

Chapter 7: The Ten Commandments of Ecological Spirituality

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What is the relationship between an increasingly endangered planet and religious institutions and movements? How are religions challenged to re-interpret their myths, rituals and practices by growing ecological crises? Can ecologically reformed religious traditions make a significant contribution to social survival, not just human survival? These interrelated questions shape the framework of my remarks today as the world around us faces ever more massive environmental problems. Scientists are in general agreement about global warming; expanding populations strain and deplete finite resources; air, land and water are polluted by chemicals and radioactive waste; consumerist market systems plunge ahead heedless of long term consequences to biotic systems. Scientific study, governmental policies and public education are crucial elements for addressing these problems. But the environmental challenge today is so great that it calls for a revised human consciousness of what it means to be a creature of earth. This demands a new spiritual understanding and experience of bonding with nature. It is what the socio-biologist, E.O. Wilson terms “biophilia”, an attitude of profound respect for and attachment to our natural surroundings.

I would like to approach this topic by presenting ten propositions or “commandments” that I have derived from a broad sweep of contemporary literature in the area

of what we might call ecological spirituality. Spirituality, a wider concept than religion, embraces ideologies, attitudes and actions that motivate humans in their quest for deeper meaning and experience about life. Religion tends to be more confined to traditional institutions, theologies, rituals and other practices. Religion and spirituality overlap in various ways, but they also differ in historical origin and purpose. I do not pretend that the ten commandments I’ve chosen completely or adequately represent ecological spirituality, but they are frequently discussed in literature ranging from Arne Naess, the Norwegian eco-philosopher and founder of the “Deep Ecology” movement, to Thomas Berry, the cultural scholar and Catholic priest who calls himself a “geologist” rather than a theologian.

These ten themes appear in various ways in ecofeminist writings as well as in the works of animal rights thinkers. In discussing each of the commandments, I will ask how traditional religions have hampered or have facilitated the realization of ecological spirituality. I will focus mainly on Christianity, but I will also refer to Buddhism and Taoism, and bring in references to American Indian religion, especially on the subject of the sacredness of land. Of course, I will have to be very selective and brief in dealing with such an array of religions when asking how they help or hurt ecological spirituality according to the ten commandments. I am also aware that a number of scholars have been exploring new modes of understanding specific religions, (see author-title list attached) such as Christianity, in an ecological perspective; their efforts, however, still remain on the periphery of church life. As a scholar of religion, I must be careful not to play God in these matters; yet I thought I might get away with playing Moses. But this Moses does not go up Mount Sinai to receive the tablets from a sky god, but rather he descends into the depths of the earth to discover the new commandments.

1. The universe, our solar system and the earth, as well as our human evolutionary emergence from animal ancestors on this planet constitute the primary sources of revelation of the ultimate mystery.

Christianity, following on Judaism, has always maintained a doctrine of creation which upholds the goodness of all beings. But there are at least three aspects of this new commandment that challenge traditional Christian ways of understanding creation. First, the focus of the statement is this-worldly; indirectly it says that “salvation,” however one understands that term, is to be found principally in this universe, not in some realm beyond it. Through Gnostic and Manichean influences from earliest Christianity, many Christians have understood liberation from the body, earth and death as a removal from the present order of reality to a heaven, usually conceived of as a spiritual realm removed from the material world. The dramatic suicides of the thirty nine Heaven’s Gate members in San Diego recently would certainly be an exaggeration of Christian perspectives, and yet this incident graphically represents the powerful desire to abandon earth because it was not their true home. Christians would reject the means of suicide, and they probably would not expect to rendezvous with a spaceship in the wake of the Hale Bopp comet. But escape from the travails of earth has long been a compelling theme in Christian preaching and iconography. By drawing Christians away from full involvement with this earth, the

church has contributed to an anti-ecological attitude; many viewed bodily life as a testing ground for the virtues that would permit entrance into an unearthly estate.

Secondly, the evolutionary aspect of the commandment has been a stumbling block for many Christians. Since Darwin, liberal Christian thinkers have made their peace with evolution, but to this day many conservative believers resist or reject our long mammalian provenance. This may not be as true in Europe as in the United States where millions of evangelicals still deny evolution and propose that creationism be taught in the schools. Reasons for such thinking are complex, but they relate to a literal interpretation of creation stories and a distaste for seeing humans as mere animals. To the conservative mind,

evolution seems to diminish the power of God and it does not sufficiently elevate humans above their animal kin. Some important negative consequences for ecology result. A totally dominating God works arbitrarily outside the natural system, imposing his will on things. In imitation of this deity, his followers, too, can manipulate the earth at

will; it is, after all, a zone outside of the realm of salvation, an objectified resource for human utilization. Thirdly, the commandment drives the beginnings of religion and spirituality far back into prehistory, implicitly claiming that our primordial religiousness was very earthbound, intimately connected with the sun and the seasons, with the spirits of mountains and rivers. Christianity has tended to remove religion from space, from the here and now concreteness of our earliest ancestors and confine it in the history of home sapiens,



Green World of Life

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especially in a time frame called salvation history. It is hard for many Christians to take the relativizing step of understanding their religion as a less decisive moment than they thought in the very long historical march of hand and brain creatures.

2. The universe is a unity of matter and energy; it is an interacting community of systems; in its earthly dimension, the psychic and the physical are intimately integrated and operate according to laws of differentiation, subjectivity and communion.

This unified vision of reality orchestrated by ecological spirituality stands against many dualisms that have pervaded western philosophy and theology. Many writers in Christian history are dualists who virtually separate body and soul, matter and mind, the spiritual and the physical. In a way reminiscent of A. N. Whitehead's process philosophy, inter-subjectivity and inter-communion are key features of the new ecological spirituality. Christianity has not accepted the subjectivity of non-human animals and much less the subjectivity of other parts of nature. There are always exceptions like St. Francis Assisi, but such rare proto-ecologists only prove the rule. Contrast the Christian perspective on this point with that of American Indian religion which honors the subjectivity of the spirits in animals, trees, streams and mountains. When all reality outside the human is reduced to merely objective relations, there is less possibility for communication; the non-human is easily reduced to things, to non-sentient entities to be dominated at will for human gain. Think of Descartes' analysis of animal pain as the mere squeaking of a machine; this master of dichotomies had managed to reduce even sentient beings to unfeeling objects. Buddhism has been more open to a unified view of reality because of its teachings of impermanence and the lack of any solid self; all existence is profoundly interconnected and changing. Sunyata or

emptiness means lack of a separated self and, therefore, it encourages a fundamental sense of interconnection with other entities, as exemplified in the Buddhist image of the Jeweled Net of Indra where all the pieces of the net reflect all the others. And yet, the unified outlook of ecological spirituality would press even Buddhism to rethink its boundaries for what constitutes sentient beings. Among eastern religions, it is perhaps Taoism that ties in most closely with ecological spirituality on the point of unified and inter-communing systems. It is not incidental that the ancient Taoist sages reacted against a very stratified Confucian culture in their return to nature to unlock the ultimate secrets of existence. The commandment on the intense unity of all reality challenges Christianity to reexamine the many dichotomies that still hold sway in its theology, liturgy and morality.

3. A main task for humans is to assist the intercommunion of living and non-living components of the earth community. This involves moving from an exclusively anthropocentric to an organic perspective, one that appreciates the intrinsic not just the instrumental value of nonhuman reality. This requires a profound reorientation among people toward an integrated human-earth relationship.

Science and technology for at least two hundred years, while bringing humanity great benefits, have also drawn people away from a sense of belonging to the earth. Industrialization, urbanization and now cybernetics increasingly isolate us from the rhythms of the seasons and from an awareness biotic networks. We have become alienated from the earth as our true home, our native place. Ecological catastrophes, impending or already present, are beginning to awaken governments, private groups and individuals to issues like global warming and nuclear pollution. Institutional religion, however, is still lagging in bringing its influence to bear on these problems. A good example of such

shortcomings can be found in typical Christian liturgies. For the most part, these services of preaching and eucharist do not portray humans with clear connection to earth or with strong responsibilities toward ecologically justice. On the contrary, most liturgies concentrate on interhuman questions or on the relationship between individuals and God. Hymns, preaching and prayers focus on the relationships between a parental God and his children or on a divinized Jesus and his adherents. The general tone of the liturgy is one of a salvation history removed from the needs of the earth itself. References to nature in the liturgy do not focus on the sacredness of the natural; rather nature is used figuratively to enhance religious beliefs that have little to do with the earth. In light of the third commandment, Christianity on the whole does not yet make the contribution it could to sensitizing people to assisting the communion of living and nonliving components of the earth community. This is not seen as a primary goal of being religious, because the sacred is not understood to reside in the earth itself.

A few Christian theologians are moving against this still general trend by reinterpreting the doctrines of creation and incarnation. The whole universe is seen as the locus of creation, as the body of God, bringing the divine down into a radical immanence without resulting in pantheism. Such thinkers distinguish pantheism from panentheism in which the divine is immersed in creation or the latter in God without an absolute identity of God and the world. From this perspective, God has always been

“incarnate” in the world. In some ways this newer Christian thinking is similar to Buddhist teaching about the discovery of Buddha-nature already present in all reality. If more Christians reinterpreted their doctrine in this way through preaching and liturgies, they could become more sensitized to the third commandment’s task of assisting in the communion of living and nonliving components of the earth. Christians formed in such theology could better appreciate the intrinsic value of nature so that their instrumental uses of it might be more mindful and respectful.

4. The primordial components of earth: land, air and water are sacred.

It is instructive to compare Christian attitudes toward wilderness (land) with those of American Indians. Puritan colonists in America saw their task, their “errand into the wilderness” as one of heroic warfare with the untamed spirits of an unruly forest. Wild animals as well as native Indians were seen as savage elements, enemies of European, that is, Christian virtue and culture. The errand into the wilderness consisted in taming and converting these vicious spirits, these wild, animalistic entities into godly beings. Since violence was thought to originate in these devilish environments, or at least to be propagated there, it became legitimate for Christian soldier-missionaries to use violence to curb what was interpreted as a violent realm. This attitude is epitomized in the story of the white maiden, symbol of Christian Europe, abducted by “savage” Indians and saved by a heroic Daniel Boone whose violence was justified by its goal of



Desert Spiral

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reclaiming the Christian maid. Contrast this view of the wild land to be tamed by gun and plow with that of Indians in both tribal rituals and in more common activities. The Indian brave went into the wild on his vision quest to discover his true spiritual identity, to communicate with the spirits of animals, trees and streams. He fasted as a holy act waiting for the revelation of his name and life vocation, waiting for his personal song to emerge from this very wilderness, often in some animal guise. In less ritualized actions, Indian men and women would sit reverently on the ground aware of contacting the holy in the earth. They dug kivas into the ground for rites in which the Great Spirit would be invoked from the center of the circle, the "sipapu," rising like smoke to encircle them in the embrace of earth. Now the descendants of the Puritans have turned land into a commodity, a dead object for exploitation as real estate development, endless highways, and as turf for noisy and ruinous dirt-bike riding.

There have always been among American settlers a few prophets of the land, but they were not closely associated with Christian churches. Henry Thoreau wrote at Walden Pond that "in wilderness is the preservation of the world," reflecting his own journey into simpler living close to nature. John Muir walked the wilderness of Yosemite and other wild places to alert the nation to its magnificent natural heritage. Walt Whitman, the quintessential American poet of the last century, sang incessantly of the union of humans with the land, the air and water. This tradition continued in this century with Aldo Leopold, especially noteworthy for his land ethic which held that things were right when they preserved the integrity, stability and beauty of biotic communities. Such spirituality was hard to come by in Christian churches which were so deeply impacted by an other-worldly eschatology. This eschatology or vision of future saw the earth consumed in flames while faithful believers

ascended away from it into God's realm. To honor earthliness was seen as a depreciation of the sky God; it was a descent into the flesh which warred against the spirit. Again powerful dichotomies divided humans from their native milieu. To rediscover in our time a fuller sense among Christians and other religionists of being children of the land, it may be most important to concentrate on spiritual aesthetics. Of Plato's trilogy, the true, the good and the beautiful, Christian theologians have traditionally emphasized truth and goodness, understood as *vera doctrina* and morality; they have for the most part notoriously neglected the beautiful as a source of the sacred. Painters, writers and musicians have broken through to the beautiful, but church theologians have looked suspiciously on beauty as a source of holiness. Reasons for this exceed the scope of this presentation, but they are often connected with dualistic thinking that separates the sensuous and earthy from the zone of spirituality. Beauty appeals to the "soft" emotions and the passionate mind, aspects of the human that are particularly hard for religious institutions to control.

5. The richness and diversity of all life forms must be preserved in a way that upholds ecojustice; the expansion of human population and its interference in nature is excessive.

The growth of human populations is closely related to the decline in the variety and health of animal and plant species. From the standpoint of ecological spirituality, all species have intrinsic and not just instrumental value. This does not mean that humans are forbidden to use nature in useful ways, just as other species do. But our greater mental abilities allow us to foresee the consequences of destructive ecological choices and acts. We must extend our sense of ethics toward a responsible use and preservation of natural diversity. It is beyond the scope of my paper to explore the ethical particulars that honor intrinsic value and sanction wise use of nature.

But it is becoming ever clearer that growing human populations coupled with the consumerist mentality of market capitalism are deducing species diversity on earth. Occasionally, we see the instrumental value of a species like the yew tree whose chemicals assist in the cure of certain cancers. But on the whole, we are still conditioned by our culture to sacrifice whales and dolphins to maximize profits. How often do we hear a sermon or a major church pronouncement on the interrelated problem of species diversity, burgeoning populations and the market ethos?

In fairness to Christianity, we should acknowledge that mainline churches have developed strong positions in social ethics from the early days of the Protestant social gospel to the long line of Catholic social encyclicals. But this social teaching focuses almost exclusively on human rather than ecological justice. This is a good example of how an organization's ethics is deeply affected by a more basic attitude or worldview that has typically excluded nature from both subjectivity and sacredness. In this view, nature has no standing in terms of rights and of justice.

A number of Christian ethicists and theologians are attempting to correct this situation today; some of their thinking makes its way into seminary training, especially on the controversial subject of population control. One of the more compelling approaches of this new thought brings the justice dimensions of Liberation Theology to bear on ecological dilemmas. Liberation Theology, originating in Latin America, has focused on the structures of human

oppression and an interpretation of the gospels as God's call to liberate people from systems of alienation and subjugation. In this theology, Jesus becomes a prophetic liberator inspiring his followers to analyze and change society while working on behalf of and in solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Applying this approach to ecology makes endangered species

and other aspects of beleaguered nature equivalent to the human poor and oppressed. Against the tendency in Christianity to spiritualize Jesus into a quasi non-earthly entity, this application of liberation thought pictures him as identified with the suffering and the

vulnerability of nature. The Christ image in drawn down to earth, incarnated in a struggle for justice that includes the environment. Another important aspect of ecojustice involves both poor people and a polluted earth. Hazardous waste dumps and nuclear facilities, for example, are frequently located in areas where the poorest people live; many see a racial discrimination component in these developments.

6. People must rethink their consumer habits and move toward styles of simpler living to preserve the earth and establish more enhancing forms of community life.

Although this commandment of ecological spirituality is universally valid, it has special relevance for those living in wealthier situations throughout the world. The mandate for simpler living, a difficult concept to define for most of us, has both material and spiritual ramifications that are closely interlinked. Excessive use or destruction of earth resources, still so very



Sunlight on the River

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prevalent everywhere but especially in advanced technological societies, proceeds from human attitudes, lifestyles and worldviews. In this sense, the material problem is at root at spiritual one. For example, in the United States, where gasoline is relatively cheap and seemingly plentiful, the automobile is developing into a truck of ever greater proportions. This increased consumption of fuel, steel and other resources is driven in large part by attitudes that associate outward signs of bigger, more physically impressive materiality with personal worth and status. This vehicle example moves beyond the personal to major social mindsets affecting industries, commerce, the media, advertising, lobbyists, politicians and economists. The automotive instance can be multiplied in many other sectors of society. Simpler living, based on acquiring and enjoying the things one needs and not the endless array of what one wants or is made to think one wants, has negative connotations in the minds of most people. It is seen as a summons to poverty, to lessened personal and social esteem, to becoming marginalized and vulnerable. Simpler living is hardly ever understood as a path toward psychological and spiritual growth.

Religions have a mixed record concerning simple living. There is certainly a long history, especially in eastern and western meditative traditions, of renouncing material goods or of using them sparingly in order to focus energies of mind and soul on spiritual development and service to neighbor. Christian movements like the Quakers (Society of Friends) and the Catholic Worker (U.S.A.) present examples of intentionally simple living. But Christian churches have also been drawn into the “gospel of wealth” in various ways. In the aristocratic European mode of past centuries, churches often fostered an image of riches in their physical structures, institutional alliances and in the personal lifestyles of the higher clergy. Ecclesial power and prestige frequently

mirrored the ostentatious ways of secular monarchs. In North America many Christians have uncritically embraced the ethos of market capitalism which largely denies any value to simple living, because the success of the market is based on maximizing production and consumption for the sake of ever-increasing profit.

Ecological spirituality urges religionists and secularists toward a constant reassessment of exaggerated uses of the natural world and its resources. Buddhist spiritual psychology, in ways similar to western religious traditions, offers a kind of voluntary simplicity that has not only benign material consequences but also stimulates the growth of mind and spirit. Commitment to simplicity in a complex world demands a delicate balancing act amid responsibilities to self and others. But those who practice such mindfulness derive important spiritual benefits: the process of attempting to live more simply makes them more aware of the things that truly count in life such as relationships and service. And the practice of simple living also heightens one’s sense of the interconnectedness of all beings, since one’s choices concerning resources impact the wider world. Buddhism also teaches that the practice of simplicity is far more important than entertaining the concept of it; for it is in actual practice that we experience valuable results that are not attainable in mere notional thinking.

7. Humans need to re-learn ways of communicating with nature via dialogue and not coercion, thus recovering their true relationship with the life of earth.

On the whole, the human attitude toward nature has been that of a master toward a slave or an owner toward an object or commodity. This outlook tends to be very violent and uncaring, not only toward animals but toward other living entities like oceans and rivers. Until this century, science and technology have tended to remove any sense of a subjectivity from the natural world, as

subjectivity implied communication between two intelligent beings. A mechanistic viewpoint has ensued in which the world outside the human and that of a few other mammals is an objectified realm suitable for manipulation but not meaningful communication. The very idea of communicating with nature seems very strange to many people in our time; to dialogue with trees (Stephanie Kaza, *The Attentive Heart*, 1995) would seem truly bizarre to the average person. Yet subatomic physics and quantum mechanics have stretched the limits of our imaginations since the early part of the century. This more organic and systemic approach to understanding the world has opened the possibility of viewing nature as alive and dynamic at its core with strong elements of creative chaos and order. There seems to be an element of “freedom” or indeterminacy in nature; moreover, all entities are caught up in a unified energy system (e.g., wave-particle theory of matter) which precludes easy separations or hierarchies of being, so popular since the middle ages.

For the most part, religions have restricted communication to that between people or with a deity or perhaps with one’s inner self. Outside of a few mystical religious virtuosi like Meister Eckhart, St. Francis Assisi and Julian of Norwich, traditional religionists in the West have confined nature to foreground or background scenery for the communication of human or divine persons. At its best in the religious perspective, nature became a treasury of symbols for what was not nature. Most

Christians would suspect a form of paganism if they were urged to communicate spiritually with the natural world. The clearest example of an ancient nature religion is Taoism which locates and experiences the Tao, the underlying, ineffable, mysterious source of all reality, through its myriad manifestations in nature. American Indian religions also find the Great Spirit in just about every aspect of

the natural realm; African primal religions have similar tendencies.

Perhaps the best way to rediscover and experience again the meaning of dialogue with nature is through the voices of modern nature writers. These authors act like seers for us, helping us to break through the barriers of technological objectification to make real contact with the natural

realm. They allow us to touch nature in a new way, to listen to its peculiar languages. Learning to move away from noise and chatter, we let the forest or the river come to life in us. Such dialogue with nature is a form of meditation or contemplation which calms our scattered minds and makes it possible for us to “talk” with animal species and other parts of a living cosmos. Our schools and churches fail badly in their educative tasks when they do not teach people how to meditate, how to unlock their mystical potential suppressed and even mocked in a culture of frenzied activity. Erazim Kohak (*From the Embers to the Stars*) describes this process as a re-personalizing of our



Canyon Dream

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relationship with nature through mutual respect and empathetic understanding. He is able to listen to the messages of dawn or dusk, to the sounds of birds and creeks in ways that shape for him a moral sense of the natural world.

Four brief selections from poetic writers alert us to the wonderful possibilities of contemplative communication with nature. Dag Hammarskjöld underlines our mystic capacity for such communication: "In the point of rest at the center of our being, we encounter a world where all things are at rest in the same way. Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation..." Henry David Thoreau teaches us how to renew ourselves: "When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and the most interminable...the most dismal swamp. I enter the swamp as a sacred place, a sancta sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow of Nature." And Rene Dubos urges us to see beyond our human exploits to experience mystery in nature: "The wooing of the earth thus implies much more than the converting the wilderness into human environments. It also means preserving natural environments in which to experience mysteries transcending daily life, and from which to recapture...the awareness of the cosmic forces that have shaped humankind." Finally, Walt Whitman pulls us away from human words to listen to other spiritual realities in nature: "This is thy hour, O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless, / Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done./ Thee fully forth emerging silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,/ Night, sleep, death and the stars." (all citations from *The Soul of the World*, ed. by Phil Cousineau, Harper-SanFrancisco, 1993)

8. A new ecological ethic needs to be founded on a deep sense of bonding with nature, as a basically aesthetic experience. Ethical principles and applications can be

positively influenced by a prior affective knowing of the natural world.

When we refer to ethics, we usually think about right and wrong choices or actions; we go back to principles and to their applications in moral situations. We ask about the ethics of global warming, of polluting the air and water, and about those responsible for such actions. Ethics has both individual and social dimensions. While all of this weighing of responsibility and accountability is crucial to working out an ecological ethic, it tends to stay on a rational or mentalist level. Ecological spirituality urges us to develop a more adequate foundation for such ethics by cultivating a prior affective bonding with the natural world, by re-experiencing ourselves deeply and symbiotically joined to our natural matrix. Science and technology, for all their indisputable benefits, have for three hundred years drawn us into a self-experience apart from nature. Ecological spirituality maintains that this separate existence, this dualistic (Descartes) and mechanistic (Newton) worldview, provides a superficial basis for the kind of environmental ethic we need today.

We must learn to re-experience in an aesthetic and affective manner the mystery and wonder of nature. Only then will we be sensitive and humanized enough to construct diverse ethical principles for the ecosystem. We have good resources for developing this ground work for ecological ethics in the newer science of subatomic physics, in certain philosophical systems that link us organically and dynamically with the natural world, and also in the work of thinkers who explore intersubjective dialogue, an intersubjectivity that can be extended to our relationship with nature. Moreover, if we envision ourselves bonded with nature on all levels, we will want to find a substratum for environmental ethics that arises from nature itself. Exploring such a natural moral order complements and enriches our mental systems of obligation imposed on nature. The task is to move away from an

ethic of intellectual distance toward an ethic of participation. This psychology of participation becomes the basis for an ethic when we introduce the idea of worth. As nature writer, John Hay, puts it, worth is defined by participation. At their deepest levels, ethical systems proceed from experiences of worth or value. When we develop greater respect for the worth of non-human nature through participation, we are engaged in environmental ethics. Such an approach to ethics is also aesthetic in that it prompts us to open ourselves to the beauty as well as the worth of the natural world.

Religious traditions have largely fallen short of preparing people for a participatory ethic regarding nature. Outside of the Taoist and American Indian heritages, most long-established religions focus on human and divine relationships usually removed from the sphere of earth itself. As I said earlier, religions use nature to find symbols for that which is beyond nature; often enough nature is simply ornamental or background music for something else. These deficiencies of religions are understandable in historical terms, because only in our time are people coming to understand the great crises of our ecosystems. Jesus, Buddha, and Moses were not aware of worldwide environmental issues. A major task, therefore, of rethinking and re-education faces world religions as they look toward the new millennium. Religions could re-shape their visions to foster an undergirding for a new ecological ethic, a task which is in itself spiritual. For no entity on earth is merely instrumental. A contemplative perspective teaches us that all beings have intrinsic value. But to approach this level of ethical insight, we need to experience again that all things indwell one another in different degrees. Religions could help humans realize that the earth is sacred, that this very world is a miracle.

9. Ecofeminism provides a negative critique of patriarchal structures that have

oppressed both women and the environment; this movement also offers positive insights from the experiences of women and nature to enhance ecological spirituality.

The literature of ecofeminism projects a negative assessment of the relationships between women, nature and patriarchy. A good historical example of this can be found in Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*. She argues forcefully that since at least the sixteenth century, women and nature came to be seen as symbols of disorder to be controlled and exploited by a dominant patriarchy. Later as scientific technology developed, she points to a new image of nature as female that could be controlled and dissected through empirical experiment. This experimentation then legitimated the exploitation of natural resources. The medieval perspective of a chain or hierarchy of being continued into the modern era; in this context, women, partially because of the mysterious and powerful natural process of birthing, were classified as closer to the animal realm. Women, in the patriarchal mind, represented graphically the earthly processes of birth, decay and death. Patriarchal religion also associated women with evil earthly powers during the centuries of witch hunting.

On the positive side, ecofeminists explore the experiences of both women and nature, develop themes of interconnectedness, immanence and new ways of empowerment. Rosemary Ruether, for example, in expanding on the goddess theme, points out that spirit and matter must not be dichotomized, but rather these terms depict the inside and the outside of the same entity. For her, the earth goddess imagery moves us away from rootless transcendence toward creative immanence in nature. This sense of the immanence of the spiritual and the material is characteristic of various schools of contemporary creation theology. For Starhawk, the goddess is embodied in all

natural systems. Her vision is akin to Lovelock's Gaia thesis, imaging the world as a living, adapting entity. If one cultivates a sense of immanent value in nature, says Starhawk, sources of inner power are unleashed. A person thus empowered can move beyond modern power relationships based on dominance over others and over nature toward a new kind of empowerment of responsibility towards others.

Traditional religions are increasingly impacted by the modern women's movement, which did not originate in religion but in society at large. One of the most important developments in this century has been the growing emancipation of women in terms of education, status and opportunity in the public sphere. The record of institutional religion in this regard is certainly mixed. In more progressive religious circles, women are gradually rising to leadership positions, but among more fundamentalist religions the role and status of women are still marked by subordination. Within a major tradition like Catholicism, for example, both ends of this spectrum can be observed. Women have taken on more pastoral and leadership functions in the church, but they are shut out from positions of higher responsibility because of their gender. Ecofeminism, of course, is just one aspect of a much broader women's movement. But in as much as religious institutions incorporate egalitarian or democratic ways concerning women, they will minimize the patriarchy that has linked women with nature in pejorative modes.

10. Humans must learn to relate to the animal world in ways that lessen cruelty and violence, while enhancing interspecies relationships with animals that benefit the whole biotic community.

Ecological spirituality calls for a reconsideration of our relationship to animals by valorizing them as intrinsically worthy and not simply as commodities for market and other human uses. Factory farming and

animal testing for cosmetic purposes inflict great suffering on animals; most of this is hidden from people today who do not reflect on the origins of their packaged meats in the supermarket. Ecologists and nutritionists point out the anomaly of using ten or more times as much in the weight of grain to produce one pound of meat, when more people could be fed directly by the grain products. About 40% of the grain produced in the world is fed to meat animals. Moreover, we know that humans could avoid a number of diseases by eating a more vegetarian diet. Factory farming of animals contributes to the destruction of forests in order to provide grazing areas, while using an extraordinary amount of fresh water, itself a scarce item in the world. Pollution from feed lots contributes to contamination of arable soil and underground water reservoirs. This situation calls for changes on many levels from business to government to education. If humans could come to regard animals with greater respect and understand the ecological outcomes of present systems, they might be more willing to change their life styles for environmental motives.

Traditional religions, with the exception of a few like Hinduism and American Indian spirituality, virtually disregard animals as spiritual beings. One can search the best theological libraries and find little or nothing on this subject. Some of the most sensitive material on the richness of animal life comes not from theologians but from scientists who explore the personal and social life of primates. A few contemporary religious authors, however, spurred on in part by the animal rights movement, have begun to challenge Christian churches on this neglected topic. These writers extend God's covenant with humans to all animals and to the natural world, and they point out God's presence and pain in the suffering of animals. There are many related problems concerning the instrumental use of animals, issues both of ethics and of spirituality, that exceed the scope of this paper. But the general trend in the new

literature about ecology and animals connotes a greater awareness of their intrinsic value and a commitment to lessen the violence surrounding our animal kin. A dramatic example of the latter appeared on public television recently, depicting the domestication of wild horses through tactics of gentleness and communication rather than the extreme violence of past methods of “breaking” horses.

These ten commandments of ecological spirituality summon traditional religions to a profound re-interpretation of their doctrines and practices. This task is only starting, but it should be encouraged, because institutional religion can make valuable contributions to the social survival of the planet. Social survival goes beyond just human welfare to encompass the wellbeing and sustainability of all the biotic systems of this beautiful planet.

Related Titles:

- Allan H. Badiner, ed., *Dharma Gaia*, 1990
Michael Barnes, ed., *An Ecology of the Spirit*, 1990
Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 1988
Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story*, 1992
David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, 1980
Frans De Waal, *Peacemaking Among Primates*, 1989
Irene Diamond and Gloria F. Orenstein, eds., *Reweaving the World: the Emergence of Ecofeminism*, 1990
Rene Dubos, *So Human an Animal*, 1968
Richard Fragomeni and John Pawlikowski, eds., *The Ecological Challenge*, 1994
Paul Gruchow, *The Necessity of Empty Places*, 1988

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