

The Spirituality of the Earth

By Thomas Berry

The subject with which we are concerned is the spirituality of the earth. By this I do not mean a spirituality that is directed toward an appreciation of the earth. I speak of the earth as subject, not as object. I am concerned with the maternal principle out of which we were born and whence we derive all that we are and all that we have. In our totality we are born of the earth. We are earthlings. The earth is our origin, our nourishment, our support, our guide. Our spirituality itself is earth-derived. If there is no spirituality in the earth, then there is no spirituality in ourselves. The human and the earth are totally implicated each in the other.

Not to recognize the spirituality of the earth is to indicate a radical lack of spiritual perception in ourselves. We see this lack of spiritual insight in the earlier attitude of Euro-Americans in their inability to perceive the spiritual qualities of the indigenous American peoples and their mysticism of the land. The attack on these spiritual qualities by Christians constitutes one of the most barbaric moments in Christian history. This barbarism turned upon the tribal peoples was loosed also upon the American earth with a destructive impact beyond calculation.

The fragility of the earth has not yet impressed itself upon us. The crassness of our relation to the earth cannot but indicate a radical absence of spirituality in ourselves, not the lack of a spiritual dimension of the earth. The opaqueness is in our understanding of the earth, not in the earth's structure which expresses an abiding numinous presence. The earth process has been generally ignored by the religious-spiritual currents of the West. Our alienation goes so deep that it is beyond our conscious mode of awareness. While there are tributes to the earth in the scriptures and in Christian liturgy, there is a tendency to see the earth as a seductive reality, which brought about alienation from God in the agricultural peoples of the Near East. Earth worship was the ultimate idolatry, the cause of the Fall, and thereby the cause of sacrificial redemption by divine personality. Thus, too, the Christian sense of being crucified to the world and living only for the savior. This personal savior orientation has led to an interpersonal devotionism that quite easily dispenses with earth except as a convenient support for life.

We can produce Christian spiritualities that function in a certain isolated context without regard for the larger society. But such redemptive spiritualities are not liable to be effective in our present world. They speak a rhetoric that is not available for our world, or, if it is available, widens rather than lessens the tragic inner division between the world of affairs and the world of divine communion. They do not offer a way of interpreting the inner life of the society itself in a rhetoric available to the society. They do not establish an understanding of that authentic experience in contemporary life oriented toward communion with creation processes. Indeed, they do not recognize that the context of any authentic spirituality lies in the creation myth that governs the total life orientation.

Creation in traditional Christian teaching is generally presented as part of the discussion concerning "God in himself and in relation to his creation." But creation in this metaphysical, biblical, medieval, theological context is not terribly helpful in understanding the creation process as set forth in the scientific manuals or the textbooks of the earth sciences as they are studied by children in elementary or high school, or later in college.

These classroom studies initiate the child into a world that has more continuity with later adult life in its functional aspect than does the catechetical story of creation taken from biblical sources. This schoolroom presentation of the world in which the child lives and finds a place in the world is all-important for the future spirituality of the child. The school fulfills in our times the role of the ancient initiation rituals, which

introduced our children to the society and to their human and sacred role in this society. The tragedy is that the sacred or spiritual aspect of this process is now absent. It is doubtful if separate catechetical instructions with their heavy emphasis on redemptive processes can ever supply what is missing.

It may be that the later alienation of young adults from the redemptive tradition is, in some degree, due to this inability to communicate to the child a spirituality grounded more deeply in creation dynamics in accord with the modern way of experiencing the galactic emergence of the universe, the shaping of the earth, the appearance of life and of human consciousness, and the historical sequence in human development.

In this sequence the child might learn that the earth has its intrinsic spiritual quality from the beginning, for this aspect of the creation story is what has been missing. This is what needs to be established if we are to have a functional spirituality. Just how to give the child an integral world – that is the issue. It is also the spiritual issue of the modern religious personality. Among our most immediate tasks is to establish this new sense of the earth and of the human as a function of the earth.

We need to understand that the earth acts in all that acts upon the earth. The earth is acting in us whenever we act. In and through the earth spiritual energy is present. This spiritual energy emerges in the total complex of earth functions. Each form of life is integrated with every other life form. Even beyond the earth, by force of gravitation, every particle of the physical world attracts and is attracted to every other particle. This attraction holds the differentiated universe together and enables it to be a universe of individual realities. The universe is not a vast smudge of matter, some jelly-like substance extended indefinitely in space. Nor is the universe a collection of unrelated particles. The universe is, rather, a vast multiplicity of individual realities with both qualitative and quantitative differences all in spiritual-physical communion with each other. The individuals of similar form are bound together in their unity of form. The species are related to one another by derivation: the later, more complex life forms are derived from earlier, more simple life forms.

The first shaping of the universe was into those great galactic systems of fiery energy that constitute the starry heavens. In these celestial furnaces the elements are shaped. Eventually, after some ten billion years, the solar system and the earth and its living forms constituted a unique planet in the entire complex of the universe. Here on earth life, both plant and animal life, was born in the primordial seas some three billion years ago. Plants came out upon the land some six hundred million years ago, after the planet earth had shaped itself through a great series of transformations forming the continents, the mountains, the valleys, the rivers and streams. The atmosphere was long in developing. The animals came ashore a brief interval later. As these life forms established themselves over some hundreds of millions of years, the luxuriant foliage formed layer after layer of organic matter, which was then buried in the crust of the earth to become fossil formations with enormous amounts of stored energy. One hundred million years ago flowers appeared and the full beauty of earth began to manifest itself. Some sixty million years ago the birds were in the air. Mammals walked through the forest. Some of the mammals – the whales, porpoises, and dolphins – went back into the sea.

Finally, some two million years ago, the ascending forms of life culminated in the awakening human consciousness. Wandering food gatherers and hunters until some eight thousand years ago, we then settled into village life. This life led us through the neolithic period to the classical civilization which has flourished so brilliantly for the past five thousand years.

Then, some four hundred years ago, a new stage of scientific development took place which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, brought about human technological dominance of the earth out of which we had emerged. This stage can be interpreted as the earth awakening to consciousness of itself in its human mode of being. The story of this awakening consciousness is the most dramatic aspect of the earth story.

The spiritual attitude that then caused or permitted humans to attack the earth with such savagery has never been adequately explained. That it was done by a Christian-derived society, and even with the belief that this was the truly human and Christian task, makes explanation especially harsh for our society.

Possibly it was the millennial drive toward a total transformation of the earth condition that led us, resentful that the perfect world was not yet achieved by divine means, to set about the violent subjugation of the earth by our own powers in the hope that in this way the higher life would be attained, our afflictions healed.

While this is the positive goal sought it must be added that the negative, even fearful, attitude toward the earth resulting from the general hardships of life led to the radical disturbance of the entire process. The increasing intensity shown in exploiting the earth was also the result of the ever-rising and unsatiated expectation of Western peoples. Even further, the natural tensions with the earth were increased by the Darwinian principle of natural selection, indicating that the primary attitude of each individual and each species is for its own survival at the expense of the others. Out of this strife, supposedly, the glorious achievements of earth take place. Darwin had only minimal awareness of the cooperation and mutual dependence of each form of life on the other forms of life. This is amazing since he himself discovered the great web of life. Still, he had no real appreciation of the principle of intercommunion.

Much more needs to be said on the conditions that permitted such a mutually destructive situation to arise between ourselves and the earth, but we must pass on to give some indication of the new attitude that needs to be adopted toward the earth. This involves a new spiritual and even mystical communion with the earth, a true aesthetic of the earth, a sensitivity to earth needs, a valid economy of the earth. We need a way of designating the earth-human world in its continuity and identity rather than in its discontinuity and difference. In spirituality, especially, we need to recognize the numinous qualities of the earth. We might begin with some awareness of what it is to be human, of the role of consciousness on the earth, and of the place of the human species in the universe.

While the scholastic definition of the human as a rational animal gives us some idea of ourselves among the biological species, it gives us a rather inadequate sense of the role we play in the total earth process. The Chinese have a better definition of the human as the *hsin* of heaven and earth. This word *hsin* is written as a pictograph of the human heart. It should be translated by a single word or phrase with both a feeling and an understanding aspect. It could be thus translated by saying that the human is the "understanding heart of heaven and earth." Even more briefly, the phrase has been translated by Julia Ch'ing in the statement that the human is "the heart of the universe." It could, finally, be translated by saying that we are "the consciousness of the world," or "the psyche of the universe." Here we have a remarkable feeling for the absolute dimensions of the human, the total integration of reality in the human, the total integration of the human within the reality of things.

We need a spirituality that emerges out of a reality deeper than ourselves, even deeper than life, a spirituality that is as deep as the earth process itself, a spirituality born out of the solar system and even out of the heavens beyond the solar system. There in the stars is where the primordial elements take shape in both their physical and psychic aspects. Out of these elements the solar system and the earth took shape, and out of the earth, ourselves.

There is a certain triviality in any spiritual discipline that does not experience itself as supported by the spiritual as well as the physical dynamics of the entire cosmic-earth process. A spirituality is a mode of being in which not only the divine and the human commune with each other, but we discover ourselves in the universe and the universe discovers itself in us. The Sioux Indian Crazy Horse called upon these depths of his being when he invoked the cosmic forces to support himself in battle. He painted the lightning upon his cheek,

placed a rock behind his ear, an eagle feather in his hair, and the head of a hawk upon his head. Assumption of the cosmic insignia is also evident in the Sun Dance Ceremony. In this dance the symbols of the sun and moon and stars are cut out of rawhide and worn by the dancers. The world of living moving things is indicated by the form of the buffalo cut from rawhide, and by eagle feathers. The plant world is represented by the cottonwood tree set up in the center of the ceremonial circle. The supreme spirit itself is represented by the circular form of the dance area.

So the spiritual personality should feel constantly in communion with those numinous cosmic forces out of which we were born. Furthermore, the cosmic-earth order needs to be supplemented by the entire historical order of human development such as was depicted on the shield of Achilles by Homer and on the shield of Aeneas by Virgil. Virgil spends several long pages enumerating the past and future historical events wrought on the shield of Aeneas by Vulcan at the command of Venus, the heavenly mother of Aeneas. All these cosmic and historical forces are presently available to us in a new mode of appreciation. The historical and the cosmic can be seen as a single process. This vision of earth-human development provides the sustaining dynamic of the contemporary world.

That there is an organizing force within the earth process with both physical and psychic dimensions needs to be acknowledged in language and in imagery. It needs to be named and spoken of in its integral form. It has a unified functioning similar to the more particular organisms with which we are acquainted. When we speak of earth we are speaking of a numinous maternal principle in and through which the total complex of earth phenomena takes its shape.

In antiquity this mode of being of the earth was indicated by personification. "Earth" itself designates a deity in Hesiod and in the Homeric hymns. This personification is expressed as Cybele in the Eastern Mediterranean and as Demeter in the Greek world. Biblical revelation represents a basic antagonism between the transcendent deity, Jahweh, and the fertility religions of the surrounding societies. There is a basic effort here to keep the asymmetry in the relationship between the divine and the created. In the doctrine of the Madonna in later Christian history there are many passages indicating that Mary was to be thought of as the Earth in which the True Vine is planted and which had been made fruitful by the Holy Spirit. Probably it belongs to the dialectics of history that direct human association with unique historical individuals, the savior and his mother, had to develop before any adequate feeling for the mystique of the earth could take place. Perhaps, too, full development of redemption processes was needed before this new mode of human-earth communion could find expression in our times.

However this may be, a shift in attention is now taking place. Several things are happening. The most notable single event is that modern science is giving us a new and more comprehensive account of our own birth out of the earth. This story of the birth of the human was never known so well as now. After the discovery of the geological stages of earth transformation and the discovery of the sequence of life in ancient fossil remains by Louis le Clerc, James Hutton, and Charles Lyell, came the discovery of the emergence of all forms of life from primordial life forms by Charles Darwin, presented in his *Origin of Species* in 1859. While Darwin saw the human appearing only out of the physical earth, Teilhard de Chardin saw the human emerging out of both the physical and the psychic dimensions of the earth. Thus the whole burden of modern earth studies is to narrate the story of the birth of the human from our Mother the Earth.

Once this story is told, it immediately becomes obvious how significant the title Mother Earth is, how intimate a relationship exists, how absolute our gratitude must be, how delicate our concern. Our long motherless period is coming to a close. Hopefully, too, the long period of our mistreatment of earth is being terminated. If it is not terminated, if we fail to perceive not only our earth origin but also our continuing dependence on our

earth-mother, then our failure will be due in no small measure to the ephemeral spiritualities that have governed our own thoughts, attitudes, and actions.

In this mother-child relationship, however, a new and fundamental shift in dependence has now taken place. Until recently the child was taken care of by the mother. Now, however, the mother must be extensively cared for by the child. The child has grown to adult status. The mother-child relationship needs to undergo a renewal similar to that in the ordinary process of maturing. In this process both child and mother experience a period of alienation. Then follows a reconciliation period when mother and child relate to each other with a new type of intimacy, a new depth of appreciation, and a new mode of interdependence. Such is the historical period in which we are now living. Development of this new mode of earth-human communion can only take place within a profound spiritual context. Thus the need for a spirituality that will encompass this process. As a second observation concerning our newly awakening sense of the Earth, we could say that a new phase in the history of the madonna figure of Western civilization has begun. Association of the Virgin Mother with the Earth may now be a condition of Mary returning to her traditional role in Western civilization. Her presence may also be a condition for overcoming our estrangement from the earth. In the Western world the earth known only in itself as universal mother is not sufficient. It must be identified with an historical person in and through whom earth functions in its ultimate reaches. Phrases referring to Mary as the Earth are found throughout Western religious literature. Whether this is anything more than a simple rhetorical device needs a thorough inquiry at the present time. But whether or not this relationship is given in any extensive manner in prior Christian literature, it is a subject of utmost importance for our entire civilizational venture. Few, if any, other civilizations were so deeply grounded in a feminine mystique as the medieval period of Western Christendom. A vital contact with this earlier phase of Western civilization is hardly possible without some deep appreciation of its feminine component. Thus we cannot fail to unite in some manner these two realities: Earth and Mary. In Western Christian tradition earth needs embodiment in an historical person, and such an historical person needs an earth identity to fulfill adequately her role as divine mother.

A third observation is that emergence of the new age of human culture will necessarily be an age dominated by the symbol *woman*. This, too, depends on the identification of woman with the earth and its creativity. Woman and Earth are inseparable. The fate of one is the fate of the other. This association is given in such a variety of cultural developments throughout the world in differing historical periods that it is hardly possible to disassociate the two. Earth consciousness, woman consciousness; these two go together. Both play a stupendous role in the spirituality of humans as well as in the structure of civilizations. Our alienation from the earth, from ourselves, and from a truly creative man-woman relationship in an overly masculine mode of being, demands a reciprocal historical period in which not only a balance will be achieved but even, perhaps, a period of feminine emphasis.

A fourth observation I would make is to note our new capacity for subjectivity, for subjective communion with the manifold presences that constitute the universe. In this we are recovering the more primitive genius of humankind. For in our earlier years we experienced both the intimacy and the distance of our relation with the earth and with the entire natural world. Above all we lived in a spirit world, a world that could be addressed in a reciprocal mood of affectionate concern. This is what gave rise to sympathetic magic as well as to the great rituals, the majestic poetry, and the awesome architecture of past ages. Nothing on earth was a mere "thing." Every being had its own divine, numinous subjectivity, its self, its center, its unique identity. Every being was a presence to every other being. Among the more massive civilizations, China gave clearest expression to this intimacy of beings with each other in its splendid concept of *Jen*, a word that requires translation according to context by a long list of terms in English, terms such as love, goodness, human-heartedness, and affection. All beings are held together in *Jen*, as in St. Paul all things are held together in Christ. But perhaps an even better analogy is to say that while for Newton, the universal law of gravitation whereby each particle of matter

attracts and is attracted to every other particle of matter in the universe indicates a mere physical force of attraction, the universal law of attraction for the Chinese is a form of feeling identity.

For this reason there is, in China, the universal law of compassion. This law is especially observable in humankind, for every human has a heart that cannot bear to witness the suffering of others. When the objection was made to Wang Yang-ming in the fifteenth century that this compassion is evident only in human relations, Master Wang replied by noting that even the frightened cry of the bird, the crushing of a plant, the shattering of a tile, or the senseless breaking of a stone immediately and spontaneously causes pain in the human heart. This would not be, he tells us, unless there exists a bond of intimacy and even identity between ourselves and these other beings.

Recovery of this capacity for subjective communion with the earth is a consequence and a cause of a newly emerging spirituality. Subjective communion with the earth, identification with the cosmic-earth-human process, provides the context in which we now make our spiritual journey. This Journey is no longer the journey of Dante through the heavenly spheres. It is no longer simply the journey of the Christian community through history to the heavenly Jerusalem. It is the journey of primordial matter through its marvelous sequence of transformations -- in the stars, in the earth, in living beings, in human consciousness -- toward an ever more complete spiritual-physical intercommunion of the parts with each other, with the whole, and with that numinous presence that has been manifested throughout this entire cosmic-earth-human process.

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This essay originally appeared as chapter 11, pp. 151-158 in Charles Birch, William Eaken and Jay B. McDaniel (eds.) *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches in Ecological Theology*, published 1990 by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 10545. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.