

EXPLORING ECO-THEOLOGY, ECO-SPIRITUALITY and ECO-JUSTICE

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I. Introductory Background

Let us turn to an ancient scriptural text to begin (Psalm 139 – *You know me*): ‘I thank you for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works’.

Perhaps the lyricist of Louis Armstrong’s song ‘What a wonderful world!’ says the same thing:

*I see trees of green, red roses too,
I see them bloom for me and you,
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.*

*I see skies of blue, and clouds of white,
The brightness of day and darkness of night,
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.*

On my study wall there hangs a beautiful photograph taken by the crew of Apollo 17 during their space journey to the moon. It shows Earth our home, the blue planet set against the inky blackness of space. Earth appears as a ball-like, single organism. We are a privileged generation to have this image and, associated with it, an understanding of the cosmos in its magnificence. But we are also the generation that is responsible for unprecedented damage to Earth’s life systems – a system that has been almost five billion years in the making. In our time, the collision between our story and the Universe story demands some accounting and reconciliation, as well as a revision of the narratives by which we live.

I expect that for many of you, as for me, progressively, across a lifetime, you have been awakened from a false consciousness which dulled your sensitivity to the whole planetary community of life. The Christianity I grew up with didn’t have much to say about the themes we are looking at in this workshop, though there was a date in the Church calendar we called ‘Harvest Festival’. In fact my early Methodist formation was not only human centred but rarely discouraged our misuse of natural resources or questioned what we called progress. A 1950s understanding of God had little to do with the natural world, indeed it was something of a heresy to imagine you were nearer to god in nature than you were in church on a Sunday, while, of course, many of my colleagues regarded the Biblical account of creation as literal fact. Things have changed. Pope John Paul II called for ‘an ecological conversion’ and certain American evangelical Christians have become converts. Check out the website: www.WhatwouldJesusDrive.org. Here in Australia there are initiatives described as ‘eco-ministry’. Great stories can be told about individual churches trying to make a difference. Theologically, liturgically and practically religion in the new millennium is greener. The question is, how much new wine can old wineskins hold? My assumption is that, by and large, even the greener churches have not substantially embraced the worldview, the new paradigm and the new theology behind this presentation.

Personally, I now speak from the vantage of a multi-layered identity, no longer content with being identified simply as a Christian or an Australian or even as a human being, though I am all that. I take seriously what science teaches about the nature of life. As I see it, I am primarily a member of the community of Earth's beings and my moral universe of responsibility extends to non-human beings and future generations. Therefore what I call eco-spirituality and eco-justice are lenses through which I must now see politics, economics, theology and indeed all relationships. That said I don't stand here as an expert on the topic of this workshop. Nor do I profess to practise all I preach. What I want to offer is a work in progress which hopefully will intersect with your own quest to find a framework of belief and commitment as a responsible member of the community of life.

I don't intend to say much about the crisis that confronts earth's community of life. My assumption is that you have a broad awareness of the gravity of the situation. The Genesis mandate that we, *homo sapiens*, are to have dominion over the Earth now haunts us in the guise of global warming, the threat to eco-systems and loss of biodiversity, depleting energy sources, a deepening water crisis, international security flashpoints, crimes against humanity, gross inequalities between and within nations, and absolute poverty and destitution facing 1.2 billion of a human population rushing toward 9 billion.¹ The situation is unsustainable. Collectively our global consumption of resources is 1.23 of our ecological footprint, that is we humans are already using one and a quarter planet Earths, 23% more than the ecosystems can sustain. And for those interested in the global social justice gap the situation is even more dire. The affluent 20percent of the world's population, of which most Australians are a part, controls and uses approximately 80 percent of the Earth's resources. So we have this double-edged urgent challenge: to achieve environmental sustainability on the one hand and a fairer and more equitable distribution of resources and life opportunities in the human community, on the other. This double-edged challenge is what I mean by *eco-justice*.

I now want to introduce you to The Earth Charter (if you do not already know of it) – its 61 principles are a comprehensive global ethics vision, comprehensive because it is more than a green document. It covers the double edged challenge which is why I call it a manifesto for eco-justice.

The opening words of the Charter set the scene:

We stand at a critical moment in earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society, founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace. (www.earthcharter.org)

The core proposition behind the Earth Charter is also the key idea informing this presentation. It directs our approach to eco-theology and eco-spirituality. In a word it is ECO-CENTRISM. Eco-centrism challenges a human centred approach to ethics, economics, religion and culture. Eco-centrism lies behind the moral sentiment named by Albert Schweitzer as 'reverence for life'.

¹ There are many performance indicators that mark this crisis but let us just note two at this stage: Fact 1. more than half of the world's original forest area has been lost and a third of what is left will be gone in 20 years at current rates of deforestation, to say nothing of the loss of species and biodiversity this represents; Fact 2. in the next hour more than 1000 children under the age of 5 will die from illnesses linked to poverty, half of them in Africa.(Porritt)

This truth has been expressed in James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis which suggests that the Earth is best understood as one organic body, a biosphere in which all species of beings, animal and non-animal contribute to the whole. A consequence of this is that when any species undermines the whole, that species puts itself at risk from Gaia's over-riding will-to-life. There is a pertinent story relayed by Mikhail Gorbachev. "Two planets meet in space. One looks ill and complains of having contracted *homo sapiens*. The other, bursting with health, replies: "Don't worry, my friend. I had the same illness, but it went away entirely of its own accord".

The Gaia theory is a scientific observation that can be expressed mystically: all is one and one is all. Theologians might speculate that the doctrine of God reflects and embraces this monistic truth. Religious liturgies might express this poetically: *God is the heart, creation the heartbeat*. In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail almost fifty years ago Martin Luther King Jr. named the ethical implications of this:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all.

It is my fundamental conviction that at its core, progressive theology or religion must be eco-centric.

(I should acknowledge this is the chief criterion I am applying to other inputs to this conference!) Any theology or spirituality which is not ecocentric is grossly inadequate because it fails to take seriously the reality of life – it rests on a faulty narrative if you like – and, furthermore, it does not provide humanity with the motivation and nurturance to make the journey into the future which will sustain the community of life.

There is a parallel conviction I adhere to: that eco-centric theology allied to the practice of eco-spirituality is a necessary companion and resource for the journey to the future envisaged by eco-justice.

Nor am I alone in this view – from outside traditional religion and from inside traditional religion many voices are making the points I have just made. Consider these statements-

From the scientist Fritjof Capra:

Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest sense. (The Hidden Connections)

From the theologian, Sallie McFague:

The encompassing agenda [of contemporary theology] would be to deconstruct and reconstruct the central symbols of the Jewish and Christian traditions in favour of life and its fulfilment, keeping the liberation of the oppressed, including the earth and all its creatures, in central focus. that...agenda...turns the eyes of theologians away from heaven and toward the earth; or, more accurately, it causes us to connect the starry heavens with the earth...(quoted by Leal)

As a post-script to this backgrounding I want to emphasise that my position is that an eco-centric theology and spirituality is not an 'add on' to mainstream theology or religious practice, that is, merely a development of the unchanging, dogmatic centre. This is not just New Testament exegesis with a green gloss, 'environmental theology', a flavour of the month

theology like some have approached ‘political theology’ or ‘feminist theology’ or ‘pastoral theology’. Not at all. This is the main game, the new systematics.

II Eco-theology: an Overview

At the outset let me make an explanation. What I have to say here is within a Christian or post-Christian context, and a Western one at that. Obviously the quest must be extended way beyond that. If we take seriously the interconnectedness of all life and if we see theology of whatever kind as primarily a human search for meaning – as I do- then in forming an eco-theology we must be open to many traditions: the monotheistic desert religions or the less theistic forest religions of the East and especially the ancient wisdom of indigenous religions. Personally I see a lot of sense in the emergence of hybrid spiritualities, the ‘catholic, buddhist, greenie’ for instance. However, it remains necessary to do the work of creating new or revised approaches from within particular traditions.

It is argued with some validity that earlier Christianity was much more in tune with the natural world. I refer to the pre-Copernican world and the earlier Middle Ages, before the philosopher Rene Descartes put the stamp of dualism on philosophy, science and the western culture at large. It is true that the witness of St Francis and even the theology of Thomas Aquinas to say nothing of the wonderful insights of medieval mystics like Hildegard and Meister Eckart can speak to our contemporary situation out of their much more organic view of life and community. They provide a richness to the tradition which we can draw on, especially as inspiration for a grounded eco-spirituality. That said, we should not romanticise this earlier period. After all, these figures we refer to and their practices were more marginalised than dominant in Christendom, a world in which life was too often nasty, brutish and short. Moreover, today in a globalized, technological and post-industrial era we face many different eco-justice challenges than did those saints who preceded the scientific revolution.

We should delve back even further to our theological origins. Because Christianity is a religion of the book, we must seriously ask the question: Is the Bible a source for eco-theology?

(Of necessity I will answer this question hastily.)

Reading the Bible as an authority has always been problematic because the culture and perspective of its writers, to say nothing of its readers, colours the interpretation. But biblical exegetes like Professor Norm Habel who are fervently committed to exploring ecoethics, ecojustice and ecotheology, do not allow this problem to get in the road. Habel has helpfully directed a publishing process of re-reading the Bible ‘from the perspective of the earth’. Now this is a great idea – for great truths are generally popularised through story – as long as we don’t expect the Bible to give us authoritative answers in this quest. Though the Bible contains helpful hints of divine immanence, you have to read between the lines to recognise eco-centrism. Certainly there are directions about stewardship, and while Jesus does call us to consider the lilies and reminds us that God cares for sparrows, the Bible as a whole doesn’t read like a manifesto for eco-justice, though the Gospels and the prophets are full of social justice indicators. Generally, the Bible’s patriarchal and monotheistic orientation is just as likely to be misleading as helpful. So what are we to do with the Bible, as distinct from Jesus the Christ (for we will visit that question in a moment)?

Thomas Berry has an answer:

One of the best ways to discover the deep meaning of things is to give them up for a while... So I suggest putting the Bible on the shelf for a while to recover the ancient Christian view that there are two Scriptures, the Scripture of the natural world and the Scripture of the Bible. (Befriending the Earth)

Berry is directing us to the basic question of divine revelation. Where do we find the sacred story for us? Where is God? I think he's right, that a religion of the Book (as Protestant Christianity especially has been) is likely to get a skewed perspective of the sacred truth about the source of life. After all, is this one reason we have been able to exploit and dominate nature? As creatures of the earth, connection to the earth and its creatures may better reveal the Eternal Spirit of Life.

Having made these points, I want to trace very, very briefly an outline of the key contemporary contributors to what I will call a neo-Christian eco-theology. (The bibliography I have supplied is a listing of many who may be referred to, though it is not complete). Especially for Protestant students of theology, the major source of modern scholarship which has laid a foundation for open-ness to neo-Christian theology is what we call 'process theology' associated with the American John Cobb Jr. and in Australia usefully interpreted by a layman whose primary field was biology. I am referring to Charles Birch. As the term 'process' implies this is theology which takes seriously the processes of life, a more organic view than one which is propositional, evolving largely out of a platonic worldview. Rejecting so called dualistic ways of understanding the world, a view of God emerges as articulated by Paul Tillich, as 'the ground of our being' – and this opens the way for a departure from traditional theism to what may be termed pan-en-theism, but I'll say more about that in a moment. Meanwhile Catholic theology, which had richer sources to draw on than the Reformation Fathers, was being influenced by the work of a paleontologist who was also a Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, whose writings harmonise with process theology and its holistic approach. It has been said (by Thomas Berry) that Teilhard de Chardin moved the essential theological focus from redemption to creation. His worldview radically situated the human story in the context of the Universe story.

In the past twenty years or so the contributors to this conversation have multiplied. They are not all in agreement of course. They spread along a spectrum which may be characterised by the degree to which they step outside the theological tradition which formed them and, of course, the degree to which they operate inside or outside of institutional ecclesial structures. They also differ to the extent that they are able to locate their standpoint between theology and science, and furthermore, to the extent that they are able to see the ethical urgency of the task. Thomas Berry, an American Passionist priest, exemplifies that end of the spectrum which has moved beyond his tradition, is open to the history of cultures and science, so that it has been said he prefers to be called a 'geologian' rather than a 'theologian'. Matthew Fox, who is now not nearly so prolific as he was in the 1980s and 1990s, was a trailblazer for what he called 'creation spirituality' pushing the boundaries of the tradition. Feminist scholars such as Rosemary Radford Reuther have been a significant part of the debate, from a perspective to the 'liberal left' on the spectrum I described earlier, while another female theologian from a Protestant background whose contribution has particularly influenced me is Sallie McFague. Another Protestant scholar who has contributed much to an ecological theology is Jurgen Moltmann while maintaining his reputation as a mainstream scholar. The last name I want to drop is an Australian whose work I greatly respect. I refer to the Catholic theologian from Adelaide, Denis Edwards, who proposes in his latest book *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* 'a theological response to the ecological crisis not in terms of bypassing central Christian traditions but in terms of going *more deeply* into them and seeking to interpret them in the

light of the ecological issues that confront us'. So, for example, Edwards is concerned to give a Trinitarian account or a theology of the Eucharist which is rich in ecological themes.

In summary out of this growing conversation the position I submit to progressive thinkers who would reframe Christianity has four characteristics. Let me outline them. A neo-Christian ecotheology is:

1. *inclusive not exclusive*, not just in a gender, race or species sense, but also in rejecting a fundamentalist mindset, it recognises that the 'truth to live by' may be revealed in varying and multiple ways.
2. *mystical rather than literalist*, that is, it centres on an experience of transcendence which is connected to life's mysteries and uncertainties while it is triggered more by connectedness with the cosmic community of life than it is by codified religious forms.
3. *eco-centric and not anthropocentric*, that is, it rejects human-centred theology which subtly endorses our species' destructive dominance of nature through human technology, in favour of a view which takes seriously the intrinsic value of all life.
4. shaped by an over-riding sense of the *goodness of life rather than its undeniable tragedy*, which suggests that life's purpose is more about celebrating original goodness rather than seeking salvation from original sin.

I want to say a bit more about these last two points because they represent a departure from what has been a dominating anthropology or understanding of human nature in Christianity, especially while dualism has prevailed, separating 'man and nature', 'spirit and flesh' and so on. To those who know some church history these points reflect the theological battle between ancient church teachers, Augustine and Pelagius². Augustine was obsessed with the fall of creation and the forces of darkness while Pelagius sought a balance which emphasised the goodness of all creation and took seriously the eternal light. The demarcation is also about power and control – for what evolved is a belief structure which places the human over nature, and then constructs a theology of human sin and redemption which prescribes a pathway to salvation controlled in effect by particular men, the men in charge of the institution, which itself conveys the means of salvation. The result is a potent means of control (though the 'means of grace' was the ecclesial term). 'Grace' or 'freely given love' then becomes a commodity franchised by those in theological control rather than the free gift which accompanies the gift of life which in reality grace is. It is true that the Protestant Reformation and the Second Vatican Council did much to challenge this development but the task has been undermined and is unfinished.

So, freed from the need to dominate (which is the hallmark of anthropocentrism) and empowered to trust the processes of life, a different, holistic and eco-centric way may open up in which the primary focus is on right relating in the community of life. The key to this happening is the realisation that we human beings are not the centre of creation, that life is much bigger than our individual failures and successes and that our nobility as a species is contingent on us relating rightly from a position of responsible dependence within the biosphere. Then loving our neighbour includes loving nature. Then unconditional love, grace or life abundant may begin to fill the Earth, for grace is that which is ultimately life-giving, allowing and enabling us to be who we really are.

² see S McDonagh , *The Death of Life*, ch.3

How then, in this framework, informed by the scientific account of the community of life, can we credibly speak of God?

The Universe story of life's evolution indicates that there is no place for a being who is unchangeable and in absolute control in such a dynamic and continuously creative process. That process is both purposeful and chancy. At the same time we can say that these processes are imbued with an awesome and mysterious force of being and becoming which transcends any particular being. An understanding of God which takes seriously this view is termed 'pan-en-theism' (as distinct from 'pantheism' which simply says 'everything is God' or 'theism' which objectifies god as a being separate from the cosmos)³. A pan-en-theistic theology allows us to take eco-centrism seriously while preserving the idea of transcendence. In this worldview there is no 'elsewhere God', 'a god –out-there' but rather 'an everywhere God' what Paul Tillich termed 'the ground of our being'. The New Testament core statement that 'God is Love' fits with pan-en-theism. Love is that energy, that quality in the process which shapes life's relationships rightly, in ways that are more harmonious, empowering, joyous and just, reflecting, if you like 'the divine'. The everywhere God is an embodied god, the god within all bodies 'in whom we live and move and have our being', in much the same way as the mystics often speak of their experience of God. Understood eco-centrally this understanding of God transforms our relationship to nature because the earth itself, Gaia, is 'the body of God' as the self-confessed pan-en-theist Sallie McFague has said.

I draw the crucial conclusion for so called progressives, that the main dividing line across the communities of spirituality and religions is that between theism and pan-en-theism – this of course is a particular challenge within the Abrahamic faiths. Of course there are many other implications flowing from this view (eg. about prayer, about sharing worship with those who are aggressive theists) some of which I will touch on, but other matters traditionally part of a Christian systematic theology (eg. eschatology) I will leave for another day.

I want to move on to another key question for a neo-Christian eco-theology: how then are we to credibly speak of Jesus named the Christ? what place does the Jesus story have in our eco-theology?

The stories that explain ourselves to ourselves matter a lot as we move into the challenge of being authentic members of the community of life in the twenty-first century. All stories must be set within the Universe story of life but I maintain that for those committed to eco-justice the Jesus story is a rich resource. Personally the Jesus story of the Gospels has made an indelible mark on me, especially that Jesus I call the Lover but also Jesus the Social Critic.

I am not pretending here to be a gospel scholar trying to uncover the original Jesus. Obviously I want to disown those versions of that story which lead to 'Jesusolatry' and which I am sure cause Jesus himself to turn in his grave. Central to those distortions are theories of atonement which reduce the Jesus story to make him a Saviour who is sacrificed to win a theistic God's agreement to forgive sins. Nor do I intend to use chapter and verse from the gospels to underline the contribution Jesus makes as a teacher about eco-justice and right relating, though there is plenty of scope to do this.

I am particularly interested in the Bonhoefferian question- 'Who is Christ for us today?' - in the light of our contemporary understanding of the cosmos, the story of life and the state of affairs in the community of life as we embark on a new millennium.

³ Birch 1990: 90 defines pan-en-theism thus: 'God is involved in the cosmos but is not identified with it. God is both within the system and independent of it.'

The Christ of faith, more than the Jesus of history, is the pre-occupation of most of those who are exploring eco-theology from a Christian background. Matthew Fox's *Coming of the Cosmic Christ* is one significant formulation of this. In a word Fox's thesis is that the historical Jesus introduces us to a Christ who is the underlying reality giving an inherent sacredness to the Cosmos. And Fox cites authorities from St Paul to the medieval mystics who talk this way: 'in him were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and invisible' (Col. 1:16) Denis Edwards has profound insights about a Christology that is ecologically informed though he avoids the terminology, 'cosmic Christ'. He introduces the phrase 'deep incarnation' and quotes the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen:

... the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or 'deep' incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature. Understood this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as with the victims of social competition. God bears the cost of evolution, the price involved in the hardship of natural selection. (Ecology at the heart of faith, p. 59)

But I propose to change tack because I believe there is another productive line of inquiry for a neo-Christian eco-theology when it comes to the question: 'who is Christ for us today?' That is to ask: what is it that nurtured Jesus, that sustained and motivated him? It is a question which may provide clues for an eco-spirituality.

When push comes to shove we have to admit that as a man of his era Jesus was probably a theist. That said he seems to have a strong sense of an 'everywhere-here-and-now' God whose kingdom is within us. His teachings and practice about right relationships, which made him an affrontingly inclusive rabbi, stemmed from a deep sense of intimacy with his God whom he apparently called *abba*, an Aramaic word which conveyed the closest of relationships with a parent. In his times there was something unique in this way of referring to the divine and that may be why the Aramaic *abba* is preserved alongside the Greek in the New Testament in several places (Mk 14:36; Gal. 4: 6; Rom. 8:15). One commentator⁴ concludes: 'the experience of God as his *abba* was the source of Jesus' wisdom, his clarity, his confidence, and his radical freedom. Without this it is impossible to understand why and how he did the things he did.' The point about this for eco-theology and eco-spirituality is that as a mystical prophet, Jesus operated out of a strong sense of unity or 'oneness' with his God which gave him a deep awareness of oneness with all, with himself, with other human beings, with all other beings and I suspect, as he spent nights in prayer on the hillsides of Galilee, one with the starry heavens and the cosmos.

The heart of an eco-centric spirituality - compassion, love and a sense of justice - all stem from a deep inner awareness that 'one is all and all is one', that is, a profound sense of the interconnectedness of the community of life. We move on.

3. Eco-spirituality and eco-justice: an even briefer overview

Those of us who are theologically formed – and that is not all of us – may see how vital and important it is to pursue the issues we've looked at so far. But we need to be reminded that all the reformed theological and philosophical understandings in the world make no difference if

⁴ A Nolan 2007:71

they are not translated into transformative practice. The point of a neo-Christian eco-theology is to contribute to a better world for the community of life.

Cultivating an appropriate eco-spirituality is critical to sustaining this task. By ‘appropriate’ I mean congruence with our eco-theology beliefs and eco-justice outcomes. Here I am using the term ‘spirituality’ to refer to practices which nurture our lives as when we speak of ‘spiritual direction’ (rather than that use of ‘spirituality’ which is sometimes a synonym for the non-institutional religious search). Spirituality in the sense I am using it here forms our identity and character; one way of putting it is to say spirituality involves attention to the Spirit and helps us live according to that Spirit.

In attempting to give some content to eco-spirituality⁵ we need caution. The movement giving birth to eco-spirituality will span several generations, disturb personal and institutional boundaries and is inevitably diverse, experimental and eclectic. Of necessity there will be a subjective element – different pathways will suit different people at different stages of their lives. Some might find a practice which is built around communal activity more suitable while others are nurtured by solitude, some might be enriched more by an innovative use of symbols while others respond to the challenge of inspirational writings.

Establishing suitable eco-spirituality rituals can be a challenge. I imagine there are plenty of good examples in this company today. (On the day I was writing this for instance I turned on my ABC⁶ and heard Jason John of the Scots Uniting Church, Adelaide talking about the eco-rituals he is involved in.) I recall how for several years I was part of a regular liturgy designed to ritualise our participation in the universe story and the cycles of earth’s seasons. We drew on Christian, Eastern, aboriginal and other sources and encouraged our group to create its own resources. We named these liturgies ‘Celebrations of Being’. For various reasons, maintaining these initiatives over or against traditional liturgies can be difficult.

One of the best resources I am aware of for rituals that expand the traditional Christian observances and ground them in the Universe story is Michael Morwood’s book *Praying a new story*. The question of how to pray in a non-theistic way is an issue for a neo-Christian eco-spirituality. In the theistic paradigm prayer is a dialogue with the divine being in the expectation the prayer can be answered by an intervention which, for instance, might alter the course of natural events like diseases. For pan-en-theists the idea of what liturgists call intercessory prayer is clearly problematic just as the idea of singing praises to one’s god might be. I find John Spong’s definition of prayer helpful and accurate: ‘Prayer is the conscious human intention to relate to the depths of life and love and thereby to be an agent of the creation of wholeness in another’. So for me, prayer is less about crying out to God and more about seeking a state of union with the Spirit of Life and Love thereby equipping oneself to be an agent who can attempt to address the needs that confront us. So understood prayer is living in a way that seeks connectedness with all beings. As such it nurtures a disposition which is the precondition for compassion. I have been impressed by the Vipassana Buddhist meditation practice known as ‘metta meditation’. Metta’ means unconditional love and is similar to the Christian term, ‘grace’. Stilled through a focus on breathing, metta meditation concentrates the mind on an ever-widening circle of being: unconditional love in this prayer form is centred first on our inner circle of relationships, moving progressively through to less intimate relationships even with non-human beings, and eventually to global situations. It is a form of intercessory prayer, but one that does not expect an external deity to intervene.

⁵ Phil Costigan’s piece in Preston N *Social Alternatives*(2007)

⁶ Rachel Kohn’s “Spirit of Things” 29/7/07 and 31/7/07 looking at ‘eco-ministry’

To sum up I describe eco-spirituality as:

arising fundamentally out of reverence, awe and gratitude for life in its unity, balance, difference and connectedness, centred on grace, the gift of unconditional love which is compassionate, all inclusive and empowering, drawing on wellsprings of wisdom that are both contemplative and prophetic, it is a spirituality which challenges the illusions that easily capture us – for instance, that consumerism makes us happy or even that there is a god out there who will save us; this spirituality enjoins us to pay attention to where we are, to tend our garden and care for our neighbourhood; it supports a focus on outcomes that are realistic and practical, even if they are sometimes less than ideal. In the quest for life abundant that is in harmony with the Earth, this spirituality calls us to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with the Spirit of Life (Micah 6:8), sure in the faith that it is the meek who inherit the earth. (Matt 5:5)

Now to eco-justice. Earlier I proposed this definition of the term: the double-edged challenge of achieving environmental sustainability on the one hand and social justice in the human community on the other.

The limits of time mean this section is brief - but I do get another bite at this cherry in a keynote on ethics tomorrow. There will be some overlap for after all eco-justice is the formulation of the social ethical goals of eco-theology and eco-spirituality.

The double-edged call of eco-justice is premised on the view that the human degradation of nature, of which greenhouse gas emissions and global warming are but a symptom, that degradation is fundamentally linked to the social patterns and social institutions that oppress human beings. We cannot address one without the other. Poverty is an ecological problem, just as violations of nature's biodiversity and the biosphere have exacerbated the extent of global poverty. So, eco-justice assumes that to address environmental degradation in our world we must also challenge the exploitation of the poor. In other words, one part of the world cannot live in an orgy of unrestrained consumption while the rest destroys its environment just to survive.

The Brazilian Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff sees this connection from the poor majority's perspective and evocatively calls the book he wrote about it: *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. The feminist eco-theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether sees the connection from the perspective of women and contends:

*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. (Preston, *Understanding Ethics* ch. 12)*

A commitment to eco-justice points to big questions that can overwhelm the individual. (To this end see my post-script to the bibliography being distributed). The advice of the slogans popularised in the 1970s still hold as good guidance for us each: *think globally, act locally* and *live simply so others may simply live*. The changes needed go beyond but include a new politics and a new economics because, in the end they require a major re-orientation of human cultures to fairer and more eco-centric cultures. This shift from the dominating cultures that have emerged from the industrial and technological eras is sometimes referred to as 'the great turning' to indicate its radical departure from the materialistic, growth and consumption based cultures which flourished in the twentieth century. And there are signs that the Great Turning

is happening! If such a culture shift is to broaden, a global consensus around an appropriate ethical vision will be necessary. The Earth Charter declares that vision. If that cultural shift is to deepen it will require a spiritual base along the lines we have examined here.

This leads me to my final statement , a restatement of what I said at the outset:

eco-centric theology allied to the practice of eco-spirituality is a necessary companion and resource for the journey to the future envisaged by eco-justice.

Questions:

What was new and challenging to you in this presentation?

What further questions does it raise for you?

What stories can you share of your own explorations into eco-justice, eco-theology and eco-spirituality?

Do you agree with the assumption behind the presentation that the quest for a neo-Christian eco-theology is central to the development of Progressive Christianity/Theology/Religion/Spirituality?

What resolutions for personal follow-up action arise for you from the presentation?

EXPLORING Eco-justice, Eco-theology and Eco-spirituality –Workshop Presentation by Noel Preston to The Common Dreams Conference, August 2007

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A Post Script – what can the individual do?

From Preston N (2006) Beyond the Boundary pps.304-306

We each have a choice: to act on this reality with hope for a better world or to be passive as we despair that things can ever improve. Ultimately the choice to hope requires faith and is an expression of love. Even when we feel that we are hoping against hope, the choice remains, for the game is not up until the final cards are played. If we look at the big picture of history there is much evidence of remarkable and hopeful transformation. The future is an infinite succession of present moments, and to live in hope today, in defiance of evil around us, is itself a marvellous victory for hope. And yet there is a reasonable question I have been constantly asked: “In the face of overwhelming odds, what can an individual do to promote changes toward a more just world?” When I hear that, I first have a passing thought (of compassion I trust): perhaps we should not expect too much of each other. ... When I first worked with Action for World Development I first designed a six step formula as a response to that query. Slightly updated it reads:

The individual can

- (1) Become informed,
- (2) Inform others and connect with them for mutual support,
- (3) Cultivate a spirituality of eco-justice which nurtures visionary compassion,
- (4) Support, financially or in kind, programs that empower the poorest,
- (5) Review and change lifestyle so that it has a less harmful impact on others and the environment,
- (6) Act politically, for example, through non-government organisations working for human rights and the environment, while using our vote to support the Earth’s future.

The last of these points is critical because, while it is necessary that we do something as individuals, the big changes that are needed are systemic changes, changes to the legal, political, economic and cultural forces which oppress many and benefit a few. As I look through this six point list I am conscious that I have adhered to them imperfectly, just as I recall many I have known who have acted on this agenda with more courage, faithfulness and sacrifice than I have. This recollection serves to remind me once again how dependent on grace we all are. I take some comfort and inspiration in the words of Colin Morris, a religious leader and author who worked in Southern Africa more than thirty years ago: “The best that most of us can do is to take hold of the near edge of some great problem and act at cost to ourselves”.