

DOMINION, POWER AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Reflections on Spiritual Ecology

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WITH THE GROWING WORLDWIDE CONCERN over climate change as a consequence of human behaviour, it has been suggested that the source of the problem, at least in part, is the Judaeo-Christian attitude towards the created universe suggested in Genesis:

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, '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'. (Genesis 1:27–28)

A wrong understanding of these lines might lead believers to think that the systematic destruction of the planet in the name of material progress is part of their biblical mandate. This error is compounded by the wrong-headed notion that *only heaven really matters*, an interpretation of the New Testament ideas of eternal life and the Kingdom of God which takes them to mean *somewhere else*. If this is the case, turning the created earth into a rubbish dump with unbreathable air and undrinkable water would seem at best irrelevant and at worst justified.¹

It is sometimes suggested that a shift away from the Abrahamic religions, or even the elimination of religion, would benefit the growth of ecological consciousness and perhaps save the planet from its current predicament.² The alternatives proposed range from ancient

¹ See on these issues Lynn Townsend White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, 155 (10 March 1967), 1203–1207.

² See, for example, Tony Watling, *Ecological Imaginations in the World Religions: An Ethnographic Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2009).

karmic religions of the orient (which also look beyond the world in their own way) to New Age inventions as numerous as the believers who affirm them.

However, the dualistic interpretation of biblical writing (heaven versus earth, spirit versus flesh, metaphysical versus material) is not part of the foundation of Christian belief. It is, in fact, a heresy—Manichaeism. Moreover, if we read ‘dominion ... over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ not in terms of authoritarianism, submission and colonialism, but as a lordship to be exercised in the manner of the Creator in whose image and likeness the first couple were made, then the biblical mandate becomes a far-reaching responsibility in relation to the created world. Filled with the gift of divine life, the mortal being is given the responsibility of lordship. This is a fundamental part of ‘image and likeness’. Human beings are called to reign over land and sea, over bird, plant, fish and land animal in the same way that the Lord Creator does. Dominion in the Creator’s name means taking charge of creation in every detail. The repercussions for our ecological commitment are enormous. All created beings are a gift for Adam and Eve and all their descendants, but humanity is sent to make use of the gifts of creation in proper measure, without excess, so that creation can continue to give glory to the unending love of the Creator. That means our use must be sustainable. We have inherited a vocation of stewardship and we have scorned it. Our relationship with the planet must change radically, and soon.

For the original sense of ‘eternal life’ is not the non-material hereafter, but rather the new transcendence acquired by every Christian at baptism, giving sense and meaning to every aspect of daily, earthly life.³ The Kingdom of God means living in the Lord’s way of love and merciful compassion, here and now.

I would like to argue that the real source of the ethos that permits environmental contamination is decidedly not Judaeo-Christian, but more properly rooted in secular thinking: in the myth of progress and in a globalised capitalism which reduces every decision to the single criterion of profitability.

³ See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008).



Burning down the World

'I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28:20)

The Constitution of the Federal Union of Brazil says,

Indians shall have their social organization, customs, languages, creeds and traditions recognized, as well as their original rights to the lands they traditionally occupy (Article 231)⁴

And yet, the lands of indigenous people continue to be invaded by those who destroy the forest, bring in cattle and plant soya, because there are profits to be made. Without the rainforest, the indigenous people have no way to live.

An elderly woman from an indigenous community came to a workshop that I was helping to give in the summer of 2010 at the chapel in her village. The workshop was about land use, environmental protection and the rights of indigenous peoples. There are legal, historical and spiritual aspects to all these issues, and native peoples do not separate these aspects as much as Westerners tend to do. We mentioned deforestation, and afterwards she came to speak to me. She had never travelled anywhere, never seen or understood television.

⁴ English text at <http://www.v-brazil.com/government/laws/titleVIII.html>, accessed 11 November 2011.

She said, 'Father, I didn't know they were burning down the world. That makes me very sad.' I did not know what to say to console her.

Deforestation in the Amazon was actively promoted during the last century, particularly by the Brazilian military government (1964–1985), in the name of 'development'. The Latin American dictatorships of the time always tended to side with economic interests, local and foreign. With the growing consciousness of climate change, however, this began to diminish. A law, the *Código Florestal*, was passed to protect the rainforest, and the Constitution itself supposedly protects the peoples who live there. Nevertheless, for many this is just a formality. Destruction, now mostly clandestine and often tolerated, is growing again. On 24 May 2011 the lower house of the Brazilian Congress approved a modification of the *Código Florestal* making it easier to destroy the woods and granting amnesty to those charged with illegal deforestation before 2008. The same day, a couple who had dedicated their lives to the defence of the rainforest, Zé Claudio and his wife, Maria do Espírito Santo da Siva, were assassinated.

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Some see only a conflict between agricultural and ecological interests. But slowly we are coming to realise that if the rainforest disappears, life on the planet will too, in the long run. The defenders of the rainforest and its inhabitants remain under threat of murder; forest rangers continue to monitor what is happening; and the Amazon woods continue to disappear, never to return. Jesus understands about blood spilt to defend life. Now, more than ever, we need a Risen Lord as our leader. He has promised to be here with us until the end of the world. Human greed threatens to hasten that end. What will our children and grandchildren inherit?

Because of its immensity and inaccessibility, about 80 per cent of the Amazonian forest remains intact. In most countries, native woodlands are only a fragment of what they once were. And what about native peoples? The destruction of indigenous peoples and the colonisation of lands traditionally occupied by them are also part of the Western heritage of 'progress'. Most indigenous inhabitants of the New World died of disease in the aftermath of European invasion (smallpox being probably the biggest killer). Some were intentionally massacred—as recently as the last century; many were enslaved; and most of the survivors were absorbed into a Europeanized way of

life. They live on the outskirts of the cities or in a rural poverty that is disconnected from their ancient culture. Many ethnic groups have disappeared completely, but there are some who still live a version of a traditional way of life in which a high priority is given to harmonious coexistence with Nature. They understand themselves as part of creation, and not separate from it. They also have a very clear idea of how humankind depends on Mother Earth for basic sustenance. Such people can perhaps help Westerners recover the spirit of lordship that exists in their own spiritual and philosophical tradition.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, the task of the new generation will be the urgent one of resurrection. It is time for *reforestation*. We must radically change the ways in which our demands affect the global economy. Businesses are burning down the world to produce paper, meat, electricity and biofuels. But we can live and be happy with less: indigenous communities give witness to that. With Christ as our Head, the entire Body can learn to live more simply, so that our children's children can simply live.

Impossible Dreams

'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' (John 20:21)

In the spring of 2011, I had the privilege of celebrating the Easter Vigil in a village in a remote corner of the Amazonian forest. It is one of those places where the 'darkness of this night' is a reality and the 'light of Christ' is welcomed. A landed family of cattle ranchers lived nearby, and they joined in. This was a nice gesture of unity and reconciliation: interests clashed dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, but some land had been returned to the local communities and peace has been restored. The community willingly made space for their neighbours.

There was, however, one uncomfortable moment of cultural misunderstanding. The native people let children do whatever they want to do. They use knives and machetes, climb on things, and handle fire, water and animals. The pack tends to self-regulate, even at an Easter Vigil with candles lit, sitting together on the floor, some under the altar. This time there were three white children mixed in. In the middle of the Eucharistic prayer, one mother decided that the

behaviour of her little boy was becoming unacceptable. So, in accordance with her code of responsibility, she went up, took her boy by the arm and made him sit still on the bench with the rest of the family. Her attitude was normal within the expectations of her culture—even a requirement in most institutional churches—but there it was a mistake. She treated her child in a way none of the local people would ever think of treating theirs, in front of the others, and during Mass.

Jesus, on the night he was taken, reminded his disciples that they must love one another as he had loved them. When he rose from the dead, he sent them on that labour of love, in the same way that he had been sent by his Father. But the hegemonic culture of our time says, *control one another, as I have controlled you*. This was not Jesus' attitude. He loved, taught, healed and preached, but in the Gospels he never *made anyone do anything*. The Good News is not imposed; it is proclaimed. The banquet is an invitation, not an obligation. The gospel is not a crusade; it is a mission.

Erik Erikson says that societies raise their children in such a way that they internalise and reproduce fundamental values.⁵ He is not talking about what we tell our children, but about how we treat them. If they are loved, they learn to love. If they are humiliated, they learn to humiliate. If they are free, they learn to liberate. If they are controlled, they learn to control. And control is an essential part of our global model for production and distribution. It is everywhere, except for a few tiny enclaves in the jungle, but there are not many of those.

I suspect that modern Christianity has been contaminated by a new heresy that fits this model. We will call it the *quixotic* heresy. This does not refer to the self-proclaimed knight in the novel by Cervantes. He is romantic, deranged and naïve; but in the end, well-meaning, harmless and even likeable. The source of the expression here is the 1965 Broadway musical adaptation of the novel, called *Man of La Mancha*, where we learn to dream impossible dreams and march into hell for heavenly causes.⁶ The music is passionate and inspiring.

⁵ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).

⁶ See 'Dream the Impossible Dream', song lyrics at <http://www.songlyrics.com/jack-jones/the-impossible-dream-the-quest-lyrics/>.

Some older people will get a little teary when they hear it. It perhaps evokes a memory of the moral and political victory achieved in the Second World War, and yet that feeling is being projected forward into a very different world. The Cold War was all about superpowers and their spheres of influence, which meant controlling other countries without actually having any mandate to do so. The hell into which boys were marching for someone's heavenly cause in 1965 was Vietnam.

Quixotic fantasy would not be a heresy if it were not coming into the Church somehow disguised as a Christian teaching. We do not see it among rural and indigenous communities in Latin America. But there has been a gradual shift of catechetical priorities in the developed world. What seems to be required for participation in the Church today is not unconditional love, God's saving grace or the inclusion of the excluded, but strict adherence to procedure.

The Risen Lord, on the other hand, sends his disciples on a 'glorious quest' of freedom, love and peace. He proposes something radically different from the world that we have created. And it is not an impossible dream: we have seen and touched it. It is part of the material world, the New Creation. This New Life, this new *way of life*, which loves without any ambition for control, has the potential to become reality.



Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, by Daumier

A Brave People

‘The Spirit helps us in our weakness.’ (Romans 8:26)

In an influential book about the cultural transformations brought about among indigenous people by the European invasion, I found a sharp criticism of the first attempts at evangelizing the Wapishana people of northern Brazil and Guyana: 98 per cent of the indigenous people, the author claimed, professed Catholicism without understanding it.⁷ It seems that some had come to believe that they could ward off the evil spirits in which they traditionally believed by mechanically chanting the Christian prayers taught by missionaries.

There is an irony here when we consider the generalised catechetical confusion of Roman Catholics worldwide. A similar percentage of urbane and educated believers seem also to have highly exotic ideas about their faith. Many apparently come to church for charms and amulets with which to try to manipulate things outside their control, or behave like customers in a shop that sells eternal life in the great beyond. They go to Mass to pay the weekly instalment on their celestial mortgage. It is all about *heaven*. At pentecost, they expect a renewal of the seven gifts—wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord—that they memorized in catechism class, in order to ‘be a good person’, not sin too much, be successful now, and go to heaven when they die. This is fine for children preparing for first communion, but it is infantile and frivolous for grown-ups who have to live in a serious world. We must go deeper than that. Perhaps this childishness explains why so many people abandon their faith when they mature as human beings..

On the other hand, in my experience, indigenous people, with all their technological and political innocence and beyond what they might or might not know about their faith, can have a certain ease with direct experience of the divine essence. It makes them courageous. It also makes them humble when standing before the deep and continuing mystery of life. The ability to connect with the life-giving spirit can be lost when erudite moderns go to great lengths to transform the strong faith of the heart into abstractions, concepts and rules.

⁷ See Carlos Alberto Marinho Cirino, *A ‘Boa Nova’ na Língua Indígena: Contornos da Evangelização dos Wapishana no Século XX* (Boa Vista: UFRR, 2008).

When I was becoming an adult, in Chile during the military regime, I had the privilege of knowing a persecuted and tormented Church. It was a trying time, and yet now I thank God for that. The sons and daughters of the Church risked their lives to defend human dignity and in the service of the poor. Young people held secret meetings to reflect on the gospel, which was considered a subversive message by those who were then in authority. This was an age of dictatorships in Latin America, imposing the Western myth of progress by force of arms. In most countries, the dictators promoted the economic model of a market-driven society, dominated by profitability at the expense of respect for the land and its people. Those were glory days for agricultural and mining interests. In Chile, fraudulent acquisition of native lands and tribal water rights was widespread, and in Brazil deforestation was subsidised by the government.

In those days, our faith was forged by tribulation. Arrest, torture and disappearance were all concrete possibilities in Chile then. The dramatic death of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador marked a generation of Latin American Catholics. Persecution for the sake of the gospel was real. In our hearts, we had an implacable desire for a more human world. Without divine inspiration, we would have died trying to achieve it. Without the Holy Spirit, we were nothing. The Lord was our help, our refuge and our strength. He was our hope and our courage. Those who fell into the hands of our persecutors, often without hate, managed to turn the other cheek and pardon. They were, for us, witnesses to a solid, mature and serious gospel.

Come, Holy Spirit. Create in us a direct experience of your divine essence, so that we might become a brave people once again. The Church must necessarily assume its prophetic responsibility for the way we handle the gift of creation. But as always, prophecy is risky.

For Others

'Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' (John 4:14)

In the Amazon, the indigenous people consider their waterfalls to be sacred sites, sources of life, transcendent places where they can connect with the everlasting nature of life itself. The falls are places in

the river that give off a living energy which gives vigour and meaning to everything. This is one reason why they object to the construction of hydroelectric dams.

Beyond the issue of flooding ancestral land, the native peoples of the Amazon consider it a sacrilege to transform divine energy into electric energy for microwaves and television sets in the city far away. An important value held in common by all the ethnic groups is generosity in sharing. The unseen energy in the falls is not there for the exclusive use of city-dwellers. God is there, pouring out life in abundance from on high, as a sign of grace in all its fullness, for the good of all.

Water is a potent sign all by itself. Without water, there is no life. Liquid, clear, cool, simple and clean: without it, we are a cemetery in a ghost town. It is as if water had an inherent goodness. If there is such a thing as a natural right for all living things, it is water.

The planet is calling our attention: be mindful of water, and along with it the delicate balance between creatures connected with it. Be mindful, or die. Economic interests and market forces have shown by their actions that they are not capable of regulating, safeguarding or sharing this source of life. It is time to reconsider the indigenous reverence for the Amazonian waterfalls if we intend to survive as a species and leave a living space for the children of our children. Our priority cannot continue to be to consume, but to share. Water, like life, is for others. Hydroelectricity is highly regarded across the world as clean energy. Of course it does not generate smoke or radioactive waste, which is an advantage. But it does flood lands that belong to real people. It creates roads and settlements in wild areas. These open up the wilderness, and bring about its eventual destruction.

Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at a well, and he promises her the water of eternal life. She belongs to an excluded people. And—we do not know why—we see that, even among her own people, she is also excluded. That is why she goes to fetch water at midday, instead of in the early morning like everyone else. But, typically, Jesus includes her. The inclusion of the excluded is a fundamental element in the Kingdom of his Father. The water of eternal life is for everyone.

Baptism is our sign of inclusion. It is our passage through living water, like the Amazonian falls, that allows us to participate in the energy of



The San Rafael falls, in Ecuador

the Holy Spirit which gives life to the entire world. But the theology of medieval Christendom transformed this generous gift of living water into a legislative gesture creating a ritual obligation that would theoretically afford access to an equally theoretical eternal salvation. What began as a universal invitation degenerated into a legalistic requirement designed to exclude those who failed to comply. It became a way to establish and condemn 'otherness'. The non-baptized could be considered less than human, enslaved or killed.

Nothing could be further from what Jesus had in mind. The Second Vatican Council, while recognising baptism as a powerful sign of resurrected life, also recognises that the Almighty has other ways of including the excluded. It is absurd to think that God's love is restricted by the rules governing the sacraments of a Church whose purpose is precisely to be a fountain of abundant life, physical and spiritual, for all of humankind. That is our calling, as disciples and missionaries of the Risen Lord in the modern world.

Modern religious feeling understands the water of eternal life as a promise of exclusively personal salvation, as if to say, *I will be saved if I am baptized; I do not know, nor do I care, what happens to anyone else*. But competitive individualism, twin brother of selfishness, is part of our economic order, not part of our faith. The ethic of traditional societies, on the other hand, is radically collective and egalitarian. If you are a

member of the tribe you share what you have, others share with you and you never take more than you need.

Jesus is not promising 'heaven later on' to those who submit to being baptized. His promise is that the baptized will become a fountain of life for others. His promise is to transform his disciples into the Amazonian waterfall: abundant life energy to be shared.

Perception

'The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' (1 Samuel 16: 7)

Not long ago, in judicial systems, testimony from an eyewitness was the most credible way to condemn someone. When a case depended on an eyewitness, judge and jury could give a sentence with a clear conscience. Now, with the advances in technology at crime labs, it has been discovered that eyewitnesses are often mistaken. There is now empirical proof to demonstrate that what they saw often never happened.

Some cases have been reopened and innocent people, condemned in the courts by eyewitnesses, have been set free. These are human beings who have lost decades of their lives in prison for crimes they did not commit. Some never lived to be set free because they had been sentenced to death.

We are not talking about an evil confabulation by eyewitnesses. Usually, there was no ill will or wrong intention. It is just that traumatic events cause confusion. But, more importantly, we must consider the process of perception itself. Human beings register, interpret and file visual data in one complete and instantaneous step. Therefore, it is not unusual for people to 'see' things that fulfil preconceived expectations, even when these things bear no relation to real events.

Aristotle noticed this process 2,400 years ago. The human mind tends to create categories based on past experience. This is called induction and, done properly, it is the basis for scientific investigation. New experiences are then catalogued in the neurological files already created. A good education should ideally broaden these categories, (though that does not always happen) so that they can account for future experience in an authentic way. We call this an open mind, when it occurs. The same thing in the gospel is called 'eyes that see'. More recently, Kant confirms Aristotle's approach, adding that no

matter how intelligent people are, they will tend to impose their presuppositions on what they see. That is what creates the job of the philosopher: to examine those presuppositions. Some still do.

It is easy to laugh at the beliefs of other cultures, and yet everyone perceives and alters reality according to his or her own mental framework. How, then, can we ever get down to the truth of truths? When we are born into a particular culture, we receive its ideological structures, with all their prejudices and paranoias. The human person inherits a perceptual handicap. It comes with the territory, like original sin.

Wolfgang Iser has proposed the idea that poetry is an act of liberation. It creates points of view that did not exist before. Art formulates clean and beautiful categories, without the preconceptions. It activates our eyes really to see the world as it is. It also stirs the heart to fight for a world that might be. This is what happens to Christians with the parables, gestures and sayings of Jesus. The Teacher shows us a way to see the created world from God's point of view, making it possible to participate in the coming of the Kingdom.

The Lord promises to open the eyes of people blinded by the presuppositions of their societies and institutions. Through his infinite compassion, he offers to break free of the categories that cause us to change facts and force events into inappropriate boxes with unjust and sometimes devastating consequences. Jesus' principal method of opening the eyes of the blind is *poetry*.

Today's disciple can have access to Jesus' point of view by contemplating the gospel. We transport ourselves to Galilee by way of inspired imagination. We practise 'seeing' clearly with the eyes of the mind, gazing on every detail of the time and place in which our Lord lived. Thus, we can reformulate our point of view, broadening our



categories. And then we can go out into the world and see what is really there, what is really happening, from the viewpoint of the infinite compassion of God, bearing witness to a world as it could be—a just world, sincere and beautiful.

Ecological consciousness is more than just one ethical concern among others for Christians. It is a fundamental part of *the way we see*. Likewise serious contemplative prayer is essential to a world-orientated, life-giving spirituality with the potential to save the peoples of our planet from self-destruction—if we begin soon enough. In this effort, the powerless and the poor, subsistence farmers and members of indigenous tribes the world over, have an advantage. They were never disconnected from their roots the way city-dwellers have been. Their categories still include the land, the waters, the trees, the birds of the air and the fish in the sea.

The Responsibility of Lordship

‘I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ (Matthew 5:20)

Rapanui, the Easter Island culture, wiped itself out by using up its resources. The great Mayan civilisation did the same. Now this is about to happen again, but on a planetary scale. According to scientists we have taken our earth to the very edge of no return. Resources are running out. The forest is becoming a desert while sea and air warm up. Drought, famine and massive human migration are imminent, and the proposed corrective measures are superficial and insufficient. And yet, we have not managed to leave behind the ambition to subjugate, to exercise power wantonly. We cannot let go of our addiction to consumer goods, the desire to have it all. This is what has brought us to the brink. Unless our understanding of the problem surpasses the way of scribes and Pharisees, the Lord’s Creation will disappear. We are not talking about a few new rules, but rather, a whole new mentality.

From the beginning, when the voice of the Lord took charge of chaos to create a universe, authority and command have been complicated issues for humanity. We are tempted by arrogance, the sin of the Pharisees. But fidelity to the law of the Lord means internalising his style, his patient lordship that liberates but never subjugates. The authority of Christ is a gentle, responsible hand that promotes life. The

point is not to impose control on a dying planet, but rather to become witnesses to its resurrection.

Francis of Assisi spoke out clearly to a medieval mentality that had divorced itself from the material world. All beings are our brothers and sisters. Christ became human because the flesh is important. Where are the holy saints and prophets today? Our brothers and sisters who still live close to Mother Earth in the ancestral way can be our guides. With their help, we can find our way. May the good Lord go with us in a realistic and practical attempt to save our planet. It is not too late.

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