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# THIS SACRED EARTH AT THE NEXUS OF RELIGION, ECOLOGY AND POLITICS<sup>†</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The principal assumption of this deliberation is that religion is undeniably political. In recent years ecological concerns have become a factor in both revealing the connection and acting as a catalyst for revolutionary development within religions themselves. Religion, Ecology and politics inter-connected, and are theoretically illuminated through liberation, political, contextual and critical theologies. This deliberation aims to clarify, and suggest, frameworks of the inter-connections such that religion will be a greater force for social change and ecological sustainability.

Of the many ways to bring Ecology into the nexus of religions and politics, I first offer an overview of four specific approaches used within Christian Ecotheology. Each presents a distinct manner of engaging religions with the ecological crisis. They will be discussed from the least to the most challenging, followed by an example of how each deals with climate change. The second section is a deliberation of two directions that need to be undertaken if religions are to be of significant influence in bringing spiritual resources to, and mitigating further, ecological ruin. The political dimension is discussed throughout.

*Keywords:* ecology, religion, evolution, religious experiences

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## **1. The ecological crisis: four religious approaches**

Our era of life on Earth is in the throes of a severe and wide-spread ecological crisis, of an unprecedented magnitude and with unpredictable consequences. This is undisputable for anyone who even gives a cursory look. It is obvious that both major and minor bio-systems of the planet are threatened. Yet, the ecological crisis, although acknowledged, has not made much of a dent in religious consciousness. While efforts are increasingly multi-religious, my comments pertain predominantly to the Christian tradition.

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I have worked at the intersection of religion and Ecology since the mid 1980's. From then to the present Eco-theology publications have increased, as well as innumerable efforts in local actions and national environmental policies. Still, Christianity has not become a political force for environmental change. Much of the work remains prescriptive; that is, in the style of making claims that God's creation should be respected and cared for. There is little analysis of how we got into such a mess. Consequently the resulting responses are religiously weak and politically inadequate.

To engage in such analysis involves three aspects: 1) admitting to the elements of Christianity that have led to a detrimental impact on the natural world; 2) exposing the reasons for the current apathy on the part of many Christians, and; 3) accepting that the prevailing theological emphasis on anthropocentrism prevents the necessary shift to perceive the sacred within the natural world. Much rethinking and reformulating are required. Without such analysis, the resources Christianity could bring to mitigate further ecological ruin remain constrained and superficial. A second step is to bring the religious resources to bear on political processes, ecological policies and social transformations. As few religious leaders and academics are either interested in ecological realities or politically engaged, there is a dearth of labourers in the field!

Nonetheless, those who engage in religious responses to the environmental crisis tend to be actively involved in transforming the religious traditions as well as immersed in political activities of many types. There are myriad ways of addressing the ecological crisis from a religious perspective, ranging from a light to a dark green paradigm. Light green environmentalism suggests that the ecological crisis is basically one of stewardship, wherein the Earth is seen as a resource base for human consumption and pleasure. Other life forms have no intrinsic value, and human superiority (anthropocentrism) is not challenged. An ecological approach, or a dark green paradigm suggests that we are a member of an Earth community, one species among many, and each has intrinsic value and a necessary place within the ecological and spiritual scheme of things. Four frequently used approaches are described as follows, and they move from light to dark green in their ecological paradigm as well as their religious radicality.

### ***1.1. Stewardship***

Stewardship is a both a biblical motif as well as an easily acceptable ecological paradigm for many Christians. Here the ecological crisis is understood mostly in its physical manifestations: pollution, species extinction, global warming, biodiversity losses, severe water and soil declines and changing weather patterns. It is predominantly a problem of resources. Good stewardship and resource management are appropriate responses. Ecological improvement results with the realization that we have misunderstood our place within creation and mishandled limited resources. Theologically, stewardship is about caring for

God's creation. Humanity joins with God as a co-creator, and jointly we care for creation. Stewardship is a light green paradigm, meaning that it maintains anthropocentrism, and no intrinsic or sacred value is attached to the natural world. This approach offers little challenge to the fundamental precepts and orientation of Christianity or mainstream society. Stewardship is an accessible model for many Christian viewpoints, and indeed galvanises communities to act for ecological integrity. It also requires the least change to the theological framework.

### ***1.2. Ecojustice***

This is the most common rubric for liberation or political theology types, where analysis of justice and socio-economics are central. The complex economic system, in both its material and ideological forms, is the basis of the production and consumption patterns, and of ecological devastation. Ecojustice analyses reveal how deeply the ecological crisis is entangled with economics, globalization, and indeed much of the 'production' of industrialized countries. At the moment the economic paradigm is pitted against ecological health. For example, we often hear of ecological sustainability in opposition to jobs, be this in fisheries, logging, or agriculture. Pollution limits are lifted for corporate jobs and profit. The economy is kept rolling with a pathological indifference to the ecological costs. The rise of environmental illnesses is startling, or should be, including epidemic rises in childhood asthma and leukaemia, skin, breast and ovarian cancers, and a rapid decline in male sperm counts. In developing countries the severity of the ecology-economic web is at the level of access to clean water, arable soil or healthy food. The examples are endless. Ecological problems are enmeshed with other systemic social problems, such as discrimination based on ethnicity, class or gender.

Ecojustice addresses these as a question of equitable access to and distribution of the Earth's resources. The religious insight or principle brought to bear is justice. The approach uncovers more layers of the ecological crisis than does stewardship. However the ecological paradigm remains anthropocentric, and the natural world has little innate value.

### ***1.3. Ecofeminism***

The joining of ecological and feminist perspectives provides an alternative lens from which to see the disturbing historical connection between women and nature, and their associated oppression. Elizabeth Johnson summarizes the basic idea of joining ecofeminism to Theology by noting that within the matrix of causes of the ecological crisis is the connection between the exploitation of the Earth and the misogynist definitions and treatment of women. These distortions have influenced deeply the religious experience [1]. As early as 1974, ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether commented: "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological

crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society.” [2]

Ecofeminism represents varieties of theoretical, practical and critical efforts to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature. Ecofeminist religious responses range from insisting on an ecojustice that includes women to reclaiming the interconnected sacredness of humanity and the natural world, with sojourns into the historical and theological teachings that degraded both women and the Earth.

Ecofeminism involves interdisciplinary and multi-religious efforts. Often women of several religious traditions collaborate locally, nationally and internationally on specific problems. While not all who espouse ecofeminism are politically active, the flexibility of ecofeminism lends itself to adhering to various women's liberation and ecological movements around the world. It is the religious traditions themselves that are most limiting to ecofeminism, due to their historically embedded misogynist orientations.

#### ***1.4. Cosmology***

The role of Cosmology, that is both the scientific understanding of the Universe as well as the macro-narratives through which human communities appreciate their existence, is increasingly important at the religious, ecology and political juncture. Cosmology is that larger scheme of things, defined as a combination of Natural science, Philosophy, Ethics and Religion - in short, a worldview. Cosmology reflects the cultural assumptions about the nature of the world [3]. Cosmologies, as cultural myths or narratives, deeply and elusively influence the formation of social order, and affect how human-earth relations are to be conducted [4]. Thomas Berry is the primary mentor in this work although it has been taken up by hundreds of religious, ecological and political thinkers and activists [5, 6]. Berry writes: “The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation. Such, it seems to me, is the situation we must deal with in this late twentieth century” [5, p. xi]. Berry claims that humanity has developed an antagonistic relationship with the Earth because there are few functional stories from which to interpret the past, adequately deal with the challenges of the present, and receive guidance into the future. There is a breakdown between religious/cultural narratives and Cosmology, and the ecological crisis is a consequence. Rosemary Radford Ruether describes the role of Cosmology as “a view of the relation of humans to the rest of nature, their relation to each other in society, and their relation to the ultimate foundational source of life (the divine). They have been blueprints for what today we would call a combined scientific, social-ethical, and theological-spiritual worldview.” [7]

Only the history of the Universe, understood as the primary religious story, is suitable to prepare us to face the order of magnitude of this transition. The Universe and the Earth must be seen as primarily spiritual and physical; a community of beings where each is an articulation of life's diversity as well as a mode of divine presence, and functions in unique and critical ways for the health and creativity of the whole. Berry writes: "...the Universe carries the deep mysteries of our existence within itself. We cannot discover ourselves without first discovering the Universe, the Earth and the imperatives of our own being. Each of us has a creative power and a vision far beyond any rational thought or cultural creation of which we are capable. Nor should we think of these as isolated from our own individual being or from the Earth community. We have no existence except within the Earth and within the Universe." [5, p. x]

A cosmological approach is enormously challenging to religious understanding, and is profoundly divergent from stewardship. At times Cosmology joins with ecofeminism but rarely with ecojustice.

Academics use tremendous amounts of trees debating which approach is the most effective and liberatory. They (we) analyse the various theological presuppositions, their continuities and discontinuities with the traditions and the political outcomes. Each Ecotheology approach has distinct political consequences, which will become evident through a discussion of climate change and how it is handled.

## **2. Climate Change**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a United Nations organization with delegates from many countries, claims that climate change is a serious threat to ecological health. The IPCC also notes that discussions about biodiversity, sustainable development, land use, forestry practices and water resources need to be related to climate change. If the global carbon dioxide levels were to stabilize by tomorrow at sixty percent below the 1990 levels it would take over one thousand years for the climate to restabilize. The most serious problems are related the rise in sea levels.

There are a number of ways the Christian tradition intervenes. The stewardship approach examines climate change from its effects on human communities. Species extinction or habitat loss are only considered if they deter the well-being of humans. Better technology, intervention in climate systems and encouraging the reduction of carbon emissions are the standard methods. The solutions are typically made by using a combination of calculations for emissions trading, carbon sinks and reforestation to decide what each region is allowed to emit in greenhouse gases. Some of these are good efforts, (with the exception of emissions trading and carbon sinks as will be explained below) but they fail to get anywhere near the heart of the problem. Stewardship as a religious response is weak, the ecological change minimal and the political action is entrenched within the limits of the status quo.

The ecojustice and ecofeminist approaches go deeper into the layers of political realities implicated in climate change. With these models, the decision-making processes themselves become an ethical problem. Climate negotiations in terms of levels, credit and debit system, and economic losses and gains are in reality the buying and selling of health, life, and the Earth's future. Although the economic benefits to climate stability far outweigh the costs, climate change needs to be considered outside of mathematical and economic frameworks. A justice approach favours equity over economics. Three examples will illustrate this.

1) Climate change is and will more so disproportionately affect the South, particularly in coastal areas. Those who are most affected by ecological ruin and climate change are the most poor and vulnerable, and with the least resources to mitigate the damage or affect change. As well, the immeasurable injury to animals, plants and ecosystems is not a predominantly economic issue, or even a resource-based issue. If justice to all life is considered, then it becomes an ethical and ecological problem.

Developing countries will not address climate change unless the industrialized countries begin emission reductions first. There must also be a transfer of wealth from those countries with the greatest resources, and who contribute the most to carbon emissions to poorer nations.

2) Many forecast that climate change will result in disruptions of food supplies, water resources and human disease. There are currently over 25 million environmental refugees in the world, more so than political refugees. Predictions by the United Nations and the World Bank estimate that in ten years this will be doubled and could climb as high as 200 million, due to climate change. An ecofeminist analysis reveals that most refugees are women and children. Worldwide, women are disproportionately affected by the ecological crisis. The United Nations as early as 1989 commented: "It is now a universally established fact that it is the woman who is the worst victim of environmental destruction. The poorer she is, the greater is her burden." [8] In every country, women make up the majority of the poor.

3) The intense campaigns of oil and coal corporations and their ability to be at the national and international negotiating tables begs the question about the relationship between democracy and governments. If, as suggests Ursula Franklin, we are in a state of occupation by an army of marketers, and our governments are mere puppets in the hands of corporations, then democracy is at great risk. There are many predictions that without functional democracies around the world, effective action against climate change will be impossible. Others say that democracies will disintegrate under the stress of ecological disasters and their social consequences.

It is evident that an ecojustice or ecofeminist approach provides numerous entry points for the task of bringing significant aspects of the Christian tradition to bear on the complex and interlaced causes of climate change.

The cosmological consideration of climate change starts with the evolution of the Earth. It took three billion years for the Earth's life-support systems to stabilize the climate to make it hospitable for the astonishing complexity of life to emerge on this planet. Earth's climate system is delicately poised and can support an elaborate array of life forms that took millions of years of experimentation, refining, and balancing to arrive at mutually enhancing biosystems. The Earth's climate involves intricate and highly sophisticated systems of oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange. This includes a hydrologic cycle that can, for example, move molecules of water from salted oceans to clouds that release fresh rain water to be absorbed into the soil and taken up through plant cells into forest systems and released to be breathed by humans and transported by mosquitos to animals to fish to rivers and back to the ocean! The relationship between forests, water and climate stability staggers human imagination and indeed capacity. Before considering what to 'do', a cosmological approach requires an in-depth understanding of Earth methods. Earth's climate processes, something about which humans know only a tiny fragment, commands some respect, if not reverence.

From this perspective, human hubris is unmistakable, and contemptible. A cosmological horizon to the issue of climate change opens the possibility of sensing a sacred presence within the very life-processes of the Earth. Human superiority fades in the face of a deeper appreciation for the wondrous, even stupendous, reality of life on Earth. Authentic respect for the natural world informs a depth of vision that leads to the most profound religious responses and radical political actions. The cosmological approach provides an adequate vision for the ecological task. Without a vision, the direction is aimless.

Each religious approach to an ecological issue arises from a particular worldview, is informed by a vision, and results in distinct political actions and consequences. Each religious framework, worldview and value system out of which we perceive the ecological crisis is related directly to how we understand the problem, what we decide are the central issues, and the potential solutions. Each approach sees something different and responds as such. The ecojustice, ecofeminist and cosmological approaches are favoured here because they enter deeply into the entangled layers of most ecological problems.

The ecological crisis is a prophetic call. It challenges our lifestyles and consumer habits. It requires the wealthy to share Earth's resources, to resist ecological ruin and to be in solidarity with and advocate for those who have less. The ecological crisis is inter-twined with economics, ethnic and gender domination, sociology, medicine, psychology and religion. It is a spiritual, moral and material crisis, and is rooted, predominantly, within a Western worldview and religious orientation.

Those who study the nexus of religion, Ecology and politics over many years discover that none of the world religions developed with resources to address this magnitude of ecological or cultural crises, or with this level of understanding about the Earth or Universe. Religions in their current form do not have the ability to respond to the exigencies of our time, but we cannot respond

without them. This is the challenge. According to many, we are entering a new phase of religious consciousness in which original insights and energies are possible, but it will take a serious overhaul of religious understanding.

Two new fields of inquiry are emerging that offer unprecedented religious insights: evolution and inter-religious consciousness. Each changes the shape of the religion, ecology and politics nexus. Both offer significant, albeit challenging, resources to religious responses to the ecological crisis.

### **3. Evolution**

Those who engage seriously with religion and the ecological crisis soon realize that the Christian tradition has not been able to deal effectively with evolution; that is either the twelve billion year history of cosmogenesis, or the evolution of life on Earth with its three billion year history. If one takes either as a starting point, one can see that there are consequences for religious understanding and Christian theology. Theologian John Haught considers that much of the reluctance of Theology to address the ecological crisis in depth stems from a prior reluctance to think about evolution [9]. The significance of evolution is only beginning to dawn on religious thinkers.

Evolution is an enormous threat to the worldview of modernity. As evidence, an acceptance of evolution as the basic understanding of the emergence of life is under siege in North America. Evolution is touted as an unprovable theory. It is put on equal par with creationism, or rejected outright. Currently over fifty percent of the United States public believe that God created humans as we are today [10]. The Christian right is taking legal action to remove evolution from the science curriculum in schools and universities. They have been successful in eleven states thus far, and are gaining ground in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Ontario and Alberta. This reveals the level of confrontation between religion and evolution. The consequences will be devastating to an in-depth appreciation of the ingenuity of life and to fostering ecological sensitivity. It is further evidence of that religious worldviews can be deeply disjointed, even irrational. It also indicates to what lengths people will go to defend their worldviews and beliefs, however erroneous.

Although it is timely, indeed popular, to reiterate that `the Earth is our home, the greater task is to allow our theological understanding to be transformed by this insight. The Earth, ever emerging with increasing complexity, differentiation and interdependence, is the primary reality out of which humanity originated. Humanity is one species among many, coming into being within a complex experimentation with life on Earth. To integrate evolution into religious and ecological perspectives is to accede to the fact that humans evolved from primates, and ultimately from the Earth's inner processes. While this 'fact' is basically accepted, the implications have little impact. Most human communities live as if any history prior to human civilizations is irrelevant and inconsequential. In addition, most industrialized societies refuse to



accept the ultimate dependence on and priority of the Earth's life systems. Yet, the Earth is primary, the human derivative, as often comments Berry.

To consider Earth history as a decisive framework is to perceive that religious consciousness is an emerging process within the larger evolutionary processes of the Earth. To situate our religious traditions - the myriad expressions and rituals mediating the sacred, the moral core and codes - *within* the evolutionary processes of the Earth is an enormous challenge. We are accustomed to our religious frameworks being the definitive references. Yet religious stories are a late development within the Earth's story. In shifting the fundamental context of religious understanding, we can begin to see the revelatory dimensions of the Earth, and the relative, yet indispensable, truths of our religious stories. Such an awareness becomes a political force to mitigate ecological ruin.

To situate Earth history within this immense epic and creative evolution of the Universe further challenges the ecologically dysfunctional patriarchal religious traditions. For Thomas Berry, the Universe is: "[...] the primary sacred community, the primary revelation of the divine, the primary subject of incarnation, the primary unit of redemption, the primary referent in any discussion of reality or of value. Any human activity must be seen primarily as an activity of the Universe and only secondarily an activity of the individual." [5, p. 6]

To conceive of Christianity in light of an evolutionary Cosmology calls for substantial re-evaluations of foundational assertions of Theology [11, 12]. Although not alone, Christianity in particular has developed an anthropocentric worldview to an extreme, even to the point that the destruction of the natural world does not register as alarming either physically or spiritually. Anthropocentrism has permeated Western worldviews as evidenced in attitudes and actions that continually break with the integrity of the natural world. The operative Christian worldview, with its emphasis that human origin and destiny are elsewhere, is a profoundly human-centred ideology. The Earth and the natural world are seen at best as resources, having no inherent or sacred presence. The Christian faith has belittled the Earth as a primary religious reality. The excessive concern for the redemptive process has concealed the realization that the disintegration of the natural world is also the destruction of the primordial manifestation of the divine.

The Christian tradition constantly tries to 'lift' humanity above the Earth and the limits it represents. This, in turn, has caused distortions at the level of foundational theological precepts. Not grounding theological precepts in evolution has caused an absence of concern for the natural world. As a result, there is a diminished Christian awareness of a sacred indwelling presence in the natural world, or creation. Some would argue that this is one of the central causes of the ecological crisis, and the excessive domination and exploitation of the Earth.

Ecotheologians, one after the other, have been compelled to deal with the Christian emphasis on humanity's transcendence over the natural world, and the thrust to desacralize it [13]. As a result, they are engaged in a profound re-examination of the worldview and basic values ingrained in Western consciousness and Christian theological presuppositions. An evolutionary framework broadens the historical framework beyond biblical and even human history. A cosmological or evolutionary starting point has moved most ecotheologians to conclude that the primary religious story is that of the emergence of life: immanent, transcendent and panentheistic. Sallie McFague suggests that a common creation story could become the beginning of an "evolutionary, ecological, theological anthropology that could have immense significance transforming how we think about ourselves and our relations and responsibilities toward other human beings, other species, and our home, planet Earth." [4]

To genuinely take evolution seriously in light of the ecological crisis requires us to re-acquaint ourselves with the divine presence revealed within the natural world, and to revere the book of nature, as said the Celts. This is an ancient awareness within all cultures, and present at times within the Christian tradition in the works of Thomas Aquinas, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and many more. To encounter the sacred in the natural world moves us to resist its destruction. To ponder that every leaf or snowflake from time immemorial is unique breaks open our understanding of creativity beyond the imaginable. To give up humanity as the pinnacle of creation and superior life form allows one to see the magnificence of the Universe, the complexity of life on Earth and the radical dependence humans have upon the earth community. To ponder the story of the Universe makes evident that religious consciousness arises from the Universe processes itself. This insight reveals that we are entering a new religions moment.

The impact of evolution on Religion is both nuanced and complex. It is a serious matter for those disputing religious literalism and fundamentalism, a lack of historical consciousness, the narrowing of worldview's, and a refusal to use rational modes of inquiry. The issue of evolution and Cosmology is now a political force at the intersection of Religion and Ecology. This debate is shaping part of the future, and battle lines are drawn. It is time, politically and ecologically, to take the Earth most seriously.

#### **4. Inter-religious consciousness**

From the first Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 to the present, inter-religious dialogue has grown in form, content and consciousness. The ecological crisis is calling forth a further consciousness and giving rise to novel forms of collaboration. From local to international, with academics and religious leaders, in parishes and temples, using conferences and publications inter-religious synergy is increasing. This is a new face and form of

inter-religious cooperation and the emphasis is more on affecting public policy than on inter-religious exchange.

The era of disparate and divided religious traditions needs to be over. While each religion has distinct contributions, common ground is necessary for the world to face such a global and intertwined crisis. It is conceivable to begin to appreciate each religious tradition as offering specific insights and teachings within a tapestry of revelations. Thomas Berry writes: “We are now living in the macrophase period of development of most religious traditions, the period of extensive influence without formal initiation. When the traditions are seen in their relations to each other, the full tapestry of the revelatory experience can be observed.” [5, p. 111] We need to genuinely encounter the many religious perspectives and spiritual sensitivities, and be transformed by this process. It is urgent that the Christian tradition engage in non-partisan inter-religious dialogue, and reinterpret itself in light of the worlds' religions. The exclusive and semi-inclusive Christian attitudes often prevail in inter-religious efforts, and continue to support a supremacy of Christianity, albeit differently [14]. This is a hindrance to finding political convergences among religions in the face of ecological concerns.

There are an increasing number of individuals and groups in this conversation, with a growth of inter-religious statements or programs on ecological issues. The world' religions are being called upon to address the spiritual and moral dimension of the ecological crisis. The World Watch Institute recognized Religion as a significant force that could join with others to mitigate ecological ruin. Secular organizations are integrating ecospirituality into their work. Canadian organizations such as the Sierra Club of Canada and the David Suzuki Foundation have explicitly connected spirituality from many traditions to their events. In June of 2001, the David Suzuki foundation asked the Canadian Council of Churches for joint sponsorship on a Climate Justice program. In the program across the country, scientific, social justice, indigenous, ecological and religious voices were collaborating to persuade the government to sign the Kyoto Protocol. The Sierra Club conference in Kingston - Planet for the People, 2002 - had several workshops on spirituality and faith.

This phenomenon is generating new and unique types of inter-religious co-operation. While taking many shapes, there are several characteristics that describe what is occurring. Four will be mentioned briefly.

#### **4.1. Form**

There is a shift occurring, moving from studying the histories, texts, doctrines, worldviews and differences to calling forth the spiritual resources of the world's religions to become a political force for an ecological sustainable future. There is an emerging alliance of Religion and Ecology, where resources are pooled rather than compared or analyzed. Academics are working increasingly in public policy. Inter-religious statements and policies are

pressuring various organizations from local governments to the United Nations to deal more effectively with ecological problems.

An innovative initiative was launched at Harvard University that invited religious leaders and thinkers to engage their own tradition with the ecological crisis. It involved both acknowledging the problems, assessing and ascertaining resources and collaborating with others. An exemplary ten volume series was published, as well as multiple other resources made available at the Forum of Religion and Ecology (FORE) (see <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion>). This ten volume series is published, with edited collections on each of the ten major world religions [15].

The vision of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions has expanded, and now represents commitments to a just, peaceful and sustainable world. To do this a basis of ecological integrity is a prerequisite. Their first axiom is: the Earth and all life are cherished, protected, healed and restored.

Thus, the form of inter-religious co-operation is changing as groups collaborate in the face of ecological challenges, or at times disasters. This face of the inter-religious cooperation is a very politically active constituent.

#### **4.2. Content**

The inter-religious and ecological conversations are raising many challenging aspects about the nature of religious knowledge. It is deeply unsettling for some to understand each religion as part of a tapestry of revelations. It requires, at times, a relativising of specific truth claims and seeking a greater truth of the religious dimension of human consciousness and societies. There is a resurgence of interest and research into the nature of religion, both as an anthropological constant and quest of the human spirit, and, as a spiritual base of all reality embedded within the processes of life itself.

In the face of the ecological crisis, religions must engage in an in-depth self-evaluation concerning those aspects of the tradition that have promoted or ignored ecological ruin. The ingrained anthropocentrism of some traditions, especially the monotheistic religions, is difficult to budge, particularly as much of the theological paradigm is based on the quintessence of the human. To shift our gaze from the primacy of humanity to an awareness of the whole of life within an evolutionary paradigm can be theologically and personally strenuous. Regardless, a religious worldview in which the natural world is sacred and not secondary is what is required of religions today. Anything less will be inadequate.

It is important to identify the transformative and prophetic insights of each tradition, and affirm the particular values that can assist collaborative responses to the ecological crises. This process, described by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim as that of critical understanding, empathetic appreciation and creative revisioning, is required to understand the multi-layered symbol systems in world religions [16]. The central task is to align religious efforts, and the spectrum of cosmologies, symbols, rituals, values and ethical orientations, within the

rhythms and limits of the natural world. This work is changing the content and consciousness of inter-religious understanding.

### ***4.3. A calling forth of ethics rather than dogma***

Given the rapid rate of ecological destruction and the uncertainty of a sustainable future, we need a substantial change in religious attitudes towards the natural world. The work of rethinking the relationship of humans to the Earth, and the implications for economic patterns, equity and life-style, are urgent tasks. For those working in the inter-religious arena there has been a shift towards ethics. The challenge is to develop ethics that are not only human centred. Theologians, drawing from the ethical core and codes of each tradition are reshaping these invaluable and necessary resources to include the natural world in ethical considerations [17].

This shift from dogma to ethics signifies a departure from both the content and the purpose of inter-religious cooperation. It orients the religious traditions to bring forth their greatest insights into a political arena, with the aim to influence action.

### ***4.4. Returning to religious experience; awe and wonder***

At this time of human history, it is pressing for all religious traditions to reclaim their roots in the natural world. Each tradition has an awareness that the natural world is a primary place of revelation and religious experience. The beauty and elegance of the natural world have been inspirational and revelatory of the divine since time immemorial. It is only in recent history that this has not been so. In addition, the sentiments of awe and wonder are renowned as the basis of religious experience. It goes by many other names: reverence, contemplation, great mystery, mysticism and so on. Religions need to rediscover their roots in the world of awe and wonder, as both integral to religious experience and decisive at the nexus of religion, ecology and politics.

Awareness of the power of wonder and awe is available to anyone who spends time in the natural world. Examples of such awareness are found in all religious traditions and are returning to consciousness in a new way in the face of the ecological crisis. It is evident that for many who contemplate the world some develop a great sense of wonder. The vastness of the stars, the beauty of mountains and streams, or the ingenuity of animals fills us with feelings of celebration and reverence. Reverence only comes with experience and care. We must be responsible, and at the same time express the wonder of our experiences of the natural world.

Wonder and awe lead to reverence, and reverence leads to responsibility and ethics. Reverence for and responsibility to the natural world are intimately connected to each other, and to authentic religious experience.

Fostering a deep ecological awakening is a central role religions could play today. This means both identifying existing resources - rituals, scriptures, ethics, symbols - and being attentive to emerging ones, such as the cosmological and feminist insights. It is imperative that religious leaders reawaken an awareness of a sacred presence active within the Earth's sublime and sophisticated life systems, to which the appropriate response is 'awe'. To see and know the Earth as such requires a new way of perceiving, and a confidence that to experience a grove as sacred is not quaint, incidental, irrelevant, or even heretical. Religions need to reclaim their heritage, such that even the tiniest caterpillar is a book about God. Ecologically oriented religious voices affirm that this kind of awareness is not a luxury, but the basis of religious experience and a necessary piece of ethical deliberations and political motivation.

To consider life as sacred is superfluous, as it is legitimate to view life as a commodity and to discuss ecological ruin in credit and debit terms. Life is a market, not an intrinsic value. Yet this view is economically shortsighted, ecologically untenable, ethically reprehensible and religiously mistaken. The governing economic worldview needs to be countered with a more powerful and alluring understanding of life. In this view, the Earth and its life forms are not a set of resources. Rather they are modes of divine presence. The difficulty is how to get from here to there!

The primary mode of knowing in Western societies is analytic. Yet analysis has its limits. Analysis sheds light on aspects of a situation, and can expose patterns, systems, causes and effects, and unmasks power dynamics. But it cannot open the door to profound insights, to what can be known beyond all conventional knowing. Awe is a way of knowing. It is a dimension of life-experience and the essence of religious awareness. Yet it is often belittled, ignored or dismissed as socially relevant. It is acceptable as a private experience, not a revelatory moment, as a personal spirituality not a crucial dimension of religious investigation. Still, awe is intimately bound to the essence of Religion. As Rabbi Heschel observed: "Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to the mystery in and beyond all things. It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine. To sense the ultimate in the common and simple, to feel in the rush of the passing, the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe." [18]

The capacity for awe remains omnipresent; a quiet eminence that radiates everywhere. It creates an unflinching and pre-eminent awareness of the extraordinary, abundant, unique and interconnected array of life. To marvel at the natural world within the large horizon of the cosmic adventure - and to understand to what degree we are constitutionally embedded within this drama - requires a transcendence of our superficial worldviews and beliefs. Wonder and awe can become a way of seeing, and of informing our political visions. Herein lies the terrain of genuine new insights, energies, understandings, ethics, analyses and awareness. From here can emerge a dynamic and consequential political energy and orientation.

Nonetheless it remains that wonder and awe cannot be analyzed, only experienced. As comments Rabbi Heschel, 'to become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words'. He writes: "We can never sneer at the stars, mock the dawn or scoff at the totality of being. Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe. Away from the immense, cloistered in our own concepts, we may scorn and revile everything. But standing between Earth and sky, we are silenced by the sight [18, p. 2].

## **5. Conclusions**

The Earth is demanding attention. The issue of water alone should be enough to awaken the masses. Water is the basis of all life, and all life forms require water. It took the Earth millions of years to create and stabilize a sublimely elaborate hydrologic cycle such that all life is cleansed, replenished and nourished by water. Today not only are the waters of life contaminated, they have become an economic and corporate commodity, and are in the hands of a few multinational corporations. Water scarcity is fuelling civil strife. Water is also the most elemental of religions sacred symbols. In water, the physical and the spiritual join utterly.

The nexus of Religion, Ecology and politics is critical for the future. In this era of ecological, religious and political instabilities, much is required of us. New insights and energies are emerging from a sustained reflection on evolution and inter-religious consciousness. Perhaps we can be inspired by the elegance and gracefulness of Earth-life, imbued with the sacred presence that animates all life, and impelled to political action. Only in doing thus can we dare to praise and honour the great Mystery at the heart of life.

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