

***The tradition of fixed theological concepts and the autopoiesis of life: an ecofeminist perspective.***

By Ivone Gebara

In this brief reflection I would like to draw our attention to the realization of a certain inertia of Christian theological concepts regarding the evolution of life and particularly of human life in its different forms. By becoming set up as Tradition and Dogmas and Rights, they have lost the plasticity of life and the challenges of each context. The leaders of the Church and the community of the faithful have not developed in relation to them the need for a continuous reorganization of life, including the meanings of Christian life. I would therefore like to draw attention to the fact that the Christian patriarchal religious tradition tends to fix behaviors and practices as representations of a divine power that is to some extent immaterial and fixed in a world in which continuous mutations characterize the very sustainability of life. These mutations indicate the reality of an autopoiesis or continuous self-organization of life that occurs without the need for great external impositions and dogmas. Studies of eminent contemporary scientists have insisted heavily on the systemic view of life, on their mutual implications, transformations, and interdependencies. This also applies to Christianity.

I hold no pretensions to be a physicist or biologist, but a simple observer of the cultural and physical world in which we live. This observation shows us how much the understanding of being human in primitive Christianity comes from other understandings situated in precise historical-cultural contexts. In the same way what we call human beings today comes from older and contextual understandings and requires the acceptance of an evolution in the very understanding of the human being. The human being of today is and is not the same as that of Antiquity and of the Middle Ages. This scientific stance has to do with feminism, with ecofeminism, with struggles for rights in the different levels of our social life and also with theologies. In other words, it has to do with the rethinking of being human, ethics and religious beliefs including the Christian ones.

In this context of mutation theologies are of particular interest to us since they represent forms of thought that affect the culture, behavior and education of many human groups. Despite some exceptions, most western and eastern theologies sought to reflect their conception of the human being from stable categories judged to be eternal. The eternity of God and the eternity of Christ manifested in human time had to maintain and obey an eternal and immutable model. There was a hierarchical culture and a philosophy that presided over the theological conceptions and directed or forced them directly or indirectly on to the community of the faithful. Of course most of the time the professional theologians of the religious institutions have not expressed themselves in those terms. However their

contextual behavior, their laws and prohibitions revealed the belief that they thought to reproduce in their conceptions a certain eternity of a personal God. In fact there are relationships between some behaviors that we might even call culturally static versus the challenging dynamics of everyday life. It is, however, in everyday life that change takes place. It is in daily life that we leave the static inheritances to perceive the wealth of newness that unfolds before us. The line that affirms a certain fixity of the laws of life is probably more recent than that which affirms the flow and the continuous mutation of the different forms of life. One finds eternal, 'unchangeable truth' and the other the truth of multiplicity.

In all times and cultures there have been sages, philosophers, and scientists who have stood in one or another position. In general dogmatic religious traditions were rooted more in the so-called heritage and fixist theory. Although theologians would have reinterpreted their beliefs and have them expressed in language more suited to different times and spaces, they continued with the same theory of founding religion or theology of the so-called 'eternal truths'.

Starting in the twentieth century we can say that there was a significant shift from the mechanistic paradigm to the ecological paradigm. The mechanistic paradigm, in a way, also maintained religion and especially Christianity dependence on the eternal truths. They established themselves as almost perfect imaginary systems, built differently from the systemic and evolutionary reality of life marked by complexities and contradictions. This change that has taken place since the twentieth century is neither constant nor uniform. We can affirm that in all areas of human knowledge the conceptual framework of the past, especially in reference to the theologies and sciences of religions, can no longer be sustained. To say this means affirming that new content and new forms of belief are emerging within Christianity, alongside the expansion of conservative positions.

One of the renewing tendencies of theological thinking is called ecofeminism, a combination of ecology and feminism as a plural social movement led especially by women. Ecofeminist theologians not only claim that the struggle for human rights, women's rights is closely linked to respect for the multiplicity of life on our planet, but denounce pollution in various traditional theological concepts and beliefs. These concepts, fruits of an essentialist anthropology that has imposed itself on daily life, appear as accomplices in the maintenance of privileges and in the exclusion of women from a more active participation in the reinterpretation of the Christian faith. It is enough to recall the masculine symbolism present in the different instances of power of the Christian churches and the theological justifications for its maintenance. We have the impression that using these concepts meant

misappropriating both the vital experience of the Jesus Movement and the vital experience of many people in present-day history.

Ecofeminist theology, the one that accompanies the science movements and contemporary social movements, does not have enough audience in churches nor penetration in popular religious communities. It clashes with the pre-established truths that seem to give more assurance to the people.

The formal education received by the clergy and pastoral agents is still based on the eternal truths maintained by a male celibate clergy and episcopate who draw on these truths to express their power. There is very limited space for the practice of freedom, of gratuity and solidarity. Moreover, the 'eternity' of these concepts helps to maintain the current capitalism that is being disseminated in the churches in the form of maintaining essentialist family and social structures for the sake of the stability of the Capital Market. For this reason, among others, they do not allow and do not recognize that new groups and different forms of religious power can emerge. Likewise, they do not welcome new content marked by the temporary nature and diversity of our time and our cultures. Finally, they can not accept the fact that if the planet earth is a living being and is capable of self-organization of all its elements, institutions and people also live the same process. Priests continue to reproduce a symbolic world almost deterministic where history seems to repeat itself without creativity. The new events are embedded in the old dualistic anthropological interpretations marked by unsustainable simplicity and lackluster observation. With this, either they do not realize the evolution of life and the newly acquired learnings of human beings or in bad faith they continue to use these concepts for their own benefit and those of the ruling Capitalism.

The ecofeminist theological perspective in which I stand, reflects equally on the forms of reproduction of religious institutions, especially of patriarchal Christian institutions. In this perspective, the struggle of many women for diaconal and priestly ordination in these institutions may be a small step towards the public expression of the religious and representative power of women. It can also be an acquisition of rights comprising the law in its form of expression established by Christian churches and by a society that understands egalitarianism in an idealistic way. However it runs a risk of continuing the same scheme of dependence on authorization or validation from the 'princes of the Church' as if they were to hold not only interpretation but the key to the continuity of Christian tradition in today's and tomorrow's world. Ecofeminist thinking is marked by criticism and at the same time interpretative mutability in relation to traditional religious concepts. It is also marked by unpredictability and human creativity capable of yielding new senses, new services and new ways of understanding life.

The drama in which we live is that we believe that there are forms of life or institutions or deities that must be eternal and that the faithful need them in that way to feel secure. Such judgments or affirmations also inhabit some groups of women who consider themselves to be feminists. They live a contemporary feminism for social issues; more of a feminism coupled with traditionalist theological views when it comes to theology and canon law. No doubt such a belief was effective in the past when feminist theology began to be thought of. But today such a posture seems to be anachronistic. It also includes the idea of the 'eternal priesthood' according to the order of Melchizedek. Pure mythology and pure concentration of masculine power is able to convince itself of the importance of its kind in relation to all the other beings of the earth. Without realizing it, we women often let ourselves be involved by this priestly model and the legislation that maintains it. Hence the doubt I have in relation to the female ministerial priesthood in this hierarchical model of the Church organization. From it, the clergy believe to have not only the representation of God or the mystery that surrounds us, but of being also the moral conscience while teaching the faithful. Once again pure pretension; still effectively functioning as symbolic power over the faithful. Are not we falling into new traps that do not help us to 'make all things new'? We are invited to think seriously about this.

Ecofeminist theology dares to repeat the words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado:

*Walker, your steps are the way, and nothing else.*

*Walker there is no way, you make the way when walking.*

Convincing ourselves that our steps are the way, that there are no pre-established 'truth and freedom' paths is a challenge and an ethical requirement. The development of these convictions is a step towards what is required of us today. Disobeying arbitrary orders contrary to our conscience and the common good. Not asking for permission to fight for the common good, especially for the poor and needy. Instituting our priesthood in another way and in temporary forms that are re-measured to the extent of the new needs and the new historical subjects perhaps due to the demands of the modern times. It is certain our visibility would be smaller and we would not perpetuate ourselves in the 'sacred power' of religious institutions. But would not we be more effective in loving our neighbor? Would not we be less formal? Less dependent on the 'male order'? Closer to the tradition of Jesus? The questions are worth asking though we can not answer them right away.

There are many arguments against this **'dis-ordained'** and provisional stance that I propose. Among the opposing arguments is the need for religious institutions in the current context of representation of social institutions. No doubt this argument may pose some difficulty. But if we dwell a little more on the observation of life we will have to admit that small ruptures allow new forms of organization to originate. They provoke the creativity of

the people, they make emerge previously unpredictable vital ways out. They introduce a different movement to life, invite thought and the creation of new social policies and new forms of organization. This has existed in nature, biology, geography, institutions of the past and continues to exist in the present as an expression of the human and social ecology that sustains the lives of many species.

I do not keep a closed stance on the question of the ordination of women in existing religious institutions. In all choices there are always paths that open and positive actions that can be lived. I only raise questions to invite us to reflect and dialogue about the interdependence and relatedness of all vital processes. These are questions that invite us perhaps to reorganize our way of serving one another and to rescue from the Christian tradition much more the ethical heritage than the Greek metaphysics and the Roman policy that encased them. This is one of the challenges that ecofeminist theology throws at us. A challenge for life, for our actions, choices and for our thoughts.

*Walker, your steps are the way, and nothing else.*

How have our steps been? Where are they leading us? What do we in fact want? What has been the force of the mediations of official religious institutions in these steps? Do they correspond to the need for meaning we seek? And do those needs correspond to the real needs of the human communities to which we want to be supportive and responsive? Are they really the expression and accentuation of the creative autopoiesis of life in us? Are they the expression of the creative force of the Gospel that we inherit and leave behind for future generations? A few questions to reflect on in our actual life...

*Ivone Gebara*

*September 2017.*