

WOMEN'S CONSULTATION ON CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Conveners: Rhodora E. Beaton, Aquinas Institute of Theology  
Julia H. Brumbaugh, Regis University
- Moderator: Kathryn Lilla Cox, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
- Presenters: Erica Olson-Bang, The College of New Rochelle  
Cristina Lledo Gomez, Charles Sturt University

The Women's Consultation on Constructive Theology honored the CTSA convention theme, "Ecology: Theological Investigations," by issuing a call for papers which invited considerations of how women's experiences have intersected with ecology. As a result, the Women's Consultation chose two papers which engaged central images of women and the earth found in the Christian tradition but offered alternative readings of said images by employing a feminist hermeneutic. Erica Olson-Bang opened the conversation with her paper, "The Wilderness beyond the Garden in Jewish, Feminist Poetry." In her presentation, Olson-Bang began by examining the way Jewish midrash serves to fill "gaps" in biblical texts by offering additional creative texts to supplement existing biblical narratives. In the example of Genesis 3, Jewish feminist midrash offers a surprising counterpoint to traditional interpretations of Eve's role in the Garden, a particularly important contribution because Eve has cast a "long and dark shadow" upon both Judaism and Christianity. Both faiths have tended to emphasize the negative aspects of the "wilderness beyond the Garden" brought on by Eve's defiance, and describe the frightening unknown spaces and dangerous expanse to which Eve has led humanity. Yet, Jewish feminist midrash describes Eve as not simply a scapegoat, but as one who is bold, curious, and inquisitive, and paints the wilderness outside of Eden as full of possibility, as open, and as a place for the future and for growth. For modern Christians, who value human characteristics such as curiosity and who are called to embrace and protect the wild places of the world, Olson-Bang suggested that Jewish feminist midrashic accounts of Eve and the Garden offer ways for Christians to re-evaluate both Eve's role in bringing about the expulsion from Eden, and the meaning and value of the wilderness of creation. Instead of a cause of undoing, Eve might be depicted as an agent inspiring growth; instead of a symptom of punishment, the wilderness of the earth might represent possibility and wonder. Finally, Olson-Bang affirmed the value which Christian women might find in retrieving the matriarchs of Scripture, such as Eve, as conversation partners, and emphasized the wisdom Christians might gain from not simply underlining women's faults in biblical narratives, but from recognizing these women's humanity.

Next, Cristina Lledo Gomez offered her paper, titled "Interruptions, Cycles, and Reciprocation: Disrupting Our Maternal Metanarratives when Speaking of the Earth as Our Mother." Gomez' presentation focused on the theme of "Earth as Mother" and examined how Christian communities have imaged the Earth as a Mother. She noted that Western conceptions of mothering have tended to imagine women as giving of the self "endlessly and unselfishly," a conception which is reflected in the language of Roman Catholic papal documents. However, Gomez cautioned, motherhood expands far beyond such capacities, as is reflected in indigenous peoples' conceptions of motherhood as a location of power, not weakness—an alternative image which offers a far more robust conception of "motherhood." Yet, particularly for Roman Catholics, the image of Earth as "mother" has not been widely received, nor have wider

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conceptions of motherhood been uplifted. For Roman Catholics, Gomez argued, the concept of “motherhood” has been hijacked by Mariology, which has significantly narrowed the concept of motherhood in Catholic discourse to focus on the feminine genius for creating, birthing, and nurturing. These particular qualities of motherhood center solely on the bearing of and caring for infants, and lean on an essentialism which is problematic to feminist scholars. Yet, as indigenous peoples’ conceptions of mothering suggest, “motherhood” might be conceived much more broadly and with more emphasis upon women’s leadership and power. Aside from birthing and breastfeeding, motherhood also includes actions such as governing, exercising forgiveness, dialoguing and teaching, and crying out against injustices. Whether for Mother Earth or earthly mothers, such a flipping of “motherhood” allows a recognition of the weakness of “motherhood,” but also emphasizes its agency. Gomez concluded that a recasting of the Western view of “motherhood” in such terms might revision both conceptions of the earth, and of women, as sites of power, beauty, vulnerability, and respect.

A round-table discussion ensued, followed by group discussion with Olson-Bang and Gomez, facilitated by moderator Kathryn Lilla Cox. Finally, Colleen Carpenter presented the Ann O’Hara Graff Award to Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M., faculty emerita of Yale University Divinity School. Formal congratulatory remarks were offered by M. Cathleen Kaveny of Boston College, Christiana Z. Peppard of Fordham University, and M. Shawn Copeland of Boston College.

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