

# SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CREATION SPIRITUALITY

By JANE BLEWETT

I WAS TAKING my usual walk along an abandoned stretch of Lake Erie early this morning when I suddenly realized that the lake had discarded the last of its winter blanket of ice and was free to dive and rise, tumble and roll, to its heart's content. The stupendous beauty of the lake, its bounty and energy, poured over me like a great wash and sent me on my own day's 'diving and rising' carrying something of its strength within me. It was an experience I have had many times this past year, an experience of linking with the earth, drawing from its rich store, and looking to it for guidance and inspiration. And in subtle but faithful ways, it has led me on.

Today, as I reflect on the movement within my own life and spirit in these recent years, a movement that has taken me from thirteen years of justice and peace work on the staff of the Center of Concern in Washington, DC, to this present location, Holy Cross Centre for Earth Learning and Spirituality in Port Burwell, Ontario, Canada, I see it as perhaps symbolic of a shift taking place in many parts of the world, a shift that is drawing an awareness of the earth and the total earth community into the very centre of our consciousness.

The earth itself is issuing a compelling message which we are slowly beginning to comprehend. As I see it, it is a call to the human species to learn anew its rightful place among all the other members of the total earth community. It asks of us a new attitude toward the earth, a stance of deep respect and reverence, a new humility, an expanded notion of the word 'rights' beyond just the human species to include trees, butterflies and all living beings.

It means coming to greater justice and peace for people *through* the earth, in the context of the earth and its life-support systems. It urges us to learn a 'new story' as scientists unfold some of the mysteries of the origins of the universe and our solar system, and

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therefore of our own origins, stardust that we are. It requires that we place our economic, political, social and religious agendas within the larger agenda of a vibrant and vital earth. It is the earth itself who sets the course, who draws us on.

### *Major themes*

Over the years, in probing deeply into the Church's social teachings, the staff of the Center of Concern has developed a list of major lessons or themes which have undergirded much of their own work for justice and peace and around which they have educated large segments of the US (and beyond) Catholic community.<sup>1</sup> I would like to look at some of those themes from the perspective—not of the Center of Concern's letterhead: 'Toward a World that is Human'—but from the perspective of Holy Cross Centre's letterhead: 'Toward an Earth that is Community' . . . in other words, to explore the themes as a member of the 'earth community' to see what insights might emerge for further reflection and discussion. My efforts will be rough and incomplete, but they will indicate, I trust, how my physical move to Canada is getting translated into an interior shift of consciousness, how I am coming to justice and peace with creation.

1. *Link of religious and social dimensions of life:* 'The "social" . . . is not "secular" in the sense of being outside God's plan . . . Therefore, faith and justice are necessarily linked closely together.'<sup>2</sup>

And I would like to add that just as the social is not secular but is 'intimately involved with the dynamic of the Reign of God', so the earth is not mere 'dirt' upon which we walk; it is not dead, inert matter, having no significance other than as a backdrop for the great human venture. No, it is a sacred entity, the product of billions of years of unfolding and evolving life that carries in its every expression the stamp of the living Spirit. (Many even support the Gaia hypothesis that claims the earth is like a single, living, self-regulating organism).<sup>3</sup> The link people are experiencing today is not only between faith and justice, bonding the human to the human in a shared journey, but in addition, bonding the human to the earth in a new sense of the holy, the Divine.

Creation-centred spirituality is emerging as a way of expressing this new grasp of a God immanent in all of creation. Instead of only looking up to a transcendent God, people are also resting on the earth, touching it gently, and discovering the God who dwells

within each blade of grass. The 'sacred book of the universe' is joining the 'sacred book of the scriptures' to be read and explored for its wisdom, holiness, joy and solace, for its revelation of who God is.

This new sense of earth sacredness does not come out of nowhere, of course. There is a tradition. Thomas Berry talks of five different earth-related models in our Christian history. The early Celtic nature model, the Benedictine custodial model, Hildegarde of Bingen and the fertility (greening) model, the Franciscan fraternity model and finally, in our times, the Teilhardian evolutionary model.<sup>4</sup>

It is this latest Teilhardian stream, with its central insight that the story of the universe must be told in both its physical and psychic dimensions, that is so nurturing to creation spirituality. And it is the same deep sense of the sacred in the whole of creation that is prompting outcries from all corners of the globe at modern industrialized society's abuses of the planet and the destruction of its many-splendoured community.

New questions are posed: is it not time to write a new Creed to nurture our religious imagination that would have more to proclaim about fifteen *billion* years of emergent creation than the single phrase, 'I believe in God . . . creator of heaven and earth'? Who is this Creator God? And along with the historical Jesus, who is the cosmic Christ? Can a cosmological model of the Trinity be formulated to deepen our religious understanding of God drawing on the three laws of the universe manifest at all levels of reality: differentiation, subjectivity and communion, as has been suggested by Berry?<sup>5</sup> What religious significance—not just aesthetic or scientific significance—do we find in the sight of our beautiful, fragile planet suspended in space with no national boundaries, no fences?

2. *Dignity of the human person*: 'Made in the image of God, women and men have a pre-eminent place in the social order, with inalienable rights . . . '.

And I would like to add that so too does all of creation carry a dignity and a mirroring of the Divine. Each creature images God in a manner unique to its species: each adds another glimpse of the Creator. Each excels as other creatures cannot—the flight of the swallow, the movement of a dolphin, the sight of a hawk, the community life of an anthill or beehive and on and on we could go. And each creature contributes to the whole, to the web that

sustains all of life, in ways that we are only beginning to discover. There are great lessons of cooperation and mutual dependency, of struggle and groping toward life, of symbiotic relationships, of dying and rising again, to inform us all.

Each participant in the earth community has rights, simply because it has a rightful place in the total scheme of creation. In 1982, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed a 'World Charter for Nature'<sup>6</sup> in which it stated, 'The General Assembly . . . convinced that: every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man (*sic*), and, to accord other organisms such recognition, man (*sic*) must be guided by a moral code of action'. Most people know of the UN Declaration on Human Rights; only a handful know and are trying to activate the Charter for Nature.

At present, we humans are like spoiled children striking blindly at all that lies in our path, as we destroy the rainforests, re-route rivers, level mountains, hardly giving a thought to the eons of generative life to which each gives testimony, nor to the communities of living creatures that each sustains. Surely, the rainforests of Brazil with their approximately 50,000 species of trees (as compared to about 700 in all of North America) deserve more regard than to be chainsawed into extinction. When we annihilate a species, we lose forever an expression of God, an experience of God, that she thought important enough to create. Such destruction of God's creation shows a degree of arrogance unparalleled in the earth community!

In saying the above, I am not denying that humans have a special form of consciousness which alone (as far as we know) can reflect upon all of creation and relate it to a Creator God, and thus mirror God in this way. Nor am I ignoring the fact that many people are denied their basic rights and the necessities to achieve a truly human life. These evils need to be addressed urgently. I do want, however, to bring into sharper focus the rights and needs of the total community that somehow have to be met if the earth itself—and therefore, the human species—is to survive.

3. *Option for the poor*: 'A preferential love should be shown to the poor, whose needs and rights are given special attention in God's eyes.'

And I would like to add that there is no way we can attend to the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, unless we attend at the same time to the 'poor' of endangered species, strip-mined hills, eroded croplands, polluted rivers, acidified lakes and gutted mountains. It is all of a piece, justice for poor people, justice for the earth. If we divorce people from the earth and pretend we are working for the poor while ignoring what is happening to their life-support systems, i.e., oceans, air, soil, plant and animal species, we are duping ourselves and them.

Tom Berry in discussing this point even asks, 'At what point does the option for the human become self-destructive?' By this he means option for the human over against option for the larger community of the earth, *including the human*. He uses the analogy of a lifeboat (the earth) on which all of life is dependent. If we do not keep the lifeboat afloat, the poor as well as all others will not survive.<sup>7</sup>

In *Our common future*, a recent United Nations-mandated study on environment and development, the point is made again and again that the poverty of peoples and the degradation of the environment go hand-in-hand. While the report is not critical enough of a growth-oriented model of development which has harmed rather than improved the lives of poor people in all parts of the world, it does demonstrate this central fact:

We have in the past been concerned about the impacts of economic growth upon the environment. We are now forced to concern ourselves with the impacts of ecological stress . . . upon our economic prospects.

The report continues, 'Ecology and economy are becoming ever more interwoven—locally, regionally, nationally, and globally—into a seamless net of causes and effects'.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, I read of a parish in Enriquillo, Dominican Republic, where the people tolled the church bells all day to cry out against the cutting of nineteen ancient ceiba trees, the last of the town's 'ecological reserve'. They were felled to make room for luxury homes.<sup>9</sup> The people mourned the death of their companion trees, one more insult in their already impoverished lives.

The story could just as well have ended that the trees were cut to help service the country's debt to the commercial banks in the rich North, an example of a nation-state trying to survive by

selling off its natural resources at the expense of its own poor people. It is an immensely cruel problem facing many developing countries (especially when so many believe the debt of the Third World has already been paid several times over),<sup>10</sup> but it cannot be solved in any lasting way unless the environment and the people are seen as an organic whole. To destroy the trees is to destroy the people.

4. *Promotion of the common good*: 'The common good is the sum total of all those conditions of social living—economic, political, cultural—which make it possible for women and men to . . . achieve the perfection of their humanity.'

And I would like to add that the word 'ecological' must be added to the list of those conditions. Ecology comes from the Greek root *oikos* which means home or household. It is the science that deals with the relations between living organisms and their environment—humans and the earth, for example. And it is this science that is helping us discover what are indeed the 'commons' of our earth-home which we need to promote with all our might.

They are, in fact, the meadows and the wetlands, the seas and forests, the great plains and the winds, the ozone layer and the arctic caps, all of which play an essential part in sustaining life as we know it. Only by attending to the good of these 'commons' can there be anything like a 'common good' within humans along with all other creatures can achieve their 'perfection'.

Something more—the 'commons' that really join us all in one community of life began about fifteen billion years ago in an initial burst of creative energy to which we are all linked. In that 'big bang' (or, more accurately, 'great light') was contained all that is in the universe, all that has unfolded eon upon eon, galaxies, solar systems, our earth, life, right down to the present moment. From the first, every particle carried within it the seeds of the next unfolding, including human consciousness. We are all cousins, as Berry says.

The earth itself is approximately four and a half billion years old and over those billions of years has evolved the variety of life forms that exist today. Perhaps in that long journey, no moment was more crucial for humans than the emergence of flowers on our earth. In a marvellous chapter, 'How flowers changed the world' in Loren Eiseley's fascinating book, *The immense journey*, he writes,

Apes were to become men (*sic*), in the inscrutable wisdom of nature, because flowers had produced seeds and fruits in such tremendous quantities that a new and totally different store of energy had become available in concentrated form.<sup>11</sup>

When we encourage one another to take time to 'smell the flowers', we are in fact acknowledging a debt we owe to our ancient 'cousins' who burst upon the earth some one hundred million years ago and who made it possible for us to be.

5. *Stewardship*: 'All property has a "social mortgage". All people are to be respected and share the resources of the earth.'

But I would like to add that the very word, 'stewardship', at least as it is commonly used to describe the human-earth relationship, is troublesome. It carries with it a deep assumption that we humans know *how* to be stewards of the earth, that it is 'our' earth and we are in charge. We may do with it as we please. In our 'stewarding', we have poured so much junk into the Great Lakes they can no longer be called 'sweet water seas' as the Native Peoples named them when they first came upon them. It is a record repeated around the world as humans have recklessly intervened in the life systems of the earth in a manner to degrade and exploit them.

On the contrary, I would claim we do not know how to steward the earth, tend the garden, because we have not understood our relationship, our place, in the rest of the earth community. Perhaps nothing has brought this home to us more vividly than the picture of the garbage barge roaming the shores of the Atlantic coast last summer searching for a place to dump its trash. We are at a moment in our journey where the earth itself is demonstrating that it cannot tolerate the profligate way of life our species has adopted.

But, you may counter, we are still in charge even though we have been poor stewards on many occasions. After all, humans came along last on the evolutionary scale and we are definitely 'on top'. I contend that it is this very attitude that has kept us from learning from the earth, from getting 'inside' the community of life and taking our cues from that posture.

Rather than being in charge, we are more like passengers on a small planet, revolving around an average star we call our 'sun' . . . one of a hundred billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy . . . one of the hundred billion galaxies in the universe. Are we in charge? In charge of a cosmic dance of divine origin that has been

whirling stars and planets in space for billions of years? Or even in charge of the one special planet we call 'earth' which has been about its task with intelligence, ingenuity, creativity and startling responsibility over the ages?

It is the earth who gives direction to life forces, who nurtures, sustains, waters, warms and cools. Through the work of scientists like James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, we are only beginning to understand the marvellous and intricate ways the earth invents to keep its temperature constant within a very narrow range—and thus make life possible—even though the sun has been steadily warming us over the eons. How do we express our gratitude for this daily, hidden, faithful, stewarding care?

6. *Global solidarity*: 'We belong to one human family and as such have mutual obligations to promote the development of all people across the world.'

But I would like to add . . . today it is imperative that we come to understand ourselves as belonging first and foremost to the 'earth family' with whom we share the obligation to promote the nurturance and well-being of each member. It is only in this total community of life that the human family can flourish and come to its full stature.

In his excellent book, *To care for the earth*,<sup>12</sup> Sean McDonagh argues that we treat the earth as we treat one another. It strikes me that perhaps we mistreat one another precisely because we mistreat the earth. We rip, rape and rob it, oppress, despise and discard it. The earth is a 'thing' as are those, too often, who appear as statistics on our 'least developed nations' list or 'global poor' inventories. We 'war' against its life forms with our pesticides and herbicides, with our infant formulas and outdated pharmaceuticals sent to the Third World. We of the rich North seed the clouds to tease out reluctant raindrops and then decide who will receive the rain. We of the rich North plumb the ocean depths for precious metals and then build a new generation of death-dealing weapons. We will tolerate no interference with our grand designs and lofty schemes. Not even outer space is safe from our gadgetry.

I am not denouncing human ingenuity or the achievements of science and technology. By no means. But I do want to raise questions about the 'scientific mindset' that has so pervaded our consciousness in the past four hundred years. With the work of Bacon, Descartes and Newton, an earth that was previously seen

as organic, whose tides and seasons, rhythms and patterns had to be respected, became an earth-machine. It was there to be fired and cast into any mould humans could design. New knowledge became power over the forces of life and nature, not understanding about them, let alone empathy with them. And with that mindset, humans too became disposable.

Only now are we discovering the toll this view of the earth and its life community has taken. The earth is not our home nor are we neighbours to vast numbers of other creatures. Tom Berry says that if a parliament of all living beings were to be held, humans would be voted 'out'. And probably if a parliament of the peoples of the Third World (not their elite leaders) were to be held, we of the rich North would also be voted 'out'.

7. *Political participation*: 'Democratic participation in decision-making is the best way to respect the dignity and liberty of people'.

And I would like to add that the best way to respect the dignity of the total earth community is to find mechanisms for its members to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Groups like the Green Party, Greenpeace, the Bioregional Movement, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Fund are a beginning. They bring to public awareness the plight of our 'cousins', the two and four-legged critters or the giant Sequoia trees, and force a hearing in many forums. It is critical that their work expand and flourish.

But I contend much more is needed. Not just *facts* about the condition of other beings but the emergence of a deep, religious stream that will help us grasp that we are first of all 'earthlings' born from the womb of the earth, and that we belong together on this planet. Creation spirituality is meant to plant and nurture this religious sense and lead us out of our narrow anthropocentric focus. Many seem drawn to its message and are giving shape to a new consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

If there is one group in the earth community who can empathize with the importance of being present when decisions are made, it is women and, interestingly enough, there are large numbers of them active in the ecological movement. In fact, ecofeminism has become an important stream within the wider feminist movement.

The realization that their gifts, charism, history, experience and expertise have been excluded from shaping all public institutions

of modern society is a major factor that fuels the women's movement in our times. Women do not sit nor have we ever sat at the tables where war games are drawn up, where the world's financial resources are parcelled out, where bishops are chosen or encyclicals written. Yet, we must live with the consequences. The feminist voices that cry out against this injustice draw energy from the earth community itself whose plight they mirror. Ecofeminism is flourishing in the strength of both the earth and women aware of their bonding with it.

8. *Promotion of peace*: 'Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon right order among humans and among nations.'

And I would like to add that peace is even more the fruit of right order between humans and the earth. The earth is the great school of learning in this regard, a 'peace institute' that surrounds us every minute of our lives. Not by competition and exploitation has the earth evolved over the ages but rather by immense projects of co-operation and co-ordination, patient groping and searching, one species linked in life-and-death fashion to another, so that, all along the way, life might perdure.

Violence is there too but a creative violence, not to wreak destruction, but to bring forth the new. A powerful bolt of lightning strikes a forest. It bursts into flames and soon nothing but a field of charred stumps remains, violent death all around. But wait . . . what do we discover? Only through the intense heat of such a fire can certain seeds be released from their casing, fall to the ground and be born anew. Lightning is midwife to the cycle, to new life emerging. It is a very different lesson from the charred remains of Hiroshima or a victim of a cheap handgun.

Probably no word is used more in the context of peace than the word 'security'. In fact, under the guise of national security—to secure our way of life—the US government spends \$800 million a day to research, develop, produce, study and learn the use of, sell, buy, stockpile and spy about the most sophisticated, destructive weapons of all time. We are told that if we just have enough of the right kind of bombs, guns, tanks, destroyers, submarines and space-based shields, we will be safe and no other nation will preempt our number one spot. It is a cruel delusion that takes its toll most heavily on the poor, both people and the earth.

By contrast, the earth teaches that the greater the diversity, the greater the security. There are no 'number ones'. The more variety

in the garden, the more likely there will be a rich harvest. Monocultures or single-species strands of trees that can be destroyed by a single insect are not nature's recipe. No one species's 'way of life' is preferred at the cost of all others, at least not in the long term. It is a powerful lesson we humans do well to ponder.

Another lesson about national security explored by the World Commission on Environment and Development in their overview to *Our common future* states,

The deepening and widening environmental crisis presents a threat to national security—and even survival—that may be greater than well-armed, ill-disposed neighbours and unfriendly alliances.

Further on, they continue,

The whole notion of security as traditionally understood—in terms of political and military threats to national sovereignty—must be expanded to include the growing impacts of environmental stress—locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. There are no military solutions to 'environmental insecurity'.

Some groups have adopted the term, organic security, to express this reality and link peace and the the environment in an integral manner.<sup>14</sup>

*Our common future* introduces a whole new class of people, 'environmental refugees', victims of the deterioration of the natural resource base and its carrying capacity, a tragedy that often leads to political upheaval and military violence. They roam the highways and byways of the world from the Horn of Africa to the Caribbean Islands. (Is it not also an apt designation for the hundreds of communities all over the world who have had to be evacuated after toxic spills, poisoned fumes, polluted water streams and nuclear accidents have destroyed their homes?) For these people, there is no need to drop a bomb; the end product of our pillaging the earth, wasting its resources and its people, has already 'wiped them out'.

### *Conclusion*

In the above eight points, I have touched on some of the themes that run through the Church's social teachings to demonstrate how

they need to be expanded in a new ecological age. That this is beginning to happen is evidenced in Pope John Paul's recent encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On social concerns). It is being hailed as 'the Catholic Church's first encyclical on ecology'.<sup>15</sup>

While I rejoice in the three or four instances in the text where recognition is given to ecology,<sup>16</sup> it still has a long way to go before being an adequate document to move the Christian community into a new human/earth consciousness. However, in both section V, 'A theological reading of modern problems' and in his 'Conclusion', the pope makes some profound contributions to lead us in that direction. In paragraph 38, he states,

Thus one would hope that all those who . . . are responsible for ensuring a 'more human life' for their fellow (*sic*) human beings . . . will become fully aware of the urgent need to change the spiritual attitudes which define each individual's relationship with self, with neighbour, with even the remotest human communities and *with nature itself*: and all of this in view of higher values such as the common good . . . (emphasis mine).

Here is a call to challenge deeply-held spiritual attitudes that have kept people from embracing the earth and its immense and wondrous community of life as an integral part of themselves and their religious journey. The 'common good' must include all who share the 'commons'—trees and toads, water and rocks, meadows and mountains, birds and bees, women and men. This points to a creation-centred spirituality that elicits our wonder and awe, encourages a new humility within the total earth community, and calls for an urgent religious commitment to its preservation and enhancement.

But even more, the pope says that *solidarity* is the 'virtue' that best captures the relationships, the interdependencies, that link all in all. If solidarity is the 'path to peace and development', it is also the essential virtue to bind all living and non-living matter in a profound embrace. Solidarity among people has no basis unless it is equally grounded in a solidarity with nature. The earth itself is calling forth this new awareness, this new sense of each and all belonging to a whole. Pope John Paul II has given a religious name to the 'web of life' in which we are all wrapped.

And finally, in some concluding remarks, the pope summons every individual to take part in a campaign 'in order to secure

development in peace, *in order to safeguard nature itself and the world around us*' (emphasis mine). This is a call that goes beyond peoples and nations, a call that reaches out into the galaxies and deep down into subatomic particles, a call that brings our fragile planet earth into the heart of our religion and our God.

The encyclical has opened the door for the Christian community to travel a new 'green' path of religious exploration, to grope with the total earth community toward a fullness anticipated in that first burst of Divine creative energy at the beginning of time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Schultheis, Michael J.; DeBerri, Edward P.; Henriot, Peter J. (eds.). *Our best kept secret: the rich heritage of Catholic social teaching*. Revised, expanded edition. (Center of Concern, Washington, DC, 20017).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 21f. All the numbered themes and following text in quotation marks in the rest of this essay are taken from these same pages.

<sup>3</sup> Lovelock, James: *Gaia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Video tape 2 from the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology, (15726 Ashland Drive, Laurel, MD, 20707).

<sup>5</sup> Berry, Thomas: *The Riverdale papers* (The Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 5801 Palisade Ave., Riverdale, N.Y. 10471).

<sup>6</sup> Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, *World Charter for nature*. A/RES/37/7. 9 November 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Berry, Thomas: Unpublished notes from the 1986 Colloquium at Holy Cross Centre, Port Burwell, Ontario.

<sup>8</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our common future* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> United States Catholic Mission Association, *Intercom*, no. 173, Washington, DC, 20017—4040, April, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Potter, George Ann: *Center Focus*, Issues 82 and 84, January and May, 1988. (Center of Concern).

<sup>11</sup> Eisely, Loren: *The immense journey* (New York: Vintage Press, 1959).

<sup>12</sup> McDonough, Sean: *To care for the earth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Casebolt, Carl: Eco-justice project of the National Council of Churches, 110 Maryland Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002.

<sup>14</sup> Editorial, 'Science fused with theology in papal letter', *National Catholic Reporter*, March 4, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. See especially paragraphs 26 and 34. In the former, he highlights 'ecological concern' as a positive aspect of development in the contemporary world. In the latter, the pope says that the moral character of development cannot exclude respect for the beings which constitute the natural world. He lists three considerations to reflect upon, the first of which states, ' . . . one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate—animals, plants, the natural elements—simply as one wishes . . . On the contrary, one must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the "cosmos".'