

### **Gebara, Ivone (b. 1944)**

Ivone Gebara is a Brazilian Sister of Our Lady (Canonesses of St. Augustine) and one of Latin America's leading theologians, writing from the perspective of ecofeminism and liberation theology. For nearly two decades Gebara has been a professor at the Theological Institute of Recife. The author of *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, Gebara articulates an ecofeminist perspective that combines social ecofeminism and holistic ecology, promoting an "urban ecofeminism" shaped by her experiences of working with poor women in Brazilian *favelas* (slum neighborhoods). Gebara claims that ecofeminism is born of "daily life" and thus considers garbage in the street, inadequate health care, and other daily survival crises faced by poor women as they provide for family sustenance, to be central issues in ecofeminist liberation theology. Gebara proposes a new theological anthropology, model for God, trinitarian language, Christology, and "religious biodiversity" from the perspective of Latin American ecofeminism.

Gebara received notoriety when silenced by the Vatican for two years in 1995. Her difficulties with the Vatican began in 1993 with an interview in the magazine, *VEJA*, in which she said that abortion was not necessarily a sin for poor women. Given the extreme poverty of many women in Brazilian *favelas* and the overpopulation in cities like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, more births would result in extreme hardship for mothers and children, increased strain on natural resources due to population pressures, decreased access to potable water, etc. For these reasons, Gebara claimed that the "preferential option for the poor" demanded by liberation theology called for more tolerance of

women's choice for abortion than that of the official Roman Catholic Church. Following numerous meetings with the President of the Conference of Bishops of Brazil during 1994, Dom Luciana Mendes de Almeida reported the case closed, citing Gebara's commitment to the pain of poor women. The Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine and Faith disagreed and began a review of her theological writings, interviews, and courses. On June 3, 1995, Gebara was instructed to refrain from speaking, teaching, and writing for a period of two years. She was ordered to move to France for two years of theological reeducation.

Following her period of theological reeducation, Gebara returned to Brazil and again became active in writing and speaking about ecofeminism. Her strong critique of the anthropocentric and androcentric view of the world found in the Christian tradition continued after her theological education, as she took on the project of reinterpreting "key elements within the Christian tradition for the purpose of reconstructing earth's body, the human body, and our relationship with all living bodies" (Gebara, 6). In 1997-1998, she organized the *Shared Garden* theological program with the Latin American ecofeminist collective, Con-spirando, based in Santiago, Chile. During each of the three "Gardens" which were held in Santiago, Chile (January, 1997), in Washington, DC (June, 1997), and in Recife, Brazil (July, 1998), participants from throughout the Americas met to explore themes and principles of an ecofeminist liberation theology. Gebara remains a central figure for the Con-spirando ecofeminist collective and organizes numerous classes, workshops, and conferences throughout Latin America.

Ivone Gebara and the Costa Rican theologian, Elsa Tamez, chart three phases of feminist theology in Latin America, placing themselves in the third stage. The first phase

(1970-1980) coincided with the growth of Christian base communities and of liberation theology. Women theologians tended to identify with liberation theology and see themselves as oppressed historical subjects. During this stage the word “feminist” was rejected as a concept imposed from the North. Construction of a more explicitly feminist consciousness grew during the second phase (1980-1990). Efforts were made toward the “feminization of theological concepts” as well as the reconstruction and questioning of biblical texts from a feminist perspective. The third phase (1990 onward) is characterized, according to Gebara and Tamez, by challenges to the patriarchal anthropology and cosmovision in liberation theology itself and by the construction of a Latin American ecofeminism. . Gebara in particular has been critical in articulating the premises of holistic ecofeminism in a Latin American context. By holistic ecofeminism, Gebara means that the daily lives of women in slums of the south show the ways “that the exclusion of the poor is to linked to the destruction of their lands” and to women’s oppression. For Gebara, just as holism in ecology means that all things are interdependent, so are all forms of oppression interdependent. All oppressions however, are not the same and not experienced by all groups with the same intensity. Her concern is with the most oppressed, which in her context means poor women in urban slums. Thus, Gebara self consciously articulates an “urban ecofeminism” shaped by the absence of sewers and safe drinking water, poor nutrition, and the numerous daily survival needs of poor women.

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## **Further Reading**

Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999.

Gebara, Yvone and Maria Clara Bingemer. *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.