

CREATURES



RADICAL ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION AFTER LAUDATO SI'
Discovering the intrinsic Value of all Creatures, Human & Non-human

Gleaning for Gender Justice in Laudato Si': Envisioning a Radical Eco-Feminist¹ Conversion

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- I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the conference organizers for inviting me and facilitating my participation at this very important conference. It is a great privilege and honour to be granted the opportunity to respond to Professor Northcott's paper. Thank you very much, your paper raises significant issues- you have availed immense food for thought for us academics and practitioners committed to the cause of ecological preservation.
- Prof Northcott articulates how our radical ecological conversion should entail taking cognisance of the **indigenous peoples, their rights to land and our universal human responsibility to care for creatures.**
- My response and my reflections to this important discussion which was ignited by the *Laudato Si* document is mainly informed by eco-feminist perspectives. I am advocating for the urgent need to 'wear gender inclusive lenses' whenever broaching the subject on radical ecological conversion. My vantage point in propagating for such a stance is that the lenses we wear shapes our worldview and consequently informs our actions.
- As an African feminist theologian living and working in my home country Zimbabwe, I resonate with all the crucial and vital issues raised by Prof Northcott in his presentation. However, I also wish to reiterate that as we seek to engage in our radical ecological conversion, we need to be constantly reminded that often times the realities of African men and women when confronted by the ecological crisis are never the same.
- For instance, whilst the Papal Document/Letter (*Laudato Si*) is an articulate and concise document exploring topical issues surrounding the global challenge of ecological degradation and suggests numerous ways in which 'our common humanity' can collaborate towards preserving and restoring the universe, 'our common home' which is referred to in the introductory remarks as 'our Sister, Mother Earth, who

¹ In its broadest sense, *eco-feminism* is the coming together of ecology and feminism, brought about by those who see the link between the domination of women and the domination of nature. See V. Plumwood (1986) "Eco-feminism: An Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments" in Thompson J.L (ed) *Women and Philosophy: Australian Journal of Philosophy* supplement to volume 64): 120.

sustains and governs us,' (par.1) however, largely, the document pays very little attention to the interconnectedness of ecological destruction and the domination and exploitation of women including other sexual minorities in the world due to patriarchal and anthropocentric attitudes towards the universe.

- Our radical ecological conversion should inspire us to commit to interrogating the correlation between global gender justice and the global ecological crisis if ever we are to ultimately come up with a lasting solution to the ecological crisis at hand.
- If we are to commit to acknowledging the significant contribution being made by indigenous communities in caring for the universe as clearly articulated by Prof Northcott, we also need to pay much more attention to the realities of the indelible connection between ecological destruction and the domination and exploitation endured by women.
- It is commendable that the *Laudato Si* consistently refers to the universe in feminine terms, e.g. it describes the universe as, 'our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us...Our *sister* is now crying out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on *her* by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed *her*. We have come to see ourselves as *her* lords and masters, entitled to plunder *her* at will...This is why the earth *herself*, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; *she* "groans in travail (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that...our very bodies are made up of *her* elements, we breathe *her* air and we receive life and refreshment from *her* waters.' (Italics, Mine)
- Be that as it may, the *Laudato Si* does not specifically address the overarching issues raised by eco-feminists who reiterate that, "the domination of women and the domination of nature are *twin dominations*² grounded in the Western patriarchal conceptual framework characterised by the logic of domination" (Warren, 1990).
- Hence, whenever we engage in discussions about the *excluded and exploited* members of the universe and fail to clearly elaborate on what we mean, the result is that women and other *excluded* communities of the world remain nameless entities who are often pushed into oblivion when it comes to fundamental discussions on issues of rights and existence.
- In the Zimbabwean context which is predominantly rural, it is women who suffer most when the water source dries up or when firewood becomes scarce because it is them who should walk longer distances to fetch water and firewood and prepare food for the family (Chirongoma, 2012).
- Consequently, ecological issues are women's issues; for they are more vulnerable to sickness, starvation and death from toxics, droughts and famines. Women's capacity to bear new life is threatened by pollution and they bear the brunt of care for the sick and dying as well as for the next generation (Rae, 1994).
- Although the *Laudato Si* pays considerable attention to the plight of the poor and how they are disproportionately affected by the ecological crisis (par.42-52), nowhere in these paragraphs is the issue of gender inequality and gender injustice ever acknowledged. It is only in (par.53) when discussing the weak 'responses' to the ecological crisis that the Encyclical once again reverts to addressing the universe in feminine terms by stating that 'these situations have caused *sister* earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course.' Conversely, in all the explored responses (par.53-61), there is absolutely no reference to gender justice issues within the ecological realm.
- More apparently, chapter two (par.62-86) of the Encyclical (LS) which focuses on 'The Gospel of Creation,' has an eloquent silence on the connectedness between gender injustice and ecological subjugation. It is only towards the end of that chapter (par 87-92) when the document 'throws in' feminine imagery when

² Emphasis mine

referring to some aspects of the universe, e.g. it refers to ‘sister moon’ and ‘sister water.’ Even then, that whole chapter dwells more on an exploration of unequal relations between the rich and the poor of the earth, those who dwell in the developed and less developed, rural and urban communities as the arena of contestation on the ecological crisis but is completely oblivious of the subjugation of women and children within the ecological arena.

- Chapter three of the *Laudato Si* explores ‘The Crisis and Effects of Modern Anthropocentrism’ (par.115-134), arguing that, “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities- it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble...” (par.117).
- Herein, the Encyclical ‘conveniently’ omits the plight of women and their God-given sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) from the discussion. It only foregrounds the ‘worth’ of a ‘human embryo’ and deliberately evades some of the extenuating circumstances that might lead women in particular to decide against carrying the pregnancy to full term. Again, the exclusion of gender justice from the discussion is very apparent in this chapter. Even as the chapter proceeds to discuss ‘The need to protect employment’ (par.124-136), absolutely no reference is made to the fact that it is women who mainly shoulder the brunt of the unemployment burden which is a result of the ecological degradation.
- Chapter four (par 137-162) of the Encyclical is entitled ‘Integral Ecology.’ In (par. 139), the Pope reiterates that, “we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” He further suggests that strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.
- Once again, the whole chapter (four) does not make any particular reference to the majority of women who suffer from gender injustice, denying them access to resources, particularly the land which is a God-given gift, ‘a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values’ (par. 146). All that the chapter does is to single out the poor in their different categories [within urban and rural areas], indigenous communities- their being neglected from enjoying the rights to land ownership and their difficulties in owning decent housing as well as being excluded from safe and reliable transportation systems. What is clearly lacking in the discussion is the fact that the majority of those who suffer such social, economic and environmental injustices are the women of the world.
- Chapter five (par. 163-201) of the Encyclical is entitled ‘Lines of Approach and Action.’ It outlines ‘the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us’ (par.163). This chapter propounds for various courses of action, including, ‘Dialogue on the Environment in the International Community’ in order to come up with a global response in sustainable use of utilization of resources in terms of energy use, political commitment to work towards the ‘common good of humanity’ and opening forums for dialogue between religions and the sciences. All these are noble ventures, however, what remains unsaid is the harsh reality that some of the major religions of the world have been complicit in the exploitation and subjugation of both women and the environment. Such issues need to be foregrounded if ever we should come up with a life-giving and transformative approach to humanity and the environment. This is what radical ecological conversion entails.

- To conclude the Encyclical in chapter six (par. 202- 246), the Pope propounds for ‘Ecological Education and Spirituality.’ The chapter reiterates the fundamental need for a major shift in our cultural, spiritual and educational values so as to engage on a path of renewal in lifestyle and embark on ecological conversion. The chapter acknowledges various initiatives which have borne significant fruit in ecological preservation and conservation, however, no mention is made of the fundamental contribution from numerous women of the world who have embarked on such a path oftentimes at huge personal sacrifice. There is not even a cursory reference to several female ecological giants of our times such as Wangari Maathai and her phenomenal work with the Green Belt Movement, earning her the honour of being conferred the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.³
- My humble contribution to this crucial dialogue on radical ecological conversion is that we need to acknowledge the interconnectedness between the global ecological crisis and the subjugation and exploitation of women. Such an acknowledgement resonates with the following remarks drawn from Rosemary Radford Ruether who argues that, ‘the fate of women and the fate of the earth are intimately related’ (Ruether, 1995). It therefore appears befitting to conclude my contribution to this discussion with two citations which raise a clarion call for a radical eco-feminist conversion:
- “Men have to learn that maturity requires taking on some qualities which they hitherto have deemed fit for only women. They must learn empathy and the joy of yielding in love...to feel new ways that have hitherto been considered “soft” and sentimental. Only a new breed of men, imbued with such qualities, can be trusted with a creation which gives evidence of being fragile and hurt...But if men are to learn how to make this new kind of maleness, *women must teach them*. If men are to enjoy this new kind of humanness, then women must show them how. And if men are to be delivered from offensive, destructive, and dominating ways, then women who are much less inclined to such behaviour, must be their tutors” (Campolo, 1992: 103).
- “Women, especially mothers, are the best teachers and if we teach our children and those around us to revere nature and to consider the preservation of ecology as a divine commission, then the present and the next generations will also make it their priority” (Chirongoma, 2012: 138).

³ See <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/Hundreds-Attend-State-Funeral-of-African-Nobel-Peace-Laureate-131381873.html> [accessed 10 October 2011]. Also see The Nobel Peace Prize 2004 http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/maathai-bio.html. [Accessed 5 October 2011]; See also “Eco-warrior’s greenbelt movement” www.environmentafrica.org [accessed 6 October, 2011]