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DEBATING THEOLOGIES OF LIBERATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF ECOFEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Vincent Manning and Mary Grey

COMMENTS ON *TO RWANDA AND BACK: LIBERATION,
SPIRITUALITY AND RECONCILIATION* by Mary Grey
(London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007). Pp. 160. Paperback.
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My first visit to Africa in 1997 was marked by surprise, disturbance and delight. Not prepared for the 'culture shock', I described it as being like 'visiting another planet' at the time – the African landscape; the beautiful skies; the people I was privileged to encounter. So it seems to have been for Professor Mary Grey when she had her first experience of Africa, visiting Rwanda in December 2004, which she reflects upon extensively in her book *To Rwanda and Back*. I was visiting friends in Arua, northern Uganda. Grey was in Rwanda at the invitation of the World Council of Churches.¹ Northern Uganda was afflicted by poverty, tribal divisions and the terrors of the 'Lord's Resistance Army' (LRA)² and still bore the scars of the Idi Amin regime. Mary Grey, a leading ecofeminist liberation

1 World Council of Churches: Faith and Order Commission, as part of a delegation of theologians, church-based leaders and human rights activists.

2 The LRA was waging a 'war' in Northern Uganda. Roads were dangerous due to land mines, and armed escorts were advised for travellers. Bus services for local people would normally go in convoy to lessen the possibility of ambush. Children were subject to kidnap and to forced recruitment as child soldiers. The week of my arrival, a bomb exploded in a local bar, known to be frequented by the 'Musungi' – white people, most of whom were attached to NGO's in the region.

theologian currently based at St Mary's University College, was entering into another African trauma, that of the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, when an estimated 800,000 people were brutally murdered in just 100 days in 1994.

Grey's sense of 'personal disturbance' comes across in the opening pages, and causes her to reflect upon her own place in relation to the people whose 'depth of suffering [she] would never be able to fathom'. She recognises that she is 'a part of the tragedy' (p. 6) and can no longer stand aside from it. These deeply-affecting challenges to faith and spirituality, as a person alert to her own responsibilities, even complicity, will be recognisable to any people who have been similarly 'shocked awake' through encounters with the lived suffering of others as a result of injustices. This then is Grey's starting point, for an exploration of the demands of justice within a spirituality that has reconciliation at 'its core' (pp. 110 and 168). This sense of overwhelming suffering is something we shall mention often.

This book is a personal 'thinking aloud', a dialogue between her spirituality and the questions that arise for her now. She is wrestling for a hopeful-way forward, a spirituality that can make a difference, bringing hope out of collective and personal traumas (p. 169).

Many examples of suffering and conflict make for uncomfortable reading. Alongside these examples, from Rwanda to Palestine; the subjugation of women and the complicity of the Church in the maintenance of injustices; globalisation and climate change; she describes people of faith from many traditions offering resistance to injustice, as active agents for healing and hopefulness. These examples, though, point to a depressing reality: most of the examples are some time in the past or seem so small in consequence. The poverty of examples reflects the reality: authentic signs of hope are hard to find. The reader may experience, as I did, a sense of being overwhelmed at times.

Using themes of 'liberation theologies', Grey constructs ways of drawing on her faith tradition that might be helpful. She emphasises the necessity of painful 're-membering' for reconciliation to be possible (p. 17); each person as precious in God's eyes, as a possible entry to repentance for the oppressors (pp. 19–20); the necessity that truth be told if right relationships are to be restored (pp. 41–2); the re-imagining of sacrifice, as an empowered act of radical love that enables victims to forgive (p. 43); compassion as cornerstone of reconciling justice (p. 76); and the need for a renewed Church, that emerges from below rather than as a powerful elite, in solidarity with the poor, where we not only risk vulnerability because of love, but discover the fullness of life in the process (p. 95).

In chapter five, Grey links the human face of suffering to the suffering earth. She recognises that liberation theologies have failed to understand the interdependent quality of justice, and have not made sufficient links

with our relationship with 'all of creation'. She gives fresh meaning to the 'preferential option for the poor', defining nature itself as a new category of poverty. Rightly, Grey identifies the poorest peoples as most exploited who suffer first, as a consequence of our destruction of the earth. She names this as coming from a kind of hubris and human arrogance (p. 119); requiring a recovery of connection with the sacred earth as gift, without which all ethical attempts flounder (p. 138).

This chapter seemed to flow most easily from her pen, and Grey seems comfortable discussing how everything, including justice, is interconnected in a 'web of life', where we have responsibility. She suggests that we can develop a spirituality of action that will enable us to resist injustice and still stay hopeful, in the face of overwhelming odds. This also felt a million miles away from Rwanda's genocide, although I am sure that it is not.

Having journeyed thus far with Mary Grey, I was hopeful of some 'answers' to these issues. What can people of faith do, and how can we go about it? Grey offers tools for theologians and church leaders in this book, and in the last chapters proposes a spirituality that can reawaken the 'power of dreaming and imagining' (p. 159) where violence gives way to symbols of life and flourishing. Using examples of Dorothy Day and Dorothee Soelle, she expounds a mystical tradition that grounds the individual firmly in prayer and relationship with the Spirit which sustains hope, but crucially impels us towards concrete action to combat injustice, challenge structural sin, and engage politically for the marginalised. This is a spirituality of the here and now, which engages with the struggle for peace and justice, shares the burdens of suffering, and challenges the dominant powers with a hopeful faith that no effort is wasted.

Grey opens this book with an apology that many questions remain unanswered, and concludes with the recognition that often things seem to be as bad as ever (pp. 168–9 and 193). She provides no new solutions here, nor easy answers, but food for thought and some theological insights that many engaged in the struggle for justice and peace from a faith perspective will find helpful. Throughout she reminds readers in the West that we bear a burden of responsibility that requires repentance, individually calls us to 'live simply', and as the churches require greater accountability to safeguard against complicity in oppression (p. 176).

In some ways, the title of the book is not entirely in line with its content. This is not about a liberation spirituality with reconciliation at its heart from a Rwandan (or even an African) perspective. How can it be? This also made me uncomfortable, because I detected a certain voyeuristic dimension in Mary Grey's writing that I felt most acutely when she includes descriptions of her home situation (pp. 106 and 141). The picture

in my mind of a theologian sitting by a babbling brook contemplating the meaning of the painful experience of others³ blocked in part my own reception of the gems that are contained in these pages. These gems include the need for a spirituality that embraces diversity, and is inclusive even, of the 'hostile other' (p. 159); her challenge to vulnerability, and the practice of daily forgiveness (pp. 180 and 191); the compelling notion of seeing the wounded face of God in creation (p. 130) and her call for an eco-spirituality; the recognition that it is we, the powerful, who are called to ongoing repentance, and the victims of injustice who are challenged to find the resources to forgive.

Perhaps in reading one person's account of an honest struggle, the discomfort resides first within myself. I too sit in my comfortable home trying to make sense of the suffering of others. I too wonder what can I do? Mary Grey makes a positive contribution to a painful discussion from a faith perspective which challenges the reader. She leaves us with the advice to begin with the small tasks that are possible (p. 165), and reminds us of the need for sustaining prayer leading to action. She concludes that our choice is limited; we must choose life or death. We can acquiesce to the dominant culture of violence, 'or keep alive the torch of the political and mystical spirituality of resistance. There is no 'Third Way' (p. 192).

In the final analysis this work reflects a more general trend within liberation-based theologies, towards discussion of spirituality and ecclesiology, more traditional themes, than attempts at any socio-political critiques, a hallmark of the first Liberation Theology of Latin America. Furthermore, this book painfully exposes the lack of a unified response⁴ to the dominant oppressive and exploitative forces in our world today. I am left with a sense of powerlessness and the question, what hope then for liberation?⁵

3 This seems to me to be at variance with liberation theology traditions as arising out of the experience of the oppressed group. Mary Grey draws upon the experiences of Rwandan people, and uses examples well to make theological points. Nevertheless, it remains the case that she is drawing upon the reported experience of others. She can only comment upon the Rwandan experience. But perhaps this is too harsh given Mary Grey's honesty in talking about her own journey, and search for meaning. By contrast her reflection upon the situation in India did not bother me, because she tells of her active involvement there. Perhaps if the book's title did not claim Rwanda as central, I would be less troubled.

4 In Latin American Liberation Theology, this concrete response was termed the 'historical project'. At the time, it included generally speaking a rejection of the capitalist system in favour of a socialist based nation state. Since the end of the cold war and the dominance of the capitalist system globally, Liberation Theologians have struggled to describe a newly realisable historical project, or liberating praxis.

5 Amongst the dominant forces I am thinking particularly of 'globalisation', multinational business and their effects; greater division between peoples and nations, and continuing poverty globally.

RESPONSE: CHALLENGE OF ECOLOGICAL AND ECOFEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

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I am grateful to Vincent Manning for his sensitive, thoughtful comments and for this opportunity to develop an exchange with a focus on the contribution of Ecofeminist Theologies of Liberation to the debate around the future of Liberation Theology. As I write, violence continues to escalate following the Kenyan elections and similarities are being noticed to the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Yet I think that whereas there are some links, there is a huge difference from a careful and long planned genocide in Rwanda and Kenyan tribal tensions exacerbated by an unjust election and the experience of poverty, injustice and dispossession in many of the townships. We do no service to the justice struggle by not insisting on the uniqueness of each situation.

The reviewer shares my concern as to the claims made by situations of oppression and injustice. What responsibility should a person bear, catapulted almost by accident – as I was – into the Rwandan situation? Yes, there appears to be an overload of suffering in the book, though I could not understand his remark that ‘most of the examples are some time in the past’. Rwanda’s sufferings fester on. Palestine’s anguish worsens each day. My Tajikistan story is admittedly in the past, but is told to show the indirect approach to peace-making which here had made all the difference. The sense that the approach to suffering is ‘voyeuristic’ raises the same question as to how to relate to a suffering people from a distance. The fact that I meditate by a river each morning – referred to somewhat sarcastically as a ‘babbling brook’ – is neither here nor there. When I’m in a Rajasthani Field Centre this would take place in freezing cold, in far from comfortable circumstances. Does that make reflection more authentic? In Rwanda I sought beauty and was dazzled by it, even amidst the horror. Ecofeminist thought invites the reflective person to situate himself/herself in relation to nature – whatever the context, be it degraded or flourishing.

The challenge still remains: what should be the response to oppression and suffering? As the reviewer is aware, I have worked for 20 years in Rajasthan and Indian Liberation theology has had a huge impact on my

work.⁶ But one of the core principles of Liberation Theology from its inception has been the empowerment of the people themselves to speak with their own voices, to develop their own agency. So, as a non-Indian, and given Britain's colonial history in India, the relationship must be one of partnership and enablement. Trust cannot be presumed. At this moment it is just as important to work here in Britain on advocacy around the issue of the Dalits (former Untouchables), as it is to work in India.⁷ Situations move on. The reviewer accurately touches on my own discomfort with armchair, academic theology and my perennial temptation to leave it—growing stronger over the years—as academia tries increasingly to ignore and marginalise Liberation Theology.

What was clear to me in Rwanda was the need, as a first world person, to visit, to hear and tell the stories. 'Your coming is part of our healing,' was what was said to us. Maybe this was exaggerated. Yet, as I related in the book, part of the woundedness of Rwanda is still the fact that the world turned away—and has not really made much reparation for this fact. This I learnt from the Director of SURF (the Rwandan fund for survivors) with whom I'm now trying to work, to discover exactly what Vincent Manning queried—what response to this suffering can and ought to be made? What kind of solidarity is appropriate, ongoing and effective?

This draws me to the heart of the argument, that 'the book is not entirely in line with its content.' The book was not meant to be just about Rwanda.⁸ It was meant to reflect on reconciliation seen as a spirituality. This means reconciliation considered as a way to live: of course there are no clear-cut answers—if there were, we could immediately solve the Palestinian situation, the Pakistan and Kenyan violence, and so on.

It was because of some of the limitations of Liberation Theology that I took this approach. Bear in mind that John-Paul Lederach (see the peace-story of Tajikistan related earlier), himself a seasoned Mennonite peace campaigner, sought 'crooked', roundabout ways to peace, even citing music, art and poetry. I saw that the struggle for justice in the teeth of oppression approach, though essential, could not cope with the complexity of certain situations, like the failure of so many liberation movements. Praxis, the core concept of liberation movements, has its limits. For a long time blind to gender and sexuality issues, Liberation Theology has only begun to factor in ecological dimensions since the Rio Summit of 1992. The Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonard Boff, published his book, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* as recently as

⁶ See my book, *Sacred Longing: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalisation* (London: The SCM Press, 2003).

⁷ See www.dsn.org. I am a Trustee of the Dalit Solidarity Network, UK.

⁸ The publisher was very clear: 'I don't just want another book on Rwanda'. Yet reviewers have treated it as such.

1995 (Orbis). Even this breakthrough lacked the full-blown approach of ecofeminism, that links oppression of women with the earth. Nature is the new category of poverty, wrote Sallie McFague. Since my earlier book in 1989, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Liberation* (SPCK), I have been trying to map these wider links. I have worked with groups who refuse to despair amidst the most desperate of circumstances and wanted to explore 'ingredients' of such a spirituality that would be relevant for more than one context. Hence these aspects – mentioned by the reviewer – of remembering, caring, revisioning sacrifice, recovering beauty and so on. They are not meant to take the place of hard-hitting political and economic arguments, but they *are* meant to provide motivation to get up in the morning and face the daily struggle. Why is it that Rajasthani women do precisely that, face the daily search for water and fodder, maintain care for husband and children, whereas in situation of drought and failure of agriculture, many men are addicted to alcohol and opium, and the suicide rate of small farmers soars? Staying close to the nourishing sources of life seems to provide strength. (It is not an answer to injustice, of course – nor should it be romanticised). In the book I related how Wangari Mathai, (Kenyan Nobel Peace prize winner), faced with the lack of democracy in Kenya, and women's lack of participation in its processes (tragically relevant at the moment), taught them to plant trees and through this, not only created huge ecological fruitfulness, but enabled them to become agents for change.

And this is precisely the focus of ecological and ecofeminist spirituality. As I mentioned, issues of land, water and agriculture are often at the heart of a conflict, yet frequently not recognised as such. With the Iraq war, Saddam Hussein and his regime were the ostensible pretext, oil was the underlying reason – raising questions of western dependency – and ecological ruin has been the result, (along with persistent violence). Ecofeminist spirituality places humanity within the entire web of life. It makes clear the logic of domination that has been at the heart of western spirituality since Aristotle, as pointed out by Val Plumwood.⁹ Aristotle (Politics Ch. 21) saw the domination of male over female, human over animal and free over slave, *as enshrined in nature*. Ecofeminist Philosophy and Theology attempt to rediscover in western thought a pre-patriarchal strand, that is both biophilic and egalitarian. This is a hotly-contested area.¹⁰ It invokes early goddess cultures – in Egypt, Greece, Canaan, India and Africa – arguing that links between women and nature were honoured in former cultures. The problem is the lack of clarity as to evidence – archaeological or textual. Whether the historical arguments are able to

⁹ Val Plumwood, *Ecofeminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰ See the many works of Carol Christ, for example, *the Return of the Goddess* (Reading: Addison Wesley Publishing, 1997).

prove the case or not, what is clear is that contemporary ecofeminist analysis explores post-patriarchal, transformative approaches to ethics, epistemology and liberation.

Relevant for my exploration of reconciliation spirituality is Grace Jantzen's proposal to replace patriarchy's focus on mortality (and related symbols) with Hannah Arendt's suggestion of *natality* (birth-giving) as focus of a new symbol system (pp. 153–5). The significance is that a patriarchal symbolism of mortality focuses on salvation/redemption, on being saved *from* the human condition and earthly ties, for a more transcendental spiritual destiny. *Natality's* focus is embodiment, creativity, attention to beauty and earthly flourishing. Death is seen not as punishment but as part of life's processes. Divine power is re-imagined as an immanent relational dynamism, evoking the shared well-being of people and earth – as illustrated by the biblical prophetic vision of shalom. What I observed in Rwanda – and other post-genocide situations – was the need, given the level of trauma that people were undergoing, not so much for the language of justice and liberation (this went without saying). Nor to be told to forgive and forget. But resources 'to bring back the beauty of life' (see Chapter 6), to kindle the will to live, to hope, to believe in a future. This can never mean forgetting the genocide. The Director of SURF has told me she has built a Centre in Rwanda¹¹ where all testimonies of the killings – still arriving – will not only be preserved, but continually retold, but in a context where young people are given something to hope for. Ecofeminist spirituality is about thinking beyond the present: it is thinking about the health of the planet inter-generationally. Some – like the Iroquois Indians – would say, encouraging thinking to the seventh generation. 'To struggle with a reconciling heart'¹² was a way to combine fighting oppression, wherever encountered globally, with the need to focus on possibilities for flourishing, for creating possibilities for joy and celebration, however modest, so that despair of life on earth will never prevail. Hence reconciliation as the goal – but also the way to the goal.

11 Funded by Stephen Spielberg.

12 My original title for the book – to make it clear that the focus goes beyond Rwanda.