The Earth Mother vs. God the Father

By Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod

Christianity is based on an egalitarian indifference to sexual difference, but in practice treats women very unequally. God the father has replaced the pagan idea of the Earth Mother, who celebrates humanity's shared belonging to Gaia.

About : Émilie Hache, *De la génération. Enquête sur sa disparition et son remplacement par la production* (On Generation: A Study of its Disappearance and Replacement by Production) Paris, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2024, 312 p., 21 €.

Émilie Hache's book, devoted to the question of generation, is presented as a "study of its disappearance and replacement by production." She analyzes generation through the myths and cosmologies that support our practices and relationships with the world. Generation, she shows, is not only concerned with reproduction, in the narrow sense of engendering children: it extends to the regeneration of the world in which we live and the "perpetuation of human beings as well as clan members, [and] relationships with our ancestors and the living beings with whom we live" (p. 203).

Mythos and logos: The cosmology of earth's inhabitants

Outside of the Christian cultural sphere and its modern legacy, myths and cosmologies show humanity's place in the great chain of interdependence between living beings and in world's perpetual regeneration. Both are usually placed under the tutelage of female powers. Hache offers a detailed analysis of the Greek ritual of Thesmophoria, during which ancient Athenian women celebrated Demeter for her "feminine sexuality and fertility" and as "the source of all life and wealth" (p. 45). Adopting an eco-feminist perspective (which she has played an important role in introducing to France),[1] Hache makes the historic bond between women and nature central to her argument. In this way, she emphasizes the power of this bond and its critical role in relation to the patriarchy, as well as the ambivalent and problematic way in which it confines generation and natural bonds exclusively to women.

One of the most interesting passages in Hache's book is when she shows that the imagery of the earth mother that Carolyn Merchant, drawing on Latin sources, had emphasized,[2] should be understood in terms of even older chthonian myths in which "the earth engenders all humanity" (p. 62). Reexamining ancient Greek myths about patriarchal autochthony, which held that the earth gives birth only to men, Hache finds in the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha traces of a non-patriarchal chthonian genesis, in which "we are all born to the earth, women as well as men" (p. 59). She shows that the demeaning association of women with nature results from assigning half of humanity a special connection to the earth. Hache, in this way, does not see the connection between women and nature in essentialist terms, but rather as the ambivalent and historically constructed consequence of a bond to the earth that originally included all sexes. But as the context became patriarchal, men withdrew and excluded themselves:

> The demeaning and fatal bond between women and nature that we have inherited obscures a powerful analogy with the earth (mother), which harbors in its breast our generative connection to the forgotten earth. Today, to call oneself a terrestrial is to express this connection; it affirms this sense of belonging, of living among living terrestrial beings (p. 63).

[1] See Émile Hache, ed., *Reclaim. Recueil de textes écoféministes*, Paris, Cambourakis, 2016.

[2] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, New York, Harper & Row, 1980.

This terrestrial cosmology is not unique to ancient Greece, where it was offset by a misogynistic society that had largely forgotten its chthonian origins. The same cosmology can be found, for example, in Native American creation myths (p. 61), as well as in the funeral rites of societies that Hache describes as matriarchal (in the sense of "nonpatriarchal egalitarian societies," p. 278). It is to Hache's credit that she avoids a simplistic contrast between these cosmologies and modern western rationality. She does not oppose *mythos* to *logos*, but sees the former, rather, as another way of expressing the truth of our shared belonging to the earth. In her view, ecological science and the Gaia hypothesis simply express, in rational forms, what myth tell us in its own way:

> These creation myths put us in contact with the earth in a way that the ecological, geological, biological, and climatological sciences that are trying to articulate Gaia are rediscovering and establishing (p. 66).

The Christian origin of industrial society

Yet it is precisely the essential truth of our shared belonging to the earth that has been lost with modernity and the growth of industrial society. If Hache is more inclined to speak of "industrial society" than "capitalism," it is because she is less interested in the capitalist accumulation of value and profit than in the economic imperative of production and its corollary: the conception of reproduction as an exclusively female task. Adopting a genealogical perspective, she seeks the Christian origins of our productivist mindset. Her book shows that the modern conception of production originates with the Christian idea of creation. The "vast cosmological upheaval" (p. 99) brought about by Christianity lies in the idea of ex nihilo creation, in which God produces the world and reproduces himself in his son, Jesus. The masculine model of an all-powerful creator replaces the female model of an interconnected fabric of living beings. With Christianity, the natural bonds of generation become unraveled, flesh and sexuality are devalued, salvation is deferred to the afterlife, and indifference to the world in which we live becomes possible. Adding an ecofeminist twist to Lynn White's thesis on the Christian roots[3] of the ecological crisis, Hache shows how the idea of a masculine God who claims to

[3] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, n° 155, 1967, p. 1203-1207.

engender everything, dispensing with all ties to the feminine and preexisting nature, played a decisive role in the emergence of a patriarchal and anti-ecological worldview.

The book thus takes seriously the Christan idea of God the Father by laying bare the cosmological transformation of the "kinship system" (p. 122) that is inherent in this idea. Drawing on Ivan Illich[4], Hache explains that we have gone from vernacular gendered societies--characterized by a high level of division of labor between men and women, but allowing for complementarity between the sexes--and a "sexist unisex world" (p. 126) which is based in principle on an egalitarian indifference to sexual difference, but which, in practice, treats women all the more unequally. Christianity is a key moment in this shift because it is based on equality before God: "From God's point of view, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither freeman nor slave, neither man nor woman, but sons (and daughters) of God" (p. 135). Hache maintains that far from representing progress, this unisexual equality made it possible to break with women's central role in pre-Christian systems of cosmological kinship. According to Christianity, we are all children of a male God, with whom all symbolic attachment to the earth (mother) disappears. In this way, the cosmological questions raised by the Christian kindship system are essential to the development of a worldview that is indifferent to terrestrial concerns.

While the connection Hache posits between the Christian idea of creation and the modern primacy of production cannot be easily summarized, we can at least say that the Physiocrats played a decisive role in this story. The Physiocrats, particularly Quesnay, abandoned the divine economy of nature, which referred to the order of the world that God desires and preserves, in favor of economics understood as a science of production. The Christian idea of creation is thus subsumed into a productivist conception of the world that is focused on abundance and is as blind as the Christian God to the regenerative bonds connecting living beings to one another:

> The Physiocrats first characterize this mode of coming-to-being of the seeds of production in theological terms, that is, as created or, put differently, as separated from any generative considerations—that is, from any concerns of time and place pertaining to this plant as it relates to the other living beings that surround it, from its place in the world's renewal to the attachments and commitments we might have to it (p. 171).

[4] Ivan Illich, *Le Genre vernaculaire*, Paris, Seuil, 1983.

Hache next draws on Dusan Kazic[5] and Bruno Latour[6] to propose "non-economic ways of inhabiting the earth" and "new, non-productivist ways of inhabiting it" (p. 274). The book seeks nothing less than to break with the Christian conception of creation, which has been secularized in modern industrial society's productivism. In doing so, Hache situates the question on the terrain of spirituality, myth, and cosmological kinship systems. We must invent new gods that can allow us to rediscover our ties with all living beings--humans as well as non-humans--and to break with economic productivism and the creationist cosmology on which it is based:

> We need new gods that can help us restore non-patriarchal masculinity as much as female gods, who must also be reconceived. Their theological character must still be elaborated, but they are already present, in cultural rather than religious idioms. To abandon a culture that for three centuries has celebrated men with men and for men for an eco-trans-feminist culture requires a new pantheon, in the literal as well as the figurative sense of the term (p. 267-268).

Is another history of Christianity and modernity possible?

Hache's book contains an implicit appeal for another book, which would complete her project. While she repeatedly emphasizes the ambivalence of non-Christian and vernacular societies, highlighting their patriarchal structure and the tension between their valorization of femininity and their unequal treatment of women, she does not address the ambivalence found in Christianity and modernity. Does she not run the risk of reducing complex, diverse, and contested traditions to a static unity? In setting her task as "reconstructing cosmological relationships in a way that transcends our Christian and Galilean creationist myths" (p. 64), Hache confronts, at times, an adversary that is too monolithic and insufficiently varied.

From an eco-feminist perspective, Rosemary Radford Ruether, for instance, has relentless searched the Christian tradition for hints of a counter-discourse that is neither ecocidal nor patriarchal.[7] She has brought to light counter-tendencies inherent in Christianity. These counter-tendencies are also present in modernity, as two

[5] Dusan Kazic, *Quand les plantes n'en font qu'à leur tête. Concevoir un monde sans production ni économie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2022.
[6] Bruno Latour, "Imaginez les gestes barrières contre le retour à la production d'avant-crise," *AOC*, 30 March 2020.
[7] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides. Readings Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1985; *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

concepts easily demonstrate: nature and production. Concerning nature, is it really the case that modernity has reduced us to living in a "world that is de-animated, objectivized, commensurable, and infinitely exploitable" (p. 24)? Hache draws on Philippe Descola and Bruno Latour's analyses of the mechanical revolution of the seventeenth century, which, they claim, reduced all of "nature" to passive matter, deprived of life, divorced from human affairs, and relegated to an undifferentiated "great outdoors" that we usually ignore--except when we appropriate it as resources.[8] But other conceptions of nature do in fact exist in modern times. In *The Death of Nature,* Carolyn Merchant emphasizes Anne Conway's vitalism as well as Leibniz's critique of mechanism. She also mentions many alternative currents: "the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, American Transcendentalism, German *Naturphilosophen*, Karl Marx's early work, nineteenth-century vitalism, and Wilhelm Reich's work."[9]

The same approach could be applied to the concept of production. Can it really be characterized as a "completely unprecedented mode of coming-to-being, [which occurs] literally without engendering [and is] (male) unisex [and] detached from every constraint and responsibility concerning the perpetuation of the world, with indefinite growth as its only goal" (p. 171-172)? For example, according to Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts,* production refers not to an all-powerful creator detached from relations of interdependence with the world,[10] but participates in a naturalist ontology of generation, according to which "everything natural has to *come into being*."[11] Thus for the young Marx, nature's productivity itself supports human productive activity. From this perspective, Marx is the true heir to Schelling's nature philosophy, Feuerbach's naturalist reformulation of Hegel, and the Romantics and Goethe. The latter, after all, condemned "unfettered mind[s]"[12] who believed that culture could be freed from its relationship with nature.

In other words, modernity is, as much as Christianity, a battlefield that pits against one another two different conceptions--of the world, nature, production, creation, kinship, life, and divinity. The demarcation line does not only divide the "Christianity-modernity" bloc from its others. It also passes through the Christian

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[8] Bruno Latour, *Politiques de la nature*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999; Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005.

[9] "the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, American transcendentalism, the ideas of the German *Naturphilosophen,* the early philosophy of Karl Marx, the nine- teenth-century vitalists, and the work of Wilhelm Reich" (Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1980, rééd. 1989, p. 288).

[10] Paul Guillibert and Frédéric Monferrand, "Camarade Latour?" *Terrestres*, July 18, 2022.

[11] Karl Marx "Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.

[12] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Nature and Art".

tradition and secularized modernity. Hence the interest of expanding Hache's project in a way that would situate the tension within the tradition she rightly criticizes, rather than outside it. The stakes are the very possibility of an immanent critique of what we are--of the broad categories that we use to think and perceive the world.

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