

Christianity, Ecology, and the Universe Story

On a July afternoon in 1990, an hour or so after the school children had been dismissed for the day, the ground of the fabled Cordillera mountains in the Philippines shuddered, heaved, settled, and slid. An earthquake of 7+ on the Richter scale rocked Baguio, the City of Pines, and laid it low. Devastation was massive and the loss of life staggering, not least because a second strong tremor arrived forty minutes after the first—just long enough to lure people back into their weakened homes to take shelter from torrential rains that continued to fall.

The sixty-two-year-old convent of the Maryknoll Sisters was among the ruins. After emergency care, the question became, what now? Rebuild somehow and take up where they had left off—elementary education and advocacy work with the urban poor and the tribal communities of the surrounding mountains—or what?

The answer took form over the course of the next years: The Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary, **[first slide]** with its Center for the Integrity of Creation, its Fourteen Stations of the Cosmic Journey, its Environmental Theater, and its Bio-Shelter. The Ecological Sanctuary protects the remaining old growth pines and, with diverted rain water and recycled gray water, restores the wetlands. The Center for the Integrity of Creation hosts the many meetings focused on jobs, housing and poverty alleviation. The outdoor Environmental Theater is where most meetings begin, with prayers danced by students from the School for the Deaf. **[slides of dance]** The Stations of the Cosmic Journey, connected by paths across the mountain that is the sanctuary, express artistically the evolution of the universe from the Big Bang to the present. **[remaining slides]** And the Bio-Shelter is home to the Sisters, itself constructed from the recycled ruins and

felled trees of the earthquake. It is simple, sleek and “hi-tech” in the way of “green” building, with an airiness that captures the feel and smell of the sanctuary’s sunshine and pine.

This “journey of the universe” is cast in the sacramental traditions of Roman Catholicism as that has taken shape in recent decades under the influence of such as Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme.¹ What Berry calls “the Great Work,” to move from “the human devastation of Earth” to a time “when humans [are] present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner”,² is what the Ecological Sanctuary embodies in ritual, spirituality and practice.

The Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary show people operating in the register of symbol and spirit.³ Their Christianity does what James Miller says religion does. Through the work of symbolic consciousness, religion imaginatively construes human experience of the world so as to invest it with meaning and provide motivation, energy, and direction. Much of this is sense-making on a grand scale—“rearranging the nonreligious furniture of our mind into a coherent whole.”⁴ This is meaning cosmic in its reach (questions of origin, destiny and purpose), sacred in its value (questions of morality and ultimate standing), and unifying in its drive (the coherent whole, the story that adds up).

The human experience of nature is integral to the process. Lasting, cross-cultural symbols are often lifted directly from nature: the sacred mountain, the rivers of

¹ See, for example, Brian Swimme & Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 3.

³ See the work of Charles Taylor as reported in “Canadian is Awarded Spirituality Prize,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2007: A20.

⁴ David Sloan Wilson, as reported in “The Origin of Religions, From a Distinctly Darwinian View,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 2002:F2.

crystalline waters, the Tree of Life, the caves of the gods, the deserts of our lives, the rock from which we are hewn, springs of living water, Mother Earth and Father Sky.

The Maryknoll Sanctuary exemplifies at every turn this human experience of more-than-human nature as the funder of symbolic consciousness. The Sanctuary has embarked on the ecological phase of Christianity.

But what about the ecological phase of other Christianities? I underline two matters.

The first is this: invitations are in the mail, some have arrived, some have RSVPed, more are on the way. Here's why the invitations have been sent.

Wicked problems like climate change, the death of nature in key locals (coral reefs, rainforests, permafrost belts), and the need for a different socio-economic-political order are problems that cannot be solved with the same means and ways of life that created them. Jesus is precise: old wineskins no longer hold, the old cloth tears (Lk. 5:33-39). Moreover, the first round of reactions is exactly as Jesus said. People respond, "The old is good," and use old wineskins for the new wine. Translation: we'll try to green the way of life we have—modernity and the industrial-technological paradigm. That's the "old" that does not hold. A new era of responsibility asks for new capacities to effect different ways of living.

That requires courage. The courage to "lift the veil"⁵ and be relentlessly honest about present human causes of Earth's degradation, the courage to live with the anguish

⁵ "Unveiling," rather than "end," is the meaning of the Greek word for "apocalypse."

of a diminished planet, and the courage to embark on “ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.”⁶

We do not start from scratch, since there is no “scratch” to start from in a world long underway. This is not about beginnings, but *re*-beginnings. And among traditions of transformation at hand are those schooled in working at the foundations of human character and conduct, schooled in shaping lives both inwardly and outwardly, schooled in patterns of death and renewal, and trained in generating and sustaining ways of life replete with rites of passage and close community.

The world’s religions, Christianities among them, are among such powers. Science is indispensable because it can tell us what is happening to the changing planet. Religion is no substitute for science. It is less exacting and less trustworthy about things empirical, and less rigorous about testing its claims.

Yet few people will die for a pie chart. Even the good data of sound science does not upend cherished ways, including dysfunctional ones. Something with more tenacity, commitment and loyalty, something with a deep enough reach to summon sacrifice, something that lays claim to cosmic meaning and locates us in communities that transcend our egos and surpass our modest moment in time, something that offers renewable moral-spiritual energy for hard transitions, and something that bangs on the door of home to insist someone be home—some such power as this needs to join all that good science coupled to good technology brings.

That something is not only religion. There are other transforming agents, not least education, the arts, and plain, healthy families. But religion bears remarkable powers that

⁶Phrases from “The Holden Prayer,” commonly prayed at Holden Village, an ecumenical retreat and renewal center in the Lutheran tradition, Chelan, Washington. The prayer is part of Morning Prayer (Matins) in *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 137.

are ignored or dismissed to the peril of all those riding the same small ark on rising seas. It is foolish not to tap millennia of fluency in the arts of life instruction and renewal, just as it is foolish to overlook the religious loyalties of what, by most estimates, approaches 85 percent of the planet's peoples. The dismissal of religion by its cultured despisers is, in any event, an exercise in futility. It runs against the grain of a species that is incorrigibly religious.

It is also foolish to dismiss those who know what moves people. We are moved by fear and terror and by love and beauty. Religions know these powers. They also know the pain and ruin that follow those who sense terror and act in fear but have no experience of a beautiful world or love of it.

Global awareness grows that new wineskins and new cloth, an era of new capacity and responsibility, are required. Thus the invitation to Christianity to join the Great Work in a central, not marginal, way.

That said—my second point—the powers of many of most Christianities are not up to the present task in many of their present forms. They lack tried-and-tested experience with geo-physical change and the experience of planetary tipping points. Most have not had their ecological phase, at least not in the era of “hot, flat and crowded.”⁷ They have even peopled the ranks of guilty bystanders witnessing “the withering of the earth.”⁸ In a word, they are as needful of conversion to the tough, new planet as other agents of change. Christian communities, too, must generate new capacities for new responsibilities on an altered planet.

⁷ **Data on Friedman needed.**

⁸ From “The Greening of the World’s Religions,” Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, in *Religious Studies News*, May 2007: 15.

Many, like the Ecological Sanctuary, are. Many more will. Facing wicked problems, they will, as living traditions, tap their own deepest traditions— sacramentalism, mysticism, asceticism, prophetic-liberative practices, wisdom—in order to generate new responsibility. They will also generate hope. It's nicely put by Denise Levertov and I close with her words.

But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope!—so much is in the bud.

How can desire fail?—we have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,

*Only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings
with beast and flower, not as oppressors.*

Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent!

Not yet, not yet—there is too much broken that must be mended,

*Too much hurt that we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.*

We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

*So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture, so much
is in the bud.⁹*

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⁹ Need to cite original source; this from *Singing the Living Tradition, Readings, No. 648*.