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# ECO-CHRISTOLOGY: Living in Creation as the Body of Christ

**E**cology is the study of the relationships between living organisms and their interactions with their natural or developed environment. The root *eco* comes from the Greek word *oikos* which means house. Ecology is the study of nature's household. All creatures live within some kind of ecosystem and relate or influence each other and their environment by their behavior. The scientific study of biological systems in the early twentieth century led to the discovery of open systems and the continual flux of matter and energy from the environment. The interrelatedness of the earth exists within a larger interrelatedness in the cosmos marked by a dynamic process of evolution. Evolution is a movement from simple to more complex life forms; at critical points in the evolutionary process, qualitative differences emerge.

We humans live on a small planet in a mid-size galaxy occupied by many different planets. Our universe, as we know it today, is about 13.7 billion years old, with a future of billions of years before us. According to the Big Bang model, the universe developed from an extremely dense and hot state. Space itself has been subsequently expanding, carrying galaxies (and all other matter) with it; the universe is dynamic. Created out of stardust, algae and other natural ancestors, we humans are evolution come to consciousness. Knowing the universe story helps us human beings identify and orient ourselves in relation to the earth. Thomas Berry called this wider environmental identity and passion the "Great Work" of awakening or turning to the earth with an active presence of relatedness. E.O. Wilson spoke of a deep ecological identification between human persons and earth, an emotional need for deep and intimate association with nature. Humans are part of the earth community and both humans and earth are manifestations of the emergent universe story; nature is critical to human meaning and fulfillment.

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The word “ecology” became popular in the 1960s when we began to recognize that we live on a planet of finite resources. Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* helped launch the environmental movement, as she described the toxic environmental impact of pesticides on the fundamental inter-relatedness of life. The word “crisis” began to be linked to the environment. A crisis is a rapidly deteriorating situation that, if left unattended, will lead to disaster in the near future. Today we can identify three main areas of crises: an overstressed planet, excess energy consumption and global warming. Scientists indicate that changes in global climactic systems and collapsing global biological diversity pose fundamental threats to the very future of human society. Natural resources are diminishing; global warming is causing species loss, increased flooding and hurricanes; energy sources are diminishing and the earth’s capacity for a sustainable future looks bleak. In a world where forty percent of the people live on less than two dollars per day and social development is stalling or backsliding, environmental disruption looms ominously (Warner 2003, 55).

In 1990, a group of distinguished scientists, including the late Carl Sagan and physicist Freeman Dyson, wrote a letter appealing to the world’s spiritual leaders to join the scientific community in protecting and conserving an endangered global ecosystem. They wrote that we are close to committing “crimes against creation.” We are on the brink of humanitarian and ecological catastrophes, and the risks they pose are not arrayed equitably. If global warming continues deaths from global warming will double in just 25 years to 300,000 people per year. Global sea levels could rise by more than 20 feet with the loss of shelf ice in Greenland and Antarctica, devastating coastal areas worldwide. Heat waves will be more frequent and more intense. Droughts and wildfires will occur more often. By 2050 the Arctic Ocean could be ice free in summer and more than one million species worldwide could be driven to extinction. How did we arrive at this point of ecological crisis?

In his controversial article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” historian Lynn White said that the source of our environmental problems is religious in nature. Christianity, he claimed, with its emphasis on human salvation and dominion over nature, made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. White pointed to Genesis 1:28 where God gave Adam dominion over creatures. This call to dominion set humans apart from the earth and gave rise to an unhealthy anthropocentrism whereby all but humans became excluded from grace. Christianity developed an ambivalent attitude toward creation, extolling the fecundity of creation on one hand and striving to transcend creation on the other. The influence of Neoplatonism on Christianity contributed to an attitude of other-worldliness. Neoplatonism was a hierarchical way of viewing God and the world and continued into the Middle Ages through the writings of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, among others. The Neoplatonic ladder of ascent was a movement away from earth, rising above natural, sensible things as if they were inferior and in some sense, not truly real (Kinsella 2002, 66). Neoplatonists turned quickly from the material world and its individual creatures to scale the metaphysical ladder to the spiritual and divine realms by means of universal concepts.



The orientation toward other-worldliness became more pronounced after the Reformation. Pointed toward heaven and away from earth, Christians became preoccupied with sin and guilt and focused on personal salvation. The earth became a stage or background to the human story and not part of God's plan for salvation. White argued that no religion had been more anthropocentric than Christianity and none more rigid in excluding all but humans from divine grace and in denying any moral obligation to lower species. We will continue to have an ecological crisis, White said, until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence except to serve us.

White's thesis strikes to the core. He claims that the roots of our ecological troubles are largely religious and the remedy must be religious as well. Is the ecological crisis essentially a religious crisis? If so, should we expect that neither political, economic nor socio-cultural changes will produce a sustainable future without a vibrant religious core at the heart of ecology? That is, is there no other way to reverse the downward slope of environmental changes without a fundamental change in our religious being and orientation?

#### A FRANCISCAN VIEW OF CREATION

The role of religion in relation to ecology may not seem like an obvious one but religion, like ecology, is about relatedness. The word "religion" comes from the Latin *ligare* which means to connect; it is also the root of the word "ligament." To whom or to what are we connected? Although this question calls for a more comprehensive explanation than what can be provided here, still it is worthwhile recalling the function of religion, particularly Christianity, up to the late Middle Ages, before the rise of modern science. Essentially religion served to integrate and connect the human person to God, neighbor and creation. Although Neoplatonism shaped Christianity into a world-transcending religion, the central doctrine of incarnation—Word made flesh—kept it grounded in creation. Whereas some spiritual writers like

Benedict and Augustine emphasized the risen Christ, others like Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola stressed the humanity of Christ, disclosing the immanence of God and the sacredness of creation.

White highlights the biocentrism of Francis of Assisi and not without reason. Francis had a powerful experience of God while praying before an icon of the crucified Christ. This experience opened him up to the reality of God's presence in the human person and in nature. Once revolted by the sight of lepers, Francis came to experience the sweetness of God in the kiss of the leper. Revelation was not an abstract idea for him but the movement of God to the poverty and humility of creaturely life. Growing in love with a God of outpouring love, Francis was led into solidarity with all creation as brother. Through his love of Christ crucified he came to see that nothing exists autonomously and independently; rather all things are related to each other because everything is created through the divine Word. All creation spoke to Francis of God and thus creation became the place for him to encounter God. To use a modern analogy, creation was God's "facebook." In beautiful things, Bonaventure wrote, Francis saw divine Beauty itself and from each and every thing he climbed up to embrace his Beloved.

The Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus formulated several important ideas that illuminate Francis's experience of God in nature. The first idea is that God and creation are not two different orders of being (divine and created); rather God and creation belong to the same order of being without confusion of natures, since God is divine, uncreated being and nature is finite, contingent being. God, however, does not exist outside the relational ordering of being, as if only the effects were ordered and the cause lay outside the relationship. Rather, the essential order of being is a unified whole, including God. Every aspect of creation is part of this unified whole revealing the rationality, freedom and creativity of God (Ingham 2002, 39-42). Each created thing in its own way tells us something about God, and God's being shines from within created being.



The second idea is related to the first. God is love and the reason for all divine activity is grounded in the infinite love of God. The Trinity is a communion of love out of which the gift of creation flows freely. In light of modern science, we can say the divine love that spilled over into evolving life was the Word incarnate long before Jesus of Nazareth appeared in history. Creation exudes the love of God.

While Scotus did not deny the reality of sin, he did not believe that sin is the reason for the Incarnation. Christ did not come because of sin but because God is love. From all eternity God wanted to express Godself outwardly in a creature who would be a masterpiece and love God perfectly in return. Christ is first in God's intention to love and hence to create. Whether or not sin ever existed Christ would have come, ordained out of the fullness of God's love; the whole creation is made for Christ. The intrinsic connection between the mystery of creation and the mystery of Incarnation, revealed in Jesus Christ, imparts meaning not only to humanity but to the entire universe. This doctrine of the primacy of Christ relates to Scotus's third insight on individuation.

Since love is the reason for Christ, everything is created out of divine love and expresses divine love by its own unique being. The doctrine of creation and the doctrine of incarnation are not two separate events but one and the same act of God's self-giving love. Scotus's doctrine of individuation (*haecceitas*) refers to that positive dimension of every concrete and contingent being which identifies it and makes it worthy of attention. Individuation sets things off from other things like it to which it might be compared. This doctrine was influential on the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. What Hopkins grasped,

through Scotus, is that every aspect of creation—a grain of sand, a shooting star, a maple leaf—by being/doing itself, directly and immediately does God, who is incarnate, Christ. In this respect, the smallest things of creation for example, a leaf or a grain of sand, become charged with divine meaning (Short 1995, 30). Such a view of nature leads to a poetry in which things are not specific symbols, but all mean one and the same thing: the beauty of Christ in whom they are created. Hopkins' indwelling Christ is captured in his poem *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;. . .  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.  
I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps graces: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Scotus's theology of creation is one in which grace and nature intertwine. Nothing in creation is accidental or excessive; nothing is worthless or trivial. Each and every thing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is of infinite value because it images God in its own unique being. We humans are called to observe closely, attentively and carefully the details of biological diversity and the many forms of life on our planet.

Things are God-like in their specificity which is why regular, daily attention to the wider world of creatures/nature is fundamental. The world is charged with the grandeur of God and we are called to see deeply into the reality of things. Without such attention we lose contact with Christ in his most widely extended body of creation.

#### TEILHARD DE CHARDIN AND CHRISTOGENESIS

It is not surprising that the Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was attracted to Scotus's doctrine of the primacy of Christ. When he discovered his teaching through the Sicilian Franciscan, Father Allegra, he claimed "Voilà! La théologie de l'avenir!" (There is the theology of the future!). Teilhard de Chardin, like Scotus, not only perceived Christ at the heart of the universe but at the heart of the material universe. As he exclaimed in his book, *The Divine Milieu*, through the Incarnation "there is nothing here that is profane for those who know how to see" (Teilhard de Chardin 1960, 66). By this he meant that Christ physically and literally fills the universe. He is immersed in space and the unfolding of time of our human existence. Teilhard de Chardin, like Scotus, saw an intrinsic relation between Christ and the physical universe; Christ belongs to the very structure of the cosmos and comes to explicit expression in the person of Jesus. He understood the science of evolution as the explanation for the physical world and viewed Christian life within the context of evolution. Evolution, he claimed, is ultimately a progression toward consciousness; the material world contains within it a dynamism toward spirit. From the beginning, life prefers increased life. The process of evolution is a spiritualization of matter and the evolution of mind. Teilhard de Chardin did not view mind apart from matter; mind is the withinness of matter from the beginning of evolution. The human person is integrally part of evolution in that we rise from the process, but in reflecting on the process we stand apart from it. Following Julian Huxley, Teilhard de Chardin wrote that the human person "is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself" (Teilhard de Chardin 1959, 221).

Although Teilhard's embrace of evolution proved difficult for the Church, he realized that without accepting evolution as the precondition for all knowledge, theology would become sterile, an abstract discourse on speculative ideas. Teilhard de Chardin saw the problem with Christianity as one of increasing irrelevance. We do not live in a fixed framework upon which we simply project the image of Christ to admire or worship. Christ is not an intrusion into an otherwise evolutionary universe, nor is belief in Jesus Christ a therapeutic remedy for sin. Rather, Christ is the core of evolution itself.

Regarding Christianity's looming irrelevance, Teilhard de Chardin's basic complaint rested on an outmoded Christology formulated many centuries ago: "Our Christology is still expressed in exactly the same terms as those which three centuries ago, could satisfy men whose outlook on the cosmos it is now physically impossible for us to accept. . . . What we now have to do without delay is to modify the position occupied by the central core of Christianity—and this precisely in order that it may not lose its illuminative value" (Teilhard de Chardin 1971, 76–77). Thus he sought to integrate Christianity and

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evolution in order to show that Christianity is a religion of evolution. The unfolding universe is the coming of Christ—not from without but from within.

Teilhard de Chardin did not think that evolution is a blind or random process but one with direction, oriented toward Christ Omega. He recognized that there is a unifying influence in the whole evolutionary process, a centrating factor that holds the entire process together and moves it forward toward greater complexity and unity. The process of evolution from the view of the physical sciences may be one of cosmogenesis and biogenesis, but from the point of view of Christian faith it is “Christogenesis,” a “coming-to-be” of Christ. His faith led him to posit Christ as the “centrating principle,” the “pleroma” and “Omega point,” where the individual and collective adventure of humanity finds its end and fulfillment. Through his penetrating view of the universe, he found Christ present in the entire cosmos, from the least particle of matter to the convergent human community.

The whole cosmos is incarnational. Like Scotus, he believed the world is like a crystal lamp illumined from within by the light of Christ. For those who can see, Christ shines in this diaphanous universe, through the cosmos and in matter. Christ invests himself organically with all of creation, immersing himself in things, in the heart of matter and thus unifying the world (Teilhard de Chardin 1959, 293–294). Everything is physically “christified,” gathered up by the incarnate Word as nourishment that assimilates, transforms, and divinizes. The body of Christ—Word incarnate—is the whole evolutionary sweep of cosmic history recapitulated in the person of Jesus and sacramentalized in the eucharistic bread and wine. Teilhard wrote that “the effect of the priestly act extends beyond the consecrated host to the cosmos itself. . . the entire realm of matter is slowly but irresistibly affected by this great consecration” (Teilhard de Chardin 1961). Christ's transforming activity must move from the church's altar to the altar of the material universe.

Teilhard de Chardin's Christogenic universe invites us to broaden our understanding of Christ, not to abandon what we profess or proclaim in word and practice, but to allow these beliefs to open us up to a world of evolution of which we are vital members. He urged Christians to participate in the process of Christogenesis, to risk, get involved, aim toward union with others, for the entire creation is waiting to give birth to God's promise—the fullness of love (Romans 8:19–20). We are not only to recognize evolution but make it continue in ourselves. The evolution of Christ's body continues in us. Teilhard de Chardin opposed a static Christianity that isolates its followers instead of merging them with the mass, imposing on them a burden of observances and obligations and causing them to lose interest in the common task. The role of the Christian, he claimed, is to “christify” the world through actions, by immersing ourselves in the world, plunging our hands into the soil of the earth and touching the roots of life. Before, he said, the Christian thought that s/he could attain God only by abandoning everything. Because of evolution, however, we now discover that we cannot be saved except through the universe and as a continuation of the universe. We must make our way to heaven *through* earth. What we have to do, he said, “is not simply to forward a human task but bring Christ to

completion . . . to cultivate the world. The world is still being created and it is Christ who is reaching his fulfillment through it” (Teilhard de Chardin 1971, 49). We are to harness the energies of love for the forward movement of evolution toward Christ Omega.

## THE CHALLENGE OF TECHNOLOGY

Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary Christianity has not yet taken root as a way of life. In thought and practice, we still cling to a medieval cosmos and medieval theology. Our religious attention continues to be focused away from earth toward another place we call heaven. We do not yet have a sense of belonging to the earth. Religion no longer serves a centrating function as it did in the Middle Ages, in part because Christianity has yet to embrace modern science, especially evolution as the basis of all reality. We do not have a seamless narrative to guide our lives; rather we have a *mélange* of scientific, cultural and religious stories. The lack of a religious centrating principle has caused us to be inward focused and other-worldly centered. We have no real vision of the inherent goodness of creation and its sacramental character.

Additionally, technology is creating a new extended self in cyberspace that is spawning a postbiological consciousness. Cell phones, ipods, tvs, dvds, all turn our attention away from the earth towards artificial mediums that promise to quickly satisfy our deepest wants and desires. We are more comfortable with machines than with people, finding ourselves related not by flesh but by digital information. Born and bred in a postmodern milieu, modern technology has reshaped our daily existence in ways that can make it difficult to experience the grace of God in our lives. We are becoming cybergnostics—mind over matter, software rather than hardware. The identification of nature with technology leaves the natural world stripped of its sacred character. Our attention to virtual other-worldliness, including avatars and second lives, has produced a nature deficit in some people and undergirds a strong anti-incarnational bias in our culture. From an ecological perspective, the body of Christ continues to be crucified.

## ARE WE AT HOME IN THE COSMOS?

Christian responsibility for the natural world demands that we think of the earth, and the entire cosmos for that matter, as our *home*. Teilhard de Chardin spent long periods of time in the deserts of China and Africa as he explored the origins of humankind. Only if we spend time with nature will we be impelled to act on behalf of nature. But this type of penetrating vision requires time to deepen. A technological mindset does not comprehend that the “dead time” of which modern technology tries to rid us is often the arena of grace. Kathleen Norris observed that “it always seems that just when daily life seems most unbearable . . . [it is then] that what had seemed ‘dead time’ was actually a period of gestation” (Norris 1998, 10). In our feverish obsession to fill our lives with more things that give us what we want, instantly, without effort or engagement, do we cut ourselves off from the graced dimension of ordinary life?

Feeling at home in creation involves attentiveness to ordinary things as mediations of grace and occasions of divine blessings. We need focal practices, communal gatherings and cyber fasts that disengage us from artificial environments and direct us to the goodness and beauty of creation. Francis of Assisi spent long periods praying in solitary places, developing inner soul space and interior freedom that enabled him to relate to all creatures as a brother. Our current age promises immediacy and expediency in artificial environments, cut off from the natural world. How can we slow down, discover our essential relatedness, be patient and compassionate towards all living creatures and realize that it is a shared planet with finite resources? We must strive to unite—in all aspects of our lives—with one another and with the creatures of the earth. Such union calls us out of isolated existences into community, to be attentive to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, to recognize the face of Christ in our midst.

Teilhard de Chardin said that God evolves the universe and brings it to its completion through the instrumentality of human beings. We go forward, however, not by finding God in the world but seeing God *through* creation, a “diaphany” of God shining through the transparent world. Thus it is important how we awaken to a new consciousness of Christ’s universal presence in our own lives, which is discovered in one’s own self-realization and full maturity in “being-with-Christ.” To be fully human, Teilhard de Chardin wrote, we must get away from what is “merely human” and return to the wilderness. He calls us to leave the cities and find the unexplored wilderness by returning to matter, to find ourselves where the soul is most deep and where matter is most dense; to feel the *plenitude* of our powers of action and adoration effortlessly ordered within our deepest selves (Teilhard de Chardin 1960, 115).

Centuries before Teilhard de Chardin, the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure wrote, “you exist more truly where you love than where you merely live, since you are transformed into the likeness of whatever you love, through the power of this love itself” (Hayes 1999, 140). Both the Franciscan and the Jesuit realized that love is the source and goal of the universe. We are to love so as to evolve into greater wholeness, to deepen our humanity by uniting with one another and with earth’s creatures. In Teilhard de Chardin’s view, love alone can evolve this cosmos toward the fullness of Christ. However, if we fail to perceive our human vocation to build the earth—to adore the living Christ—then we will bear its revolt, as Bonaventure wrote:

Therefore any person who is not illumined by such great splendor in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outcries is deaf. Anyone who is not led by such effects to give praise to God is mute. Anyone who does not turn to the First Principle as a result of such signs is a fool. Therefore open your eyes; alert your spiritual ears; unlock your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love, adore, magnify, and honor your God, lest the entire world rise up against you (Bonaventure 2002, 61).

## RECOMMENDED READING

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