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A COMMON CREATION STORY? INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND ECOLOGY

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PRECIS

This essay explores the contemporary proposal that our scientific understanding of the earth—how it originated and how it functions—can serve as a common creation story for all religions and as the basis, therefore, for interreligious dialogue. Recognizing the danger that such a proposal can become another "meta-narrative" imposed by the West, the author suggests that these dangers might be avoided if the religious communities approach the earth first of all as an ethical story rather than a creation story. By first taking up, together, the ethical challenges of an endangered planet, the religions can determine the common ground on which they might, as a second step, hear each other's religious stories about the earth and develop, together, a common creation story. The shared praxis of ecological engagement can become the common ground for deeper ecological religious dialogue.

"For the first time in our history, we have empirical evidence for a common creation story." Thus declared a group of fifty representatives of various religious traditions back in the early 1990's in one of the first steps toward what eventually was to become the Earth Charter.[1] Over the past decade, that vision of a common creation story has grown in both substance and urgency, especially through the scientific research and prophetic voices of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme.[2] The proposal—and the dream—is that science, an enterprise that is available to all cultures and religions, is now providing the religious communities of the world with something that, so far, they have not been able to find on their own: a truly common ground that will enable them to talk

[1]In a document distributed by the International Coordinating Committee on Religion and the Earth, Wainwright House, 260 Stuyvesant Ave., Rye, NY 10580.

[2]See, especially, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco, CA: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1992).

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together and work together as never before. The creation story as science tells it is delivered in a way that all religions can, and must, hear it. Hence, science and its understanding of our earth and universe are providing the arena for a new kind of interreligious dialogue. Swimme put it this way:

> Though scientific knowledge has put lethal weapons in our hands, it has also provided the Earth with the first common story of our origins and development . . . Precisely because this story of the universe comes to us through our investigations beginning with our eyes and ears and body, we can speak of a transcultural creation story. Members of every continent are involved in discovering and articulating this story. Members of every religious tradition are involved in its telling.[3]

What science is telling us today about the origins of the universe (especially the creative, mysterious, still-evolving Big Bang) and how the universe works (through a pervasive, on-going net of interrelationships that make humans "cousins to the stars, to the rocks and oceans, to all living creatures")[4] is a story that all religions can use to "hear again" and "deepen" their own stories of how the universe originated or how it works. As Sallie McFague has made clear, the scientific creation story is not meant to replace but to adjust and invigorate traditional myths and beliefs and relate them interreligiously:

> This common story is available to be remythologized by any and every religious tradition and hence is a place of meeting for the religions, whose conflicts in the past and present have often been the cause of immense suffering and bloodshed as belief is pitted against belief. What this common story suggests is that our primary loyalty should be not to nation or religion but to the earth and its Creator (albeit that Creator may be understood in different ways).[5]

This suggestion of a "primary loyalty" to the new creation story has been spelled out by Berry. He announced that, unless religious communities realign their traditional creeds in view of the earth as the primary revelation and context of religious experience, they will not be able to respond adequately to the sensitivities and needs of our third-millennium world. "We are . . . at a time when these earlier traditions can no longer, out of their own resources, provide adequate guidance in the task that is before us."[6] So, Berry urged the religions to open themselves to the reality of a universal revelation, or a meta-religious context, that can reanimate each and reconnect them all: "Our new sense of the universe [the new creation story] is itself a type of revelatory experience. Pres-

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[3]Brian Swimme, "Science: A Partner in Creating the Vision," in Anne Lonergan, ed., *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), p. 86.

[4]Sallie McFague, "Cosmology and Christianity: Implications of the Common Creation Story for Theology," in Sheila Greeve Devaney, ed., *Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), p. 31.

[5]Ibid., p. 34.

[6]Thomas Berry, "The Universe Story: Its Religious Significance," in John E. Carroll, Paul Brockelman, and Mary Westfall, eds., *The Greening of Faith: God, the Environment, and the Good Life* (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, for the University of New Hampshire, 1997), p. 216.

ently we are moving into a meta-religious age, that seems to be a new comprehensive context for all religions."[7]

Dangers and Reservations

As I view the beauty and feel the power of Berry's "universe story," his notion of "the great work" and the possibilities of a common creation story, I find myself, with many others, both inspired and hopeful—but also hesitant and fearful. My reservations are prompted not just by what I hear from my colleagues in our thoroughly postmodern academy but also from my brothers and sisters in the interreligious dialogue. They warn me of the danger of universals, and that means the dangers of "common stories" or "meta-narratives." If I can summarize crisply the root of this danger, I think it has to do with the way universals tend to skip over the reality of language—which means the reality of how language makes all that we know and say always limited and often lethal.

The fact that language limits anything we know or say is clear from the contemporary realization that our ability to speak does not just communicate what we know; it also determines what we know. Language—or our cultural-linguistic systems—does not affect just how we speak of what we know but also how we know what we know. It determines, in other words, what we know. And, by determining, it limits. We can never see the whole picture. We can never have a universal language. Yes, languages can and must communicate with each other, but to propose a universal language will most likely mean to impose it. Hence, truth, like language, will be better served and protected when it is recognized to be inherently and ineluctably diverse. Any kind of a "common story" for humanity, therefore, will somehow also have to be diverse. Otherwise, it is dangerous.

The danger mounts when we remind ourselves, further, that language and culture not only always limit what we know; they can also render it lethal. Language is always a restriction, but it can also be a weapon. One does not have to agree fully with Michel Foucault to get his point that language is tied to power.[8] We tend to use it in a way that promotes our own well-being over others', even when we are not aware that we are doing so. So, the words we use and the stories we tell in order to know and communicate not only limit what we are saying; they can also be used to limit and control and devalue what others are saying. Language, in other words, is not only culturally conditioned; it is also politically and economically conditioned. This is why we of the so-called "first world" are told by our friends in the "two-thirds world" that the language that is used in cross-cultural conversations is usually the language of those with

[7] Berry and Swimme, *The Universe Story*, p. 255.

[8] See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); and Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

the most economic power. Similarly, this is why so often the "common ground" that is proposed for a universal project based on universal need turns out to be the "ground" or the "need" that is much more "common" to one group than to others—usually the group that has more money or weapons than the others.

Thus, there are critics of those of us who speak of a "common creation story" or of the way our "one earth" can provide the common ground for a new dialogue among "the many religions." I have been told that my own efforts along these lines[9] are, like all the others, nothing more than renewed and cleverly camouflaged attempts to carry on the Western-based, hegemonic project of modernity. There is a "Kantian motor" driving all this talk of a new common text—this one written by scientists—that is supposed to subsume or be the higher norm for all the earlier, disjointed, and "primitive" texts. Such proposals for a shared creation story or for a new interreligious dialogue that takes the earth as its common ground have been described as a "divinization of the earth" based on a "sacralization of science," a "new ecologism" that becomes an "eco-olatry." All this, we are told, is a "Trojan Horse" within which hide the forces of a new meta-narrative; such a narrative is not only theologically a new form of idolatry, but it can also easily become, politically, an "eco-fascism" that proclaims one unified, universal, authoritative voice—now the voice of the earth—over all other voices.[10]

In no way am I suggesting that such criticisms should derail our efforts toward a new kind of ecological dialogue of religions, which might be grounded in a shared creation myth; these criticisms, I suspect, are driven by their own motors. However, I do believe that they have to be taken seriously. They are pointing us toward real dangers that can all too easily corrupt or co-opt any efforts to call the religions of the world together around a new earth story.

In what follows, I would like to suggest ways in which we can confront and defuse these dangers, so that, if there is to be any kind of a common creation story, all religious voices will be part of telling it, and, if the earth is to be the common ground for a new dialogue, no one religion or nation will be allowed to own more stock in that ground than others. The pivotal point of what I would like to propose is simple: Where we begin and how we proceed is crucially important. I want to suggest that an interreligious dialogue that seeks to elaborate a common earth story should begin with ethics rather than with formal religion, with moral praxis rather than mystical reflection, with acting together for the earth rather than elaborating a common religious story about the earth. The first steps toward exploring common ground or a common story should be interethical more than expressly interreligious. I also hope to indicate how, if we

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[9]Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

[10]John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997), p. 258; Gavin D'Costa, "Critical Questions of the Pluralistic Theology of Religions with Reference to the Work of Paul Knitter," unpublished lecture delivered at a conference on pluralistic theology, Bildungshaus St. Virgil, Salzburg, Austria, May, 1996, p. 1-5, passim. See also Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 33-39.

start with ethics, we will, necessarily and happily, find ourselves closer together as religious persons. Ethical "first steps" enable and require religious "second steps." The door, or the guide, to a deep mystical ecumenicity among the religions can be found in an ethical ecumenicity. An earth ethics can be an effective key to open the door to an interfaith earth mysticism and the possibility of a common creation story.

Ethics: The Soil in Which Religion Grows

Elsewhere, I have tried to make the case that if, as the critics insist, there are no such things as meta-narratives, there are such things as meta-problems. We may not have universal solutions that work for everyone, but we do have—it is hard to deny—universal problems that affect everyone. Perhaps the most urgent, menacing, and impelling of the problems that humanity faces today have to do with the way we are destroying the life-sustaining abilities of our planet. Ecological problems are meta-problems. Using the resources of both other theologians and environmentalists, I have tried to show why it is necessary for the religions of the world to offer an interreligious contribution to solving these problems and why it is possible for them to do so.[11] The first step in what I offer for consideration is to suggest that, if the religions, together, take these ethical environmental problems seriously, they will find the common ground on which to share their religious stories and perhaps hear the religious message of what science is telling them about the earth.

To understand religion, to feel religion, we can start with ethics. Though the two realities—religion and ethics—are to be clearly and resolutely distinguished, they are inextricably and genetically intertwined. Ethics are the soil—or at least a big piece of the soil—in which religion grows. I trust that not only the analysis of philosophers but also the awareness of religious people will sustain this claim. The process in which one feels and then acts ethically is not just the result of religious experience; it is also the originator or stimulant for that experience. There is, in other words, a living link between behaving and believing, with a genetic priority (this does not mean an ontological priority) for behaving. Each of us might discover how, in our efforts and struggles to figure out how best to "behave" in this world, we can find ourselves in contact with what might be called the Sacred or the Mysterious. In trying to determine how we can live in a way that will be life-giving and peace-filled for ourselves and for others, in seeking to ground the moral feelings that we have about what makes for a wholesome life and society, and especially in trying to be faithful to

[11]See Paul F. Knitter, "Deep Ecumenicity versus Incommensurability: Finding Common Ground on a Common Earth," in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications—Religions of the World and Ecology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 365-381; and Knitter, *One Earth*, pp. 98-117.

living such a life when it hurts and seems to contradict our own interests—in such a moral process we find ourselves or, better, feel ourselves, part of or touched by a larger Mystery or Process. To behave morally, we find ourselves believing or trusting in that which grounds and animates and makes possible such a way of behaving. This is not a logical or intellectual or even necessarily conscious process; the vital connection between behaving and believing, or between morality and religion, is experiential—yes, mystical. It is in following the Way that we know the Way.[12]

Daniel Maguire is telling us something important and helpful for what we are calling an "interreligious ecological dialogue": "Morality is primary; religion, God-talk, and theology derive from and explain this foundational moral reverence. . . . The foundational moral experience is the foundation of religious experience. . . . Moral-talk is logically and epistemologically prior to God-talk"[13] (even though we might add, to calm theological qualms, God-talk is ontologically prior to moral-talk). This suggests that if persons from differing theologies and God-talks feel themselves called and enabled to gather together on the moral commons of environmental concern and commitment, if they all share a "foundational moral reverence" for the earth and its needs, then we can expect that they have the grounds, or the starting point, to move, together, to shared experiences by which they can "communicate" with each other about that which grounds and stimulates their ethical commitments to the earth. In Maguire's terminology, if the environment is providing the religious communities of the world with a shared foundational moral experience, is it not thereby also providing them with a shared foundation for religious experience? In their environmental behaving together they have new possibilities of believing together—at least, of realizing and exploring how their very different and incommensurable beliefs might, after all, share some kind of common roots.

Environmental Prophets Are Environmental Mystics

These reflections on the relation between ethics and religious experience reflect the dipolarity between prophecy and mysticism that I believe animates all religious traditions (admittedly, in different expressions and proportions). One finds mystics and prophets in all religions—yes, even in the heart of every religious person. What we have just said about ethical commitment's leading to or containing religious experience confirms that the "poles" representing the mystical and the prophetic are not two extreme ends on a linear continuum but, rather, two points on a circle that is continuously turning. Theirs is the dyna-

[12]The substance of this paragraph is taken from the more elaborated case made in Knitter, *One Earth*, pp. 102-104 (in a section on "The Ethical Wellspring of Religion").

[13]Daniel C. Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 39-40.

mism of the yin and the yang of Taoism: The more we feel the "yin" of the earth's ethical challenge, the more we will also feel the "yang" of the mystical pull and power of the earth. There is a mystical power and revelation in the ethical responsibility we feel toward preserving the well-being of the earth and its creatures. As St. Ignatius told the contemplative orders of his time who thought they had to hie themselves to the monastery to contemplate God, there is "*contemplatio in actione*"—contemplation in action, mystical experience in prophetic involvement.

What I am trying to get at with this notion of contemplation in ecological action is contained in remarks by an apparently noncontemplative and nonreligious scientist. In his book, *Biophilia*, Edward O. Wilson described the ethical responsibility we feel toward other species as something that cannot be explained in purely rational terms or as a calculated course of action. It is something more than rational, something that escapes human packaging. We are called to love and care for other species, not just because if we do not we are hurting ourselves; rather, we do so because, as we explore these feelings toward other forms of life, we discover or sense or intuitively know that there is something that bonds us with them in one community of life. Thus, in caring for the earth and other species, we experience a "nobility . . . defined as reasoned generosity beyond expedience . . . the ultimate ennobling act."[14] We know this not by studying or contemplating it but by feeling it in the "sense of responsibility" or the pain that we experience in viewing a polluted pond or the dwindling numbers of elephants. Holmes Rolston has commented on Wilson's *Biophilia*: "No other species can be either responsible for or religious toward this planet, but *Homo sapiens* reaches a responsibility that assumes spiritual dimensions."[15] Or, in Wilson's less religious language: "The stewardship of the environment is a domain on the near side of metaphysics where all reflective persons can surely find common ground."[16] "A responsibility that assumes spiritual dimensions." "A stewardship that is on the near side of metaphysics." This is what I am trying to say: The prophetic or the ethical becomes the mystical.

Joanna Macy, in a different context, meant the same kind of contemplation in action when she powerfully reminded us that, when we feel pain and even despair at the sufferings of others, we should shout "alleluia," for we are feeling, and indirectly but really affirming, our connectedness and community with them in a larger pattern of life.[17] It is the energy field of the life-giving and life-enhancing Spirit that we feel coursing through us when we feel and respond to the pain of others.

Centuries earlier and in a totally different cultural-linguistic system, Men-

[14]Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 131.

[15]Holmes Rolston III, "Ecological Spirituality," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 18 (January, 1997): 63.

[16]Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 351.

[17]Joanna Rogers Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Baltimore, MD: New Society Publishers, 1983), pp. 21-37.

cius described this same mystical experience transmitted through ethical sensitivity when he reminded us of the spontaneous feeling that most humans (dare I say *all* humans?) sense when "they see a child about to fall into a well." The immediate, unrehearsed, unprompted sense of concern and movement to rescue the child is an example of what Mencius called "the mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others."[18] Centuries later, another Confucian philosopher, Wang Yang-ming, went beyond the child at the well to include also the suffering "of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, . . . plants broken and destroyed, . . . tiles and stones shattered and crushed,"[19] and added that, when we feel in us the mind that cannot bear their suffering, we are sensing that we indeed form "one body with the child"[20] and with the animals and elements of the earth. We bear a "humanity that forms one body with all."[21] To feel in our ethical concern and commitment to the earth what Mencius called "mind" and Chün-fang Yü called "one body" is to be mystically aware of what Wilson called the "near side of metaphysics" in environmental stewardship. It is to experience an earthly mysticism through earthly prophetic and ethical action.

Entering and Sharing the Common Creation Story

To realize that there is an ethical door through which we can pass into the mystical and revelatory splendor of nature can be a help and a safeguard, I suggest, in making more sensitive and more ecumenical use of Berry and Swimme's image of the universe story as a common creation story. As we have heard, a postmodern criticism of their proposal asks whether they run the danger of pressing the cultural-linguistic system of modern science on worldviews and cultures for which the scientific creation myth, although used in laboratories and factories, may not have validity in temples and ceremonies. Perhaps not all religious cosmologies can "hear" or relate to the scientific creation story as readily and eagerly as Berry thinks or hopes. Perhaps many religious persons, especially in the two-thirds world, will fear that the new creation myth is another example of the West's taking over, this time under the guise of science.

This is where Berry and others who urge a common universe story might profit from the ethical approach I have been suggesting. Maguire helps me

[18]Mencius 2A:6. See also W. A. C. H. Dobson, tr., *Mencius: A New Translation Arranged and Connotated for the General Reader*, UNESCO Collection of Representative Works—Chinese Series (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 132: "It is a feeling common to all mankind that they cannot bear to see others suffer."

[19]Cited in Chün-fang Yü, "Chinese Religions on Population, Consumption, and Ecology," in Harold Coward and Daniel C. Maguire, eds., *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 167, quoting from Wang Yang-ming, *Instruction for Practical Living*, tr. Wing-tsis Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 272.

[20]Yü, "Chinese Religions," p. 166.

[21]Cited in ibid., p. 167, quoting Wang, *Instruction*, p. 272.

formulate what I mean: "Scholars who seek out the 'common essence' [or the common creation story] of religions regularly miss the moral commons on which religions meet. This comes from introducing God-talk [or creation stories] too early." By adding the statement already cited, "Moral-talk is logically and epistemologically prior to God-talk,"[22] Maguire has helped me formulate my suggestion to Berry and others: The universe story as ethical demand may have a priority over the universe story as creation myth. In other words, rather than beginning with the beauty and the interrelatedness and the common origins of the universe story as science sees that story, we might do better to begin with the agony and the peril and the horror of the universe story as environmentalists are telling the same story.

Whereas Berry and others are taking a directly mystical view of the earth, I am suggesting another—indirect, but perhaps more readily available—mystical approach, through the ethical and the prophetic. Simply put, the sense of the sacred that Berry finds in the scientific story of the universe is even more widely at hand in the ethical practice of saving the earth. You do not have to accept the picture of the universe given by Western science, nor do you have to have the finances to go mountain-climbing or to take ecological vacations, in order to feel the mystical power of nature. That same power is available by hearing the call of the impoverished earth and, especially, in acting to do something about it.

In no way am I suggesting that the two stories, the scientific-mystical and the environmentalist-ethical, are necessarily opposed. On the contrary, I am urging that, if we begin with the ethical challenge of what we all know about the earth story at the beginning of the new millennium, we are taking an epistemologically more universal and effective approach to rally the religions around the earth and its mystical, explicitly religious message.

In this regard, I suspect that Max Oelschlaeger's understanding and expectations of the creation stories of different religions are more realistic and practical than Berry's. Oelschlaeger did not find the common ingredient of all these creation stories in their ability to affirm and accept contemporary science's understanding of nature as having a common origin, as interrelated, and as evolving. Rather, for him, "Each tradition articulates its own creation story. But all find solidarity *in a common core concern of caring for creation*."[23] As different as creation stories or cosmologies may be in their understanding of how it all began or of how the Creator relates to creation, "Every faith . . . can articulate a compelling sacred story, based on the metaphor of caring for creation, to treat nature with respect."[24] Oelschlaeger is convinced that, when religions come together to address the ethical challenges of our environmental predicament, they will discover "that creation stories across the spectrum of belief coalesce,

[22]Maguire, *The Moral Core*, p. 40

[23]Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 215, my emphasis.

[24]Ibid. p. 231

despite their differences, around a politically efficacious—or at least potentially useful—metaphor of caring for creation."[25]

Even if Oelschlaeger, too, is overstating the common content or potential of the many different religious creation myths, the procedure I am suggesting still remains: If the religions, whatever their creation myths and whatever their view of Western science, can respond, together, to the need for an environmental ethic, if they can share a prophetic praxis of drawing on their differing religious resources to heal the wounds and address the injustices inflicted upon the planet and its species, they might more readily experience the earth not only as an object of concern that draws them together but also as a subject that speaks to them with the voice of the Sacred. If the earth is first a common ethical story for all religions, it has greater possibilities of becoming a common religious or creation story for all religions. The prophetic experience of ethical engagement for the earth (which is also a mystical experience of the sacred call of the earth) can provide the different religious communities not only with new ears by which to hear again or to reinterpret their own creation myths and religious language; it can also provide them with personal experiences and new languages by which they might learn from and perhaps even unify their differing cosmologies and theologies. Religious persons who struggle together to save the earth can better talk together and share together about that which makes them religious.

Ecological Dialogue: A "Second Step" to Ecological Praxis

In these final reflections, I will offer some practical suggestions for realizing a "deep ecological ecumenicity" among the religious families of the world. If there is any validity to what I have said about the way an ethical common front can prepare the way for a mystical or religious common ground for dialogue among the religions, then one can say that an ecological interreligious dialogue should be a second step to an ecological interreligious praxis.

Here I speak as a Christian liberation theologian when I suggest that what is a methodological given in liberation theology might also serve an analogously similar role in an interreligious ecological dialogue. In Christian liberation theology, theology is always a "second act." It follows the *compromiso*, or ethical commitment, of liberative praxis, of actual engagement in some kind of an effort to bring justice into a world of suffering due to sociopolitical injustice. The experience of such praxis, which is both intensely individual and necessarily communitarian, enables the theologian to "hear" God's word with new ears. The kind of interpretation of the Christian tradition that takes place after praxis would not have been possible before praxis. Both at the origins of liberation theology back in the late 1960's and in its ongoing life within the Christian

[25]Ibid. p. 119.

churches, this first step of liberative praxis and this second step of theological interpretation take place not primarily in universities but in the well-known *communidades cristianas de base*—base Christian communities.[26]

I suggest that such a methodology or procedure can vivify and direct an interreligious ecological dialogue. When persons from differing religious communities come together to "dialogue" about the sacredness of the earth and how we must care for it, they should preface (or intertwine) such explicitly religious conversations with shared engagement in some concrete environmental problem—preferably one that is facing them in their own shared ecological backyard. Let them start by looking at this problem, commit themselves jointly to doing something about it, understand and analyze it with the help of nonreligious experts, feel together what the problem seems to be demanding of them, and then propose a course of action that their religious tradition would suggest. They will be acting, analyzing, struggling, perhaps anguishing together as an interreligious community—gathered around not a common creation story but a common environmental pain. The first step in gathering together will be a shared ethical praxis to relieve environmental suffering.

As this ethical praxis moves forward, because it is the praxis not only of environmental activists but also of environmental religious activists, it will move, naturally and necessarily, toward a more explicitly religious conversation. It will become a more self-conscious religious dialogue. This movement will be propelled by two forms of energy, practical and mystical. Practically, the participants in these shared environmental efforts will want and need to explain the deeper religious reasons for the forms of action they propose; also, they will naturally feel moved to give witness to what it is that motivates and steers them in their environmental praxis, especially when that praxis might lead them to heroic acts of confronting the system and suffering the system's reaction. The environmental prophet will want to speak about his or her mystical sources. This mystical or expressly religious witnessing will also be a natural result of the shared praxis because, as I tried to lay out above, the prophetic or ethical act of responsibility toward and caring for the earth is already at least implicitly a mystical experience in which one feels the Sacred Call within the ethical commitment. Sharing in a common mystical experience, mediated through their common ethical commitment, the participants in the dialogue will want to tell each other how they "read" this mystical experience in the distinctive religious languages of their traditions.

When they try to speak their different religious languages to each other, when they try to communicate to each other how they are mining or reinterpreting their sacred texts or teachings on the basis of their environmental praxis, when they enter this explicitly religious dialogue about the environment—they will, I trust, have "new ears" by which to hear each other. Having acted together, having come to know each other in the struggle for environmental jus-

[26] See Gustavo Gutiérrez's classic, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, tr. and ed. Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

tice and well-being, having felt together the mystical-religious content of their mutual prophetic commitments and actions—they will be able all the more effectively (which does not mean perfectly or fully) to understand and learn from each other's differing religious languages and stories. Shared environmental praxis will becomes what Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has called a "hermeneutical link" by which the religions will be enabled to unlock their religious treasures of experience and story for each other.[27]

What I have just described are new forms of religious communities—not Basic Christian Communities but Basic Interreligious Communities. What gathers these communities together and provides them with extraordinary capacities both to interpret and to communicate are the same two factors, analogously understood, that gather the Basic Christian Communities: (1) a commitment to justice, understood now as eco-justice, the need to address the unjust sufferings of the entire earth community; and (2) a religious commitment within a religious community and tradition, with a plural understanding of the community as a community of communities, with the door open to any religious community concerned about the environment. I expect and hope that the new millennium will see a proliferation of such Basic Interreligious Communities throughout the world.[28]

Praxis Includes a "Preferential Option" for Victims

There is another aspect of the Basic Christian Communities and their method of liberation theology that needs to inform the Basic Interreligious Communities and their ecological dialogue. Liberation theologians insist that the liberative praxis that grounds the whole hermeneutical process of their theology must be based on what they call "social" or economic analysis. In other words, one's ethical response and projects have to stem not only from one's religious experience and beliefs but also from hard-nosed examination of what is causing the blight of social and economic injustice. They use differing social analyses, of course, but common to them all is the insistence that, whatever the analysis, it must be infused with and guided by a "preferential option for the poor" or by the "epistemological privilege of victims."[29] The victims of economic and social violence, in other words, have a central, determinative role to play in doing the analysis and in determining what kind of liberative praxis is called for. The role they play is a privileged one: The experiences of the mar-

[27]Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Theological and Religious Studies: The Contest of the Faculties," in Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 137-142.

[28]A description of such communities in India, called "Basic Gandhian Communities," can be found in Knitter, *One Earth*, pp. 170-172.

[29]For a general review and analysis of the preferential option for the poor in liberation theology, see John O'Brien, *Theology and the Option for the Poor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992). Also see Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor: A Review," *The Month*, January, 1995, pp. 5-10.

ginalized, their viewpoints, their evaluations of what might work or not are to "come before" others', and they are to carry a greater weight in the conversation and decisions about what is wrong and what is to be done. This does not mean that the victims and the poor have an absolute voice or an always decisive vote, but it does mean that their voices must be listened to first and constantly throughout the dialogue.

Liberation theologians insist on this hermeneutical privilege of victims, not just out of a sense of justice, to make up for the long exclusion or marginalization of the voices of the poor from the deliberations of political and religious leaders, but also for an epistemological reason: The victims of injustice—those who have had to live on the margins of society and who daily experience the difficulty of being heard in the halls of government, university, and church—know things that the established classes do not and perhaps cannot know.[30] The voices of victims, therefore, must be given a privileged hearing in order for the liberative praxis to be based on an adequate knowledge of what is going on.

A similar "preferential option" or "hermeneutical privilege" for victims is, I believe, essential for the success or failure of the interreligious ecological praxis I have been proposing and for the interfaith religious dialogue that flows from this praxis. Such an option or privileging will require the religions to bear in mind that their analyses of whatever environmental need or suffering they are addressing must be grounded not only on the input from scientific and economic specialists but also, and especially, on the witnessed experience and assessment of those who are the primary or immediate victims of the environmental exploitation and violence. Efforts toward an interreligious environmental ethics and an interreligious ecological dialogue must include not only religious persons representing differing spiritual families; it must also, somehow, include those who, though they may not even be religious, have been the human victims of ecological injustice or have devoted their energies to speaking for the sentient beings and parts of our sentient planet that are directly suffering from the plundering of the earth. Their voices must be heard and heard within and above other voices; if they are not, we will not really understand.

This hermeneutical privileging of victims, this insistence that they occupy not only a place of honor but also a place of power within the environmental dialogues among religious communities, is one of the best safeguards, I suggest, for preventing the co-opting of the ecological dialogue by first-world powers or by the religious communities sharing in that power. Aloysius Pieris, who from his South Asian perspective has witnessed how all too often religion is used as an ideology to serve the interests of special or dominant groups (in India and Sri Lanka, that is called "communalism"), urges an effective means to offset such abuse: "The people who can truly purify a religion of communalist ideology are not the theologians . . . or the religious hierarchs, but only the conscien-

[30] Victims have "learned more about the culture of the powerful than the powerful know about those they subjugate" (Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990], p. 65).

ticized victims of that ideology."[31] By insisting that the ecological dialogue of the Basic Interreligious Communities be populated not only by "theologians" and "religious hierarchs" and leaders but also by victims—by those who can speak directly out of or for the pain of the earth community—we are making sure that there will always be present someone who can keep the dialogue honest and can keep it from gliding down the slippery slopes of ideology.

The participants in our interreligious dialogues on the environment must include not just spokespersons for the religions but also spokespersons for the earth—environmentalists, whether they are religious or not. As much as possible, these environmentalists should include environmentalists from the two-thirds world, for it is they who can best alert us first-worlders to the links between social and ecological injustice and between social and ecological renewal. Larry Rasmussen has admonished that "all efforts to save the planet [must] begin with hearing the cry of the people and the cry of the earth *together*."[32] By making sure that the cries of people-victims and of earth-victims continue to hold a privileged place in our ecological interreligious dialogue, we can hope, more assuredly, that our dialogues will be both more effective and better protected.

A Five-Step Program

Let me try to summarize my suggestions for a deep ecumenicity—that is, for an ecological interreligious dialogue that begins with environmental ethics and leads to environmental mysticism. I recommend a five-step program for such dialogue. Each step is described with a word that bears a prefix derived from the Latin *cum*—"with"—showing that each step can and must be taken together, linking people across religious divisions.

1. *Compassion*: A dialogue of deep ecumenicity begins with a shared feeling—a feeling of *com-patire*, suffering with those who are suffering. This is the feeling that compels the dialogue I am talking about: not a shared feeling of the Divine, not a shared feeling of the wonder and sacrality of nature, but a shared feeling of sorrow, of concern, perhaps of horror and consternation at the plight of this planet and its inhabitants. This is the first movement of bonding between persons of differing, maybe vastly differing, religious backgrounds: They all "cannot stand to see the sufferings" of the earth.

2. *Conversion*: Compassion, if it is real, will not stay put. It becomes a call to do something, to change the direction of one's living in order to reach out to those for whom one feels compassion. To feel with or suffer with someone who is suffering is to be claimed by that someone. That means we can no longer live

[31] Aloysius Pieris, "Faith-Communities and Communalism," *East Asian Pastoral Review*, vol. 26, nos. 3/4 (1989), pp. 308-309.

[32] Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 291, my emphasis.

the way we did before we felt the compassion. We are, in other words, called to some kind of conversion. This is the second step in an ecological dialogue. In being converted, or turned toward the suffering earth, we are turned toward others who feel the same conversion. We want to join ranks with them, even though, at this stage, we do not know just what we all will do. We do know that we all want to do something. We have all undergone a common conversion—not to a common God (although, as I wrote above, there is a common call and, therefore, a common caller within this conversion) but to a common, as yet undefined, course of action: to stop or heal the suffering.

3. *Collaboration*: The momentum of these shared experiences moves the multiple experiencers to the third step in their encounter: collaboration, or acting together. Here they enter the actual praxis that grounds and feeds their coming together. From being members of different religious communities who experienced a common call and conversion they become co-workers or co-activists, if you will. As I tried to stress earlier, they will be co-workers not only with each other as religious persons but also with the victims—or those who speak for the victims—of environmental suffering and injustice. Their collaboration with the victims will strengthen and illumine their collaboration with each other. Such collaborating is a very different way of being together than if they just gathered to study each other's religions or to pray together. Collaborating on a shared program of praxis means analyzing together, becoming frustrated and angered together, perhaps going to jail together, even dying together for the sake of the compassion and conversion they have all felt. This kind of being together creates new bondings between people, new ways of feeling about each other. It creates religious brothers and sisters among those who may know little about each other's religions.

4. *Communication*: Collaborating religious brothers and sisters will find themselves moved to become communicating religious brothers and sisters. With this fourth step, we enter the explicitly religious level of the dialogue—where participants will feel the need to tell each other, to witness to each other, about how their religious experience and traditions nourish and guide their ecological commitment and praxis. They will feel a need not only to witness but also to be witnessed to, for, having seen the fervor and depth of my sister's or brother's praxis, I will want to know more about the spiritual matrix of that praxis. However, they will not only feel the need to talk to each other; they will also discover an ability, which they did not have before, to talk and explain, as well as to listen and understand. The bonds that grew in their collaboration now become lines of communication. Having acted together heart-to-heart, they can now talk together heart-to-heart. In this heart-to-heart talking they will find new ways of opening their scriptures to each other, new opportunities to "pass over" into each other's religious experiences and beliefs.

5. *Communion*: The passing-over will be more than communication of ideas and new insights; it will also become a passing-over to, or a recognition of, that which was already present and active in the very first steps of the encounter, that which stirred the compassion and moved the conversion and

grounded the praxis. I am talking about the "mystical content" of all prophetic feeling and action. I am referring, weakly, to that in which the participants of this ecumenical ecological dialogue are communing through all the steps of their encounter—the Sacredness of the earth, or the Sacred Earth, or the Mystery housed in the universe, the *Notum Ignotum* (the Known Unknown) that we sense and come to know more clearly when we "suffer with," "turn to," and "work with and for" the sufferings of this earth. There comes a stage in the dialogue where the participants in this dialogue will feel both the need and the ability to give greater, clearer expression to the communion they have been experiencing all along. At this point they will certainly have to sit in silence together—but they will also have to devise new ecumenical-ecological rituals and liturgies with which they can celebrate and commemorate the Mystery that the earth has revealed to them. Such communing will clarify and strengthen the compassion, the conversion, the collaboration, and the communication.

So will turn the circle of an interfaith ecological dialogue, and the earth, with the religions, will be the better for it.

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