

# Ecojustice at the Center of the Church's Mission

Rosemary Radford Ruether

*28 January 2000*

Many traditional Christians feel a deep suspicion toward the ecology movement, particularly when it lays claim to theological and religious meaning. They see this as the rise of a new 'nature worship' to be regarded as totally contrary to 'Biblical faith'. What I wish to show in this talk is that the Church's mission of redemption of the world cannot be divorced from justice in society and the healing of the wounds of nature wrought by an exploitative human industrial system. Furthermore that this wholistic perspective is central to the Biblical vision of redemption. It is a Christianity that divorces individual salvation from society and society from creation that is unbiblical.

This does not mean that some of the questions directed at the Biblical and Christian tradition by deep ecologists and ecofeminists<sup>i</sup> have been totally off base. The Biblical and Christian traditions do have elements that sacralize domination and negation of body, earth and woman. But they also struggled against what they perceived to be injustice and evil and sought to vindicate the goodness of creation and the body and their ultimate redemption against extreme dualists that saw in the material world only the manifestation of the demonic. We can reclaim these more wholistic traditions to ground an ecojustice vision of redemption.

Let me be clear what I am not saying by such affirmations. I am not saying that the Biblical and Christian tradition is the sole source of religious truth, the only way of access to true divinity, and therefore only here is religious truth to be found. The great Asian religious traditions, as well as the unjustly-scorned nature religions of indigenous peoples, have precious resources that need to be cultivated. An ecological crisis of global proportions can mean nothing less than a true dialogue and mutual enrichment of all spiritual traditions.

Secondly, I am not saying that these Biblical and Christian traditions are adequate. They need critique and reinterpretation. But I suspect that this is true of all human spiritual heritages.

The global ecological crisis is a new situation. Until now humans have assumed that nature's power far transcended puny humans. Even Biblical apocalyptic thought did not put the power to destroy the earth in human hands. The notion that our power has grown so great that we must now take responsibility for pre-serving the biotic diversity of rain forests and the ozone layer of the stratosphere was unimaginable in past human experience.

Although Biblical and Christian tradition is not the only source for ecological theology and ethics, it is a source that must be central for us of Christian background. First, there are magnificent themes here to inspire us. Secondly, Christian people and their institutions are a major world religion and world power. They have been a major cause of the problems. But they will not be mobilized to conversion unless they can find the mandates for it in those traditions which carry meaning and authority for them. Finally, I suspect that none of us work in a healthy way if we operate merely out of alienation from our past. We need new

visions. But new visions have power when they are not rootless, but are experienced as gathering up and transforming our heritage.

The ecological theologies of Christian inspiration at this time seem to fall into two different types, which I call the covenantal and the sacramental. The covenantal type is represented by books such as Richard Austin's *Hope for the Land*. It draws strongly from Hebrew Scripture, and claims the Bible as the primary source of ecological theology. A second type is that of Matthew Fox's *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* and Thomas Berry's, *The Dream of the Earth*.<sup>ii</sup> Fox claims a Biblical basis for his thought in the cosmological Christology of the New Testament. He also draws on Patristic and Medieval mysticism and casts out a wide net of ecumenical dialogue across world religions.

Protestants have generally been stronger on the covenantal tradition that searched for an ecological ethics, while Catholics have tended to stress the sacramental tradition. My view is that these two traditions, covenantal and sacramental, are complementary. A useable ecological theology, spirituality and ethic must interconnect these two traditions. Each supplies elements which the other lacks. In the covenantal tradition we find the basis for a moral relation to nature and to one another that mandates patterns of right relation, enshrining these right relations in law as the final guarantee against abuse. In the sacramental tradition we find the heart, the ecstatic experience of I and Thou, of interpersonal communion, without which moral relationships grow heartless and spiritless.<sup>iii</sup>

The notion that the Bible is anti-nature comes in part from the reading of the Bible popularized by German scholarship of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This scholarship read into the Bible their own sharp dualism of history against nature, setting the true God of history against the gods of nature. Although the Biblical view of God expresses a transformation of the way God is seen as related to nature, there is also a lively sense of God's relation to and presence in nature that was overlooked in this stress on the God of History 'against' nature.

Although God is seen as 'creating' nature, rather than being an expression of it, nevertheless the nature God creates is alive and enters into lively relation to God. God delights in the creatures God creates, and the creatures return this rejoicing in joy and praise. Divine blessing inundates the earth as rain, and the mountains skip like a calf, the hills gird themselves with joy, the valleys deck themselves with grain; they shout and sing together for joy.

This language is typical of Hebrew Scripture. There is no reason to write it off as "mere poetic metaphor", a judgment which reflects the modern loss of the experience of I-Thou relation to what we see around us. The experience of nature, of fields, mountains, streams, birds and animals, in Hebrew sensibility, while not seen as 'divine', is still very much animate, interacting as living beings with their Creator.

The modern nature-history split distorts the Biblical view. In the Biblical view, all things, whether they happen as human wars and struggles for liberation in and between cities or whether they happen as rain that brings abundant harvests or as drought that brings

disaster to the fields upon which humans depend, are 'events'. In all such events, whether in cities or in fields, Hebrews saw the presence and work of God, as blessing or as judgment.

All such events have moral meaning. If enemies overwhelm the walls of the city or floods break down irrigation channels and destroy the fruits of human labor, God is acting in judgment upon human infidelity. When humans repent and return to fidelity to God, then justice and harmony will reign, not only in the city, but in the relations between humans and animals, the heavens and the earth. The heavens will rain sweet water, and the harvests will come up abundantly. Thus what modern Western thought has split apart as 'nature' and as 'history', Hebrew thought sees as one reality fraught with moral warning and promise.

There are problems in reading moral meaning and divine will into events in 'nature'. We would not wish to see in every flood, drought, volcanic eruption and tornado the work of divine judgment. But when destructive floods rush down the Himalayan mountains, carrying all before them into the Pakistan delta, or drought sears African lands, we are right to recognize the consequences of human misuse of the land, stripping the forest cover that held back the torrential rains, and over-grazing the semi-arid African soils.

In these disasters today we have to recognize a consequence of human culpability and a call to rectify how we use the land and how we relate to the indigenous people who depend on these lands. As human power expands, colonizing more and more of the planet's natural processes, the line between what was traditionally called 'natural evil', and which was ethically neutral, and what should be called sin; that is, the culpable abuse of human freedom and power, also shifts. Hebrew moral sensibility, in which relation to God is the basis for both justice in society and prosperity in nature, while disobedience to God's commands of right relation brings both violence to society and disaster to nature, takes on a new dimension of moral truth.

Hebrew genius saw divine commands of right relation between human beings and to the rest of the creation enshrined in a body of law. Much of this law did not seem relevant to Christians, who believed that their new relation to God through Christ allowed them to discard a good deal of it. But some elements of this legal tradition take on new meaning today, particularly the tradition of sabbatical legislation. These are the laws that mandate periodic rest and restoration of relations between humans, animals and land.

Hebrew theology of creation rejects the aristocratic split between a leisure-class divinity and a humanity that serves this divinity through slave labor that was typical of Ancient Near Eastern mythology. In Genesis God is described as both working and resting and thereby setting the pattern for all humans and their relations to land and animals in the covenant of creation. This pattern of work and rest is set through a series of concentric cycles, of seven days, seven years and seven times seven years.

On the seventh day of each week, not only the farmer, but also his humans and animal work force, are to rest. "On the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and your resident alien shall be refreshed" (Ex.23:12). In the seventh year attention is given to the rights of the poor and to wild animals, as well as to the renewal of the land itself. "For six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield;

but the seventh year let it lie fallow, so the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard and your olive orchard (Ex.23:10-11). Slaves are to be set free and laborers to rest, as well.

Finally in the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year, there is to be a great restoration of all relationships. Those who have lost their land through debt are to be restored to their former property. Debts are to be forgiven, and captives freed. The earth is to lie fallow, and animals and humans are to rest. All the accumulated inequities of the past seven times seven years, between humans in debt, loss of land and enslavement, and to nature in overuse of land and animals, are to be rectified. All is to be restored to right balance.

This vision of periodic redemption and restoration of right relation underlies Jesus' language in the Lord's Prayer. It is a vision of redemption more compatible with finitude and human limits than the radical visions of the millennium and the once-for-all apocalyptic end of history through which recent Biblical scholarship has read the meaning of the term "Kingdom of God". Modern revolutionary thinkers would have done better if they had taken the Jubilee, rather than the millennium and the apocalyptic future, as their models of historical change. Periodic renewal and restoration of right relations is a more doable and less dangerous vision than final perfection.

Although Christians saw themselves as people of the new covenant, a covenant no longer limited to one people, the Jews, or to one land, but extended to all nations and to the whole earth, they also spiritualized and eschatologized these ideas in a way that lost the concreteness of Hebrew faith. Christians, in the early centuries, were city people, and the farmer ethic of Sabbatical legislation was less meaningful to them. In their belief in a Christ that had transcended the law, they saw themselves as mandated to ignore some good ideas, along with some bad ideas, in Hebrew legislation.

The Reformation, with its stress on historical, rather than allegorical, interpretation of Scripture, brought new attention to Hebrew Scripture. In the Reformed tradition there was a new stress on the idea of being a covenanted people, and this was identified with the social and political contracts binding local and national communities. Not all of this had positive results. There was a revival of tribal notions of being an elect People of God that fuelled English and American religious/racial nationalisms.

But another aspect of the notion of covenant as the basis of political community gave birth to the idea of citizens who contract together to form civil society, who have mutual rights and obligations and whose leaders are accountable to the citizens. These ideas have been the foundation of modern constitutional government. In the 17th and 18th centuries it was assumed that these citizens were limited to white propertied males, but gradually this concept of citizenship, and with it civil rights, was extended to all adult men, and eventually to adult women.

Slavery was incompatible with this idea of rights. It was gradually abolished, although more for economic than for humanitarian reasons. Although guaranteed by their relationship to particular political communities, these rights were seen in Enlightenment thought as 'natural'; that is, grounded in the fundamental nature and dignity of the human person. The

rights of those not able to be responsible citizens also received protection; children, the sick, the mentally ill or retarded, the imprisoned. Some 19th century English liberals and progressive Evangelicals began to claim that rights should be extended to animals as well. Beating, torture and painful ill-treatment of all kinds should be banned, whether toward humans in prisons, schools, armies or hospitals, or toward animals in laboratories or farms.

Both environmentalists and animal rights activists today draw on this tradition of 'natural rights'. They seek to extend this concept to species and ecospheres and to sentient animals. Environmentalists argue that endangered species have the right to be protected against extinction, not simply because they are or might become useful to human, but in their own right, as unique expressions of evolutionary life.<sup>iv</sup>

One must ask whether the natural rights tradition is adequate for the ecological ethic we need today. Protecting an animal or a plant because it is a member of an endangered species is still a highly individualistic idea. Species are not endangered in isolation, but because the ecosystems of forest, prairie or wet-land in which they live are endangered. It is ecological communities that are the context in which particular animals or plants thrive or die.

It is finally all ecosystems, not just wild ones, but the ones in which humans must learn to share their lives with a great variety of animals and plants, that have to be protected. We need an ethic that encompasses the sustaining of ecological community, not simply the members of community in isolation from each other. The natural rights tradition is limited because it sees only the right of the individual in relation to the community, but fails to uphold the community as the matrix in which the life of the individual is sustained. What is needed is a new interconnection of the ethic of the individual and the ethic of the community, and the extension of this ethic beyond the human individual and group to the biosphere in which all living things cohere on the planet.

The basic insight of the Biblical covenantal tradition that we have to translate right relation into an ethic, which finds guarantees in law, is an essential element in building an ecological world order. In the World Charter for Nature, signed by all members of the United Nations (except the United States) in 1982 laid out the basic principles of such an ecological ethic. International treaties on climate change, protection of biodiversity and forests, the oceans and lakes, are being negotiated to set limits to human abuse of the environment. A body of international law is beginning to emerge, although all too slowly and without adequate means of enforcement, that affirms the interdependency of the global human community with the earth community of air, water, animals and plants.

The sacramental tradition of Catholic Christianity complements the covenantal tradition that has been emphasized by Reformed Christianity and its secular heirs. It starts with the community as a living whole, not only the human community, but, first of all, the cosmic community. The human being, not only mirrors cosmic community as micro to macrocosm, but also intercommunes with the whole cosmic body. God is seen not only as over against and 'making' this cosmic body, but also as immanent within it. The visible universe is the emanational manifestation of God, God's sacramental body. God is incarnate in and as the cosmic body of the universe, although not reduced to it.

Hellenistic Judaism developed this vision of divine Wisdom as the secondary manifestation of God and God's agent in creating the cosmos, sustaining it and bringing all things into harmonious unity with God.<sup>v</sup> Strikingly, Hebrew thought always saw this immanent manifestation of God as female.

Wisdom...pervades and permeates all things...She rises from the power of God, the pure effluence of the glory of the Almighty...She is the brightness that streams from everlasting light, the flawless mirror of the active power of God and the image of his goodness. She is one but can do all things, herself unchanging, she makes all things new; age after age she enters into holy souls and makes them God's friends and prophets....She spans the world in power from end to end and orders all things benignly. (*Wisdom of Solomon: ch. 8*)

In the New Testament this cosmogonic Wisdom of God is identified with Christ. Jesus as the Christ not only embodies, in crucified form, the future king and redeemer, but also incarnates the cosmogonic principle through which the cosmos is created, sustained, redeemed and reconciled with God. In this cosmological Christology, found in the Preface to the Gospel of John, in the first chapter of Hebrews and in some Pauline letters, Christ is the beginning and end of all things.

In the letter to the Colossians, the divine Logos which dwelt in Christ is the same Logos which founded and has sustained the cosmos from the beginning. "All things have been created through him...and in him all things hold together". This same Logos, through Christ and the Church, is now bringing the whole cosmos to union with God. "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God is pleased to reconcile himself with all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (1:16-20).

New Testament and patristic cosmological Christology was a bold effort to overcome the threatened split between the God of Creation and the God of eschatological redemption, found in gnostic systems such as that of Marcion. This theology sought to synthesize cosmogony and eschatology, and bring together the Hebrew creational and the Greek emanational views of the relation of the divine to the cosmic body. Being and Becoming are dialectically interconnected. The Greek body-soul dualism was made more fluid, by seeing body was the sacramental bodying forth of soul and soul the life principle of the body.

Irenaeus, the second century anti-gnostic churchman, sought to spell out the cosmological Christology of the New Testament in a comprehensive vision of redemptive history. The visible cosmos is itself both the creation and the manifestation of the Word and Spirit of God. The Word and Spirit are the 'two hands', by which God creates the world, and also the ground and principle of being of the cosmos.

Human freedom allows this connection to the divine source of being to be forgotten, and human relation to God and to each other is distorted. But God continually sends manifestations of the Word and Spirit that heal this relationship, culminating in Christ, whose work is now carried to fulfilment in the body of Christ, the Church. For Irenaeus, the Christian sacraments are the paradigmatic embodiments of this process of cosmic healing. The body itself, human and cosmic, is thereby regenerated, renewed and filled with the

divine presence which is its ground of being. Irenaeus sees the entire cosmos becoming blessed, and eventually immortalized by being ever more fully united with its divine source of being.

Later Latin Patristic thought gradually dropped the lush prophetic visions of a redeemed earth that were part of early Christianity as being too dangerous to an empire that now claimed to be Christian. But medieval Latin thought, represented by thinkers such as Bonaventure, preserved elements of the idea of a cosmic presence of God through which we can be led upward in the 'mind's road to God'. Sacramental theologians of the Victorine School set their reflections on the sacraments of the Church in the context of the sacramentality of Creation.

This tradition was repressed by the dualists of mind against matter, Descartes and Newton and early modern European science, but the effort to bring mind and matter, God and creation together in one unified vision lived on and was continually rediscovered in traditions of European philosophy, theology, poetry and art. The Anglican Cambridge Platonists expressed this effort to bridge mind and matter, God and cosmos, in the 17th century; Fichte, Schelling and Hegel in the 18th and 19th. In poetry it was expressed in the English romantics, Coleridge and Wordsworth; in theology in Tillich's view of God as ground of being. Ecological theologians of the late 20th century, such as Thomas Berry, or Matthew Fox's rediscovery of the cosmological Christ, represent the new impetus to rediscover and reinterpret this tradition of sacramental cosmology.

Berry sees human-nature relations deeply threatened by Western technological exploitation. He calls for a deep metanoia that is necessary to bring about a new ecological consciousness. This metanoia must encompass many levels. These include technological, social and cultural. For Berry, Western people are caught between the older stories of classical civilizations and the confident mechanistic scientism of modernity, both of which are under challenge today, and a new spirituality, rooted in the new universe story, that is waiting to be born. We need to create a new socio-economic incarnation of the human species into its earth matrix. Although the technological aspects of this are necessary, the most important shift must be a renewed vision of our relation to the whole of the creation, a renewed way of telling the story of who we are.

Reclaiming the covenantal and sacramental traditions are central to a renewed understanding of Christian redemptive hope as encompassing ecojustice. But this needs to be embodied much more deeply in our preaching, worship and Biblical study. We need to learn to reread these great traditions of covenantal ethics and sacramental spirituality in our Biblical studies and teach it in our preaching.

This vision needs to become a visible part of how we design our churches and worship spaces. It needs to flow out in our stewardship of the land and buildings of our church communities, through a praxis of recycling and conservation of energy. It can be expressed in the transformation of our lands from wasteful overwatered lawns to natural grasses and permaculture gardens to help feed the poor. Only by embodying the vision of ecojustice in its own teaching, worship and praxis can the Church make itself a base for an ecojustice ministry to the larger community in which it stands. Ecojustice becomes central to the

Church's mission only when it is understood as central to the church's life. Anything less will lack credibility.

## **From the author**

Also in IAMS, Mission Studies, Vol. XVI – 1,31 – 1999

---

<sup>i</sup> A major source of the condemnation of the Bible as the source of the Western culture of domination is Lynn White's essay, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis", Science (10 March, 1967), pp. 1203-1207

<sup>ii</sup> Austin's book was published by John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA, 1988; Fox's book by Harper and Row, San Francisco, CA, 1988 and Berry's book by Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, CA, 1988

<sup>iii</sup> This summary of the covenantal and sacramental traditions is drawn from my book, Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing (Harper San Francisco, 1992), pp. 205-253

<sup>iv</sup> As an example of this approach, see Roderick F. Nash, The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989)

<sup>v</sup> For the culmination of the Hellenistic Jewish cosmological spirituality, see E.R. Goodenough, By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1935)