

Excerpts from the keynote address

Reconciliation with Our Earth: Wisdom from Spiritual Traditions

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Once upon a time, there was a tiny speck in the vast blackness. It was extremely small, and hot and dense. Then, thirteen and a half billion years ago, the little speck exploded in a giant firework, sending off hot flakes in all directions. Scientists call this explosion the Big Bang.

With the Big Bang, began the grand cosmic dance that gave birth to the universe that continues to expand to this very day - and with radiation from its infancy still around us.

Everyone loves a good story. I begin here with the Big Bang, a story from science about the origin of the universe. The Big Bang theory tells us that the universe emerged from a tremendously dense and hot state about thirteen and a half billion years ago with a cosmic explosion—exploding and cooling ever since. American astronomer Edwin Hubble discovered, in 1929, that distant galaxies were moving away from us, such that the farther a galaxy is, the faster it is moving away. In other words, we are living in an expanding universe - not in a fixed and unchanging world as it was previously thought. The distance between the different galaxies is growing all the time, and radiation released from the Big Bang is still all around us today. Radiation from the very hot early stages of the universe was discovered in 1965 by two American physicists, Penzias and Wilson. For this, they were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1978.

Cultural historian Thomas Berry (Berry 1988) recognizes the story of the Big Bang as being mystical and sacramental and calls the universe - or the natural world -the “primary revelation of the ultimate mystery.” For him, the current ecological crisis arrived as a result of the modernity, which created a gulf between humanity and the natural world especially in the Western society. The natural world then became resources to be utilized with greater control. Religion and science isolated from each other, each with an ideologically differing focus, science focusing on the control of the physical world and religion - Western religions, i.e. - on the redemption of humanity. Deep antagonisms developed between them. Without a unifying story, no community can exist, Berry warns. We need a new story about the natural world, or a new shared context for humanity, which can help us renew

our understanding of the Earth-human relationship. A greater sense of the sacredness of the natural world can then motivate us to work together to restore the Earth-human relationship. The idea of “nature as being mystical and sacred” is as old as human history. Human recognition of and reverence for the sacredness of nature can be understood as a basic impulse, as manifested in so many of the world’s religions.

For instance, indigenous traditions are extremely sensitive to the natural elements, regarding them as sacred. Many hold an animated world view, where everything in the world is seen as being alive, and with life force present in everything. In such a world, human beings must treat all things with care and respect. An ethic of restraint and conservation follows. One is expected to take only what one needs and to use all the parts of an animal or plant.

Similarly, in Hinduism all things come from the same sacred source, Brahman, and all forms are manifestations of the Divine spirit. For Hindus, non-violence is an essential virtue. Buddhism also teaches an ethic of non-violence and demands the awareness of the unity of the universe. In Taoism, which originated in China, everything is a part of the rhythm of nature - the Dao, the sacred. In Japan’s Shintoism, natural forces are sacred, and spirits (kami) are omnipresent, animating all of nature. In Zoroastrianism, the religion of the ancient Persian Empire, one of the oldest living religions with its 3000 years of history, which had tremendous influence on Judaism (and therefore on Christianity and also on Islam), earth, fire, water, air are regarded as the most sacred elements in life, and therefore cannot be polluted. In Judeo-Christian traditions, nature is God’s creation, and the creative divine Spirit is vitally at work throughout creation. For Saint Francis of Assisi, the natural world was a sacred book, the “Book of Creation;” it was God speaking to him. In Islam, nature is sacred and nature actively praises God in its existence and movement.

To solve our present ecological crisis, it is essential that we aggressively pursue science, develop technologies, and establish policy frameworks, which can help us slow down climate change and which can enable us to cope with its consequences. However, unless we see the current environmental crisis as fundamentally a moral crisis, or a spiritual crisis, and address the problem as such, the solutions we offer, based on technological and scientific grounds and environmental policies alone, will be ignoring the most basic human impulse.

To effectively address the present ecological crisis, we need to engage values and ethics, religion and spirituality. Just imagine the sheer magnitude of the potential power of religious beliefs and institutions. There are approximately 2.1 billion Christians worldwide, 1.5 billion Muslims, 900 million Hindus, 400 million Buddhists, another 400 million adherents of the Chinese traditional religions, including Daoism and Confucianism, 300 million indigenous peoples, and so

on, easily adding up to 80 percent of the world's population of 6.8 billion. Consider the potential for inspiring them and mobilizing them in the ecological movement.

Certainly for Francis the mystic, all creation was related and interdependent. His world view was holistic. It was full of wonders with genuine novelty. When Francis prayed in the caves on the mountain-side, it was Sister and Mother Earth upon which he rested. The wolves in Gubbio and the birds in the Spoleto Valley, with whom he conversed, were his brothers and sisters. Thomas Berry's proposal can be seen as a contemporary echo of Francis' world view, which is shared by many of the world's religions. In this view, all things are related, interdependent, holistic, and mystic, just as in an emerging scientific world view of our time as in the Big Bang story.

Perhaps this can provide a starting point for a spirituality that is inclusive, and transcendent of any particular faith tradition or a dogma. Perhaps we can explore and promote this spirituality, which we can call an eco-spirituality, as providing a shared story and an ecological vision for all people of good will who wish to honor our home, our Sister and Mother Earth, and save her from our own destructive, ignorant, and indifferent behaviors, and from our greed. An eco-spirituality demands that we "reconcile" with our Earth, our home planet.

What does reconciliation with the Earth mean? According to Delio and others (Delio 2008), who argued from the Franciscan tradition, "It entails transforming our relationship with the Earth, understanding how to pursue this, and bringing it into action."

As such, reconciliation with the Earth calls us to turn to the Earth and its sacredness and to Earth's community of living things. It involves the recognition of our role on the Earth, and our fundamental relatedness to the whole, not just to other people but to the entire Earth community. It is engagement with the human and nonhuman world of amazing diversity and beauty; it is participation in the well-being of all. It is to turn from oneself as an individual, self-consuming subject toward an ecological self, a self interwoven in the web of life, dependent on others and on the things of this Earth.

The fruit of this change of the heart is a new way of being and acting in the world - and living out an eco-spirituality. This involves a set of challenges. We are challenged to change our individual lifestyles. We have to take individual responsibility for our own lives and households. But that alone is not enough. As Delio insists, "We must call others - individuals and institutions - to reconciliation." We must invest time and energy to engage larger systems, such as our churches, our schools, and our economic and political institutions so that we can begin creating systems for a sustainable future on a much larger scale.

This is how we can reconcile with our Earth, honoring her as our Sister and Mother, and as the unfolding revelation of the ultimate mystery.

References: Berry, Thomas, 1988. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club. Delio, Ilia, et al. 2008. *Care for Creation*. Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press