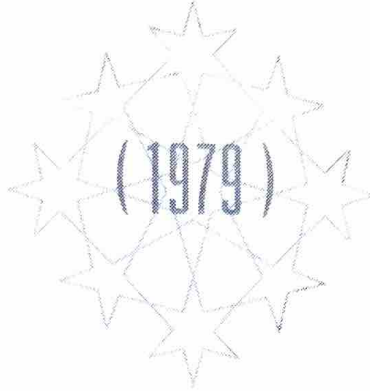


CHAPTER 5

The Spirituality of the Earth



THE SPIRITUALITY of the Earth refers to a quality of the Earth itself, not a human spirituality with special reference to the planet Earth. Earth is the maternal principle out of which we are born and from which we derive all that we are and all that we have. We come into being in and through the Earth. Simply put, we are Earthlings. The Earth is our origin, our nourishment, our educator, our healer, our fulfillment. At its core, even our spirituality is Earth derived. The human and the Earth are totally implicated, each in the other. If there is no spirituality in the Earth, then there is no spirituality in ourselves.

Not to recognize the spirit dimension of the Earth reveals a radical lack of spiritual perception. We see this lack of spiritual insight in the early European Americans' inability to perceive the spiritual qualities of the indigenous American peoples and their mysticism of the land. The opaqueness is in us, not in the Earth, for the Earth expresses an abiding numinous presence. Christianity's failure to recognize the Earth's spiritual qualities constitutes a significant challenge for us. Indeed, Christianity's failure led to aggression against the tribal peoples of this continent and the land itself with a destructiveness beyond calculation.

Clearly, the Earth as spiritual reality has been generally ignored by the religious-spiritual traditions of the modern West. This alienation from the spirituality of the Earth goes so deep that it is beyond our conscious mode of awareness. While there is recognition of the Earth in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and liturgies, the dominant tendency is to see the Earth as a seductive reality that brought about alienation from the divine in the agricultural peoples of the Near East.

A redemptive spirituality that functions without regard for the larger human community or regard for the natural world that supports life is not likely to be effective in our secular world. Such a spirituality uses a rhetoric unavailable for our secular world, or, if it is available, it risks widening rather than closing the tragic inner division between the world of daily affairs and the world of divine communion. It cannot offer an adequate way of interpreting the inner life of the community in a rhetoric available to the community. Nor does it establish an understanding of that authentic experience in contemporary life that is oriented toward communion with creation processes. Indeed, it does not recognize that the context of any authentic spirituality lies in the creation story that governs the total life orientation.

In traditional Christian thought, creation is generally presented as part of the teaching on "God in himself and in relation to his creation." But this metaphysical, biblical, medieval, and theological context for understanding creation is not especially helpful in understanding the creation of the Earth and of the universe, as presented in scientific textbooks of Earth or life sciences as studied by students in elementary, high school, or college.

These textbooks initiate the child into an understanding of the formation and development of the Earth that has more continuity with later adult life in its functional aspect than does the catechetical story of creation taken from biblical sources. This scientific presentation of the formation of the universe in which the children live and find their place is crucial for their future spirituality. In our era, the school fulfills the role of the ancient initiation rituals that introduced children to society and to their human and sacred role in society. The tragedy is that the sacred or spiritual aspects of the initiation process are absent.

The Spirituality of the Earth

The student is told the marvelous story of the physical emergence of the universe, the Earth, and the human, but without reference to the larger *meaning* of this process.

It may be that the later alienation of so many young adults from the redemptive sacramental tradition is, in some degree, due to this inability to communicate to the child a spirituality grounded more deeply in creation dynamics. How different might it be if our religious traditions understood the spiritual significance of experiencing the galactic emergence of the universe, the shaping of Earth, the appearance of life and of human consciousness, and the historical sequence in human development.

In this sequence, the student might learn that Earth has, from its origin, an intrinsic spiritual quality. For too long this spiritual aspect of the creation story has been missing. This spirit dimension of the universe and of the planet Earth needs to be established if we are to have a functional spirituality. The issue is how to give the child an integral world. It is also the spiritual issue for the modern religious personality. Our most immediate task is to establish this new sense of the Earth and the functional role of humans within the Earth community. One might ask: how are we to do this?

To begin, we need to understand that the Earth acts in all that acts upon the Earth. The Earth is acting in us whenever we act. In and through the Earth, spiritual energy is present. This spiritual energy emerges in the total complex of Earth functions as each form of life is integrated with every other life form. Even beyond Earth, by force of gravitation, every particle of the physical world attracts and is attracted to every other particle. This attraction holds the differentiated universe together, enabling it to be a universe of individual realities distinct from, but intimately present to, one another. The universe is not a vast smudge of matter, some jellylike substance extended indefinitely in space. Nor is the universe a collection of unrelated particles. The universe is, rather, a vast multiplicity of individual realities with both qualitative and quantitative differences, all in spiritual-physical communion with one another. Individuals of similar form are bound together in their unity of form. The species are related to one another

by derivation: the later, more complex life forms are derived from earlier, simpler life forms.

The first shaping of the universe was into great galactic systems of fiery energy that constitute the starry heavens. In these celestial furnaces the elements are shaped. Eventually, after some ten billion years, the solar system and Earth were born out of the particles cast out into space by exploded stars. So far as we know, Earth and its living forms constitute a unique planet. On Earth, both plant and animal life were born in the primordial seas some three billion years ago. Plants emerged upon the land some six hundred million years ago, land that the planet Earth shaped through geological upheavals that formed the continents, mountains, valleys, rivers, and streams. The atmosphere developed slowly. The animals came ashore a brief interval later. As these life forms established themselves over some hundreds of millions of years, the luxuriant foliage formed layer after layer of organic matter that was then buried in the crust of the Earth to become fossil formations with enormous amounts of stored energy. One hundred million years ago, flowers appeared, and the full beauty of Earth began to manifest itself. Some sixty million years ago, birds were in the air and mammals walked through the forest. Some of the mammals—whales, porpoises, and dolphins—went back into the sea.

Relatively recently, the diversity in the forms of life expression brought about the human mode of being. These first humans were wandering food gatherers and hunters until some ten thousand years ago, when they then settled into village life. This led through the Neolithic period to the classical civilizations, which flourished for the past five thousand years.

Approximately four hundred years ago, a new stage of scientific development took place, which brought about a human technological dominance of the Earth out of which we had emerged. This can be interpreted as Earth awakening to an intellectual understanding of itself. It has led to Earth taking a certain amount of control of itself in its human mode of being. The story of this scientific understanding of the universe, and the consequent ability to affect the functioning of the planet Earth, is among the most dramatic aspects of the Earth story.

It is difficult to understand or explain the aggressive attitude that then caused or permitted humans to attack the Earth with such savagery as we now witness. That it was done primarily by a Christian-derived society, and even with the belief that this was the truly human and Christian task, makes an adequate explanation especially challenging. Possibly it was the millennial drive toward a total transformation of the earthly condition that led us, resentful that the perfect world was not yet achieved by divine means, to set about the violent subjugating of the Earth by our own powers, in the hope that some higher or less vulnerable life would be attained.

While a more serene life is a positive goal, it must be acknowledged that the negative, even fearful, attitude toward the Earth resulting from the general hardships of life led to the radical disturbance of the entire Earth process. The increasing intensity of exploitation of the Earth was also the result of the rising expectations of Western peoples. Furthermore, the Darwinian principle of natural selection encouraged an attitude that each individual and each species struggles for its own survival at the expense of the others. Out of this strife, supposedly, the glorious achievements of Earth take place. Darwin had only a minimal awareness of the cooperative and mutual dependence of each form of life on the other forms of life. This is remarkable: he himself discovered the great web of life, yet he did not have a full appreciation of the principle of intercommunion.

Much more can be said about the conditions that permitted such a mutually destructive situation to arise between ourselves and Earth, but we must turn to suggest something of the new attitude that needs to be adopted toward Earth. What is needed is a new spiritual, even mystical, communion with Earth, a true aesthetic of Earth, a sensitivity to Earth's needs, a valid economy of Earth. We need a way of designating the Earth-human world in its continuity and identity rather than exclusively by its discontinuity and difference. We especially need to recognize the numinous qualities of Earth.

We might begin with some awareness of what it is to be human, the role of consciousness on Earth, and the place of the human species in the universe. While the traditional Western definition of the human

as a rational animal situates us among the biological species, it inadequately expresses the role we play in the total Earth process. The Chinese, for example, define the human as the *hsin* of Heaven and Earth. The word *hsin* is written as a pictograph of the human heart. It can be translated by a single word or by a phrase that conveys both feeling and understanding. It could be translated by saying that the human is the "understanding heart of Heaven and Earth." Even more briefly, in this context, we can say that the human is "the heart of the universe." Yet another way to translate *hsin* is to say that we are "the consciousness of the universe" or "the psyche of the universe." Here we have a remarkable feeling for the fullest dimensions of the human, the total integration of reality in the human, and the total integration of the human within the reality of things.

We need a spirituality that emerges out of a reality deeper than ourselves, a spirituality that is as deep as the Earth process itself, a spirituality that is born out of the solar system and even out of the heavens beyond the solar system. For it is in the stars that the primordial elements take shape in both their physical and psychic aspects. Out of these elements the solar system and Earth took shape, and out of Earth, ourselves.

There is a triviality in any spiritual discipline that does not experience itself as supported by the spiritual as well as the physical dynamics of the entire cosmic-Earth process. Ultimately, spirituality is a mode of being in which not only the divine and the human commune with each other but through which we discover ourselves in the universe and the universe discovers itself in us. The Sioux Indian Crazy Horse (c. 1840–1877) invoked cosmic forces to support himself in battle. He knew that those forces resided in the depths of his being and he in them. He painted lightning upon his cheek, placed a rock behind his ear, an eagle feather in his hair, and the head of a hawk upon his head. The Sun Dance Ceremony of the Plains tribes of the Lakota and Crow also recognizes the power of these cosmic insignia. The entire universe participates. Dancers wear symbols of the sun, the moon, and the stars, both on their ceremonial dress and painted on their bodies. The world of living, moving things is indicated by the form of the

buffalo cut from rawhide and hung on the centering tree, as well as by the eagle feathers used by the medicine leaders to heal. The plant world is represented by the cottonwood tree, a generative life presence set up in the center of the ceremonial circle. The fullness of spiritual energy in the multiplicity of life itself is represented by the circular form of the dance area. In this manner, the participants commune with those numinous cosmic forces out of which we were born.

This cosmic-Earth order needs to be supplemented by the entire historical order of human development. For example, when the Greeks went into battle, they drew energy from recalling historical events and depicting these on their shields. Virgil (70–19 BCE) devotes several pages to enumerating the past and future historical events wrought on the shield of Aeneas by Vulcan at the command of Venus, the heavenly mother of Aeneas. Homer similarly describes the shield of his hero Achilles.

Today we are in a new position where we can appreciate the historical and the cosmic as a single process. This is the vision of Earth-human development that will provide the sustaining dynamic of the contemporary world. We must nourish awareness of this vision. Our language and imagery need to acknowledge both the physical and psychic dimensions of this organizing force. It needs to be named and spoken of in its integral form. Just as we see the unified functioning of particular organisms, so too Earth itself is governed by a unified principle in and through which the total complex of earthly phenomena takes its shape. When we speak of Earth, we are speaking of a numinous maternal principle out of which all life emerges.

In antiquity, this mode of being or maternal principle of the Earth was often personified. For example, "Earth" designates a deity in Hesiod and in the Homeric hymns. It is expressed as Cybele in the eastern Mediterranean world and as Demeter in the Greek world. An exception is the Hebrew community, which distinguished itself by its monotheism, with a God seen as the creator of all things. Biblical revelation represents a basic antagonism between the transcendent deity, Yahweh, and the fertility religions of the surrounding societies. The basic effort here is to maintain an asymmetry in the relationship

between the divine creator and the created. However, in the doctrine of the Madonna or the Divine Mother enunciated in later Christian history, there are many passages indicating that Mary was thought of as the Earth in which the True Vine is planted and which had been made fruitful by the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, this identity of Mary with the Earth was never adequately developed in association with the doctrine of the Incarnation.

It is entirely possible that the dialectics of history required that the first direct human association with these unique historical individuals, the savior and his mother, had to develop before any adequate feeling for the mystique of the Earth could take place. Perhaps, too, a full development of redemption processes was needed before this new mode of human-Earth communion could find expression in our times. However, it is clear that a shift in attention is now taking place. The most notable single event bringing about this shift is the new and more comprehensive scientific account now available to us of our own birth out of the Earth. This story of the birth of the human mode of being was never known so well as now. After the discovery of the geological stages of Earth's transformation and the discovery of the sequence of life in ancient fossil remains by Louis le Clerc (1707-1788), James Hutton (1726-1797), and Charles Lyell (1797-1875) came Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) discovery of the emergence of all forms of life from primordial life forms. His *On the Origin of Species* (1859) describes the human appearance only out of the physical Earth. The French priest-paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) saw the human emerging out of both the physical and the spiritual dimensions of the Earth.

It is a challenge for contemporary Earth studies to narrate the story of the birth of the human from our Mother the Earth. Once this story is told, it immediately becomes obvious how significant the title Mother Earth really is. Our long motherless period may be coming to a close; hopefully, the long period of our mistreatment of planet Earth is being terminated. If it is not terminated, if we fail to perceive not only our earthly origin but also our continuing dependence on our Earth-mother, then it will be due in no small measure to the redemptive and

transcendentally oriented spiritualities that have governed our own thoughts, attitudes, and actions.

In this mother-child relationship, an essential, fundamental shift has taken place. Until recently, the child was taken care of by the mother. Now, however, the mother must be extensively cared for by the child. The child has grown to become an adult. The Earth-human relationship needs to undergo a renewal similar to that which occurs in the ordinary process of human maturation, where both child and mother experience a period of alienation, followed by a reconciliation period characterized by a new type of intimacy, a new depth of appreciation, and a new mode of interdependence. This period of reconciliation is the historical period in which we are now living. This new mode of Earth-human communion requires a profound spiritual context and a spirituality that is equal to this process.

In addition to a renewed awareness of Earth as mother, a second observation concerning our newly awakening sense of the Earth is that a new phase in the history of the Madonna figure of Western civilization has begun. The association of the Virgin Mother with the Earth may now be a condition to return Mary to a meaningful role. Her presence may also be a condition for overcoming our estrangement from the Earth. Because of our emphasis in the Western world on personhood, it is insufficient to see the Earth itself only as universal mother. It must be identified with a historical person in and through whom Earth functions. Phrases referring to Mary as the Earth are found throughout Western religious literature. These need to be retrieved and explored as a subject of utmost importance for our entire Earth-human venture. The Earth needs embodiment in a historical person, and such a historical person needs an identification with the Earth to fulfill adequately her role as divine mother. The medieval period of Western Christianity deserves special exploration in this regard. Few if any other civilizations were so deeply grounded in a feminine mystique as medieval Europe. A vital contact with this earlier phase of Western civilization is hardly possible without some deep appreciation of its feminine component. Thus we cannot fail to unite in some manner these two realities: Earth and Mary.

A third observation concerning the importance of the feminine or maternal principle is that the emergence of a new age of human culture will necessarily be expressed through the symbol of woman. This is because of the identification of woman with the Earth and its creativity. Woman and Earth, while differentiated, are inseparable. The fate of one is the fate of the other. This association is given in such a variety of cultural developments throughout the world in differing historical periods that it is hardly possible to disassociate them. Earth consciousness and woman consciousness go together. Both play an essential role in the spirituality of the human as well as in the structure of civilizations. An overly masculine mode of being has contributed to our alienation from the Earth, from ourselves, and from a truly creative man-woman relationship; it demands a reciprocal historical period in which not only a balance will be achieved but even, perhaps, a period of feminine emphasis.

A fourth observation is to note our new capacity for subjectivity, for subjective communion with the manifold presences that constitute the universe. In this we are recovering the more primal genius of humankind. For in our earlier years we experienced both the intimacy and the distance of our relation with the Earth and the entire natural world. Above all, we lived in awareness of a spirit world, a world that could be addressed in a reciprocal mood of affectionate concern. Nothing on Earth was a mere "thing." Every being had its own divine, numinous subjectivity, its self, its center, its unique identity. Every being was a presence to every other being. This gave rise to relational worldviews expressed in kinship as well as to Earth-based rituals, epic poetry, and the nature-inspired architecture of past ages.

Confucian thought gave the clearest expression to this intimacy of beings with one another in its splendid concept of *jen*, a word that requires translation according to context by a long list of terms in English: humaneness, love, goodness, human-heartedness, affection. All beings are held together in *jen*, as in the epistle by St. Paul (1 Colossians 1:17) where he notes that "all things are held together in Christ." Another perhaps even better analogy is in Newton's universal law of gravity, whereby each particle of matter attracts and is attracted to

every other particle in the universe. The law of gravity indicates a mere physical force of attraction, whereas the universal law of attraction for the Confucians is a form of feeling identity.

For this reason, in Confucianism, there is the universal law of compassion. As the early Confucian thinker Mencius (372–289 BCE) suggested, this is especially observable in humankind, for every human has a heart “that cannot bear to witness the suffering of others.” When the objection was made to the neo-Confucian Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) that this law of compassion is evident only in human relations, Wang replied by noting that even the frightened cry of the bird, or the crushing of a plant, or the shattering of a tile, or the senseless breaking of a stone immediately and spontaneously caused pain in the human heart. This would not be, he tells us, unless there existed a bond of intimacy and even identity between ourselves and these other beings.

Recovery of this capacity for subjective communion with the Earth is a consequence and a cause of a newly emerging spirituality. Subjective communion with the Earth, identification with the cosmic-Earth-human process, provides the context in which we now make our spiritual journey. This journey is no longer only the journey of Dante (1265–1321) through the heavenly spheres. It is no longer simply the journey of the Christian community through history to the heavenly Jerusalem. It is the journey of primordial matter through its marvelous sequence of transformations, in the stars, in the Earth, in living beings, and in human consciousness. This journey is an ever more complete spiritual-physical intercommunion of the parts with one another, with the whole, and with that numinous presence that has manifested throughout this entire cosmic-Earth-human process.