under Harrison’s rubric is sharing personal narratives. Personal narrative surfaces over and over among feminist thinkers not as a finished product but as a way of knowing for healing, growth, deepening solidarity, and promoting work for justice. There is spiritual depth in the openness and self-transcendence necessary to shape one’s story and to listen to the stories of others, a component of feminist understandings of dialogue.

Cultivating the ability to remain open to what is unknown is necessary for change and for building community in difference. Fear closes us; willingness to suspend judgment until deeper

⁴⁵ Catherine Keller, “Burning Tongues: A Feminist Trinitarian Epistemology,” *Introduction to Christian Theology: North American Perspectives*, ed. Roger A. Badham (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 229.

⁴⁶ Anne Primavesi, “A Tide in the Affairs of Women?” *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 188.

⁴⁷ Beverly Wildung Harrison, “Feminist Thea(o)logies at the Millenium: ‘Messy’ Continued Resistance or Surrender to Post-Modern Academic Culture?” *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty Russell*, eds Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 168.

understanding is attained requires a self-transcending openness which may bring unanticipated, unpredictable results. The practice of openness, therefore, counters and suspends the reflexive, closed nature of fear. Grace Jantzen has argued that “much of our need to dominate is built on revulsion born of fear. Since this is at the root of our need to control, our greatest lack is not in the first instance intellectual.”⁴⁸ The lack Jantzen discusses is not so much lack of information but lack of openness due to fear.

In her discussion of a spirituality for life, Letty Russell emphasizes a need for “cultural sharing” in a context of trust, a space in which all participants accept the risk of vulnerability in dialogue, “in which all persons and groups identify their own cultural location and realities of colonialism and structural racism and sexism that are involved.”⁴⁹ In her judgment, real change cannot occur without both a willingness to be changed as one encounters others and commitment to work for justice with those whose stories one hears. True listening is not aural voyeurism.

Feminist practices of personal narrative exchange seek to be open-ended and require vulnerability to the other without collapsing difference in order build unity. Maura O’Neill’s “conversationalist paradigm” for interreligious dialogue includes all these values of openness, vulnerability, and the need to construct a unity which does not ignore or devalue difference. O’Neill argues that since “in a women’s dialogue the social issues of liberation and oppression are inseparable from the more theoretical ones, knowledge of one another’s personal experiences

⁴⁸ Grace Jantzen, “Healing Our Brokenness: The Spirit and Creation,” *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 296.

⁴⁹ Letty Russell, “Spirituality, Struggle, and Cultural Violence,” *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, eds Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, J. Shannon Clarkson, Mary C. Grey, Letty M. Russell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 24.

is essential.”⁵⁰ Theory is not unimportant, but the movement toward theory must be grounded in the particulars of experience.

According to O’Neill, personal story does not substitute for theory but is “a new starting point”⁵¹ from which to develop theologies of religious difference. Active listening and sharing of one’s own life involve the risk of being changed in the encounter. Not merely a means to an end, the encounter is itself part of the process of self-transcendence and life integration, a spiritual practice of openness. In this humbling yet life giving process, participants may encounter their own limitations, lack of awareness, and assumptions. Thus the knowing through narrative is participatory and potentially transformative.⁵²

O’Neill’s work on face-to-face narrative encounters among women across both inter- and intra-religious difference documents the praxis of connection that Egnell found in her study of women participating in interreligious dialogue, even in absence of theory. Elizabeth A. Johnson’s reconstruction of the communion of saints is a significant theological development which also bridges the gap Egnell identified between feminist experience and theology. In Johnson’s work, the symbol of the communion of saints is no longer an exclusive community closed upon itself, turned inward, but one that opens to include the whole Earth. In her theological development, the communion of the saints opens outward not only to all people of integrity and good will, but also to the interconnected web of life that is the Earth. In Johnson’s pantheistic, ecofeminist and sacramental theology, this symbol functions to reveal the sacred

⁵⁰ Maura O’Neil, *Women Speaking, Women Listening*, 89.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 92.

⁵² In the last chapters of *Women Speaking, Women Listening*, 94-105, O’Neill makes it clear that exchanging personal narrative is not all that is required for dialogue. She also addresses the issue of conflict and discusses dialogue as an end in itself, not merely a means. In *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), she discusses the experience of and need for intra-religious dialogue among conservatives, centrists, and progressives.

value of all ordinary lives lived with integrity. The symbol includes the non-human world because Creator Spirit is continually present in all that is as source of life. The Spirit is the relational source of all holiness, the sacred bond connecting Earth's life forms and all saints.⁵³

As she opens this relational symbol outward, Johnson braids memory, narrative and solidarity together, arguing that women need each other's stories to resist harm, to dismantle oppressive structures, and to be challenged in times of ease.⁵⁴ In addition to the narrative in face-to-face encounter, Johnson argues that remembering and telling stories of women's lives from the past can build solidarity in the present to work for the future. Those whose have gone before become present to us in the power of memory. As their stories are told and retold, their lives call forth lament at injustice suffered, as well as gratitude for inspiration and the empowering examples of spirited lives.⁵⁵

Personal narrative can be personally and socially transformative, deepening self-awareness and building solidarity for justice. For those harmed, naming pain and structuring the story of suffering enables the narrator to be more than that pain. In the act of telling, the narrator is not only the injured one, but one who continues to live, who risks the openness necessary to speak, who interprets memory as creative act. In this way, stories can empower survival. Our hearts are enlarged and fueled to action in truly listening to others' pain and joys. Such listening is demanding; its results unpredictable. A spirituality of openness is evident in narrative as an embodied way of knowing which can be deeply transformative, arriving with an ethical demand.

An Ethic of Discernment and Risk

⁵³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (NY: Continuum, 1998).

⁵⁴ Ibid, 165.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 159.

Themes of the always-in-process self and relational ways of knowing have ethical dimensions in a Christian ecofeminist spirituality of openness. When knowledge is regarded as perspectival, humility is required in the recognition that many vantage points are needed. As Ann Primavesi has said, “Acknowledgment of our limited perspective is a necessary act of ecological humility.”⁵⁶ Affirming the relational nature of truth leads to emphasis upon humility and an ethic of discernment for assessing the demands of truth in a given circumstance.

Christian ecofeminists emphasize developing skills and methods of discernment rather than depending upon a system of thought to provide abstractly formulated moral rules.⁵⁷ As Brock argues, “truth is contextual, provisional, and need be neither universal nor final to be efficacious.”⁵⁸ The ethical demand arises organically from within the relational context. Since process and goal cannot be divorced, an ecofeminist spirituality of openness is one of firm ethical commitment, in which openness is necessary for discerning the particular ethical demand of the moment and context.

A pervasive theme in Christian feminist theology is the need to be ethically responsible in the middle of ambiguity. Forms of the word “messy” appear in titles of Beverly Wildung Harrison and Helene Egnell’s works, reflecting the theme of ambiguity and flux. A particularly important contribution is Sharon Welch’s *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, in which she states that “the fundamental risk constitutive of this ethic is the decision to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success.”⁵⁹ Ambiguity entails risk. Choosing to fully enter into the fray of life,

⁵⁶ Ann Primavesi, “A Tide in the Affairs of Women?” *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (NY: Orbis, 1994), 190.

⁵⁷ A connection between openness and discernment is also made by pragmatic feminism in the above referenced Charlene Haddock Seigried’s *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*.

⁵⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock, “A New Thing in the Land: The Female Surrounds the Warrior,” *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia Rigby (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1997), 139.

⁵⁹ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 68.

choosing not to give up, embracing responsibility without the assurance of absolute answers is a way of living which embraces an ethic of risk.

For those in desperate external and internal circumstances, such as systemic oppressions, mental illness, emotionally abusive contexts, and other imprisonments, choosing life may mean risking that the present pain is worth enduring in order to survive. Clearly, not all are able to do so. Caution, therefore, is needed in any examination of risk and responsibility, because “[W]hen we dare to probe what enables and sustains survival, we may at no time imply that those who did not survive were less courageous or less worthy.”⁶⁰ This investigation of discernment and risk does not judge those who have not survived their suffering or those so crushed they have lost the ability to reflect and make decisions.

Denise Ackermann writes of the struggle so many have in “risking to believe that there may be a future.”⁶¹ In her view, “the ultimate crisis of human existence is reaching the point of simply not caring any more [sic].”⁶² In considering the risk to care, openness may be a more helpful concept than hope.⁶³ Openness, like Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” seems a more modest goal than hope since it does not focus upon a specific desired outcome but simply on the possibility of life. A spirituality of openness nourishes a positive yet unstructured stance of commitment to life, even in the messiness of it “as is.” When one’s hold on life flickers and is tenuous as a spark, hope may be too demanding. Hope may even become impossible. A razor thin crack in the wall of despair, an opening to connection, may be all that is humanly possible.

⁶⁰ Denise M. Ackermann, “The Alchemy of Risk, Struggle, and Hope,” *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* eds Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, J. Shannon Clarkson, Mary C. Grey, Letty M. Russell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 142

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 143.

⁶² Denise M. Ackermann, “The Alchemy of Risk, Struggle, and Hope,” 145.

⁶³ I am thankful for having received financial assistance from the Unitarian Universalist Association which enabled me to participate in a small group discussion in which Rebecca Parker interrogated hope as problematic. This occurred during The Future of Unitarian Universalist Scholarship, Co-Sponsored by Harvard Divinity School and the Unitarian Universalist Association, October 2009.

And that may be sufficient. The power which survivors enact, daring to risk by continuing to live, may itself be framed as a spirituality of staying open to the possibility of a future rather than becoming closed off against the future. As persons and as communities, maintaining a receptivity to possibility rather than shutting off and closing inward requires the courage of a spirituality of openness.

Ursula King writes that “spirituality can be likened to a leaven which makes our life, with its sufferings, violence, and pain, rise anew and transforms it.”⁶⁴ The first motion of this leavening is taking the risk to care enough to resist death. Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes “African women know that to resist death one must be ready to risk death.”⁶⁵ Openness to risk and resistance to dehumanizing powers and structures are inseparable, necessitating discernment between what is potentially life affirming and what is certainly destructive. Welch emphasizes that an ethic of risk defines responsibility not by being able to guarantee an outcome, for one can guarantee another’s death but not cooperation.⁶⁶

Openness is also required to risk encountering what one may have the resources to avoid, if one so chose, especially the suffering of others. Numbness and apathy, as ways of seeking escape from suffering, are marks of being closed-off rather than open. As Dorothee Soelle has said, “Middle class numbness is a luxury of being able to avoid direct interaction with victims.”⁶⁷ Openness is required for those who may be tempted to close off from others in anesthetizing comfort, the reduction of life to entertainment and pleasure. Soelle has argued that “Alienation,

⁶⁴ Ursula King, “Spirituality for Life,” *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, eds Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, J. Shannon Clarkson, Mary C. Grey, Letty M. Russell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 154.

⁶⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction,” *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, eds Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, J. Shannon Clarkson, Mary C. Grey, Letty M. Russell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 165.

⁶⁶ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 121.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 168.

sin, and addiction are different names for the spiritual death that masquerades as life, the death that surrounds us.”⁶⁸ Anesthetization shuts out rather than opens up to life.

For some, therefore, taking the risk to open to connection with suffering may paradoxically be the way into deeper life. O’Neill writes that women who participate in interreligious dialogue “run a great risk” in deepening awareness in two ways.⁶⁹ Firstly, as they hear stories of other women’s experiences, they may awaken to a new and painful awareness of ways they have been marginalized in their own religious tradition. Secondly, they may become aware of ways in which they have unwittingly contributed to the oppression of others.⁷⁰

Risk accompanies any new knowing or encounter which threatens a comfortable lifestyle, a too-settled identity or stretches one’s empathy. The simplistic rule so often targeted to women, to always put others before oneself, simply repeats the harm done to women and less powerful groups who need the empowering of their responsible selves.⁷¹ An ethic of discernment takes up the risk of caring and accepting responsibility for decisions which must often be made in complex contexts of ambiguity.

⁶⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 192.

⁶⁹ O’Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening*, 102.

⁷⁰ Ibid. O’Neill shares an example of a conversation she had with Susannah Heschel, which caused her to see ways in which aspects of her Christian theology were damaging to Jewish women.

⁷¹ Theological literature on the dangers for women in the notion of self sacrifice is too extensive to list, but selected key texts on related themes include: Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” rpt. In *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 3-18; Susan Nelson, “The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Neibuhr’s Account of the Sin of Pride,” *Soundings* 65 (1982):316-327 ; Emilie M. Townes, ed, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); Mary Potter Engel, “Evil, Sin, and Violation of the Vulnerable,” *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, eds (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 152-164; Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, transl. Barbaraand Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); “Roundtable Discussion: Mysticism and Feminist Spirituality” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24 (2008), 143-187.

The Power of Beauty

A common assumption is that concern for social justice and attention to beauty are either mutually exclusive or, at best, unrelated. In sharp contrast to this view, ecofeminist spirituality affirms that social justice and beauty are each parts of a larger whole, enhancing one another, each needing to be brought to the foreground at differing times.

In ecofeminist perspective, beauty is not defined by the objectifying gaze and its criteria of desirability or utility. The objectifying gaze is incapable of the openness required in other-centered attention. Sallie McFague has theorized an “attention epistemology,” which pays “close attention to something other than oneself” simply because it exists, with no immediate goal other than the connected knowing discovered in the act of paying attention.⁷² Ursula King also emphasizes attention as a way of knowing, drawing connections to Thich Nhat Hanh’s Buddhist explanation of mindfulness. King writes, “[A]ttention . . . requires the suspension of one’s self as the center of the world, making oneself available to another person, being open to another reality.”⁷³

McFague’s and King’s emphasis on attention suggest a way of engaging the power of beauty which requires openness of relational encounter. In her argument for the moral value of beauty, Ki Joo Choi argues that in addition to personal contemplative appreciation, “beauty also provokes relational practices of conversation” as people wish to share and discuss what they see as beautiful.⁷⁴ In this way, beauty can be a catalyst toward forming community, bringing people together in shared enjoyment and exploration. Ross also argues that when we open ourselves to

⁷² Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 49.

⁷³ Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life* (NY: Bluebridge, 2008), 13.

⁷⁴ Ki Joo Choi, “The Deliberative Practices of Aesthetic Experience: Reconsidering the Moral Functionality of Art,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29 (2009): 211.

beauty, we in effect “participate in a dialogue” in which we give over our attention, expanding our vision and awareness.⁷⁵ Whether in literal dialogue of conversation or in Ross’s more metaphorical sense, sharing beauty can promote community.

Yet beauty’s positive effects are not automatic. We are attracted to it, yet we can also be blind to it. Beauty’s power is best considered as an opportunity, invitation or challenge not always perceived, let alone accepted. In addition, its power for good cannot be charted clearly in a cause/effect sequence. Causative arguments for the moral power of beauty are immediately discredited by examples in which beauty has no positive impact on morality, such as the notorious Nazi love of the arts.

The intertwined devastation of the Earth and dehumanizing living conditions for the most vulnerable people, often women, children, and peoples of color, are morally and aesthetically ugly. Both justice and beauty are violated when what is inherently valuable is devalued, defaced or destroyed. Thus, as Susan A. Ross argues, justice and beauty need not be regarded as competitive values. They are intimately linked.⁷⁶ Wendy Farley takes a similar approach when she writes, “The throb of beauty running through life carries with it a judgment against wanton destruction or exploitation.”⁷⁷

Dorothee Soelle argues that, with the exception of times when the weight of suffering makes this impossible, we must “take responsibility . . . for the joy of life, which at the same time means responsibility for beauty.”⁷⁸ We are responsible for opening ourselves to the gift in

⁷⁵ Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 83.

⁷⁶ Susan A. Ross, “Women, Beauty and Justice: Moving Beyond von Balthasar,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25 (2005), 94. See also *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality, and Justice* (NY:Paulist Press, 2006), 57.

⁷⁷ Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 79-80.

⁷⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, 186.

life, even as we know this lets in pain. It is not enough to passively acknowledge beauty as a descriptive fact. Those who have known the heavy inner deadness of being unable to be moved by the yellow of daffodils in spring or the glory of a pearlescent moon know that the pain of being unable to respond to beauty is the pain of feeling no connection, of being closed off from life, of “becoming habituated to death.”⁷⁹ This is the very antithesis of openness.

While cultivating mindful attention is a disciplined practice, beauty may also grab us by the throat in unexpected ways. In those moments, we are given an opportunity if we are alive to the irruption and interruption.⁸⁰ There is an unpredictable quality to the power of beauty understood in this way. In such moments, we are overtaken, stabbed with the sharp edge of transcendence within finitude.

Attention to the power of beauty in a spirituality of openness is a potentially important complement to the necessary ecofeminist work of suspicion and critique. Living exclusively in the key of critique, which focuses on injustice and suffering, can become a paralyzing negativity, extinguishing creativity, imagination, resilience, and joy, in a word: spirit. Focusing on the power of beauty is thus not an escapist strategy unconcerned with justice; instead, it is a resource for maintaining and renewing commitment to life, grounded in gratefulness, as many women who work to bring beauty into the ordinary spaces of daily life well know. Nourishing openness to beauty is a way of heeding Soelle’s admonition to take responsibility for the joy of life.

Two dangers in advocating the power of beauty remain to be addressed: privatization and co-optation. In a Western, middle class context, beauty often becomes a possession of those who can afford it, a private luxury. Addressing this problem, Ross argues that holding beauty and

⁷⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁸⁰ Iris Murdoch uses an example in her argument for the moral power of beauty in *The Sovereignty of Good* (NY: Schocken Books, 1971), 84.

justice together means joining beauty with commitment to the communal good. Without a communal dimension, beauty can become privatized and commodified to serve the personal pleasure of those who can purchase access to it.

A final danger is co-optation. Attraction to the beauty of others and other ways must be pursued in an ethical manner, according to the terms of the others. Postcolonial writers charge that indigenous traditions, especially, have been raided by whites, women and feminists in particular, in a form of spiritual colonization which has not been truly respectful, in part, because of disregard for community context.⁸¹

One recurring manifestation of this lack of humility and disrespect is the Western tendency to use others' communal practices in order to promote personal well-being without responsibility to the community from which the practice is learned. Jung Ha Kim argues this happens frequently with Americanization of a variety of Asian spiritualities and practices. She does not call for a retreat from exchange and learning but cautions careful discernment. In her words, "[A]ppreciating the Other . . . must not be equated with appropriating the Other, and acts of consuming 'exotic' spiritual commodities must not be equated with acknowledging spiritual traditions of the Other."⁸² Her critique again makes evident the necessity of joining the embrace of beauty with justice.

Conclusion

Four recurring themes in Christian ecofeminist theologies, relationality and the self, relational ways of knowing, an ethic of risk and discernment, and the power of beauty, surface a

⁸¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 228-229.

⁸² Jung Ha Kim, "Spiritual Buffet: The Changing Diet of America," *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui Lan and Seung Ai Yang (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 84.

spirituality of openness. Exploring dimensions of a spirituality of openness across intra-religious difference in diverse Christian ecofeminist thought can advance feminist contribution to inter-religious dialogue since these themes and spiritual values surface in other feminisms and faith traditions.