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The Intersection of Environment, Poverty and Migration. An Italian perspective[1]

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Abstract

Connections exist between environmental injustice and worker exploitation in Italian agriculture, as well as between violence against women and violence against the Earth. As many do, the Waldensian Church in Italy sees abuses, such as low wages, unsafe working conditions and illegal toxic industrial waste disposal, as "modern slavery" and a commodification of people. A theological re-imagination is needed of concepts like "sin" and "hope" in the context of liberation that emphasises the interconnectedness of all creation and the experiences of marginalised communities. Protestant churches in Italy's programmes, e.g., "Being Church Together" and "Mediterranean Hope" that support migrant and refugee routes and efforts to foster a collective consciousness of environmental justice are discussed. Finally, referring to Nussbaum, Pulcini, and Butler's acknowledgement of our interdependence, shared humanity, and the necessity of building nonviolent alliances, compassion intertwined with justice through education and ethical reflection is called for en route to a more just society.

Keywords: Women; Climate justice; Predatory economy; Intersectionality; Co-breathing

Economic and social roots of environmental disasters

I write from a southern European country – specifically Italy – a nation frequently afflicted by environmental catastrophes such as floods, mountain avalanches, and earthquakes. These disasters are exacerbated by the persistent inefficiency of Italian institutions in both prevention and adaptation to such events, despite possessing highly effective emergency response mechanisms through its "Civil Protection" services.

In recent years, Italy also has endured severe droughts that have compromised agricultural productivity, while major urban centres like Bologna and Florence have suffered devastating floods. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), projections indicate that Italy will increasingly experience a tropicalized climate, characterized by extreme precipitation in some regions and desertification in others.

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The current environmental crisis is largely attributable to intensive industrial and extractive practices over the past seventy years. This has been compounded by the neglect of rural landscapes, particularly in the plains, where large-scale, industrial agriculture has depleted the soil. Mountainous and remote rural areas, often abandoned and left uncultivated, have become sources of destructive waters that inundate the plains and cities during floods.

Global warming and the degradation of the Earth's natural resources are, unsurprisingly, deeply intertwined with economic and social dynamics, necessitating transformative responses that address the internal structures of society and the economy.

Extractivism and underpaid workers

Within this context, the ecological crisis disproportionately affects women. Drawing upon ecofeminist theological methodologies, which foreground women's embodied experiences (including sexuality and corporeality), a clear nexus emerges between women's daily lives and systemic forms of oppression. Ecofeminist theologians thus link the exploitation of women to broader patterns of environmental and economic exploitation. Their intersectional approach, beginning with the body, reveals the multifaceted oppression experienced by marginalised populations, particularly women (cf. Crenshaw 1989).

Furthermore, according to national labour regulations (cf. ELA 2023:7), the agricultural sector in Italy is characterised by widespread illegal employment and substandard wages. The exploitation of land is thus inseparable from the exploitation of labour. Migrant workers, especially those without legal status, are among the most vulnerable, often lacking the protections afforded by formal labour contracts negotiated by trade unions. This enables agricultural enterprises to maximise profits, with the tomato industry being a paradigmatic case of such exploitation.

In agriculture, particularly in tomato production, the so-called "caporalato" system – an illicit labour brokerage network – remains deeply entrenched, despite its official prohibition in 2011. Both workers and intermediaries ("gangmasters" called "caporali") are frequently non-Italian and endure deplorable living and working conditions. The system exploits the precariousness of migrant workers, deducting wages for job placement and transportation, and relegating them to isolated slums or abandoned dwellings, thereby impeding social integration. These outrages play on the fears of workers of joining the vast ranks of the unemployed and a dependency on work as a requirement for obtaining legal status in the country. Political and media discourses in turn play on the fears of Italians by often portraying migrant men as inferior or dangerous, reinforcing their marginalisation.

Seasonal employment contracts, either illegal or non-existent, also lead to the fact that women, both Italian and migrant, are particularly susceptible to abuses under these exploitative labour arrangements, including sexual violence, which often goes unreported due to fear of job loss (Bulfon 2024). Such dynamics reinforce patriarchal structures that commodify both women's bodies and the Earth. The perpetuation of these practices beyond the agricultural sector into broader society underscores the imperative for churches to denounce gender-based violence and to dismantle the ideologies that legitimise domination over both women and nature.

The intersection of global warming, environmental degradation, gender oppression, racialised labour, and poverty constitutes a profoundly ethical and theological crisis, threatening the very future of life on Earth. Churches must therefore engage issues of gender equality and faith in dialogue with climate justice, adopting an intersectional perspective that encompasses racial, economic, health, and environmental dimensions.

Illegality and criminality

In 2022, the Waldensian and Methodist Synod (the General Synod representing the Italian branch of the Waldensian Church) produced a document on work entitled the "Documento sul tema del lavoro" (Document on the theme of labour), aiming to draw the attention of churches to the contemporary labour context (CEV 2022). Among other things, the document highlights "grey areas" where workers' rights are violated, leading to moral compromises, complacency, and adaptation to illegal practices within Italian society. It calls upon churches to denounce such practices and to advocate for the recognition and protection of civil and human rights for all.

Another pressing environmental concern is the connection between contaminated land and the illegal disposal of toxic industrial waste by companies seeking to avoid the costs of safe disposal. In regions where toxic waste is leaked, buried, or burned, both land and water are poisoned (Giuffrida 2025; Povoledo 2025). Although monitoring agencies sometimes provide conflicting data, it appears that such environmental poisoning increases the incidence of blood disorders and cancers, and may cause early mortality in children. Consequently, many voluntary associations of women and mothers whose children have died due to pollution have demanded institutional attention to these so-called "lands of fires."[2]

The above atrocities are often perpetrated by "eco-mafias" (Rando 2024), criminal organisations that combine fiscal crime, the exploitation of migrant and impoverished workers, and environmental pollution. Such organised crime not only undermines Italian democracy but also has a major impact on public health and the quality of life for both natives and migrants. Furthermore, these organisations perpetuate racist exploitation of migrants and legitimise institutional policies that reject migrants, such as the closure of Europe's Mediterranean borders.

Bodies and lives that do not matter

At the time of writing this essay, two international rescue ships carrying migrants saved from certain death remain stranded off the coast of Sicily, prevented from docking. In accordance with European policies, Italy refuses to accept responsibility for these individuals. Recently, on November 2, 2022, the Italian government and the authoritarian Libyan regime renewed the Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding on Migration (Di Nunzio 2023), extending for three years measures aimed at stemming the flow of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. This agreement also provides for their detention in centres that have been compared to World-War-II Nazi concentration camps (cf. Capussotti and Liliana 2003; Puggioni 2013). Despite extensive media coverage, public

[2] The phrase "Land of Fires" identifies a large area of southern Italy, among Naples and Caserta, defined by the on-going presence of waste fires in illegal warehouses. The definition was later extended to include large areas in Northern Italy around Brescia, and elsewhere, linked to so-called eco-mafias. See: De Stefani 2025; Povoledo 2025.

awareness, and survivor testimony, Italian society and politicians remain largely unmoved, suggesting the persistence of underlying racism and the defence of Western privilege.

The above state of affairs may remind one of Martha Nussbaum who, in *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (2004), elucidates how shame and disgust function to humiliate and exclude oppressed groups, particularly migrants. These emotions, rooted in fear of contamination by "strangers", facilitate discrimination and, at the extreme end, the destruction of entire social or religious groups. Nussbaum warns that shame and disgust are inherently hierarchical, reinforcing subordination and undermining the principles of equality and dignity foundational to liberal society. In Nussbaum's word, these emotions "typically express themselves through the subordination of both individuals and groups based on features of their way of life" (2004:321) and indulging them is "profoundly subversive of the ideas of equality and dignity on which liberal society is based" (2004: 232). She also notes the historical use of disgust to justify misogyny, anti-Semitism, and homophobia (2004:75). In all of these, biopolitics are involved in that it views bodies as commodities, but of different values.

To Nussbaum's analysis, I would add a third emotion prevalent in contemporary Europe: indifference, especially toward the poor and migrants of colour. This indifference, evident in the lack of response to the plight of asylum seekers in Libyan detention camps or those rescued at sea, can only be countered by increased empathy, compassion, and justice. Without these, marginalised groups will continue to be denied recognition of their full humanity.

Argentinian feminist anthropologist Rita Laura Segato examines power relations underpinning gendered, sexual, racial, and colonial violence. She documents the reification and dehumanisation of women's bodies in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, arguing that the normalisation of violence generates a broader societal landscape of cruelty. Segato contends that media and judicial victim-blaming constitutes "secondary victimization", and that civil institutions often reinforce the aggressors' position. She describes this as a "pedagogy of cruelty," which fosters a diminished capacity for empathy within "predatory capitalism" (Segato 2024:25). Resistance, she argues, requires a commitment to community relationality and solidarity with victims. "Choosing the relational path means opting for the historical project of being a community", says Segato (2023:162), as she contrasts communitarian forms of happiness and freedom with a "powerful rhetoric of the meritocratic, productivist, developmental and concentration-oriented design of things" found in the individualistic ethos of extractive capitalism.

Similar processes of reification, dehumanisation, and exploitation are evident in Italy's treatment of migrant women and men, inhibiting the development of empathetic and solidaristic movements among privileged citizens. In conclusion, drawing on the insights of Nussbaum and Segato, it is imperative to foster inclusive communities that embrace all social strata. Such communities are essential not only for countering the destruction of nature but also for resisting the exploitation of humanity. Churches engaged in the struggle for climate justice must thus cultivate empathy and compassion toward marginalised and excluded persons, affirming their right to self-representation.

Ethics of vulnerability

To comprehend and address the situation of migrants, it is essential to recognise our shared mortality and mutual dependence. Education and conscientisation toward compassion and empathy entail acknowledging our own vulnerability, dependence, and diverse abilities as intrinsic to the human condition. For Nussbaum, in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), compassion must be integrated with justice and entitlement, and a liberal society must foster these dispositions.

Theologically, one might assert that the grace of God precedes us, and that we are inhabited by a reality beyond our self-centred perspective. We are called to transcend ourselves and orient our lives toward others. Ethical reflection must therefore focus on interconnectedness and vulnerability. Integrating care and justice from an intersectional and gendered perspective is vital for feminist ecotheologies, as exemplified in the work of Elena Pulcini (*Between Care and Justice: The Passions as Social Resource,* 2024 – Italian version, 2020) and Judith Butler.

For Butler, in her work *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (2020), it is imperative to transcend the structural violence inherent in social dynamics by grounding nonviolent alliances in the radical vulnerability of human embodiment. This necessitates an acknowledgement that human existence and rationality are inextricably bound to the fundamental condition of interdependence and mutual support.

Churches and the encounter with climate refugees

In Italy, recent years have witnessed the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees from Eastern Asia, and from sub-Saharan Africa. Repressive policies and ambiguous reception procedures, intended to deter humanitarian asylum claims, have posed challenges to churches, just as churches have challenged these policies from the outset. This is evident in welcoming initiatives undertaken through programmes focused on the legal rights of refugees, launched at support centres in major immigration hubs, as well as in training and information dissemination to churches.

One example of church action is the "Mediterranean Hope" (MH) project established in 2013, a

> … refugee and migrant programme of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, funded in large part by … the Waldensian Evangelical Church – Union of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, and by other Italian and foreign Protestant churches and donors. (Mediterranean Hope 2024)

The project was established in the wake of a shipwreck on 3 October 2013, when 368 individuals perished a few miles from the island of Lampedusa while attempting to reach Italy by sea. The programme's objectives include

> … to support migrants with their right to migrate, applications for protection, self-determination, solidarity activities, reception, implementation of safe and legal pathways, advocacy, and awareness-raising on issues of social justice, rights and discrimination. (Mediterranean Hope 2024)

Besides operating "in various border areas working with local communities, churches, civil society and institutions", MH also established a reception centre in Lampedusa, the primary landing point for immigrant boats in Italy. Alongside this work at the borders, MH has developed projects that accompany migratory routes and has concluded agreements with the government to operate humanitarian corridors for Syrian refugees from Lebanon.

However, it is frequently not recognised by migrants themselves that their migration is also precipitated by the climate emergency, manifesting as drought or other environmental catastrophes. While migrants and refugees often flee dictatorial regimes, they are also motivated by the prospect of a better future in the context of the severe economic repercussions of climate change in their countries of origin.

Unfortunately, the hope that inspired these predominantly young individuals to embark on perilous journeys is frequently unfulfilled. In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, they are often relegated to precarious existences on the margins of society, where racism and marginalisation are daily realities.

Of course, this does not mean that some individuals do not succeed in overcoming their ordeals, often with the assistance of volunteer or mutual aid organisations. One example is that of Joy, a Nigerian girl who fell into trafficking, partially as a result of the complicity of a Pentecostal church in Africa. Her story is told by Mariapia Bonanate in *Io sono Joy. Un grido di libertà dalla schiavitù della tratta* (2021) (loosely translated as: "I'm Joy. A cry for freedom from the slavery of trafficking"). Joy escaped years of forced migration and a period of coerced street prostitution, aided by a Roman Catholic religious community dedicated to restoring dignity to trafficking victims. Her story tells of the recovery of her dignity and freedom rooted in faith in the God of liberation that she experienced in her homeland before her migration journey, and that not even the violence and abuse she suffered could erase.

Another example of someone that survived the migratory life is Aboubakar Soumahoro, originally from Côte d'Ivoire. Formerly a migrant labourer on Italian tomato farms, Soumahoro is now an Italian citizen, a member of Parliament, and a former trade union activist who has combated the illegal recruitment of vulnerable and exploited workers in southern Italy (Poletti 2020; Zabala 2022). In Parliament, he continues to challenge his colleagues with postcolonial discourse that exposes the covert racism of those in positions of power.

Migrants are often torn between two worlds. Their migration aspirations are frequently thwarted by contradictory norms and regulations that undermine their efforts. In such circumstances, individuals often experience profound dislocation. Sometimes, due to environmental disasters and climate-related conflicts, the world they left behind ceases to exist. The internal struggle to reconstruct their fragmented lives is essential for beginning anew in a context where opportunities are scarce.

In this struggle of migrants, churches also have a role to play, as they should be places that not only provide the power of prayer but also offer the support of a faith community that extends to the margins of society, confronting societal prejudice. As such, churches can and should become sites of prophetic denunciation and the reconstruction of new relationships with both society and the Earth.

Even though the homelands of migrants may be beyond restoration, their new places of settlement may still be healed from the degradation and pollution wrought by capitalist

exploitation. The psychological and spiritual wounds of those whose bodies and dreams have been repeatedly shattered may be more challenging to heal. Profound wounds may endure, burdening survivors with confusion and pain for years to come. Here, too, churches can be places from which hope can spring again, both for native and (im)migrant people by functioning as spaces for building a shared worldview based on the Gospel (Luke 4). In Italy, one church initiative that strives toward this is ideal is the Being Church Together Program established in 2000, also by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy. This programme or model "relies on mutual integration where both the receiving community and newcomers undergo transformation" (Green 2016). It offers advice on intercultural engagement and is "aimed at Italian and foreign members of the Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and Waldensian churches who are interested in promoting the integration processes for religious and civic communities" (Scuderi 2015:177).[3]

To release hope

How can "sin" and "hope" be reconceptualised, re-imagined theologically in the context of liberation, from the perspective of the whole of creation and from the margins of society?

As a country that receives migrants, Italy can recognise the strength and passion of the many young women and men who are part of successive generations of Italians with non-Italian (African and Asian) roots. Italy must be exposed to eye-opening instances of overt and covert injustices, for example from voices such as that of Aboubakar Soumahoro and many others. As communities engaged in the "Being Church Together" and "Mediterranean Hope" programs, we, alongside immigrants, can build a new environmental consciousness by taking a global look at climate devastation and climate justice. And in this area too, the challenges of interculturalism for our theologies are an open construction site and a valuable laboratory for society.

The theological concept of "sin" must therefore be reinterpreted in light of the intersection of multiple forms of exploitation. There is the exploitation of the Earth's resources that has led to the climate crisis, but also the exploitation of the bodies of women who, if they are not caught in human trafficking and prostitution, are nonetheless driven to reproduction by European societies that are growing increasingly older and in need of younger generations to ensure sustained economic production to ensure that social services to and the pensions of the elderly continue to get paid. Then there is also the exploitation of illegal migrant and poor workers in the agricultural sector and toxic agricultural practices that are practised for economic reasons and contribute to the poisoning of the environment. "Hope", too, can only be reconstructed in a context that

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[3] One example of this project at grass root level is "[t]he local Waldensian congregations in Vicenza and Verona … [m]ade up of mostly Ghanaian church members [that] … have long developed into multi-ethnical congregations. Reports on their experiences show that the way there is a tedious one, as well as a strenuous process with an open ending for all concerned. Differences in spirituality and values, but also in the expectations towards pastor or services and lastly language barriers, lead to tensions especially in the early stages. … 'Despite the differences named above all parties involved obviously have a basic understanding of wanting to be one church together and to invest themselves into it. In a final review the Waldensians evaluated their multi-ethnical congregations, by all means, as a win-win-project: Ghanaian church members are mostly successfully integrated into the Italian society, while the old core congregations are enriched through the ethnical diversity'" (Reported by UEM 2015).

does not permit violence to be suffered in silence, but rather denounces it, just as the crucified body of Christ in John 20 bears the wounds of violence even in the resurrected body.

The salvation of creation and social justice are interconnected as both human and non-human beings experience cruelty and indifference, but also joy, beauty, and loving relationships. Ecotheologies acknowledge the need for networks of interconnection and acts of compassionate justice. These are acts that require community engagement in the breath of the Holy Spirit.

The theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who played a crucial role in the development of a specific stream of feminist theology and ecofeminist theologies, emphasises the need for seeking communities of both celebration and resistance, for agricultural economies capable of coping with industrial militarisation. She calls for a conversion – a *metanoia* – a "change of consciousness [that] recognizes that true security is not in the power of domination and the impossible search for total invulnerability, but in the acceptance of vulnerability, limits and interdependence with others, with other humans and with the earth" (Radford Reuther 1992:268). Ecofeminism seeks to deconstruct dualistic worldviews. According to Radford Ruether, the goal is "earth healing, a healed relationship between men and women, between classes and nations, and between humans and the Earth" (Radford Ruether 1992:1). Ecofeminists see the destructive downside of the dualistic framework of the Western classical tradition, with the consequent separation of God from the world. Instead, what is required is interconnection and inspiration to embody hope.

Conspirando is an ecofeminist group from Brazil that seeks to intertwine the principles of environmentalism with feminist activism and spirituality. It has influenced also the reflections of ecofeminism in Italy, especially as it links to Christian base communities. Indeed, what we need is "co-breathing" – *"con-spirando"* – even conspiring, as Brazilian eco-feminists say: breathing together to understand the conditions under which Christian theologies in different contexts have affected the degradation and exploitation of the Earth.[4] Recognising that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected issues, Conspirando advocates for a holistic approach to activism. This requires the empowerment of marginalised communities, promoting sustainable practices, and challenging patriarchal structures that contribute to both ecological degradation and gender inequality. Through education, advocacy, and community engagement, Conspirando encourages collective action to protect the environment while uplifting women's voices and rights, fostering a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

In conclusion, only when the voice and dignity of all are recognised can we open ourselves to the coming of the kingdom of God. Only then can we collectively build and realise the future vision proposed by Jesus through the parables of the kingdom and his practice of sharing the table with the marginalised.

[4] See: https://conspirando.cl/

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