

## Theological Trends

# Ecology's appeal to theology

*Anne Primavesi*

INVITED TO REFLECT ON THE RELATIONSHIP between theology and ecology, and to explore why that relationship might seem to have 'lost its appeal', I decided to look at the Christian theological tradition and the demands that a fruitful and appropriate relationship with ecology might make on it. Do theology's anthropological postulates encourage the kind of theological freedom needed to respond to contemporary ecological consciousness? Or do they limit theology in such a way that it cannot engage with ecology?

### *Theological freedom*

In a benchmark article in 1964 entitled 'The problem of religious freedom', John Courtney Murray defined the theological task as tracing the stages of growth of a tradition as it makes its way through history. The furthest task, he said, is discerning the 'growing end' of the tradition. This is usually indicated by the new question that is taking shape under the impact of the historical moment.<sup>1</sup> On this premise, such questions, and the search for answers to them, would themselves become part of that 'growing end'. In this way historical consciousness, which is the ability to discern what is of moment at a particular stage in our history, in some measure constitutes and also acts as a necessary spur to the exercise of theological freedom. Therefore the evolution of human history, recorded as change in human societies through time, is constitutive of the evolution of theological tradition, of its development through time. 'Stages of growth' within theology correspond in some measure to those discerned within history.

The historical theological moment for Courtney Murray was the Second Vatican Council and in particular its 'Declaration on Religious Freedom', not least because by recognizing the historic legal principle of religious freedom it also sanctioned the development of doctrine. The Declaration establishes the right of members of the Catholic Church, as well as those of other religions, to the free exercise of their religion. This right, it is argued, is based on persons' growing awareness of their own dignity and of their active participation in society. The

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opening words of the Declaration, *dignitatis humanae personae*, translate as 'the sense of the dignity of the human person', and it is this sense which is invoked as justifying the demand that we should act on our own judgement, 'enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty'.<sup>2</sup>

However, the demand made by the Vatican document is for 'the right of the person and of communities to *social and civil freedom* in matters religious' (my italics). It is assumed that in regard to society they have demonstrated their capacity to handle the responsibilities of freedom. If this were paralleled in theological freedom, it would establish the right of theologians, on the basis of their human dignity and of their being active members of society, to demonstrate their capacity to handle the responsibilities of their freedom to theologize. It would assume religious freedom in the sense I am arguing for: freedom to respond theologically to the stages of growth within history so that 'the growing end' of the theological tradition might be shaped by 'the concrete exigencies of the personal and political consciousness of contemporary man [*sic*]'.<sup>3</sup>

Courtney Murray asserts in his preface to the Declaration that human dignity consists in the responsible use of freedom. But this is not sufficient to define the origin and nature of human dignity, and the Declaration itself goes on to state unequivocally that it 'is disclosed by the revelation that man [*sic*] is made in the image of God'.<sup>4</sup> This claim for our dignity (as opposed to that of any other species) presumes that we alone are made in the image of God, an anthropological postulate used to argue for a sharp distinction between our species and all others: one often expressed in the claim that we are the centre of creation.

How does this claim accord with the concrete exigencies of contemporary ecological consciousness?

### *Ecological consciousness*

Ecology (from the Greek *oikos*, 'household') is a scientific discipline which investigates the relationships interlinking all members of the Earth household with their environments, relationships characterized by interaction and interdependence. It assumes a systems approach in its analysis of the character and function of relationships within different types of community, emphasizing the whole system over its parts, and its processes, such as negative and positive feedback loops, over its structure. These posit a circular arrangement of causally connected elements, in which each has an effect on the next, until the last

'feeds back' the effect into the first element of the cycle. Briefly here, human ability to exist and to act in freedom depends on the stability of the natural ecosystem in which human societies are embedded. This modifies the concept of human freedom to one of freedom in interdependence, an interdependence in which the concrete ecological exigencies of human life become part of an internally connected moral order which embraces the whole Earth household.<sup>5</sup>

Acknowledging human dependence on the other members of Earth's household also acknowledges their intrinsic value to the ecosystems which sustain all of us. In an historic twist in self-perception, as we come to know more and more about the complexity and diversity of those systems, our own intrinsic value to them is increasingly put in question. Our year-on-year global economic expansion, for instance, and the resultant increase in carbon emissions (around 200 tons of carbon burnt to produce \$1,000 income) has affected world climate so adversely that most governments have agreed to the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement which would legally bind their countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Those involved realize that it does not make sense if our economic growth causes more damage than benefit, not only to ourselves but to the planet which has to sustain that growth. There are no extra-terrestrial resources available to us, and projects mooted for finding them, such as terra-forming Mars, would only use up even more of this planet's resource base.

The negative impact of our economic infrastructure and consumerist lifestyles undermines theological arguments for our supreme dignity and for its theological corollary, our God-given right to dominate the Earth household. Our dysfunctional behaviour within that household ill accords with that responsible use of freedom which we claim would accord with our dignity. Can we honestly argue that a planetary household created and sustained over billions of years exists for our sole use and benefit? Can we claim a divine mandate for our species' increase in numbers to such an extent that we consume a totally disproportionate amount of the household's resources? Can we invoke a 'God-given' right to exploit and abuse other species by claiming that human communities alone, and their relationships with one another, are all that 'count' before God? In other words, can we make a convincing claim to our right to destroy our own life-support systems? Not unless, ecology says, we are compiling the longest suicide note in history. And making God countersign it.

Ecologically, all our interrelationships, and those with whom we share them, count as part of an interconnected physical and moral order.

We can no longer see our well-being or our dignity as divorced in any real sense from that of the whole Earth household. How we live affects all its members and, measured along different timescales, their lives affect ours. This growing ecological consciousness reflects a shift in western historical consciousness evident in legal/political foundations, in government ministries and programmes devoted to 'the environment', and in listings for university courses and school curricula which now include courses on environmental law, environmental health, environmental ethics and environmental justice movements worldwide.

Theological listings, however, remain focused on 'human-only' concerns, as do undergraduate and further education courses targeted on clergy and religious. Why so? Briefly, in traditional theology geocentricity only emerges as anthropocentricity, and the change in self-perception required by ecological consciousness requires a revolution away from anthropocentricity. And in the course of that revolution, the traditional theological centre cannot hold. Brecht vividly expresses the frightened reaction to this in his play *Galileo*. The old cardinal cries out: 'I won't have it! I won't have it! I won't be a nobody on an inconsequential star briefly twirling hither and thither.' The earth, he says, is the centre of all things, and 'I am the centre of the earth'. The lesser lights of the stars and the great light of the sun were created, he cries, 'to give light upon me that God might see me – Man, God's greatest effort, the centre of creation'.<sup>6</sup>

The fears inspired by the loss of this theological anthropocentricity, or even the suspicion of its loss, explains why ecology seems to have 'lost its appeal' for some theologians. For how can their theological freedom to respond to its demands be endorsed theologically? But if they exercise their freedom not to respond, what happens to theological tradition, or to their active membership of an ecologically conscious society? What happens to any organism, person or tradition which refuses to grow, which refuses to evolve?

### ***Ecology and evolution***

The ecosystems within which all living organisms interact with their environments have evolved over many millions of years. The term 'evolution', whether applied to physical, environmental, communal or social entities, is generally understood as meaning change through time, change through which new life forms and environments gradually emerge and healthy ecosystems are sustained which nourish the life potential of the whole Earth household. After Darwin, evolution

usually focuses on a scientific description of the processes whereby organisms and their environments come into being and pass away. No species, including ours, can live outside these co-evolutionary processes or fail to contribute to them, positively or negatively. The widespread use of the term evolution and understanding of its concrete exigencies might appear then as common ground between ecology and theology.

However, for many Christians today Darwin and his theories constitute as great a threat to human dignity as did Copernicus or Galileo. For the facts of evolution in relation to all species – that is, that all of them now living, including our own, may and do evolve from and into other species – signal the loss of the biblical notion that we are special because there is a sharp distinction between our creation by God (in God's image) and that of all other beings. And since our God-given supremacy over other beings rests on that distinction, to lose it is to lose our supremacy. So in 1999, in a decision forced through by Christian religious conservatives and supported by Roman Catholic bishops, the state of Kansas voted to remove most references to the theory of evolution from its new standards for science education from kindergarten through to high school.

This particular denial of our inclusion in an expanded Earth household and its moral order is unusually public. It usually takes the form of denial by omission. A quick glance at the indexes of most theological manuals will find no references to ecological and/or evolutionary consciousness, discussing the evolution of life in the universe as if nothing new has been discovered about it. Noting this, Karl Schmitz-Moormann accounts for it by pointing to the change in perspective required if theologians take evolution seriously. The importance of the biblical text changes, he says, from absolute to relative, since knowing what the first man and woman did (as if we did know!) does not tell us much about human beings today. Our evolving universe is marked by the slow but constant emergence of new realities, and the new cannot be deduced from the old. 'Nobody who studies the earliest stages of the universe could write an algorithm that would lead with certainty to the existence of humans.'<sup>7</sup>

All this is unsettling enough, but for traditional theology there is a greater challenge still. Darwin moved the timescale inferred for the evolution of our species back beyond any individual 'Adam' to a shadowy and uncertain past where we, as one species among others, cannot point, in any strict sense, to a precise starting point for our own. 'Adam' ('earthling') was not, however much we might want to believe

otherwise, put into the Earth household by God at a particular moment in time, in a pre-specified form and subject to specific rules of conduct. Yet western Christian theology and its cultural descendants have remained focused on the oppositional relationship postulated between this putative individual and Christ. The range of theological enquiry has been reduced to whatever has been deduced, imagined, interpreted, defined and taught about the relationship between them and its import for the whole of human history. Theology has officially and effectively been reduced to salvation history with all that has meant for church life, order, teaching and authority. But, evolution asks, salvation from what? And for whom?

### *Anthropology based on salvation*

The fundamental assumption of salvation history is the notion that we are rescued 'from' something by someone we call 'saviour'. We are, we are told, saved by Christ from the bodily inheritance (sin) bequeathed us by Adam. His sin marked and marred every human being born after him, and left us lacking the ability to rescue ourselves from its effects, the most notable, it is averred, being death. Without Adam's sin, there would be no death, and no need for Christ to rescue us. But because Adam sinned, and left us prey to the power of death, we need a saviour, Christ. The 'anthropo-logic' implies, indeed states, that we human beings were distinguished from all others by being created by God to live for ever. Our salvation by Christ means that God's purpose stands, and that we alone, out of all species, are to be exempt from death.

However, our bodies die. So a further logical move is necessary. It is our souls which Christ rescues from death. They are the 'immortal' element in the human being, the element which distinguishes us absolutely from every other species. Our souls, reunited with our bodies, will live for ever with God in an unearthly realm we call heaven. In this Platonic universe Christ saves us, ultimately, from being what we are: members of the whole Earth household.

Those other members who do not (according to us) share the distinction of having souls are nevertheless, we say, inextricably and negatively bound by our history. They are condemned to eternal death because of what one member of our species did. In a fundamentalist version of this traditional doctrine, their condemnation is shared by the majority of our own species, since Christ saves only those who believe in him. All those who lived before him and those who live after him and who, for reasons of space and time, have no opportunity to believe in

him, are not saved either. They are condemned to living death in the unearthly realm called hell.

This is the merest outline of a central Christian doctrine which rests on an exclusive claim to be saved from death by Christ. The claim is validated by locking it into the claim to human dignity, one based on our being created in the image of God. That image, we are told, is centred in the human soul. As no other species is ensouled, we are distinguished from all others. This interlocking anthropo-logic validates our claim to be the centre of creation.

However, as I argued in *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, a close reading of the biblical texts on which the claim is based (the first three chapters of Genesis) reveals no apple, no 'Fall', no use of the word 'sin'.<sup>8</sup> The tradition of reading these last two concepts back into the text has become so much part of Christianity as to be apparently unassailable. It remains so because it appears to answer some of our deepest questions, and indeed fears, about the nature of life and death, about human weakness and evildoing, about our experience of suffering and our role in inflicting it. We find answers which are summed up eventually in Christ as *the* answer, as the one who saves us from weakness, evildoing, suffering and above all, death.

Losing this framework, or even suspecting we might lose its security, provokes reactions ranging from the cardinal's outburst to absolute denial. The suspicion aroused by ecology, and in particular evolution, is that it challenges us ultimately to think again about our origins and how our self-perception meshes with our perception of them. This accounts in no small measure for the loss of ecology's 'appeal'. It is perceived, however dimly, as poor compensation, or indeed none at all, for the immeasurable loss of human dignity predicated on our unique creation. Emily Dickinson describes the perceptual process and the sense of loss:

Finding is the first act  
 The second, loss,  
 Third, Expedition for  
 the 'Golden Fleece'  
 Fourth, no Discovery –  
 Fifth, no Crew –  
 Finally, no Golden Fleece –  
 Jason – sham – too.<sup>9</sup>

In that word 'sham', says the biblical scholar Dominic Crossan, one hears the chilling slam as the door closes on the classic vision of a fixed

centre out there somewhere.<sup>10</sup> One also hears, and indeed may echo the Brechtian cry at the imminent loss of our theological anthropocentricity.

### *Evolution and revelation*

There is another major change in western cultural perception of our origins which has, potentially at least, altered historical and ecological consciousness of the landscape within which Christian theology is set. James Lovelock's Gaia theory moves the timescale of our evolution back still further: beyond our species to the evolution of the first living organisms on the planet. There, ultimately, lie the days of our infancy, days so far removed from us in time and in emergent processes as to distance us almost completely from those life forms from which we originated.

Gaia theory focuses on the processes of self-regulation within the whole Earth system over vast timescales whose beginnings cannot be accurately expressed or assessed by us. These processes affect our lives as they continue to regulate the temperature and composition of the Earth's surface, keeping it comfortable for life. They are driven by free energy available from sunlight, and this fact, once intuited and now increasingly understood through modern scientific technologies, makes us all, whether we like it or not, heliocentric. It also constitutes a phase-change in human understanding of the environment and the evolution of its ecosystems. We share and depend on this energy in all its forms, and constantly metabolize it for ourselves and for each other.<sup>11</sup>

This account of the evolution of the planet over a vast timescale presupposes theologically that God's relationship with the Earth household is commensurate with the same immeasurable period. God did not wait until we emerged to form this relationship. We relate to God from within an existing bond continuous with the long, variegated lineages within the household, and we share enough of our habits, needs and abilities with other species there to reveal our common life source, contemporary kinship and interdependence. Star-trekking is not for us. We cannot survive outside the world-mothering air of our planetary home.

Refocusing our self-perception in this way realigns our focus on the concept of revelation. Franz Rosenzweig's insight into the Genesis text shows revelation following this pattern:

God spoke. That came third.  
 It was not the first thing.  
 The first thing was: God created.  
 God created the earth and skies. That was the first thing.  
  
 The breath of God moved over the face of the waters:  
 over the darkness covering the face of the deep.  
 That was the second thing.  
  
 Then came the third thing.  
 God spoke.<sup>12</sup>

Taking this sequence seriously, one common to the biblical and Gaian accounts, we realize that God was not first revealed through speech. From 'the beginning' God was and is revealed through the processes of creating, through the evolution of the planet, its atmosphere, its life, its species. Here, in Rosenzweig's phrase, 'the shell of the mystery breaks'. And as it breaks, God's self is expressed, revealed throughout the processes we call evolution.

To whom, or to what is God's self revealed? To every living creature which emerges through co-evolutionary process and which responds to God 'according to its kind'. But not with words. The morning stars sang together, the heavens recited the glory of God, but 'no speech, no words, no voice was heard' (Ps 19:3).

This humbling recognition of the nature of revelation and of every living being's response to it has been obscured if not totally discounted by theological traditions which elevate the human soul to the cosmic place of honour, as the only one capable of receiving God's self-expression and responding to it. Furthermore, they presuppose that God's self is expressed only in human words, and that that self was not revealed until someone spoke in God's name: until there was a human voice to utter and a human ear to hear; until there was a human intelligence to interpret and a human hand to record; until there was a human response to the mystery of God's self-expression.

Jesus is credited with an alternative view:

If they tell you,  
*Look! This presence is in the skies!*  
 remember,  
 the birds who fly the skies have known this all along.  
  
 If they say,  
*It is in the seas!*

remember,  
 the dolphins and fish have always known it.  
 It is not apart from you.  
 It wells up within each and surrounds all.<sup>13</sup>

Revelation, however, has been consistently limited to human speech in such categorical statements as: 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son' (Heb 1:1–2). In the eponymous text, Revelation, it becomes 'the revelation of Jesus Christ', in which Jesus, a man, is the 'full' revelation of God, a 'fullness' made problematic since it is in fact confined by time, place, species, race and gender and defined as and in human male presence and language.<sup>14</sup>

Ecology, however, appeals to us to exercise our theological freedom responsibly by recognizing God's continuous revelation to the whole Earth household and positing a response from each creature within it. This does not exclude revelation in Jesus, nor make it less precious to those to whom it is offered. But it does humble us, in the positive medieval sense of containing us within our limits (*virtus humilitatis in hoc consistit ut aliquis infra suos terminos se continet*).<sup>15</sup> So contained, we do not extend ourselves into those things beyond our capacity. The ultimate arrogance in traditional views of revelation consists in the fact that by placing no limits on our own capacity to receive the full revelation of God, not only do we place limits on others' capacities and responses, but we have also (in intent if not in effect) limited God's capacity to reveal to our capacity to receive. We have forgotten Job's instructions to Zophar:

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;  
 the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
 or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
 and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
 Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done  
 this?  
 In God's hand is the life of every living thing  
 and the breath of all humankind.

(Job 12:7–10)

I am not saying that the mystery we call God has not been revealed to us through human language, nor that what has been revealed in and by the life of Jesus is not central for Christians. I am saying that we cannot reduce the whole of that revelation to what has been expressed to us, or

by us; nor indeed can we reduce that to what has been said by or to a particular group of human beings at any particular time or place. I am also saying that ecology's appeal to us to develop the doctrine of revelation is at the same time an appeal to recognize the dignity of every living creature. All life forms which emerged, flourished and died in the billions of years before our emergence were worthy of knowing God according to their kind. Does recognizing their dignity diminish ours? Is it not rather the case that by exercising our freedom to accord them their own dignity, the dignity of the whole Earth household is enhanced? By respecting the limits of our own freedom, we respect the freedom of other creatures to exist in dignity, without coercion or exploitation. And by learning the interdependence of our own and others' dignity, we develop our capacity to live with them in non-coercive relationships. Which contributes positively to the 'growing end' of ecological and theological tradition.

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## NOTES

1 John Courtney Murray, *Theological studies* 25 (1964), p 569.

2 Walter M. Abbott (ed), *Vatican documents* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), pp 673, 675.

3 Murray, *op. cit.*, pp 505, 523.

4 Abbott, *op. cit.*, p 689.

5 See my article 'Ecology' in the forthcoming *Oxford companion to Christian thought*, ed Adrian Hastings (OUP, 2000).

6 Quoted in and translated for Heiko Oberman in *The dawn of the Reformation* (T&T Clark, 1986), p 181. Similar fears are routinely aired (albeit less dramatically) in letters to the broadsheet and religious press. See *The Tablet* (28 August 1999), p 1165.

7 Karl Schmitz-Moormann, *Theology of creation in an evolutionary world* (Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 1997), pp 1–26.

8 Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis* (Burns & Oates, Tunbridge Wells, 1991), Chapters 11 and 12.

9 Emily Dickinson, *The complete poems*, ed T. H. Johnson (Faber & Faber, 1975), No 870.

10 John Dominic Crossan, *The dark interval* (Argus, Illinois, 1975), p 43.

11 Anne Primavesi, 'The recovery of wisdom: Gaia theory and environmental policy' in David Cooper and Joy Palmer (eds), *Spirit of the environment: religion, value and environmental concern* (Routledge, London, 1998), pp 73–85.

12 Franz Rosenzweig, *The star of redemption*, trans William Hallo (Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1985), p 112f.

13 Gospel of Thomas 3 (Mark Primavesi's translation).

14 Anne Primavesi, 'The spirit of Genesis' in *Upptäckter i Kontexten*, ed Sigurd Bergmann and Göran Eidevall (Institutet för kontextuell teologi, Lund, 1995), pp 103–116.

15 Quoted in Oberman, *op. cit.*, p 187, n 21.