

1.

THE CRISIS: ECOCID

Let us begin by taking a cold, clear-eyed look at the earth's situation today. "Blue Planet" depicts in vivid images what news headlines daily report and what the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 made clear: unfolding around us is an ecological disaster of ruinous proportions. It seems to be happening in slow-motion, as we count the days. But speeding up the camera of time even a little reveals how rapidly the situation is deteriorating. Naming some of the many crisis points moves language into cadences of biblical, prophetic lament:

- We are poisoning our life-support systems of soil, water, and air with toxic waste such as fumes, chemicals, sewage, detergents, pesticides, and radioactivity. Many pollutants that have already risen

into the atmosphere or seeped into the ground cannot be recaptured. We are making the planet unfit for life.

- Through burning, logging, or industrial showers of acid rain we are destroying the earth's forests, ruining the trees that create and purify the air we breathe.

- Largely through the chemicals used in refrigerators, air conditioners, and several industrial processes that serve the life-styles of rich nations, we have torn a hole in the protective ozone layer that shields life on earth from the ultraviolet rays of the sun. In the early millennia of our planet before there was such an ozone envelope, the first living creatures that evolved in the sea had to remain two to three feet below the surface of the water to avoid being frizzled by these rays. It was only after millions of years of these blue-green algae doing their marvelous photosynthesis act that gives off oxygen as a waste product, and only after millions of years of this oxygen collecting and forming into an ozone layer, that it was safe for life to come out of the depths of the water. And now our generation has ripped an opening in this shield, exposing life to a destructive onslaught of

sunrays.

- Our great oceans are littered with plastic and laced with sewage; many prize fish and mammals are being hunted or harvested to extinction; and the wetlands that provide their spawning ground are being drained or overbuilt.

- We are turning fertile soil into deserts through insensitive agricultural methods, losing roughly eighteen billion tons of topsoil every year. The world is running out of usable farmland; starvation looms.

- Through unlimited human reproduction we are increasing the numbers of our own species exponentially. From the beginning of the human race to the turn of the first Christian millennium (1000 A.D.), human population grew to approximately one-quarter billion people. By 2000 A.D. the number will be six and a quarter billion people; by 2050 A.D., eleven billion. This human population explosion is fast exceeding earth's carrying capacity. It puts increasing pressure on resources and habitat to the point where these become exhausted, causing intense misery to human beings and other creatures alike.

- We are annihilating our companion creatures

at a rapid rate. Thousands of species are already extinct, and by a conservative estimate 10,000 species a year continue to be destroyed. We are experiencing in a single lifetime the loss of more than half the living species created by God. Life forms that have taken millions of years to evolve, magnificent animals and intricate plants, disappear forever. Each one, as Meister Eckhart put it, is a word of God, a book about God.² Each is important for the life of this planet. We can never bring them back. And they will not evolve this way again.

- The great net of nuclear terror is thrown all over the world, threatening a radioactive conflagration that would effectively annihilate life now and in the foreseeable future.

To say that we are dealing with an environmental “problem” is an understatement. In her essay entitled “Women Against Wasting the World,” Catherine Keller consults Webster’s Dictionary and finds that to waste something means to ravage it, to devastate it with great violence, as in “to lay waste.”³ At the present moment the earth is still a community of living creatures endowed with powerful, responsive forces for life. But it is being

wasted, with great violence, by multiple acts that add up to nothing less than ecocide. Our blue planet as a habitat for life stands in jeopardy due to atmospheric damage, deforestation, pollution of the seas, disruption of ecosystems, destruction of habitat, extinction of species, loss of biodiversity, overpopulation, resource exhaustion, and nuclear proliferation. Lasting damage has already been inflicted, and time is short, since the deterioration of some life-support systems appears to be accelerating. Unless there is a radical reversal soon, we must ask the question whether life, our own and that of future human generations as well as that of myriad living creatures, will flourish on this planet or will pathetically diminish, even disappear.⁴

In the light of this painful reality, people around the world today are thinking new thoughts about the environment. The realization is dawning that for the sake of survival, our own and others, women and men together must be against wasting the world. This awareness, furthermore, is charged with spiritual value as people rediscover the sacred dimension of the earth and the resulting ethical imperative to cherish it.

In the Christian community biblical scholars

and theologians are beginning to explicate creation, prophetic wisdom, and gospel traditions in the effort to construct a life-saving environmental ethic and spirituality. The living memory of the gospels, for example, depict Jesus preaching a non-violent ethic pervaded with compassion and mutual regard. He himself lives in tune with the natural world, knowing about growing seeds and harvests, clouds and sunsets, fig trees and weeds, sheep and mother hens. His disciples are instructed to learn lessons about their relationship to God from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Mt 6:25-33). His own exuberant desire to feed people and his creative use of bread and wine left communion in these earthly things as the living symbol of his presence to this very day. Indeed, in the light of the resurrection of the one who was crucified on the cosmic tree, the Johannine and later Pauline traditions see that the whole world is created through Christ (Jn 1:3) and is the cosmic body of Christ (Col 1:15-20).

Much excellent work has already been done.⁵ Yet to this day and in most quarters the churches, institutionally and in their members, remain curiously unmoved by this most serious moral and religious challenge facing our generation. To use a

religious analogy, earth is entering into its passion and death, with newly victimized species and life-systems crying out from the depths, while too many of her disciples seem to think they can avoid what is going on by hiding in some isolated upper room.

2.

A TAPROOT OF THE CRISIS: THE TWO-TIERED UNIVERSE

I am persuaded of the truth of ecofeminism's 21 highlighters insight that analysis of the ecological crisis does not get to the heart of the matter until it sees the connection between exploitation of the earth and the sexist definition and treatment of women.⁶ As a theologian I am further convinced that the distortion found in those two instances also influences the Christian experience and doctrine of the mystery of God. This, I suggest, is the genius of women's spirituality in our day, informed by feminist analysis: that it sees the deficient pattern as a whole rather than in bits and pieces. Having faced something of the devastating result, let us cut to a major taproot of the crisis, namely, the dominant form of western rationality called

hierarchical dualism.

This is a pattern of thought and action that (1) divides reality into two separate and opposing spheres, and (2) assigns a higher value to one of them. In terms of the three basic relations that shape an ecological ethic, this results in a view in which humanity is detached from and more important than nature; man is separate from and more valuable than woman; God is disconnected from the world, utterly and simply transcendent over it, as well as more significant than it. Hierarchical dualism delivers a two-tiered vision of reality that privileges the elite half of a pair and subordinates the other, which is thought to have little or no intrinsic value of its own but exists only to be of use to the higher.

In the form in which it affects Christian theology and most of western thought, hierarchical dualism was first articulated in ancient Greek philosophy. Here it is envisioned that reality is composed of two separate levels of existence, namely, spirit and matter. Spirit is a transcendent principle that brings into play activity, autonomy, reason, the mind, the intellectual, the soul, the permanent, the infinite. Matter, on the other hand,

is the principle signifying immanence which shows itself in passivity, dependence, emotions, the body, the physical, nature, the transitory, the finite.

In some ancient conceptual frameworks matter and spirit thus distinguished exist in a harmonious tension of opposites. But the thought pattern that became most influential in subsequent tradition separated and graded them. Consequently, rather than existing in dialectical interplay, these two spheres of existence are described as polar opposites and their differences are maximized. With a logic that assumes differences automatically signal the presence of something inferior, spirit and matter are also ranked. Spirit is valued more highly than matter, which, as a lower, entrapping element, is meant to be controlled for the sake of spirit. These two aspects of reality, in other words, are separate and unequal.

The resulting dichotomy is familiar to anyone educated in western anthropology. The essential self is the soul, which is divided from the body. In the resulting hierarchy of the self, the body is less valued and is even given a negative connotation, while the mind is prized as more permanent, closer to the sphere of divinity, and meant to rule

over the recalcitrant flesh.

WOMEN AND EARTH

Feminist reflection brings to the fore another ^{32 highlighters} basic element in this construction, namely, that it equates spirit with the masculine principle in the world while matter is identified with the feminine. In terms of actual people, this means that men are linked with a transcendent, spiritual principle beyond nature, while women and the earth embody the lower, material principle, existing with a natural inferiority for which there is no remedy. The hierarchy of mind over body in the individual is therefore not a neutral construction but has political consequences. It translates into social structures of domination/subordination undergirded by the belief that man should rule over woman, the quintessential “Other” whose reproductive power and survival skills he needs and gets but whom he is also free to disparage. This arrangement does not benefit all men, but only those of the ruling classes. Onto other men of the lower classes and different races are also projected the same so-called “feminine”

qualities of bodiliness, irrationality, and so forth that cry out for “stronger” male control. “According to Aristotle’s *Politics*, ruling class Greek males are the natural exemplars of mind or reason, while women, slaves and barbarians are the naturally servile people who must be subdued and ruled by their ‘head’.”⁷

This social dualism in the human community, thought to be naturally in tune with the shape of the universe, also has ecological consequences. For the earth is matter, the antithesis of spirit. The ruling man’s hierarchy over women and slaves extends also to nature, most often symbolized as female. She is meant for his service while he, in his nobility, has a duty and right to tame and control her. The female symbolism for nature that generally pervades human thought arises from the fact that women are the life-givers to every human child, as the earth itself, Mother Earth, brings forth fruits. Within a system of dualism, however, both women and the natural world are separated from the men they bring forth and sustain. Both are assigned instrumental value, with little or no intrinsic worth apart from their potential to serve the needs and desires of men. Women whose bodies mediate physical existence to humanity thus

become symbolically the oldest archetype of the connection between social domination and the domination of nature.

The ancient tree of hierarchical dualism received a new layer of foliage with the advent of the modern age. Philosophers of the Enlightenment era argue in a new way that the mind as knower is separated from all other things that are the object of knowledge. The rational mind (*res cogitans*) is the essential self, while matter, nature, the universe (*res extensa*) stand over against this mind as objects to be explored and mastered. The self, in this view, is essentially solitary and disembodied, the body being an alien material clothing that insulates the discrete psychic substance that is the rational mind. René Descartes' famous axiom, *Cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am," sums up this new dualism of body and mind.

Coherent with this view of the body, the emerging Enlightenment philosophy of science quantified nature as a thing. Rather than being the mysterious source and matrix of life, an organism in its own right, nature is now newly envisioned as a machine. It is made up of components that man's rational mind can identify, take apart, and put to

work in new ways. Because it is mere matter, lifeless and dead, nature can rightly be probed, subjugated, manipulated. It has, in this view, only instrumental value, of worth only to the degree that man can master it to advance progress. Isaac Newton's image of the world as a gigantic clockwork mechanism, wound up in the beginning by God the watchmaker and now mechanically ticking away by its own inexorable laws, is a memorable depiction of this view.⁹

Hierarchical dualism in both its traditional and modern forms places the privileged, so-called rational man apart from and above other persons such as women, the poor, and people of color, as well as nature, and even his own body. Feminist analysis insists that the devastating ecological consequences of this two-tiered vision cannot be fully addressed until we face it as a whole. We need to understand that an anti-body philosophy is profoundly misogynist. We need to realize that the natural environment is oppressed, manipulated, and abused in ways analogous to the patriarchal use of women. Under patriarchy women are identified literally and symbolically with the natural world. Mutually associated and mutually devalued, both are subjugated in the same act.

Their exploitation has a common ideological root: men's separation from and supposed superiority to material femaleness.

In her groundbreaking study *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant illustrates this in telling detail. The birth of modern science depends on the move to make nature not a great teacher but man's servant, and man not nature's child but her master, in accord with patriarchal rule. Francis Bacon, a celebrated founder of modern scientific method, is one who makes the connection with women's subordination explicit. He speaks of wresting new knowledge from nature's womb; of seizing her by the hair of her head and molding her into something new by technology; of penetrating her mysteries; of having the power to conquer and subdue her. He suggests that nature is a devious female similar to those women in his society who were thought to be witches. He likens the scientific method that interrogates nature to those of the juridical inquisition that examines these women, including torture with mechanical devices as a symbolic tool for wresting from nature her secrets. He writes: "Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth

is his whole object....”⁹ His attitude, widely influential for subsequent scientific history, is summed up in his work *The Masculine Birth of Time*: “I am come in very truth leading to you nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave.”¹⁰

In our day the mentality that sees nature as something to be dominated more often than not continues to draw on the imagery and attitudes of men’s domination of women. For example, the much used phrase “the rape of the earth” reveals the extent to which exploitation of nature is identified with violent sexual conquest of women. Our language speaks of “virgin forest,” as yet untouched by man but awaiting his exploration and conquest. Symbolized as female, earth can be made to yield up her secrets; she can be penetrated, conquered, possessed. She is given to man for mastering and as a resource for his pleasure and need. At the same time, to be truly himself man must transcend nature in the pursuit of culture, inevitably described as a masculine endeavor.¹¹

These and other linguistic metaphors point to the fact that the social domination of women and the ecological domination of the earth are

inextricably fused in theory and practice. Hence the common statement that at the root of our ecological crisis is an overly anthropocentric view of the world is not quite accurate. It would be more precise to say that the problem lies in an androcentric view. Historically, not the superior identity of humanity in general but of man, understood as ruling class males in a patriarchal system, mandates the domination of nature.

Catherine Keller has noted that dualism always comes with the heroic self “who divides so he can conquer.”¹² Thus some analysts argue that a primary motivation for the creation of this system is man’s profound anxiety about finitude and death. Dualism allows a man to split off the dark side from his essential self, to take his mortality and dependence and project it upon the body, nature, women, the poor, which he can then attempt to conquer and control. There is some truth to this, I think, although it leaves out of the picture what women do to deal with their own anxiety about death. Understanding the motivation for this dualistic system reveals that fear of finitude is its inner engine.

Sexual dualism and its two-tiered universe is a

critical taproot of the ecological crisis. With great clarity Rosemary Ruether, a pioneer in feminist theological attention to the earth, sums up the problem. "It is perhaps not too much to say," she writes, "that the Achilles heel of human civilization, which today has reached global genocidal and ecocidal proportions, resides in this false development of maleness through repression of the female."¹³

WOMEN, EARTH, AND SPIRIT

Hierarchical dualism also shapes the classical Christian doctrine of God, who is depicted as the epitome of the masculine half of the dualistic equation. The all holy Other is uncontaminated by matter, utterly transcendent over the world and unaffected by it. The way in which patriarchal authority commands the obedience of women and other creatures on earth serves as a prime analogy for God's relation to the world. Absolutely omnipotent, "He," for such a concept is always designated by the grammatically masculine, is the victorious sovereign whose will is law and whom all are meant to serve. Even when this monarchical

model graces the Supreme Being with a benevolent attitude, “He” is still intrinsically remote, ruling the universe while not affected by it in any significant way.

The doctrines of the incarnation of the Word and the indwelling of the Spirit ameliorate the religious impact of this divine concept to some extent, connecting God to the historical, finite world. But as long as dualistic logic holds sway, these beliefs and the intimate religious experiences that they express are not allowed to change the fundamental idea of God as such. God remains essentially separated from and over against the world, which is created to serve “Him.”

Consequently, a certain cosmic alienation accompanies the sexism that pervades classic Christian spirituality and theology. As material and therefore feminine, nature, the body, sexuality, and women are of themselves separated from the sphere of the sacred. Man alone bears the fullness of the image of God, while women only deficiently so, and nature not at all. Persons seeking spiritual perfection need to extricate themselves from these instances of carnal matter by ascetic practices. The path to holiness is marked “Flee the world.” To be

holy one must escape the prison of the flesh and its transitory desires and seek a higher world where passion and finitude are overcome. The trivialization of nature is the background against which Christian life, from the spirituality of the individual to the social life of the institution, is shaped by the dualistic legacy of soul over body, man over woman, and God over the world. In every case, it is the dualistically conceived masculine principle *über alles*.

The influence of this massive heritage sheds some light on the peculiar neglect of God the Holy Spirit in western Christianity. The whole church remembers the Spirit on the feast of Pentecost and on the occasion of the sacrament of confirmation; charismatic Christians pray and heal in the power of the Spirit; and local communities may invoke the Spirit before making important decisions, singing the ninth century hymn "Veni Creator Spiritus," "Come, Creator Spirit." But apart from these instances there is little sustained appreciation of the Spirit in an existential or intellectual way. As Heribert Mühlen observes, when most of us say God, the Holy Spirit never comes immediately to mind; rather, the Spirit seems like an edifying appendage to the doctrine of God.¹⁴ In unusually

colorful language, theologians today describe the Spirit as the forgotten God, something faceless, shadowy, ghostly, vague, the poor relation in the Trinity, the unknown or half-known God, even the Cinderella of theology.¹⁵

The logic of hierarchical dualism sheds light on why this is the case. Valuing spirit over body and transcendence over immanence, it concentrates on the one high God who creates by “His” word to the neglect of the indwelling, sustaining presence of God within the fragility of matter and historical process. When this pattern of thought turns to Trinitarian theology it keeps the focus on the relation of Father and Son, one generating and the other being generated, finding it difficult even to know what proper name to give the Spirit. Dualism has trouble with threes.

But it is not only the framework on which the doctrine of God is built that excludes the Spirit. In a subtle way this mindset connects the Spirit with the female side of the dualistic equation, with women’s reality and functions, which it devalues. The Spirit brings forth and nurtures life, keeps all things connected, and constantly renews what the ravages of time and sin break down. This is surely

analogous to traditional “women’s work” which goes on continuously in home and society, bringing forth life, holding all things together, cleaning what has been messed up, while unnoticed and unremunerated. Neglect of the Spirit has a symbolic affinity with the marginalization of women and is an inevitable outcome of a sexist, dualistic lens on reality, which also, let us remember, disvalues nature.

The extent of what is lost to the richness of faith can be glimpsed when we realize that what is being neglected is nothing less than the mystery of God’s personal engagement with the world in its history of love and disaster; nothing less than God’s empowering presence active within the cosmos from the beginning, throughout history and to the end, calling forth life and freedom. Forgetting the Spirit is not ignoring a faceless, shadowy, third hypostasis but the mystery of God vivifying the world, closer to us than we are to ourselves, drawing near and passing by in liberating compassion.

Three basic relationships: human beings with nature, among themselves, and with God. In each instance the major classical pattern of relationship is shaped by hierarchical dualism, that is, modeled on

the dominance of ruling male elites and the subjugation of what is identified as female, cosmic, or foreign, an underclass with only instrumental value. As the ecological crisis makes crystal clear, the polarization of each pair's terms is nothing short of disastrous in its interconnected effects. Our eyes have been blinded to the sacredness of the earth, which is linked to the exclusion of women from the sphere of the sacred, which is tied to focus on a monarchical, patriarchal idea of God and a consequent forgetting of the Creator Spirit, the Lifegiver who is intimately related to the earth.

In the quest for an ecological ethic grounded in religious truth, these three relationships need to be rethought together. But we must be wary of roads that lead to dead-ends. I think it is a strategic mistake to retain the dualistic way of thinking and hope to make an advance simply by assigning greater value to the repressed "feminine" side of the polarity. This is to keep women, earth, and Spirit in their pre-assigned box, which is a cramped, subordinate place. Even if what has previously been disparaged is now highly appreciated, this strategy does not allow for the fullest flourishing of what is confined to one pole by pre-assigned definition. In truth, women are not any closer to

nature than men are; this is a cultural construct. In truth, women are every bit as rational as men, every bit as courageous, every bit as capable of initiative. At the same time, precisely because women have been so identified with nature, our voices at this moment in time can speak out for the value of despised matter, bodies, and nature even as we assert that women's rational and spiritual capacities are equal to those of men. What we search for is a way to undercut the dualism and to construct a new, wholistic design for all of reality built on appreciation of difference in a genuine community. We seek a unifying vision that does not stratify what is distinct into superior-inferior layers but reconciles them in relationships of mutuality. Let us then listen to women's wisdom, discern our kinship with the earth, and remember the Spirit, as vital steps toward an ecological ethic and spirituality.

3.

HEARKENING TO WOMEN'S WISDOM

The wisdom arising from women's experiences today is articulated in theory called feminist, from the Latin *femina*, woman. Christian feminist theology, a branch of this worldwide movement, concerns itself with religious matters in the Christian tradition. It engages in the age-old quest of "faith seeking understanding" in the light of the fundamental principle that, as Margaret Farley articulates it, "women are fully human and are to be valued as such,"¹⁶ a principle not often honored in the theological tradition. Accordingly, feminist theology attends to women for clues as to how they experience and interpret reality, especially spiritual reality, and uses these indicators as guides to construct a vision of a

religious and moral universe wherein women's well-being along with everything they treasure is promoted. Christian feminist theology does this in conversation with its own community's founding texts and subsequent tradition. At its heart is the collective imagination of the reign of God that Jesus preached and that the Spirit brings forth: a new world and a new way of being in the world that holds a blessing for all life—women, men, and their children, all races, the poor, and the earth included. To cooperate in the coming of God's reign, feminist theology argues, the Christian community needs to be transformed into a community of the discipleship of equals as a sacramental witness to the vocation of the whole world. In the face of the centuries-long subordination of women and their concerns, therefore, feminist theology advocates women's flourishing in all their dimensions and relationships as an essential element, missing to date, of the redeemed human community.

Focused by the lens of women's flourishing, feminist theology raises a strong critique against sexism, which is a pattern of thinking and acting that subordinates women on the basis of their sex. In structural terms sexism shows itself as

patriarchy, the social arrangement where power is exercised of necessity by the dominant male or males, with others ranked in descending orders of dominance. This results in a social group modeled in the form of a pyramid. In intellectual terms sexism is expressed in androcentrism, the thought pattern that takes the human characteristics of the adult male as normative for the whole of humanity, consigning whatever deviates from this to the outer realms of otherness or deficiency. As both a social arrangement and an ideology, sexism succeeds in making women mostly invisible, inaudible, and marginal, except for the supportive services they provide. "To be in the margin," as Bell Hooks writes, "is to be part of the whole but outside the main body."¹⁷ It is not an unnecessary place, but a place of systematic devaluing. Being there signifies being less, being overlooked, not having as much importance.

Running counter to this disparagement, Christian feminist thinking seeks a new wholeness, a new community of the mutuality of equals. It does so in the context of myriad sufferings resulting from women's being demeaned in theory and practice in contradiction to the creative power, dignity and goodness that women appreciate to be

intrinsic to their own human identity. Feminist theology results when women's faith seeks understanding in the matrix of historical struggle for life in the face of oppressive and alienating forces.

Its most distinctive move is to consult women's experience both as a reality check for all religious statements and practices, recognizing truth in those that promote women's flourishing and untruth in those that diminish it, and as a neglected source of wisdom about the world that can generate insights much needed today. One of the clearest insights emerging to date is that women tend to experience themselves as a self in fundamental embodied connection with others.¹⁸ I prescind here from the debate over whether this is the result of nature or nurture or both, being loath to stereotype any characteristic as intrinsically masculine or feminine. The point is simply that, given the specific ways they have historically lived in the world, women as a group at this moment of time articulate their self-understanding with a strong accent on relationality.

Classic theology assumes that the self is best defined over against the other. Students of

personality formation now point out that this idea reflects primarily a male experience, springing from the pattern of the young boy with his mother.¹⁹ To become himself a boy needs to differentiate himself from his mother. He finds his identity by some measure of separation or opposition to her. When carried unnuanced into adulthood this stance leads to the ideal of the solitary self, the “Cogito, ergo sum” model of self-identity that sees strength in being a sealed, watertight self and that defines power in adversarial relations over against others. The classic idea of God is deeply rooted in this dualistic experience. It conceives of holy mystery on the model of the male self typically constructed over against others. Consequently, the being of God stands over against the world, solitary, superior, untouched by contingency and its pain, and able to best all comers.

The experience of the young girl with her mother yields an alternative paradigm. To become herself the girl does not need to become totally different from her mother. Rather, she matures by a dialectic of identification and differentiation, being and growing with the other in mutually enhancing relation. As a result, adult women establish their identity not in total separation but in

a form of relational autonomy, a becoming distinct through interconnection. From this experience feminist theory draws a wisdom which it recommends to all, women and men alike, as a human ideal, namely, the self is rightly structured not in isolation from or dualistic opposition to the other but in intrinsic relationship with the other. Rather than “we” meaning “not they,” we and they are intertwined. Neither heteronomy (exclusive other-directedness) nor autonomy in a closed egocentric sense but relational independence, freedom in relation, full related selfhood becomes the ideal. The vision is one of autonomy which honors the inviolable personal mystery of the person who is constituted essentially by relationship with the other.

Not just any pattern of relationship will do, however. A relation structured according to the dominant-subordinate motif inevitably shortchanges the full potential for flourishing of everyone caught in its pyramid. By contrast, women’s experience bears out again and again that the most life-giving exchange occurs when bonds are reciprocal or mutual. Mutuality is a form of relation marked by equivalence between persons. It involves a concomitant valuing of each other, a give

and take according to each one's strengths and weaknesses, and a common regard marked by trust, affection, and respect for differences—all this in contrast to competition, domination, or assertions of superiority. It is a relationship patterned like friendship, an experience often used to characterize the freedom-connection dialectic at the heart of all mature caring.

Feminist thinking prizes dialectical connectedness that flourishes in a circle of mutuality. This has obvious implications for the idea of God. If relation is at the heart of the universe, if mutuality is a moral excellence, then the deity of God does not consist in being over against and superior to, but expresses itself in freely drawing near and being connected in mutual relation. This, as we will see, is precisely the way the Creator Spirit is present and active in the world.

In the realm of theory, if the self is not defined by opposition but by the dialectic of friendly, constitutive relation, then it becomes possible to reconcile all manner of previously dichotomous elements: self and other, most basically, and consequently matter and spirit, body and soul, passions and mind, embodiedness and

self-transcendence, women and men, humanity and the earth. The intuition of interconnection in women's experience deconstructs the pyramid of hierarchical dualism and constructs in its place a circle of mutual, unfettered interconnectedness. Oppositional, either-or thinking which is essential to the dualistic pattern of reality is transformed by a new paradigm of both-and. This shift reunites classical splits and releases hospitality toward disparaged aspects of reality. Regarding humanity's connection to the earth, women's wisdom suggests that the relation is not one of "over against" and "superior to" but "together with," moving in an interactive circle of mutual kinship.

4.

DISCERNING KINSHIP WITH EARTH

Our era of planetary destruction brings to the fore the question of how we should conceive of our relation to the earth. At least three positions are possible, corresponding to what I would call the absolute kingship, the stewardship, and the kinship models.

The kingship model is the position I have been criticizing in this lecture. It is based on hierarchical dualism that sees humanity separated from the earth and placed in a position of absolute dominion over all other creatures who are made for us. In this view the creatures of the world are ranked according to their participation in the fullness of spirit, with greater value being assigned to those higher up on the great chain of being. At

the lowest level is inorganic matter; next comes vegetative matter, followed by animals, human beings, and non-physical spirits or angels. In the progression from the pebble to the peach to the poodle to the person, with women somewhere between the latter two, the higher order of creatures has the right to use and control the lower. This is the patriarchal pyramid again, resulting in a top-down domination of nature by man.

The stewardship model keeps the structure of hierarchical dualism but calls for human beings to be responsible caretakers or guardians of the earth and all its creatures. Having neither fur nor feathers, human beings need to use the earth creatively for shelter, food, and the basics of survival, developing culture as the medium through which these achievements are passed on. But in so doing, they know that they must care for the earth, even in terms of their own self-interest. In this model humanity is still at the top of the pyramid of being but has a duty to protect and preserve what seems weaker and more vulnerable. This position is clearly an improvement over the absolute ruler model, for it guarantees a modicum of respectful use of the earth. Particularly in the political and legal spheres, its vision is highly beneficial for crafting policy. Yet

it misses the crucial aspect of human dependence upon that which we steward. Upon reflection the stewardship model itself finds its deepest foundation in the kinship model that traces an organic connection between human beings and the earth.

If separation is not the ideal but connection is; if dualism is not the ideal but the relational embrace of diversity is; if hierarchy is not the ideal but mutuality is; then the kinship model more closely approximates reality. It sees human beings and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life. Because we are all mutually interconnected, the flourishing or damaging of one ultimately affects all. This kinship attitude does not measure differences on a scale of higher or lower ontological dignity but appreciates them as integral elements in the robust thriving of the whole.

Take, for example, trees. Their process of photosynthesis creates oxygen, the most essential, life-sustaining element in the air we breathe. Without trees there would be no animal or human life on this earth; we would all be asphyxiated. Now, biologically speaking, trees do not need human stewardship. Without human beings they existed

very well for millennia. Human beings, however, positively need trees in order to breathe. Who, then, needs whom more? By what standard do human beings say that they are more important than trees? At this point in evolutionary history we form one mutually interdependent community of life. We are all kin.

Recommending this kinship attitude Rosemary Ruether uses the metaphor of dance: "We must start thinking of reality as the connecting links of a dance in which each part is equally vital to the whole, rather than the linear competitive model in which the above prospers by defeating and suppressing what is below."²⁰ The natural world has given birth to all living things, and sustains us all. It is the matrix of our origin, growth, and fulfillment. Articulated within a religious perspective, the kinship stance knows that we humans are interrelated parts and products of a world that is continually being made and nurtured by the Creator Spirit. Its attitude is one of respect for the earth and all living creatures including ourselves as a manifestation of the Spirit's creative energy; its actions cooperate with the Spirit in helping it flourish. What goes on in this stance is neither a sentimental love of nature nor an

ignorance that levels all distinctions between human beings and other forms of life. Rather what is involved is a recognition of the truth: human existence is in fact one with the immensity of all that is. Even as a species we are not separate and isolated, but in all our uniqueness, as Sallie McFague so eloquently writes, “We belong, from the cells of our bodies to the finest creations of our minds, to the intricate, constantly changing cosmos.”²¹

COSMIC HISTORY

Mutual interrelatedness is inscribed at the heart of all reality. This insight is borne out in an uncanny way by contemporary science, from the macro scale of astrophysics to evolutionary biology to the micro world of quantum theory.

Consider the story of the universe, which originated fifteen billion years ago from a single point. Starhawk describes the elegance of what happened: “Out of the point, the swelling; out of the swelling, the egg; out of the egg, the fire; out of the fire, the stars.”²² The so-called Big Bang is the wellspring that

poured out matter and energy in an unimaginable act of creation. This material expanded according to a very precisely calibrated rate, neither too fast nor too slow, in an unfurling that is still going on. Its lumpy unevenness allowed swirling galaxies to form as gravity pulled particles together and their dense friction ignited the stars. The lights went on in the universe.

Roughly five billion years ago some of those giant, aging stars collapsed in spectacular supernova explosions. The enormous heat generated by their death forged some of their simpler atoms into heavier elements such as iron, which flew out with the rest of the debris into the cosmos. Some of this cloud of dust and gas condensed and reignited to become our sun, a second generation star. Some of it coalesced in chunks too small to catch fire, forming the planets of our solar system. At first they were all bare, rocky bodies bombarded by asteroids whose impact released entrapped water, methane, and ammonia. Only earth was at the right distance from the sun to permit released steam to condense and rain down, and over eons the mighty oceans took shape. These seas were like a primeval soup that contained all the building blocks of life. Through a wondrous alchemy abetted

by intense ultraviolet sunrays, specific molecules connected and another fire ignited, life, more complex and filled with the future than any star's radiance. The oxygen spun off by the ancient blue-green algae rose to form a protective envelope, the ozone layer, and to fill in its underside with breathable air. In the sea jelly fish, worms, and creatures that lived in shells gradually took shape. Out of the sea came the progenitors of plants, insects, amphibians. On the land spread flowers, birds, giant reptiles, mammals. Life was like an advancing tide, fragile and unlikely but unstoppable.

By 180 million years ago, after four billion years of Earth's development (a number that I cannot conceive), this planet had a fully developed biosphere and would have looked as it does today from outer space. Two million years ago all the flora and fauna that we now know had taken shape. But nowhere over the face of the earth was there yet a wisp of smoke from a campfire. By forty thousand years ago bands of *Homo sapiens* roamed as hunter-gatherers. Their creative intelligence now propels life's development ahead with dizzying rapidity. Ten thousand years ago they lived in rural farm villages; five thousand years ago they formed cities and nations and invented written language;

two hundred years ago they devised steam engines, starting the industrial revolution; thirty years ago their numbers began to multiply out of proportion to other living species and to Earth's carrying capacity, and the smoldering ecological crisis blazed into a firestorm. Now the water, air, and soil are being rapidly depleted, and all other living things are finding life more difficult, if not impossible, due to the depredations of us, the latecomers. This state of affairs is entirely new.

A crucial insight emerges from this creation story of cosmic and biological evolution. The kinship model of humankind's relation to the world is not just a poetic, good-hearted way of seeing things but the basic truth. We are connected in a most profound way to the universe, having emerged from it. Events in the galaxies produced the iron that makes our blood red and the calcium that makes our bones and teeth white. These and other heavy elements were cooked in the interior of stars and then dispersed when they died to form a second generation solar system with its planets, on one of which the evolution of life and consciousness followed. In the words of scientist Arthur Peacocke:

Every atom of iron in our blood would not have been there had it not been produced in some galactic explosion billions of years ago and eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust of the earth from which we have emerged.²³

Chemically, humanity is all of a piece with the cosmos. The same is true of our genes. Molecular biology shows that the same four bases make up the DNA of almost all living things. The genetic structure of cells in our bodies is remarkably similar to the cells in other creatures, bacteria, grasses, fish, horses, the great gray whales. We have all evolved from common ancestors and are kin in this shared, unbroken genetic history. To put it more poetically, we human beings as physical organisms carry within ourselves “the signature of the supernovas and the geology and life history of the Earth.”²⁴

Living in the present moment, furthermore, involves us in a continuous exchange of material with the earth and other living creatures. Every time we breathe we take in millions of atoms breathed by the rest of humanity within the last

two weeks. In our bodies seven percent of the protein molecules break down each day and have to be rebuilt out of matter from the earth (food) and energy from the sun. Seven percent per day is the statistical measure of our interdependence. In view of the consistent recycling of the human body, the epidermis of our skin can be likened ecologically to a pond surface, not so much a shell or wall as a place of exchange. In a very real sense the world is our body.

Earth with its river of life past, present, and future is a rare gem of fantastic beauty. It is even more wondrous when we realize how fine-tuned were the factors that produced it. If restored to a previous stage, the world would in all likelihood not repeat its evolutionary course up to the present, for at each point a different potential might be actualized. Hundreds of historically contingent factors were and continue to be essential parts of evolution, and even a small change in one of them would result in a different outcome, including ourselves.

The relational character of reality discovered by astrophysics and evolutionary biology is reaffirmed by the study of matter at the atomic and

subatomic level. Rather than being an inert substance, matter is composed of atoms that are themselves energy events. Atoms are not inanimate particles moving solidly through space but rather dynamic, undulating structures that often act more like waves than stable things. The subatomic particles that go to make up atoms are even more insubstantial. Whirling and swirling, they move around in an apparent state of random flux. In truth, however, they are participating in an inclusive pattern or field that we cannot pin down. At any given instant they may interact and combine, leaving a discernible trail, but there is no way we can predict the outcome. Organized in patterns and relationships, these merest specks of dancing energy form the basis of the tangible world. Consequently, the idea that matter is a self-contained thing with only external relations to other things is antiquated. Made up of dancing particles that are internally constituted by their relationships, matter itself is profoundly social.²⁵

KINSHIP

The human race along with all living creatures is physically made of the dust of the earth which is the fallout of stardust. But, one might argue, what about intelligence and freedom which so distinguish the human species? Does this not break the kinship that humanity shares with the rest of creation? Not at all. Human consciousness is in continuity with the energy of matter stretching back through galactic ages to the Big Bang, being a special, intense form of this energy. The law of complexity-consciousness reveals that ever more intricate physical combinations, as can be traced in the evolution of the brain, yield ever more powerful forms of spirit. Matter, alive with energy, evolves to spirit. While distinctive, human intelligence and creativity rise out of the very nature of the universe, which is itself intelligent and creative. In other words, human spirit is the cosmos come to consciousness. Teilhard de Chardin broached this point years ago as he wrote, "The human person is the sum total of fifteen billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself."²⁶ In her search for ecological wisdom Joanna Macy recounts a conversation that yields a similar insight:

One day, under the vine-strung jungles of eastern Australia, I was walking with my friend John Seed, director of the Rainforest Information Centre. I asked him how he managed to overcome despair and sustain the struggle against the mammoth timber interests. He said, "I try to remember it's not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking. "27

Human spirit expressed in self-consciousness and freedom is not something new added to the universe from outside. Rather, it is a sophisticated evolutionary expression of the capacity for self-organization and creativity inherent in the universe itself. In Thomas Berry's metaphor, we are part of a great journey, the journey of primordial matter through its marvelous sequence of transformations in the stars, in the earth, in living creatures, in human consciousness. This makes us distinct but not separate, a unique strand in the cosmos, yet still a strand *of* the

cosmos. Consciousness is the flowering through us of deeply cosmic energies. Thus human spirit is rightly interpreted *within* rather than *over against* human kinship with nature.

Since nature is a dynamic web of interconnected processes of which we are one part, it becomes clear that each species that has evolved has an intrinsic value of its own, apart from immediate human use. The kinship paradigm appreciates this even as it knows our own human difference. For it arises from an experience of communion which at its deepest level is religious. From a religious perspective, all diverse strands in the web of life are expressions of the creative power of the cosmos which is ultimately empowered by the Creator Spirit. The enormous diversity of species itself points to the inexhaustible richness of the Creator, whose imaginative goodness these species represent. As Aquinas ruminates:

For he [i.e. God] brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented through them. And because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one

creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided. Hence the universe as a whole participates in and represents divine goodness more perfectly than any single creature alone.²⁸

Realizing this, the religious kinship attitude cherishes and seeks intelligently to preserve biodiversity, for when a species goes extinct we have lost a manifestation of the goodness of God.

To sum up: appreciating the deep patterns of affiliation in the cosmos, the kinship model knows that we are all connected. For all our distinctiveness, human beings are modes of being of the universe. Woven into our lives is the very fire from the stars and the genes from the sea creatures, and everyone, utterly everyone, is kin in the radiant tapestry of being. This relationship is not external or extrinsic to who we are, but wells up as the defining truth from our deepest being. “Humans and yeast are kin,” writes physicist Brian Swimme of this cosmic fact:

They organize themselves chemically and biologically in nearly indistinguishable patterns of intelligent activity. They speak the same genetic language. All things whether living or not are descendants of the supernova explosion. All that exists shapes the same energy erupting into the universe as the primeval fireball. No tribal myth, no matter how wild, ever imagined a more profound relationship connecting all things in an internal way right from the beginning. All thinking must begin with this cosmic genetical relatedness.²⁹

Hearkening to women's wisdom and discerning kinship with the earth yield the same result, namely, a transformation of the hierarchical, two-tiered view of the world into a vision of the community of creation, necessary if life is to be cherished and preserved. At the most basic level, however, the ecological crisis requires us to rethink our idea of God and God's relation to the world in order to direct our action aright in harmony with divine care. What must the Creator be like, in

whose image this astounding universe is created? Realization of its energy, diversity, relationality, fecundity, spontaneity, and ever surprising mixture of law and chance makes the times ripe for a rediscovery of the neglected tradition of the Creator Spirit.