

# Worldly Wonder

Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase

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With a Commentary by  
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*Followed by a Response, Discussion,  
and Epilogue*

The Second Master Hsüan Hua  
Memorial Lecture



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## **The Transformative Context: Reclaiming and Reconstructing**

The challenge, then, for religions (and for scholars of religions) is how to participate in this transformative moment by reclaiming and reconstructing religious traditions so as to promote flourishing human-Earth relations. This will involve the careful retrieval of selected scriptures and commentaries, symbols and myths, rituals and prayers. It will also require the re-evaluation of particular beliefs and practices in light of the environmental crisis. Finally, it will necessitate the reconstruction of traditions in their fuller planetary expression.

This section will explore several key topics in this process of retrieving, re-evaluating, and reconstructing traditions, namely dogma, rituals and symbols, moral authority, soteriology, and ethics. Within these topics we will highlight some of the creative tensions that are involved in such reconstructive processes. These creative tensions are intended to be viewed as dyadic and interpenetrating relationships rather than as irreconcilable dualisms. In other words, our aim is to see such tensions as interrelated forces, not as clashing opposites. In the space between such creative tensions there can emerge the deeply motivating spiritual resources of the religious traditions toward grounded transformative action.

### 1 DOGMA: ORTHODOXY VERSUS DIALOGUE

As teachers of doctrinal truth or dogma, some individuals or institutions in particular traditions assume self-appointed roles as repositories of orthodoxy. These individuals or institutions tend to be conservative in that they wish to preserve particular versions of "truth," which they sometimes claim as special revelation through scripture. Consequently, religious traditions can promote triumphalism and exclusivity that may lead to proselytizing and even to violence. The counterpoint is that religions are constantly being brought into dialogue with contemporary issues and ideas, and thus they continue to change. Furthermore, as noted earlier, religions throughout their history have frequently been in active conversation with other religious traditions and been transformed in response to this dialogue. Indeed, the changes may be in the form of syncretism and fusion of religions, as is frequently the case in East Asia and South Asia. The major counterweight to rigid orthodoxy or exclusivist claims to truth is ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues.

During the last forty years, significant steps have been taken in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues. The Christian churches have held important ecumenical meetings to discuss differences of doctrine. Moreover, significant inter-religious discussions have taken place between Christians and Jews, Christians and Buddhists, and Christians and Confucians. With

regard, then, to ecological issues, the ground for further inter-religious discussion has already been prepared. There is thus great potential for focusing inter-religious dialogue on the urgency of the environmental crisis. With several decades of preparation, the religions may be poised to move beyond dogmatism to a shared sense of the common good of the planet. This may result in a renewal for the religious traditions themselves through a restoration of the planet.

Examples of such cooperation include international multi-religious projects such as the Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE) based at Harvard; the Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC) based in England; and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), also based in England. Within nations, important long-term efforts include the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) in the United States and the Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation (ZIRRCON). Also, major international conferences involving the world's religious leaders and laity have focused on the environment. Among them are the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders in Oxford in 1988, in Moscow in 1990, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, in Kyoto in 1993; the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1993 and in Capetown in 1999; and the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the United Nations in 2001.

## 2 RITUALS AND SYMBOLS: TRADITIONAL OR TRANSFORMATIVE

Religions are also inheritors of cultural traditions and as such they may become ritually constrained or fossilized in forms of worship. Ritual and prayer can become rote or remote while symbols and images may no longer convey the depth of meaning they originally embodied. As a result, rituals and symbols are reduced to flattened forms of reference. The connection to the living biological context in which they are embedded may need renewal or reactivation. For religious rituals and symbols to be vibrant, they need to be connected to the living world, even if they point beyond it. A deep numinous mystery resides in this connection and when rituals and symbols are disconnected from this reality they cannot activate a resonance with the ineffable power that sustains life. Hence, they become withered and attenuated.

The historian of religion, Mircea Eliade reminded us of this when he illuminated the implicit layering of references from the natural world underlying Christian rituals and symbols.<sup>29</sup> Central to Christianity is the reflection on birth, death, and rebirth that is present in the natural world. The liturgical cycle is set entirely within the larger rhythms of nature's seasons. Christmas is situated at the winter solstice with the return of light; Easter is celebrated at the spring equinox and the renewal of life. The sacraments, too, draw on the rich bounty of the natural world. The

Eucharist uses bread and wine associated with harvest, thanksgiving, and life-regenerating processes. Baptism uses water to welcome an individual into a community of faith. In monastic life the cycle of daily prayers is coordinated with the diurnal turning of the planet around the sun.

A contemporary example of opening traditional forms of ritual and symbol into their ecological phase is the *Missa Gaia* or Earth Mass with the music of Paul Winter. This moves the Christian Mass into its planetary expression. The Earth Mass has been celebrated for the last two decades in October on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Many local parishes across the country have been inspired to hold similar rituals. Returning to recapture the spirit of Francis with regard to the animals and the inspiration of medieval cathedrals in fostering community, St. John's opens its great entry doors for the procession of the animals down the main aisle and the blessing of the animals in the context of the Earth Mass.

Other examples of contemporary ecological rituals can also be identified from among the world's religions. These include the Hindu ritual of tree planting as likened to a *prasad* offering in South India, the Theravada Buddhist monk's ordaining of trees in Thailand so as to stop loggers from clear-cutting the forest, Shona and Christian tree planting in Zimbabwe to counteract deforestation after the civil war, the Jewish practice of observing Shabbat to allow time for

rest and rejuvenation of individuals and communities, and the Jain respect for life so that meat or fish are not eaten.<sup>30</sup>

Dialogue between religion and ecology can revivify rituals and symbols in light of the current environmental crisis. Moreover, it can assist in awakening a renewed appreciation for the intricate cosmological web of life in which we dwell.

### 3 MORAL AUTHORITY: OPPRESSIVE OR LIBERATING

As conservators of moral authority, religious traditions can become institutionally rigid citadels of power. The misuse of power by religions has been documented throughout history. It is all too familiar and need not be elaborated here. The authoritarian aspects of religion are often what make people flee its influence. Institutional moral authority, however, can be oppressive or liberating according to how it is invoked. Religions can be cradles of conformity or vessels of creativity. They can be suppressors of change or beacons of transformation.

The narrowness of religions can also be seen in the fact that most of them have been gender biased, some have been militantly ethnocentric, and others have been racially prejudiced. In the twentieth century, liberation movements for human rights have helped to overcome some of these constraints. Indeed, the religious traditions themselves have often provided leadership

for these movements, recognizing the inherent dignity of the individual and the right to equitable employment, decent housing, and adequate education.

Discussions of human rights have broadened to include a sense not only of individuals but also of communities, both of the human and the more-than-human worlds. For example, feminist studies have expanded their focus to identify the degradation of women and the Earth as part of a continuity of the devaluation of matter. By the same token, these ecofeminist studies have suggested that attention to women's concerns and to the nurturing of the Earth need to be seen as part of a larger social transformation of consciousness, without essentializing women by identifying them exclusively with the Earth. Recent ecofeminist thinking in the world religions has helped to expand environmental discourse and pluralize its perspectives by foregrounding women of various ethnic and racial backgrounds.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, by seeing environmental racism as morally problematic, religions have helped to expand the focus for human rights to include the right to a clean and healthy environment. This has involved identifying previously invisible arenas of racial prejudice and environmental injustice where minority communities have been viewed as dispensable and have been used as dumping grounds for waste, incineration, and pollution. Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities in the United States and African communities abroad have been particular

victims of these callous attitudes whereby the excesses of industrial society have been deposited in their communities. Religious leadership has helped to uncover these problems and called for their rectification. The United Church of Christ statement on environmental justice is particularly important in this regard.

While much remains to be done, it can be said that Christian churches in the twentieth century have embraced teachings regarding social justice and human rights and brought them out of the words of encyclicals, pastoral letters, and policy statements and into the world with calls for racial and economic equity. (Gender equity still seems to lag behind, however.) For example, in the Jubilee 2000 movement, Christian churches urged the World Bank and major lending institutions to consider debt reduction for poor nations.<sup>32</sup> Religions have the potential for similar transformative leadership in the area of ecology, justice, and the future of life forms on the planet.<sup>33</sup>

No other group of institutions can wield the particular moral authority of the religions, notwithstanding the abuses this authority has also been subject to. Thus the efficacy of religions in encouraging individuals and communities to protect the environment is considerable in potentiality and demonstrable in actuality. Indeed, many scientists have recognized this. They have called upon the religious traditions to provide a compelling moral force for drawing citizens into a larger sense of concern for

the reality of environmental degradation. The scientists note the potential of religions for highlighting the awe and wonder of nature and the need to preserve it for present and future generations of all species. Examples of this appear in key documents such as "Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion," released in 1990; "The Joint Appeal in Religion and Science: Statement by Religious Leaders at the Summit on Environment," published in 1991; "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity," issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists in 1992 (See Appendices I, II, and III). More recently, in the United States the Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) and the National Council of Churches have conducted campaigns on climate change. This has highlighted the moral authority of Jewish and Protestant leaders in relation to this massive global problem. Similarly, the "Common Declaration by Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I" has had wide circulation. (See Appendix V)<sup>34</sup>

#### 4 SOTERIOLOGY: WORLDLY OR OTHERWORLDLY?

In discussing the positive and negative dimensions of religions with regard to environmental issues it is sometimes observed that religions can tend toward an otherworldly soteriology. In other words, they have a salvific orientation that privileges the divine as residing

in the transcendent world of Heaven, Nirvana, Moksha, or the Pure Land. This encourages concentration on personal salvation or liberation out of this world and into the next. The critical question arises: How, then, can religions be attentive to this world and to the environment? When the transcendent becomes primary, what happens to the sense of the divine or the immanent reality in nature? It should be noted, however, that indigenous traditions stand in stark contrast to this otherworldly orientation in their participation in natural cosmological processes.

It is undeniable that an otherworldly orientation and a focus on personal salvation in some of the world's religions can create a tendency to see this world as simply a vale of tears to be endured and ultimately transcended. The sometimes exclusive focus on an individual's relationship with God or the divine can diminish the sense of the importance of the Earth. Worship, prayer, and meditation are often directed at purifying the soul, praising God, or getting rid of ego in order to advance toward the goal of personal salvation. The consequence of this orientation toward the next world and personal salvation is the tendency in some religions to devalue nature and deny the importance or even the reality of matter. Redemption out of the world as fallen and liberation into a Heavenly realm is seen as a primary aim. This dualism that divides matter from spirit and privileges spirit as the highest good has created ambivalent attitudes toward nature in a number of the world's religions.<sup>35</sup>

That many religious traditions have elements of an other-worldly orientation is not necessarily an exclusive or defining concern. Religions can, in fact, embrace both world-affirming and world-negating dimensions. In Christianity, for example, the idea of the Kingdom of God may be used to establish criteria for justice on Earth or for entry into a paradisaical world beyond. Similarly, in Mahayana Buddhism, the Pure Land is seen as a salvific next world, while the Tathagatagarbha doctrine affirms the Buddha Nature as present in the natural world. In Daoism, achieving immortality may be a long-term goal, but practices are encouraged that induce health in this life such as balanced diet, meditation and breathing, and movement exercises like *tai qi* and *qi gong*. These exercises place the practitioner in alignment with nature through drawing on the elements and on the varied movements of animals, insects, and birds.

Thus, it is helpful to recognize that there may be fruitful and creative tensions between the transcendent and immanent dimensions of the world's religions. In other words, the pull toward wholeness, completion, and fulfillment represented by the transcendent longings of the human can be balanced by a sense of reverence, reciprocity, and care for the fecundity of life that reflects the presence of the divine in this world. The here and hereafter can be seen in a creative dialectic of intimacy and distance, of commitment to change in the world along with detachment from the fruits of one's actions.<sup>36</sup> In Christianity, for example,

the broadening of certain theological or sacramental perspectives may enhance an appreciation of the beauty and sacrality of this world without diminishing the sense of a larger reality beyond this world. Through a renewed sense of the incarnational dimensions of Christianity, there may emerge a more encompassing Christology that embraces the Cosmic Christ of the universe.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, a richer sacramental theology may be articulated which recognizes all of nature as part of a sacred reality. The work of Matthew Fox and others to identify a Creation-Centered Spirituality in the Christian tradition have been an important contribution to these efforts.<sup>38</sup>

##### 5 ETHICS: ANTHROPOCENTRIC OR ANTHROPOCOSMIC

The focus of ethics in the world's religions has been largely human-centered. Humane treatment of humans is often seen not only as an end in itself but also as a means to eternal reward. While some have criticized this anthropocentric perspective of world religions as rather narrow in light of environmental degradation and the loss of species, it is nonetheless important to recall that this perspective has also helped to promote major movements for social justice and human rights.

While social justice is an ongoing and unfinished effort of engagement, the challenge for the religions is also to enlarge their ethical concerns to include the more than human world. Social justice and

environmental integrity are now being seen as part of a continuum. For some decades environmental philosophers have been developing the field of environmental ethics that can now provide enormous resources for the world's religions in considering how to expand their ethical focus. Emerging biocentric, zoocentric, and ecocentric ethics are attentive to life forms, animal species, and ecosystems within a planetary context. A new "systems ethics" of part and whole, local and global, will assist the religions in articulating a more comprehensive form of environmental ethics from within their traditions. This is a major part of the development of religions into their ecological phase.

Thus religions can move from exclusively anthropocentric ethics to ecocentric ethics and even to anthropocosmic ethics. The latter is a term used by Tu Weiming to describe the vibrant interaction of Heaven, Earth, and humans in a Confucian worldview.<sup>39</sup> In this context, humans complete the natural and cosmic world by becoming participants in the dynamic transformative life processes. This idea can extend ethics to apply to the land-species-human-planet-universe continuum.

As Tu Weiming observes for the Confucian tradition:

Human beings are . . . an integral part of the 'chain of being', encompassing Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. However, the uniqueness of being human is the

intrinsic capacity of the mind to 'embody' (*ti*) the cosmos in its conscience and consciousness. Through this embodying, the mind realizes its own sensitivity, manifests true humanity and assists in the cosmic transformation of Heaven and Earth.<sup>40</sup>

This cosmic transformation implies that humans have a special role in being aligned with the fecund, nourishing powers of life. They need to be responsive to other humans but also to the larger macrocosm of the universe in which humans are a microcosm. This is clearly expressed by the Neo-Confucian thinker Zhang Zai in his renowned essay "The Western Inscription" which hung on the western wall of his study:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.

All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

. . . Respect the aged . . . Show affection toward the orphaned and the weak . . . the sage identifies his virtue with that of Heaven and Earth . . . Even those who are tired and infirm, crippled or sick, those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to.

. . . one who puts his moral nature into practice and brings his physical existence to complete fulfillment can match [Heaven and Earth] . . . and one who penetrates



spirit to the highest degree will skillfully carry out their will.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Comprehensive Context: Restoration of Wonder**

If our optimal role as humans is to be creative participants within cosmological processes, how can the world's religions foster that role? The religions have been challenged over the last several centuries by major revolutions in the understanding of the role of humans in relation to science, politics, economics, and society. Some may see the ecological revolution as just another step in these significant movements in human history and consciousness. However, we might observe that this is more than simply a slight shift of perspective. It is rather a major transformation that involves both effort and evocation. It requires a comprehensive re-visioning of what it is to be human on a finite planet amidst infinite immensities. We have the possibility to envision ourselves now not only as political, economic, or social beings, but also as planetary beings embedded in and dependent on nature's seasons, cycles, and resources. Although urban living and modernity have removed many humans from this direct experience, it has not lessened our capacity for biophilia, as E.O. Wilson suggests, or for a deep sense of renewal and wonder in contact with nature's rhythms. Through science we understand that we are cosmological beings within a vast evolutionary

universe and now have a responsibility, in some way, for the integrity and stability of these life processes.

Religions have historically served as a means of channeling the hopes and aspirations of humans toward a larger vision of their place and purpose. Now religions are challenged to provide a more comprehensive narrative perspective for situating human life in relation to our finite planet. The renewing energies that ground and dynamize the human spirit must be brought forward. For millennia, these energies have provided the spiritual orientations of the world's civilizations and cultures. Religions have traditionally been a means of expanding the measure of the mind through the power of the religious imagination; now is the moment for the religions to move forward boldly with comprehensive narrative perspectives that are grounded in relevant traditional resources, open to a sense of wonder, and guided by inspiring moral visions for shaping human-Earth relations for a sustainable future.

In this spirit, the religions of the world are moving into their ecological phase and finding their planetary expression. This is their fundamental challenge in relation to the environmental crisis. Can the religious traditions awaken a renewed sense of awe and reverence for the Earth as a numinous matrix of mystery? Can they activate the depths of resonance in the human that will resound with the awesome beauty of the universe? Can they open a space for our participation in the life processes that is healing

and renewing for human-Earth relations? Can they raise key ethical questions regarding the destruction of the environment, and at the same time provide resources of inspiration that will sustain the energies needed to preserve, protect, and restore the environment? Can the religious traditions speak effectively to the contemporary world while challenging the limits of modernity as well?

These are their challenges and indeed all of our challenges as we begin to take on our cosmological being, to dwell in intimate immensities. We are cracking open the shell of our anthropocentric selves and our particular religious traditions to move toward more expansive religious sensibilities that embrace both Earth and universe. New configurations of tradition and modernity will emerge, and with them will come retrieval of texts, reconstruction of theologies, renewal of symbols and rituals, re-evaluation of ethics, and, most importantly, a revived sense of wonder and celebration.

Central to this great transformation of the religions into their ecological phase is the reawakening in the human of a sense of awe and wonder regarding the beauty, complexity, and mystery of life itself. Rachel Carson highlighted this many years ago in her reflections on *A Sense of Wonder*.<sup>42</sup> In his book, *The Tangled Wing*, the anthropologist and neurologist, Melvin Konner, calls for this recovery of wonder:

It seems to me we are losing the sense of wonder, the hallmark of our species and the central feature of the human spirit. Perhaps this is due to the depredations of science and technology against the arts and humanities, but I doubt it—although this is certainly something to be concerned about. I suspect it is simply that the human spirit is insufficiently developed at this moment in evolution, much like the wing of *Archaeopteryx*. Whether we can free it for further development will depend, in part, on the full reinstatement of the sense of wonder.<sup>43</sup>

Will the world's religions assist in the further development of the human spirit as they have throughout their long, unfolding journey to the present? If religions are vessels for nurturing the sense of the sacred, surely they will continue to respond to the sacred that is manifest in the wonder of life and in its continuity. If indigenous traditions have sustained human-Earth relations for some 150,000 years, surely their traditional environmental knowledge and sense of awe in the presence of nature will continue to contribute to the future of the Earth community. If the human mind and spirit has created compelling and coherent visions to inspire the flourishing of civilizations for the last five thousand years, surely that same rich and diverse religious imagination will continue to activate the energies and commitments needed to sustain life on the planet. These are our collective tasks; these are our particular challenges.

Those energies and commitments will depend in large part on the measure and magnitude of the awe and wonder we evoke. And let us remember it is not only awe and wonder but also dread and terror that awakens the human imagination and lies at the heart of the burning bush. That which is numinous attracts us and repels us, as Rudolph Otto reminds us.<sup>44</sup>

Nature is filled with awesome mystery, with beauty and death inextricably intertwined. Will the fire consume us or transform us? Will it ignite worldly wonder?