An Earthy Christology

'For God so loved the cosmos'
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When the noted U.S. naturalist John Muir came across a dead bear in Yosemite, he wrote in his journal a biting criticism of religious people who make no room in heaven for such noble creatures: “Not content with taking all of earth, they also claim the celestial country as the only ones who possess the kinds of souls for which that imponderable empire was planned.” To the contrary, he believed, God’s “charity is broad enough for bears.”

Few in Muir’s day agreed. The rise of ecological awareness in our day, however, provides a pressing context for new reflection on this question. Does the creative love of God embrace bears, the salmon and berries they eat, the rivers where they fish and their hibernation dens with compassion for their mortality and the promise of redemption? If not, then ruining their habitat and driving them toward extinction has little religious significance. But if so, then the value of their lives and of all of nature should become explicit in the church’s teaching and practice.

Without ignoring the human dilemma, recent theology is broadening its attention to include the natural world from which human beings emerged, in which they live embedded and for which they are responsible. This wider scope puts theology back in tune with major themes of biblical, patristic and medieval theology, allowing it to play melodies about the cosmos that have not been heard for centuries. To date, the lion’s share of attention has rightly focused on the doctrine of creation. Since God created the world, judging it to be “very good” (Gn 1:31), nature is more than a mere backdrop for the human drama of sin and redemption, more than simply an instrument to supply human needs. It is God’s beloved handiwork, indwelt by the Spirit of life, with an intrinsic value all its own. This faith perspective flows into an ethic of care that honors the integrity of creation at every scale. When, after discussing Scripture and doctrine, Pope John Paul II wrote in 1990 that “respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends to the rest of creation,” it signaled a new chapter in the link between faith in God and ecological ethics.

What about Jesus Christ? Christian belief pivots around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, cherished as Emmanuel, God with us; therefore insight from this quarter would be vital. At first glance Christology’s ecological relevance seems secondary, if not remote. Traditional Western emphasis on Christ’s coming to save us from sin puts the focus almost exclusively on human beings. The approach of contemporary Christology, such as Karl Rahner’s work shaped by transcendental analysis of the human subject, and of liberation theologies based on Jesus’ option for the poor, also tends to relegate the natural world to a zone of disinterest. Asking the ecological question reveals that Christology is not exhausted but holds yet further potential to galvanize faith that includes the earth. Consider three central elements: the ministry of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the doctrine of incarnation.

An Earthy Ministry

As depicted in the Synoptic Gospels, the ministry of Jesus centered on the reign of God, that indefinable symbol pointing to the moment when the divine will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Given the Creator's inclusive love in a suffering world, this means nothing less than salvation, the flourishing of all creation. Jesus announced in word and enacted in deed the imminent approach of this reign. In parable and beatitude his teaching limned its saving effects, including a reversal of who is first and who last in the kingdom of heaven. In healings, exorcisms and table companionship so inclusive that it gave scandal, his deeds provided a joyous foretaste of what salvation would entail. In the end, his death by state execution was the price he paid for fidelity to this public ministry. The women and men who had accompanied him around Galilee and up to Jerusalem became the surprised witnesses of his new presence by the resurrecting power of the God of life. Filled with the Spirit, they and all disciples since then are called to follow the Way, working for the reign of God wherever life is throttled and gagged amid the changing circumstances of history.

Ecological awareness brings to light how very earthy the ministry of Jesus was. For one subsequently interpreted as a spiritual Savior, it is remarkable how his healing practices placed people's physical suffering at the center of concern. Their bodies mattered, and he used his own spittle and warm touch to convey health. And how he cared about feeding people! Large numbers on hillsides and smaller groups in homes where he was a generous host and table companion knew his concern for their bodily hunger.

Jesus' orientation to physicality pervaded his preaching as well. Set within an agrarian culture, his parables are salted with reference to seeds and weeds, fields and vineyards, plowing and harvesting, sheep and nesting birds, rain and sunsets. He did not hesitate to speak movingly of God's care for the wildflowers, or to use divine concern for a dead sparrow as an analogy for his Abba's love of human beings. From the outset (in the Gospel of Luke), he positioned his ministry in the prophetic tradition, proclaiming, along with good news for the poor and freedom for the oppressed, a year of favor from the Lord, this last evoking the covenant tradition of Sabbath year and jubilee, when the land was allowed to rest and recharge (Lk 4:18-19, citing Is 61:1-2, which itself refers to Lv 25). The reign of the God of heaven and earth that grounds his ministry is all-inclusive. In the prophetic spirit of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, its approach promotes the well-being of all creatures.

It would be anachronistic to attribute to Jesus of Nazareth the environmental concerns of 21st-century people. The point rather is that his life's ministry is filled with orientations that open to physical, earthly dimensions without strain, once the question is raised. Since the reign of God embraces all, then this includes the planet itself, its many different ecosystems and the creatures that inhabit them. Since the reign of God is especially attentive to the needy and outcast, then solidarity with the poor encompasses the earth and its distressed creatures. In an ecological perspective, Jesus' great command to love your neighbor as yourself extends to all that share in the evolutionary community of life, humankind and "otherkind" alike. The Gospel narratives of Jesus' historical ministry press toward this new frontier, commensurate with the wideness in God's mercy.

An Earthy Hope

Jesus' cross and resurrection also bear rich potential for ecological insight. No exception to perhaps the only ironclad rule in all of nature, Jesus died, his life ending in a spasm of state-sponsored violence. Contemporary theology is rich in reflections on the power of this death to disclose the self-emptying, compassionate nature of divine love that suffers with the agony of the human race. But humans are not alone in their pain: "The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now" (Rom 8:22), longing for redemption. An ecological Christology interprets the cross, revered as the tree of life, as a sign that divine compassion

encompasses the natural world, bearing the cost of new life throughout the endless millennia of dying entailed by evolution. To be in solidarity with divine care amid creation's groaning, the community of disciples must enter the lists on the side of those who act for ecological well-being, enduring the suffering this entails.

Thanks to its context in Jewish eschatological expectation, the proclamation that Jesus is risen from the dead has always connoted corporeality as an essential element. It is not his soul alone that is saved from death but his whole body-person-self. What this means in the concrete is not seriously imaginable to us who still live within the space-time grid of our known universe. It certainly does not mean that Jesus' corpse was resuscitated to resume life in our present state of biological existence, along the lines of the Lazarus story. Yet the empty tomb does stand as a historical marker for the love of God, stronger than death, which reaches into biological existence itself. As a seed is unrecognizable in the mature plant into which it sprouts; as what is perishable turns into something imperishable; as a creature of dust comes to bear the image of heaven (1 Cor 15), so too transformation beyond death entails unimaginable change. The angel, a streak of lightning in the tomb, says simply, "He has been raised" (Mt 28:6).

For Jesus, this means the abiding, redeemed validity of his human historical existence in God's presence forever. The joy that breaks out at Easter comes from the added realization that his destiny is not meant for himself alone but for the whole human race. It signals that a blessed future awaits all who go through the shattering of death, which is everyone. The poetry of an early Christian hymn captures this succinctly: the risen Christ is "firstborn of the dead" (Col 1:18). Death does not mean annihilation, nor does salvation mean the escape of the human spirit from a relational existence embedded in matter. Rather, the risen Christ awakens hope for transformation of the whole body-person, dust and breath together, into the glory of God.

Ecological awareness pushes this reading beyond its human scope to include a future for the whole natural world. "In Christ's resurrection the earth itself arose," declared St. Ambrose of Milan. Given that Jesus' life was part of the historical and biological community of earth, real to the core, it could hardly be otherwise. His destiny signals in advance the future that awaits all of creation, making Christ not only the firstborn of the human dead but, as that same early hymn sang, "the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). In a beautiful synergy of visual and verbal poetry, the liturgy of the Easter vigil celebrates this with cosmic symbols of light and dark, new fire, flowers and greens, water and oil, bread and wine. The "Exsultet," sung once a year on this night, shouts, "Exult, all creation, around God's throne," for Jesus Christ is risen! It continues:

Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendor,
radiant in the brightness of your King!
Christ has conquered! Glory fills you!
Darkness vanishes forever!

Broadening the circle of redemption to include the natural world gives added impetus to an ecological ethic. Far from being left behind or rejected, the evolving world in its endless permutations will be transfigured by the life-giving action of the Creator Spirit. Divine purpose is ultimately cosmocentric and biocentric, not merely anthropocentric. In the light of the risen Christ, hope of salvation for sinful, mortal human beings expands to becomes a cosmic hope, a shared hope. Care for the earth and all its creatures flows as a response.

An Earthy God

Before the Gospel period closed, belief that Jesus was the incarnation of divine Wisdom came to full flower. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). Thus does the prologue of

John's Gospel, adapting an older Jewish hymn to Wisdom, proclaim this defining belief. The original Greek does not speak of the Word becoming human (*anthropos*), but flesh (*sarx*), a broader reality. Here the flesh is not identified with sinfulness and contrasted with a spiritual mode of being, as in the older *sarx-pneuma* Christology of Paul. Rather, *sarx* in John signifies what is material, perishable, fragile—in a word, finite, the opposite of divinity clothed in majesty. In its historical context, the anti-Gnostic tone of this hymn is unmistakable. It protests the idea that in Christ the Word of God made only a superficial appearance while remaining untouched by the contamination of matter. Taking the ancient theme of God's dwelling among the people of Israel a step further, it affirms that the Word was uttered into earthiness, entered into the sphere of the material and mortal to shed light on all from within.

Granted, the configuration of sarx that the Word became was precisely human. But this does not mean that Christology is inevitably anthropocentric. Knowledge of the world in our day is repositioning the human race itself as an intrinsic part of the evolutionary network of life on our planet, which in turn is a part of the solar system, which came into being as a later chapter of cosmic history. Out of the Big Bang came the galaxies of stars; out of the exploding material of aging stars came our sun and its planets; out of the molecules of Earth came living creatures; out of those single-celled ancestors evolved all plants and animals, including human beings, we primates whose brains are so richly textured that we experience self-reflective consciousness and freedom, or in classical terms, mind and will.

Repositioning the human phenomenon with regard to its historical, ongoing relationship to planetary and cosmic matter has far-reaching implications. It rearranges the landscape of our imagination to know that human connection to nature is so deep that we cannot properly define our identity without including the great sweep of cosmic and biological evolution. We evolved relationally; we exist symbiotically; our existence depends on interaction with the rest of the natural world.

From this perspective, the flesh that the Word became is part of the vast body of the cosmos. The phrase "deep incarnation," coined by Niels Gregersen, is coming into use in theology to signify this radical, divine reach into the very tissue of biological existence and the wider system of nature. Jesus of Nazareth was an earthling, a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the carbon, oxygen and nitrogen cycles, a moment in the biological evolution of this planet. The atoms comprising his body once belonged to other creatures. The genetic structure of his cells made him part of the whole community of life that descended from common ancestors in the ancient seas. The *sarx* of Jn 1:14 thus reaches beyond Jesus, and beyond all other human beings, to encompass the whole biological world of living creatures and the cosmic dust of which they are composed.

This kind of reflection that honors both ancient doctrine and contemporary science has significant ecological implications. "Deep" interpretation understands Jn 1:14 as saying that the Word of God entered into solidarity not only with all humanity but also with the whole biophysical world of which human beings are a part and on which their existence depends. Hence the incarnation, a densely specific expression of the love of God already poured out in creation, confers dignity on the whole of earthly reality in its corporal and material dimensions. The logic of this dignity leads in a clear direction. In place of spiritual contempt for matter, people of faith are called to ally themselves with the living God by loving matter. In place of an exclusive concern for human neighbors, they extend moral consideration to the whole community of life. In place of ecological wastefulness, they repent of the grievous sins of polluting, profligately consuming and killing other species into extinction. They do this because earth and its creatures, as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. wrote, have been blessed by the stirring of the Spirit and the simple, concrete act of Christ's redemptive immersion in matter.

A Christic Paradigm

One way to unify the disparate strands of these reflections is to use the notion of the Christic paradigm developed by Sallie McFague. Drawn from the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus' ministry centered in the reign of God all the way to the cross, this paradigm makes clear that "liberating, healing and inclusive love is the meaning of it all." Consequently, concern for all those who suffer, and in particular for the millions of the earth's poor people deprived of life's necessities, must characterize church teaching, practice and spirituality. Since social systems are a form of embodiment, being structural extensions of human decisions that share in sin and grace, the reign of God achieves its goal only to the degree that social systems themselves (political, economic, cultural) embody inclusive love for the most disregarded.

Writing the signature of this Christic paradigm across the natural world extends the liberating, healing and inclusive love of God to the ends of the earth. Then incarnation underscores the dignity of what is physical, for bodies matter to God—all bodies, not only those beautiful and full of life but also those damaged, violated, starving, dying bodies of humankind and "otherkind" alike. Then resurrection grounds the promise of fulfillment of all the bodies in creation, not only those that succeed in their time but also those that are disparaged, judged unimportant or unacceptable, broken, pushed into extinction. The ethical implication of this Christic paradigm brings social justice and the integrity of creation into a tight embrace.

Jesus Christ is a gift given because "God so loved the world," *kosmos* in Greek (Jn 3:15). Christ's benefits are intended not just for the human world but the whole natural world in its beauty and pollution, its wonder and distress. The celebration of this journal's centenary provides occasion for a new hope: that 100 years from now when **America** celebrates its bicentennial, this truth and its practice will have seeped so deeply into the consciousness of faith that it will not need telling.

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