

from The Christian Future and
the Fate of the Earth

by Thomas Berry

edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker
and John Grim

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and the Fate of Earth**

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The Christian future, in my view, will depend above all on the ability of Christians to assume their responsibility for the fate of Earth. The present disruption of all the basic life systems of Earth has come about within a culture that emerged from a biblical-Christian matrix. It did not arise out of the Buddhist world or the Hindu or Chinese or Japanese worlds or the Islamic world. It emerged from within our Western Christian-derived civilization. If these other civilizations were not ideal in their presence to the natural world, if they intruded extensively into the functioning of the planet, their intrusion, in its nature and in its order of magnitude, nowhere approaches the disturbance brought about by our modern Western disruption of the planetary process.

Although our Western industrial civilization was itself a deviation from Christian ideals, it came originally from within a Christian context. In its historical expression it could not have arisen out of any other tradition. We might conclude then that the Christian tradition is susceptible to being transformed in this direction. Until we accept the fact that our central beliefs carry with them a vulnerable aspect we will never overcome our present failure to deal with the increasing disruption of the planet.

If the planet fails then we fail, not only as Christians but even as humans.

That the planet is failing is evident from the meeting of biologists in September 1986 sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences and the Smithsonian Institution. At that meeting Norman Myers, the renowned Oxford biologist, stated that we are bringing about what may well be the greatest diminution in the variety and abundance of life on earth since the first flickerings of life almost four billion years ago. Harvard's E. O. Wilson indicated that we are probably losing some ten thousand species each year. Paul Ehrlich, the Stanford biologist, suggested that we may be bringing about through our industrial processes conditions similar to that of a nuclear winter. Later the following spring Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden, gave an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled "We're Killing Our World."

Whole volumes of such quotations from the best of our scientists could easily be assembled to indicate what is happening to the planet. Endless statistics could also be gathered to give evidence of the overwhelming destruction that is taking place. We need only read the annual report of the Worldwatch Institute, entitled the *State of the World*, or the biennial report of the World Resources Institute to fix the details in our minds. If we were totally realistic in training our youth for what is ahead of them, we would do so under the title: "Living Amid the Ruins"—amid the ruined infrastructures of the industrial world and amid the ruins of the natural world itself.

That Christians are ill-adapted to deal with these issues is clear from their general lack of concern for what is happening. Christians are somewhere off in the distance as, indeed, are most of the professions and institutions of our society. Probably in this country there is more understanding of the problem and there are more effective efforts at its solution outside the churches than within the churches.

I do not say that nothing is being done. There are a multitude of Christian environmental and ecological projects in this country and throughout the world. There is especially the

Au Sable Institute in Michigan, founded by Calvin DeWitt. There is the Web of Creation website on Christianity and ecology. There is the work being done by the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York. Matthew Fox has for many years been guiding a program in creation-centered spirituality, a program that recalls with special emphasis those Christian traditions that experienced the divine in its cosmological manifestations. There are the efforts of those working toward an ecological balance through the ideals of an eleventh commandment. Genesis Farm is one of the foremost centers in the eastern section of the North American continent in guiding us toward an intimate human presence to the natural world. These are only a few of the Christian-sponsored projects that are functioning at the present time. My impression is that a new awakening is taking place within the Christian communities of this continent.

It is to foster these efforts and to make them more effective that I present these reflections. My first thought is that we not try to go it alone. The initial impulse of many Christians, it seems, is to go it alone, especially with those Christians most devoted to their religious heritage. There is the satisfying sense of bringing forth an ecology movement immediately derivative from their biblical-Christian heritage. This is important. It needs to be done.

Yet we have an even greater need to establish our identity with the more comprehensive ecology movements that are already far advanced in their understanding and efficacy, much further advanced than any of the movements that so far have emerged from a specifically Christian context. The ecology movement exists in its own right. It has inherently religious dimensions. It does not need biblical verification or consecration. Such piety, however valid, tends to alienate those whose rhetoric is different from the Christian rhetoric, and yet who feel the sacred dimension of Earth in the depths of its reality. Even when they make no reference to this sacred dimension and find it unsatisfactory to try to explain it, even then in doing the work itself they are fulfilling a sacred task. Their dedication has proven it. While some Christians were neglecting this task,

others saw it and devoted an enormous amount of energy and talent to protecting the life systems of the planet. It is upon their foundations that we must proceed in the practical dimensions of our work.

That these other movements have a religious feeling about their work is often experienced as something of a threat to those Christians who are highly sensitive to what is sometimes considered naturalism, paganism, or even pantheism. When this attitude appears, the Christian presence is experienced by many ecologists as something alien or intrusive. In this situation the movement is divided. Its efficacy is diminished.

This difficulty could be mitigated if we were to recall that in earlier Christian ages the tradition considered that there were two revelatory sources, one the manifestation of the divine in the natural world and the other the manifestation of the divine in the biblical world. These needed to be interpreted in and through each other. In this context, to save Earth is an essential part of saving the pristine divine presence.

In the sixteenth century after the invention of printing, when written Bibles were more available, Christian emphasis became concentrated on the written text. The doctrine of the *two* books—the Book of Nature and the Book of the Bible—was diminished. The Book of Nature disappeared except for a few instances, such as in the work of the English naturalist John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Creation*, published in 1691. But even in instances like these we must feel that something is missing in the experience. Christians have been hesitant to enter profoundly into the inner reality of the created world in terms of affective intimacy. We do not hear the voices of the natural world. We tend to be autistic in relation to the non-human beings. We seldom appreciate natural reality in itself, a universe that unfolds from within its own powers, since divine reality does not make a world of automatons but a world of realities with real powers, even the powers of self-creativity. This is a dependent self-creativity that is further infolded in a divine presence that is, as Saint Augustine tells us, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.

This hesitancy of Christians can be associated with the biblical experience of the divine as transcendent to all phenomenal existence, as personal, as creator of all that is, and as having established covenant relations with a chosen people. These are the teachings indicated in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis and further emphasized in the first of the commandments given to Moses. In this context a sense of Earth and the pull toward an intimacy with Earth does not come easily for Christians; the more intense the Christian commitment, the more difficult such a sense, such a pull, is. The covenant itself, because of its juridic reference, has posed problems from the beginning, as we can see in the prophetic critique from Isaiah to Micah.

To this difficulty we must add the difficulties consequent on the emphasis given to redemption from a flawed world. Christianity is primarily a redemptive experience of salvation from the seductive forces within ourselves and those that surround us in the sensuous qualities of the natural world. This attitude creates an immense psychological barrier to our Christian intimacy with Earth. We are here, as it were, on trial, to live amid the things of this world but in thorough detachment from them. We long for our true home in some heavenly region. We long to pass over the river Jordan to that other world. That we truly belong to this world is difficult for us.

That the ultimate sacred community could be the universe itself is even more difficult, although such a proposal might be based on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Colossians where we are told that in Christ all things hold together and that we look forward to the time when God will be "all in all." As a further consideration we might note the great emphasis we place on the spiritual soul of the human, a soul created immediately by God, a soul that establishes the human in some manner above or outside the rest of creation. Every earthly reality is given over into our care. Thus we bear a responsibility for the community of creatures, since these glorify God in their own way. Yet there is an ambivalence in the relationship of humans with the natural world since the natural world exists also for the benefit of the human community.

Apart from the primary intention of the scriptures, the practice of Western Christians has been to consider that every earthly reality is subject to the free disposition of humans insofar as we are able to assert this dominion. We do not feel responsible precisely to the world about us since the natural world has no inherent rights; we are responsible only to the creator and to ourselves, not to abuse anything. But this leaves us in an alienated situation. We become an intrusion or an addendum to the natural world. Only in this detached situation could we have felt so free to intrude upon the forces of the natural world even when we had not the slightest idea of the long-range consequences of what we were doing.

Another observation concerning the difficulty of Christians in relating to Earth on any intimate basis has to do with the millennial vision of John in the Book of Revelation, a vision that promises a thousand years of intra-historical bliss toward the end of the world. The Great Dragon will be chained up. Christians will experience peace and justice and abundance and will no longer be subject to those basic life difficulties that we identify as the human condition. This promise of bliss in a transformed earthly context produces a radical dissatisfaction within the historical process, since every achieved form of fulfillment is insignificant in comparison with the promised preternatural fulfillment.

A final difficulty in our concern for the natural world is the prophetic message of care for the afflicted. Our finest achievement in the human order undoubtedly is our sense of the pathos of the human in both our individual and our social lives. Our ever more demanding social concerns, due to massive inequities and crippling poverty, may be one of the most difficult of the obstacles we need to overcome in establishing a more lasting human presence on Earth. To resolve this tension is one of the great challenges. It is now being called eco-justice, where social and ecological concerns are seen as deeply intertwined.

In overcoming these special ways in which Christians seem to be inherently distanced from Earth an ever-increasing emphasis has been given to the doctrine of stewardship.

According to this teaching based on the early chapters of Genesis, to us has been confided dominion over the earth and all its living creatures, "dominion" here interpreted as "care." While this teaching has its own attractive qualities and needs to be taught and practiced, we might ask if it fully resolves the tensions that we have here indicated. It does not seem to provide us with the feeling qualities needed to alter the destruction presently taking place throughout the planet. The doctrine of stewardship may be too extrinsic a mode of relating. It strengthens our sense of human dominance. It does not establish any intimate presence of ourselves to the world about us. Earth and ourselves: we remain separate and extrinsic to each other. Stewardship does not recognize that nature has a prior stewardship over us as surely as we have a stewardship over nature, however different the implications of these modes of stewardship. It does not enable us to overcome our autism at its deepest level. If we hear the voices of the natural world, these are not the fraternal voices heard by Saint Francis of Assisi but the voices of subservience.

Somehow there seems to be an affected quality in our efforts to establish an intimate presence to the natural world. In reality the story of the universe is our personal story, however we think of the universe. The reason for Christian aversion to the story of an emergent universe is that the story has generally been told simply as a random physical process when in reality it needs to be told as a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material process from the beginning. In my view, the first step in achieving any adequate human or Christian activity in saving the planet from further irreversible dissolution is to recognize that the universe story, the Earth story, the life story, and the human story—all are a single story. Even though the story can be told in a diversity of ways, its continuity is indisputable.

We need only reflect on the fact that any diminishment of the splendor of Earth is a diminishment of the human in its most sublime functioning. As Saint Paul tells us in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, the invisible divine reality is known from the visible things that are made. We have a glorious sense

of the divine because we live in such a magnificent world. If we lived in a less resplendent world, our sense of the divine would itself be diminished. As we lose our experience of the songbirds, our experience of the butterflies, the flowers in the fields, the trees and woodlands, the streams that pour over the land and the fish that swim in their waters; as we lose our experience of these things our imagination suffers in proportion, as do our feelings and even our intelligence. If we lived on the moon, our sense of the divine would reflect the lunar landscape, our imagination would be as empty as the moon, our sensitivities as dull, our intelligence as limited.

Not even the scriptures could replace what we would have lost, nor could the incarnation itself or redemption or the prophetic teachings concerning care for the afflicted. Our rootedness in Earth is itself a condition for any of these things taking place. None of it has any adequate meaning apart from the basic structures and functioning of all those glorious and nourishing forms that surround us, all those stupendous natural experiences that we have in the dawn and sunset, in the seasonal sequence, in the rainstorms of summer and the blizzards of winter.

We are so integral with the world about us that we might consider the universe itself as the larger dimension of our own being. We, in turn, enable the universe to reflect on and celebrate itself and its numinous origin in a special mode of conscious self-awareness. The universe has what might be considered a human dimension from the beginning. Even in modern cosmology, when considering the place and role of the human in the universe some of our best physicists have evolved what is known as the anthropic principle. According to this principle the universe must, from its beginning, have had tendencies that would eventually lead to the emergence of the human. The integrity of the human with the natural world might be accepted regardless of how a person views the question of the beginning, whether in accord with historical developmental processes or through such sequences as are indicated in the Mediterranean stories of creation.

In 1988 one of the most profound statements of concern for Earth from within a Christian institutional context was the pastoral letter of the Philippine bishops entitled "What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land." After describing the devastation being inflicted on the land, this pastoral letter tells the Philippine people: "At this point in the history of our country it is crucial that people motivated by religious faith develop a deep appreciation for the fragility of our islands' life systems and take steps to defend the Earth. It is a matter of life and death." [See their statement in 2008 also.]

Seen in its larger context, the urgency of the work to be done here in our own country and throughout the world requires a coherent effort of the human community across all the boundaries of nationality, ethnic derivation, cultural formation, and religious commitment. A comprehensive expression of this task and the means of its fulfillment are contained in the Charter for Nature, passed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1982. There, a clear recognition was given to the dependence of all human affairs on the larger context of the natural world:

Mankind is a part of nature and life depends on the uninterrupted functioning of natural systems which ensure the supply of energy and nutrients. Civilization is rooted in nature, which has shaped human culture and influenced all artistic and scientific achievement, and living in harmony with nature gives man the best opportunities for the development of his creativity, and for rest and recreation... Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and, to accord other organisms such recognition, man must be guided by a moral code of action.

This charter also calls for every person in the world to assist in fulfilling the directives of this charter.

It was estimated a few years ago that there are in this country some twelve thousand organizations, movements, and

publications devoted to defending the environment from further destruction. My own feeling is that this number has considerably increased in more recent years. Indeed, it might be said that the most significant division among humans at the present time is based neither on nationality, ethnic origin, social class, or even religious commitment, but is rather the division between those dedicated to exploitation of Earth in a deleterious manner and those dedicated to preservation of Earth in all its natural splendor. This difference might be phrased somewhat differently by using the terms "anthropocentric" and "biocentric" as the basic referent as regards reality and value.

Religion undoubtedly would already be deeper into such issues except for the pressing social issues and the pathos of the human in contemporary urban society. But now the loss of topsoil, the poisoning of the air and water, the threat of the weakening ozone layer, the increasing greenhouse effect on our climate, the extinction of so many species of plants and animals, the elimination of forest lands, the spoiling of our beaches—all these things are drawing us ever more deeply into issues that we have never dealt with previously, issues that must be resolved in some effective manner if our Christian social programs are to have any lasting efficacy.

Morally we have a well-developed response to suicide, homicide, and genocide. But now we find ourselves confronted with biocide, the killing of the life systems themselves, and geocide, the killing of the planet Earth in its basic structures and functioning. These are deeds of much greater evil than anything that we have known until the present, but deeds for which we have no ethical or moral principles of judgment.

The changes we are bringing about in their nature and in their order of magnitude are the most significant changes that have taken place since the modern human came into existence some sixty thousand years ago. These are not simply cultural changes, such as the change from the classical Roman period to the medieval Christian period or the change from the medieval to the Renaissance period. The changes presently taking place are changes in the chemical constitution of the planet, in its geo-

logical structure and in its biological systems. We are eliminating life forms that took hundreds of millions, even billions of years to bring into existence. The tropical rainforests took sixty million years to come into existence. They are possibly the most beautiful life expression on Earth or even in the universe. Yet we are wiping out these rainforests at the rate of fifty acres every minute of every day. A simple doctrine of stewardship does not seem adequate in dealing with such massive issues. More profound developments in our sense of relatedness to the natural world are demanded.

In conclusion, I propose that new religious sensitivities need to be developed. In former times if such a situation had existed, a new religion might have arisen. But the time is over; apparently, when a religion like any of the classical religions could come into being. What is needed now is not exactly a new religion but new religious sensitivities in relation to planet Earth that would arise in all our religious traditions. The model for these new sensitivities might well be the sensitivities that can be observed in the earlier, more primordial religions, sensitivities that can still be found among some of the tribal peoples of the world.

While these traditions are sometimes considered primitive nature religions possessing none of the grandeur or authenticity of the Christian religion with its transcendent monotheistic personal deity/creator of a world clearly distinct from himself, still they contain insights into the basic relations of humans to the natural world that we are desperately in need of just now and that we cannot articulate within the context of our own resources. The most needed of these insights is the realization that humans form a single community with all the other living beings that exist upon the earth.

In accord with the teachings of Saint Paul and Saint John we might perceive that there is a Christ dimension to this more extensive community of Earth and that what we do to this community we do in some manner to Christ himself. It is difficult to believe that God created such a beautiful world if it were not also the divine intention to redeem, sanctify, and bestow eternal blessing upon it throughout eternity.