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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/act.v35i1.6371>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

**Acta Theologica 2023**

Supp 35:1-15

**Date received:**

25 May 2022

**Date accepted:**

26 March 2023

**Date published:**

26 April 2023

# We Inter-Are: The pandemic challenge redefining human beings and communities

## ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic calls for a critical introspection into our way of being human in relation to other forms of life on this planet. Given that social hierarchies attribute higher and lower status to human beings based on their race, class, caste and gender identity, and legitimise the exploitation of other human beings and the earth, re-thinking our hierarchical positioning as “masters” of this universe becomes imperative. In this context, eco-feminist reconstruction of relationality is projected as a corrective, as it focuses on linking relationships instead of ranking relationships. In addition, the mystical notion “We Inter-Are”, shared by the visionary Buddhist sage Thich Nhat Hanh, is proposed as a key for growing into a consciousness of inter-relationality with other beings on this planet, as it opens us to the infinite mystery of the deeper relatedness of all forms of life. Viewed from this perspective, the pandemic can become a defining moment in the evolutionary story of human beings.*



Published by the UFS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The eruption of a deadly pandemic has surely taken human beings off guard, across the globe. No one ever dreamt that such an experience would mark their lives, yet it has happened and it is there to stay for quite some time. Even before the outbreak of the current pandemic, scientists had warned about earth's sixth mass

extinction event being underway as billions of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians were lost all over the planet. As noted by Carrington (2017), the resulting biological annihilation would have serious ecological, economic, and social consequences. Humanity will eventually pay a very high price for the decimation of the only assemblage of life that we know of in the universe. In this situation of an existential crisis affecting the planet, it is sensible that we ask ourselves some critical questions on our identity as human beings in relation to other forms of life here on earth. I would like to address the following question: In which way does the pandemic challenge our way of being human beings in this world?

Noted Indian feminist thinker, activist, and writer, Arundhati Roy, speaks of the challenge posed by the pandemic to us human beings. Roy (2020:n.p.) observes:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

The ground realities of the pandemic experience in any part of the globe would illustrate how the microbial virus could shake up some of the dominant systems of power that were taken to be eternally potent and unshakable. In the Indian setting, when the first wave of COVID-19 struck the country, everything seemed apparently in control for the ones who held the reins of power economically or politically. Nonetheless, for the domestic migrant workers who are among the most vulnerable sections of people in my country, it was a sudden disaster that snapped the ground below their feet. They were left homeless overnight when the Prime Minister declared a national lockdown in a four-hour notice with a “Stay home, stay safe” slogan.

When my country was shaken badly by the second wave of COVID-19, even the most potent ones got a taste of the bitter cup of vulnerability, which has always been the lot of *“les misérables”* of this society. The fall of the mighty from their thrones was well illustrated by an Indian cartoonist in a popular daily of my state. First, it portrayed the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi rolling over the virus triumphantly in a yoga pose when everything seemed under control after the first wave of COVID-19. In his position as leader of one of the fastest growing economies, he was trying to impress the world that his yoga prescriptions could be the best defence

against the virus. In less than a year after this conquering stance, he was flat under the virus when the country was swept over by the second wave of the pandemic with thousands falling dead every day and millions exasperated, as they helplessly watched their loved ones succumb to COVID, not having access to oxygen, the most basic element that sustains life.

The eruption of this deadly virus has had an equalising effect, since it made all human beings defenceless, irrespective of the “power masks” they have been wearing. The virus did not shy away from the dominant of this world, nor did it “fear” those who pretended that they could crush it with their economic, political, or religious potency. This sense of shared vulnerability, though apparently threatening, can also be a blessing, as it can become a significant turning point in the evolutionary story of human becoming. It can pave the way for the emergence of a new cosmic human, who is an inter-dependent and symbiotic being. This is the framework within which the pandemic becomes a portal, a gateway between one world and the next, forcing human beings to break with the past and imagine their world anew, as noted by Roy.

In this article, I first examine the “breaking” that is called of us human beings, which is imperative if the new has to emerge. In my opinion, this breaking demands a critical assessment of the problematic of the “*homo hierarchicus*”,<sup>1</sup> or the “hierarchical human” mould within which an average human being has been cast *vis-à-vis* the different facets of his/her identity. In my opinion, deconstructing the hierarchical world view could facilitate the reconstruction of the symbiotic human being and a new world order in the making.

## 2. THE HIERARCHICAL STANDPOINT AND ITS PROBLEMATIC

Hierarchy is considered a central feature of a social context and it involves graded ranks marked by differences in power and resources (Moane 1999:24). Hierarchical ordering of relationships is the preferred mode of functioning, as it leads to a sense of security and control. Everything is apparently in place and needs to function as per expected norms. Viewed from this perspective, hierarchies provide the best structure to deliver goods in a most competent manner and they fulfil the human need for order, giving the reins of control to those in command of the situation.

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1 Louis Dumont uses the expression *Homo hierarchicus* (Dumont1980), referring to the hierarchical mindset of human beings within the caste system.

Management psychologist Harold Leavitt explains why hierarchies thrive. In his opinion, hierarchies provide clear markers that let us know how far and fast we are climbing the ladder of success. They give us more than these somewhat questionable measures of our worth; they give us an identity. Like our families, communities, and religions, they help us define ourselves. Hierarchical organisations seduce us with psychological rewards such as feelings of power and status. In addition, multilevel hierarchies remain the best available mechanism for doing complex work (Leavitt 2003). Besides, it is argued that social hierarchies are a natural and necessary part of social groups, as they provide status, which, in turn, has a profound effect on thought and behaviour (Koski *et al.* 2015:527-550).

While hierarchical structuring is taken to be most conducive to order societal life in a disciplined and efficient manner, it can also have a very destructive impact on human growth as individuals, communities, and its institutions. Since hierarchy refers to structures, in which influence, control, power, dominance, status, and value are differentiated among individuals, this can be contrasted with more egalitarian social systems, in which the differentiation on these dimensions is suppressed (Zitek & Tiedens 2012:98-115). In social hierarchies, there is an implicit or explicit rank order of individuals or groups with respect to a valued social dimension (Magee & Galinsky 2008:354).

Generally, nearly all societies are organised hierarchically and, as noted by Giddens (1997:206),

societies can be seen as consisting of 'strata' in a hierarchy, with the more favored at the top and the less privileged nearer the bottom.

This leads to a situation in which the higher ranking members possess more power, influence, and advantages than the lower ranking members (Zitek & Tiedens 2012:102). Dominant hierarchies exist in numerous social species and the positioning in such hierarchies can dramatically influence the quality of an individual's life. Human beings belong to multiple hierarchies and tend to value most the one in which they rank highest (Saplosky 2004:393-418). A salient feature inherent to the definition of a social hierarchy is the stratified ranking of group members along a valued dimension, with some members being superior or subordinate to others, and fewer members occupying the highest positions (Magee & Galinsky 2008:359).

Even as the ordering of societal life in a hierarchical manner maximises a collective identity and coherence, the basic problematic results from the fact that hierarchy is basically a structure that facilitates domination

and subordination. Since social hierarchies attribute higher and lower status to human beings based on their race, class, caste, and gender identity construction, they legitimise human exploitation, discrimination, and marginalisation in the domestic and public spheres of life. No human institution, whether it is in the economic, political, social, religious or any other aspect of life, is spared of the negative outcomes of hierarchical categorisation and its consequences on people's lives.

Psychologists argue that a dynamic of inferiority-superiority is inevitable in hierarchical situations, as they block people's prospects of growth and development. As noted by feminist psychologist Jean Miller, once a group is defined as inferior, the superior or dominant group judges them to be incapable of performing roles that the dominant group values highly and assigns them roles such as providing services that are poorly valued. The inferior capacities of the subordinates are viewed as innate or natural. Stereotypes of the subordinates include submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependency, lack of initiative, and inability to act, decide, or think. These stereotypes obviously reinforce and justify inequality. Miller (1986:7-9) argues that the dominant group has the most influence on cultural outlook; it legitimates and obscures inequality through myths such as the biological inferiority of the subordinate group, or in the case of women, arguments about the natural place for women. Dominants define what is "normal". They seek to convince both themselves and the subordinates that the way things are is right and good, not only for them, but especially for the subordinates. They will use their control to suppress conflict, since any questioning of the status quo is deemed to be threatening.

The problematic of hierarchical outlook gets aggravated when dualistic thinking is woven into it. Dualistic thought considers differences in exclusive and oppositional terms, and superior value is attributed to that which occupies the higher rungs of the hierarchical ladder. Consequently, those positioned on the lower rungs are attributed lesser worth and are blocked from access to resources and opportunities that are basic to growth and well-being. The logic of domination and subordination operates in the interplay of hierarchical and dualistic thought that nips off, in the bargain, the buds of better prospects in life for those who are subordinated. Dualism, as Randell (2020) observes, is considered a logic of domination that seeks through hierarchical thinking to construe the world in terms of a certain kind of centre who is master and its necessary periphery who is slave, the horrible outcome of which is exclusion, devaluation, and reduction of those on the fringes.

Hierarchical dualism has not only adversely affected the relationships among human beings, but also distorted the relationship between human beings and the earth. Human pretension to be the “crown of creation” has led to brutal exploitation of the earth and its creatures. Human greed and the subsequent claims by human beings to be masters of this universe have had devastating consequences on ecological health and systemic balance of this planet. The sixth mass extinction that is underway, annihilating vulnerable human beings and other forms of life from the face of the earth, testifies to this. Evidently, the question is whether we as human beings can restore the lost harmony of this multi-verse and if so, how?

### 3. ECO-FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTION OF RELATIONALITY

In re-thinking human relationality, it is important to note that systemic configurations do not exist in black and white distinctions, but there are many grey areas constituted by intersectionalities and related constructs. Moane (1999:54) argues that systems of domination rarely involve unmitigated domination by one group and total subordination of another, but rather involve varying degrees of systematic and intentional domination by the dominant group along with levels of both cooperation and resistance by the subordinate group. Since the vast majority of individuals in a system belong to multiple groups, which may be relatively dominant or subordinate, individuals may gain or benefit by the degree to which power differentials favour or disadvantage them. As individuals, they may vary in the degree to which they intentionally exercise, collude with, or resist domination. Individuals favoured by power differentials may reject the benefits of whatever privilege they have or take action to rectify inequalities. Individuals disadvantaged by power differentials may seek to overcome the obstacles and attain positions of power where they can benefit by power differentials, or, likewise, take action to resist or change the situation.

The contradictions underlying the domination-subordination paradigm are also noted by hooks (2016) when she argues that, without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination – imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. hooks (2016) observes that women and men, who spend a lifetime working to resist and oppose one form of domination, can be systematically supporting another.

A resistance story that is potent enough to redefine the dynamics of human relationality has been voiced with the emergence of the feminist movement. The feminist vision has challenged and continues to interrogate critically the domination-subordination paradigm that has marked human relationships in all the diverse aspects of life. What has evolved mainly with the assertion of women's rights has matured over the years, by addressing the complexities of the intersectionality of gender with different markers of human identity construction such as concerns of other marginalised sections, sexual minorities, and the like.

Going beyond justice concerns among human beings, new dimensions are brought into feminist thinking with the emergence of ecofeminist thought that interrogates relationality between human beings and the earth. Noted eco-feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether (1975:204) argues that women's movement and ecological movement need to be united, in order to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of society. In her opinion, no solution to ecological crisis will be realised within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. Or, as noted by Mies and Shiva (1993), structures of traditional patriarchy merge with structures of capitalist patriarchy to intensify violence against women and the earth.

Ecofeminists have emphasised linking relationships instead of ranking relationships, a "power with" approach rather than a "power over" mode of relating. They do this by affirming the sacredness of each being and argue that each has inherent value that cannot be ranked in a hierarchy or compared to the value of another being (Starhawk 1989). They have explored the masculinised violence directed at women, people of colour, animals, and the natural world through structures of domesticity, enslavement, hunting, militarism, science and technology – all legitimated and normalised through religion, culture, and language (Collard & Conrucci 1989). Gaard (2011) sees ecofeminism developing in convergence with the environmental health and justice movements. In her opinion, "social ecofeminism" developed, articulating a materially based analysis of alienation, hierarchy, and domination that linked the mutually reinforcing structures of the economic, political, social, and gender hierarchies. Issues such as Black ghetto ecology, colonialism and third-world development, as well as environmental justice theory have been foregrounded in ecofeminist anthologies. This transformed ecofeminism has been renamed as a hybrid "global feminist environmental justice" (Gaard 2011:37).

The notion of the inter-relatedness of life has repeatedly been mentioned by many ecofeminists, with Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva being a prominent voice among them. Shiva points to separatism being at the root of disharmony with nature and violence against nature and people and we need to overcome an eco-apartheid based on the illusion of separateness – the separation of human beings from nature in our minds and lives. She calls this eco-apartheid, which refers to the ecological separation of human beings from nature in the mechanical, reductionist world view, which is resulting in the multiplicity of the eco-crisis that is threatening human survival – climate catastrophe, species extinction, water depletion and pollution, desertification of our soils, as well as acidification and pollution of our oceans. It also refers to the apartheid created between corporations and citizens, between rich and poor, on the basis of the appropriation of the earth's resources by a few and denial to the rest of their rights to access the earth's gifts for sustenance of all life, including human life.

Shiva (2012:95-97) asserts that making peace with the earth must begin in our collective minds and consciousness, by changing our world views from those based on war with nature to those that recognise that we are but a strand in the web of life. It involves a shift from fragmentation and reductionism to interconnectedness and holistic thinking. It involves a shift from violence, rape, and torture as modes of knowing to non-violence and dialogue with the earth and all its beings. It involves the inclusion of biodiversity and of other knowledge systems – of women, of indigenous communities, of our grandmothers.

The noted Latin American eco-feminist theologian Ivone Gebara (1995) takes the discussion of relationality to a theological level and argues that the impulse to dominate and exploit the vulnerable is at the root of ecological sin. In her opinion, this system of exploitation threatens to undo the processes that maintain the life cycle of all earth's beings in relation to one another, crafted by the earth over billions of years. Ruether (2012:28) takes the argument further and asserts:

Humans are latecomers to the planet. The plants and animals existed billions of years before us. We are descend[an]ts of the long evolution of increasingly complex life forms on earth ... We were not created to dominate and rule the earth, for it governed itself well and better for millions of years when we did not exist or existed as a non-dominant mammal ... Immortality does not lie in the preservation of our individual consciousness as a separate substance, but in the miracle and mystery of endlessly recycled matter-energy out of which we arose and into which we return.

Insights from the eco-feminist standpoint lead us to infer that it is time to revisit our human identity and positioning in relation to other forms of life. The pandemic can become a turning point in the human evolutionary story if it helps us redefine the way of being human in this world. This implies shedding away the sense of moral superiority to other forms of life and returning to a sense of inter-connectedness and mutuality with the elements of the earth and its creatures.

#### **4. WE INTER- ARE: RE-DEFINING THE HUMAN WAY OF BEING**

Ruether (1995:89) observes: Growing into this consciousness of inter-relatedness with other beings on this planet calls for an ecological feminist theology of nature that questions the hierarchy of human over non-human nature as a relationship of ontological and moral value. This theology must challenge the right of the human to treat the non-human as private property and material wealth to be exploited. It must unmask the structures of social domination – male over female, owner over worker – that mediate this domination of non-human nature. Finally, it must question the model of hierarchy that starts with non-material spirit (God) as the source of chain of being and continues down to non-spiritual “matter” as the bottom of the chain of being and the most inferior, valueless, and dominated point in the chain of command.

Switching over from a hierarchical mode of relationality to a realisation of interconnectedness demands recognising that our existence would attain its purpose and meaning not as isolated beings but only through dignified mutuality. This consciousness of inter-relatedness calls for an openness to the infinite mystery of the deeper relatedness of all forms of life, in its plurality and synchronisation, in its vulnerability and vigour. Only on understanding the truth of the inter-relatedness of life do we realise that we become who we are through our relationship with one another as human beings and through our relationship as human beings with the earth.

Perhaps we can gain greater insights into the inter-relatedness of life through Christian eco-feminist theology of creation. Mary Grey (2003), the noted feminist theologian, calls for a radical re-thinking of all our cosmic, cultural, and vital theological reference points. In her opinion, this means experiencing the world as sacred, as held by a sacred being or God, who is not extraneous to the world, but both transcendent and immanent, as

power of life, energy, love, sustaining and energising this web of life. This would lead to acknowledging God as the mystery of relational life, God's energy sustaining the entirety of life forms.

Sages and mystics, who have had a glimpse into these deeper realities, have uttered the truth that we are not merely human beings but inter-beings with all other forms of life. Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the expression “Interbeing” to express the meanings of the Vietnamese term *tiếp* *hiện* - *tiếp*, meaning “being in touch with”/“continuing” and *hiện*, meaning “realising”/“making it here and now” (Hanh 2017). This compound term means “mutual” and “to be” the many in the one, and the one containing the many. Hanh (2005:88) drew the notion of interbeing from the traditional teachings on dependent origination, non-self, emptiness and interpenetration, as well as current scientific and ecological thought.

“To be” is always to “inter-be”, observes Hanh. If we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be”, we have a new verb, “inter-be”. To inter-be and the action of inter-being reflect reality more accurately. We inter-are with one another and with all life. Hanh (2017:28) explains the notion of inter-being in simple terms:

If we continue to look into the sheet of paper, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. Without the sunshine, nothing can grow, not even us. So we know that the sunshine is also in the sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. Looking more deeply, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. We also see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread. So the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger's father and mother are in the paper as well. Without all of these other things, there would be no sheet of paper at all. Everything – time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat, and even consciousness – is in that sheet of paper. Everything coexists with it. To be is to inter-be. You cannot just *be* by yourself alone; you have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is because everything else is.

By sharing this insight of interbeing, Hanh (2017:17) invites us to touch this wisdom of non-discrimination that can set us human beings free from belonging to simply one geographical area or cultural identity. In his opinion, this freedom will enable us to perceive the presence of the whole cosmos in us.

Nowadays, feminist seekers committed to spirituality and justice are unpacking the concept “We Inter Are”, signalling to our existence as mutually constituted beings with the rest of creation. Feminist contemplative writer Lata Mani explains “We Inter Are” looking at its Latin root meanings such as “between”, “among”, “in the midst of”, “mutually”, “reciprocal”, “together”, and “during”. For her, “We Inter Are” acknowledges how we are within, between, and among. We are reciprocally, mutually constituted. We are always already together. We would not begin by assuming that we are autonomous individuals, separate from each other, who need to learn about our interrelationships. We would be oriented to seeing our embeddedness in the world. In her opinion, the idea of “I inter am” makes it more possible for a person to imagine his/her relationship to the breeze, the wind, the lake, the tree, the bird, and nature. It is a very simple way of signalling something that is true: our always already embeddedness in the near-infinity of interrelationships that make us who we are (Mani 2021:7). Further, Mani (2021:8) argues that we live in very stratified social systems, but Creation itself is non-hierarchical poly existence.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si* makes assertions that come close to the notion of “inter-being”, stating that

everything is interconnected, and genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature are inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others (no. 70).

Nonetheless, *Laudato Si* is dotted with contradictions, as it affirms the hierarchy of human beings over creation. It speaks of human beings as endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator (no. 85). Even as this encyclical rejects a tyrannical anthropocentrism in which human beings remain unconcerned for other creatures (no. 68), it is still anthropocentric, as it speaks of a “fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power” (no. 78). In addition, *Laudato Si* endorses the dominion of the Father over creation as it speaks of “a Father who creates and who alone owns the world”. (no. 75).

However, Thomas Berry (2009:65), who was a catholic priest and sage of our times, has a different take on the place of human beings in this universe and expresses the notion of “inter-being” in different words. He calls the universe a sacred absolute unity, in which every component is a universe referent and all the components are inter-referent among themselves. In his classic work, *The dream of the earth*, Berry states emphatically that every reality of the universe is intimately present to every

other reality of the universe and finds its fulfilment in this mutual presence. The entire evolutionary process depends on communion. Without this fulfilment that each being finds in beings outside itself, nothing would ever happen in the entire world (Berry 1988:106). He speaks of the challenge to create a new language, even a new sense of what it is to be human. This, in his opinion, calls for transcending not only national limitations but even our species isolation, to enter into the larger community of living species, and this would bring about a new sense of reality and value (Berry 1988:42).

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is an indisputable fact that the pandemic has become a history marker. Certainly for a few generations further on, people would speak of the pre-COVID and the post-COVID times, although it could mainly be in terms of the losses incurred. For those who have lost their loved ones, perhaps only time can heal the pain resulting from woundedness of separation in close relationships. The economic crisis and other adversities resulting from the pandemic undoubtedly challenge human beings to tread on an uncertain path at different levels. A meaningful unfolding of the future will depend on how the different stakeholders offer their resources and rebuild lives and livelihood, taking into consideration the needs and yearnings of all who are affected and who are seeking to survive the pandemic in a dignified manner.

All the same, in spite of the gloominess that might stay on for some time, the pandemic crisis can also become an opportunity, if we are ready to listen deeper to the groans and whispers that can be heard beneath the surface. The shared vulnerability can have a revolutionary impact on the unfolding story of life. The pandemic can be a threshold that leads humanity to evolve in more significant ways if, as noted by Shiva (2020:n.p.),

a little virus can help us make a quantum leap to create a planetary, ecological civilization based on harmony with nature.

When we human beings are ready to make this leap, then the pandemic will become a turning point in the human evolutionary story, which enables us to become inter-beings with all other forms of life on this planet.

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*Keywords*

Hierarchical problematic

We Inter-Are

Eco-feminist theology

Inter-being

*Trefwoorde*

Hiërgaries-problematies

Ons inter-wees

Eko-feministiese teologie

Inter-wees