

Reports from Conferences

Introduction to the Shared Garden Seminar, Washington 1997

Judith Ress

The project we now call 'A Shared Garden' began as nothing more than a dream—a bit of wishful thinking more than four years ago.

In March 1993, Brazilian ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara came to Chile to give a course in feminist theology. Our collective, 'Con-spirando', which was only about a year old at that time, helped to organize that event. During Ivone's last evening in Chile we gathered for a farewell dinner and began dreaming together. Perhaps it was the vintage Chilean wine, but we began to talk about the possibility of starting some sort of 'roving school' for women where we could ask our own theological questions and talk about our own experiences of God, of the Divine, without fear of censorship. All of us gathered around the table that March night became excited about the idea of forming some sort of 'space'—workshops, seminars, courses—a safe space for women, where we could explore together our theological questions and celebrate freely our intuitions of the Sacred in our lives. We talked about how we wanted this experience to be open to the many activist women we knew who would love such a chance to have this sort of experience. While it would be academically rigorous, the point was to create a space where grassroots women would feel at home. Methodology would be highly participative. Our goal was to break down the distance between teachers and students. All of us went home that evening excited and charged up about this dream—but it was still very much just a dream.

A few months later, I visited Ivone in New York where she was spending a semester teaching at Union Theological Seminary. Mary Hunt and Diann Neu of WATER were friends of Ivone's and mine and all of us met for breakfast at Ivone's in the Bronx. We continued to talk about our dream, this time seeing that we wanted to break

through

the barriers set by patriarchy—barriers of geography, especially between the North and the South of the Americas, barriers marked by denominations—between Protestants and Catholics, barriers marked by race—white women, African American women, Hispanic women, mestiza women, barriers of class—between First- and Third-World women. This project would try to reach beyond these barriers, always sensitive to our diversity, seeing our differences as a great strength and blessing.

However, it wasn't until two years later that we were able to put flesh on this dream. After many a stumbling block—including the silencing of Ivone by the Vatican—Ivone, Diann, Mary and the women of Con-spirando met in Santiago in March 1995 to lay concrete plans for what we named 'A Shared Garden'. At that time, we wrote the following description of our project:

'We are women from both North and South America working in feminist theology and spirituality. We see the need to create theological spaces for women to express what gives meaning to our lives. We believe in the richness of women's unique experiences of the Holy and want to foster the exchange of these experiences across cultural as well as geographical boundaries. We are convinced that this sharing is necessary to envision possible alternatives for living in greater harmony with ourselves, our communities and the Earth. We believe that such an exchange will also chip away at the patriarchal structures that separate us. These structures are present in the racism, sexism and classism as well as in the homophobia and anthropocentrism that pervade our lives, our societies and our churches. Studying and celebrating together as a community of women from North and South will, we believe, offer a new way of "doing theology". We are also committed to empowering ourselves to do theology from our own experience and reflection by working with our economic and academic disparities and listening to each others' voices. We affirm as key to our efforts the exchange of teachers as well as of students.

' "A Shared Garden" is a project begun by Con-spirando in Chile, WATER in the United States, and Ivone Gebara in Brazil with the hope of enlarging the circle as we go. We have collaborated for years, formally in lectures and workshops, and informally as we have accompanied one another through hard times. We have formed a team of eight women from the three above-mentioned groups. We have spent a week together in Santiago (19–23 March 1996) outlining the concept of this exciting new project, and planning how it will

operate. Our first effort will be two two-week seminars during which participants

from both continents will discuss, reflect, celebrate and strategize together on themes of common concern in our increasingly globalized and increasingly unjust socio-economic situation. We seek to bring the resources of our critical feminist religious traditions to this situation, and begin to create and deepen the links among us. Overall objective: To empower ourselves, as women, to speak our theological words, to celebrate the Holy in our lives according to our deepest intuitions, to share what it means to live righteously and reverently with Earth and all Earth's children by providing spaces of reflection to grapple with the theological questions we are asking. Specific objectives:

'To bring together a group of women from the Americas to share our feminist commitments and questions with regard to politics, economics and religion as these concern the earth, our children, and ourselves.

'To stimulate participation in two weeks of discussions, liturgies, workshops, body work, theo-political analysis and strategizing, study of sacred texts and symbols, and good fun as we live what we dream.

'To connect these experiences with participants' local communities, and these communities with a growing network of activist women as together we bring about justice for people and our planet.

'And above all, to search for the kind of ACTIVIST THEOLOGIES AND SPIRITUALITIES which help us bring about liberation and solidarity.'

We decided that during the two seminars to be held in 1997 the theme would be: 'Beyond Violence: Solidarity and Ecofeminism'. The first Garden was held in January in Santiago, Chile with Conspirando as host; the second was held in June in Washington, DC with WATER as host. Each seminar concentrated on four specific focuses:

1. Historical focus: Sharing our personal histories, then placing them in the socio-political, economic, cultural and religious contexts in which participants live and the global context we share.

2. Theo-ethical focus: Reflecting from an ethical and theological perspective related to the questions raised by participants.

3. Deconstruction and reconstruction: Taking a critical look at religious myths, symbols, sacred texts and images of the divine, giving attention to how these perpetuate and/or help to eliminate violence. We also examined religious violence, including how this takes place

in churches, as well as how religious ideas influence the larger culture.

4. Focus on action: Examining ethics and spirituality, giving attention to ways of bringing about change as we try to undo violence. We evaluated what spiritual resources can be useful here. Finally, we concentrated on strategies and concrete political actions we can take to assure that we, our children and our planet can live beyond violence.

Theological context: Why the emphasis on violence? Today, violence is a daily occurrence in our modern societies: there is a growing awareness of the upsurge in violence against women, violence within the family and child abuse, as well as the destruction of the environment. Indeed, we live in a system of violence, of power relations which demand our participation as either victims, perpetrators or accomplices. These different ways of participating in violence have to do with our patterns of power relationships characterized by hierarchies and dualisms.

This program is designed to unmask and critically examine those religious myths, symbols, images and biblical texts in traditional Christian theology and in the teaching of our churches that establish, tolerate and even justify violence. Recent feminist theological research raises the question, for instance, of the image of an all-powerful father God who so loved the world that he sent his only son to die on the cross for our sins as in fact justifying violence and even child abuse.

Feminist theology is also pointing to the iron-clad control patriarchal societies have held over women's sexuality and reproduction, always emphasizing maternity to the detriment of women's integral development. Symbolically, this ideal is expressed by contrasting two models of woman: Eve and Mary—the woman who disobeys God's law, the temptress, the prostitute, versus the submissive woman, the saintly, silent, faithful virgin.

These feminist insights are coming mostly from women in the United States and Europe, but are now being analyzed by Latin American women as well. In our time together in 'A Shared Garden', a critical feminist hermeneutics was brought to bear on participants' experience in relationship to the theological underpinnings of violence. Furthermore, language about the divine, doctrines, dogmas and teachings which have been shaped in exclusively masculinist ways are to be deconstructed.

Methodology: The questions that we are asking, while theological, also cross disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, psychology, ecology, economics, sociology, literature and the arts. They also

profoundly affect faith and spirituality. Our intention was to provide spaces for a theological education that conveys an ecofeminist as well as a global justice perspective; we also are committed to exploring new methods of learning aimed at involving women who have traditionally been excluded from theological education programs. Above all, we seek to value our own experiences of the Holy.

Santiago Garden: More than 50 women from 10 different countries—Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile and the United States—participated in the first Shared Garden which took place in Santiago this past January. We began our time together by connecting with and sharing the history that is molded into our bodies, and then placing that history within the context of the current system of globalization and the generalized violence we experience in our societies. With this as our backdrop, we addressed themes such as the role of symbols in our lives, theology as a political stance, sexuality and pleasure beyond violence, the myths surrounding the origins of evil (here we concentrated on a critical re-reading of Genesis), ethics as the search for eco-justice and ecofeminism. We began each day with some form of body work (Tai Chi, Shibashi or Pal dan Gum) and ended each day with a ritual prepared by participants from the various countries. On the weekend, we traveled to the beach where we deepened friendships by walking on the beach, singing and dancing around the campfire, celebrating the sunset and the stars together. On one evening we held an open session with talks by Mary Hunt and Ivone Gebara on solidarity and ecofeminism and on another evening a presentation by Danish feminist theologian Lene Sjørup on the role of the Vatican in the globalization process.

The first Shared Garden was, in the opinion of participants, an explosion of energy, creativity, laughter, dance and excitement to let 'bloom' a myriad of new ways to do theology!

A third Shared Garden is now being prepared by Ivone Gebara and her team in Recife, Brazil for July 1998.

Addresses of the three organizing groups:

Colectivo Con-spirando

Casilla 371-11

Correo Nuñoa

Santiago, Chile

Phone/Fax: (562) 222-3001; e-mail: conspira@bellsouth.cl

Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER)

8035 13th St.
Silver Spring, MD 20910 (USA)
Phone: (301) 589-2509; Fax: (301) 589-3150; e-mail:
mary.hunt@hers.com

Ivone Gebara
Rua Luiz Jorge dos Santos, 278
Tabatinga
54756-380 Camaragibe - PE
Brazil