
New Christian Attitudes toward the Earth: A Survey

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In June 1993, I had a very unusual experience. Invited to an inter-religious panel at the Third Canadian Conference on Foundations and Applications of General Science, I found that the scientists were actually eager to pursue the ethical dimensions of science. Their concern was expressed this way: "Today's ecological, social and technological challenges...have outgrown the narrow bounds of disciplines and of nations." They wanted to move beyond the "narrow bounds" of their scientific disciplines (systems sciences and engineering and applied science) to engage the discipline of ethics. Unfortunately, the overall design of the panel was not well-suited to deepening their insights into religious ethics. After a brief but well-conceived talk on religion and the science of spirituality by Suwanda Sugunasiri of the University of Toronto, and another short yet excellent talk by Peter Timmerman of the Institute of Environmental Studies at the University of Toronto (on Buddhist spirituality as a reclaiming of ritual to attune ourselves to the Earth), the audience listened to a Native religious leader, a Buddhist, a Jewish scientist, an Islamic scientist and a Roman Catholic theologian. At the end of the conference I was left with a question: "What is the new agenda for Christian theology in light of these ecological and technological developments?" I say "new" agenda because Christian theology is rather tardy in addressing these challenges.

Claiming that we in the modern, industrialized world of the Northern hemisphere are experiencing a turbulent transition to "postmodernity,"

Frederick Ferré sums up these challenges aptly:

Much of the current distress felt by those living in the global North during this transition springs from sheer bewilderment in the face of collapsing certitudes; much arises from fear of the crumbling of material affluence, on which life's meaning has been too firmly anchored. The urgent need is for philosophic perspective broad enough and for religious resources strong enough to cope with change on an order of magnitude that occurs seldom in human history (Ferré 1993, 1).

This is the problem, whether we are ready or not. My contention is that Christian theology is not ready. Further, I hope this all-too-brief survey will reveal the missing part of the agenda. I will comment on authors who have attempted to be "ready," then authors who are presently contributing to "readiness," and finally sketch my own view of the theological imperative in light of these challenges. My approach will be theoretical for I will take up the question of the new agenda. My thinking on this question has been strongly influenced by a study of Thomas Berry, who was one of the first to articulate a theological agenda in response to the so-called "ecological crisis."

Attempts at "Readiness"

In May 1993, I participated in an invitational conference of nearly a hundred theologians and theology school administrators, mostly from the U.S.A., entitled "Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge: Toward Just and Sustainable Communities." As social ethicist Larry Rasmussen rose to speak, he said: "I am not going to hazard too much in my remarks, because, basically, my reading list is sitting behind me," alluding to John B. Cobb, Jr., Rosemary Radford Ruether, James A. Nash and Thomas Berry.¹ If funds had been more abundant, some others could have been added, notably, James M. Gustafson, Jürgen Moltmann, Ian Barbour, H. Paul Santmire, and Douglas John Hall. In this listing, I take John B. Cobb, Jr., as the symbolic presence of process theology and Thomas Berry as the symbolic presence of Teilhardian thought. To speak this way is to give emphasis to the horizon which determines how individual authors approach the "magnitude of the question" (Ferré). Actually, there are two magnitudes for the theologian to address. The first is the one Ferré sketched above, which is the ecological crisis; the second is the theological magnitude, or what I will call the "radical openness of theological discourse."

1. The conference was sponsored by the Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith, Princeton, New Jersey and the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, Washington, D.C. The conference was held at Stony Point, New York, May 13-16.

All of the authors I cite are genuinely attempting to take seriously the first magnitude, i.e., the ecological crisis. For example, Jürgen Moltmann has noted:

Our situation today is determined by the ecological crisis of our whole scientific and technological civilization, and by the exhaustion of nature through human beings. This crisis is deadly, and not for human beings alone. For a very long time now it has meant death for other living things and for the natural environment as well. Unless there is a radical reversal in the fundamental orientation of our human societies, and unless we succeed in finding an alternative way of living and dealing with other living things and with nature, this crisis is going to end in a wholesale catastrophe (1985, 20).

While it is clear that some theologians are attempting to deal with the magnitude of the ecological crisis, how does one describe the magnitude of the theological “crisis” or the questioning it engenders? I will attempt a response as the issue pertains to the relation between theology and science by using a specific indicator: radical openness.

Ian Barbour has summed up the general terms of the theology/science question clearly and helpfully with his four headings: (1) conflict (e.g., scientific materialism/biblical literalism); (2) independence (e.g., neo-orthodoxy/linguistic analysis); (3) dialogue (e.g., limit situations/paradigm shifts); and (4) integration (e.g., natural theology/formulation of doctrines) (Barbour 1990, 3–30).

The question of theology’s relationship to science is not new. Barbour opts for “integration” through a theology of nature but declines the challenge of what I call radical openness. When Bernard Lonergan addressed the situation of theology, he insisted that theology must take science into account; a science aware of its subjectivity, free of the shackles of a spurious objectivism. In this aspect, Lonergan was genuinely “postmodern” in the way that Ferré uses the term. He nevertheless affirmed a program of radical theological openness to what it discovered in this science. In short, it was the turn to the subject. My preoccupation is not the turn to the subject, however, but the turn to cosmology. Here is a symbol of what I perceive as the problem. As Frederick Ferré observes:

Religious ideas [formerly] included an image of Earth being at the center of the physical universe, Earth being surrounded by visible heavenly bodies (which were thought to be made of material entirely different from the vulgar stuff of Earth)....This universe was believed to be not very old. The best calculations were that 4,004 years before the birth of Christ, God had created all this out of nothing in six magnificent days, during which the ancestors of all human beings, Adam and Eve, were brought directly and specially into being and given dominion over all the

rest of creation. Then, gradually Christendom went to college. One of the earliest “professors” was Nicolaus Copernicus, whom Martin Luther called “the fool” (*der Narr*) for wanting to turn everything upside down, to displace Earth from its center of attention (1993, 28).

“Everything upside down” is an apt symbol for our present state. In a sense, Copernicus’s disturbing news about the universe still awaits general theological integration. Perhaps this is a result of the myriad questions associated with the presumed disturbance that would arise should we take the turn to cosmology: the place of the Bible; what to make of our Christology; the place of redemption; the role of Christianity in a larger story of the universe; and, perhaps most distressing, the question of how to look at the human as a *participant* in the Earth community rather than the *focus* (however nuanced) of that community. Moreover, can we entertain the project suggested by Thomas Berry of elaborating an ethics that would seek to re-invent the human at the species level?

In this light, the leadership of the authors I have named, all pioneers in the field, seems somewhat ambiguous. James M. Gustafson, as Ferré points out, was assailed for turning ethical considerations away from anthropocentrism, an essential note of the turn to cosmology, though the turn to cosmology does not seem to interest him *per se* (Beckley and Swezey 1988). Jürgen Moltmann attempted a more overt constructive dialogue with current cosmology. For him, however, what might be considered revolutionary possibilities of new Christian formulation were sidelined by a less-than-radical approach to the retrieval of doctrine. His sense of the doctrine of the Redemption, for example, makes it impossible for him to espouse a non-anthropocentric ethic. In addition, while few people have given us more clarity and concern about scientific issues than has Ian Barbour, the theological trajectory he sets forth is not exactly “revolutionary.” In an historical *tour de force*, H. Paul Santmire culls extraordinarily rich evidence from the Christian past of our religious investment in nature as Christians, but his project is not, strictly speaking, cosmological. John B. Cobb, Jr., includes cosmological concerns through process thought, but seems to resist taking on the cosmological task directly:

As I have gradually learned that an honest return to the Bible can be a positive resource rather than an obstacle to the kind of thinking and acting now required, I have given up the language of a “new Christianity.” Today I would say instead that our need is for a postmodern Christianity (Cobb 1992, 10).

Moreover, Douglas John Hall has provided careful re-visiting of biblical texts and theological traditions, and, in so doing, supplied fresh ethical impetus to Christian commitment to the Earth. I would submit, however,

that a theology of stewardship, which he develops, cannot address the cosmological revolution. Rosemary Radford Ruether has recently published *Gaia and God* (1992), a book whose title cannot be accurately read without a sense of the new cosmology's view of the Earth. Her book is an important synthesis of her thought and genuinely introduces the question of the new cosmology. In my opinion, however, this is not the challenge for theology as Ruether sees it. Rather, the feminist question remains primary for her, with the ecological and cosmological aspects "thickening" the text. In my judgment, while these authors are trailblazers for Christian theology, in light of the ecological crisis they fail to sense that the turn to cosmology is truly a revolution in our perception of the universe, the Earth, and of ourselves, demanding a new "horizon" for the theological task.

A Shared Openness

To comprehend what has grown from these rich theological roots and from other dynamic currents in theology, we could well borrow the summary description articulated by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson in which he regards these developments in progressive stages: environmental theology, creation theology, ecological theology, eco-justice theology, and now a theology of life. In my opinion, this indicates an interesting paradox: the ecological issue has been taken up by the so-called "liberation" stream more recently than by the mainstream. That is a paradox because one might think that those who have a passion for human dignity would be most threatened by the non-anthropocentric tendencies of ecological thinking. It is less a paradox, however, when one considers that liberation theology shares the element of radical openness which I am identifying with the turn to cosmology. Feminist authors such as Sally McFague and Carol S. Robb, liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez, and so-called "social justice" authors, such as Dieter T. Hessel and David G. Hallman, are all contributing to this collective "radical openness" in theology. Moreover, promising additions to the literature on the cosmological question can be found in William French (1990), John F. Haught (1984), and forthcoming work from Jay McDaniel and Larry Rasmussen which will attempt to further the theological consideration of the new cosmology.

A Sketch of the Theological Agenda

In helping to turn our collective attention to the fate of the planet, the theological agenda remains ambiguous at best. It is my contention that Christian theology can no longer afford to rest in this ambiguity. Briefly,

I will propose some elements from the horizon Thomas Berry suggests which may help to define further the task.

Thomas Berry's horizon is found in brief outline in his "Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe" (Lonergan and Richards 1987, 107–108). The first principle claims the universe is the "primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being." "Primary" can have more than one meaning. It can mean original; it can also mean most important. I understand it in both senses. It is most important, functionally, in view of the ecological crisis, or in view of the need to value all religions. The sense in which we take the universe as original revelation is, however, astoundingly new. We know the universe in a radically different way today scientifically and therefore must read the "revelation" accordingly. In his third principle, Berry states: "From its beginning, the universe is a psychic as well as a physical reality." We fail to know where we are if we fail to understand the universe as a "cosmogensis" and the Earth as an "ecogenesis" or "geogenesis." We are a species in process, as is every other species. And, as Berry asserts, "The emergent process of the universe is irreversible and non-repeatable in the existing world order." It is that very irreversibility that puts so much urgency in the message of ecologists. Our technological humanism mesmerizes us into thinking that we can both drive and control change. Ecologists are aware that biological processes are ultimately beyond our control, and the irreversible deterioration continues apace. This reality leads Berry to assert that we are leaving the Cenozoic Era, the age of biological florescence, and entering either the Ecozoic Era, a new geological age with a recognized interdependence between the entire Earth community and the human species, or the Technozoic Era, in which we will continue to destroy the life systems of the planet.²

Time is running out for us to see ourselves through a genuine cosmological lens. If we do, we may well concur with Berry's description of the human as that "being in whom the universe activates, reflects upon, and celebrates itself in conscious self-awareness." We are yet a long way from a radical theological openness to this reality first glimpsed by Copernicus, then brought into empirical awareness throughout the history of modern science and now the subject of enormous bursts of discovery. Our radically new understanding of ourselves in science is co-existent with our destructive march of power against all other creatures of the Earth community. What force in human life could carry more promise in this task than religion, etymologically cast as agent of re-joining? My contention is

2. See, for example, the cover article of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 30, 1993, by E.O. Wilson: "Is the Human Species Suicidal?"

that only the turn to cosmology is adequate to the task. This is not in an effort to establish yet another political correctness. From the cosmological viewpoint, as Berry notes, the pervasive reality in the universe is differentiation, subjectivity and communion. The energy of wholeness is communion, not correctness. Communion requires the valuing of differentiation and subjectivity. This, I believe, is the integration that theology seeks with science today. It is also an energy for wholeness, not fragmentation.

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