

Ivone Gebara

September 2025

Theology Congress of the John XXIII Association – 2025

‘You are the light of the world’: economic, ecological and gender justice

Ivone Gebara

The statement “***a world in darkness***”, the title of this Theology Congress, indicates that we are in a dark world with forms of violence and daily destruction, and yet there are some ***lights***. That is why I have been asked to share something about “***the light of the world***” which, according to the Gospel of John, is, in a certain sense, the prerogative and responsibility of the disciples of Jesus. How can we understand this in the midst of so much darkness, contradictions and destructive behaviour present in the most diverse dimensions of life on our planet?

More than in the Christian world, these lights seem to be found in the actions, voices and feelings of those who have modelled their lives on values identified with compassion and mercy or the search for social justice in different movements and religious creeds. From this perspective, the title I have been given for reflection indicates ways or behaviours that can bring ***light*** into the thick darkness that covers the earth.

How can we talk about them? I approach them from a poetic observation of life, because poetry touches the heart and always invites reflection. Furthermore, it can contain provocations, inspirations and mobilisations from its multiple meanings. In attempting to name some of them, I am not sure I can speak of them in a univocal way, for the lights are also mixed with darkness.

Nothing can be only light, nor only darkness; in fact, both are necessary for us to distinguish the steps we take or those we still have to take.

Furthermore, from our subjective point of view, what is light for some often seems to be darkness for others. Nothing has absolute meaning or significance. We must learn this new logic, which has nothing to do with a single line that would lead us straight to a happy ending, but rather makes us think of a dance of life with different rhythms and music. Human relationships are like a ball of mixed colours with many knots wrapping around the different parts. This is how we could visually imagine the world we live in, with its difficult and tight knots, and suddenly, with effort, we manage to undo one and then another and breathe better.

In this perspective, mixed with uncertainties about the meanings of darkness and light, my reflection is based on a certain contemporary Christianity marked by pluralism and also light and

darkness. Surely this current Christianity does not have the answer to our questions either, but it invites us to step out of our usual place and try to untie some new knots in the novel of life today.

Since the 1980s, *eco-feminist Christianity* has grown in many parts of the world, with women playing a particularly leading role. In saying this, I must also use the plural, as there is no single way of thinking, nor is there absolute convergence in the understanding of the contents of the Christian tradition and in the use of current instruments for interpreting our world in a state of increasing destruction. I must also state that much of this “novelty” is not integrated into the official theologies of the Christian churches because it contradicts hierarchical patriarchy, traditional dogma, customary biblical interpretations and the political and economic structures that the churches uphold.

Faced with these limitations, the challenge is to learn to walk each day anew on fragmented terrain mixed with light, darkness, flowers, and thorns. This is our human condition on this extraordinary planet that they say is blue and of which we are the body, just as it is our greater body. This will also be the perspective of the present reflective poetic contribution of ecofeminism in which I place myself.

1. How is light recognised and who recognises it?

What kind of light are we talking about? How do we locate and understand it? Who are those who bring light in the midst of the darkness of this world?

The light we recognise, as I have said, can also be darkness for some, and darkness in such a way that the mission of many people's lives would be to eliminate what some recognise as light. Therefore, we must acknowledge the complexity of light and darkness when it comes to current historical processes.

Taking this limitation into account, I think we must first consider an **epistemological process of perception** from ecofeminism. Perception of the realities of our world through categories of knowledge that are more appropriate for understanding our world.

The first category for affirming this epistemology is that of **mixture**. Mixture is the fundamental component of life and epistemology that supports ecofeminist reflection. **Everything is a mixture of everything**, everything mixes with everything. Mixture is thus the structure that supports everything that exists. Thus, light and darkness are part of the same physical, cognitive, psychological, emotional and religious reality. We must understand the mixture of darkness and light in our times, in our bodies and in our quests. Light cannot be perceived without some darkness, nor darkness without some light, even in a moment of almost complete blindness.

The darkness of our world is transited by little fireflies that in this time are characterised by something we could call, from the mixture that we are, **the irruption of interdependent multiplicity and of the rights and non-rights of everything that composes it**. It is about the growing awareness of the multiplicity that we are, the multiplicity of living beings in their vital complexity with their

differences and convergences. It is the ***interdependent multiplicity*** perceived as absolutely plural that connects everything with everything. That is more or less what we call ***life/death*** in its different manifestations. It is the interdependent multiplicity that bursts into the consciousness of some women and men in the face of the challenges of our time.

This intrusion creates unease and dissatisfaction with the **hierarchical dualistic theories** that continue to support our knowledge of the world and that continue to produce hierarchies and destruction both within and outside of theologies.

Women, more accustomed to the mixture of life, are rejected when they propose a theology of mixture in ecclesial environments. And not only them, but also homosexuals, transsexuals and other more diverse groups unite against the exclusionary dualisms enshrined as God's will. From their lives, they all try to propose ways out of the dualism that has become part of Christian metaphysics, capable of judging and condemning those who do not fit into the dualistic law established as divine will. Dissatisfaction with doctrine, liturgy, judgements and policies of exclusion nourish the advent of another understanding of Christian ethics. And this is the play of light and darkness that shapes our present history and invites us to know and recognise our world in a different way.

So much blood spilled, so many forests burned, so many rivers dead, so many animals and plants extinct, so many women victims of femicide, so many wars to maintain the arms industries and to eliminate peoples and individuals considered disposable.

And with all this, there continues to be a **failure** to recognise the planet as our greater body and women as **not** equal in rights, subject to old prejudices and cultural and religious anthropological theories that maintain violence and inequality of rights.

In the face of these forces that give victory to death in all parts of our world, small groups are organising themselves against the giant Goliath, the destroyer of our lives.

From far and near, multiple voices can be heard singing:

May I not be indifferent to the pain of others, of the earth

May I not be indifferent to war

May I not be indifferent to the lives of the children of Gaza

May I not be indifferent to the future of our planet...

We must change the way we feel/think about the world, we must change the organisation of our common home, we must realise that class, gender and race hierarchies cannot stand up to the greater

mystery of the mixture of life. And this is not a new theory, it is purely a **consequence of careful observation** of life destroyed by the current economic, political and religious systems. The light does not come only from groups of scientists who observe the problems of ecosystems, it comes from the struggles and concrete results in the life of the planet and its many inhabitants. It is from this defence of life that women raise their voices, take their bodies as armour to defend their lives, the earth, their offspring, and together shout ENOUGH to this collective insanity. In this cry, something of light is born; in that ENOUGH, something of freedom is born, the possibility of change is born, the way out of the captivity of injustice. That ENOUGH is something of light in the midst of the darkness of our times.

2. The stubbornness of women

Who said that all is lost?

Beyond the theories about the death of the planet, beyond these infamous wars driven by the profits of a few and supported by many silent ones, beyond the irrecoverable losses of our dead, our homes, our gardens, our plural cultures,

How does ecofeminism understand life? And what does it propose to safeguard it? These are key questions for understanding something of our longstanding rebellion.

Since the emblematic **Chipko Movement**, a social and ecological movement carried out by rural inhabitants, especially **women** in India in the 1970s, we have travelled a long and diverse path of light. The aim of this movement was to protect vital trees and forests that were to be cut down and used for timber exploitation with government support. Women use their bodies as weapons of defence. They embrace the trees as if they were their offspring, as if they were their home, as if they were their child, their body. Embrace to defend, shout to defend! Added to this movement are the numerous women's movements in Latin America, Africa and other parts of the world where we organise ourselves to say no to policies of exploitation. Something new is emerging in our history that can be considered a simple alternative path of light or struggle for life.

The Hindi word **chipko** means 'to hug' or 'to hold on' and reflects the protesters' main tactic of hugging trees to prevent the action of the capitalist system's loggers. It is often women farmers, indigenous women and other women without significant economic resources who are the main guardians of their local communities and of traditional knowledge about the sustainable use of natural resources. They face significant challenges, including threats and violence in defending their territories and the ecosystems in which they live.

These small initiatives are capable of nurturing hope and concrete action, even if they do not receive widespread coverage in the media and do not have an immediate impact on dominant policies.

The predicted disasters and the inevitability of the march of capitalist trade take up all the space and provoke feelings of anguish and defeat for any alternative initiative. Capitalist initiatives to control

deforestation do not always guarantee the real protection of fields and human and other lives. The monetisation present in carbon purchase transactions is also unclear and does not provide certainty as to the real future consequences for the planet. That is why we are invited to look at life from the concrete perspective of our actions, that is, from the initiatives of local populations and looking at their lives and dignity as processes of resistance so that our lives remain alive.

All of this allows us to understand something of the way in which **eco-feminism understands life**. Life is not limited to the consideration of the existence of individualities. Individualities alone cannot sustain themselves. We are a collective among ourselves, with the Earth and its complex ecosystems.

Our individual bodies are only sustained in the collective body of the Earth and its inhabitants and its systems of sustaining life, which is always plural and unique on this planet. This is also where ecofeminism is located as a **philosophical understanding** based on an observation of how individual/plural lives are sustained in interrelation and not by exclusive hierarchies.

First, we must remember that **eco** comes from *oikia*, our greater home, and **feminism** because it is women who are organising themselves in a particular way in the face of violence against their bodies, in the face of the destruction of plural lives, in the face of the neglect that the patriarchal world has created in order to develop **profit** or **gain** as a value of human relations.

We who have been swept out of the leadership of the world, considered second-class citizens, the weaker sex, incapable of representing the people and especially the patriarchal God, rebel against discriminatory laws and the hierarchisation of life. That is why it must be said that the new understanding we propose does not exclude men, does not subject them to hierarchies, but invites them to step down from their thrones, from their illusory superiority, from their pretended divinity, from their egocentric science, and to face the **interdependence** between the genders and between everything that allows us to live.

That is also why rights are affirmed from the demands of this very interdependence. The main attempt is to emphasise the vital interdependence of everything that exists, an interdependence beyond **exclusive patriarchal hierarchies and theoretical discourses** that are often little more than empty words (**I don't understand the word**) without concrete actions.

Here, the new epistemology is emphasised once again, **the epistemology of mixing** as a way of approaching and understanding our lives as if we were hybrid beings of great complexity. The image of Noah's ark could be a suggestive analogy for what we are looking for. For us women, it is not a question of having spaces opened up for us in the same pyramidal structure of the world, nor of being allowed to repeat their theories and being given academic titles because we did so according to patriarchal norms.

We must leave that enormous capitalist ocean liner that feeds on the lives of those excluded from humanity. It is about building another ship, the ship of women and men who seek egalitarian relationships in the difference and mixture of their being. It is about increasing the number of these ships and hoping that once again the green of hope can give us new life.

Thus, through small initiatives, we seek to overcome the **dualistic binary model** that ends up opposing and excluding one of the parties. This new epistemology is also critical of current **dualistic theological models** that oppose good and evil, justice and injustice, women and men, God and humanity, always privileging men and the dominant elites.

Ecofeminism opens up an ecological anthropological vision for an interconnected multiplicity, for the complexity that constitutes us. It invites us to seek new paths and new words to express this new perception of human reality as absolutely interdependent in all that exists. It is now a question of talking about **mixture** as a fundamental category for understanding the world, of considering that everything that exists has a reverse side and a front side. And no side and no element can exist without the other. It is therefore a question of affirming **interdependence as a higher law** that can even illuminate our theological theories and change aspects of their patriarchal, violent and exclusionary structure.

3. Mixing and change as epistemological sources not of theology, but of VIDALOGY, of the mystery of life

As Thomas Berry proposed in the 1970s, putting the word theology and other related words to sleep for a while inspires me to do something similar. I propose that, as far as possible, we use the word **vidalogy** as an attempt to gain a new understanding of what we experience and in which we live to find meaning in the observation of reality. It would replace the word theology, already tainted by so much patriarchy, so much hierarchy, so much independent and domineering power.

Vidalogy is an attempt to understand our lives from other parameters, parameters that are not hierarchical, but absolutely interdependent and intertwined with one another. It is an attempt to consider that in life, just as there is diversity of beings, there is diversity of perceptions, and that there is not just one recognition of **one** that has to command **the others** or declare itself better or coming from some God who would order the world according to his will.

The word God should also depart from its scholastic meaning of “*being in itself*” and its biblical meaning of *Father Creator to give way to Life* or “Greater Mystery”, or “Mystery of Life”, which are not really new concepts, but the reality in which we exist and are with the diversity of all that exists. Thanks to Life, thanks to love, thanks to the tender justice that sustains and renews us every day. And this is because we must admit the many difficulties of the misuse of the word God and the pitfalls that this word has caused throughout history.

In the case of ecofeminism, it is a question of extending the concept of LIFE, of perceiving its breadth and its smallness, its extraordinary mixture and its beauty. That is why we seek to put the word God in brackets in a hierarchical society such as ours, a society in which the use of the word God is present in the most diverse situations, even when it is decided to kill or wage war on another group, and even when asking for something on a personal level. We realise that it is not just a question of words, but of a philosophical and educational process that seeks a broader and more inclusive transformation of our world. It is a question of entering into a process in which daily life becomes our teacher and helps us to confront the many illusions we have inherited and continue to build limited and dangerous meanings from them.

From a commitment to the poorest, those who still speak of God must be invited to a self-catechesis, always inviting them to take ownership of their own lives and meanings. It is a new educational process that is slowly developing in many places. It is like an invitation to “**know oneself**”, to explain one's beliefs and not just be a receptacle for theories already made in other times and by other people. It is an invitation to construct one's own vital meanings, to leave religious consumerism behind, to discover a **self/us** that is renewed every day of our lives.

4. Towards a new understanding of Christianity

Moving away from a dualistic view implies a new consideration of our traditions and beliefs. And it is from this perspective that we could ask ourselves questions that might be considered sacrilegious from a traditional theological point of view. We are well aware that the proclamation of Christological dogmas dates back to the 4th century with the Council of Nicaea and under the power of Emperor Constantine. Isn't it time to start saying something different? Isn't it time to talk about the **Greater Mystery** in which we live and that Jesus is simply our brother, one of us who marked his world and marks ours by his ethics committed to life and not to the money and honour of empires? We have to un-celebrate Nicaea.

What would become of our world if he were not proclaimed God? What would happen? What if he were not recognised as the second person of the Trinity, truly God and Man? What if we could speak only of a different humanity, a humanity that reaches out to the fallen, the prisoners, the homeless and the landless, not as a Christian prerogative, but as a movement of the human guts that constitute us?

Of course, this would lead to the fall of religious hierarchies, which for many of us have already fallen internally. This would lead us to simplify the structures of Christian communities, perhaps with more respect for the diversity of our bodies and the diversity of the places where their members live. This would bring us closer to those who express their different beliefs in other ways, and we could join hands when it comes to saving the oppressed, recognising the value of women and caring for our planet, our greater body.

I repeat: what if Jesus had not proclaimed himself a God? What if he were just a carpenter who left his work to reach out to those hungry for bread and justice? A craftsman with a keen social and political conscience? What if he were just the companion of Mary Magdalene, a strong and tender woman? What if he were a mere mortal in search of meaning for his life?

I am not denying the importance of biblical texts or global theological tradition. I am simply affirming that times have changed. Now is a time for more earthiness, more circularity, more interdependent awareness in the face of the destruction that is taking place as a result of our profit-seeking.

I am proposing that we **move away from religious hierarchies**. Priests do not know more than carpenters. I am proposing that each and every one of us observe and value this new era that is ours, seeking alternatives that give meaning to our lives. It is like being in a Tower of Babel surrounded by many wounded people, and the language must be that of mercy, of mutual aid without monetary gain.

All this may be considered insanity among so many other forms of insanity, but it is what we seek to reassure our children, our abandoned loved ones, our scorched earth and our hearts thirsting for mutual love.

Brief conclusion

I would like to propose a new foray into the poetry of life, something beautiful capable of moving our inner selves, something that could make us temporarily better. I would like to rescue the poetic productions of our world capable of awakening tenderness and commitment. I would like us not to seek justification from an all-powerful authority, but rather from the authority of the gentle breeze that gives us breath for today and our daily bread. I would like to be able to propose a silence to religious, economic and political academicism, to the market, to the many theological theories of the past and present, and to rescue only immediate gestures of mercy and tenderness, even if they only serve for this moment. In addition to that, I would like to give a collective cry for Gaza, A CRY WITH REAL CONSEQUENCES. I would like a collective cry for our forests and seas and rivers, our bodies, so that we do not let the financial passions of many kill them.

And with that, perhaps revalue life and the Earth on which wars are increasingly organised and entire peoples are destroyed. To that end, we must also put the academicism of the Bible and theology away for a time **in our archives and libraries**. We must open only the pages of its poetry, of stories of enchantment with life and especially with the right of all lives to live in their time and space. Once again, I am in poetry as a name of hope that encourages us, as a simple light in the darkness of our time. Light and darkness that inhabit us today and always. Light and darkness that constitute our lives, always.

Always.

Bibliography

In an attempt at consistency, I am not writing it. Forgive me.

