

ECOLOGY AND JUSTICE SERIES

**THE CHRISTIAN FUTURE  
AND THE FATE OF EARTH**

*By Thomas Berry*

*Edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim*



ORBIS BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berry, Thomas Mary, 1914–2009

The Christian future and the fate of earth / by Thomas Berry ; edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim.

p. cm. — (Ecology and justice series)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-57075-917-8 (pbk)

1. Human ecology—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Ecotheology. I. Tucker, Mary Evelyn. II. Grim, John. III. Title.

BT695.5.B468 2009

261.8'8—dc22

2009008811

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# Women Religious

## *Voices of Earth*

(1994)

In these past two centuries an immense amount of work has been carried on by the various religious congregations of women throughout the world in the areas of education, nursing, social services, the alleviation of poverty, and spiritual guidance. There is no way of expressing the full extent of the work they have accomplished or the influence they have exerted.

Just now, however, women's religious communities—along with every other component of human society—are called to accept a new role, the most difficult role that any of us has been asked to fulfill, that of stopping the devastation that humans, principally those in our commercially driven societies, are inflicting on the planet. Otherwise the natural world will not survive in any integral manner, nor, in this situation will humans or Christians survive in any acceptable mode of fulfillment.

Survival, however, is not sufficient. A new type of community, a much larger Earth community, including all the living and non-living components of the planet, must now be brought into being. This would be a comprehensive community where humans would be present to Earth in a mutually enhancing manner. This has not been a primary human objective since we

attained empirical knowledge of the structure and functioning of the planet.

The tragedy is that the extinction of species, the ruin of the forests, the loss of soils, the pollution of air and water, the thinning of the ozone layer—all these things are coming about through global economic drives shaped by the dominant influence of a Western civilization formed within a biblical-Christian as well as a classical-humanist matrix. The economic rapaciousness is not a trivial fault or a minor error in our thinking and acting. It is among the most devastating things that has happened to the planet since its emergence into being more than four billion years ago. It is the consequence of a profound failure deep in the religious-cultural tradition itself. Certainly it is as decisive a transition moment in the course of human affairs as was the beginning of the Neolithic period some twelve thousand years ago.

The transformation that will be needed is of an order of magnitude greater than any previous transformation of Western civilization, vaster certainly than the transition from the classical to the medieval period, or from the medieval period to the Renaissance, or from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, or from the Enlightenment to our modern world. It is also much greater than any of the transformations that have taken place in other cultural and religious traditions.

Quite simply stated, we are terminating the Cenozoic period of Earth history. This term, “Cenozoic,” refers to the last 65-million-year period when Earth and all its living forms as we know them came into being—the trees and grasses and flowers, the birds and fish and mammals particularly. In this situation every human being is involved, whether in formal religious life or not, whether men or women, from whatever region of the world, and from whatever profession or occupation. All our efforts are needed to bring to its full expression the emerging Ecozoic Era, the coming period when humans will be present to Earth in a mutually enhancing manner.

Humans in this period will regain sensitivities needed for the benign insertion of their activities into the ever-renewing processes

of nature, or else humans will enter into a degraded mode of being. Our only security lies in an integral human relation with the life systems of the planet. Every human activity, every professional role, every religious tradition, must now be judged by the extent to which it inhibits, ignores, or fosters this mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship. We need an Ecozoic economics, an Ecozoic jurisprudence, an Ecozoic education, an Ecozoic medical practice. So, too, our religious and spiritual development lies in the transition from our present Cenozoic religious and spiritual life to life in an Ecozoic context.

What is preventing such a transition is that our present Western life orientation is so totally human-dominated in its values. This perspective is true of our religious lives as well as of our economic lives. It is a perspective in which the purpose of creation is seen as simply for human use, with everything else considered as background. Where did this human-dominated perspective arise? When the biblical world, at the time of the Exodus, began to perceive the divine primarily through the historical human order rather than through the cosmological order, this outlook made it possible for us to neglect the natural world in our emphasis on our meeting with the divine in the events of human life. Whatever the gains in the mode of human consciousness attained at this time, there was a danger in the changes it brought about. This danger of moving into an exaggerated anthropocentrism was vastly increased by Christian integration with the classical-humanist tradition of the Mediterranean world.

These historical developments made possible a single-minded concern for the human to the neglect of Earth so that we would in these later centuries abuse and plunder the life-sustaining functioning of the planet. We were not really concerned that the loss each year of some twenty-five billion tons of topsoil throughout the world would make it increasingly difficult and even impossible to nourish the increasing numbers of humans. Nor were we concerned that, after enabling people to survive, they would have an acceptable world in which to live—a world with the grandeur in its natural forms that would provide the psychic-spiritual as well as the physical needs of humans.

This is because as Christians we have been primarily concerned with divine-human and inter-human affairs in accord with the two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbor. Thus we have fulfilled the precepts of the law and the prophets. However effective this presentation of Christian spiritual teaching might have been in the past, it is no longer sufficiently comprehensive for Christian survival. There is a third component that cannot be neglected, namely, love of the natural world without which the human world cannot function in any effective manner. Earth entire was born of divine love and will survive only through our human and Christian love. Christians are ineffective just now largely because we have not understood the need of compassion for suffering Earth, the compassion expressed by Saint Paul in his reference to the world "groaning for deliverance."

At the present time the protest of the pillage of Earth, compassion for Earth, and commitment to the preservation of Earth are left mainly to secular environmental organizations as though the matter were too peripheral to be of concern to Christians. While recent statements made by Church authorities on environmental issues have been admirable, they have not always displayed the depth of understanding needed. Nor have they yet provided the inspiration required for an effective Christian movement for the survival of Earth in all its living forms of expression. So, too, our Catholic universities have not attained any distinction in the field of ecology. They contain a few courses on environmental thought, but these offer little real understanding, insight, or guidance for effective action. Nor have our religious orders yet shown significant leadership on ecological issues.

### **The Ecozoic Era and Christian Leadership**

What then are the necessary conditions for moving into the Ecozoic era? The first condition is to recognize the human community as integral in its structure and functioning with the larger universe in which we live. There is no human community in

any manner separate from the larger community of all those living and non-living beings surrounding us and on which we totally depend for every breath that we breathe. The created world forms a single community with Earth itself. So intimate is the human with every other being on the planet that we must say that the human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single sacred community or neither will survive in any acceptable manner.

Although life on Earth and the human mode of being may not be in immediate danger of becoming extinct, Earth and all its basic life systems are being severely and irreversibly damaged as the immense diversity of life is diminished. Even now we are living amid the ruined infrastructures of the industrial world and of the natural world itself—with all the physical, aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual implications of life in that condition. These ruins are becoming even more pervasive as the industrial world increases its exploitive control over the planet.

The second condition for effective action in the future is to recognize that planet Earth will never again function in the manner it has functioned in the past. Planet Earth emerged into being in all its grandeur over 4.5 billion years completely apart from any human decision, since *Homo sapiens* arose only some 150,000 years ago. Before the Industrial Revolution of the past few centuries, humans were not capable of damaging the planet to the degree that we are now able to do.

In the future, however, almost nothing will happen without human involvement. We cannot make a blade of grass, but in the future there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless we accept it, protect it, and foster it. In the future these will be the three basic human functions with regard to the natural world: to accept, to protect, and to foster. Through our science and our technologies we have intruded so extensively into the natural world that we cannot simply withdraw from the situation we have created. For example, until recently we did not need to think about the ozone layer. Now we must worry about it and take measures to protect it.

The question then arises concerning the role of Christians and especially the role of women's religious communities in cre-

ating the conditions for the emergence of the Ecozoic era. In answering this question we might reflect on the fact that over the centuries after the decline of the Roman Empire Christian religious communities were among the principal forces in creating an entire civilization, a civilization that we speak of now as the medieval world. It was an enormous effort, and it constituted one of the most creative periods in human history.

We are called to such an effort at the present time. Yet in its magnitude and form our task is far greater. Our destiny is to work with the larger Earth community in shaping an integral planetary process. This is not simply a Christian process or simply a human process, but rather a comprehensive process of planetary renewal in its geological and biological as well as in its anthropological aspects.

### **Voices of Earth**

The task of renewing Earth belongs to Earth, as the renewal of any organism takes place from within. Yet we humans have our own special role, a leading role in the renewal, just as we had the dominant role in the devastation. We can fulfill this role, however, only if we move our basic life orientation from a dominant anthropocentrism to a dominant ecocentrism. In effecting this change we need to listen to the voices of Earth and its multitude of living and non-living modes of expression.

We should be listening to the stars in the heavens and the sun and the moon, to the mountains and the plains, to the forests and rivers and seas that surround us, to the meadows and the flowering grasses, to the songbirds and the insects and to their music especially in the evening and the early hours of the night. We need to experience, to feel, and to see these myriad creatures all caught up in the celebration of life. We especially need to hear the creatures of Earth before it is too late, before their voices are stilled forever through extinctions occurring at such a rapid rate. Once gone they will never be heard again. Extinction is forever. The divine experience they communicate will never again be available to humans. A dimension of the human soul will never

be activated as it might have been. None of the wonders of the human can replace what we are losing. However, to speak of the voices of the natural world is to become suspect to some “religious” people, for the Western religious traditions have developed a suspicion of such attitudes toward nature, devaluing them as simply “pagan” or “animistic” notions. We have lost sight of the fact that these myriad creatures are revelations of the divine and inspirations to our spiritual life.

Our inner spiritual world cannot be activated without experience of the outer world of wonder for the mind, beauty for the imagination, and intimacy for the emotions. If we lived on the moon our minds would be retarded in their development, our imagination would be as empty as the moon; our emotions would be as dull. Our sense of the divine would reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape. Our Christian spiritual life is already being diminished as the basic faculties of the human soul are denied their inspiration from the larger context in which they function. The ultimate reason that we cannot live on the moon or on some other planet such as Mars is that our souls would shrivel into their unfulfilled selves.

Through our contact with the natural world we learn that the universe throughout its vast extent in space and throughout its long sequence of transformations in time is a single multi-form celebratory event. Our role is to enter into this celebration in a special mode of conscious self-awareness, for this celebration is the divine liturgy, the purpose of all existence, a celebration begun in time but continued through eternity.

To save the integrity of this celebration is the first lesson in survival, for this is the context of all the productivity of the planet as well as our primary experience of the divine. If we fail to enter into this celebration, if we seek simply to exploit the myriad creatures about us, then they will fail to produce their fruits and the grand cycle of existence will be diminished. This indeed is already happening.

We, and our children, are becoming autistic in relation to the natural world. We live in a world of computers, cell phones, digital photography, television, highways and automobiles,

supermarkets, and trivial plastic playthings for our children—all fostered by inescapable advertising aimed at stirring our deepest compulsions to buy and consume. Our education is focused on producing skills associated with the production, distribution, and use of such a multitude of objects with none of the exaltation of soul provided by our experience of natural phenomena. We no longer realize that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects—subjects to be communed with as divine manifestation, not objects to be exploited solely for economic gain.

### **The Role of Women Religious Historically and at Present**

If in past centuries women religious have been dedicated to educating, healing, and guiding the human community, the primary role of religious congregations of women at present might well be to preserve Earth from further devastation. This work is a condition for fulfilling any other role. The natural and human imperatives are prior to and a necessary condition for any Christian imperative. We cannot be integral Christians because we are not integral humans. We are not integral humans because we have alienated ourselves from the larger life community.

This reorientation of Christian thought and action from its completely human preoccupations to a concern for the larger sacred community lies in the sequence of changes that began in the seventeenth century when Francis de Sales established the first modern laypersons' spiritual guide with publication of his *Introduction to a Devout Life*. Inspired by his work, Vincent de Paul founded the Daughters of Charity in 1634. Shortly after this a group of six women in Le Puy, France, founded the Sisters of Saint Joseph in 1650 with the assistance of Jean Pierre Medaille, SJ. These initiatives involved monumental changes in the religious role of women in the Church beyond the convent because the Council of Trent in the prior century had defined religious life for women as having to be lived in cloistered enclosure. Further

changes took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the founding of a the long list of women's religious congregations for teaching, care of the poor and afflicted, missionary work, and a multitude of other specialized concerns. In 1809, Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the Sisters of Charity in this country for the education of children and for works of mercy. Katharine Mary Drexel founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for missions to African Americans and Native Americans.

What is clear is that until our own century no religious community has been founded to protect Earth from devastation increasingly inflicted on the natural world through human agency. Such would in former times have been unthinkable. Now, however, there is hardly any religious or human activity that has prior claim to our concern, since everything else becomes irrelevant if the natural world undergoes further devastation. If a women's religious congregation committed to the saving of the natural world was unthinkable in former centuries, it is now unthinkable that any such congregation should not be committed to this task. If the life systems are not saved, then everything else is irrelevant. None of the other purposes whatever can now be fulfilled except in this ecological and Ecozoic context.

A new awakening is indeed occurring in women's religious communities. Much of this development has taken place in an agricultural context, since the first step in human-Earth relations is to associate our presence to Earth in its life-giving wonders. In 1980 Sister Miriam Thérèse MacGillis, of the Dominican Order, a leader in this movement, founded Genesis Farm in the Delaware River watershed in Blairstown, New Jersey, as an Earth-literacy center. It has brought forth a community-supported agricultural project and has initiated and supported other regional projects in many aspects of sustainability. Sister Miriam Thérèse MacGillis has also developed an accredited academic program exploring the universe story and its implications for human meaning and social transformation.

A long list of other religious women could be mentioned in this context. Sister Paula Gonzalez in Cincinnati has shown how we can diminish our dependence on fossil fuels by a more pro-

found understanding of the sun and how it can heat our buildings as well as inspire us spiritually. Sister Mary Ann Garisto, a Sister of Charity of New York, has established an impressive agricultural project upriver from the city. It connects people and neighborhoods from the city with food cultivated on the farm. Sister Rita Wieken has done similar work on the Franciscan lands in Tiffin, Ohio. On the motherhouse lands of the Dominican sisters of Amityville, New York, a project initiated by Sister Jean Clark is spreading Earth-literacy in communities on Long Island. Sister Virginia Pearl, a Sister of Saint Joseph, is working with Heartland Farm outside Salina, Kansas. Sister Chris Loughlin has established an Earth-literacy center called Crystal Springs south of Boston. Then there is the new venture in Vermont to found a monastery for women led by Gail Worcelo and Bernadette Bostwick. Named Green Mountain Monastery, it is dedicated to protecting and preserving Earth by modeling ways of supporting a new pattern of human presence to the planet. Of special note is a remarkable project initiated by Dominican sister Patricia Siemen who, with the support of her order, has created a Center for Earth Jurisprudence jointly sponsored by the law schools of St. Thomas University and Barry University in Miami, Florida.

In addition there are the extensive properties owned by religious communities, properties that are still in a relatively undisturbed state, where wildlife is often abundant, where human predation is limited, where the primordial impress of the divine can still be felt, and where a sense of the sacred is available. Preservation of such lands is one of the great urgencies of the moment. Religious orders have been so absorbed in the salvation processes of the human that they have had little time for recognition of the profound need of the human soul for contact with natural processes. Now, however, we might recognize that these regions where wildflowers grow and where birds nest have become infinitely valuable as places more needed than ever by the human spirit. Such regions might be thought of as shrines where the pristine impress of the divine can still be experienced. To lose these lands to development would be an irreparable spiritual loss.

The appeal of this larger dimension of Christian concern for Earth has led to a remarkable movement, namely, the founding of an association called “Sisters of Earth” made up of both nuns and laywomen. The group has been meeting every two years for the past ten years. This network of women from diverse religious communities and beyond is a significant venture, both for the movement of general concern for the natural world and for the religious life within its Christian context. All of these women have discovered the larger dimension of the universe and Earth as the context for their work and their spiritual practice. Many of the activities of these women are described in the book by Sarah Taylor titled *Green Sisters*, published by Harvard University Press.

### **The Primacy of Human-Earth Relations**

To propose that human-Earth relations have a claim on our attention prior to divine-human or inter-human relations is simply to assert that our experience of the universe is prior to our experience of ourselves or of the divine. As Saint Paul mentions in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, from the things that are made we come to know the Maker. These three—divine, natural, human—are so integrally connected with each other that none can function effectively without the others. Yet, because of an over-balance in favor of divine-human and inter-human relations, the sense of the integrity of the divine, the natural, and the human has been neglected for centuries by Christians.

In the past Christians have been concerned with internal religious conflicts over problems of salvation, biblical interpretation, theological explanation, sacramental administration, and ministerial functioning on the one hand, and concern for human well-being on the other. These concerns and the pervasive ambivalence of Christians toward the natural world, especially since the sixteenth century, have produced insensitivity to natural life systems. Even Saint Thomas thought that the natural world was for the glory of God and the use of humans. It had no

rights in itself. A persistent effort in Christian spirituality has been to distance ourselves from the natural world, to become detached from rather than committed to our surroundings. There are exceptions to this, as when the natural world did come into focus through such individuals as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and Francis of Assisi (1181–1226).

After the sixteenth century, especially after modern science—with its abandonment of a personal creative deity as origin and ruler of the universe—began to develop, Western Christians became further alienated from the world of natural phenomena. When science began teaching that humans had originated from within the processes of the natural world, this view led to a negative reaction and further Christian emphasis on the human as a spiritual being in a non-spiritual natural world.

Now this opposition between Christianity and science is largely in the past. We know at this time that the universe story and the human story constitute a single story. There is no human without the universe, no universe without the human. Devastation of the outer world is simultaneously devastation of the inner world. To be isolated from the phenomenal order of the natural world is to be alienated from the deeper dimensions of our own being.

The responsibility is universal, and goes beyond ethnic or gender or occupational identity, beyond clerical or non-clerical status in the Church. Yet each of these has its own special role. So, too, there is a special role for women in this situation, a role that has come to take on increasing importance. The eco-feminist movement joins some of the most powerful movements of our times in effecting the transition from a non-viable to a viable mode of existence for the planetary community, namely, the transition from the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic era in Earth history. It is a matter of following the guidance that nature gives to herself in ordering the affairs of the planet.

It might well be that women are attuned to the voices of Earth in a way especially needed as we move into a future less dominated by the plundering processes of the industrial

nations. Women may help us recover our reverence for natural manifestations of the divine in the world around us. The time has come when the single greatest service that women religious can make to the larger destinies of the human, the Christian, and the Earth community is the recovery of our human and Christian intimacy with all those wonderful participants in the universe of being.

Acceptance of such intimacy with the Earth community is a condition for transcending the mechanistic life attitude that dominates the modern world. It is also a condition for entering into the poetry of existence, for composing music, for creating the visual arts. In all these areas the inner form of things is experienced in and through their physical reality. This inner form is the voice listened for and heard when we become present to Earth in some significant manner. Only if Earth is perceived as precious, only if there is a profound intimacy with the inner self, the inner spontaneities of nature, will we have the will or the psychic energy to bring about the difficult transformation in human life required of us. We are nourished by the natural world both physically and spiritually. We cannot have the physical without the spiritual.

For the foreseeable future, this unity of humans with their environment will almost certainly be a primary context for inspiring the various activities of women's religious communities. Whether their work is teaching or healing or community building or fostering movements for social justice, or educating, or more direct spiritual or religious activity, none of these will any longer succeed apart from the larger context of the natural world. This larger world is the only integral community of existence. It is the only effective context for physical survival, for healing, for religious ritual or spiritual development. Religion itself is awakened in the human soul by our experience of the awesome qualities of the immense universe about us, its overwhelming grandeur, its terrifying as well as its entrancing qualities. As the grandeur of the natural world declines, the primordial manifestation of the divine is progressively diminished.

## The Universe Story

All of this must find its expression in the story of the universe. Indeed, the various civilizations of the world are generally founded in some story indicating how things came into being in the beginning, how they came to be as they are, and role of the human in the story. This story of the universe is eventually the context of education, of healing, and of any other activity in which humans engage.

This story is the story that the universe tells of itself. It is the story told by every being in the universe, by the stars in the heavens, by the mountains and rivers of Earth, by every wind that blows, by every snowflake that falls, by every leaf in the forest. To know this story of the universe as our sacred story is to have an adequate foundation for the task before us. This story tells us who we are and how we came to be here and what our lives are all about.

For the Christian it tells us of the Trinity in the three most basic tendencies of the universe: differentiation, interiority, and universal bonding. These deepest tendencies of the universe, which manifest the ultimate divine forces that brought the world into being, can provide us with a profound way of thinking about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, too, the universe story can be told as the Christ story in accord with the teaching of so many Church Fathers as well as theologians and spiritual teachers over the centuries.

Thus the voices that resound throughout the universe are ultimately the divine voice resounding in the immense variety of its modes of expression. Precisely in this immense differentiation of natural phenomena lies, in the phrase of Saint Thomas, "the perfection of the universe." In this perfection the divine order of existence finds its most complete manifestation. At the end of his *Divine Comedy* Dante tells us that in his vision of divine reality he saw "all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume." Such is the origin and end of all our human or Christian or religious communities.