



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

ECOFEMINISM AND SPIRITUALITY – WHAT DRIVES US FORWARD?

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Biography



Ana Vujković Šakanović¹ was born in Šabac in 1993. She completed her undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade (Department of History) in 2016 as the best in her generation. She continued her education at the same faculty, where in 2017 she defended her master's thesis in History on the topic "The Sword in the Middle Ages". In the same year, she began her doctoral studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad, under the mentorship of prof. Dr. Milice Kisić. The date of defense of the dissertation and acquisition of the title of Doctor of Science is currently expected. During her education, she was the recipient of the highest honours and awards for outstanding success. She won first place at the National Competition in History, three "Dositeja" awards from the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports for gifted high school students, the Dean's award for exceptional success during studies, the "Dositeja" scholarship provided for the 800 best students of the Republic of Serbia, and was the first-place winner of the scholarship for doctoral students in the category of humanities awarded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia. She has participated in several regional and international conferences, of which she singles out three conferences of the European Academy of Religions in Bologna. She speaks English well, and knows Italian, Latin, Old Slavonic and French. She lives and works in Tuzla, Bosnia & Herzegovina.

¹ This article has been prepared as part of the EWI (Ecumenical Women's Initiative) Fellowship i.e. Research Grants Programme (*EFP 2022*) and under the mentorship of Professor Jasmina Husanović Peħar, PhD, to both of whom the author is immensely grateful for the support received in the process of research and during the writing of this paper.

Abstract

The paper aims to shed light on the relationship between ecoactivism and spirituality. The research it is based upon includes ten interviews with female activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina engaging in environmental issues. Respondents rooted in different backgrounds and traditions offered feedback indicating that different levels of spirituality may be a motivating factor for nature preservation and protection. Nature itself is threatened by human actions. Based on the theory of ecofeminism, the study indicates a high level of awareness among the respondents concerning the human domination of nature. Such awareness is evident among grassroots women activists and other women in their local communities. Furthermore, the same urge for nature preservation is present among women rooted in different religious traditions and as such becomes a factor that brings them closer together and stimulates joint action. The author goes on to conclude that the motivation arising from women activists' spirituality has a unique power and potential to drive further action.

Keywords: *ecofeminism, spirituality, activism, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Islam, Orthodoxy, New Age*

Introduction

The paper addresses the relationship between ecofeminism and spirituality. As a key element, it highlights the importance of grassroots activists' reflection in the development of ecofeminist theology and ecofeminism in general, attempting at the same time to shed light on the motives that stimulate the activism of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the field of environmental protection. The motivation for such activism is mostly born from spirituality, as also demonstrated by the globally acclaimed nature conservationist Jane Goodall in her book "Reason for Hope – A Spiritual Journey". In this regard, the study aims to examine the experiences of women activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while placing special emphasis on the correlation between ecofeminism and spirituality. In doing so, it primarily seeks to highlight the power of spirituality as a global agent of change, above all in the fight against poverty and injustice, but also against the oppression of both women and nature.

As the next step in the transition from theory to empirical research, this paper attempts to define the scope of spirituality in relation to activism and within it, which can be achieved by considering a number of examples from around the world, supported by theoretical postulates of spirituality. The most critical element of this part of the paper is defining religious experience within the concept of spirituality, and determining the scope of spirituality as any form of human belief arising from a person's inner need.

The second part of the paper deals with movements and global organisations, inspired by a certain form of spirituality, that have impacted significant social changes in the field of ecology. The theoretical framework is built primarily around earlier studies by Zilka Spahić Šiljak, who points out that faith-based initiatives, initiated by secular civil society organisations (CSOs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, can be a powerful tool of dialogue, peace and development. Therefore, the paper examines whether such potential may be stored within the realm of ecofeminist activism as well. Following a separate part dedicated to the detailed presentation of the research methodology and the selection of respondents, the paper goes on to present the research results obtained on the basis of 10 interviews.

In the analytical part of the paper, we are first introduced to the respondents' perceptions of nature, and their need to protect nature from powermongers, their answers brimming with actual examples of ecofeminist theory – implying action, i.e. theory in practice. The next part of the study concerns the respondents' spirituality, which – for a certain number of them – is directly associated with their subjective experience of nature. Based on an analysis of the respondents' perceptions of the impact of spirituality on their own environmental activism, four categories of activists were singled out (listed below, in the part presenting the results of the analysis).

The analysis of responses in each of these categories forms a separate part of the paper, significant for the fact that it offers a pioneering study of the motivation of female environmental activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting on the strength they draw from their own motivation, i.e. spirituality, as well as the potential of such motivation to initiate further changes in the country.

On ecofeminist theology, activism, spirituality and religious experience

Ecofeminist theology draws upon three previously established strands of thought and activism – ecology, feminism and theology. As such, it also offers a critical perspective on the role of religion in the domination i.e. oppression of both women and nature. In addition, it provides constructive ideas for a clearer insight into theological thought and practice, with the aim of transforming them towards the liberation of both women and nature. Such a multidisciplinary framework enables the acquisition of knowledge and insights that contribute to overturning and transforming the dominant paradigms in theological thought and practice, all aimed towards the well-being and preservation of our natural environment, planet Earth, and the exercise, protection and advancement of women's human rights (Warren, 1990; Ruether, 1996; Mercer, 2014).

As other authors have already pointed to and linked the Roman Catholic upbringing and the eco-feminist activism of Wangari Muta Maathai, one of the world's most famous environmentalists and human rights activists, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of the Green Belt Movement (Kristić, 2012, 224–226; Van Klinken, 2021), this paper also starts from the premise that the connection between ecofeminist activism, spirituality and religious experience

needs to be studied in more detail, and that there is a basis for such research. Therefore, the initial hypothesis of this paper is that, regardless of whether they rely on Islamic or Christian religious teachings, i.e. whether they declare themselves as active, practicing believers, or not as believers at all, women activists in BiH are motivated towards peace and coexistence with nature. The reason for this lies in the fact that the connection between the spiritual, the religious, and nature preservation has been observed in Hinduism – the example of Vandana Shiva (Tøllefsen, 2011, 89–95), in the religion of indigenous peoples of North America (Booth, Jacobs, 1990), in Christianity – Jane Goodall, Aruna Gnanadason (Goodall, 1999; Cloete, 2021) and in Islam alike (e.g. Egyptian activist Prof. Nawal Ammar (Ammar, 2010; Ali, 2014). If spirituality and religious experience indeed are proven motives of female activism on the African, Asian, North American and European continents, it is also justified (not only for the purposes of research but also for political i.e. reconciliation purposes) to test the mentioned hypothesis on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order to show – as confirmed in a previous study of the connection between activism and Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Spahić Šiljak, 2012, 221) – that different paths of spirituality essentially lead to the same noble purpose – the protection of the most vulnerable social groups and towards the common good in general.

Western societies see spirituality and religious experience as inextricably connected. The term “spirituality” comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning “breath”, or in a broader sense “breathing”, denoting something that provides the body with vital life energy. The existence of such a concept has been documented in historical sources ever since the 5th century. In today’s day and age, however, spirituality is most commonly associated with Eastern religions, esotericism, and the New Age movements. Nevertheless, many identify spirituality with piety. Protestant theology thus seeks to keep both of these concepts and their mutual connection alive. There are many different definitions of spirituality. According to one, spirituality is conditioned by faith and encompasses the totality of human existence in the reality of our lives. Spirituality refers to the realm of human existence that lies in the beyond², outside the limits of the material world, and gives life a sense of purpose, meaningfulness, connection, integrity and hope. Unlike the concept

² The term “beyond” is used in this paper to denote what lies outside the limits of the material world, what is transcendental and beyond the laws of physics.

of religion, which is about knowledge, teaching or the methodology of spirituality, spirituality itself enables the direct experience of ultimate reality. Religious experience refers to one's personal experience and ability to communicate with God. Defined in such a way, the concept of religious experience is part of the concept of spirituality as it lies within the person's understanding of the beyond. Spirituality as such does not formally belong to any religion. It represents the satisfaction of certain universal human needs, such as the need to question the origin of life and to search for its meaning. It is also inseparable from the human need for togetherness with others and is part of the realm of human existence that lies in transcendence, beyond the limits of the material world, forming that which gives one's personal life a sense of meaning, connection, integrity and hope (Matanić, 1994, 15–24; Špehar, 2004, 155–163; Z. Leutar, I. Leutar, 2010, 81–83; Leutar, Leutar, Turčinović, 2013, 217).

According to Jukić (Jukić, 1991, 14), today's spirituality is highly unsecular, non-political and non-ecclesiastical. Secularisation has led to conventional religious experience losing its traditionally dominant position (Maksimović, 2020, 50). The new, contemporary religious sensibility is explained as a result of the individualisation of religion. Religion survives as significant on an individual level, as an attitude-forming and activity-shaping factor. Along these lines, based on extensive empirical data, Berger concludes that individuals, as active social actors, redefine the concept of religious experience on their own, thus dismissing the established interpretations of the traditional religious community (Berger, 2001, 443). Personalised religious experience consists of an "internal and individualised attitude towards the sacred" (Bešić, 2014, 80) and is based on the construction of the religious world on a personalised spiritual level. Any kind of belief is a deep human need (Cvitković, 1996, 49) which does not necessarily fit the mould of a particular religious community and its rites. Individualism is, after all, one of the most important characteristics of modernity.

Within the scope of this paper, the study of spirituality implies the identification of personal experiences of women activists that, according to the respondents' testimonies, lie beyond the material world, i.e. in the realm of the metaphysical, where they find the motivation for their activism. Spirituality is recognized as an impetus for women to engage in environmental activism,

arising from their personal, transcendental beliefs, regardless of whether these are based on religious or other teachings, or are born spontaneously and intuitively.

Social movements and ecofeminism at the end of the 20th century

The theoretical framework of ecofeminism rests upon reflection on the historical symbolic link between women and nature, seeking to demonstrate their special connection conditioned by the overlapping spheres of interest of feminism and ecology. This mutual impact emerges from the placement of women at the very bottom of the hierarchical ladder, between men and nature. The degradation of women and nature in relation to men and culture/society is evident both on a conceptual and symbolic level, which only confirms how patriarchal supremacy is at work through a system of binary oppositions and dichotomies. Ecofeminists have identified patriarchal domination as part of the logic – both behind the destruction of nature and the subordination of women. Therefore, the *female experience* is seen as necessary in this context, as it makes women closer to and more connected with non-human beings, ecological processes and systems, as compared to men who do not share this kind of experience (Shiva, 1989, 4–5; Galić, 2020, 66). It is, on the other hand, shared by all those who are subordinate within the system of patriarchy: members of the female sex, the LGBTQ+ population, persons with disabilities, nonbinary people, members of the lower class and the like (Stone, 2004).

New social movements that emerged in the 1960s were guided by the idea of a new social spirituality and solidarity which opposed technocratic rationality and the principles of economic competition, exploitation and materialism. The peace movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement, the new religious movement and others all work towards conquering spaces of discourse and the actual material world and defending the world of life, which has been colonised by the world of power and supremacy, for the sake of the principles of solidarity, peace, care, equality, freedom, liberation, etc. (Pavlović, 2006, 121; Popov-Momčinović 2012, 102).

Political life in the United States from the 1980s onwards has been characterised by different forms of activism, with faith-based activism being one of the most important and represented forms. Religious communities enter the personal realm of emotional and family relationships,

connecting the private and the public spheres through the public manifestation of their teachings. It is notable in this context that faith-based organisations, such as the Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synods, the A Rocha International organisation, the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, or the United Methodist Women Green Team, transcend class, racial, and other divisions. The scope of their activities includes combating poverty and corporate power, fighting for public security, employment, better education and health care, immigrant rights and the environment. For example, activities aimed at combating toxic waste have engaged entire families, channelling numerous personal dissatisfactions – such that are generally voiced and discussed within the family – into a public manifesto (Swarts, 2008, 49–65).

Taiwan is a country that experienced unprecedented economic growth at the beginning of the century, accompanied by huge environmental issues. Within the Buddhist religious community, independent – predominantly female-led – organisations have since been established and have launched programs aimed at raising ethical awareness and taking concrete action, acting from a spiritual and religious perspective. These women have been calling for the purification of the mind and the bonding of hearts in the spirit of environmentalism, through which a new, holy world is entered and broken organic bonds are re-established. Such activities change man and society for the better – not for earthly gain, but for the sake of a higher life and cosmic purpose. Motivated by religious enthusiasm, female and male activists have thus been changing religion itself (Wan-Li, 2003, 126–130). Similarly, research by Zilka Spahić Šiljak (2015, 689) has shown that faith-based initiatives led by secular CSOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be a powerful tool of dialogue, peace and progress.

Research methodology

Starting from the assumption that women activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of whether their activism is based on their religious or secular beliefs and values, are motivated for peace and coexistence with nature, this paper aims to explore the experiences of such activists by examining the connection between their personal perception of spirituality and their ecofeminist engagement. The research is at the same time interdisciplinary (applying the feminist,

psychological, ethnographic, theological and historiographical approach) and qualitative and combines multiple strategies (analytical data processing, comparative approach, semi-structured interviews). Data for the empirical part of the research was collected by means of an interview (which will be discussed later on in this part of the paper).

After the selection and study of relevant literature, data for the empirical part of the research was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews consisting of open-ended questions. The unit of analysis were testimonies of 10 activists from nine towns/municipalities³ and two federal entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina⁴, collected through a total of 10 interviews.

The initial intention in terms of the research sample was to include members of the dominant religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The study was conducted on a small, appropriate sample. The interviewed activists were selected based on their previous activist engagement in the fields of ecology and feminism, according to the information available on the activist platform Ekofem BiH⁵ and the Facebook group *Rijeke Bosne i Hercegovine „Budi promjena”* (Rivers of Bosnia and Herzegovina “Be the Change”).⁶ Membership in one of the mentioned groups was the first criterion for selection. The second one was age – the sample was to include women over the age of 18. The third criterion was the diversity of the activists’ communities or more specifically the diversity in terms of activities and issues tackled by a community. Members of the groups were contacted randomly, via Facebook. Following a conversation, the contacted activists either agreed to an interview or, for various reasons, refused

³ City of Sarajevo, the town of Tuzla, the town of Zvornik, the town of Bijeljina, the town of Zenica, the town of Prijedor, the municipality of Foča, the municipality of Kakanj, the municipality of Maglaj.

⁴ The two federal entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are: Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁵ Ekofem BiH is an activist platform that brings together 16 civil society organisations from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina which aim to promote an eco-feminist strand of activism through joint action and reflection. Members of the platform meet in person at public gatherings or at online meeting sessions. The civil society organisations that are part of this platform support each other’s efforts to preserve the environment and protect other oppressed members of the patriarchal society.

⁶ Rivers of Bosnia and Herzegovina “Be the Change” is an online group that is active on Facebook and Instagram. The group has 59,000 members. The objectives of the group are: Bosnia without garbage, being part of the solution, working to promote the environmental potential of Bosnia and Herzegovina, finding the best solutions and encouraging social activism, continuous monitoring. A number of environmental actions have been organised within the group and photo-documented on its Facebook page. Through various activities, members of this group are working to raise the environmental awareness of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

to be interviewed. The respondents received an information sheet and a consent form for participation in the study, after which the interviews were scheduled.

All respondents had to answer the following set of initial questions:

- How would you describe yourself from birth to present?
- How would you describe your activist engagement so far?
- What are your thoughts, reflections and emotions regarding the events described?
- In your opinion, is it important to respect nature and if so, why?
- What inspires you in particular in your activism?
- Do you have a principle that guides you in your activist engagement and in life in general?
- Where do you draw the strength from for your activism?
- Do you attribute this strength to a higher power? Do you believe there is some kind of a higher power?

Only the respondents whose answer to the last initial question was affirmative were asked to respond to an additional set of questions regarding their spirituality, namely:

- What inspires you spiritually in particular? What would you single out? A person, a thought, a book, or something else? Are there more things that inspire you spiritually, and who are your spiritual role models?
- What do you think sin is? Where do your values come from? What do you consider a sin with respect to nature?

All ten interviews were conducted in the period from September 22 to October 31, 2022. Six interviews were conducted in person, during meetings with the respondents in their respective places of residence. The remaining four were interviewed via Zoom, Viber and Facebook online platforms. With the prior consent of the respondents, the in-person interviews, which were conducted in the presence of the researcher and the respondent alone (i.e. without third persons present), were audio or video recorded and the recordings were stored in the author's personal archive. The interviews were conducted in person in cafes, where the noise of other people allowed privacy, except in one case when the interview took place in the home of a respondent who was

alone in the room at the time. Interviews via online platforms were conducted without the presence of a third person on the interviewer's side, while the same cannot be guaranteed for the respondents. During the interviews, a total of 4 hours and 39 minutes of material was recorded, which served as the basis for the analytical part of the research included in this paper.

Research results

The results of the research are first presented in this part of the paper with respect to the presence of theoretical postulates of ecofeminism in the respondents' activism. This is followed by a section dedicated to the respondents' spirituality and religious experience as part of their motivation for eco-feminist activism.

Based on the answers provided by the respondents, a brief summary of the individual interviews is given below, reflecting the respondents' general attitudes and their positions on spirituality:

- Respondent 1 – states herself to be a religious Muslim, pointing out that her mother taught her about the importance of nature, and especially that harming nature was a sin.
- Respondent 2 – doesn't consider herself a spiritual person but states that nature soothes her and that she can sometimes stand apart from a group and just observe nature, letting go of all her worries and negativities. She describes herself as a very rational person.
- Respondent 3 – points out her respect for people who see spirituality in nature, but states herself to be rational and guided solely by reason.
- Respondent 4 – is a person who relies on tradition. Although she says that she draws her roots from a Serbian Orthodox family, and classifies her own as such, she doesn't see herself as a spiritual person. The main motivator for her activism is her family, or more exactly her wish to secure a better future for them and to create better conditions for her husband and children to stay in their own country.

- Respondent 5 – states herself to be a spiritual and religious person who finds her role models in Russian Orthodox literature. She is a member of the St. Sava's Youth Community and believes that faith drives her forward and gives her strength.
- Respondent 6 – does not consider herself a spiritual or religious person. She emphasizes that she doesn't believe in God. Her relationship with nature is a result of her work in an association led by her uncle.
- Respondent 7 – at the very beginning of the interview, she points out that she is a religious Muslim who draws her energy from God. Her perception of nature is inspired entirely by spirituality.
- Respondent 8 – comes from a traditional Muslim family but found her own spirituality in meditation. She sees spirituality in nature and believes that we are all one.
- Respondent 9 – loves nature and this love inspires her to fight for its preservation. She believes that Bosnia and Herzegovina is quite distinct from other countries as it is a country of three constituent peoples and that one's religion is a sensitive issue not to be discussed in front of members of other religions. At the very end of the interview, she states that she believes in God, although she gives the impression of not having relaxed completely during the interview.
- Respondent 10 – comes from the Roman Catholic tradition but is not a churchgoer. She thinks God doesn't need religious buildings to work from, and that our DNA goes back into space when we die. She practices meditation and yoga and regularly attends reiki seminars.

Theoretical foundations of the respondents' activism

Theoretical tenets of renowned ecofeminist and feminist philosophers that are reflected in the attitudes expressed by the respondents:

The position of women is similar to that of nature, especially here in the Balkans. Of course, I definitely associate this with my dogs: for it to be nice for them, the environment has to be clean. But there is no nature and it's not nice. And as far as women are concerned... I grew up in the country and I know how women lived back then and how they live even today, unfortunately. They don't have the power to say anything. Just like that poor tree standing there and like the poor dogs, or all other animals. So there's a really good correlation between their positions ... (Respondent 8)

Despite the fact that the respondent has never participated in seminars on the theory of ecofeminism, and her main field of activism is animal protection, her testimony reflects a certain theoretical background. For a long time in history, it was only white men that were considered actual human beings, while women were seen as both women and animals. And when something is defined as not human it does not have to be taken seriously – it can be abused and misused (Arbogast, 2002, 10–13). Women already showed solidarity with oppressed animals during the first wave of feminism, as demonstrated by the British anti-vivisection movement (Hopley, 1998, 2). It was not until 1874 that the rights of children in America were equated with those of animals. Up until then, there were no associations to fight for children's rights, so they were less protected than animal rights (Pearson 2011, 12).

Respondent 10, educated in the field of ecofeminism, sees in it a logical extension of patriarchy. In her opinion, ecofeminism offers a gradual departure from patriarchy. Relying on the postulates of the patriarchal society, it undermines it by empowering women in those walks of life in which they are to an extent already recognized for their expertise within the existing system, such as health, family care, nature conservation. Respondent 10 first spoke about seminars on (im-)proper disposal of plastic waste, which her association organised in local communities in north-eastern Bosnia, pointing out that these received a better response from women. When asked why she thought this was the case, she replied:

This has to do with patriarchy again. Women are the ones who are responsible for the family, the ones most responsible for the family's health. Sometimes this role is forced on

them, but sometimes they accept it themselves. This is also a part of patriarchy, the fact that she considers herself responsible for her child's health makes her keep going. The responsibility for the family – especially in these rural communities – is for the most part a women's duty. Men go off to work, leaving everything else around the house to the care of women who are forced to keep fighting and be more involved in it all. Water, for example – you've seen in all these protests, it's mostly women. So, she's involved, she is the one who must provide clean water and prepare lunch using clean water and wash up and everything. Men go off to work and somehow, in patriarchal societies, they feel that they have done their part. I'm not saying they're completely disengaged, but if we look at numbers, then women are more responsible, much more involved and more active in this area. As I see it, ecofeminism is indeed a movement that can do a lot of good. (Respondent 10)

The attitude that women are more receptive to seminars and other content related to ecofeminism is also reflected in the statements of other activists who draw inspiration for their activism from the desire to protect the health of their children and create better conditions for their future:

I have (...) children and I do my best to make it clear to people that no matter how powerful a car they drive and how heavy their bank account is, all of us breathe the same Sarajevo air... And when we're driving on our roads over trash and keep stumbling over dog poop when we're walking, we are all poor. I don't want my kids to grow up thinking that this is normal, because it's not. I'm really sensitive to all these issues that affect children, and I'm really sorry when I hear my children, or anyone's children, talk badly about the country they were born in. They can't wait to get out of here, and all this revolts me and makes me try to do something. (Respondent 3)

I'm a nature lover, probably because I have roots in the countryside. Not from some noble countryside mansion, but like everyone else here, I had grandparents who lived in the countryside, and I simply developed a sense of nature, a sense that it needs to be

protected. Anyone who went to the countryside and spent time with their grandparents could see how much effort one had to put into a single piece of land – and how it paid off. Nature preservation is incredibly important to me, simply because I have children. And I see it as a cataclysm: if we do not preserve nature, we destroy the future of our children. So it is through this activist struggle that I'm trying to do something for our children. Our knowledge as a society and our knowledge of nature is simply getting worse and I am forced to tell my children to get out of here. And then I say that it's not so bad. We need to try and change something. (Respondent 4)

Spirituality and religious experience as part of the motivation for ecofeminist activism

The analysis of the respondents' testimonies points to four types of attitudes of women activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina towards their own spirituality as a motivating factor for their environmental engagement and activism. The first type of relationship is such where activists draw their motivation from spirituality which is based on religious experience or is, so to say, incorporated within the existing religious models and traditional religious affiliations. The second type is one where activists find their motivation in spirituality that cannot be categorised based on existing religious models. The third category represents those activists who consider themselves religious, but not spiritual, stating that they do not draw their motivation for activism from spirituality. The fourth group consists of activists who do not feel that they draw their motivation from spirituality. An overview and analysis of the characteristics of the four different attitudes of women activists towards their own spirituality is given below.

Spirituality within the existing religious models

Four respondents (1, 7, 5 and 9) see the source of their motivation in spirituality that is based on religious experience.⁷ Respondent 7 clearly recognises spirituality as her motive to engage in environmental activism, stating that:

I'll comment on this from the aspect of faith. I am a Muslim and our religion prescribes – because Islam is a prescriptive religion – that cleanliness is half of faith; this is a clear and exact answer. So, cleanliness is half of faith, and what is cleanliness? We must practice cleanliness when it comes to nature, and not litter, not pollute, not do anything that goes against cleanliness. This is my first and foremost guiding principle, and the last Prophet in this world, according to the book which I am guided by, constantly spoke of cleanliness and purity. When we look at his words – and he is my greatest role model, to be honest – the majority of quotes also refer to the cleanliness which I am talking about. For example, in order to adhere to their faith, every believer, every Muslim must ritually clean their body 5 times a day, that is for each of the 5 daily prayers, one must perform the process of ablution. Now, the matter of performing ablution... To perform ablution and prayers, you must have clean water. A clean place to worship. This is very important. Now, as far as water is concerned, I did some research recently and it showed that if we walked along the river Bosnia, and farther, along the rivers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are very few places where you could stop and perform ablution. Why? Because the water is not clean – and what does that tell us? If people were to adhere to every religion, Muslims and Orthodox and Christians alike, because indeed the Bible and the Quran and other books speak of purity. If all of us adhered to this purity that our faith prescribes, we would truly be good people, pure people, and an

⁷ Despite the fact that Respondent 9 states to believe in God, her guarded attitude when discussing the topic makes it unclear whether her concept of God falls within clearly defined religious worldviews, or she has a different notion of God. Based on the cultural and religious determinants of ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Respondent 9 can be considered to belong to one of the three confessions included in this study and can therefore be classified in this group of respondents. However, she provided no further information at all regarding her own religious affiliation or spirituality.

example to others, to people who really do not see this aspect in their lives and are not guided by it. (Respondent 7)

One of the basic principles she takes from her religion is the principle of cleanliness. As an activist, she fights against improper waste disposal, especially in nature, and strives to support this with her own example. Muslim believers can also find support for this kind of behaviour (Ali, 2014, 111) in Islamic law that prohibits wastage (*tabzir*) and corruption on Earth (*fasad fi al-ardh*). However, she draws her motivation directly from the Quran and states that her role model and inspiration is the Prophet who “constantly spoke of cleanliness and purity.” A source of her motivation is also the desire to be useful to the community, which she supports through the narrative that man is God’s representative on Earth, elaborating on it as follows:

Everything I do, I do heartily, sincerely. Most people ask me what motivates me... Well, the very fact that doing this feeds my soul motivates me. It’s when you instil in yourself as a child the notion that it’s very good to be useful to the community. A wise man once said that man is truly a vicar of God on Earth, in the sense that one should answer for everything one does, that we shall all be held accountable. (Respondent 7)

Respondent 7 expresses a positive and motivating understanding of the postulate of all Abrahamic religions: that man was sent by God to rule and reign the Earth. Rather than ruling the Earth, believers often focus on dominating it, so instead of a conscientious attitude towards nature we frequently see self-importance and a focus on one’s own needs and desires. Respondent 5 elaborates on this as follows:

Nature needs what it needs, and there are things you need to respect in order for nature to give you air, or to give you a river. We’ve become selfish, thinking only of our own needs, believing that we are God-given, that we are that people, that we are the link that God loves over all the rest, when in fact God has given us everything in harmony. Why are people fleeing more and more to the countryside? Because you can’t even breathe in the city anymore. I won’t go into what the air is like here and there, but it’s all

people's doing, it didn't come by itself. I start with myself: it's my fault, I start my car, I use the electricity produced by the hydropower plant that took away my river. We seem to lack responsibility towards ourselves, towards nature, towards everyone. We are failing to understand our role in all of this, how great our impact is. I think we're all connected. And I think that the way we have been behaving is very bad – this selfishness of ours, this desire to be the best, the greatest, the ones who are God-given. (Respondent 5)



Photo No. 1: Banner in the hometown of Respondent 5

This view is supported by research addressing human self-centeredness and the polarisation of man against nature (Hiebert, 1996, 14; Barkasy, 2019, 5). When asked if she attributed her strength to a higher power, Respondent 5 gives the following answer:

I think that in my childhood from the age of 10 this was what kept me going the most, these prayers gave me strength. But over time, as you grow older, you don't notice this happening, but you simply start seeing things differently. You realize that if you live your life – or try to live your life honestly, you try to be empathetic, to show understanding for other people, to pray... You don't need to be in church every Sunday. But if I get the urge to go on Wednesday, I'll go on Wednesday. No one has to see me, I

don't have to do it in front of others to see me there, but definitely, my guardian angel has always been there for me. I know it and I feel it. (Respondent 5)

The comment by Respondent 5 on the banner in her hometown that “*there is something good here* (in the place she comes from; author’s note) *after all*” testifies to the collective pessimism concerning the position of nature. Although this kind of pessimism was expressed by eight out of ten respondents, it is important to note that they nevertheless find strength and continue to engage in the preservation of nature and a healthy environment.

Spirituality outside the existing religious models

The group of those who believe to draw their motivation from a spirituality that cannot be subsumed under the existing religious models includes two respondents (Respondent 8 and 10). Their spirituality could roughly be associated with that of various New Age movements. Due to the wide variety of such movements, the respondents’ attitudes presented below cannot be categorised under a single model. Their statements, however, do include certain recognizable features of this kind of spiritual practice, such as meditation and yoga.

When talking about her relationship with nature, Respondent 8 also mentions meditation which she used to practice regularly while living in Germany. Pointing out that a walk in nature fulfils her the same way as those meditation sessions did, she says:

I feel on top of the world then. Especially in these parts, by the river. In Europe they have all kinds of meditation sessions and everyone is there. These meditations are good; but then when I go to Bukovica, the river flows, the forest all around, birds singing – there is no meditation like this in all the world. People listen to that on tape, on television, and we get to have this kind of meditation live – of course, you feel (on top of the world, author’s note)... I go to the city only if I have some errands to run. But most of the time I’m in the woods and that’s where I feel the best, especially in nature like ours. Germany has beautiful nature, of course, but it’s all developed and arranged

somehow, and here it's virtually untouched, disordered as it is. Two days can't go by without me going to the woods. (Respondent 8)

When asked if she considered meditation a form of spirituality, she says yes, elaborating on her answer as follows:

As for me, this meditation really helped me. Just like when I come back from nature: my soul feels good and there is no pressure, I'm free, as if I could fly. So, in this kind of meditation that I used to practice in Germany, I tried – well, people normally try to imagine the sea, and I always imagined a river and a hill. I do go to the sea, but I always feel better by the river and in the woods. So, it helps people, they don't need to focus, they just need to relax and nothing else, it just comes on its own (relaxation; author's note). (Respondent 8)

Despite recognizing her spirituality in meditation, she at the same time makes a distinction between spirituality and belief in God, as evident from her answer to the question of whether she draws her strength from some kind of a higher power:

As for a higher power, in the sense as I once believed in God, I don't believe that anymore. The way of life and people simply made it so. So, as far as that kind of faith is concerned, I don't believe. But I do believe that there are some higher powers, some forces that could hit us. There's this force, the storm, an earthquake, these are all some kind of "forces majeure". (Respondent 8)

It can be concluded from conversations with Respondent 8 both before, during and after the interview, that her perception of the existence of God is equal to the concept of God in the traditional religious community and the background that she grew up in. Such a notion of God is no longer something she can relate to or find a source of spirituality in. This is one of the reasons why she rejects the notion of a higher power which, when confined within the boundaries of religion, does not fit into the concept of spirituality as experienced through meditation in nature.

Respondent 10 draws strength for her activism from the practice of yoga. When asked if she practiced meditation in addition to yoga, she explains her rituals:

Meditation as well, yes, and when Reiki sessions are organised by other CSOs, I go and practice that, because I think that I still haven't learned enough in that area. And I haven't, because I like to get up early and in peace, without any distractions, I like to do yoga, then meditate, then make a plan for myself, slowly, calmly; what I'm not during the day, that's what I am in the morning. So I make my plan and I lay a good foundation to succeed in realising it. (Respondent 10)

When asked if she recognised spirituality in the rituals she practices, Respondent 10 gives the following answer:

I do, I think that the energy we get from space, then our DNA – which I read was a fluid and, according to the latest research, it's 500,000,000 km long – I read it several times, to make sure I read it correctly... And when a man dies, it's the latest research, this fluid goes into space, and that's what I believe. Matter can't be destroyed, the body perishes and disintegrates, but your DNA goes into space. I believe there is a kind of destiny. At certain points in my life when I was really overwhelmed with problems and everything, I was, I was getting some kind of help, without doing anything about it myself. And I believe in destiny. I am not... I don't go to church and stuff. I think that this Creator, this thing we can call God, that it doesn't need houses built by man, who most often – while building and working – desecrates that very same God. I don't support that. I have my own view on this, I believe that I was created to do good. And sometimes when I am bad, I shame myself, I abash myself, because I think that every man was created to do good, not evil. It's a thing of mine; I'm not saying that I only do good, but when I do something that's not good, I abash myself. That's how I perceive this God and this Creator and this circulating energy and all that around us. Those who do good, receive good in return. Those who spread spirituality of this kind, relish in it. (Respondent 10)

Asked about her relationship with nature, Respondent 10 answers:

When you are in nature, when you are in the woods, when you are tired, and you hug a tree with your hands, to get energy, to breathe – a skill I try to develop through yoga. I use my every visit to nature to cleanse my lungs, almost as if doing some inner spring cleaning, and I like to spend every free moment there. (Respondent 10)

Religious experience as part of the tradition with no spiritual motivation for activism

An activist stating that she respects the traditions of her people but doesn't see an influence of a higher power in her activism, emphasizes that she does not believe that good always prevails (Respondent 4). In the further course of the conversation, she points out her Orthodox identity, underlining, however, that she does not see it as a driver and motivator in fighting injustice. She states to find her motivation in her family, husband, children and friendship. Such an understanding of religious experience as presented by this particular respondent is quite interesting and undocumented in studies of spirituality conducted in this region so far (Z. Leutar, I. Leutar, J. Turčinović, 2013). Specifically, Respondent 4 states:

Well, I don't know, I come from an ordinary family. We're Orthodox Serbs, um. Not really believers or anything, we simply honour this tradition and I have some kind of respect – I don't know – for the past, for our ancestors and for some things that they did. (Respondent 4)

In the further course of the interview, she states that she doesn't believe in a higher power that makes good always triumph over evil:

No, this I don't believe, and whether there's a God, I don't know what to believe. Things happen in life, life is far from a fairy tale, far from good and the truth always winning. (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4 denies believing in a higher power and says:

No, no, I don't have ideas like this, sometimes it happens, maybe when you get into activism, into that story, it seems impossible: look at me, this ordinary little woman, getting into a fight against the most powerful man here... And it all seems like an unequal fight, but I hold this belief that fortune sometimes favours the brave. Sometimes something opens up, you just have to try and not just... When you just look at your chances, you'd condemn yourself to failure and give up, but once you start, then opportunities open up. That, if we can call that a higher power, yes, but nothing else.
(Respondent 4)

Speaking about her main motive, she says:

Believe me that I didn't know much about small hydropower plants and how much damage they did both to people and society in general, until the story got a personal note, until my friend was involved. The fact is that I am from such a family and that I have special feelings for friends, I feel when my friend is threatened and I can't play dumb. (Respondent 4)

What Respondent 4 highlights as her motivation is fighting for the protection of nature by protecting the rights of loved ones, of our friends. This sense of protecting friends is something she says she took away from her family so, in a way, her decision to engage in activism is rooted in tradition as well.

A similar observation, but directed towards other believers of traditional religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is made by Respondent 1, a member of the Muslim community:

I am also a Muslim, and I believe that it is a major factor, but then again I think that, for fear of God and out of respect for some values, we will act in a certain way and so on. (...) At certain points in my life it was very important for me, I saw it through my mom as well, but I don't let it restrict me anymore. Although I think that in Bosnia and

Herzegovina it is much more a part of tradition than a matter of actual faith. I don't want to judge anyone, but true spirituality is something much higher and more elevated.

Considering the statements of Respondents 4 and 1, one direct, the other indirect, a shared view is observable, especially evident in the case of Respondent 4, that religion is part of tradition and as such not a motive for activism in the community. As far as Respondent 1 is concerned, spirituality is recognized as part of the motivation to engage in activism as a *major factor*, but only insofar as this activism is not limited by the boundaries of religion and faith. The respondent expresses her opinion on tradition as an observation on other believers (referring primarily to Muslims, but also to others).

Respondent 1 highlights the fight for justice as her main driver:

Ever since I was a child I've always been sensitive to injustice, whether directed towards me or others. (...) I had this in my family; my Mom is incredibly just, but she is the total opposite of me, not someone who will confront others if she sees something. She also used to react to injustice, but through her stories, through her life, you see... Even as a little girl, I had the urge to defend her in some situations, before her family mostly. The combination of family and life circumstances is what led me to see that unfortunately not all of us are equal, not before the law, but simply – our positions in life are different, some are more privileged than others. (Respondent 1)

During the interview, she goes back to reflect on spirituality, defining her relationship to God more deeply:

But I really think, to elaborate on what I said at the beginning, why I believe that there must be something after this...I really think that God didn't create me like this just so, for no particular reason. I think that there is a reason why I was born this way, at this particular time, and that I am like this with all my flaws, which are many, and I really think that this is my role. And to go back to that beginning again, I think I would lose myself if I didn't pass this forward. And luckily, I have a lot of friends who are like me, from different small

communities in BiH, who are very close friends of mine and we have many things in common, both personal and other stuff. I think that's what's keeping me here. It's hard for a person to be alone. It's very hard. (Respondent 1)

Therefore, Respondent 1 belongs to spirituality within the existing religious models, although her statement concerning other believers of religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina supports the position of Respondent 4.

Negating religious experience and spirituality as a motive for activism

Respondents 2, 3 and 6 belong to the group of those who do not think that they draw their motivation for activist engagement from spirituality. All three consider themselves to be very rational and deny any kind of spirituality. However, when describing her subjective experience of nature, one of them states:

It's only nature that relaxes me in these crazy times. I find some serenity there. We usually think of people who spend so much time walking by the river and in nature as some kind of eccentrics, but I actually draw energy from nature. Actually, when I'm most tired, say at work, when stress piles up because of numerous reports, and obstacles we encounter, I go into nature, and I like to work in nature. The thing they say about gardening, that it relieves stress, well, it really does calm me down. I don't know how to explain it, but when I see that something is wrong, I ask if anything can be done about it, and of course, I try to help. It's something stronger than me. (Respondent 2)

This respondent also explains her connection with nature by saying that she could “philosophically reflect on rivers that take away all that is dirty, for example, and thus purify in some way”.

From her entire testimony, it can, nevertheless, be concluded that, albeit in figurative terms, she is in fact speaking about spirituality in the broader sense – as a reference to the spiritual dimension by which man is free, and therefore – in spirit – moral, responsible, and even religious

(Coulter, 2001; Ivančić, 2007, 7–8; Leutar, Leutar, Turčinović, 2013, 216). However, the respondent does not recognize spirituality as such, stating in the further course of the interview that she is not a spiritual person. Nevertheless, it can clearly be observed from her responses that her “unperceived” spirituality (but perceived by the researcher) is what brings well-being, regardless of the respondent’s own awareness of its presence. A similar attitude is observed in the testimony of Respondent 7. Being a believer, she does not refer to herself, but to an acquaintance who perceives himself as an atheist and whose attitude regarding the relationship towards nature, which is essentially almost pantheistic, she seems to share:

There are people who are atheists. Of course, we can't... If I am a believer, this is my choice, my decision, but there are people who are not believers and who think that it is nature that drives us. I understand such people as well, and that nature drives them, too. I just recently spoke to an atheist: if it's nature that moves you, and you argue that it's living matter, Mother Nature, as they say, Mother Nature doesn't send you signals to pollute it in any way. She even asks of you to give her back what she gives you, the beauty of creation, the beauty of a clean river, a clean forest, of greenery. (Respondent 7)

Although classified in the same category, the respondents who deny any kind of spirituality and perceive themselves as atheists can further be subcategorized into two groups. Respondent 2, unlike the other two, particularly emphasizes and recognizes her own connection with nature. This connection is not easily described in rational terms, as the respondent highlights herself, and can be subsumed under the category of transcendental because, as she says, philosophically – *water takes away all that is bad*. The other two respondents (Respondent 3 and Respondent 6) find motivation for their activities in their families and the care for their families, which they both emphasize.

Conclusion

The conducted research points to a connection between ecofeminism and spirituality both at a personal level and in terms of activism, which as such represents an extraordinary potential for future environmental activism and engagement. This connection has been observed regardless of the respondents' religious affiliation, background or the tradition in which they were rooted. It is also present in the case of spirituality which does not fit into the standard religious frameworks. The spirituality observed in activists is inseparable from their activist engagement and is in fact a factor of inspiration for such engagement. Women activists included in the research seek to eliminate the injustice they recognise in the human relationship towards nature. At the same time, they find comfort and strength in nature for their future activism. During the interviews, the respondents started speaking about their spirituality in two ways. The first way could be anticipated – by answering the question related to spirituality. The second way was by talking about nature, which at the same time proves the close connection between spirituality and nature, and their inseparability with regard to the respondent's activist engagement. Exploring this connection would provide additional answers regarding the religious and spiritual potential in general in the context of organised environmental activism. One of the ways of harnessing this potential is recognised in the activism of faith-based CSOs, as supported by numerous positive examples mentioned in the paper. However, through further research, a different model could be devised that would better suit the specific circumstances in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, regardless of denomination, religious affiliation and spiritual background, this potential would be well used as a contributing factor not only to ecofeminist activism, but to establishing connections and building peace. New Age movements have proven to be a strong motivator of activist engagement, much like similar movements in a range of environmentally conscious and self-sustaining communities (e.g., Auroville in India, Damanhur in Italy, Findhorn in Scotland, Hot Springs in Arkansas, USA, and many others). The spirituality of the New Age movement is, however, recognizably reflected in the spirituality of ecofeminist women of Bosnia and Herzegovina included in the research that was conducted for the purposes of this paper. A convenience sample of ten respondents from Islamic, Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, namely, showed that two persons stemming from traditional forms of spirituality adopted patterns and spiritual practices characteristic of New

Age movements. The reason for this lies in the fact that this unconventional form of spirituality motivates their activism and positive engagement in society in general.

Empirical field experience leads the author of this paper to the methodological conclusion that it would be useful for future research to state immediately and directly what it is about, so that those respondents who are spiritual would get the opportunity to talk about it, while it would not affect those who are not, nor change their attitude. Personal and in-depth questions, which require introspection to be answered and which reveal the higher moral postulates of a person, do not entail the possibility of interfering with and instructing the respondents' answers because, in most cases, they have firmly established attitudes on the matter of spirituality. The proposed form for future research corresponds to that conducted by Zdravka Leutar, Ivan Leutar and Jelena Turčinović (2013, 221) when exploring spirituality in social work, where already the first question draws attention to religious experience and spirituality. The research conducted for the purposes of this paper focused on an indirect study of spirituality and as such made a significant contribution by identifying the smallest common factor of spirituality in the respondents' activism. In this way, an excellent starting point was provided, since the aim of the study was to establish the existence and impact of spirituality in activism. From this point of view, the conducted research, focused on the very motivation of the respondents to engage in activism, is very much justified. A qualitative analysis of the conducted interviews has yielded information that contributes to a clearer understanding of the role of spirituality in women's environmental activism. Further and more detailed research is needed on the relationship between tradition and spirituality, in order to examine whether ritual-based religious experience is part of spirituality or part of tradition. In addition, more extensive quantitative research, which would use a survey method and would be aimed at presenting a scale of spirituality, would significantly contribute to the further study of the role of spirituality as a motivating factor for ecofeminist activism.

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