

## Article

# Is There a Place for Pantheism in (Post-)Christian Ecofeminist Reconstruction of the God/Goddess–World Relationship

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to consider an alternative pluralist pantheism (Mary Jane Rubenstein) as the next step in the evolution of interpersonal, interspecies, and God–human–nature relationships and its possible realisation in (post-)Christian ecofeminism and its epistemology. It follows the methodology and epistemology of theological ecofeminism, which assumes that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature stem from the same constellation of phenomena: patriarchal domination, dualistic anthropologies, and global hypercapitalism. Recognising that pantheism is a very complex phenomenon and should not be viewed as a single codified viewpoint, but rather as a diverse family of different doctrines, this paper understands pantheism primarily as the paradigm that asserts that everything is part of a divine unity consisting of an all-encompassing, manifested deity or God/Goddess. The paper first explains the pan-en-theistic turn in Christian ecofeminism as a tool for deconstructing the dominant Cartesian dualistic binaries and their symbolism and metanarratives, and as the first “safe” phase of transition from Christian anthropocentrism. From this standpoint, Grace M. Jantzen’s defense of pantheism as an alternative to transcendental theism is further explored as she argues that divinity is found “in” the physical and material world and nowhere else. The paper then moves to the second phase, proposed in the final part of the paper, on the possibility of the theoretical adoption of pluralist pantheism in (post-)Christian ecofeminist ecotheology. Here, the question of the “fear and horror of pantheism” in Western thought is discussed.

**Keywords:** ecofeminist theology; nature; pan-en-theism; pluralistic pantheism



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## 1. Introduction

Climate change, global warming, the loss of biodiversity, and other processes resulting from environmental pollution and the long-term overexploitation of natural resources are the expression and consequence of the globalised consciousness of human’s consumerist-imperialist attitude towards nature. Ecological destruction and the survival of life on this planet require a new understanding of our relationship to nature, to other people, and to (living) beings. New epistemologies are needed, new ways of thinking and feeling towards nature—*metanoia*, a change of mind and heart—is required for the necessary ecological transformation.

Consequently, anthropocentric (Judeo-Christian) theologies are challenged to adopt new post-anthropocentric, ecologically affirmative paradigms. Anthropocentrism varies in the different Judeo-Christian traditions, but it is unified by the assertion that the human being is the sole or essential *imago Dei*. This view emphasises the paradigm that humans are spiritually transcendent and consequently superior to the natural world. It is this component of human dominance over nature that justifies the exploitation and abuse of the environment (nature). The dualistic Cartesian split in Western philosophy, which has been incorporated into Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology, is the source of an essentially human-centered, instrumental understanding of nature. The result is a pronounced anthropocentric tendency.

From a theological point of view, anthropocentrism is not easy to overcome. The anthropocentrism of Christianity is linked to the central doctrines of creation, redemption, Christology, resurrection, and eternal life. Of course, these are complex theological doctrines that are interpreted differently within and between Christian traditions.

In view of this, this paper follows the hypothesis that Christianity, and religions as such (especially the Abrahamic monotheistic religions), are challenged to find new ways beyond the anthropocentric paradigm, even if the (Abrahamic monotheistic) religions actually promote anthropocentrism. Also, according to Thomas Berry—one of the pioneers of a vision of ecological spirituality—at present, religions must find ways to respond to biocide, ecocide, and geocide (Jenkis et al. 2017, p. 5).

Using the methodology and epistemology of theological ecofeminism—which assumes that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature result from the same constellation of phenomena: patriarchal domination, dualistic anthropologies, and global hypercapitalism—the possibility of implementing Rubenstein’s model of pluralistic pantheism as an alternative for post-anthropocentric ecological theologies will be analysed.

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim successfully summarised ecofeminist claims regarding the destructive stereotype of human dominance over nature and the natural world:

Anthropocentrism in various forms, religious, philosophical, scientific, and economic, has led, perhaps inadvertently, to the dominance of humans in this modern period now called Anthropocene. (It can be said that certain strands of the South Asian religions have emphasized the importance of humans escaping from nature into transcendent liberation. However, such forms of radical dualism are not central to the East Asian traditions or indigenous traditions). (Jenkis et al. 2017, p. 5)

Theological ecofeminisms seek to deconstruct and overcome the instrumentalised view of dualistic binarisms that spring from a dualistic Western philosophical split of mind and matter, and to find new paths to non-dualistic metanarratives that go beyond the purely anthropocentric androcentrism strongly imprinted in Judeo-Christian religions.

From this standpoint, Heather Eaton critically points out that anthropocentrism excludes planetary solidarity. As an antidote to the anthropocentric approach, she proposes an Earth-centric approach that does not diminish the uniqueness and superiority of *homo sapiens* as a technologically adept and dominant species. She also points out that this requires at least good stewardship and an ethic of living within the rhythms and limits of the natural world. She asserts:

However, for an authentic planetary solidarity, stewardship is insufficient. It implies an ontological separation between humans and natural world and maintains a strong anthropocentrism with an understanding that together with God we will take care of God’s garden. As an ethic of restraint, stewardship is essential. As a theological model, it is detrimental. An Earth-centric approach would mean the ecological and ethical primacy of a functioning biosphere. In this framing, the Earth community has rights and humans have obligations toward planetary solidarity that includes the entire planet. (Eaton 2017, pp. 32, 33)

From this standpoint, this article explores the intersections that link environmental concerns and ethical issues related to the understanding of the relationship between nature, humans, and God from the perspective of theological ecofeminism and the possibility of intervention with the pantheistic understanding of the relationship between God and the world and, consequently, the understanding of the sacredness of all living natural creatures.

Recognising that pantheism is a very complex phenomenon and should by no means be regarded as a single codified viewpoint, but must be understood as a diverse family of different doctrines, we will at this point only roughly define pantheism as it is understood in this paper. Pantheism will be defined in more detail in the second and third parts. In

this paper, pantheism is primarily understood as the paradigm that everything is part of a divine unity consisting of an all-encompassing, manifested deity or God/Goddess.

It is also necessary to point out that theological ecofeminisms are anything but a monolithic phenomenon. There are many types of ecofeminist thinking (religious, spiritual, theological), and there are certainly tensions between different ecofeminist theological camps (reformers, revolutionaries, womanists, etc.).

This paper will first focus on a constructive critique and challenge to Christian ecofeminism (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Ivone Gebara, Anne Primavesi, etc.), which, in the beginnings of its deconstruction of Christianity's patriarchal androcentrism, bases its ecologically affirming theology on a pan-en-theism.

We could understand the pan-en-theistic turn as a tool to deconstruct the prevailing Cartesian dualistic binaries and their symbolism and metanarratives. Therefore, this article will first outline the issue of Christian ecofeminism and the intervention of pan-en-theism in ecofeminist theologies. At this point, the article hypothesises that pan-en-theism is the first and "safe" phase of the transition from the anthropocentrism of Christianity to the second phase, which the paper proposes in the final part: to the possibility of the theoretical adoption of pluralist pantheism in (post-)Christian ecofeminist ecotheology. Pantheism is heavily weighed down by negative stereotypes of the savage, primitive, and dangerous; however, at least in its methodology and symbolism, it is an enticing paradigm that, despite criticisms of its undifferentiated nature, offers a very tempting alternative to anthropocentrism and the binaristic dualisms of Western hierarchy.

In the last part, the paper develops the central question: could pluralist pantheism be understood as the next step in the evolution of God/Goddess–human–nature relations, and as such, be incorporated into (post-)Christian ecofeminism?

## 2. Intervention of Pan-En-Theism in Christian Ecofeminist Theologies

Deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism are referred to as "radical (revolutionary) green theories" in the environmental debate. Like all other radical green ideas, ecofeminism calls for "fundamental theological, social, political and economic changes" and a paradigm shift in all intellectual disciplines. The exploitative elements of neoliberal hyper-capitalism and hyper-consumer culture and the moral critique of modern industrial societies are critically questioned by ecofeminists. We need deeper values, and to achieve these deeper values, there must be fundamental reforms in theology, society, politics, and economics.

Ecofeminism views the environmental or ecological crisis as the result of an unethical and broken relationship of humans with nature and the environment, due in part to the effects of a paradigmatic view characterised by hierarchical Cartesian binaristic dualisms and a strong anthropocentrism. Ecofeminism is radical because it calls for a profound change in the way one thinks about and understands the relationship between humans and nature, and as such, it calls for a paradigm shift. And this paradigm shift that ecofeminists seek is in contrast to the softer approaches to environmental issues that merely support "management and technology solutions" and focus mainly on addressing the signs of environmental crisis by trying to reduce the impact of excessive human intervention in nature, but still uphold the "power over" paradigm of anthropocentric domination over nature.

From this point of view, Christian ecofeminism calls for the concept of immanence to be re-symbolised and placed at the center of the theological matrix. It considers God/Goddess as an integral part of the development of the created order and its evolutionary process and holds that God/Goddess as its creator cannot be separated from it. This has direct implications for several theological areas. For example, Christology could be symbolically reinterpreted from the perspective of the descending Christ to the perspective of the maturing Christ, through the process of the divinisation of communities and the individuals within them, in nature and the natural world. "Ethics can no longer be seen as sent down but must be experienced again as growing out of the creative immanence between people"

(Ivy Singh 2003, p. 17). Relationality is strongly emphasised at the core of Christian ecofeminism, especially in (eco)feminist ethics. It encompasses the perception of mutuality and interdependence that extends to nature and all created natural beings (Furlan Štante 2022, pp. 318, 322).

In the search for ecologically affirming theologies and post-anthropocentric views on the relationship between God/Goddess and Human/Nature, ecofeminist theologians (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Sallie McFague, Carol P. Christ, Judith Plaskow, etc.) have introduced a pan-en-theistic web of life as an alternative to strong anthropocentrism. The metaphor of the “web of life”, also an indigenous concept frequently used in the poetics of women’s vision (notably by Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich), illustrates the dynamics of a collective feminine insight into an interconnected world of subjectivities. According to indigenous worldviews, a person’s entire being (physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual) is intertwined with the earth, the land, nature, and with other people (family, communities, etc.).

The essential difference between indigenous religions and the world religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam lies not in the debate between polytheism and monotheism, as is the case in the classical religious and anthropological works of the 20th century, but in the different conceptualisations of human nature (God/Goddess).

Indigenous religions and traditions perceive humanity as equal actors in the creation of cosmic harmony; i.e., they place humanity alongside all other living and non-living beings. Christianity places the human being at the center of the world.

At this point, the post-development discourse of the global South, enriched with pantheistic religious content, with its concrete socio-political achievements, can contribute in some way to solving the ecological and spiritual crisis in which the global North finds itself, as it offers examples of how to solve environmental problems.

In the indigenous interpretation, humans are also animals, plants, rocks, and spiritual beings, such as the ancestors, etc., who together with humans help to shape the unity of the world or the cosmos. Furthermore, the Earth, in all its planetary complexity, is a personality to be particularly respected. The anthropologist and ethnologist Marija Mojca Terčelj claims that two ethnic groups, the Quechua and the Aymara, were the bearers of great pre-colonial civilisations before the founding of the Inca Empire. She explains that among the Incas, the Quechua and Aymara played an important political and cultural role. Today, both are the protagonists of “Pachamamism”, a social movement that has become part of the political, philosophical, and development discourse of the global South; some authors also refer to it as “spiritual ecology” (Terčelj 2021, pp. 77, 78).

In classical ethnographic literature, Pachamama is usually described as a fertility Goddess who takes care of sowing and harvesting, lives in mountain caves, and causes earthquakes. She has a chthonic and ambivalent character and embodies the principle of procreation and destruction. Her name is usually translated as “Mother Earth”, although her character refers not only to the female gender and the fertile earth, but to nature in general or the earth in all its universal complexity. To better understand Pacha Mama, we need to familiarise ourselves with the etymology of the term and the main ethnographic explanations. Pacha Mama literally means “Mother Earth”, from pacha or “earth”, and mama or “mother”. Mother Earth or Pacha Mama, through which life reproduces and materialises, has the right to full respect for her existence and to the preservation and renewal of her life cycles, her structure, her functions, and her evolutionary process.

In 2008, the Republic of Ecuador adopted a new constitution in which the right of the Pachamama was included as an equal entity. It is not about the protection of the natural environment (as an object), but about the Earth as a person, even though the two issues overlap and complement each other. For a better understanding, here is a summary of Article 71 of the Ecuadorian Constitution:

Nature or Pacha Mama, in which life reproduces and materializes, has the right to full respect for its existence and to the preservation and renewal of life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes. (Constitución del Ecuador 2008)

Ecuador is thus the first country in the world to formally recognise Nature as a civil right. In doing so, it has also recognised indigenous cosmologies as an equal and equal discourse to existing politics and philosophy.

In this respect, the global North can learn a lot from the pantheistic religious content of the global South.

According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, the “life-giving matrix as pan-en-theistic or transcendently immanent” describes how ecological interdependence and the dynamics of a collective feminine insight function in an interconnected matrix of subjectivities (Radford Ruether 1992, p. 260). This “life-giving matrix” ensures that the natural cycles of life are constantly renewed. It also gives us the strength and encouragement to fight against the prevailing oppressive and abusive structures and to forge new bonds of mutual affirmation between humans and nature. Mercedes Canas similarly describes the interconnectedness of humans and nature in “the web of life”:

Life on earth is an interconnected web, and there is no privileged hierarchy of humans over nature that would justify their domination. A healthy, balanced ecosystem that includes human and non-human inhabitants must maintain diversity. (Canas 1996, p. 27)

Ivone Gebara also includes the Trinitarian concept of God in this interconnected web of life. According to her interpretation, the idea of the Holy Trinity is not to be understood as a revelation from above, which is to be understood as an unquestionable, eternal truth that is incompatible with the experience of daily life, but as something that is constantly shaped by relational experiences in people’s daily lives and, as such, always takes on new forms and shapes (Radford Ruether 2005, p. 113).

As I have already summarised in the article *Transcendence in Christian (eco)feminist hermeneutics* (Furlan Štante 2017, pp. 593, 594), Sallie McFague challenges the traditional hierarchical, anthropocentric, and androcentric, individualistic and dualistic models of theology and their implication in the current ecological crisis. The idea that the world serves as “God’s body” illustrates McFague’s notion of how God/Goddess manifests himself/herself in the world, according to which “the world is our place of encounter with God” (McFague 1993, p. vii).

Her anthropological and theological approach focuses not only on how humans interact with God/Goddess, but “takes as its starting point our earthly context: our interrelationships and interdependencies with all other living beings on our planet, as well as our important differences from other forms/.../, for the earth is our only home and the home of all other beings” (McFague 1993, p. 34).

In *Weaving the Visions*, Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ also argue that relationality is essential to human life for feminist theologians and make a connection between the feminist focus on relationality and divine immanence. The self is fundamentally relational and intertwined with the body, emotions, relationships, community, history, and the web of life, all of which serve to both contain and strengthen the self. The idea of the relational self is similar to the feminist perspective of the immanent turn of the sacred, as both recognise the relationship to that which is finite, mutable, and limited. The Other (whether human or natural) is always the place where, how, and in whom the mercy of God/Goddess comes to us (Plaskow and Christ 1989, p. 299).

In many ways, all contemporary theological reflections on the human condition, nature, the universe, or the connection between humans and nature and Goddess revolve around the concept of the Mother Goddess when associated with the paradigm of the Triple Goddess. The two books that likely contributed most to the development of the paradigm of Triple Goddess were *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk and *Drawing Down the Moon* by Margot Adler, both published in 1979.

Starhawk explores the archetype of the Triple Goddess (possible interpretation of pre-Christian patriarchal Trinity), which represents the three stages of a woman’s life: Maiden, Mother, and Crone. She claims that this archetype can also be seen as a metaphor for the natural cycles of birth and death. In her opinion, people can gain a deep respect

for the natural order and a better knowledge of their role in the world by exploring and understanding these metanarratives (Starhawk 1979).

However, in many pagan beliefs, including modern Wicca, the Maiden is seen as a virgin lady (girl) or maiden who has not yet awakened. She radiates fresh ideas, excitement, and a sense of wonder at new beginnings. She is associated with the waxing phase of the lunar cycle, which occurs when the moon rises from a dark to a full sight.

The next phase in a woman's life is motherhood. It represents growth and abundance, fertility and fecundity, and the acquisition of knowledge. She is the epitome of sexual, social, and emotional fulfillment, and the full moon is her symbol. Her realm is spring and early summer; the Mother becomes green and fertile along with the soil. It is not necessary for a woman to have biological children to accept the position of mother.

Finally, the last phase is the Crone aspect. She is death at the end, the night, the witch, and the wise woman. She is the setting moon, the winter cold, the withering of the earth.

In the search for ecologically affirming theologies, a kenotic incarnational model for ecology, as advocated by many ecofeminists, conveys a new sense of relationship, a recognition of interconnectedness, and an appreciation of all inhabitants of ecosystems and living beings in the web of life. Priscilla E. Eppinger proposes "the kenotic model of incarnation as a far more theologically appropriate model for Christians" (Eppinger 2011, p. 47).

In order to show how we can unite disparate entities such as God and nature, see them as interrelated, as the one person of Christ, and recognise the perichoresis between the divine and the human, the divine and nature, without mixing their identities, Ioanna Sahinidou claims the patristic-Christological use of perichoresis. For her, Christological perichoresis is a response to the redemptive power of Christ who became flesh and inserted himself as a creature into the web of life, and it affirms the idea that all creation is incorporated into God's newly created world (Sahinidou 2015, pp. 118, 119).

The question of pantheism and its theological implications erupted with the strong revival of pre-Christian mythologies and beliefs in the form of Modern Paganism. One of the best-known and most popular forms of Modern Paganism or western neo-paganism is Wicca or neo-pagan witchcraft. Witchcraft offered an interesting alternative for religious women who had eagerly embraced the second wave of feminism from the early 1960s onwards and therefore rejected the male-dominated hierarchical structures of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic religions. Their followers not only accepted women as priestesses, but also used feminine symbols and metanarratives to symbolise the face of God or Goddess, and appeared to organise in a non-hierarchical manner, which was in line with the egalitarian ideals of the "consciousness-raising" entities in the movements for women's empowerment. Emerging from the moderate, androcentric tradition of European occult groups, pagan witchcraft had to be transformed to conform to radical feminist positions, but it clearly offered a kind of empowerment and fulfillment that was perceived as quite different from their earlier experiences with Christianity and Judaism (Salomonsen 2002, p. 6).

Most Wiccans worship a God/Goddess who manifests in both female and male form. Many believe that everything on earth has two sides: one male and one female. The divine is both monotheistic and polytheistic, but it is also one. It is also believed that divinity is inherent in everything, including rocks, rivers, animals, plants, sky, clouds, etc. Everything possesses a celestial energy, a spirit within itself. In this context, the divine is seen as animistic. Last but not least, the divine is associated with the cosmos, or more precisely, the universe is seen as a self-expression of the divine. Everything is permeated by the Divine, which is present everywhere. The Divine is pantheistic when it is perceived in this way.

Wiccans believe that the divine can be experienced through a wide range of perspectives, including pantheistic, animistic, monotheistic, and polytheistic. Another essential quality of the Goddess—in contrast to the transcendent, patriarchal male God—is immanence. Therefore, the Goddess becomes the representative of a new society, and her worship through rituals and moral behaviour serves as a catalyst for cultural and individual

change. Starhawk—ecofeminist, activist, and neo-pagan witch and pioneer in the revival of earth-based spirituality and Goddess religion—poetically describes a dance of differences, equally recognised in their intrinsic value, with a strong emphasis on immanence: “This is the consciousness I call immanence—the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance” (Starhawk 1982, p. 9).

Many modern Paganists embraced the pantheistic (and pan-en-theistic) paradigm because, for them, it represented the stronger theological paradigm for the earth-centred paradigm that allowed for the process of transformation and healing of the “rigid, patriarchal burdens of Judeo-Christian androcentric traditions” and the “broken human–nature” relationship” From this perspective, Starhawk defines her theistic spirituality in contrast to Judeo-Christian theism (which separates God from nature and humanity).

In order to overcome this separation and the Cartesian binarisms, she fuses the divine with nature, so that the divine is no longer transcendent and distant, but immanent to nature. She uses the term “spirit” as a synonym for “immanent value”, which in its ethical dimension is the catalyst of Starhawk’s “power-within”, which is linked to the sacredness of all beings, of nature, of humanity, of the earth, of the entire universe: “What is sacred—whether we call it Goddess, God, Spirit, or something else—is not outside the world, but manifests in nature, in human beings in the community and culture we create. Every being is sacred” (Starhawk 1989, p. 21).

Starhawk’s reference to the cultural implications of the revival of the Goddess is based on a particular theory of symbols put forward by some feminist theologians; for example, in Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father* and Carol P. Christ’s well-known essay “Why Women Need the Goddess”, the purpose of religious symbols is to represent the ideals of the human social environment as well as its values. As for the influence of symbols, she claims that they have both psychological and political effects because they promote the inner circumstances (deeply rooted ways of thinking and feeling) that enable people to accept or feel comfortable with the social and political structures that correspond to the symbol system.

The process of reconstructing anthropocentric metanarratives and symbolisms from an ecofeminist perspective and the process of transforming collective memory and contemporary religious conceptualisation of the sacred itself are strongly influenced by the insights and presence of (Christian) feminist theology, the Goddess movement, the revival of women’s lost folk religion and (modern) paganism, thaology and various other movements of women’s spirituality. The question of the paradigmatic transformation of the image of God/Goddess in terms of an ecofeminist epistemology implicitly aims to question, redefine, reassess, and rethink the interaction between humans and the earth or environment, leading to the need to redefine both the “earth-nature and the self”.

According to Anne Primavesi, the question of self-identification in relation to the earth becomes equally difficult for men and women when the (personified female) earth is considered as the archetypal Cartesian body without soul/self/self-worth; i.e., without rationality and presumably without inherent self-worth (Primavesi 2003, p. 78).

The judgmental dualism that pits Judeo-Christian tradition against pagan belief is reversed by Goddess feminism, (neo)pagan feminist spirituality, or the Wiccan movement. While paganism is perceived as a feminist religion built on ancient matriarchy, biblical beliefs are seen as wholly patriarchal and only serve to promote male dominance. In the article *Goddess Gaia and an Earth Healing Spirituality of Peace* (Furlan Štante 2014), I argued that “merely replacing a male transcendent deity with an immanent feminine one is an inadequate response to the “God image problem” given that “God the Father is a common name for the divine, but also that the whole web of divine-human relations, interpersonal relations, and human–nature relations is understood in this patriarchal context”—an argument also made by Sallie McFague (1987) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (1992). It is important to note that the ecofeminist paradigm can also be described “as a way of “creating a discursive symbiosis between feminism and a self-defined femininity. In

this symbiosis, the feminine is the ecological principle that enables feminism to transform the world" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004, p. 67).

In the search for gender-specific and ecologically affirmative metanarratives and poetically designated symbols for God/Goddess, feminist theologies have adopted the symbolism of "Gaia—the Great Mother Earth". Thus, Gaia is understood as a transformative, ecologically affirmative force within. In Greek cosmology, Gaia was one of many female and male deities. In the New Age movement and in neo-paganism—the subcultures in which the hypothesis emerged—Gaia is an important, though not the only, goddess. The sacred is female and feminine. It does not dwell in the heavens. It dwells below in the earth. Gaia is the word for the Greek earth goddess, and it is also a term adopted by a group of planetary biologists, such as James Lovelock (1979) and Lynn Margulis, to refer to their thesis that the entire planet is a living system that behaves like a unified organism. Both scientists (Lovelock and Margulis) distance their hypothesis from religion at all costs. According to Mary-Jane Rubenstein, sympoetic Gaia does not so much exclude religion as a particular way of imagining the divine. She notes that Lovelock insists that Gaia has functioned on its own from the beginning and does not need a God to intervene (Rubenstein 2018, p. 125).

In *Healing Gaia: Practical Medicine for the Planet*, Lovelock (1991) concedes that the Earth is not alive, claiming that when he speaks of a living planet, he is not thinking in animistic terms of a planet with sentience.

It is important to note that feminist theologies have adopted the concept of Gaia in their efforts to change the male-centred, androcentric, and anthropocentric image of God. Gaia is seen as a personified being, as immanent multiplicity. The connection between God/Goddess and the world is represented by various symbols. Some fall back on female personifications of nature and the divine (in particular the representatives of pagan ecofeminism or ecotheology) and recognise the divine principle in the concept of Gaia, and therefore call her Goddess, Mother Earth. They see creation as a body that comprises different ecosystems; a multitude of diversities that are interconnected in co-existence. However, despite the influence of the Gaia hypothesis on theological ecofeminism, there is (in Judeo-Christian ecofeminist perspectives) a strict recognition of the pan-en-theistic paradigm that rejects animism and pantheism and embraces a "soft" anthropocentrism (in a form of pan-en-theism), despite its ecologically affirming call to heal the broken human–nature relationship towards ecocentrism and biocentrism.

For example, the description of *She who changes* (originally written by Starhawk and revised by Carol P. Christ) contrasts with the male image of God (images of Lord, King, and Father) as an old white man with a long white beard, the common and familiar myth or stereotype of the male image of God in Western culture, is one of the "new" metanarratives of ecological and gender-affirming theologies, and embraces a (post-anthropocentric) pan-en-theistic view of the world:

She changes everything She touches, and everything She touches changes. The world Is in Her body. The world is in Her and She is in the world. She surrounds us like the air we breathe. She is as close to us as our own breath. She is energy, movement, life and change. She is the ground of freedom, creativity, sympathy, understanding, and love . . . She sets before us life and death. We can choose life. Change is. Touch is. Everything we touch can change. (Christ 2003, p. 200)

In order to break away from androcentric anthropocentrism, pioneers of ecofeminism have sought new frameworks in Christianity (Rosemary Radford Ruether), Judaism (Judith Plaskow), and process theology (Carol P. Christ) to establish an ecologically affirming feminist theology within a pan-en-theistic paradigm. The latter can be understood as a foundational step in the development of theological ecofeminism, opening the door to new perspectives and paradigms for an effective and consistent transformation of androcentric-anthropocentric interpretations of the relationship between God, humanity, and nature.

We could understand the pan-en-theistic turn as a tool for deconstructing the prevailing Cartesian dualistic binaries and their symbolism and metanarratives. Serena Anderlini-

D’Onofrio points out that “the notion of the Earth as a being with a life of its own abolishes the dichotomy between subject and object, mind and body, human and nature” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004, p. 87). The urge to move towards earth-centred metanarratives within the poetic symbolism of Gaia and feminist goddess epistemologies led ecofeminist theologies to use Gaia and the pan-en-theistic paradigm as a tool to deconstruct binaristic dualistic dichotomies.

More recently, the pan-en-theistic turn could also be understood as a tool for decolonising theology. Marilu Rohas Salzar argues that Christianity is an accomplice to violent colonisation, that has distorted Christianity’s complicity in the erasure not only of indigenous peoples but also of indigenous notions of sacredness, the concept and image of the biblical Christian God through Christian colonisation. She asserts:

The colonization of spiritual wealth went hand in hand with the destruction of ancestral knowledge, which the original colonizer and current neocolonizers have categorized as “superstitions”. For this reason, the decolonization of epistemologies and their underlying theologies in the Global South, here we focus on Latin America, is urgently needed. In doing so, we draw on ecofeminist theology, especially the panentheism it advocates. (Rojas Salazar 2018, p. 93)

Pan-en-theism as a tool for decolonising theology offers a broader framework and is not limited to the Christian God, but also refers to the experiences of indigenous peoples with their deities. When ecofeminists invoke the pan-en-theistic paradigm, they remain within the “safer” framework of Western interpretations of the (Christian) monotheistic God in the sense that not everything is God/Goddess, but God/Goddess is in everything. They emphatically and decisively distance themselves and their pan-en-theistic paradigms from pantheism. Mary Jane Rubenstein also notes that Sally McFague asserts that her eco-theological body of God is neither idolatry nor pantheism, and that Yvonne Gebara insists that the immanent divinity of ecofeminism must not be understood pantheistically. She claims:

Instead, along with process theologians, they affirm the delicately balanced doctrine of pan-en-theism, according to which “the world is in God, but God is also more than the world”. They hold on to the ontological distinction between God and the world. They call upon the “en” to ensure the separation between God and world that enables their relation (Rubenstein 2018, p. 4).

### 3. Pluralist Pantheism As the Next Step in the Evolution of Interpersonal, Interspecies and God–Human–Nature Relationships?

The rejection of pantheism is firmly rooted in Western religious thought. Pan-en-theism is often presented in opposition to pantheism, as we saw in the previous section of this paper (the case of Christian ecofeminism, which adopts the pan-en-theistic paradigm). But the differences are perhaps smaller than one might think. Few pantheists believe that God “is” the universe. Like pan-en-theists, most pantheists recognise both the transcendent One and the immanent Many. In her recent book *Pantheologies*, contemporary philosopher of religion Mary Jane Rubenstein examines the history of intellectual discussions of pantheism and raises the question of why so many Western philosophers and theologians have resisted the concept.

Etymologically, the term “pantheism” refers to the identification of pan or “all” with theos or “God”, but from there the term changes significantly depending on how one defines the “all” that God/Goddess “is”. Pantheism is by no means a monolithic paradigm. It would be more appropriate to speak in the plural; i.e., pantheisms, pantheologies. There are more claims that say you are a pantheist, and that is absurd, than there are claims that say my paradigm is pantheistic, and that is what it entails, according to Rubenstein (2018, p. 3). The word “pantheism” generally refers to the devotion of “nature” in the sense of the Greek god Pan. Pan is a figure who frequently and literally stands for pantheism in Renaissance, Romantic, and Victorian poetry.

Although practically everyone would like to avoid it, philosophically speaking, pantheism is nothing more than a borderline situation—a myth of the past and the present, regardless of one’s own theoretical inclination. “For theists, atheists, rationalists, empiricists and idealists” alike, pantheism has always been a position to be categorically rejected and avoided, as Rubenstein reveals (Rubenstein 2018, p. 4). Thus, “pantheism” has not developed into a coherent system or even an independent concept because the “horror of pantheism” is ubiquitous in Western thought. Most of the time it remains a pejorative term and a means of implicit rhetorical censorship, stigmatized and prejudged as “primitive, inferior and dangerous”.

Edward Burnett Taylor’s (1832–1917) assertion that indigenous peoples were unable to make an ontological distinction between themselves and everything else on earth, and that this was the central difference between Western and non-Western ontologies, contributed greatly to the stigma of inferiority and the prejudice of savagery of the pantheistic paradigm. Anti-pantheistic sources from the 18th to 20th centuries contain several dominant accusations that are regularly filtered through the orientalist lens: Pantheistic indistinguishability repeatedly characterised as an intrusion of mystical, Eastern monism into the soberly dualistic West (Rubenstein 2018, p. 92).

Despite its strong stigmatisation, Canadian feminist philosopher and theologian Grace M. Jantzen has proposed pantheism (Jantzen 1997) as “an imaginative alternative” to transform and overcome the limitations of the imprisoning and oppressive, hierarchical, dualistic symbolism of the Cartesian split. She encourages demonstrating the exact opposite, as pantheism “opens a new way to difference, to alterities of every sort”, though it was once feared as an abyss in which everything would be a version of the same (Jantzen 1997, p. 267).

Jantzen believes that the “liberating promise” of pantheism is to completely disrupt and provoke Western thought. She speculates that if pantheism were taken seriously, the validity of all Western iconography, symbolism, and metanarratives would be called into question. Pantheism rejects hierarchies based on the separation between spirit and matter, light and darkness, and everything else. For Jantzen, pantheism is the position that promises to deconstruct oppressive binarisms because “pantheism opens the way to difference” in terms of a liberating pantheistic imaginary, especially given its creative potential for a sensible transcendent (which, according to Luce Irigaray, is fully immanent and serves as a projection horizon for our embodied growth, not as a substitute for the flesh) and an embodied freedom. Pantheism as an imaginative alternative is therefore, for Jantzen, the way to embrace pantheism, at least symbolically and methodologically: “To suggest that in some sense the divine is inseparable from the physical universe, as pantheism does, would not be merely to propose a change of theological doctrine. If pantheism were seriously considered, the whole of Western symbolism, constituted as it is by the binary polarities that run through it like a fault line, would be called into question. Pantheism rejects the split between spirit and matter, light and darkness, and the rest; it thus also rejects the hierarchies based on these splits” (Jantzen 1997, p. 271).

She urges a distinction between transcendence and immanence in the sense that the divine must always be transcendent outside the boundaries of material reality and is undoubtedly irreducible to the physical binaristic dualisms of the physical world:

The transcendent and the immanent are not to be seen as opposites. Rather, the sensible transcendental, the pantheistic projection of the female divine, opens out what has so far been seen as a set of polarities into a play of diversities, bringing the god to life through us. In doing so it not only subverts the symbolic of modernity, but in so doing offers new horizons for becoming which are rooted in gendered embodiment. (Jantzen 1997, p. 277)

Mary Jane Rubenstein argues that by affirming pantheism, Jantzen seeks to reconsider the notion of “divinity” being entirely separate and distant from the created world, rather than asserting that God is identical to the universe or that the cosmos itself is God/Goddess, as she symbiotically connects divinity to the living diversity of the physical world and aligns

divinity with the living diversity of the material world itself. In this respect, according to Jantzen, pantheism is a much more extreme stance than atheism, which ultimately reintroduces the idea of the God it rejects (Rubenstein 2018, p. 11).

Like Jantzen, Rubenstein finds pantheism attractive because it rejects the dualism of Western philosophy and the frameworks that determine how we perceive the world. Both consider pantheism to be the most effective strategy for undermining the distinctions between God and the universe, mind and matter, man and woman, and culture and nature. They also see it as a tool (methodologically and symbolically) to break down the prevailing Cartesian dualisms, their symbols, and metanarratives. In terms of a pluralistic pantheism, Rubenstein identifies and proposes an alternative pantheism. She adds that there are means to interpret this pan of pantheism as a multiplicity, rather than describing the “all as one”.

One of the possible ways of understanding this multiplicity of pantheism could also be understood, within the contemporary issue of the human condition, is that Pan could also be sexual and bread; that is, what we ingest to nourish ourselves and what we employ as the most basic culmination of life and the most basic affirmation and continuation of ourselves. At this point, LGBTQ thought, and more specifically the transgender perspective, are particularly significant in terms of deconstructing rigid binary beliefs.

This multiplicity is a manifestation of our fundamental immanence in our complex and dynamic existence and not a reflection of a distant transcendence. This form of pantheism is more compatible with our conceptions of God and the universe if it is conceived as a pluralistic multiplicity. The proposed pluralistic model of pantheism is more coherent in light of the current conceptual and scientific knowledge. Clayton J. Crocket affirms that “we can also consider such perspectives in the context of scientific theories of quantum physics” (Crocket 2023).

The question arises as to whether Christian ecofeminist theologies, despite their strong rejection of pantheism as such, could to some extent adopt Rubenstein’s model of pluralist pantheism. Mary Jane Rubenstein notes that the reason for the rapid rejection of pantheism is not pantheism itself, but that the fact of rejection itself would be a problem. Considering that the price of identifying with pantheism is often severe stigmatisation and excommunication, such fear of pantheism and a priori rejection of it seems understandable. She quotes Jantzen: “If a proposal is seen as pantheistic or leading to pantheistic consequences, that is deemed sufficient reason to repudiate it, often with considerable vitriol” (Rubenstein 2018, p. 4). Jantzen argues that the fear of pantheism could also be understood as a fear of the abolition and transformation of the masculinist symbolism of the West: “The fear of pantheism bespeaks a perceived if unconscious threat to the masculinist symbolic of the West” (Jantzen 1997, p. 272).

Rubenstein, according to Clayton J. Crocket, breaks down pantheistic resistance and provides new perspectives on pantheism, and even pantheology:

So many people today are caught in the either/or of monotheism vs. atheism. The theists and the atheists agree on their conception of God—a Supreme Being who is all powerful, all good and all knowing, but they differ in terms of the existence or nonexistence of such a being. Pantheism offers new ways to intervene into such conversations. (Crocket 2023)

The Rubensteinian model of pluralistic pantheism and the concept of multiplicity, which does not reflect a distant transcendence but is an expression and manifestation of the deep immanence of our complicated and dynamic dwelling in the world, is, in my opinion, very close to the ecofeminist understanding of the relationality of all beings in the web of life. From the (eco)feminist perspective, human beings choose “to enact the divine” (Grigg 1994, p. 507).

This indicates a rejection of the conventional notion of the divine as a supernatural being who dwells outside and apart from the finite. The focus on immanence that is so crucial to feminist theology may be associated with a certain kind of transcendence, at least according to scholars like Radford Ruether. She rejects the transcendent, imperial God of patriarchal Christianity and instead invokes the “primal matrix”, the primordial womb, the

great womb in which all things, including gods and humans, heaven and earth, humans and nature, are created. Here, the divine is not distant from us, not above us in the form of an abstract ego, but is in the midst of us as the source of all life and relationality in the web of life, proclaiming “power within” rather than “power over” (Radford Ruether 1983, pp. 48, 49). The divine is clearly immanent in this conception of what Radford Ruether would have us refer to as God/Goddess, but it is also all-encompassing, and in some sense, transcendent (Radford Ruether 1983, p. 85). The “primal matrix” refers to a vast framework or foundation that is independent of ourselves, yet a component of which we are a part.

From this perspective, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s “primal matrix” is not so distant from Rubenstein’s proposal of a model of pluralist pantheism as pluralist multiplicity, as this multiplicity does not reflect a distant transcendence, but is an expression of a radical immanence of our complex and dynamic existence, and perhaps more compatible with our conceptions of God/Goddess and the world.

#### 4. Conclusions

Despite the stereotypical criticism of being too undifferentiated, pantheism is an attractive paradigm which, at least in its methodology and symbolism, offers a very tempting alternative to anthropocentrism and the binaristic dualisms of Western hierarchy. However, pantheism is heavily burdened by negative stereotypes of the savage, primitive, and dangerous, which should be abandoned and transformed once and for all.

In my opinion, Rubenstein’s pluralist pantheism is a sophisticated antidote to the anthropocentric approach; it is more akin to the Earth-centered or ecocentric approach of many ecofeminists (Heather Eaton, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Starhawk, etc.) and could be understood as an inevitable challenge and opportunity for (post-)Christian ecofeminist thinking, moving towards new models of ecologically affirming spirituality.

It should be recognised that (pluralist) pantheism is far more convincing and consistent in its methodology and symbolism than any other anthropocentric approach to overcoming Cartesian-hierarchical binaristic dualisms and improving human–nature relations. Also, in its theoretical extension, it offers the cross-section of the theological, the spiritual with science (quantum physics), and the ecologically affirmative platform for infinite possibilities of intersection. Pluralist pantheism with the paradigm of multiplicity represents the possible next step in the evolution of post-Christian (ecofeminist) thought towards ecologically affirming theologies and beyond oppressive Western dualistic binarisms, as well as their metanarratives and symbolism. It is a tool for the consistent decolonisation of the image of God/Goddess from the masculinist and anthropocentric symbolism of the West.

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