

# The Greening of Christianity

**Lloyd Geering**  
**2005**

Published by  
St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society  
PO Box 5203, Wellington  
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Editor: Tom Hall  
Cover Design: Becky Bliss

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**ISBN 0-9583645-9-1**



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## FOREWORD

The crisis facing our home, the planet Earth, should be obvious to all its inhabitants. However, Christian language about domination of the earth, and even stewardship language, has allowed Christians to distance the theology of human salvation from the plight of the earth. Lloyd Geering's lecture series, given at St Andrew's on The Terrace in May 2005, addresses this problem and gives us resources of analysis and celebration to respond to it.

Over the past twenty years, progressive theologians have developed a new stream of theological work, eco-theology. Many of the contributors have been feminist theologians whose projects of unmasking ontological dualisms have had relevance both for women as a gender, and for the earth, with which women have been associated in traditional religiocultural systems. As male-female dualism has disadvantaged women, so too has spirit-matter dualism disadvantaged the earth.

Lloyd Geering takes his audience through an analysis of the current global crisis. He also draws attention to a frightening development amongst fundamentalist Christians, the fiction of rapture theology. This barely biblical scenario has led many conservative Christians, including those in powerful political and economic positions, to utterly devalue earthly existence. They develop the environmental policies and programmes that affect all of us, and yet they hold beliefs that see the earth as temporary and expendable.

As Lloyd Geering so rightly points out, how people understand God is a crucial aspect of response to environmental crisis. It is up to us Christians and other people of faith to challenge the image of God as a ruthless warrior, who controls in micro-detail the affairs of earth. Lloyd Geering invites us to take seriously the task of re-imagining God in ways that are immanent and focused on the sustaining of life. To do so we will need to move from an external divine imperative to an internalised earthcentred moral imperative for care of the earth and a justice commitment to all, human, animal, plant, and mineral who dwell upon it.

The nature of the crisis may lead us to a place of despair. However, Lloyd concludes by outlining the possibilities for new festivals that may revive our moral imagination and enable us to experience compassion for the earth, and to feel, as eco-theologian Sally McFague has claimed, "that the earth is God's body."

The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society expresses its deep gratitude to Lloyd Geering for his insight, his wisdom and his passion, and especially for his willingness to share it with so many through the lectures and this publication.

**Margaret Mayman**  
**Chairperson**

**St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society**



# 1. The Global Crisis

**D**uring the twentieth century three words all linked to the same Greek root began to capture our attention. The Greek word was *oikos*, meaning ‘household’, ‘dwelling’, ‘home’. The rise to prominence of these three words reflects how we humans are becoming increasingly conscious of the global home we share.

‘**Ecumenical**’ came from *oikos* by way of the Greek word *oikumene*, which means ‘the whole-world that humankind inhabits as its home’.

‘**Economic**’ came from *oikos* by way of the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means ‘the law of the household’ or ‘household management.’

‘**Ecological**’ also came from *oikos*, but more indirectly.

The word ecology was coined by a German zoologist, Ernst Haeckel, who used the term *oekologie* to mean the relation of an animal to both its organic and inorganic environment. Thus ecology deals with organisms and their home environments, and has been defined variously as ‘the study of the interrelationships of organisms with their environment and each other’ and as ‘the biology of ecosystems’.

In the course of the twentieth century we became increasingly familiar with these three words. In the first half of the century the word ‘ecumenical’ became widely used to describe the attempt by many Christians to reestablish the essential unity of the world-wide Christian church after it had been increasingly fragmented following the Protestant Reformation.

Then, as the cultural phenomenon of globalisation began to gather force after World War II, economics grew in importance as the study of understanding and managing material affairs, first those of our national household and, more recently, in what is called macro-economics, those of our global household.

In the last third of the twentieth century our growing awareness of the ecological character of all life on earth awakened us to impending planetary crises, disruptions for which we humans are largely responsible, whether out of ignorance or wilful self-centredness.

Since St. Andrew’s trust was established to study the interaction between religion and society, this series of lectures has been planned to explore what impact our new understanding of ecology will have on the Judaeo-Christian tradition. To what extent, if any, does it require Christian thought and practice to undergo change? As we shall find, that impact is so far-reaching that these lectures could well have been titled ‘The Transition from Theo-logy to Eco-logy’. We start now with ‘The Global Crisis.’

## A gathering storm

Today, scientists, historians, and other commentators warn us of a global ecological crisis. This has the potential to be even more devastating and long-lasting than a thermo-nuclear war, for it could mean the end of all life as we know it. The crisis they point to has been growing for some time; at first it was quite



unobtrusive, but recently its accelerating effects have become alarming.

The first hint of it that I recall came when I was a rural parish minister in North Otago in the early 1940's. Farmers were being warned that improper use of their land was causing soil erosion of such serious degree that it could lead to disastrous results. I remember how some farmers took strong objection to being told what they could or could not do with their own land. That was an early indication of how many people react today, as more and more information comes to light about the irreversible damage that we humans are inflicting on the very earth we depend upon for life.

### **A first clear cry — and recent echoes . . .**

1962 saw the publication of a prophetic book. Its author, Rachel Carson, was an aquatic biologist who had already established a worldwide reputation for her books on the sea, but today she is chiefly remembered for *Silent Spring*. Although it became a best seller and is credited with creating a worldwide awareness of the dangers of environmental pollution, her suggestion that synthetic pesticides were doing more harm than good caused many to dismiss her book as 'so much hogwash'. Her death in 1964 prevented her from seeing her allegations confirmed, the banning of many pesticides, and the rapid spread of organic farming.

The last three decades have seen an ever-increasing number of books warning that a frightening nemesis is now appearing on the horizon as a result of our changing relationship with the earth. Their titles commonly proclaim the gravity of the problem. *The Fate of The Earth* (Jonathan Schell, 1982); *The Dream of the Earth* (Thomas Berry, 1988); *The Crisis of Life on Earth* (Tim Radford, 1990); *Earth in the Balance* (Al Gore, 1993); *The Sacred Balance* (David Suzuki, 1997); and *Five Holocausts* (Derek Wilson, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

These modern secular prophets are alerting us to the early warning signals coming from a planet now feeling dire pressure from the activities of the human species. What may be called the humanisation of the earth is leading to an imminent global crisis. Our species is now in the process of destroying in a few decades a life-support system that took millions of years to evolve. Some of these prophets are so pessimistic that they question whether it is possible for some six to eight billion people to change the direction of our global life sufficiently in the relatively short time left in which to do it.

Others are more hopeful and see no reason why, with human ingenuity and the latest technology, we should not be able to reverse the dangerous trends we have already set in motion. Jonathan Schell ends *The Fate of the Earth* by pointing out that humankind must make a choice between the path that leads to death and the path that leads to life. His words are reminiscent of the ancient challenge of Moses: 'I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil ... therefore choose life.'

### **. . . falling on deaf ears**

But how many today understand that we face a choice between life and death on a global scale? The large masses of the earth's population are almost completely ignorant of the larger picture. They are so caught up with what goes on in their own little worlds that they are as yet unaware of what the prophets are



saying, let alone able or concerned to judge or act upon their prophecies. A significant proportion of these inhabit the third-world countries of Africa, India, and South America, and can be excused for their ignorance on the grounds that all of their energy and thinking is taken up with the need to scratch out a living.

Much more serious is the ignorance or apathy to be found among those in the first and second worlds whose affluent life styles are chiefly responsible for the crisis. There too, most people are so taken up with personal and local affairs of the moment that they either remain largely unaware of the crisis or feel helpless to make any difference. It is there also that we find the vigorous critics who dismiss the prophetic voices as ‘doom merchants’, purveyors of unrest who grossly exaggerate the warning signs and ignore the capacity of human ingenuity to respond positively to them. These critics are people whose wealth, business interests and economic policies are dependent upon the very technology currently doing the damage. Largely driven by acquisitiveness, they appear to have shut their eyes to the consequences of their own self-interest.

### **A muffled detonation . . .**

What is it we should all be more aware of? First and perhaps foremost is the population explosion. It has been estimated that at the beginning of the Christian era the human population of the earth was some 300 million. Population growth remained relatively slow, so that by 1750 it had reached only about 800 million. Disease, epidemics, famine and high mortality among children always took their toll. But that has now been drastically changed by such otherwise beneficial developments as medical science, education in personal hygiene, better sanitation, and improved economic conditions.

Population growth has steadily accelerated since 1750. By 1800 the world population had reached one billion, and it had taken some two million years to do so. But by 1930 it had doubled to two billion. A third billion was added by 1960, a fourth by 1974, the fifth before 1990 and the sixth by 1998. During the twentieth century the human population of the earth quadrupled, and this in spite of the tens of millions who died from world wars or epidemics.

### **. . . becomes a super-bomb**

Present projections estimate that the global population will have reached eight billion people by 2025. We currently add the equivalent of another London every month and another China every fifteen years. We see this expansion only from the human point of view, but relative to all the other animals, the human species has suddenly expanded like a plague of locusts, and is eating them out of house and home.

Since the size of the planet remains the same, the increase in human population forces people to live more closely together. In 1800 only 3 per cent of the world’s population lived in urban areas. By 1900 it had grown to 13 per cent and this had reached 50 per cent by 2000. This trend not only produces slums but means that many fewer people have first-hand experience of the earth and the way it produces our food. This fact, coupled with the rapid process of modern globalization, means that humans are becoming increasingly dependent upon one another for their well-being and basic sustenance, so that any upset has increasingly



disastrous ramifications.

Until the 1950's the debate about human numbers remained largely academic. When artificial forms of contraception were coming into common use in the first half of the twentieth century, some people vigorously opposed them on religious grounds, regarding it purely as a matter of personal morality. Now that the global population is reaching the limits of sustainability on the earth, contraception has become a social concern as well as a personal one. The Roman Catholic rejection of all artificial forms of contraception and the still widespread moral condemnation of clinical abortion show that traditional morality is sadly out of touch with today's moral problems.

## **Collateral damage**

The population explosion is also drastically altering the racial composition of the world's population. For example, in 1950 the population of Africa was only half that of Europe, but by 2025 it could be three times that of Europe. By the year 2025 Nigeria's population could jump from 113 to 301 million, Kenya's from 25 to 77 million, Tanzania's from 27 to 84 million and Zaire's from 36 to 99 million. This means that nations already economically depressed, and in many cases saddled with massive international debt, will bear the burden of feeding between two and three times as many more mouths than they do at present. This predicament is setting the scene for a pandemic of unthinkable proportions.

A massive rise in population means a gigantic increase in the demands being made on the earth to provide the necessities of life — water, food, clothing, housing. Modern agricultural science and new technologies have made possible a great increase in food production. That is the positive side. Indeed the affluent countries have never been so well fed. But the radical imbalance in global wealth has meant increasing hunger in third world countries, most of them the very countries where the population is expanding fastest. Perhaps with more willingness to share the fruits of the earth, and more efficient means of distributing food, we could feed the global population adequately. But while this sanguine hope is continually promoted, it shows no signs of fulfilment. And even this argument will soon become invalid if we do not find a means of stabilizing the population of the globe.

## **The best-laid plans . . .**

But increasing food production to meet the needs of an expanding population has had some dangerous ancillary effects that may cumulatively spell disaster on the grand scale. To make the point quickly, I shall present the chain of cause and effect in a somewhat simplistic manner.

To meet the basic needs of an expanding population we must increase the food supply.

- To achieve this, agricultural science has come to depend on artificial fertilizers and pesticides, some of which have negative side effects.
- To house more people we must build more cities.
- To build more cities we must gobble up valuable agricultural land.



- To replace the land thus lost, as well as breaking in even more agricultural land to meet the increased food requirements, we destroy the forests. (The earth's forests are shrinking by 17 million hectares per year, the rain forest of the Amazon valley being the prime example.)
- By destroying the rainforests and other surface vegetation we are losing productive land by washing vast amounts of topsoil into the sea. The United States alone is reported to be losing four to six billion tonnes annually.
- But the rainforests, by absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen, have been instrumental in keeping in balance the atmospheric gases necessary for life.
- The increased level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as a result of the greatly increased burning of fossil fuels is now causing the phenomenon of global warming.
- Global warming is changing our weather patterns, bringing extremes of both storms and droughts, and thus seriously reducing food production.
- Global warming will soon cause the ice-caps to melt and the sea levels to rise, endangering the homes of hundreds of millions who live close to sea level.
- A number of our inventions and activities have had the effect of depleting the ozone layer, which protects us from the harmful effects of the sun's radiation. This not only increases the incidence of malignant cancers but can also bring about unforeseen genetic changes.

### **... can go astray.**

It was not until the twentieth century that the effects of such human factors as the population expansion and human technology began to rival natural forces. Together they are now sufficient to compromise the natural conditions of the surface of the planet. We are not only causing the extinction of many other species by destroying their natural habitats; we are endangering our own habitat by polluting air and water, the two most basic elements on which our existence depends.

The chain of causes linking these unfortunate phenomena is an example of the interconnectedness of all life on this planet. It vividly illustrates the reason why we had to create the new term 'ecology'. We are coming to have such a radically new understanding of all life on this planet that the term 'biosphere', coined less than a century ago, is now being replaced by 'ecosphere'.

Just as we have come to understand each organism internally as a complex living system, so also each species of organism constitutes with its natural environment a larger living system, which could be called a 'life field'. Thus all forms of planetary life are involved in, and dependent on, systems. The ecosphere is a complex system of systems within systems, and is itself dependent on the energy of the sun.

### **Wanted: equilibrium**

The continuing life of each species depends upon the preservation of the delicate balance that has





evolved between the organism and the environment that supports it. Each organism contains self-regulating mechanisms that help to preserve that balance. We can understand this better by thinking of the organism we know best — the human being. We have long been accustomed to think of ourselves as wholes, rather than as aggregations of parts. Indeed, it is only modern physiology that has fully identified the various organs, glands and immune systems that exist within the human body and promote its well-being. When one or more of those systems has its balance disturbed and can no longer function (as, say, in diabetes) our health (literally, our ‘wholeness’) suffers. We become ill and, if the balance cannot be restored, we die.

The earth both provides certain basic necessities and imposes certain requirements for the survival of all its creatures. Humans have evolved within those parameters. Our respiratory system is suited to both the nature and the proportions of the gases found in the atmosphere. Our bodies, which are 80 per cent water, reflect the earth’s abundant supply of that vital liquid. The ozone layer protects us from the sun’s harmful radioactivity. Our muscles and bone structure have evolved to meet the conditions of the earth’s gravitational pull. For humans to be healthy they must be able to breathe fresh air, drink clean water, eat adequate food, and live in an environment not too different from that in which they became human. They must even keep to a diet not too different from that of their ancestors going back tens of thousands of years. The more the environment changes from that in which a species has evolved, the more the health and behaviour of that species will show maladjustment. If the change is great enough, the health of the species will deteriorate to the point of extinction. We humans will always be earthlings, and like all other earthly creatures our existence depends upon our mother earth.

The fast-increasing human population has not only put added strain on the natural resources of the earth; more seriously, it has upset the ecological balance between various species and their sources of sustenance. By our sudden expansion in numbers, we humans are interfering with the food chains that have evolved over time, and are depriving many other creatures of sustenance to the point where first, they become extinct, and later, we face a similar fate. All food for human consumption, as well as that for many other species, comes either directly or indirectly from four ecological systems: croplands, grasslands, forests and fisheries. And each of these is being seriously depleted by a rapidly growing human population.

More than a dozen years ago 1575 distinguished scientists, including more than half of all living Nobel Laureates, signed a document that warned of the dire threat to western civilisation in the foreseeable future and appealed for help from industries, businesses, and religions. During the last four years 1300 scientists from 95 countries have produced a report entitled *Millennium Ecosystems Assessment*, which concludes that the human race has so ruinously squandered the earth’s natural resources during the last fifty years that the planet has been overdrawn, thereby saddling our descendants with an environmental debt of staggering proportions.

## **Christianity and crisis**

How shall Christianity — which has always claimed to be concerned with the salvation of humankind



— respond to this global ecological crisis? This is a question we must now explore.

In the light of what was said earlier it may seem odd that the idea of an imminent global catastrophe is not at all new for Christianity. On the contrary, such an expectation permeates the New Testament. In his earliest letters Paul referred to the imminent coming of wide and sudden destruction that would arrive without warning like a thief in the night. Early Christians believed the end of the world would come in their own lifetime — they referred to it as the *eschaton*, or end-time — and preached the Gospel as the answer to that dire threat. Paul and others declared that when in the last days the global catastrophe struck, Jesus Christ would return in glory and establish his everlasting kingdom. Only those who responded to the Gospel would be saved.

Many current New Testament scholars have cast doubt on whether this concern with the end-time was a part of the original teaching of Jesus; but, if not, it certainly played a prominent role in Christianity from the time of Paul onwards. It may well have been one of the factors contributing to the rapid spread of Christianity in the latter half of the first century. In any case, the first three Gospels, written some twenty to fifty years after Paul, placed warnings of the coming *eschaton* very prominently in the mouth of Jesus. In Mark we find Jesus warning of the tribulation shortly to come, on a scale such as had never been known since the beginning of time: the sun would be darkened, the moon would lose its light, the stars would fall from the sky and heaven and earth would pass away. In Luke, Jesus is said to have likened the imminent crisis to the Great Flood that wiped out nearly all of planetary life in the time of Noah.

Once this expectation of a world crisis became incorporated into Gospels that were later raised to the status of Holy Writ, it gained a permanent role in the Christian tradition. Of course Christian interest in it has waxed and waned through the centuries. A striking example is the fact that St. John's Gospel, written at the end of the first century, seems to have ignored it. Indeed, some scholarly interpreters have regarded this last Gospel as a fresh interpretation of the Christian message especially written for the time after the first wave of expectation had passed. One such scholar called it 'realized eschatology', a term by which he indicated the Gospel's assumption that the *eschaton* had already come, that Jesus had already returned, but not in the way originally expected; rather he was now present spiritually in the life of the church.

But even if that were the Fourth Gospel's intention, it could hardly erase the early convictions about an imminent end-time and the hope for the return of Jesus Christ, since these remained in the earlier Gospels and were subsequently spelt out in the Creeds. This fact in itself was enough to ensure that, from time to time throughout Christian history, there has been a resurgence of this eschatological expectation among Christians. In the nineteenth century the many Protestant sects that arose on the basis of biblical literalism nearly all focused on the imminent end of the world and the return of Jesus. The Jehovah's Witnesses still make much of it and the Seventh Day Adventists even included this hope of the Second Coming in their name.

Curiously enough, when modern methods of studying the Bible began to emerge a little over 200 years ago, scholars at first took little notice of this element in the New Testament. It was not until just over a



century ago that Johannes Weiss, followed by Albert Schweitzer, alerted biblical scholars to what then became known as the eschatological strand in the New Testament. Awareness of it came as a severe jolt to the liberal theologians of the day, for they found it difficult to reconcile these end-time expectations with much traditional theology, to say nothing of modern religious thought. The division of academic theology known as 'eschatology' has long focused its attention exclusively on the eternal destiny of the individual after death, rather than on the destiny of the earth. Generally speaking therefore, theologians at the beginning of the twentieth century concluded that the eschatological expectations embedded in the New Testament were simply part of the mythical thinking of the ancient world that had now become outmoded.

## **The rise of a dangerous counter-current**

Such an interpretation does not satisfy those who read the Bible literally. They take the New Testament references to the 'last days' very seriously. This is why, as fundamentalism has spread during the twentieth century, and is even moving into some mainline churches, we encounter the most widespread manifestation of end-of-world thinking to be found among Christians since the religion's earliest days. A Time-CNN poll taken in 2002 found 59 percent of Americans to believe that the prophecies found in the book of Revelation are about to come true - and nearly one-quarter to think the Bible actually predicted the 9/11 attacks. This explains why the best-selling books in America today are the 12 volumes of the 'Left Behind' series, written by the Christian fundamentalist Timothy LaHaye. By relating the words of the Bible to current events in the Middle East, he has prophesied a scenario of the future that has captivated the imagination of millions of Americans.

Here is a sketch. Israel will shortly occupy the rest of the lands long ago given to it by God. It will then be attacked by the legions of the antichrist - presumably the Arab nations and Russia. This will lead to the final showdown, biblically known as the battle of Armageddon. The messiah will return for the 'rapture', the process by which true believers will be lifted up from the earth and transported to Heaven. From their grandstand seat they will watch the fate of those 'left behind'. The latter will suffer years of tribulation after which the righteous will enter Heaven with the Son of God and sinners will be condemned to eternal hellfire.

To all reasonably thoughtful people living in the modern world this whole scenario is so preposterous as to be quite laughable. We *could* afford to ignore it were not the people buying these books the very ones who put George Bush back into the White House. They also lend strong moral support to Israel and the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and back it up with money. Far from fearing war with Islam, they welcome any future

Christian-Islamic conflict as a necessary step on the road that will bring them final redemption. They see the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as warm-up acts. Iran may be next. This is a message that can be heard regularly in the United States over 1600 Christian radio stations and 250 Christian TV stations.



## **An ominous concurrence**

The two very different apocalyptic pictures I have outlined constitute a tragic irony. At the very time when the Christian community is being challenged to direct its energies to the ecological crisis now looming as a present reality, its fundamentalist wing is giving its attention to a mythical global crisis expected two thousand years ago. It is alarming enough that fundamentalist Christians in the world's most powerful nation have become such a significant force that they now endanger international peace, but far worse, their vision of a coming Armageddon is blinding them and others to the real problem we face — the ecological crisis.

It is their misuse of the Bible that has led fundamentalists astray. Certainly the Bible records numerous warnings issued by the ancient prophets; however, they were speaking not to us, but to the people of their own times. It is salutary to recall that Jesus rebuked the religious people of his day for failing 'to interpret the signs of the times'. It has been left largely to prophets outside of the churches to read the signs of the times in our day. Christian fundamentalists completely reject and even despise today's secular prophets. They show no interest at all in the many environmental initiatives now being launched in an attempt to respond positively to the ecological crisis. Since the great majority of Christian fundamentalists live in the United States, it is no accident that this most powerful nation not only rejects such international protocols as the Kyoto agreements, but undertakes actions that directly endanger world peace.

Perhaps the most striking example of the fundamentalist mindset is James Gaius Watt, who rose to be Secretary of the Interior in the Reagan administration. He advocated giving developers access to national parks and natural resources. His argument was as transparent as it was chilling: 'The earth is merely a temporary way station on the road to eternal life. It is unimportant except as a place of testing to get into heaven. The earth was put here by the Lord for his people to subdue and to use for profitable purposes on the way to the hereafter.'

This line of reasoning did not end with the Reagan administration. The present administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's office on the environment recently declared that the re-election of President Bush now provides a mandate to relax pollution limits for ozone, to eliminate vehicle tailpipe inspections, to ease pollution standards for cars, to allow corporations to keep certain information about environmental problems secret from the public, and to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling.

To the degree that it reflects the administration's fundamentalist supporters, such an attitude shows Christianity at its very worst and in its most dangerous form. This form of traditional Christianity, however much it may still bring comfort to individuals, shows no concern for the salvation of the planet and is becoming a threat to the future of humankind. Clearly, the two threatened global catastrophes described above are fundamentally different from each another. That envisaged by the fundamentalists is solely in the hands of God; all that humans can do is to passively accept the salvation being offered by God in the Christian Gospel. The ecological crisis, on the other hand, is the result of human action and only humans can do something positive about it.



## **God helps those who help themselves**

If Christianity is to respond to the challenge contained in the manifesto issued by the ecological scientists, it must put its own house in order. It must first reject completely the ancient expectation of a final Armageddon and the literal return of Jesus Christ. Then it must replace this by an appreciative understanding of the real crisis facing humankind - the ecological crisis - and initiate a positive response to it. How can it do that? An American Catholic priest, Thomas Berry, has said 'we must move beyond a spirituality focused simply on the divine and the human to a spirituality concerned with survival of the natural world in its full splendour, its fertility, and its integral well-being'.

In the lectures that follow I shall try to sketch what this new spirituality may entail. It could appropriately be called the Greening of Christianity.



## 2. Beyond 'Our Father who art in heaven'

In 1967, in a now famous article in *Science*, University of California history professor Lynn White wrote, 'Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism ... has ... insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends'. He was referring, of course, to the biblical story of creation in which God created humankind, blessed them, and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'.

These words are clearly in conflict with our modern need to stabilize population growth, to husband the earth's natural resources, and to acknowledge the interdependence of all planetary species. Not only is this supposedly divine command no longer appropriate, it is positively dangerous now that we humans have filled the earth to overflowing and find it difficult to stop multiplying further. Furthermore, coming as they do from an ancient cultural context very different from our own, these words no longer command uncritical acceptance. Rather, they warrant moral condemnation in that they give humans unlimited power over all other creatures.

### A sharp indictment, a flawed defence

And Lynn White went further. 'Christianity', he said, 'bears a huge burden of guilt for the human attitude that we are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim ... We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man'.

This is the first instance I know of in which Christianity, far from being simply rebuked for not taking sufficient interest in the growing ecological crisis, is actually accused of being the cause of it. This serious, and to many Christians, ridiculous charge does not come from an atheistic opponent of Christianity. White was in fact a practising Presbyterian, yet he felt it incumbent upon himself to draw attention to the dangers he found inherent in traditional Christianity.

Many theologians, of course, came to the defence of Christianity against White's charges. In a short essay in *Man and Nature*, A.R. Peacocke pointed out that 'the exploitative, rapacious, attitude to nature', which White quite rightly condemned, was by no means uniformly encouraged in Christian society. Christianity had also produced both a St. Francis and a St. Benedict. Peacocke conceded that nature had been de-sacralized by the Old Testament prophets, but he contended that in the biblical view 'man is a trustee, steward and manager for that which is not his own and which is of value for its own sake to God'.

To be sure, the Bible does refer to stewardship. We find it mentioned, for example, in the well-known parable of the Talents. But nowhere does the Bible teach that the human relationship to the world of nature is one of stewardship. This sort of Christian teaching, commendable though it is, has emerged only very



recently, and in direct response to our growing awareness of the ecological crisis. Thus a number of books written from a Christian perspective now expound the stewardship of the earth's resources as a Christian duty.

But is a call to stewardship sufficient as the Christian response to the ecological crisis? Anne Primavesi, for example, has pointed out that even the idea of stewardship can be exploitative and unecological, for it is commonly the task of stewards to maximise the profits both for themselves and for their employers. Such an approach takes little or no account of the inherent rights or worth of the earth's resources, particularly its livestock. Stewardship, in short, still assumes an anthropocentric attitude towards nature and shows no appreciation of the fact that we humans are ourselves part of nature.

Simply learning to be better stewards, then, is not enough. Christianity must make more radical changes in its understanding of our place and role in nature. In 1973 the celebrated historian Arnold Toynbee put his finger on the problem when he wrote, 'Some of the major maladies of the present day world - in particular the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures, and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured - can be traced back to a religious cause, and this cause is the rise of monotheism'.

## **The origin of monotheism**

To understand why Toynbee made such a serious and alarming charge against the monotheistic traditions we need to understand how monotheism arose. This is no frivolous proviso, for only in very recent times have we been in a position to conceive of what Karen Armstrong has brilliantly outlined in her recent best seller, *A History of God*. Throughout most of Christian history the reality of God as the Creator and controller of the universe appeared to be so self-evidently true that it was not open to question. Only since the time of Darwin, has it become clear that all languages, all cultures and all religions are of human origin. Since the very concept 'god' is the creation of human imagination, 'the history of God' catalogues the wide variety of ways in which this idea has been understood. It is not a little ironic that the Bible proved to be an important documentary source for writing such a history.

Let me briefly sketch the rise of monotheism. All people of primal societies — take for example the pre-European Maori — saw themselves dependent upon the forces of nature. They personified these forces as unseen gods and spirits who controlled all the changing phenomena of the natural world. These gods must be obeyed if humans were to continue to enjoy the necessities of life provided by them. Chief among the gods were the Sky-Father and the Earth-Mother. The Sky-Father presided over the heavenly bodies, and controlled thunder, lightning and storms. The Earth-Mother provided for humankind the fruits she produced from her bountiful vegetation.

In our tradition, the beginning of true monotheism is to be found in the Israelite prophets, who over a period of some five hundred years weaned the people of Israel from their dependence upon the gods of nature - first by denying they had any reality and then by replacing them with the one God Yahweh. Henceforth, the



prophets declared, the whole of humankind was to worship and obey only Him. This was the very first commandment: 'I am Yahweh your God. You shall acknowledge no other gods before me'. This God was not only the Creator and the Provider; he was also the Lord of history. Thus came to birth the kind of monotheism that has been the foundation of faith for Jew, Christian and Muslim ever since.

## **From the Many to the One**

This transition from polytheism to monotheism took some centuries and was more complex than the simplistic summary I shall now sketch, but in effect what happened was this. Yahweh, the national god of the Israelites who delivered them from slavery in Egypt, had originated both as the God of war who led people to victory, and also as the Sky-God, who manifested his wrath against misdeeds in storms and droughts. The well-known biblical term, 'Lord of hosts' can be translated, both as 'God of the armies' and as 'God of the stars'. It is this Israelite Sky-God, Yahweh, who eventually became transformed into the monotheistic deity of Jew, Christian and Muslim. That is why we continue to address him, as we do in the Lord's Prayer, with the familiar words 'Our Father who art in heaven'. In this transition Yahweh became universalised and all other gods were banished from existence.

At the time, this movement from polytheism to monotheism was a great intellectual and spiritual advance. Its replacement of multiplicity with a simple unity provides an interesting example of Ockham's razor, the philosophical principle that simple theories are to be preferred to complex ones. The transition to monotheism had the potential to unify all humankind by means a common faith. The capacity of monotheism to win universal conviction is shown by the fact that despite its fragmentation into three often antagonistic subdivisions, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic, it has lasted more than two and a half thousand years.

## **Monotheism flawed**

But as we have only recently begun to recognize, monotheism brought with it several unfortunate corollaries. The first is that God, having originated as the Sky Father, has always been spoken of in male terms. This has had the effect of nurturing and authorising patriarchal societies in which women were demeaned. As Mary Daly, the most outspoken exponent of feminist theology so trenchantly said, 'Where God is male, the male reigns supreme'. Women came to be considered too carnal to perform holy and priestly functions, and lest they deflect males from the path of humble obedience to God, their fleshly charms needed to be hidden. Even such recent theologians as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were still defending the supremacy of men over women on theological grounds. As the women's liberation movement rightly contended, it has now become necessary to take our cue from the title of Mary Daly's book and move *Beyond God the Father*.

Second, the advent of monotheism annihilated the goddesses of nature so successfully that the Hebrew Bible does not contain a single word meaning 'goddess'. One or two personal names of ancient Canaanite goddesses have survived; we find Ashtoreth, goddess of fertility, but only after her name had been





deliberately disfigured by replacing its vowels with those of the Hebrew word for ‘shame’ — an ancient example of what we might term ‘theological correctness’.

Thus the original gender balance existing in polytheism disappeared in monotheism, and women were left at a spiritual disadvantage, as they had no feminine figure or icon with which they could identify. To fill this spiritual vacuum is probably the reason for the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition, and for her acclamation as the Queen of Heaven.

Third, because the Earth-Mother was one of the gods of nature to be annihilated, the earth itself became desacralized. All of the sacred power it once possessed was effectively transferred to another world - the heavenly dwelling place of God the Father - and the forces of nature now became impersonal phenomena that God could control by way of reward and punishment. Even worse, Christians came to regard the earth as a fallen world and found evidence of this in the way species preyed on one another, in what but recently was proverbially called ‘nature red in tooth and claw’.

Fourth, monotheism led to the dualistic view of reality that so dominated traditional Christianity up until modern times. It helped to deepen the contrast between the earthly and the heavenly, the material and spiritual, the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal. And thus the natural world, previously venerated as the source of the necessities of life, came to be seen as degraded, under divine judgment, and destined for destruction.

Fifth, monotheism preserved in this one God such personal qualities and virtues as had been found in the gods of nature. Although capable of being angry and vengeful, he came to be seen primarily as all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving. God was the infinite mind who planned the universe, provided it with its order and wonder, and continued to control its affairs. All the gratitude, fear and wonder which the original polytheists had felt towards the gods of nature were now to be directed to ‘Our Father who art in heaven’

## **Dangerous ambivalences**

Humankind’s pious worship of the gods of nature had previously been held in check its greedy impulse to exploit nature. But the rise of mono-theism, as Toynbee observed, ‘removed this age-old restraint’, freed humankind to do what it wished with the natural world, and even encouraged it to exert domination over all living creatures. This is why he declared monotheism to be responsible for the coming ecological crisis.

We should note in passing, however, that the desacralization of the earth did produce some positive results. Most important, it permitted and even fostered the rise of empirical science, for only after the earth had lost its presumed sacred power did the first scientists feel free to experiment with natural phenomena. The German physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker suggested in his 1959 Gifford lectures on *The Relevance of Science* that except for Christian monotheism, modern science would not have evolved as it did. ‘The concept of strict and generally valid laws of nature could hardly have arisen without the Christian concept of creation. In this sense I call modern science a legacy of Christianity’.

The enterprise of empirical science has undoubtedly been of great benefit to humankind, particularly



during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But now, science itself is beginning to set off alarm bells, first with nuclear weapons and now with genetic modification. We are coming to recognize that our ability to control and even modify nature has become so powerful as to threaten devastating effects on the future. Jurgen Moltmann, one of today's leading German theologians, has said much the same as Toynbee: 'It was the Western "religion of modern times" that freed the way for the secularisation of nature. The ancient view about the harmony between the forces of nature has been destroyed - destroyed by modern monotheism on the one hand, and by scientific mechanism on the other. Modern monotheism has robbed nature of its divine mystery and has broken its spell.'

## **A necessary step**

Because of the ecological crisis now looming, it has become necessary to move beyond monotheism - beyond the idea of 'Our Father in heaven, omnipotent creator and controller of the earth'. As Jurgen Moltmann explains, 'If modern society is to have any future, what we need above all is a new respect for nature, and a new reverence for the life of all created things'.

But how can Christianity move beyond monotheism? Does not that belief underlie all Christian teaching? The answer to this question, strangely enough, is 'Yes!' and 'No!' Yes, because most Christians, including most clergy and theologians still defend monotheism and focus on the heavenly Father as if He alone were God. No, because they too conveniently forget that by the fifth century Christianity had abandoned true monotheism and replaced it with trinitarianism. Indeed, Christianity's innovative modification of the doctrine helped Islam spread as rapidly as it did among Eastern Christians, for in this regard Islam saw itself as a movement commissioned by Allah to restore a pure monotheism.

Christianity's new image of God, the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was made necessary to do justice to its unique new doctrine of the Incarnation - the declaration that God had enfleshed himself in the man Jesus. This doctrine, which shocked Jews and Muslims into reinforcing their pure monotheism, implied that there no longer exists an impassable gulf between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, between the supernatural and the natural worlds. The gap has been bridged; God has come down to earth.

The doctrine of the incarnation was the first step in reconnecting the divine Creator with creation, or what we call nature. This radically new departure from strict monotheism would lead at last to the modern secular world. That it should have taken so long should not surprise us. Just as the transition from polytheism to monotheism was a slow and complex process that took some centuries, so the movement beyond monotheism has been gradual and multi-faceted.

The twin doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Holy Trinity proved too revolutionary even for most Christians to cope with, let alone Jews and Muslims. The human Jesus became lost from view behind the wholly divine Christ, who was proclaimed a kind of Hindu-style 'avatar' of God the Father. The radical significance of the incarnation was thus obliterated and the gulf between heaven and earth reappeared. The



doctrine of the incarnation had been hi-jacked by the increasingly dualistic view of reality that dominated the Middle Ages.

## **Nature finds a voice**

Yet even in that theologically reactionary climate there arose a brave attempt to reconnect God with the world of nature. St. Francis exhorted Christians to value nature for its own sake. He saluted all earthly creatures as his brothers and sisters and, in the well-known hymn he bequeathed to us he even speaks of 'Dear Mother Earth'. He founded the order of the Franciscan Friars, from which came Roger Bacon, the man who took the first practical steps towards empirical science. Then followed another Franciscan, William of Ockham, whose philosophy spelled the end of metaphysical speculation and helped to promote the Renaissance, whose humanist scholars and artists affirmed the inherent value and creative potential in the human condition. People began to look with new eyes at the natural world and the universe itself. Artists found beauty and wonder not hitherto experienced in craggy mountains and natural landscapes untouched by humans.

The Renaissance led to the Protestant Reformation, which in turn precipitated the closure of the monastic institutions and forced thousands of nuns and monks out into the secular world. Then came Galileo, whose scientific exploration of the heavens demonstrated that the heavenly bodies were of the same physical order as the earth.

All of these events occurring in fairly rapid succession propelled Western Christianity into a period of accelerating cultural change - one marked by an ever-increasing focus on the physical universe. The inevitable result was the dissolution of the dualistic world-view and its replacement by today's monistic view of the space-time continuum as the only reality. We now commonly refer to this process of cultural change as secularisation, seldom recalling that it is the long term result of the doctrine of the incarnation. Although Christians have been all too slow to realise this, it was acknowledged by the Anglican theologian J. R. Illingworth, who as long ago as 1891 wrote in his essay on the Incarnation, '**Secular civilization has co-operated with Christianity to produce the modern world. It is nothing less than the providential correlative and counterpart of the incarnation**'.

## **What does 'God' mean?**

But in this process what has happened to the God of monotheism? What does it mean to speak of God if we go beyond 'Our Father who art in heaven'? What is now to be our image of God? Ever more anxiously in the last 400 years the Western world has been wrestling with such questions and propounding a variety of answers. Those who suggested new answers did not receive much help from the church; indeed they often found themselves ostracized, for as a rule the church forbade such questions to be asked.

One proposed answer was that God is to be found everywhere in the world of nature. Known as pantheism, this view was pioneered in the seventeenth century by the Jewish philosopher Spinoza. He began



to treat the terms ‘God’ and ‘Nature’ as interchangeable. I doubt whether he realized how close he was to the attitude of the ancient Israelite sages. They had largely ignored the kind of monotheism promoted by the prophets. They did not expect to receive any direct messages from God, nor did they look to God to solve their problems for them. When they spoke of God, as they occasionally did, they used the word as if it were a symbolic name for the way things work in the natural world. (The Hebrew language then had no word meaning ‘nature’.)

Even Jesus of Nazareth seems to have been such a sage; what else can one make of his insistence that ‘God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust’? Thus already in the biblical tradition there is a stream of thought that identifies God with nature and in such a way as to acknowledge the amoral character of natural forces. The recent disastrous tsunami affords a useful illustration. Pure monotheists felt themselves obliged to interpret this as an act of divine judgment, as the Anglican Dean of Sydney is said to have done. But the Israelite sages would have said, ‘That is the way that nature operates and one must learn to respond accordingly’. That was the attitude of

Jesus in his famous parable commending the wisdom of the man who in anticipation of storm and flood built his house on a firm foundation.

But the pantheistic answer of equating God with nature has not proved to be wholly satisfactory. First, it soon makes all reference to God redundant and hence leads to atheism. This may be illustrated by the famous reply of the French scientist Laplace to Napoleon. When Laplace presented his astronomical explanation of the movement of the heavenly bodies, Napoleon asked him about the role of God in his theory and Laplace replied, ‘I have no need of that hypothesis’. Here is Ockham’s razor with a vengeance: our growing understanding of the way nature works obviates the need to postulate an infinite divine mind controlling its operation. The heavenly bodies, wind and rain, earthquakes and tsunamis operate according to nature’s fixed laws, which in turn are quite amoral and completely disinterested with respect to how they affect earthly life.

Pantheism also leaves unanswered other questions which monotheism appeared to answer: Why is nature here at all? Why is there something and not nothing? To respond to these, the answer known as deism was formulated. It retained sufficient of the monotheistic God to affirm him as the creator of the universe, the first cause, and the designer of the laws of nature. But having set everything in orderly motion, the deist God played no further active role in the world, either in physics (so miracles did not occur) or in human history (he did not answer prayer or direct human history).

The glaring omission in pantheism, atheism and deism was any reference to the supreme moral values of justice, compassion, and love - that have long been claimed as attributes of God. How were they to be accounted for?

## **A Daniel come to judgment**

The first person to bring them into the equation was Ludwig Feuerbach. In 1841 his epoch-making book, *The Essence of Christianity*, shocked contemporary readers by asserting that ‘God’ is a humanly created



concept. Although the Bible tells us God made human beings in his image, the truth (said Feuerbach) is that humans have made God in *their* image. Using the psychological technique of projection (widely understood today but unknown in Feuerbach's time) he argued that our ancient forbears had unconsciously projected onto this humanly created concept such moral qualities as justice, love, compassion, and forgiveness - which all humans revere and to which they aspire. Thus reassigned, they became greatly magnified and were judged to be the divine attributes. 'The personality of God,' he said, 'is nothing else than the projected personality of man.' Today some people find that conclusion almost a truism, while others reject it as fiercely as they did in Feuerbach's day. 'God is our highest idea', said Feuerbach; and curiously enough that is how Anselm, 800 years earlier, began his famous 'proof' of the existence of God.

What is often overlooked, however, is that Feuerbach's deconstruction of God did not stop there. First he showed that the very essence of Christianity was its doctrine of the incarnation. Making the human Jesus the new basis of religion and treating him as divine meant that the heavenly throne was now empty. As Paul said, Jesus Christ represented the new humanity that had to accept responsibility for functions and goals previously projected on to the Father in heaven.

Unfortunately, Feuerbach's subsequent book, *The Essence of Religion*, never received the public attention of the first one. In it he pointed out that since his first book had dealt only with the moral and personal attributes of God, more remained to be said. When viewed as the creator and controller of the natural world, God had taken over the functions of the earlier gods of nature; accordingly, the monotheistic image of God also embodied what Feuerbach called the 'personified essence of nature'.

It is important to see what Feuerbach had thus done. He had deconstructed the God concept into two quite different orders of reality: the world of nature (as emphasized by the pantheists and deists) and the collection of supreme human values (as emphasized by the theists). As Feuerbach saw it, God was the projection of both the essence of nature and the essence of humanity - and therefore the monotheistic God had long served as the way to understand both the natural world and the human condition.

## **The Resolution of theology into two areas**

Now if theology means the study of God, then Feuerbach's deconstruction of God has effectively resolved theology into two complementary areas -the study of nature on the one hand and the study of humanity and its values on the other. An interesting way of illustrating this is to observe what has happened to Western institutions of higher learning in the last 800 years. At the time they were founded it was thought that all knowledge could be understood as a manageable unity: hence the name 'university'. But the mediaeval university was based on, and revolved round, the Faculty of Theology, the discipline then known as the Queen of the sciences.

Perhaps the last person to attempt to expound all knowledge as a unity was Thomas Aquinas, when he set out to reconcile Aristotle's philosophy of nature with what was assumed to be the truth received by divine revelation. This he did in his renowned *Summa Theologica*, which he did not live to finish. But his synthesis



was never universally accepted and eventually broke down, opening the way for the explosion of academic disciplines in modern times.

They fall into two main groups: the physical sciences study the natural world, while the social sciences and the arts study humanity and culture. These two groups have now replaced the theology faculty that by itself sufficed in the twelfth century, when simple monotheism was universally accepted. What is more, by the middle of the twentieth century there was such an evident rift between these two groups that the scientist C. P. Snow wrote some widely read novels deploring what he judged to be the bifurcation of society into 'two cultures' that no longer understood each other. By the end of the century the rift was being partially healed by a growing mutual respect among scholars of different fields. Let us look briefly in turn at these two areas, which both began as provinces of theology.

I was thinking of that foundational discipline when I said earlier that this series could well have been entitled 'From theo-logy to eco-logy'. I meant that we have moved far beyond focusing our attention on an unseen personal God who designed and controls the world in which we live. We now focus our attention on the physical universe itself. This we have found to be almost infinite in space and time and to operate according to its own internal laws. And even though our mind's eye catches occasional glimpses of a greater dimension, we acknowledge ourselves to be a part of the natural world - physical organisms who live and die like all the simpler forms of life in this complex web we call the ecosphere. If we are to live life to its full potential, we need to understand the ecosphere and respond to it appropriately.

One of the most important lessons we learn from ecology is that the forces of nature do not operate according to any moral plan or ultimate purpose. Rather, nature operates according to what Jacques Monod has called a process of 'chance and necessity'. Ecology leaves us with no assurance like that of monotheism that we live in a moral world, where everything will work out for the best in the end. Since nature shows no special interest in the human race, when we move beyond monotheism we have no divine deliverer to turn to. Rather, we must now treat the forces of nature with the respect they deserve, for our life and well-being depend on them, and we know not when or how they may bring life to an end. (Witness the sudden end of the age of dinosaurs!) Such a view of nature, incidentally, is not wholly foreign to the biblical tradition. We find it, as we have seen, in the sages. More than two thousand years ago Ecclesiastes observed that we humans are all subject to 'time and chance'.

## **Our search for value and meaning**

Now let us turn to the second branch of learning, that concerned with human culture and values - and the one to which traditional academic theology retreated. When our ancient ancestors began to ask basic questions about human existence, their answers became the world's many cultures and religions. This why the concept of God came more and more to embody our highest values and satisfy our search for meaning and purpose. And though the concept of God has been deconstructed and can no longer be taken to be the name of a supernatural, thinking and acting being, the term 'God' may still remain useful as both the



symbolic embodiment of our desire to find meaning in life and the metaphoric equivalent of such values as love, justice, truth, and compassion, which continue to lay powerful claims upon us.

The theologian Gordon Kaufman, for example, thinks we need this traditional word 'God' if only as a symbol, because it provides us with 'an ultimate point of reference' and thereby enables us to unify and order our experience of reality in the mental world we construct for ourselves. The image of God that remains, therefore, is the sum total of the very values once described as his attributes. God is the symbolic name for the aggregate of our highest values.

This process had begun by New Testament times for that text already affirms that 'God is love'. In modern times the symbolization has gone much further. Mahatma Ghandi, for example said that 'God is truth'. Leo Tolstoy (in *War and Peace*) says 'Life is God and to love life is to love God.' Don Cupitt, in making a study of how our daily language is changing, found a large collection of phrases now coming into common usage that include the term 'life'. 'How's life treating you?' 'That's what life is all about!' 'I need to move on in life'. 'Get a life!' It is as if in daily secular speech we are now unconsciously turning to the word 'life' as the natural replacement for the once common term 'God'.

Gordon Kaufman's book *In Face of Mystery* comes to this conclusion: 'To believe in God is to commit oneself to a particular way of ordering one's life and action. It is to devote oneself to working towards a fully humane world within the ecological restraints here on planet Earth, while standing in piety and awe before the profound mysteries of existence.'

Clearly, the Greening of Christianity stands in strong contrast to much of the historical tradition. In the latter we humans saw ourselves as helpless creatures, passively dependent on the grace and power of an external supernatural being. In Green Christianity we find that the responsibility for our future and that of the ecosphere has been placed upon us. By our chosen actions we must en flesh the values we once regarded as the attributes of God. That is what the incarnation means. We are required to be perfect in the way God symbolized perfection. Of course, as you no doubt recognize, I am simply quoting what Jesus the sage said in the Sermon on the Mount.

Are we really up to that? The impending ecological crisis gives us no option but to try. In the next lecture we shall explore what that attempt will entail.



### 3. The Ecological Imperative, A new Ethical Dimension

**W**hen I was a theological student, one of the chief textbooks on Christian Ethics was *The Divine Imperative*, written by the celebrated Swiss theologian Emil Brunner. This 700-page tome, published in English in 1937, is not only laborious to study but strikes today's reader as rather odd. It discussed divorce and contraception, but never once mentioned homosexuality - a topic that in our time so divides Christians. Written in the aftermath of World War I, it declared war to have outlived its purpose, but made no reference to peacemaking. These points strikingly exemplify how much our ethical problems have changed in seventy years. I refer to the book because I have half borrowed its title by way of recalling that Christian ethics was long assumed to be an exposition of the human behaviour that God has commanded — hence *The Divine Imperative*.

But the disintegration of monotheism that was outlined in the last lecture means that ethics can no longer be based on divine commandments supposedly revealed in the distant past. Some have interpreted this to mean we are now free to do whatever we like. Nietzsche thought the death of God would cause the collapse of the whole system of Christian thought. Dostoevsky complained that the absence of God meant that everything is permissible. Not so!

#### **A new dispensation**

As long ago as the end of the Enlightenment, the great modern philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) had shifted the base of ethics from divine revelation to what he called 'the moral law within'. He was referring to the experience of a sense of moral duty, and called it 'the categorical imperative'. Of course, this radical shift has made ethical decision-making a great deal more difficult than it used to be. It is no longer simply a matter of debating how to interpret a divine commandment. Now we must first decide why it is that some actions are to be judged right and others wrong. This has led to what is known as 'Situation Ethics', a process by which one must examine all the factors in the situation that impinge on the ethical dilemma and then decide which course of action will promote the maximum well-being for all concerned.

The global crisis outlined in the first lecture is alerting us to the radically new situation in which the human race finds itself, one that calls for making ethical decisions of a kind it has never had to face before. Unfortunately, we are ill-prepared for this task, partly because our Christian past has left us unskilled in the new mode of ethical decision-making, and partly because too few are even aware of the critical situation in which we now live.

To contrast this new situation with the old, we need only recall that until 200 years ago the whole of the Western world lived by the story of human origins as told by the Bible. Nearly everyone accepted as fundamental to ethics the idea that the earth and all within it was created by God, who still holds it in his control; that He made us to be like him and, to guide us, he revealed his Divine will; and that since this has





been permanently recorded in Holy Writ, our duty is simply to obey. It is by this formula that traditional Christianity still struggles to decide such contemporary issues as birth control, homosexual behaviour, and the ordination of women.

But for all reasonably well-informed and thoughtful people, the biblical story of origins has now been replaced by an entirely new story; this scenario sketches the changing universe from the 'bigbang' onwards, through the evolution of life on this planet, followed more recently by the evolution of human culture. The new story of origins not only leaves us with an entirely different picture of the vast universe we live in, but describes our relationship with the earth in strikingly different terms.

## **Reading from a new page**

This modern understanding of the source of our being indicates that while we rightly value what we may call the spiritual dimension of the human condition, there is no absolute gulf between us and the other living creatures. As Teilhard de Chardin so wonderfully put it, all physical matter has the potential for spirituality. Therefore, the spiritual dimension of human experience can never be divorced from the physical, and the supposed dichotomy between spiritual and material is spurious. We humans are psycho-physical organisms. We must abandon the widespread but false notion that we are spiritual beings only temporarily encased in physical bodies — a notion that derives, after all, not from the Bible but from the Greek philosopher Plato.

Furthermore, the new story of origins returns us humans to our proper place among the many and diverse life forms on this planet. As the American Catholic priest Thomas Berry has said, everything on earth is cousin to everything else. This has now been scientifically demonstrated by the genetic code, the mechanism that determines the physiological structure of every creature and that shows how we are related to all other forms of planetary life. We humans have no special rights of ownership and dominion over the others.

Our problem, says Berry, is that we are living between the two stories. While we are still trying to accept the implications of the new story, much that belonged to the old story still lingers on in our thinking - even though it has become not only obsolete but positively dysfunctional.

## **"I set before you today fact and fiction ..."**

In the old story we were subject to the dictates of the Heavenly Father, and believed ourselves to have been given dominion over the earth. In the new story we have lost our privileged place in the web of planetary life and we are subject to the same forces of nature as are all other living organisms.

In the old story storms, droughts and earthquakes were 'acts of God' and were thought to have moral significance. In the new story the forces of nature have no personal interest in us at all. Yet although totally amoral, they can determine whether we live or die, and we ignore them at our peril.

These forces constitute the parameters within which all planetary life has evolved. Humans have evolved within limits set by the earth's conditions. Our physique, for example, is suited to the mass of the planet



earth; we could not survive on a planet with Jupiter's gravity. Fascinating though it may be to imagine future space travel to distant stars, it will almost certainly be never more than a delightful fantasy. We are earth creatures, who can live only within the delicately balanced natural forces, geographical conditions, and interdependence of species that constitute the ecology of our planetary home. Because of our new understanding of our origins and of the nature of our ecological home, the ethic that concerns us today is no longer the divine imperative but what may be called the Ecological Imperative.

But no one should conclude that the shift from the divine imperative to the ecological imperative represents an ominous new heresy, for it involves not rejection, but reorientation. 'The Greening of Christianity' means that Christian thinking must now incorporate all that we have learned about the human species from the human sciences — including, of course, the relatively new science of anthropology. (Few today are aware that the term 'anthropology' originated as a theological term; it referred to the Christian doctrine of the human condition.) In the last two hundred years our understanding of the human species and of its relationship to the natural world has changed so drastically that, as Feuerbach showed, theology has been turned upside down — or more appropriately, inside out.

## **Common ground**

That being the case, one might expect to find little or nothing in common with the earlier Christian doctrine of humankind. Surprisingly, this is not so. The biblical myth of origins declared with striking boldness that we humans are formed of the dust of the ground, and when our lives come to an end we return to dust. Three thousand years later we still use the words of that ancient story at our funeral services - 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. The biblical proposition that we are made of earth remains basically unchallenged, though of course we are now more sophisticated and know that the 'dust' we are made of consists chiefly of atoms of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen. And whereas the biblical myth pictured God forming us much as a child makes mudpies, we are now aware of the complex nature of human physiology. The lifeless atoms of which we are composed are united in the most intricate designs to form the myriads of living cells and the many internal organs that constitute the human organism.

But common ground with the ancient myth does not stop there. We are becoming increasingly aware of how fundamentally our amazing internal systems depend upon an appropriate environment. And in its quaint but profound way, the biblical myth acknowledges this new ecological insight as well. After the fashioning of the human body from dust, says the Bible, God breathed his breath into it. Since Hebrew uses the same word to mean breath, spirit, wind, and air, we can translate the ancient myth into modern terminology by saying that though we humans are made of the same elements as are found in the ground beneath our feet, we come alive and stay alive only if we supported by the correct atmosphere. Indeed, we cannot live more than about two minutes without breathing it.

What in ancient times was understood simply as our dependence on the breath of God has in modern times become expanded into the highly sophisticated study of ecology. The ecosphere has now become, to



use Paul's quoted phrase, the God 'in whom we live and move and have our being'. In 1993 Sallie McFague wrote *The Body of God*, in which she proposed an ecological theology centered on this striking new image: 'The body of God is not a body but all the different, peculiar, particular bodies about us'. She called this an incarnational theology, for it points out what our forbears understood and treated as the divine is to be found all around us and within us in the ecosphere. This being so, we must respect every 'body', animate and inanimate, in the natural world, and value it for its own sake and not as a means to an end. We are immediately reminded of words attributed to Jesus: 'Whatever you do for the least of these my brothers, you do for me'.

Thus worship directed to the Heavenly Father is to be replaced by our grateful acknowledgment of the ecosphere's all-surpassing worth to us, and dutiful obedience to the God of heaven changed to devotion to the ecological imperative of doing what the ecosphere requires of us. Even the doctrine of sin, so prominent in traditional Christianity, has its new counterpart. The belief that Adam's disobedience condemned all humans to a tragic state of alienation from the God is superseded by our alarming awareness that humanity is currently at war with the very planet that has given it birth and sustenance.

### **Take a breath ...**

To discuss the ecological imperative further, let us start with the atmosphere, for it is the most critical parameter set by the ecosphere for planetary creatures. From time immemorial our ancestors simply took the atmosphere for granted. It is only in recent times that we have been forced to realise how dependent we are upon it and how we have evolved to fit its particular mixture of gases - one that consists chiefly of nitrogen and oxygen and has been stable for some millions of years. If we travel to the moon we must take our supply with us. Even climbing high mountains often requires extra supplies of oxygen. Every time we board a plane we are solemnly reminded by the cabin attendant how to use the oxygen supply in an emergency.

Some gases, even in small quantities, are highly toxic to us. One of these is carbon monoxide; yet since the introduction of the internal combustion engine we have been releasing this substance into the atmosphere in ever-greater quantities. The air in some heavily populated cities is now so polluted as to be unhealthy, and in some cases positively dangerous. One of the most basic ecological imperatives, then, is to control every practice that pollutes our most basic requirement for life and thus to keep the composition of the atmosphere stable.

This task points to the mysterious and wonderful character of the earth's ecology. We humans, along with all other breathing creatures on the planet, have for millions of years been unknowingly co-operating with the vegetation in keeping the right balance of the gases in the atmosphere. We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. Plants and trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. This balancing act, which has long kept the composition of the atmosphere stable, is only one of many of the earth's phenomena which led the scientist James Lovelock to liken the earth itself to an organism whose living skin is the biosphere in the same way as bark is the living skin of the tree. For this reason he referred to the earth as



Gaia, reviving the name for Mother Earth found in ancient Greek mythology.

## **... and be inspired**

Of course Lovelock did not mean that the earth is a thinking, planning being, but that it has many characteristics of a living system. The earth's outer layer is made up of all forms of life from the viruses to the great whales, from tiny ocean algae to the giant redwoods, all living within their own special eco-systems and yet integrated with the atmosphere, the ocean, and the surface rocks and soils. But all of these have evolved in such a complex network of delicate balances with one another that the earth appears to have fashioned for itself an all encompassing and self-regulatory system. Just as our own bodies have immune systems that protect us from disease and thermostats to keep us at a constant temperature, so the earth seems to regulate itself, keeping the climate constant and comfortable, and preserving just the right amount of oxygen in the air and the right amount of salt in the oceans.

When we humans upset these balances - say by increasing the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere — we are attacking the earth's regulatory system in a manner analogous to the way AIDS ravages an individual. But as participants in this amazing ecosphere, we are obliged by the ecological imperative to understand it, respect it, and take appropriate actions to nurture it and preserve all its balances.

The earth has been a living, evolving system for some three and a half billion years. We humans are very late comers on the scene. If we threaten the ecosphere too severely, it will eliminate us from its system - though no more by conscious decision than one's personal immune system eliminates invading bacteria. Just as individuals can cause their own death by foolishly defying the law of gravity, so the human species can effect its own extinction along with that of many other species by wilful and thoughtless interference with the ecological conditions on which our survival depends.

Our growing knowledge of how life has evolved, and of the earthly parameters within which all creatures live, has amounted to a new revelation that supplements but largely replaces the supposed revelations of the past. Unfortunately, those who focus their attention too closely on the divine epiphanies of the past tend to be blind to present secular manifestations. That is why, as we noted in the first lecture, it has been left largely to prophets outside of the churches to read the signs of the times in our day.

This should not surprise us. The periods of new growth and development in the Judeo-Christian tradition have always started on the margins rather than at the centre of the tradition. Jesus himself was neither a priest nor one schooled in the rabbinic academies, but a wandering sage. Similarly, the pioneers of the modern secular world lived on the margins of Christian orthodoxy. It is only to have been expected, then, that the first to become aware of the new revelations would be found on the fringes of Christian society rather than at the centre.

## **Secular prophets**

These prophets from the secular branches of Western culture are now loudly proclaiming the ecological



imperative through books, lectures and protests. They are calling us all to be active in stabilizing population, in halting our wasteful and destructive ways, in avoiding pollution of air and water, in conserving the earth's non-renewable resources, and in changing to renewable sources of energy. The good news is that these ecological imperatives are being adopted by many individuals and voluntary groups, as well as by local, national, and international forms of government; conservation and environmentalism are now being acknowledged as highly desirable social aims.

Thomas Berry welcomes these moves as the beginning of a vast sea change in human consciousness, one that will take us forward to a new understanding of what it means to be human. He believes that such a radical re-evaluation of life and the resulting new sense of values will not only lead us out of our self-centred worlds, but even come to transcend our national loyalties. We may call it the rise of Green Consciousness.

It is manifesting itself world wide in a great variety of ways. At both national and international level, there are now ministries and commissions devoted to the care of the environment. A number of major international conferences have been convened and such new organizations as Greenpeace and the Bird and Forest Society have been founded. We also see the emergence of many one-issue movements, positive responses that have ironically revived some of our most basic religious words. We hear 'salvation' echoed in slogans like 'Save Manapouri'; 'Save the black robin'; 'Save the blue-eyed penguin'. 'Sanctuary' is another religious term to return in secular garb. It once referred to holy places where the divine presence was thought to offer protection to the weak and vulnerable; now when we set out to save endangered fauna, we establish 'bird sanctuaries', 'fish sanctuaries', or 'wild life sanctuaries'.

Once again these point to the earthy, fleshy nature of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. The more that Christianity's belief and practice came to emphasize the saving of souls, the more it lost sight of its most unique and central doctrine.

For the same reason Christians long held themselves aloof from the earthy world of politics, yet it was inevitable that Green consciousness would find political expression. New Zealand can justifiably claim to have been one of the first countries to see the rise of such a political party. In the 70's it was called the Values Party. Since that time Green Parties have been springing up throughout the Western world, seeking to bring Green Consciousness to bear on all government decisions.

## **A wider horizon**

But the ecological imperative calls for more than even governments have the power to achieve. Multi-national corporate bodies, for example, are not only beyond the control of any one national government, but often influence national policy. Unfortunately, they tend to dismiss Green Consciousness as a passing fad, based on false evidence and dangerously alarmist. Their resistance to environmental issues is quite understandable because it is built into the economic principles underlying capitalism itself, principles which, since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, have been widely adopted around the globe.

A primary axiom of capitalism is that a nation's well-being depends upon the wealth produced by its



industry, technology and economic development, the aggregate of which can be measured by its per capita Gross National Product (GNP). The natural corollary is that to achieve maximum well-being a nation must maximise its economic growth. Thus annual economic growth is commonly being used as a criterion to measure the success or failure of political policies. Modern economic orthodoxy regards these precepts to be not only basic to capitalism but also normative for the way humans relate to the natural world.

But will western-style capitalism respond to the ecological imperative? Some are already prophesying quite the contrary, fearing that capitalism is leading the world to the edge of an abyss because its fundamental principles are ultimately destructive of the ecology of the earth. In 1989 Herman Daly published *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*. In writing this book, the former economist with the World Bank collaborated with theologian John Cobb, well known in the theological world as an exponent of process theology - a system that moved beyond the concept of God as heavenly Father to find the divine reality in the process of evolution itself. These two argued that the standard system of profit-and-loss accounting used by economists is deeply flawed. For example, many solar-powered energy systems seem uneconomical when compared with those dependent on coal, oil or uranium; but when the full cost - including production, consumption of a non-renewable resource, waste disposal, and damage to environment — is taken into account, they could prove to be relatively inexpensive.

Similarly, they argue, the accounting system used for the calculation of GNP can produce seriously misleading results. However useful GNP may be for short-term planning, it gives false expectations about the long term. The trouble is, such a calculation regards a national economy as a self-contained system that can be divorced from its surroundings, whereas in reality it should be treated as a sub-system of the larger eco-system on which it is dependent. Since all economic activity draws upon raw materials (some of which are irreplaceable), produces waste products (which have to be deposited somewhere), and may well cause damage to the eco-system, any calculation of GNP that ignores the negative impact caused by these other factors is false. When these subtractions are made, 'positive' economic growth may well turn out to be negative in fact.

## Using 'real' numbers

Daly and Cobb argued that producing a balanced picture of the current state of human well-being on the planet requires an assessment in terms of the whole eco-system, not just one of its sub-systems. They set about constructing an alternative benchmark for economic growth, one that took account of the whole system. They called it the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW). Then they applied it to the American economy. Judged by the standard GNP statistics, the US per capita income had increased in real value by 25 per cent since 1976; but the ISEW indicated that over the same period the economic well-being of Americans had actually declined by 10 per cent.

Thus, widespread as Green consciousness has now become, it is far from certain that political endeavour and planning at national and international levels is going to achieve the necessary outcomes. The Kyoto



protocols have not been adopted by some of the most powerful nations. Even here in New Zealand there is much resistance to carbon taxes. We face the question of how far Green consciousness can, or should be, promoted by coercion. China has put drastic measures in place to deal with the population explosion; parenthood is there restricted to one child per couple. Elsewhere such heavy-handed legislation is likely to be flatly rejected as totalitarian. Does this mean that the limited power of democratic governments may not be sufficient to arrest the ecological crisis? What is needed is a groundswell of Green consciousness at the grassroots of society. What can provide the motivation for that?

## **Motives and motifs**

Motivation is normally heightened by appeal to self-interest. But is not self-interest at the root of our current problems? Of course it is! But there are different kinds of self-interest. We need to distinguish between individual self-interest and corporate self-interest. The latter has for aeons provided the strength of family and tribal units, in which individuals frequently sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of the group. Where corporate self-interest reigns, the good name of the family and the survival of the tribe take precedence over the desires of the individual.

Unfortunately, such beneficial group cohesion often led to long histories of inter-tribal strife and inter-ethnic war that must now be superseded by global unity. But we are ill prepared for this; tribalism at the national level is still very powerful and is preventing us from meeting the ecological crisis. As individual self-interest gave way to tribal self-interest, so tribal self-interest must now give way to ecological self-interest. We all have a basic interest in preserving the ecology of the planet, both for ourselves and for our descendants. The whole of humanity must pull together.

Christianity began as a movement aimed at uniting all humans in one body, the body of Christ, with 'neither Jew nor Gentile, neither freeman nor slave, neither male nor female'. After the fall of Rome, Christianity even began to exhibit something of the Empire's *Pax Romana*, but it gradually lost this vision of a united humanity as it became increasingly focused on a spiritual life after death. From that time onwards, corporate self-interest waned, and individual self-interest re-asserted itself as people were urged to embrace Christianity in order to be saved from Hell and guaranteed a place in heaven. By offering to save people's souls for life in another world, Christianity lost its own soul in this world, thus meriting the dismissive words of the cynic who said 'the church has become so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use'.

The hope of personal immortality in a world beyond death goes back only to the second and third centuries. It developed at a time when Christianity was competing with and being influenced by various salvation cults and other mystery religions. This belief must now be judged an aberration - a concession to personal self-centredness. To provide motivation for Green consciousness, Christianity must rediscover its real roots.



## **A new and better hope**

Already in Old Testament times our spiritual forbears were learning to accept their mortality. This was a great spiritual advance, for in the ancient pagan world some sort of belief in an after-life was almost universal. In contrast, the Israelite sages urged their people ‘to number their days that they might apply their hearts to wisdom’. Any intimations of immortality were to be seen in their children and what they bequeathed to them and to society generally. That this acceptance of mortality continued in the early church is evident in the earliest Christian epitaph: *Requiescat In Pace*, ‘May he/she rest in peace’. In the grave one would sleep quietly until the end of time, when all would be raised for the mythical Last Judgment.

This earliest form of Christian belief is our clue to the kind of immortality that is still to be prized most highly. It is not the immortality of the individual, but of the species. It is the species and not the individual that has the capacity to live on from generation to generation. And it is further true of all living species that they are dependent on one another and the earth itself. This is the kind of immortality that ecology is concerned with. Ecological immortality calls for a much greater degree of selflessness than we find in the traditional Christian concept of immortality - a self-serving hope that by a tragic irony became the very opposite of the Christian definition of love found in the Fourth Gospel: ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’.

Immortality, then, is a quality that pertains to the species rather than to the individual, and above all to the evolving web of life on this planet. We human individuals remain as mortal as all earthly creatures. It is our great privilege even to have been born into this awe-inspiring web of life and to have inherited the evolving human culture created by our forbears. And it is our responsibility to transmit this rich culture to our descendants and to hand on to them the earth itself in the best possible state. That is our only proper role and destiny. This is the

ecological version of loving God with all one’s heart and of loving one’s neighbour as oneself. We must respond to the ecological imperative not primarily for our own personal benefit, but for that of our children, our grandchildren, and countless generations beyond.

Now that I have sketched some of the radical changes in Christian belief and moral behaviour that ecology requires, we must finally turn to a consideration of what rites and festivals will be most appropriate to foster and celebrate Green Christianity.





## 4. Greening Rites and Festivals

In 1976 Arnold Toynbee published his last book, entitled *Mankind and Mother Earth*. ‘We now stand at a turning-point in the history of the biosphere’, he wrote, ‘It looks as if man will not be able to save himself from the nemesis of his demonic material power and greed unless he allows himself to undergo a change of heart’.

But such a revolutionary change of heart, Toynbee warned, would require the kind of motivation usually generated only by religion. Of course he was not looking for a religious revival of the traditional, supernaturalist variety. He regarded religion as the ‘human being’s necessary response to the mysteriousness of the phenomena that he encounters’. Indeed, that is how all religion began.

### Returning to origins

But how will such a spirituality arise in this global, secular age and whence will it come? No religion has ever been invented from scratch; all have evolved out of whatever preceded them. Thus any future religion will arise out of the faiths of the past - and not only from Christianity, Islam and the like, but also from the pre-Axial nature religions that preceded them. Just as the Protestant Reformers, on setting out to reform the church, went back to what they took to be primitive Christianity, so we now need to go back even further -- to the pre-Axial religions.

When we do this we find, perhaps to our surprise, that they have never been wholly eliminated. Underneath the surface of the various layers of Christianity lurk the remnants of religion that focused on nature. For example, tucked away in an obscure corner of many a European cathedral is the sculptured representation of the little green man who symbolised the spirit of nature. And more obviously, we still name the days of the week after the ancient Germanic gods — Sunday for the sun-god, Monday for the moon-god, Wednesday for Woden, and Saturday for Saturn.

These relics remain in spite of the efforts of priests to eliminate everything that smacked of superstitious paganism. The devotees of monotheism were so anxious to reject the gods of nature that they disconnected the human species from the world of nature and focused attention on the human species itself. ‘Much of our trouble’, said the Catholic priest Thomas Berry, ‘has been caused by our limited modes of thought. We centred ourselves on the individual, on personal aggrandizement, ...A sense of the planet Earth never entered into our minds’.

Christianity taught us to fix our attention on heaven above and to regard this as a fallen world, doomed for ultimate destruction. That is why in mediaeval times so many withdrew from the world into monasteries and nunneries to prepare themselves spiritually for their ultimate salvation. Even when Protestantism closed the monasteries and took a giant step towards the secularising of Christianity, they still saw the world as the place where the Devil beguiled and entrapped the careless and the unsuspecting. This conviction, still clearly



manifested today, explains why fundamentalism regards those who call for the greening of Christianity as doing the work of the Devil.

## **To dominate nature or love it?**

Even theologians of the calibre of Emil Brunner warned against giving too much attention to the world of nature. ‘Because man has been created in the image of God’, he wrote, **‘therefore he may and should make the earth subject to himself, and should have dominion over all other creatures ... Man is only capable of realizing his divine destiny when he rises above Nature.’**

It is not surprising, therefore, that it has been left chiefly to secular prophets and voices outside of the church to take the lead in re-valuing the earth and teaching us how to care for it. Just as two thousand years ago Paul claimed that ‘God has chosen the foolish in the world to shame the wise’, so today one can reasonably assert that Mother Earth now relies on the lefties, Greenies and despised heretics to shame the leaders of political and religious officialdom.

The very first greenie, as we have already noted, was the man now honoured as St Francis, who pioneered the greening of Christianity back in the thirteenth century. Of course his references to nature were still enfolded within the context of giving honour to the Heavenly Father. We are now free, as he was not, to give our full attention to the immense universe itself, to the mystery of life, and to our dependence on the forces of nature. This is just what theologians such as Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague are setting out to do. In 1997 McFague wrote *Super, Natural Christians: How we should love nature*, in which she effectively reconnects the Christian tradition with the natural world. And it is noteworthy that female scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Karen Armstrong, and Anne Primavesi have been in the forefront of attempts to expound and popularise a green theology.

## **Step back to leap ahead**

Perhaps there is no better way to reconnect Christianity with the natural world than to examine the major Christian festivals and trace them back to their origins in nature. All festivals were originally related to the movements of the heavenly bodies, for these were once worshipped as deities. Notice how the monotheists who composed the opening chapter of the Bible deliberately downgraded the sun and the moon — first by declaring them to be created, and second, by stating that their creation did not occur until the fourth day! That three days should pass before it appeared was a real put-down for the sun!

The waxing and waning of the moon and the changing path of the sun divide the passing of time into days, months and years, and thereby determined the time frame for all religious celebrations. But the sun and moon remain just as much time-markers for us as they were for primitive humankind. Indeed, our very bodies have biological clocks built into them and these we have tended to ignore for too long. The daily, monthly and annual festivals keep us in tune with the rhythms of the earth and may well play an important role in promoting our physical and mental health. The attempt to focus on these rhythms by some health



programmes and New Age cults is not so outlandish as it may at first appear.

The oldest festivals we know of are those that celebrated the New Year and the appearance of the New Moon. In the biblical tradition the festival the New Moon was particularly important and we hear much of it in the Old Testament. The prophets saw it as a relic of the nature worship and tried to stamp it out. Isaiah vigorously declared that God hated Israel's new moon festivals and found them a wearisome burden.

It is interesting to find that these celebrations had lasted until Isaiah's time, for their origin goes back to the Hebrew patriarchs, who lived a semi-nomadic life. The moon not only provided the light for night travel through the desert but it always seemed more kindly than the sun, whose burning heat could be oppressive. It was much the same for the later people of Arabia and this explains why the month has remained the dominant segment of time in Islam. The Islamic world has never adopted the solar year, and to this day lives by a twelve-month lunar year that is eleven days shorter than the solar year.

The fact that the lunar and solar cycles do not neatly fit each another has long been a problem for cultures that follow a lunar calendar. We have solved the problem simply by dividing the solar year into twelve months of unequal numbers of days, thus disengaging our months from the actual lunar cycles. The people of ancient Israel solved the problem differently, in a way that has remained Jewish practice to this day. They observed a year of twelve lunar months as does Islam, but unlike Islam they adopted the Babylonian system of introducing a thirteenth month nearly every third year in order to re-align their lunar system with the true solar year.

## **The Canaanite Calendar**

The ancient Hebrews first had to come to terms with the solar year when they entered Canaan, for in becoming one people with the Canaanites they had to accommodate themselves to a predominantly agricultural culture that was closely tied to the solar year. While adopting the seasonal pattern based on the sun, the Israelites continued, as the many biblical references to new moon festivals show, to observe the lunar cycles.

The Canaanites appear to have developed a very complex calendar that divided the year into seven periods of fifty days, a scheme now known as the pentecontad calendar. Each pentecontad consisted of seven times seven days plus one. The number seven was treated as sacred, partly because of the four (approximately) seven-day phases of the Moon and partly because there were seven moving heavenly bodies—the five planets, the sun, and the moon. The seven pentecontads followed New Year's Day, with seven-day interludes after the fourth and the seventh to permit celebration of the Feast of Booths and the Feast of Unleavened bread, respectively. I mention the Pentecontad calendar only because remnants of it have survived to this day in the seven-day week, in the fifty-day period between Easter and Pentecost and in the Year of jubilee, or Fiftieth year.

Also surviving from ancient Canaanite practice, but in later forms, were the agricultural festivals: the festival of unleavened bread at the spring equinox, the first fruits (fifty days later) and the Ingathering of



harvest in the autumn. The Israelites gradually disengaged these festivals from their original connection with nature and turned them into commemorations of basic events in their cultural history. Unleavened bread became the Passover, celebrating the deliverance from Egypt. First fruits became Pentecost, celebrating the giving of the Mosaic Law at Sinai. The ingathering retained the name Booths (or tents), but came to celebrate the long trek through the wilderness.

As Christianity emerged out of Judaism, it transformed the first two of these into Christian festivals. Because Jesus had been crucified during the Passover season, this erstwhile spring festival became the commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Jewish Pentecost (originally the festival of first fruits) was similarly taken to signal the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the course of time the Easter celebrations became the most important of all Christian festivals, with Good Friday the holiest day of the year and Easter Sunday the most joyous.

### **The more it changes ...**

We too often forget that the Easter festival never entirely shed the practices that betray its connection with the spring festival, whether in Canaan or Europe. In Western Christianity, for example, we still call it Easter, preserving the name of the pagan goddess of spring, *Eostre*. What is more, and often to the chagrin of Christian clergy, its most popular symbols in this secular age are Easter eggs and Easter bunnies—echoes from time immemorial of spring festivals that long preceded the Jewish Passover and the Christian celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

If we wish to reconnect Christianity with nature and foster the kind of religion Toynbee called for, there is perhaps no better way than to return to the origins of our major festivals, all rooted as they were in the celebration of nature. The ecological spirituality of the future will celebrate the wonder of the universe and the mystery of life. It will focus on the natural processes that produced and continue to sustain life. It will encourage people to be grateful for the richness and the beauty of the natural world and to respond positively to the ecological imperative laid upon us all.

Let us look at what this might mean for Easter. Easter has commonly been regarded by Christians as the miraculous return of a dead man to life—a notion that Bishop David Jenkins called a travesty that turns Easter into a piece of cheap science fiction. Easter is very much greater than that.

Thirty-five years ago I wrote a book, *Resurrection — A Symbol of Hope*, that traces the long development of the Easter message. The theme is not uniquely Christian, but permeated the religion of the ancient Middle East long before the rise of Christianity. Christians did not create the Easter message, but used it to interpret the tragic death of Jesus in positive terms of hope.

### **Out of death comes life**

The essential message of Easter can be put in the form of a paradox: All life ends in death but out of death there also comes new life. The theme of death followed by resurrection had long found expression in



the stories of the gods --- stories we today call myths --- and chief among them was the story of the dying-and-rising god.

The ancients told these stories because that is how they experienced life. They saw the sun die every day in the West and rise again with new life the next morning. They saw the moon wax and wane every month. Then for a short time it could not be seen at all. But on the third day the new moon appeared. That, by the way, is the origin of the well-known biblical phrase — ‘on the third day’.

Then they noted the seasons of the year. The summer fruiting was followed by the autumn harvesting and then by the dying of vegetation in the winter. But in spring, what seemed to be dead came to life again. That is why the Easter festival was celebrated in spring. In spring, more strikingly than at any other time, death was being followed by resurrection to new life.

And not only in vegetation! Human life also ends in death. We too flourish like the grass, then wither and die, as the Psalmist observed. But as each generation passes away, it is succeeded by a new generation. Death and resurrection are built into the very fabric of all life on earth, including human life. This is the way Easter was celebrated for many centuries by the peoples of the ancient Middle East. The ancient Israelites reflected it in their own writings.

In Hosea, for example, we read:

*Come let us return to the Lord  
for he has torn us but he will heal us,  
he has struck us but he will bind up our wounds  
after two days he will revive us,  
on the third day he will restore us to life,  
that we may come alive in his presence.*

## **The resurrection of Israel**

But the Israelites seized upon the theme to interpret their own history. When they faced near extinction as a people by being overrun by powerful empires, they drew on the ancient hope of resurrection. That is why we find the prophet Ezekiel expressing hope for Israel’s resurrection in the well-known vision of the valley of dry bones. ‘These bones are the whole house of Israel! Behold, says the Lord God, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live and I will place you in your own land’.

The prophet applied the renewal observable in the natural world to the ongoing destiny of his people. That application of the ‘Easter’ experience, once started, came to the fore every time the people of Israel faced new threats. In the middle of the second century BCE, Greek rulers tried to destroy the Jewish people and stamp out their traditions. That’s when the Book of Daniel was written, a text in which we read this obviously inspiring promise: ‘There shall be a time of great trouble, but your people shall be delivered and those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake and the wise among them shall shine like the stars for



ever.’

Thus Easter faith — resurrection from the dead — was much talked about in Jewish circles at the beginning of the Christian era. It was an inherent part of the context of Jesus’ ministry, and he debated it with his fellow-Jews. Therefore, when he himself died on the cross as a martyr, his followers already had to hand the appropriate language with which to express their conviction that what Jesus represented to them could never be vanquished. Jesus was not dead, he was alive! But he was alive in a new way. He was alive in them. It was Paul our earliest written witness to the resurrection of Jesus who put it so eloquently saying, ‘It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’. And that explains why he came to speak of the community of Christians who shared this experience as the very ‘body of Christ’. The historical Jesus had died but all that he stood for was very much alive. The Church itself was the embodied risen Christ.

### **Nothing new under the sun**

You may think that the Easter experiences of the first Christians was of an order quite different from the nature festivals of the past. The first Christians did not think so. Indeed, the Fourth Gospel places these words in the mouth of Jesus: ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’. In other words, the death of Jesus had been understood as analogous to the death of a seed that springs into new life.

Listen to how Clement, one of the very early Popes of Rome, put it: ‘Let us observe how the Creator is continually displaying the resurrection, of which we find an example in his raising of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. Let us look at the resurrection that happens regularly all the time. Day and night shows a resurrection; the night goes to sleep, the day rises: the day departs, night comes on. Let us take the crops. How does the sowing happen and in what way? The seed falls on the ground and dies. Then from the death of the one grain, by the mightiness of divine providence, there grows much more fruit’.

If even the early Christians could see that the rising of Jesus from the dead was all of a piece with the death and resurrection to be observed within nature, how much more are we free to do so today. Now we can not only observe that life on this planet has an awe-inspiring capacity to keep renewing itself, but that the evolution of life in all of its innumerable and diverse forms out of this once lifeless planet is itself the greatest resurrection miracle of all.

Even that is not the end of it. As astronomers now begin to unfold to us the marvels and mystery of our ever-evolving cosmos, they tell us that the earliest galaxies and stars did not yet have within them the chemical elements of carbon and the like that are essential to life. Before these more complex elements could even be created, stars of the type known as a supernovas had to explode and die, for only out of their fragments could the planets and the higher chemical elements be born. That is death and resurrection on the grand scale.



## One grand motif

Thus the universe itself is deeply permeated by this basic phenomenon of death and resurrection. The Easter theme of life out of non-life — of life, death and resurrection — has been operative from the beginning of time. It is inherent in the nature of the universe itself and a fundamental principle of all life on this planet. This wellspring of existence as we know it surely calls for continual celebration.

What an opportunity there is in this ecological age for green Christianity to restore to Easter celebrations the eternal message of Easter. That is something to give us hope as we face an imminent ecological crisis. Just as our own bodies show a remarkable capacity to recover after illness and disease, so the earth has a remarkable capacity to recover, to regain its stability, to renew itself. We can take heart from the fact that the creative forces within us, within nature, and within the universe itself, are of such a kind that a new earth can yet be resurrected out of the death with which we humans currently threaten it. Easter, thus celebrated, can revive in us the hope for a worthwhile future on this planet.

Now let us turn to Christmas. For some 1500 years the 25<sup>th</sup> of December has been celebrated as the birthday of Jesus Christ, but that was not the case early on. It is now widely accepted that we know neither the day nor the year in which Jesus was born. What Christians did, in about the fifth century, was to take over and Christianize an already existing nature festival --- the one that marked the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere. It celebrated the day when the sun began to rise higher in the sky, bringing greater heat and longer days. This festival began as another version of the Easter theme, and its slogan was *Sol Invictus* — - The Unconquerable Sun. Christians thought the words particularly apt for the celebration of the new hope they associated with the coming of Jesus Christ.

The Christmas festival remains much more popular today than Easter because, without any guidance from anyone, society has long been unconsciously engaged in changing its character. Those who wish to celebrate it as the birthday of the supposed Saviour of the world are still free to do so. But for the majority it no longer means that. Even though the outward trappings remain-angelic choirs, the shepherds, the Bethlehem manger, the Three Wise Men — Christmas has become a time of giving and receiving gifts along with outpourings of peace and goodwill. Above all, it is the one season of the year when families try to get together. This fostering of family life is to be encouraged and extended. It is a celebration of something very important in nature. Our very humanity, including the evolution of human culture, has been made possible by generation after generation of people being nurtured in families.

We in the southern hemisphere have special problems with both of these annual festivals. We celebrate Easter in the autumn, although it is in essence a spring festival. And Christmas is more appropriate in the winter, when the cold and darkness of the season encourage the family to move closer together around a burning fire in the hearth. Thus some pioneering souls in our hemisphere are already making attempts to mark the 21<sup>st</sup> of June with a winter solstice celebration. Such a move is to be encouraged in this ecological age. Should New Zealand become a republic, we could well replace Queen's Birthday weekend with the



celebration of the winter solstice on the third Monday of June. This could be joined with the Maori New Year, Matariki. This was celebrated on the first new moon after the appearance on the north-eastern horizon of the cluster of stars, called the Pleiades by the Greeks and Matariki by the Maori.

## **The Day of Re-creation**

Until modern times the Christian church has been the official promoter and guardian of our festivals. Unfortunately, however, because it became increasingly divorced from the natural world and interpreted human life in other-worldly terms, it now has a great deal of unlearning to do before it can give to our ecological age the spiritual guidance that is so badly needed. Paradoxically, the church must learn to discover and experience within itself its own most basic message. Like the Lord it proclaims, the church must be prepared to die to its former life in order that it may be resurrected to the new vitality demanded by the ecological age.

Before it is too late, the church must take the opportunity to re-orient its own most frequent festival — the Sunday service. We have already noted that the seven-day week goes back to the ancient Canaanites, representing the basic unit of the Canaanite agricultural calendar. The chief reason why it survived through later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition was the observation of one day in seven as a day of rest. It has been celebrated in a wide variety of ways through history --- the Jewish Sabbath, the Christian Lord's Day, Muslim holy day, and now a secular holiday --- but it has never lost its original beneficial purpose of providing a day of rest from normal work. That is why it was called the Sabbath, which means 'cessation'. Originally it entailed rest from labour not only for humans but for animals, and not only for creatures but for the land. The processes of nature also had to have their rest, if they were to continue produce their fruits for humankind. The existence of the sabbatical year shows that ancient Canaanite agriculturists had learned the value of letting land lie fallow.

In many respects the seven-day week, with the institution of one of them as a day of rest, is the most enduring cultural gift we have inherited from ancient Canaan. In spite of the overwhelming secularisation of the Sabbath, this day of rest from work remains firmly embedded in our culture and, through Christian and Muslim influence, is now becoming a worldwide observance. What we are in danger of losing, however, is the positive spiritual direction it has in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Perhaps today we value rest from labour, whether mental or manual, more than ever; it provides for the re-creation of energy in mind and body. What Jew, Christian and Muslim added to this, by their various forms of worship, was re-creation of spirit.

In order to get the most out of life, we need regular occasions for taking stock of ourselves, clarifying our aims, admitting our mistakes, and resolving to make a new beginning. This is what their various spiritual practices did for Jew, Christian and Muslim in the past.

## **A new order of worship**

If we are to respond constructively to the coming ecological crisis, reorienting the Sunday service to the





cause of green consciousness can play an important role. Less change would be needed than at first appears necessary. The service will still be a form of worship—that is, acknowledging what is of supreme worth to us. As Thomas Berry points out, ‘There is an awe and reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun and the heavenly bodies; to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forest and the birds of the air. To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice’.

Reflecting on our cultural origins will still have its place; that is what Bible readings provided. Time will still be set aside for meditation; that is what the prayers provided. Mental stimulation, which is what the sermon provided, will remain an essential ingredient. It is the content rather than the form that needs to change. Ecological spirituality will focus on the nature of our relatedness, not only to one another as humans in human society, but also to all living forms of life in the ecosphere and to the forces of nature.

The singing of songs will still have an important place. You may think that what we sing is of no real significance. Not so! This may be illustrated by observing the rapid spread of the Protestant Reformation through northern Europe, for a great upsurge in congregational singing communicated the new spirit far more powerfully than could pulpit oratory or doctrinal tracts. Pope Urban III complained that Martin Luther had sung the church into heresy. In a similar way the evangelical revival under the Wesley brothers was spread by hymn lyrics. To this day the religious beliefs of churchgoers are shaped more by the hymns they sing than by the sermons they hear. It has been well said that religion is not so much taught as caught. And already appropriate hymns are being composed — particularly by New Zealand’s best-known hymn writer, Shirley Murray.

The reformed Sunday worship will also celebrate everything we have come to value in human existence, such as the importance of healthy human relationships, and the rich inheritance of human culture. In these days of declining church attendance, the reason why some still go to church despite the obsolete nature of the words often used, is the fellowship and mutual support they find there.

## **Change in the practices**

We should note in this respect the great change that has already taken place in the way Christians celebrate their central ritual, known variously as Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, the Mass or the Eucharist. Over the last four centuries it has been interpreted less and less as the commemoration of a sacrifice offered on an altar to God (as it was in the Middle Ages) and more and more as the sharing of a common meal. Even the Catholic Church has made significant moves in this direction since the Vatican II Council. This ritual originated among the ancient Semitic nomads, who placed great emphasis on hospitality. It has gone through many forms, for better or for worse, but it can still celebrate and nurture the rich and sacred character of human fellowship.

The ritual that has changed most during the twentieth century has been the funeral service. It is fast ceasing to be the official ‘send-off’ to the next world and is becoming the celebration of a life lived in this



world. Similarly, though the alteration has barely begun, the ritual of infant baptism can be profitably changed: once the business of cleansing from original sin, it can easily become the welcome of new life into the family. And confirmation will be replaced by a ritual in which growing adolescents acknowledge their adult responsibilities both to their fellow humans and to the ecosphere.

As the religious activities of the past are reformed to meet the needs of the ecological age, more and more forms equivalent to those of the past but relevant to life in the present will be created and widely adopted. One of the great creations of the past is what we know as the Ten Commandments. It has lasted so long largely because it was once such an inspired creation, and indeed there are frequent calls to return to it. But good as it was in the past, its relevance in the ecological age is much diminished, not least because even the word 'Commandment' is no longer suitable. Today we are free people who choose our behaviour out of inner conviction. Nevertheless, as Green Christianity responds to the ecological imperative, it may well compose statements of intent to replace the creeds of the past.

### **Now, therefore, be it resolved ...**

Let me conclude by offering **Ten Resolutions** which could help us build a healthy world to hand on to those who follow us.

1. Let us take time to stand in awe of this self-evolving universe.
2. Let us marvel at the living eco-sphere of this planet.
3. Let us set a supreme value on all forms of life.
4. Let us develop a lifestyle that preserves the balance of the planetary eco-system.
5. Let us refrain from all activities that endanger the future of any species.
6. Let us devote ourselves to maximising the future for all living creatures.
7. Let us set the needs of the coming global society before those of ourselves, our tribe, society or nation.
8. Let us learn to value the human relationships that bind us together into social groups.
9. Let us learn to appreciate the total cultural legacy we have received from the past.
10. Let us accept in a self-sacrificing fashion the responsibility now laid upon us all for the future of our species and of all planetary life.

So ends this sketch of the greening of Christianity.



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