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The Importance of Religion for Eco-Feminism by Ivy Helman

BY [IVY HELMAN](#) on [JANUARY 8, 2017](#) · (7)

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“Why is religion important to ecofeminism?” A student, in the Master’s course I teach at Charles University, asked this as we began the class session dedicated to the topic. Given the overwhelming presence of atheism in the Czech Republic, I wasn’t too surprised by the inquiry. Nonetheless, the idea has been at the back of my mind ever since: what does religion have to do with ending patriarchy and bolstering the health of the planet? While I may take the connection as obvious, it is clearly not for many feminists out there. Here is how I understand it.

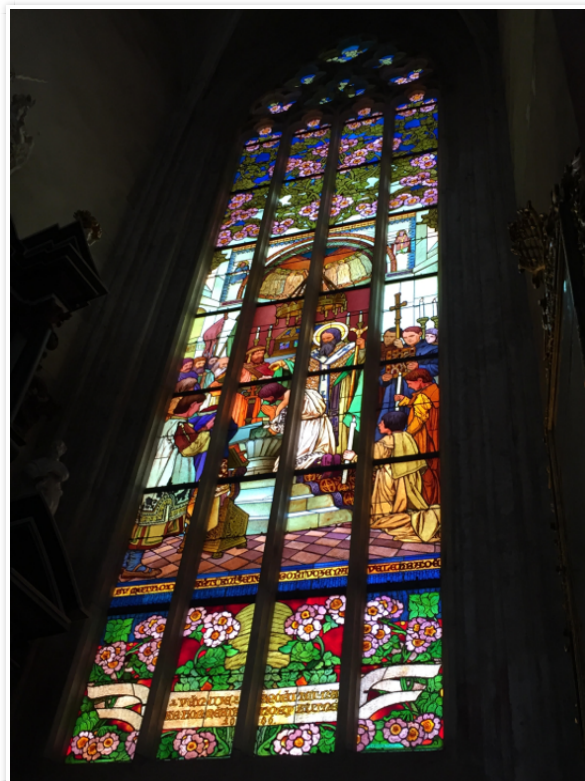
First, it is true: many of our inherited religious traditions have been and still are considerably patriarchal. Because of that, some feminists outright reject religion. In fact, some feminists even consider religion dangerous and threatening, as it is often utilized to contradict many feminist aims. Yet, there are many, many feminists who find, within their

given or chosen tradition, non-patriarchal elements that can be recovered, remembered and/or (re)created. Religious feminists work tirelessly to transform religions in life-sustaining and post-patriarchal ways not just for themselves but also for those women and men who belong to the same communities.

Second, it is critical to recognize the ways in which these patriarchal religions support, complicitly or actively, the use and abuse of the earth. Some sacred texts declare humans to be in charge of the earth. Others suggest the earth was built for humanity’s use. Most of the

religious traditions that uphold these understandings of nature conclude that the earth is not our true home, but only temporary. The better life comes after this one. Many religious traditions also support hierarchical dualistic thinking. All of these ideas separate humanity from the materiality of our existence. They also harm the planet by valuing humans above nature and animals, the next life above this one and some humans above other humans.

Third, patriarchal, religious tenants underlie much of Western society. In other words, religious standpoints are part and parcel of Western political philosophy and praxis, capitalism, societal structures, racism, sexism, class differences, attempts to control and define sexuality as well as much more. For example, they have supported the slave trade, denied women voices as well as leadership roles, questioned whether indigenous peoples had souls, murdered countless who refused to convert, crowned kings and rulers and advanced the prosperity gospel, which considers success, wealth and material goods proof of the person's goodness and the Divine's favor. Therefore addressing religion is an essential component of feminism in general.



So, there is a direct association between patriarchy, its religious manifestations and the health of the environment. But, why is religion so important? There are many reasons.

First, religion, for many people, makes sense of the world as well as their place within it. This understanding has a direct impact on humanity's willingness to protect and care for the environment. If we believe a better life awaits us after we die, what reason(s) do we have to care for those aspects of life that support our existence now?

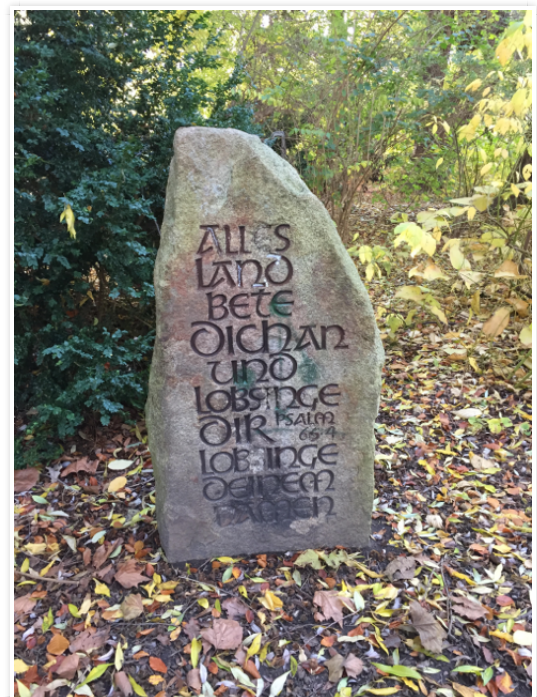
Second, religious traditions provide adherents with

understandings of who they are and their role(s) within humanity. These notions shape proper relationships between human beings. If we believe the divine created womanhood from the rib of a man and describes this woman's role as helper, what reason(s) do we have for equality between humans?

Finally, many religions are based on belief, trust and concepts of truth. For some religions, these are essential truisms even when they contradict generally held knowledge – scientific or otherwise. If we were created as distinct beings after the creation of animals, what reason(s) do we have to consider their plight?

Without a feminist and ecologically-minded critique of patriarchal religious traditions and their manifestations in society, we have little chance of ridding the world of patriarchy once and for all. For in as much as patriarchy has external factors, patriarchy is also internalized. Religion is intricately connected to this internalization for Western society.

We only have one planet. Our lives depend on it for our continued existence. Religious traditions have colluded with patriarchy for its destruction. This is why ecofeminism must address religion. This is why feminism must address religion and ecology. If we do not, we have little hope of a future.



7 replies



juliekelly1

January 8, 2017 • 4:04 am

Hi, I just read your article on ecofeminism and religion and I found it particularly interesting. There are many points that I would like to raise with you, not because I disagree with what you're saying but because I would like to clarify some things that you have written. First I would like to say how much I enjoyed the article as it is something very different that we don't often see being written

about. Here are the points I would like to clarify. In the article you say it is true that 'many of our inherited religious traditions have been and still are considerably patriarchal. Because of this, some feminists outright reject religion. In fact, some feminists even consider religion dangerous and threatening, as it is often utilized to contradict many feminist aims.

Yet, there are many feminists who find, within their given or chosen tradition, non-patriarchal elements that can be recovered, remembered and/or (re)created. This statement in the article may very well be true, but you have not provided any real evidence to back up what you have said, yet you state that many feminist have been threatened by these beliefs and even felt in danger of them. Because the above statement has no evidential back up, it's difficult for me to understand how you came to this conclusion and why so many feminists are affected by it. However you do go on to say with respect, how there are also many feminists Who have found non-patriarchal elements that can be recovered, remembered and or recreated.

You also clearly point out how many patriarchal religions support man's use and abuse of the earth. Actually on reading this I do agree with much of what you said and I also believe that man and woman could and should treat the earth with reverence & respect. However when you mention how 'Most of the religious traditions upholding these understandings of nature, conclude that the earth is not our true home, but only temporary' and there's a better life after this. Again I struggle to figure out how you actually know this for certain and also how this connects with hierarchical dualistic thinking. I'm not sure that I agree that all of these ideas separate humanity from the materiality of our existence and also that they cause us to devalue human nature and animals. You point out that religion for many people makes sense of the world and defines their place in it, but that this has a direct impact on our willingness to protect and care for the environment. From this you raise a valid point – If we believe a better life awaits us after we die, what reason(s) do we have to care for those aspects of life that support our existence now?

In answer to this, I'd like to say that (it may not necessarily be religion that for people make sense of the world, but people themselves who use religion to make sense of the world) and in relation to the belief of a better life beyond this one, and your question of 'what reasons do we have to care for those aspects of life that supports our existence now?' Surely this depends on which perspective you are coming from?

The reason I view this as a very valid point is because as a Buddhist, it is my firm belief that the way in which I treat the planets and the people creatures

insects and every sentient being whilst I am here in this life, will very much determine the life that awaits me after I pass.

I really loved the point you make about Eve having been born from Adams rib and agree 100% how this is completely patriarchal. However we must surely keep in context this particular story and how society was at that time.

To end your article you mention how 'many religions are based on belief, trust and concepts of truth but I have to ask at the risk of sounding naive – Isn't this what Feminism is based on?

I guess some of the points that you have raised in this article are very new to me and they ignited many questions about my own belief systems and that of those around me. I don't necessarily agree with the feminist view and even after getting to the end of your article, I still feel that much of what you have said very much depends on which perspective you are coming from, religious or otherwise. For example you point out, that if we were created as distinct beings after the creation of animals, what reason(s) do we have to consider their plight? I'm not sure how a feminist would answer this question, but from a personal perspective as a Buddhist, I would say that conscience, compassion, awareness – all the things that we gain as we enter life as a human are sufficient reasons to consider the plight of every living being no matter how small or how insignificant they may be perceived.

Again I would like to say how much I enjoyed this article and look forward to reading more of your work

★ Liked by [2 people](#)



PennyD

January 8, 2017 • 7:50 am

Thank you for your response Julie Kelly. As a Feminist Christian Humanist I found Ivy's article to ring true with my experience. Your response as a Buddhist reminds me of the importance of understanding my religion within the context of all religious traditions. Those people who have a blanket rejection of religion cannot appreciate the unconscious influence of religion on the cultures in which they live—and on their own psyches. I've pretty much given up on organized religion, but feminist and progressive religious authors motivated me for a long time to stay in the game and attempt to change our patriarchal system from within. Change has been slow and often comes through finding commonalities with Buddhists, Pagans,

Humanists and other traditions.

★ Liked by 2 people



Carol P. Christ

January 8, 2017 • 5:00 am

Yesss

★ Like



Leah

January 8, 2017 • 5:47 am

Thank you! Addressing ecofeminism in my class this semester.

★ Like



Sarah Whitworth

January 8, 2017 • 6:14 am

Thanks Ivy, a very important post, clear, deeply thoughtful and helpful.

★ Like



kertsen

January 8, 2017 • 9:00 am

‘Valuing humans above nature and animals and other humans’ What you are objecting to here is evolution itself each species seeks to be top dog and within each one we have pecking orders. Contrary to popular belief we are not born equal, some are born into rich western nations or rich families, others are born with high IQ’s which means much better lives. As you know inequality is on the increase and we are heading for trouble. Freud had it about right when he said we are at war with ourselves and he invented the id, ego, and superego or

conscience. We are still largely led by the id or give me what I want when I want it. Religion was taken over quickly by the elite as a control mechanism and that elite were in the main male. We will not have things all our own way already we are approaching an antibiotic apocalypse predicted by Alexander Fleming way back in 1928! The world is a battleground and we are top dogs at this moment in time.

★ Like



Barbara Cooper

January 8, 2017 • 9:03 am

Interesting post Ivy. I'd like to fill out some areas that are a part of my life and would offer an addition to what you write.

While a feminist approach to religion would help free the stories that form our religious belief from Patriarchy – such as the “Adam’s rib story” – the balance I find is in history, social understandings, life situations, etc. of the original stories. Without that, feminism can become another swing of the pendulum that simply replaces patriarchy with matriarchy.

Biblical scholarship is what led me to a feminist outlook on religion and life. In Genesis 2 the story is of Adam (humans) ish and ishah, male and female. That’s the story where people have got the idea that we are “above the animals”. an idea helped along by dualisms of body/soul, etc. (Ever tried to eat a pizza with your “soul”?) But there is a creation story in Genesis 1 from a different tradition. It probably came from Temple worship and might be sung. The refrain is: “God saw that it (creation) was (very) good”. I can easily imagine the One we call “god” giving birth and nourishing creation at “her breast”, an image elsewhere in the Bible.

There are many traditions in what we call the Bible, just as there are many people today who call themselves “Christians” but advocate things totally contrary to what I read in the Gospels. (such as the “prosperity gospel”) A lot of mischief happens when people pick a part of religion/scriptures/beliefs and focus on the one that suits them, or oppose the one that offends them. I believe we are best served when we assemble all the pieces of the picture and have a questioning, critical mind.

There are some very good feminist scholars in print, such as Elizabeth Johnson and Ilia Delio, Mary Malone has a three volume work on Women and Christianity.

★ Liked by 1 person

