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The Ecological Challenge to Christianity

Most people who think seriously about the ecological crisis will agree that it presents the premier challenge for the coming millennium. Exploding human populations will put vast strains on resources. Global warming, deforestation, and other forms of pollution to air, land, and water will continue to expand as the ethos of technology takes over our world. In this evolving scenario of ecological degradation what is the role of religion in general and of Christianity in particular? Just as all religions were shaped in specific cultural climates all living religions have had to adapt their message and action to new crises in history. In his brilliant meditation on the poetics of matter-energy convertibility, David Toolan (1996:14) asks: "So now, what shall we make of nature?" In light of the new creation story, that of a multi-billion year development, and of the new physics in our time characterized by Einstein, Toolan seems to be asking our great world systems of spirituality to respond in depth to the ecological challenge.

I would like to explore some avenues for approaching this challenge to religions in a more limited way by focusing on dimensions of Christianity that are summoned toward revisionary thinking in face of the growing threat to the planet. Those of us who work in the interfacing of religion and ecology are aware of significant thinkers who are addressing these issues; a growing list of such scholars includes Thomas Berry, Sallie McFague, Jay McDaniel, James Gustafson, Rosemary Ruether, and others. There are also Christian environmental organizations and programs attempting to raise consciousness within churches and seminaries. But on the whole, the ecological reconfiguration of Christian thought and practice is still in its infancy. Ecology has hardly penetrated the shell of modern Christianity. The impact of this spiritual reconfiguration has not been felt significantly in the concrete circumstances of Christian living; it is like a distant comet still far removed from where we live. The new challenge calls us far beyond recycling or a few prayers for the earth at Mass or turning the church garden into a bird sanctuary or talking occasionally about a stewardship ethic toward the planet. If we take the challenge seriously, it will cut to the roots of our religious consciousness and activity; it will ask about how Christianity can become a nature religion. I will consider aspects of this challenge in the areas of doctrine, liturgy, spirituality, and ethics.

ECOLOGICAL DOCTRINE

Honesty demands an admission that in the realm of doctrine Christianity does not lend itself easily to becoming a nature spirituality. Lynn White in his now seminal critique of Christianity as anthropocentric and otherworldly, threw down in the 1960s a gauntlet that theologians have been running ever since. In *The Travail of Nature*, for example, Peter Santmire traces in Scripture and tradition myths that point in an otherworldly direction, to escape from earth and others that point horizontally toward journeying and fecundity on earth. While his effort is stimulating, it tends to make Christianity look more ecological than it really is. It is, of course, possible to find an Irenaeus in antiquity and a Francis of Assisi in the medieval Church who become spokesmen for a somewhat ecological vision. But Christian master stories, inherited from Judaism, and modified by platonism and by more than a touch of gnosticism and manicheism resist ecological interpretation. In the Hebrew stories, creation is certainly good, but the main drama is anthropocentric-theocentric; it is a parent-child tale about God and Israel. The long drama of the Jews is about salvation history of humans, not about salvation of the planet. Notice also how the Israelite mentality is shaped in constant struggles against pagan symbols, fertility statues in high places, and golden calves. They were protecting the transcendence of the divine; they were not encouraging its immanence, for the most part. Early Christian thinkers tried to defend against the extreme dualisms of gnosticism and manicheism, but Augustine's heritage of dualistic thinking (City of God/City of man, the depravity of the sexual body and human will over against God's grace) profoundly influenced subsequent Christian history. Even the famous Catholic doctrine of grace building on nature was about human nature, not about the nature of rivers, birds, and mountains.

I focus on these ecology-resistant dimensions of Christian teachings to underscore the need for candor, lest we slide into an easy theology of nature, something like Bonhoeffer's "cheap grace." Even the process of retrieving and reinterpreting ecologically friendly Christian doctrines will call for a kind of hermeneutical courage. For example, when we theologize about creation, incarnation, sacrament, and covenant in an ecological vein, we will find ourselves moving toward new understandings which may be quite different from those we were taught. The doctrine of creation, for example, points to the goodness of all creatures and to God's abiding love for the universe. But the doctrine of creation is intrinsically linked to that of redemption. We have not been used to thinking about God's work of redeeming the nonhuman world. If the latter is as valuable to the Creator as the human species, what restraints, accommodations, and additions will need to be made in other areas of Chris-

tian thought? Most Christians associate the doctrine of incarnation to Jesus as the Christ, although it is also understood in the broader sense of God's enfleshed or "en-mattered" presence in all things. But does the image of the crucifixion extend in an intrinsic way to the suffering of animals and to devastated rain forests? The christological myths express Christian faith as the nearness and concreteness of divine presence. But God's sacred dwelling will need to transcend humans to be found in calves tortured in immobilizing boxes to produce milk-fed veal, in poisoned rivers and bays, in mountains clear-cut and gouged by greed.

The process of rethinking Christian doctrines in an ecological direction raises at least two problems. One is the danger of turning Christianity into a form of pantheism. The Judeo-Christian tradition has resisted this move because of its faith conviction about the supreme mystery of God. The divine was not to be limited to or totally contained in the finite. I will not pretend to deal adequately here with this question. Rather I will point toward a helpful mode of approaching the inclusion of the universe in God in the Process Theology concept of panentheism. The latter permits us, at least intellectually, to conceive of a radical immersion of all things in God, while at the same time preserving the transcendence of the divine. A second problem in a serious greening of Christian teachings concerns the historical continuity of the very religion itself. Would the changes necessary to realize a deeply ecological Christianity result in creating a completely different religion? Again, answers to this question would require a long treatment of the possibilities for development of doctrine and institutions.

My thought on this issue takes two general roads. One way is summarized in A. N. Whitehead's phrase "religion in the making." All religions are the products of human spiritual imagination and experience over millennia. This statement does not exclude divine revelation; rather it points to the mode of that gradual revealing, that is, through the development of human consciousness in history over a vast evolutionary time. The human mind does its limited best in shaping creative metaphors (doctrines) to represent what it believes are experiences and contours of the divine. This is done individually (great teachers) and in groups (church, sangha). In this perspective, religions are always in the making as is the revelatory process in history. This outlook may be discomforting to those who demand certainty and conceptual literalness; it is a test of one's ability to live with ambiguity and even religious surprise. This also means that religions can change, in light of new conditions and experiences, much more profoundly than many of us are willing to acknowledge. A second path to grappling with the continuity problem has to do with taking the contemplative, the mystic dimension of religion with primary seriousness. Our doctrinal metaphors are very valuable aids for religious thinking, but they are secondary to the

experience of prayer and contemplation. Christianity, like most religions, has as a central purpose the inward transformation, both ethical and spiritual, individual and communal, of its adherents. I will make more of this below in a section on ecological spirituality.

ECOLOGICAL WORSHIP

While doctrinal issues are important, Christians are more immediately formed by involvement in liturgy and worship. Ecological spirituality is still generally absent from worship in Catholic and Protestant churches. The earth is merely an incidental backdrop to the main action in liturgies of Word and Eucharist. Listen to the readings from Scripture, to sermons, and eucharistic prayers. The messages are almost uniformly about human-divine and inter-human transactions. One can go through a whole year of the liturgical cycle and hardly know that the earth exists much less that it is sacred. The problem is only partially one of lack of seminary formation in ecological liturgics and homiletics; the more profound issue is that ecological questions, as we know them today, were not being asked during Christianity's last two millennia. Religions are shaped in terms of key questions posed during their formative periods. Even when nature is mentioned in hymns and prayers, it is rarely commended for its own intrinsic value; it is used rather as testimony to the glory of God or as an example to underscore human virtues. The worshiper's orientation is pulled away from nature. Earth continues to be seen as a cluster of beautiful or frightening objects but not as multiple subjects for spiritual communion. To rephrase Toolan's question here, it is not so much what shall we make of nature, but what can we learn religiously from nature's voices? Can Christianity be greened by listening with respect to those religious traditions we used to dismiss as "animist"?

Even an amateur survey of the gospels, read regularly at Christian worship, reveals a remarkable number of references to nature. Here is a partial list: salt, light, physical illnesses and cures, stormy and peaceful waters, multiple eating scenes, seeds, trees, vegetables, the weather, fruits, bread, wine, wilderness, flow of blood, wells and springs, birds, flowers, sheep, mules, yeast, humans and references to their different organs. Most of these nature tropes are employed as background for parables that focus on human-divine relations. We need to foreground these many nature symbols for an ecological interpretation of Scripture. The same point could be applied to the larger body of Hebrew scriptures. The book of Psalms, for instance, is replete with nature references. Here again, they serve as background for the great myths of parent (God) child (Israel or the psalmist) relations in a context of persecution from enemies. In the process of foregrounding the earthly aspects of the psalms) we could emphasize the intrinsic value of the natural realities

which both praise Yahweh and are filled with divine presence. If they are filled with this presence, they become subjects for intercommunion, not dead objects of lesser value. In this vein, two kinds of gospel stories, those of healing and of eating, are particularly fraught with ecological potential. These passages are not just for something beyond nature, a spiritual healing alone or a banquet somewhere in the heavens. Rather they speak of healings of body and mind right in the natural realm, and of convivial and inclusive meals in the here and now. Where are the ecologically trained biblical and liturgical scholars now that we need them?

When I asked a renowned liturgical scholar for leads to books of contemporary ecological liturgies, he was stumped. Articles here and there dealt with the topic but not books. An ancient and a modern version of ecological liturgy provide examples of work that can be mined from the past and created in the present. A eucharistic prayer compiled in the fourth century, *Apostolic Constitutions*, has a remarkable description in some detail of natural elements right down to the "hissing of reptiles and the cries of birds." Sources for creativity in reformulating Christian worship in an ecological mode can be found in liturgical writings by eco-feminists, like Dolores LaChapelle, and others influenced by the contemporary Wicca movement. Another rich source for creative liturgists are the abundant works of nature writers and poets. These artists of the word can lift our souls in a holistic way into feeling mystically the beauty and meaning of nature.

There is understandable resistance to making substantial changes in the liturgy. The prayer of the Church has existed in its present form of a God-human drama for ages. Yet great liturgical festivals like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are related to nature events: the winter solstice, the rebirth of Spring, and the gathering of harvests. It might be helpful to approach a liturgical revision of the Christian calendar by way of theological analogy. A number of the New Testament stories of love, such as that of the good Samaritan or the prodigal son, do not speak explicitly of God or of things out of the earthly order. The love actions are horizontal, this-worldly: caring for a wounded man, embracing a lost child. The theme of the First Letter of John sums up this point: when we open our hearts to our brethren, we are implicitly loving God. We don't have to be using the explicit language of "God" or "Lord" or "Father." When we love the neighbor, it is understood that we are loving God who dwells in him or her. By analogy, it seems correct to say that when we are liturgically meditating on the splendors or the sufferings of nature, we are implicitly honoring the God who, to people of faith, lives in the natural world.

Serious liturgical revision in an ecological mode could also be based on the teaching of the cosmic Christ. This is a way of looking at trinitarian doctrine in an intensely sacramental manner. By reflection on the cosmic Christ, the Christian imagination sees the presence of God

in the universe as a saving or reconciling interconnectedness. In this perspective the universe becomes the sacrament or outward sign of a redeeming God. A neglected period of church history could also provide insights for an ecological liturgy. We need to revive our knowledge of Celtic Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries. The religion of Patrick and Columba was still closely linked to the sacred places and mysterious groves of the Druids and Bards. The Celtic religious leaders saw no opposition in using the language of nature to speak of holiness and spiritual presence. They found a holy intimacy of human, natural, and divine. John Scotus Erigena could speak of the two shoes of Christ: Scripture and nature. Monastic traditions like that of Iona bonded with nature as already graced.

I have stressed liturgical renewal in an ecological direction because liturgy at its best moves people from the realm of concept to that of experience. It transcends the merely intellectual to grip the worshiper aesthetically and affectively. It is mainly in the realm of affect and beauty that we learn to bond with nature as sacred. Without such bonding with earth our environmental ethics will risk being anemic and externalist. Nature will remain for us a zone of objects, of commodities for conservation management rather than a community for communing with subjects. E. O. Wilson, the sociobiologist, understands this very well in his concept of biophilia. If we don't love nature deeply and feel united to what we love, he is telling us, we will not cherish it. But liturgy is only one way for the Christian to bond spiritually with the earth. Equally important is the development of a naturalistic spiritual life.

ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

Perhaps the greatest deficiency in Christian nurture today in most churches is their almost total neglect of cultivating our mystical potential. Most Christians associate the spiritual life with going to church, with formal, mostly oral prayer or singing, with liturgical participation, and with listening to sermons that exhort them to do good and avoid evil. Few have the sense of a personalized spiritual path that can be enhanced by regular meditation and other spiritual methods. Institutional religion in the west has generally been suspicious of mysticism because it is hard to control. Some of this is changing today with the expansion of retreats like the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius into the daily life of retreatants as well as the recent development of techniques for centering prayer.

The Deep Ecology movement in the post-World War II era challenges Christianity to rediscover its contemplative tradition as a major way of contributing to a fuller appreciation of being an ecological self in an environmental community. A leading visionary thinker in the Deep Ecology movement, the Norwegian philosopher-ecologist Arne

Naess, would have us awaken to the ecological self. In the image of Joanna Macy, we are today called upon to recover from a millennia-long amnesia, especially in the west, to who we really are. We have seen ourselves as separate and competitive beings generally isolated from the natural world rather than coextensive with all planetary life. This ecological sense of selfhood calls for a spiritual change, a new kind of metanoia, through which we experience ourselves profoundly interconnected with the rest of nature. Gregory Bateson called the false separation of the human ego from nature the "epistemological fallacy of Occidental civilization." From the early days of twentieth-century science to contemporary systems theory we have been challenged to re-imagine the human self as deeply interactive with other species and with the environment as a whole. Deep Ecology does not deny the distinctiveness of our species nor the particularity of other species. Rather integration and differentiation are the very rhythm of the evolutionary dynamic. At one and the same time, we are the rain-forest thinking and yet distinct human entities.

Without using God language, the deep ecology movement understands the importance of a mystical or deeply experiential conversion in our attitudes toward nature as a prerequisite for thinking and acting in ecologically sound ways. But a contemplative ecological movement needs more than theorizing. It needs to learn from the experiences of contemplative traditions that have not only thought about the mystical tradition, but which have also developed techniques and insights for the meditative process. In this regard, deep ecologists like Macy tend to seek wisdom from Buddhism with its long meditative tradition. For the most part, the Christian contemplative tradition seems to be unknown to the ecologically-minded who look to traditional world religions for resources. This is understandable since most churches today ignore their own contemplative traditions when it comes to popular piety. The Quakers may be the only Christian family that has preserved meditation as a regular practice for all the faithful. In general, most Catholics and Protestants would not know what to do with long periods of silence in our now wordy services. They have not been taught the ways of contemplative prayer. For most Christians going to church means prescribed prayers, hymns, sermons, and other liturgical actions. It does not mean learning and practicing the inward journey, the way of deeper personal union with God immersed in the universe and in our inner being.

Yet Christianity has venerable contemplative traditions from antiquity to the present. Unfortunately, this spirituality has usually been confined to religious orders, with the exception of retreat movements among some laity. It is heartening to see significant changes today in the expansion of contemplative prayer and spiritual direction into the lay world. The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are being conducted with

and even by lay people in the daily circumstances of their lives. Spiritual guides like the Cistercians Thomas Keating and William McNamara are making the ways of contemplative prayer known to a wider public. Keating presents centering prayer as a means toward an interior silence a "resting in God," that is beyond thinking, images, and emotions. As a spiritual guide, he is showing people through one type of meditative prayer how to gradually move away from a false self, "dis-eased" by fears and cravings and other negative thoughts and emotions to find their authentic selves in a peaceful union with the freely given mystery of God's presence. It was encouraging to see Keating on national television instructing an Episcopal congregation on contemplative prayer. But Keating and other Christian spiritual directors do not significantly incorporate nature into their meditative teachings.

The same critique can be made of those who lead retreats based on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius. Again nature is only backdrop, a congeries of stage props in the composition of place; the main drama of discernment takes place in personal relations between the retreatant and God. Perhaps the clearest place in the Exercises for Christian nature mysticism comes in the final meditations where Ignatius summons the retreatant to contemplate the vast, dynamic process of God's love coursing through the whole universe. The challenge to ecological retreat leaders will be to re-imagine the Exercises in light of this culminating point. A key for this rethinking, this foregrounding of nature, can be found in the central Ignatian genius of finding God in all things, of discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary, of becoming people for others. The "other" here in its intrinsic sacredness can be bird or river or mountain or air, all constituting the body of God.

Ecological sensitivity within Christian spirituality will take special notice of our own traditions that are explicitly open to nature. The recapitulation theology of Irenaeus offers a sweeping vision that gathers all things into a Christic framework that need not be limited to humans. Eastern Christianity sees its icons as images of the "divinization" of nature of God's sanctifying presence in the very wood, metal, and artistry of the icons. We have already noted potentially rich sources in early Celtic Christianity. The Benedictine monastic tradition certainly had its hands in the soil, as it were, teaching agriculture, animal husbandry, and herbal medicine to populations surrounding their monasteries. St. Francis stands out as a primary nature mystic. Matthew Fox has helped us better appreciate the nature mysticism of medieval visionaries like Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and Hildegard of Bingen. What is true of most great writers is certainly applicable to Dante: an immersion in natural images from the dark forest at the start of the *Inferno* astronomical visions in the *Paradiso* of that which moves the heavens and all the other stars.

A rich vein of Christian reflection on nature in an organic as opposed to mechanistic way can be found in the tradition of the fifteenth century school of Marsilio Ficino in Florence to Pico della Mirandola, John Dee, and Giordano Bruno. This tradition, combining forms of Neo-platonism and the old hermetic wisdom was widely respected in its time, even by churchmen like Nicolas of Cusa. An ecological re-visioning of Christian spirituality would certainly want to look again at the great religious art and architecture of medieval and Renaissance Europe. The cathedrals themselves, as natural extensions of hand and brain, were not only shaped in stone, but the tales carved into them include plants and animals and other natural elements. Perhaps we can learn today to move against that tendency in Post-Reformation churches to look with man-achievable eyes at the earthy beauty of Renaissance and earlier art. God might be found again in the beautiful breasts and lips of Botticelli's Florentine maidens celebrating spring. The erotic and the sensual, despite all attempts by clerical censors to the contrary, belongs to the long sacramental heritage of Christianity.

New Partners in Spiritual Dialogue

In its attempt to become ecological, Christian spirituality will need to become broadly ecumenical. Such a dialogue could begin with nature writers whose humanistic outlook may be full of spiritual insight in secular idiom. A long American literary tradition of such writing stretches from Thoreau to Whitman to Gary Snyder, Barry Lopez, and Annie Dillard. These verbal artists know how to evoke the deeper resonance of things and our relations to them. In their works, nature comes alive as subjects speaking to our imaginations and hearts, messages of intrinsic worth, shared benefits, and special needs. A number of great modern scientists like Edwin Schrodinger and Albert Einstein have left us profound spiritual reflections from their experiences of physical reality. Scientific visionaries like Loren Eiseley and Teilhard de Chardin are also sources for a contemporary *lectio divina* on the spirituality of the natural world.

As Christians develop a more adequate ecological spirituality, the ecumenical journey involves crossing over into other religious traditions and returning enriched by mutual conversations. Or as John B. Cobb, Jr., the noted process and ecological theologian, has learned from years of dialogue with Buddhists, religious traditions can offer correctives to one another as they mutually seek truth. Buddhist teachings present a non-dualistic worldview in their concepts of nonself, of co-dependent arising and compassion towards all sentient beings; these perspectives lend themselves to an ecological grasp of the evolutionary process. Buddhism also offers valuable contemplative methods, many of which have already been incorporated by western thinkers and practitioners of the

spiritual life. Christianity and Buddhism differ on important theoretical levels. But it is interesting to note how contemplatives from both traditions describe similar experiences when they talk about the outcomes of their meditative processes. The ancient Taoist tradition of China is rooted in respect for nature and knowledge derived from it. In the *Tao Te Ching*, the master not only teaches us the virtues and nonactive action of living in accord with nature, but she also helps us sense the deepest mystery of nature, the unnamable Tao, within ourselves and in the natural world.

Shaping a deeper ecological spirituality for Christians could benefit by studying American Indian attitudes towards nature. Christianity has generally favored time over space, the long sweep of human history as a temporal process over immersion in the sacredness of earthly places. Although the historical-temporal mindset dominates in Christianity, a sense of sacred place is hardly absent from it. In addition to the space-place perspectives of Celtic Christianity, one could argue that the great Christian churches and shrines possess a sense of holy space. Think of the pilgrimages to shrines like Compostela or Lourdes as well as the festivals drawing the faithful to great cathedrals or to landmarks of martyrs. Even though these shrines are human artifacts, they are also natural in the sense of being extensions of human creativity, and they also become a sort of holy ground. One might think this way about Francis's Subiaco or Ignatius's Montserrat. But the Indian perception of place occupies a much broader part of their spirituality. Their myths of origin are powerfully connected to a particular mountain or valley or mesa. Their processes of spiritual transformation, such as the sweat lodge rituals, the vision quest, modes of healing, and counseling participate closely in the concrete rhythms of animate and inanimate nature. The Great Spirit rises up from the center of the kiva, dug into the earth, to energize the tribe.

New Directions in Spirituality

A new Christian ecological spirituality will have to reconsider our relationship to animals. On the whole, Christian theology has been enormously negligent in reference to the animal realm. Our anthropocentric and hierarchical attitudes have relegated animals to inferior species; we treat them in almost totally instrumental ways. In a market capitalist culture, we reduce them to commodities without intelligence or affect or any rights to decent ways of living. Wanton cruelty to animals is still very widespread: the confinement of calves for milk-fed veal, the caging of de-beaked chickens, unnecessary laboratory experiments. An ecological Christian spirituality must be concerned with many ramifications of our treatment of animals. One of these aspects is the question of vegetarianism. Beyond the health dimensions of moving toward a more vegetarian diet, there are very important ethical, eco-

logical and spiritual considerations. Ethics of animal treatment is a very large topic involving issues of needless suffering and animal rights in general. But the ecological and spiritual aspects are less understood. The cattle and meat industries, for example, are involved in the destruction of rain forests to obtain grazing areas, excessive uses of scarce fresh water, and the pollution of soil and water tables with animal waste. Meat consumption is also a hugely inefficient and often unhealthy way to nourish humans. The generalized use of a more vegetarian diet could help to eliminate a number of these ecological problems.

But vegetarianism (respecting a whole spectrum of choices among people from more radical types to more moderate options) can also become a valuable spiritual discipline. It not only heightens our awareness of what we eat and the consequences of food choices. It also helps us appreciate the intrinsic value of animals; in the past Christianity has stressed mainly their instrumental value for humans. We can contemplate how God's presence in animals implies divine concern for them. If animals are part of God's body, the divine suffers in them. In many cultures, animals have been seen as spiritual guides; at the very least Christians would be called upon to reconsider what they mean by "the image of God" to include animals. Christians who choose to consume animals could profit spiritually from prayerfully incorporating an Amerindian attitude of gratitude and respect for the animal who gives its life for us. In New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine there is an annual ceremony of the blessing of the animals in which various species are processed through the church to receive the blessing. While such a service is ecologically sensitive, we might also wonder how we are spiritually blessed by animals. This can be understood by anyone who has had a long relationship with a companion animal.

An ecological spirituality for Christians would also involve new directions for pastoral counseling or spiritual direction. A growing body of literature in eco-psychology focuses on a key theme: technological culture with its mechanistic mentality has separated us from a deep connectedness with the earth and with communities of intimacy. Among the psychological results of this alienation from nature are chronic anxiety, anger, a sense of personal woundedness and of not belonging: a homelessness on earth. Many of our addictions in highly developed technological cultures are the result of not having primary needs met; as a consequence, we substitute secondary sources in addictive ways in an attempt to fulfill more basic needs for connection to the earth and to intimate communities. Another way of stating this problem is that the vast outward damage that we are inflicting on the health of the planet brings with it significant psychospiritual harm for individuals and groups. How much do spiritual directors appreciate the connection between our dis-ease and even rage about our condition

and our separation from the healing earth and from communities that are closer to it? In this regard, Thomas Berry made a very significant comment about our fear of death as related to our dissociation from our earthly roots. In Dylan Thomas' words, we "rage against the dying of the light," not knowing that our rage is largely based on denying our place on and eventually in the earth. Perhaps the earth-consciousness of the paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, led him to pray that he would be able to end well, at peace with his condition in nature. Certainly, the Taoist master understood this when he taught: "Immersed in the wonder of the Tao/ you can deal with whatever life brings you/ and when death comes, you are ready."

ECOLOGICAL ETHICS

The ecological challenge will also call for new reflection on Christian ethics. While there are a few good books in Christian ecological ethics, Churches have not written major documents or encyclicals on the topic. In some ways this lack of documentation may be a blessing. A truly serious Christian ethic on the environment should follow from the experiential living of an ecological spirituality in daily life. Otherwise we will tend to write an abstract set of principles and applications that do not derive from our own deeply felt participation in the natural world. We first need to become porous to the sacred in nature; we need to dwell holistically on earth letting its creatures dictate their needs to us. To be in dialogue with nature in this mode, we will have to listen carefully to the earth's voices, re-personalizing nature as a conversation partner after such a long period of desacralizing and depersonalizing it. The best Christian ethic for nature will be an aesthetic morality that is forged from our own bonding with the sufferings and joys of Gaia. Such an ethic will not be anti-instrumental, as all of nature uses nature in some manner or other. But a new Christian ethic for ecology will not start from a stance of dominating hierarchy, the human over all creatures seen as objects for manipulation and consumption. Rather this ethic will flow from a renewed sense of the co-creativity of God, nature, and humanity. It will be an ethic built on intersubjectivity that acknowledges sameness and difference, but that above all respects the intrinsic worth of the natural world and our essential interconnectedness with it.

Sallie McFague (1993) invites us to shape the foundations of a Christian ethic of nature in part from a reinterpretation of major stories in the New Testament. She points out the deconstructive or destabilizing aspects of Jesus' parables which overturn conventional hierarchies such as the human dominating nature. These dislocating stories make us realize that it is we who have marginalized our fellow creatures in nature for our own greedy purposes. The healing stories associated with Jesus bring forth the reconstructive task toward nature. Healing

here is not only of the human spirit, but of the physical, earthly bodies of the world around us. The many eating stories involving Jesus look ahead to a new kind of conviviality in which all creatures are invited to the banquet, accepting and respecting our differences. Again this is not a spiritualized feast, but one that feeds the legitimate and very real hungers of all creatures. McFague is shifting the focus of liberation theology to undergird an ecological ethic that identifies with the suffering and needy in nature.

These reflections on the present and coming challenge of the ecological era call for a profound reinterpretation of Christian traditions. Such a task will be one of both retrieval and of construction on the levels of theory and practice. Whether the greening of Christianity will go forward depends in large measure on how one judges the reality of ecological crises. Are these exaggerated fads, hyped by the media, or are they the most crucial dilemmas facing the future? The scientific evidence for the seriousness of ecological decline increases year by year. We can ignore it and live in denial, a dysfunctional mental state for which our progeny may curse us. Yet the ministry of Jesus, like the prophets before him, was to awaken people from spiritual blindness and denial. He wanted his hearers to become aware of the signs of their times.

The ecological challenge underlies most of the major world traumas: war, poverty, famine, overpopulation, the destruction of species, and many others. Christianity, in dialogue with other wisdom traditions, can contribute significant spiritual resources for ecological awareness and inspiration. This great mission will require joint efforts from the world's religions. A Laguna Pueblo prayer sums up this breathing together, this conspiracy for our sacred earth:

I add my breath to your breath / That our days may be long on the earth / that the days of our people may be long / that we shall be one person / that we may finish our roads together.

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