To not discriminate: Advocating a nonbinary approach to women, the womb and gender [1]

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Religion has a dual character: a history of being a perpetrator and the potential to be a liberator when it comes to the life and work of women globally. The interpretation of scriptures by religious communities and their traditions has impacted the lives of women for centuries, including their access to education and training, their participation in the economy, and their agency in relation to their bodies and relationship choices. The "three H's" – heteronormativity, hierarchy and hegemony – are the toxic combination that perpetuates gender-based violence. South Africa is unfortunately renowned for having one of the highest rates of gender-based violence worldwide.

However, religion has not been the sole perpetrator in this regard. In combination with binary cultural and social frameworks, it has perpetuated discrimination against women both overtly and covertly. Women's theology, which includes feminist theology and ethics, has demonstrated that binary frameworks regarding gender and sexuality, lack of recognition of epistemological diversity (different ways of "knowing") and exclusive language patterns contribute significantly to stereotyping, and result in discrimination and oppression. Fortunately, counteractive measures are possible that reveal the potential of religion to be liberating.

En route to 2030, when an evaluation of progress regarding the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is scheduled to take place, feminist theology is particularly well-situated to evaluate progress thus far, if indeed there has been any progress with SDG 5, which focusses on gender equality and equity. This takes place alongside growing awareness of the ways in which religious communities can be agents for sustainable development, as shown in the Programme for Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt University (Berlin), which is a partner of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at UP.

1 This contribution is a summary of previously published work (see bibliography).

As described below, rooting out discrimination, and recognition and achievement of gender equality and equity are dependent on critiquing and dismantling the binary framework of gender roles, particularly women's so-called ability to nurture, which is often over-emphasised in religion and culture. This is of course a form of benevolent sexism.

A vast body of research in feminist studies and feminist theology has highlighted challenges regarding women's reproductive health and social inequities, difficulties accessing contraception, women's poorer health, women's limited access to health care, women's low levels of education, women's limited access to education, and finally the economic, religious and cultural factors that impede women's health (cf. Rakoczy 2004; Shepard 2015; Bowers Du Toit 2018, to name a few). The underlying paradigm, which (over)emphasises the place, role and function of women as mothers (or nurturers), is a determining factor. Professional women are still interrogated about how they intend to juggle family life and career (Ainge Roy 2017), and single women still get asked when they will "grow up", get married and start a family. The assumed relationship between women and nature – because of women's biological capacity to bear children – is described by the political scientist Emma Foster (2015) as the "women-nature nexus". This nexus has been instrumental in the development and enforcement of the idea that women have "natural" gendered roles and need to occupy gendered spaces, and that their contribution to the public, economic and political spheres should be limited (Ortner 1974). The automatic linking of women and nature has other inherent dangers. It is a rationale for the determination of femininity, and it reinforces the notion that women have essentialist characteristics. The "unquestioned link" between women and nature leads, therefore, to generalisations about women's experiences and identities, and does not allow for other types of identity intersection, such as culture, class and geographic location. In general, the nexus maintains gender binaries and dichotomies.

Apart from these impacts, the women-nature nexus has had a significant influence on our understanding of humanity's sustainable relationship with nature, and how the relationship is conceptualised and articulated. This is particularly evident in the ways that environmental policies, strategies and action plans have been informed by gendered assumptions based on the nexus.

Documents such as the United Nation's *Agenda 21*[2] and *Agenda 2030 of 2015*[3] describe contradictory paradigms in terms of women's role in the environment. More often than not in these documents, caring for the environment becomes the primary task of women, because of their so-called special ability to nurture and to care for nature. On the one hand, documents and policies acknowledge that gender relations affect women's involvement in decision-making, but they also make assumptions that maintain gender binaries (cf. Van Wyk 2019). In this regard, any notion of the 'empowerment' of women is linked to the idea that women are closer to nature, because they are farmers, mothers and carers. The problem is that women's empowerment, including the religious perspectives of women, is solely based on their so-called natural ability to nurture, and this has been exposed by ecofeminist theologians as highly problematic (Rakoczy 2004; Pui-Lan 2005).

Another unfortunate and contradictory consequence is 'pronatalism', where women are encouraged to have children, due to their ability to nurture. Pronatalism is an ideology based on the inference that childbearing and parenthood are necessary for human continuity, and elevates reproduction and "the family" in society. Religious pronatalism is expressed through injunctions against abortion and birth control, encouragement of large families, the conviction that heterosexual marriage is the only (or the ideal) context in which to raise children, emphasis on the sole purpose of marriage being procreation, and designation of gender-ascribed roles to males and females (cf. Hadebe 2016; Salzman & Lawler 2012; Cleminshaw 1994). However, the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (IPCC 2018) has demonstrated that high population growth has contributed to the climate crisis. In this regard, deconstruction of a binary gender framework is an urgent matter, because it has problematic environmental consequences.

Feminist and gender studies, feminist theology and ecofeminist theology have significantly highlighted and problematised the three effects of binary gender construction in relation to a patriarchal framework: hierarchy,

2 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1992, Agenda 21, viewed 29 November 2018, from http://sustainabledevelopment. un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf

3 United Nations Division for Sustainable Development (UNDSD), 2015, Sustainability goals, viewed 30 November 2018, from https://sustainabledevelopment. un.org/sdgs

heteronormativity and hegemony, which together lead to discrimination and ultimately gender-based violence, because exclusion is normalised (cf. Van Wyk 2018). In this regard, the work of feminist theology is incomplete; one might speak of an "unfinished reformation". Although Valentine Moghadam (2015, cf. Van Wyk 2020) has argued that there is considerable evidence of transnational activism – that is, cross-border collective action in the form of advocacy – it is still questionable whether women are truly united in protest against the way binary gender constructions (and hence patriarchy) are maintained. Despite intersectionality – that is, acknowledgement of the ways in which different identity markers such as ethnicity, culture, gender, and sexuality intersect to create varying epistemologies and paradigms – I wonder whether women are able to reconcile their diversity and work as a collective to combat patriarchy. Could acknowledgement of such differences be a critical step to facilitate joining across borders, in families, in cultures, in the church and in the workplace?

It is the role and responsibility of a Faculty of Theology and Religion to participate in breaking down the binary, and to reclaim the liberative role of religion in this regard.

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