

ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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JOHN PAUL II was the first pope to call for a global ecological conversion; his predecessor, Paul VI, and his successor, Benedict XVI, also spoke out against the degradation of nature and the exploitation of the natural environment.¹ More recently, in 2015, Pope Francis devoted an entire encyclical letter to the ecological crisis: *Laudato si'*. In the third part of its final chapter, he turns to the notion of ecological conversion: 'Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.'²

What is to be understood by such an ecological conversion? How would this conversion come about? What would it look like as a community conversion? Do the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius have a role to play in bringing it about?

Let us start by saying that conversion is transformational: it transforms both the one who undergoes it—in his or her interior world of ideas and images—and the way that person relates to the exterior world where he or she operates. While private and personal, it can also become communal and even historical. As Bernard Lonergan wrote:

By conversion is understood the transformation of the subject and his world It is as if one's eyes were opened and one's former world faded and fell away Conversion is existential, intensely personal, utterly intimate. But it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many, and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation Finally, what can become communal can become historical. It can pass from generation to generation³

¹ As quoted in Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, nn. 4, 5, 6.

² *Laudato si'*, n. 219.

³ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 2007 [1972]), 130–131.

What is Ecological Conversion?

It is with individuals, of course, that conversion begins, and if an individual, such as Thomas Merton, records his or her experiences in a journal, we can trace the transformations as they unfold. When Merton first came upon a review of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, he was shocked to learn 'what is happening to birds as a result of the indiscriminate use of poisons'.⁴ When he later read the book for himself, his eyes were opened to his own complicity in this destructive practice, causing him to renounce totally his 'own follies with DDT'.⁵ What was transformed was, first, his own awareness of what he was involved in; and, as his awareness and understanding grew, his ways of relating to his natural surroundings also underwent a transformation.



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*Thomas Merton near his hermitage,
November 1964*

Though Merton's moment of conversion probably began in the first sudden shock of reading about Carson's book, the groundwork had been laid long before, in early childhood, through the influence of his parents (both painters), who gave him a love for nature and taught him to see and care for the natural world around him.⁶ This was a key first step involving empathy with the natural world in all its beauty and fragility, a *sine qua non* for what would follow.

However Merton's particular transformation in the early 1960s amounted to an *environmental* rather than *ecological* conversion: it was focused on the natural environment where he lived as a monk and hermit in the Kentucky woods. A further step was required

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, volume 4, 1960–1963: *Turning toward the World. The Pivotal Years* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 274, quoted in Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: U. of Kentucky, 2011), 12.

⁵ Thomas Merton to Rachel Carson, quoted in Weis, *Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, 18.

⁶ Weis, *Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, 29–33.

in order to develop an ecological vision.⁷ Merton needed to move from empathy with the natural world to understanding it as an interlocking set of systems sustaining all life on the planet. His environmental conversion was only a first unfolding in the ‘evolution of an ecological consciousness’.⁸

Stages in the Development of Ecological Consciousness

Just as there are stages in the development of consciousness as such, so also there are stages in the development of ecological consciousness.⁹ Historically, a first step consisted in the *conservation movement*, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, which led eventually to the establishment of national parks in the United States and elsewhere (Yellowstone, in Wyoming, the world’s first national park, was established in 1872).¹⁰ Henry David Thoreau gave philosophical expression to this movement in *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), while Gerard Manley Hopkins gave it poetic expression, for example in ‘Inversnaid’ (1881):

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet,
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.¹¹

A second stage in this development was the *environmental movement*, sparked by the publication of *Silent Spring*. The book had a profound impact upon many, and it led to the establishment in the USA of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and to the banning of DDT in 1972.¹² That same year, in Stockholm, the UN Conference on Human Environment led to the establishment in many countries of ministries of the environment, and later to political representation by various Green

⁷ The word *ecology* was coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, and has been defined variously as “the study of the interrelationships of organisms with their environment and each other”, “the economy of nature” and “the biology of ecosystems”. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

⁸ Weis, *Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, 8.

⁹ See chapter 3, ‘Meaning’, and especially section 5, ‘Linguistic Meaning’, in Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

¹⁰ See ‘Warming Alters Yellowstone’s Soul’, *The New York Times International Weekly* (15–16 December 2018), 1, 6.

¹¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Inversnaid’, in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 168.

¹² Weis, *Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, 12. DDT was banned in most countries worldwide over the next decade.

parties in Europe and elsewhere.¹³ Thus the environmental movement called forth a new awareness of the impact of human actions on the natural world, and led to the implementation of wide-ranging political decisions.

A third stage has been the *ecological movement*, a coming together of minds on a global level to address the continued existence of life on Earth itself and the survival of the interconnected systems that sustain it. This movement has been growing internationally, as demonstrated by the successive United Nations Conferences on Climate Change, by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and its special report on global warming (7 October 2018), and by gatherings of the Parliament of the World's Religions.¹⁴ In the USA there is Thomas L. Friedman's 'Green New Deal' proposal. Yet, as Friedman himself points out, 'I believe there is only one thing as big as Mother Nature, and that is Father Greed—a.k.a. the market'.¹⁵ Therefore, unless there is a true ecological conversion, with a subsequent 'change of course and direction', on the part of those who wield political and financial power, greed for short-term gain will inevitably oppose and undo our best idealistic efforts.¹⁶

A True Ecological Conversion

How should this true ecological conversion come about? In her most recent book, which makes frequent use of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* and adopts the literary form of a Platonic dialogue, Elizabeth A. Johnson opens a way for us with what she calls 'the profound step of conversion to the earth as God's beloved creation'.¹⁷ A true ecological conversion must also be a religious conversion, that acknowledges Earth as part of a created universe brought into being by a personal, loving Creator. Johnson goes on to say,

¹³ See Ann Hironaka, *Greening the Globe: World Society and Environmental Change* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), 53–54, 83. For more on the history of Green political parties, see *The Evolution of Green Politics: Development and Change within European Green Parties* (London: Earthscan, 2002).

¹⁴ See the yearly reports of the independent thinktank the International Institute for Sustainable Development, from the Paris Agreement of 2015 to the conference in New York on 23 September 2019, at <https://www.iisd.org/about/annual-reports>; IPCC, 'Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5°C', available at <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>; <https://parliamentofreligions.org/>; and see also *Faith and the Common Good*, at <https://www.faithcommonsgood.org/>, all accessed 23 March 2020.

¹⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, 'The Green New Deal Rises Again', *The New York Times International Weekly* (19–20 January 2019), 11.

¹⁶ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 130. Lonergan argues that conversion 'is not just a development or even a series of developments. Rather it is a resultant change of course and direction.'

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2018), 195.

This is a turning that will impact our whole lives. It will expand our understanding of the God we are called to love with all our heart and soul, mind and strength, making clear that the Creator is also the Redeemer who accompanies the whole natural world with saving compassion. It will also expand the neighbour we are called to love as ourselves, since the beaten-up traveller left by the side of the road whose wounds we must tend to includes needy and poor human beings along with natural ecosystems and all their creatures.¹⁸

Johnson builds an argument to demonstrate that creation, incarnation and salvation all spring from a God who is love, who is compassion for every created thing. She devotes a good part of her book to establishing ‘a theology of salvation as accompaniment, an “I am with you to deliver you” view of God’s saving work’. With the incarnation there comes ‘divine involvement with the flesh of all creation in its suffering and dying, with the merciful promise of new life that only a God who creates could give’.¹⁹

Along with many other contemporary theologians, Johnson rejects Anselm’s theory of atonement—that Christ’s death on the cross atoned for sinful humanity by repaying ‘a debt to God, whose infinite honour has been offended past the limit of any purely human act of compensation’.²⁰ She interprets the cross in a way that ‘foregrounds the meaning of salvation as God’s accompanying the whole troubled, sinful, agonized, and dying world into the depths of agony and death and beyond. Mercy upon mercy.’ Thus the cross can be understood as ‘a particular event of divine solidarity with the suffering and death of all creatures’.²¹

A Vision of Hope

Such a vision gives us hope, not that Earth will be spared the conflagration that seems surely to be coming, but that God will be with us in it, just as God was with Jesus in his suffering and death.²² Only such a hope can empower us to go on acting against the forces of destruction, even when action may seem futile, rather than sinking into a slough of despond. For Lonergan:

¹⁸ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 195–196.

¹⁹ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 222.

²⁰ Lisa Sowle Cahill, ‘*Quaestio disputata*: The Atonement Paradigm: Does It Still Have Explanatory Value?’ *Theological Studies*, 68/2 (2007), 418.

²¹ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 194, 222.

²² See ‘As the World Burns’, a report on wildfires around the world in *Harper’s Magazine* (August 2018), 23–40.

A religion that promotes self-transcendence to the point, not merely of justice, but of self-sacrificing love, will have a redemptive role in human society inasmuch as such love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress.²³

Christians, because of their vast numbers, can have a huge impact on undoing the damage done to Earth if they can come to see Earth, not just as our home, but as beloved by the Creator, and then respond to it with self-sacrificing love.

Johnson says toward the end of her book,

A whole agenda arises when we realize that for this conversion to take root it needs to find expression in church liturgies and eucharistic prayers, in religious art and music, in public preaching and teaching, and in private prayers and spirituality, and devotional writing.²⁴

We might also add that ecological conversion may find expression in the giving of the Spiritual Exercises, which are aimed simultaneously at the ongoing conversion of individuals and the establishment of God's reign in the world.²⁵ As Trileigh Tucker affirms, 'The wisdom of the Spiritual Exercises can offer new ways of entering into environmental concerns and addressing our current ecological crisis'.²⁶

But how would such a conversion to Earth as God's beloved creation come about? And how are we to reach those who are not Christian or who are not religious at all, who are not going to listen to homilies or read devotional literature or make the Exercises? Can people come to see Earth as part of God's beloved creation if they believe neither in God nor in creation? Though millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000) tend to be interested in spirituality rather than religion, this does not stop them from looking to religious communities for inspiration.²⁷

From Common Sense to a Genuine Moral Conversion

The land, the water, the air are surely there to help us achieve whatever purpose human beings may imagine for themselves, whether they believe

²³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 54.

²⁴ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 226.

²⁵ See Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 30.

²⁶ Trileigh Tucker, 'Ecology and the Spiritual Exercises', *The Way*, 43/1 (January 2004), 8.

²⁷ See *Nuns and Nones*, at <https://www.nunsandnones.org/>. This project brings together religious sisters and young people of no religious conviction to promote 'community and spiritual formation, land stewardship, and social action'.

in creation or not, but these things cannot continue to help us if we continue to pollute them. It is simply common sense to come to the realisation that we must stop destroying the very things our life and our work depend upon.

But once we have come to know how intricately complex and interrelated the beings that make up and sustain the life and health of the planet are, and have begun to understand how destructive our modern world, dominated by the ‘left-brain’, has become, then what begins as common sense develops into an enormously complicated challenge.²⁸ It demands transformation—step by painful step, stage by patient stage—of our ways of thinking, imagining and acting, in order to undo the damage we have done, individually and collectively, and to remake our relationships with all those other beings with whom we share planet Earth. This must call forth communal efforts of heroic magnitude.

Empathy is still the key. Even if people are irreligious—as was the young Thomas Merton—they can still have empathy for the natural world and can be open to understanding it as an amazing piece of work, as something truly good and worth preserving. Empathy can open people to a genuine moral conversion, opting for the good of the planet and of every creature that dwells on it, even if this means setting aside personal preferences and desires. For Bernard Lonergan, ‘Moral conversion changes the criterion of one’s decisions and choices from satisfaction to values’; it ‘consists in opting for the truly good, even for the value against satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict’.²⁹

Empathy can open people to a genuine moral conversion

Further, in this time of ecological crisis, as the world convulses with storms and fires, people can be moved to respond by taking action. Responding to the moral imperative to act is itself a conversion on a moral level: ‘deciding is one thing, doing is another’.³⁰

Two Examples of Response to the Ecological Crisis

At the beginning of 2018 more than 25,000 students in France, disillusioned with a capitalist system of super-consumerism and attempting to transform ecological and social discussion into significant and concrete action,

²⁸ See Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2012).

²⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240.

³⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240.

signed the *Manifeste étudiant pour un réveil écologique* (Student Manifesto for an Ecological Awakening), which led to the formation of Le Campus de la Transition, a project which aims to bring together in one place a collective—people from many walks of life (academics, students, staff, ecologists and even members of multinationals)—to create a new pedagogy.³¹

The campus became real with the gift, from the Sisters of the Assumption, of the château de Forges, a property on the boundary between the Île-de-France and Burgundy. Though the project is still in its very early stages, the hope is that people with little experience or with much, working together to produce their food and living together for various lengths of time (six months or less), will engage in conversations that will ultimately be transformative. What is demanded of each participant is a real desire to change one's way of life: to stop living on credit that will be repaid by the resources of the planet and by future generations.

Similar work is going on at Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph, Ontario, where I am based: each year university students and graduates from many parts of Canada join us for six months (some for less) to learn ecological methods of growing vegetables on our six hundred acres of organic farmland (free of all pesticides and herbicides). One hundred



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Interns at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre shared agriculture programme

³¹ See Xavier de Bénazé, 'Vivre ensemble la conversion écologique', *Christus*, 262 (April 2019), 92–100.

of these acres have been set aside in perpetuity for the establishment of an old-growth forest, from which invasive species are being removed and where thousands of trees are planted each year, many by children from local elementary schools. Our ongoing challenge is to find new ways to integrate into all this the Ignatian spirituality which, for sixty years, has drawn people from all over the globe to make the thirty-day Spiritual Exercises as well as shorter individually directed retreats.

Many others around the world are also responding. They are acting in all sorts of ways which together constitute a growing ecological movement. A multiplicity of organizations and groups focused on ecological concerns can be found in most parts of the world, often brought together by the internet. The extent and complexity of contemporary electronic communications have created what Walter J. Ong calls 'secondary orality': a modern-day form of spoken, as opposed to written, culture.

Secondary orality generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture—McLuhan's 'global village'.³²

This culture offers the possibility of establishing a truly global community—but a community of persons intent not just on communicating with one another but on saving planet Earth. Such a movement involves conversion on a moral level surely, but it can call forth conversion on other levels as well.

Levels of Consciousness and Levels of Conversion

Different levels of conversion assume different levels of consciousness. Lonergan writes about how conscious awareness begins in experience, seeks understanding, calls for judgment of the correctness or completeness of its understanding, yielding a conclusion which may then demand deliberation or discernment, decision and action. He describes,

... four successive, related, but qualitatively different levels. There is the *empirical* level on which we sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move. There is an *intellectual* level on which we inquire, come

³² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 136. And see Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 1962) and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

to understand, express what we have understood, work out the presuppositions and implications of our expression. There is the *rational* level on which we reflect, marshal the evidence, pass judgment on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability, of a statement. There is the *responsible* level on which we are concerned with ourselves, our own operations, our goals, and so deliberate about possible courses of action, evaluate them, decide, and carry out our decisions.³³

The same conscious and intentional operations (experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding) on different levels of consciousness (empirical, intellectual, rational, responsible) occur in all individuals, though not always with the same degree of awareness. The different levels of consciousness are part of one dynamic movement, which is the human desire to know, the desire for self-transcendence that Lonergan calls 'the eros of the human spirit'.³⁴

What we desire to know is not just what is true but also what is good.³⁵ And the ultimate terrestrial good is not possible without the survival of our home, the Earth itself. People can be moved by the goodness and beauty of things to fall in love with them. It is this falling in love with the beautiful complexity of Earth that opens us to the possibility of a Being who is pure goodness, pure intelligence and all beautiful, and to the possibility of coming eventually to love that Being—in other words, to religious conversion. Such a religious conversion is aided by a growing recognition of the need for a saviour: alone, we ourselves cannot save the planet.

Though religious conversion may normally lead to a moral conversion, there is no reason why a moral conversion cannot come first and then lead to a religious conversion.³⁶ When the moral conversion concerns saving planet Earth itself, falling in love with the world in all its complex beauty often leads to falling in love with the Source of all beauty. It is thus a conversion not just to helping save the Earth (a moral conversion), but a conversion to Earth 'as God's beloved creation', the conversion for which Elizabeth Johnson calls.³⁷ Such a religious conversion involves a

³³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 9. Lonergan sets out his ideas at more length in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1958).

³⁴ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 242, and see 13.

³⁵ See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 13.

³⁶ '... from a causal viewpoint, one would say that first there is God's gift of his love. Next, the eye of this love reveals values in all their splendor, while the strength of this love brings about their realization, and that is moral conversion.' (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 243)

³⁷ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 195.

choice, a decision to believe; and, of course, it involves grace. It also involves a development process and the acquisition of skills, 'learning new operations, and ... bringing [people] together in new combinations to new ends'.³⁸

Ecological Conversion and the Spiritual Exercises

The Society of Jesus began with a few individuals who 'formed a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation': a community which, despite reversals, continues from generation to generation to help in the transformation of others through the Spiritual Exercises.

The Exercises are aimed at personal transformation or conversion, at 'the deep change of heart that can only arise out of a new personal discovery of God's mercy'.³⁹ This change of heart normally occurs during the First Week of the Exercises.⁴⁰ The Second and Third Weeks lead us to a continuing conversion, to a deeper and deeper attachment to the person of Jesus—through his incarnation and birth, through his call to follow him in a new way, and through his compassionate dying, sharing the lot of two crucified criminals.⁴¹

But it is at the end of the Fourth Week, after the joy of the resurrection and in the Contemplation to Attain Love, that we begin to see how the Exercises can lead to an ecological conversion. There the person making the Exercises moves from contemplating the gifts of creation in all their magnificent multiplicity to the dynamic presence of the Creator dwelling in all that has been created—labouring and working 'for me in all creatures on the face of the earth' (Exx 236). 'All creatures on the face of the earth' is a phrase that opens us to the intimate relationship that God has with every single thing that exists, and in turn opens us to the intimate relationship that each of us has with everything in which God is dwelling and labouring for me, for us.

From Love of the Creator to Love of Creation

If the God who is Love itself, who is Compassion, is so intimately present and active in every creature, in every particle, delighting in creating

³⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 30.

³⁹ Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 44.

⁴⁰ See Eric Jensen, 'Hell and the Image of God in the Spiritual Exercises', *The Way*, 57/3 (July 2018), 91–102, on taking into account subsequent cultural and theological developments when making and giving the Exercises, especially the First Week.

⁴¹ See Eric Jensen, 'The Kingdom Exercise: Two Suggestions', *The Way*, 57/2 (April 2018), 101–109.

and in creation, loving it and through it loving us who contemplate it, then it is hard to imagine this God as indifferent to the fate of all these creatures. It seems obvious that the Contemplation to Attain Love is meant to lead us not only to a love of the Creator but also to a love of creation, to being in love with both—out of compassion for everything that lives and suffers and dies. If God dwells in us and in all things, making temples of them, then we should feel moved to preserve these sacred things.

As the Exercises are meant to lead to a decision, to an ‘election’, usually near the end of the Second Week, so also at the end of the Exercises, the Contemplation to Attain Love could lead to an *ecological election*, to a decision to serve the Creator in serving creation out of love for all that God has made. Here let me quote just one telling sentence from a recent Jesuit General Congregation: ‘We Jesuits are called to help heal a broken world, promoting a new way of producing and consuming, which puts God’s creation at the centre’.⁴²

An ecological election, to put God’s creation at the centre, would no doubt involve profound changes in our way of life, or at least a transition to a new, more ecologically sound way of life, and could flow naturally out of a recapitulation of the ‘reform of life’ (Exx 189) made in the Second Week. In the Exercises’ concluding prayer, the *Suscipe* (a Latin word which here means not merely to *take* but to *take under one’s protection*),⁴³ we are called to surrender to God’s protective love all that has been lavished on us, so that we in turn may emulate the Creator in protecting and caring for creation—the task first given to humankind in the beginning in Eden Garden (Genesis 2: 15).

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⁴² GC 36, decree 1, n. 29.

⁴³ See Eric Jensen, ‘The Spanish Autograph or the Latin Vulgate?’ *The Way*, 53/3 (July 2014), 85.