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The Spirituality of Interreligious Dialogue

Shaping a New Ecological Consciousness

Dr. Fabrice Blée



A part from a few authors who refer to ecology here and there when they compare the Christian faith to other religions, the theology emerging from the praxis of interreligious dialogue has not yet given much attention to this area of concern. For example, when Ewert Cousins speaks of the “second axial period,” he encourages axial religions to join together in giving attention once again to the earth.¹ For his part, Raimon Panikkar proposes a Christophany that is the fruit of dialogue between religions and cultures as well as of a respectful relationship to the environment.² But on the whole Christians engaged in the “dialogue of religious experience” are just beginning to become aware of the urgency of the ecological crisis.³ Monastic men and women who engage in dialogue are a good example. Monastic Interreligious Dialogue was created in 1978, but only now, thirty years later, have these monks, whose practice of dialogue is recognized as especially advanced and profound, dedicated a major conference to this topic.

¹This essay, originally entitled “La spiritualité chrétienne du dialogue, creuser d’une nouvelle conscience écologique,” was published in the April 2008 issue of *La Chair et le Souffle*, an international journal of theology and spirituality founded in 2006 by the faculty of the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. It was translated by William Skudlarek, OSB, and appears here with permission.

That said, we need to note that the link between dialogue and ecology is not new. Over the past ten years it has been the topic of research and scholarly conferences, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world and often within the framework of ecofeminist theology.⁴ The emphasis here is on interreligious cooperation between partners who already have a shared vision of nature, who recognize the urgency of finding a concrete solution to the ecological crisis, and who therefore call for a reform of their respective theologies.⁵ Their search for consensus means that they give less attention to the specificity and coherence of the religious systems represented in the dialogue.⁶ The way they enter into dialogue is determined by their ecological consciousness, and this, in turn, becomes the criterion by which they judge the relevance of any theology that would attempt to address the problem.

My approach, however, is to begin with the praxis of dialogue, specifically dialogue rooted in the Christian tradition. I then will try to show how this tradition promotes a respect for nature.⁷ My goal is not to find a practical solution for one problem or the other, but to describe a way of establishing a relationship with nature that can give support to informed action in the future. In order to do this, I will pay special attention to two points. First of all, I will identify those elements of a Christian spirituality of dialogue that favor the adoption of a new way of thinking about nature and entering into a faith-inspired relationship with it.⁸ Second, I will reflect on the dialogic approach to nature that flows from this new way of thinking. I will then suggest some future directions and will conclude by reflecting on how interreligious dialogue can mobilize Christians to participate in the work of resolving the ecological crisis.

A Spirituality of Dialogue That Suggests a New Approach to Nature

A Christian spirituality of dialogue is born when dialogue becomes a spiritual act, that is, when a relationship with another religion is

no longer regarded as a threat to one's faith but a privileged place for its authentic expression. Such a relationship goes beyond physical encounter or mere conversion; it is a welcoming of others in their very "otherness" and leads to an interior or "intrareligious" dialogue.⁹ Dialogue of this kind requires an attitude shaped by the virtues proper to every form of spirituality: love, faith, humility, commitment, detachment, fidelity, pardon, and so on.

For Christians the "dialogue of religious experience" is the most challenging form of dialogue because it requires that they love their "enemies." In the past Christians have regarded those who believe differently—the heretics inside and the pagans outside the church—as among these enemies. This is not to say that total openness to the other is the only kind of relationship that qualifies as authentic dialogue, but—given how demanding it is—if it succeeds, its ground rules and methods will certainly prove helpful to every other kind of relationship that aims to move from communication to communion, including our relationship to nature. This can be seen by looking at three characteristics of interreligious dialogue: the practice of hospitality, respect for otherness, and the liberation of the body.

The Practice of Hospitality

Becoming aware of the ecological crisis is one thing; doing something about it is another. How do we move from knowledge to action? Even more, what do we want to accomplish by our action?

These same questions need to be asked in a pluralist setting. We are enthusiastic about the idea of respecting other religions in order to live together in peace, but we quickly become discouraged when we try to put theory into practice and come up against difficult issues. We organize major conferences to propose a shared vision of the world and shared ideals—a praiseworthy endeavor, indeed, but one that puts us into a relationship with otherness. What makes others "other" is often their overarching religious vision and their understanding of

the role of religion in bringing about peace. How can we arrive at a shared understanding of our situation, and what is to be done about it if we give little or no attention to the specific cultural, psychological, historical, political, or economic claims made by our partner in dialogue? To what degree is it possible to resolve a conflict with someone we do not know? How can we speak about interdependence if we do not experience it?

Monks who engage in dialogue are absolutely convinced that passing from knowledge to action necessarily involves the practice of hospitality. You can read every book ever written on the necessity of extending hospitality; you can issue all sorts of pronouncements about the necessity of living together in peace. Nothing will accomplish as much as actually entering someone else's world and receiving that person into our own, regardless of what we think about the individual and his or her beliefs.

What makes dialogue spiritual is the fact that it is not about theories but about life. Above all, it is praxis. It should not be confused with the study of religions or with working out a theory of unity with its principles and its rules. There is no way to become reconciled with believers from other religious traditions—or with nature, for that matter—if we do not allow ourselves to be challenged by them, not only on the intellectual level, but on the level of our life and our faith.

A spirituality of dialogue reminds Christians of the necessity of entering heart and soul, into a relationship with nature that goes beyond our preconceptions and that is undertaken even before we have worked out a vision of the world that restores nature to its rightful place vis-à-vis human beings. When we do this, the earth is seen not as a thing we can deal with as we please, but as an autonomous living entity with which a human being can communicate as an equal, because—according to the language of faith—the divine Spirit is active at the heart of all creation.

Respect for Otherness

An ecological consciousness that leads to change does not come about unless we come back to the earth, allowing ourselves to be affected by its inherent logic and entering into a dialogue in which human beings and nature learn to live together for their mutual benefit rather than in a relationship of domination based on the belief that the one exists simply to benefit the other.

However, this return to the earth is not always accompanied by a desire to allow ourselves to be questioned by nature. Some try to understand the rhythms of nature for no other reason than to satisfy their desire to consume. This is why I am somewhat critical of the otherwise useful work of William McDonough and Michael Braungart, who propose a “cradle-to-cradle” approach to sustainable development.¹⁰ They present nature as a vessel we have to look after and live in with care if it is not to sink. But our lifestyle does not have to change. Their approach is still very anthropocentric. There is no place for a dialogue that invites us to “mutual impoverishment.”¹¹

How do we rediscover the way to enter into communion with nature? Interreligious hospitality calls us to respect otherness. What this means concretely is that we are not to reject out of hand what we find unacceptable in other believers, nor to grab onto what we find familiar. We allow ourselves to be touched by the faith and beliefs that constitute their way of life and their purpose. This can be done, in part, by observation. However, the only way we will really understand and appreciate another's faith and religious practices is by making them our own in some way. Respect for difference comes about through a heart-to-heart encounter, through a relationship that strives for authenticity rather than for peace at any price, a relationship that, paradoxically, allows for the possibility of conflict. Dialogue does not flee from conflict. Rather, it clears away confusion and misunderstanding and thus gives rise to the hope that communication will lead to communion.

Spiritual dialogue teaches Christians that communion with nature

also depends on an acceptance of otherness rather than on an *a priori* idea of the other's true nature and role. Spiritual dialogue thus predisposes Christians to come to a deeper understanding of the true nature of their partners in dialogue. These partners are always individuals. No one ever meets Islam or Buddhism. We enter into relationship with men and women who profess a particular religious tradition and who are endorsed by a given community.

By the same token, we never encounter "nature"—an abstraction used to designate a reality that can never be grasped in its entirety—but rather the disparate elements that constitute it without ever exhausting its richness and complexity. We cannot say we respect nature if we unthinkingly cause harm to what we consider insignificant. Likewise, we cannot claim to love humanity if we neglect our neighbor. At the same time, it is also true to say that the elements that constitute nature show us just how different it is from "culture." Nature is that which is not humanly conceived.¹²

These conflicting views of nature are not easy to reconcile and are sometimes expressed by contrasting the desire to free ourselves from the laws of nature that stand in the way of human freedom and the common good (the Enlightenment philosophies of the West) with the desire to be in harmony with nature by surrendering our egoistic tendencies (the Buddhist and Hindu spiritualities of the East, traditional religions). In both cases, nature stands over against the human by virtue of its *raison d'être* and its ultimate destiny.

Interreligious dialogue is also spiritual when it invites us to love the enemy, the stranger, the one in whom we cannot immediately recognize ourselves and who is seen as a threat to everything we stand for.¹³ The practice of dialogue prompts Christians to act the same way toward nature, and to do so all the more because of the difficulties involved. In fact, the encounter with otherness, whether in the form of another believer or of nature, shows us the degree to which we are strangers to ourselves, both in our capacity for wonder and in our illusion that we can control the universe.

Liberation of the Body

How do we rescue nature from human exploitation? Ecofeminist theology responds by making the connection between the emancipation of nature and the liberation of women from the patriarchal domination that is also found in religious settings.¹⁴ Personally, I believe that the close link between nature and the body—the body that has so often been identified with the feminine—is of the greatest importance for the issue at hand: Nature projects itself into the body and determines what it will be, even at the risk of being opposed to reason.¹⁵ It forces us to deal with what we have suppressed.

The difficulty of entering into a relationship with nature is that its otherness is not simply because of its strangeness, but also because in certain ways it is too much like us. The more we cut ourselves off from the body, the more we become distant from nature and from ourselves. Is it not precisely this that characterizes modern society? We are all aware of the cult of the body, but the body that is worshipped is an artificial body, one that is opposed to nature. Underlying our determination always to demand more of the body and to go beyond its limits is our dream of achieving a perfect equilibrium, a universal ethic, tranquility, even a kind of immortality where happiness consists in our capacity to keep our universe static and without surprises. We go so far as to create virtual worlds more real than the natural world. In these worlds we are totally in control and the individual becomes a virtual "I" who now has to conform to new standards. The chasm that separates us from nature is growing wider.

Becoming more at home with our bodies can actually help us renew our contact with nature. Again, the interreligious journey can be of help. Christian monks in dialogue with Buddhist and Hindu contemplative traditions often rediscover that the body has a part to play in the process of "divinization."¹⁶ Union with the divine does not take place in spite of the body, but in its very depths, in a body that is totally accepted. Numerous Christian practitioners have given witness

to the ways in which zazen or yoga have helped them come to a more incarnated spiritual life.¹⁷ Pierre de Bérthune sees here an occasion for the theology of the incarnation to be given the kind of anthropology it deserves.¹⁸ A spirituality of dialogue invites Christians to reappropriate the corporal dimension of spirituality and predisposes them to be reconciled to at least two of nature's characteristics: its impermanence and the irrationality of its power. First, the body mirrors nature in its movement, change, cycles of birth and death, fragility, and interdependence. In it are imprinted the rhythms of nature. One of the first things I learned about Zen meditation when I was in Japan was the power of nature, in its many variations, to bring me to experience the "I"—above all the embodied "I" with its sensations, feelings, and ideas—as constant change.¹⁹

The powers that lie hidden in the body are often in disarray and are only freed when one recognizes and accepts their natural rhythms. Within human beings there is an irrational nature, a collection of forces—some of them terrible, others sublime—that reason strives to contain in order to prevent a loss of control. In the West, where human beings think of themselves as masters of their destiny, one can see why people have welcomed the disenchantment of the world. A return to nature does not happen without crossing over into the hazardous realm of the unconscious where everyone has to enter into combat with monsters who demand to be recognized for what they are and insist that we mount them and ride off to discover new horizons.²⁰

The Promise of a Dialogic Approach to Nature

A spirituality of dialogue sets the stage for an encounter with the natural environment in its otherness and also opens the way for a dialogic approach to nature that is capable of rallying and organizing Christians to come to grips with the ecological crisis. I highlight two characteristics of this approach: otherness as opposed to divinity and responsibility as opposed to anthropocentrism.

Otherness versus Divinity

James Lovelock puts forth the thesis that the earth is like a goddess (Gaia) who takes care of creation.²¹ However, divinizing the earth is not the way to rally Christians, much less political and economic elites. This approach carries with it the double risk of returning to the superstitions from which the West has been able to free itself and of creating a new dogmatism.²² Decreasing that nature is divine sets up a priestly hierarchy that monitors all that we need to do. There is no escaping it! Human domination is replaced by a biocentrism that, in turn, gives rise to a new religious and intellectual elite.²³

Nonetheless, we must return to an understanding of nature as sacred. We might do that by formulating statements and coming up with theories that would affect public opinion to some degree. But nothing can take the place of a life immersed in nature, totally dependent on the natural environment. Such is the case with aboriginal peoples whose religion is most deeply rooted in a relationship to nature. For them nature is sacred not because of some *a priori* theology, even one that says we must protect it, but because they live in such a close relationship with it. The sacred is not an abstract idea, but something experienced.

Only those who are hospitable to nature and allow themselves to be questioned and transformed by it have the right to say that it is sacred. Otherwise we engage in romanticism, seeing nature as something that is graceful and beautiful, but forgetting that it is also harsh and cruel. The sacred is both breathtaking and intriguing (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*);²⁴ we can also speak of it as something to be feared. But this only makes sense if we speak out of experience. The sacred only exists to the degree that it has been sensed. Revering nature as if it were something divine will be of no use in dealing with today's challenges.

What will help is a dialogic stance, an act of hospitality grounded in the silence of the Spirit. The earth is a living entity, but that does not make it divine. It is possible to enter into dialogue with it, how-

ever, allowing it to reveal its holiness within the space created by dialogue. In spiritual dialogue the stranger is certainly received as Christ, but that does not mean that the stranger is the Christ. Those who are unfamiliar are received as Christ in the sacred space of relationship. The one who practices dialogue is awakened to the presence of the divine Spirit in the other by coming face-to-face with his or her otherness. What this means is that nature is divine only to the eyes of faith.

Responsibility versus Anthropocentrism

Between the romantic vision of a Mother Earth to be worshiped and the stark view of nature as a savage entity to be tamed, there is the biblical understanding of responsibility or stewardship. We need to ask if this understanding is pertinent to our discussion.

There are those who believe that the concept of stewardship is to be rejected because it is anthropocentric.²⁵ However, what is to be rejected is an understanding of nature that subjects it to human beings. Nature must be given its autonomy and divine legitimacy. Spiritual dialogue in an interreligious setting does not summon people to unite around any particular divinity or God. Rather it demands that everyone be responsible—in accordance with their own tradition—for entering more deeply into the divine mystery, which no one can claim to monopolize. They do so by their willingness to enter the “desert of otherness.”²⁶

The desert is the symbol of the relational space to which Christians are called by Satan (the adversary), as was Jesus, to make a choice that will be decisive for their life of faith. Will they choose to be self-sufficient, or will they opt to submit themselves to God? Will they choose worship without love, or being reconciled first with their enemies (Matt. 5:23–25)? The position that human beings take is crucial for the creation of mutual understanding and peace. Even though everyone may believe in God, each individual still has to choose—in God’s

name—whether to reject the other or enter into dialogue. The same holds true for an individual’s relationship with nature. People cannot be brought together by offering them a univocal understanding of the earth as a goddess coupled with a way of living on earth that would deprive them of their supremacy. If human beings are the problem, they are also the solution.

The notion of responsibility is not obsolete, but our understanding of it needs to be revised. Responsibility does not require us to become masters of creation, placing it at the service of our well-being. To be responsible for others means seeing to it that they become all they are meant to be, helping them become free people and not servants. The only way nature can be subject to human beings is if humans subject themselves to the divine Spirit, who radiates love (Rom. 5:5) and guarantees freedom (2 Cor. 3:17). Otherwise submission is the reverse side of tyranny. What is needed is a conversion to a new way of thinking about others and their environment, a conversion of heart that begins with oneself.²⁷

The principal challenge of a spirituality of dialogue is combining the reception of the other with the abandonment of self-interest. There is no question here of anthropocentrism, because true believers do not find their center in themselves. Their center is in the divine power that is present and active in all of creation, but not identified with it.²⁸ This being the case, locating the origin of human beings outside the earth is not an obstacle to ecological conscientiousness.²⁹ On the contrary, as soon as humans allow themselves to be led by the Spirit, the Spirit enables them to see nature as the reflection (Eckhart) or the expression (St. Francis of Assisi) of God.

Even more, the Spirit shows them how to divinize creation through the selfsame Spirit by directing it to its destiny. When human beings submit themselves to God, they receive the gift of establishing peace with everything that surrounds them. All of nature becomes submissive to them, as can be seen in the lives of those saints whose simple presence was enough to pacify the most savage beasts. These saints

offer us a glimpse of paradise, where the human race lives in complete harmony with its environment (Ezek. 11:1-9).³⁰

Conclusion: The Manifold Dynamics of Dialogue

The dialogic approach to nature I have briefly outlined here does not call into question other interreligious approaches. We need to take into account the complex nature of dialogue in our relationship to nature. The link between ecology and dialogue can take different forms depending on the kind of dialogue undertaken: of life, of action, of experts, or of religious experience. The Anglo-Saxon movement referred to above (R. R. Ruether, M. E. Tucker, J. Grim, L. White, H. Eaton, and others) is, on the whole, directed to a dialogue of action in order to redress injustice. The emphasis is on cooperation between believers of different religions for the purpose of finding a concrete solution to a specific problem. The cause determines both the dialogue and the way it is articulated theologically.

The dialogue with nature is unique and urgent. At the same time, it should not be singled out as the only viable interreligious activity, thereby minimizing the many and varied dynamics of dialogue. As we have seen, dialogue at the level of religious experience is founded on hospitality as an expression of faith. This form of dialogue is often neglected, but it guarantees that relationships will not be self-serving and that they will be rooted in the silence of the Spirit. The dialogue of experts ensures that each new experience will be connected with one's own religious tradition. Theological dialogue is extremely important, even if it does not give priority to ecological questions.

There are some who criticize a theology of religious pluralism precisely because it does not give enough attention to the natural environment. It goes without saying that there is an urgent need to do so, but we cannot skip over important steps. If we do, we run the risk of creating a parallel movement on the margins of our traditions and jus-

tifying that decision by saying that peoples' attitudes are not changing fast enough.³¹ If we adopt positions that are outside religious traditions, can we really expect to be able to rally those traditions around a cause?

Providing a theological interpretation of the praxis of dialogue allows it to have an even greater impact on our behavior and the behavior of those who will follow us. Only in this way will it be possible to persevere in our hospitable response to nature. In the end, each individual enters into dialogue according to his or her own charism; no individual or group can claim to exhaust all the possibilities. If Christians are to come to a new understanding of nature and devote themselves to its cause, collaboration among the different contributors is crucial, as is an understanding of dialogue as an ecclesial activity.

One of the greatest challenges Christians will face is learning to live out their faith by being open to those who pray and believe differently than they do. If Christians are to change the way they regard nature, they need to be open to religious otherness. Otherwise it will be impossible to become a part of the burgeoning movement that Ewert Cousins relates to the vision of Teilhard de Chardin: "He sees individuals deepening their autonomy by uniting the centers. In such a union both unity and difference are maintained in absolute polarity and creative harmony."³² In this way religions can draw on and share their respective stores of spiritual wisdom, releasing the energy needed to create a "cosmic solidarity" that will lead to a new global ecological conscience.³³

Green Monasticism

Donald W. Mitchell & William Skudlarek, OSB, Editors

May 2008, Buddhist and Christian monastics gathered at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, to discuss how their respective religions conceived of our relationship with the planet, what they felt was the responsibility of their faith traditions, orders, and individual communities toward healing both our inner and outer ecology. *Green Monasticism* collects the work of these scholars and practitioners in a volume that reflects both deep engagement and critical thinking about protecting the environment.



"We need people of faith to encourage us to find ways to live more sustainably and responsibly on our planet. Monastic communities embody values such as modesty, thrift, and gratitude, and we can be inspired by their commitment and dedication to these ideals. *Green Monasticism* encompasses their voices and aspirations, and I welcome its contribution to the environmental debate, which is the most urgent challenge of our time."

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Green Monasticism: Buddhist and Christian Responses to an Environmental Calamity

Green Monasticism

A Buddhist—Catholic Response
to an Environmental Calamity



Donald W. Mitchell
& William Skudlarek, OSB, Editors

The Gethsemani Encounters

We recognize greed and apathy as the poisons at the heart of ecological damage and unbridled materialism. Throughout the centuries, monastic life has inspired generous personal, social, and spiritual effort for the good of others. We give and receive in the spirit of gratitude.

We acknowledge our complicity in damaging the environment and will make a sincere and sustained effort to reduce our negative impact on the planet. We are committed to take more mindful, universal responsibility for the way we use and manage the earth's resources. We resolve to develop our hearts and minds in ways that will contribute to a sustainable and hopeful future for our planet. We renew our commitment to the sacredness of the earth, relating to it as a community, not a commodity.

May our love for all beings and this world sustain our efforts and may our earth be revitalized. This is our prayer and commitment.

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