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The thesis of Jennifer Lail entitled
The Ecological Vision of Thomas Berry

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The Ecological Vision of Thomas Berry

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the relationship between religion and science and, more specifically, the important link between theology and ecology. Modern culture tends to divorce the natural world from theology, showing, in the words of Thomas Berry, "little concern for the natural world as the primary bearer of religious consciousness."¹ Such a view, endemic to our secularized, industrially-driven consumer society, is motivated in part, according to Berry, by an anthropocentric world view which disregards the integral nature of human-earth relations: "We. . . seldom consider ourselves as species among species."²

The most direct result of this view is man's subjugation of nature, which, fueled by the mythic ideal of progress, has led us into a period of unprecedented environmental destruction and resource depletion. The impact of this self-inflicted crisis extends beyond the physical environment to the human spirit and intellect. It is this dynamic of interconnectedness which Thomas Berry is concerned with.

¹Thomas Berry, "The Cosmology of Religions" in Pluralism and Oppression: Theology in World Perspective, ed. Paul Knitter. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988) 100-101.

²Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988) 21.

Berry, a Passionist priest and historian of cultures, is the author of The Dream of the Earth (1988), a collection of sixteen essays which outline a “functional cosmology” based upon the idea of the earth as an “irreversible time developmental process,” a process that is both scientific and religious in nature. In these and other writings, Berry concerns himself with a “new story” which recognizes that everything in the universe is genetically related and acknowledges that the religious stories of human creation cannot be separated from the evolutionary processes of the natural world. Based on his recognition of the mutuality of human-earth relations, Berry proposes an environmental ethic grounded in the renewal of the earth as a “bio-spiritual planet.” Central to Berry’s vision is the need to recognize “the sacred character of the natural world as our primary revelation of the divine” and the need “to diminish our emphasis on redemption experience in favor of a greater emphasis on creation processes.”³ While Berry’s vision is broad in scope, this paper will be limited to an examination of Berry’s criticism of the Christian redemptive experience as lacking concern for the natural world, and why he feels creation-centered spirituality offers an important, and necessary, ethical framework for confronting the threat of planetary extinction.

³Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988) 81.

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The growth of what is called the Modern World has been, by turns, both the cause and the effect of the destruction of that old sense of universal order. The most characteristically modern behavior, or misbehavior, was made possible by a redefinition of humanity which allowed it to claim, not the sovereignty of its place, neither godly nor beastly, in the order of things, but rather an absolute sovereignty, placing the human will in charge of itself and of the universe.

And having thus usurped the whole Chain of Being, conceiving itself, in effect, both creature and creator, humanity set itself a goal that in those circumstances was fairly predictable: it would make an Earthly Paradise. The projected Paradise was no longer that of legend: the lost garden that might be rediscovered by some explorer or navigator. The new paradise was to be invented and built by human intelligence and industry. And by machines. For the agent of our escape from our place in the order of Creation, and of our godlike ambition to make a Paradise, was the machine—not only as instrument, but even more powerfully as metaphor. Once, the governing human metaphor was pastoral or agricultural, and it clarified, and so preserved in human care, the natural cycles of birth, growth, death, and decay. But modern humanity's governing metaphor is that of the machine. Having placed ourselves in charge of Creation, we began to mechanize both the Creation itself and our conception of it. We began to see the whole Creation merely as raw material, to be transformed by machines into a manufactured Paradise.

And so the machine age did away with mystery on the one hand and multiplicity on the other. The Modern World would respect the Creation only insofar as it could be *used* by humans. Henceforth, by definition, by principle, we would be unable to leave anything as it was. . . . By means of the machine metaphor we have eliminated any fear or awe or reverence or humility or delight or joy that might have restrained us in our use of the world. We have indeed learned to act as if our sovereignty were unlimited and as if our intelligence were equal to the universe. Our "success" is a catastrophic demonstration of our failure. The industrial Paradise is a fantasy in the minds of the privileged and the powerful; the reality is a shambles.

Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the relationship between religion and science and, more specifically, the important link between theology and ecology. Modern culture tends to divorce the natural world from theology, showing, in the words of Thomas Berry, “little concern for the natural world as the primary bearer of religious consciousness.”¹ Such a view, endemic to our secularized, industrially-driven consumer society, is motivated in part, according to Berry, by an anthropocentric world view which disregards the integral nature of human-earth relations.

The most direct result of this view is man’s subjugation of nature, which, fueled by the mythic ideal of progress, has led us into a period of unprecedented environmental destruction and resource depletion. The impact of this self-inflicted crisis extends beyond the physical environment to the human spirit and intellect. It is this dynamic of interconnectedness which Thomas Berry is concerned with.

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an “irreversible time developmental process,” a process that is both scientific and religious in nature.² In these and other writings, Berry concerns himself with a “new story” which recognizes that everything in the universe is genetically related and acknowledges that the religious stories of human creation cannot be separated from the evolutionary processes of the natural world. Based on his recognition of the mutuality of human-earth relations, Berry proposes an environmental ethic grounded in the renewal of the earth as a “bio-spiritual planet.”

Central to Berry’s vision is the need to recognize “the sacred character of the natural world as our primary revelation of the divine” and the need “to diminish our emphasis on redemption experience in favor of a greater emphasis on creation processes.”³ While Berry’s vision is broad in scope, this paper will be limited to an examination of Berry’s criticism of Christian theology, with its attendant anthropocentrism and emphasis on redemptive experience, as lacking concern for the natural world, and why he feels creation-centered spirituality offers an important, and necessary, ethical framework for confronting the threat of planetary extinction.

Berry calls himself a “geologist,” and describes his studies as an

²Ibid., 99.

³Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988) 81.

attempt “to understand the unity and differentiation of human cultures and the dynamism that shaped their sense of reality and value. . . . I was progressively led back to what I call the study of the earth community, including its geological and biological as well as its human components.”⁴

His work builds upon the premise that we are entering a time in which “such an order of change in its nature and in its order of magnitude has never before entered into earth history or into human consciousness.” Man’s ability to alter significantly the chemical and biological processes of the planet was articulated by the American naturalist and writer Rachel Carson in 1962: “Only within. . . the present century has one species--man--acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world.”⁵

This paper is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, entitled “Technological Man,” establishes a contextual framework for Berry’s ideas, examining some of the characteristics of modern culture which have brought us into what Berry has called “the scientific-technological period.” This examination of ideas that shape the modern American viewpoint is intended to show how the “ever-rising and unsatiated expectation of Western

⁴Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds. Thomas Berry and the New Comology (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987) 3.

⁵Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1962) 5.

peoples”⁶ has defined our relationship with the earth. Chapter Two, “Christology and Ecology,” will consider Berry’s argument that our present ecological crisis has been fostered by certain aspects of subject-centered Christianity, particularly its anthropocentric and redemptive emphasis. Chapter Three, “Wisdom Traditions & The New Origin Story,” will explain how creation spirituality differs from the fall/redemption tradition criticized by Berry, and will consider briefly how the creation-centered traditions of Native Americans and other indigenous groups provide a model for constructing a meaningful and sustainable culture. Throughout the paper, I will emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of Berry’s thought, comparing his ideas with those of other writers who have influenced, or who have been influenced by, Berry’s work. I hope to show why these ideas are important, how they relate to modern culture, and how they contribute to our understanding of the way we live.

⁶Thomas Berry, “The Spirituality of the Earth” in Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology, ed. Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay McDaniel (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1990) 154.

CHAPTER 1

TECHNOLOGICAL MAN

The “redefinition of humanity” which has led us to seek the “industrial Paradise” decried by Wendell Berry in The Unsettling of America is a logical starting point for describing how contemporary views regarding religion and our relationship with the earth have evolved. Early theology saw nature “as created by the divine and as a primary revelation for the divine. . . intimately related to the biblical revelation.” However, this focus on the natural world as the source of religion gave way to “the ever-increasing awareness of the pathos of the human, the need to fill the obligations associated with divine-human and inter-human relations.”⁷

This shift, which has resulted in both the physical devastation of the planet and a sense of alienation from basic life processes, is both cause and result of the anthropocentric, individualistic world view that defines our existence. That sense of alienation has led to the belief of future deliverance which is embedded in our cultural mythology under the guise of progress, a journey toward both religious and technological salvation.

Thomas Berry’s views, and those of other ecological theologians, have evolved as a response to the human destruction of the Earth. Some general

⁷Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, The Universe Story (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) 198-99.

observations about the condition of modern man and his environment will form the basis of this chapter, which will examine Berry's ideas in relation to our fundamental assumptions about what it means to be human in the universe. These assumptions descend from the interplay of a number of seemingly distinct concepts: evolution, creation, science, religion, economics, technology, industrialization, capitalism, individualism, and anthropocentrism. We easily associate, for example, science and technology or creation and religion. Likewise, it is easy to see that individual competition is engendered by both the capitalistic economic system and the liberal democratic ideal of personal liberty. Yet our secular world view -- the "conviction that 'this world,' the immediate environment available to ordinary experience and scientific investigation, is all there is to reality⁸ -- disregards the fact that the universe itself is, as Berry claims, a spiritual as well as a physical process and that human consciousness emerges from both science and religion.

Anthropocentrism -- the conviction that human beings are the most significant entity of the universe and thus know what is best for ourselves and the planet -- has led us to control nature for the benefit of man, sacrificing the natural world to an unqualified growth economy. The industrial process is generally accepted, yet the failure to recognize the "universe as an intimate

⁸John Haught, What is Religion? (New York: Paulist Press, 1990) 199.

presence of all things to each other, each thing sustained in its being by everything else”⁹ jeopardizes our very existence. The physical environment serves not only as the biotic community that sustains human life, but ultimately determines its form and survival. If we destroy nature, the primary revelation of the divine, we destroy ourselves.

The link between theology and ecology is illuminated further by William French, who has noted that “. . . environmental problems, which raise key questions about humanity’s relationship to the nonhuman natural world, pose fundamental challenges to firmly held beliefs regarding the sphere of God’s action and grace, the nature of freedom, eschatology, the range of value, and rights.”¹⁰ These “firmly held beliefs” are supported by what Berry calls the cosmological myth, the theories dealing with the origin, structure and space-time relationships of the universe. This mythology serves as our primary understanding of how things came to be. Berry holds that “we are at the end of an entire religious-civilizational period”¹¹ marked by a fundamental shift in our conception of structural and space-time orientation. Berry advocates a new understanding of the universe as an

⁹Berry and Swimme 219.

¹⁰William C. French, “Subject-centered and Creation-centered Paradigms in Recent Catholic Thought,” The Journal of Religion 70 (January 1990): 49.

¹¹Berry, Pluralism 101.

irreversible time developmental process which moves beyond -- not destroying, but transcending -- the traditional, sectarian creation stories, which no longer provide a "context in which life [can] function in a meaningful manner."¹²

Since Man has the capacity for conscious self-reflection and at any given time exists within a specific political, economic, and social order, consideration of the "condition of mankind" is certainly not exclusive to contemporary cultures. What is unique to the modern age is our tendency to exclude the Universe order from consideration of the human condition. This denial of the reciprocal relationship between part and whole, as Jerry Mander has noted, is indicative of an anthropocentric world view which erroneously "sees Western technological society as the ultimate expression of the evolutionary pathway."¹³ Further, we view evolution as a physical process only, neglecting its spiritual/mythic dimension.

The need for a vision which acknowledges the interconnectedness of humans and the Earth is one of the central themes in Berry's work. We find this view in the work of many other writers, such as the American naturalists

¹²Thomas Berry, "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values," Cross Currents 37 (1987): 187.

¹³Jerry Mander, In the Absence of the Sacred (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991) 209.

Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, whose ideas formed the basis of the modern environmental movement. Leopold in particular significantly influenced Berry's work. In his now famous essay, "A Land Ethic," he writes, "All ethics so far evolved rest on a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . ." Carson's widely read book, Silent Spring, was one of the first to direct public attention to the damage done to the environment and ultimately to people by the widespread and indiscriminate use of pesticides -- "the synthetic creations of man's mind, brewed in his laboratories, and having no counterparts in nature" -- and contains numerous references to the essential relationship between man and nature. Like Berry and Mander, she is critical of anthropocentrism and laments that "the rapidity of change and the speed with which new situations are created follow the impetuous and heedless pace of man rather than the deliberate pace of nature."¹⁴

Closely related to anthropocentrism is individualism.

"Individualism," Robert Bellah writes, "lies at the very core of American culture. . . We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit. . . is

¹⁴Ibid., 7.

sacrilegious.”¹⁵ Driven by economic self-interest, Americans define success in terms of the outcome of free competition among individuals in an open market. The pre-industrial era in which subsistence needs were met by human ingenuity acting upon the natural world stands in stark contrast to our present cash economy, in which we compete not for survival but for consumer goods, in the process defining ourselves through our consumptive patterns. Bellah observes that “for over 100 years....the middle class has imagined that the virtual meaning in life lies in the acquisition of ever-increasing status, income and authority, from which genuine freedom is supposed to come.”¹⁶

The “Darwinian principle of natural selection, indicating that the primary attitude of each individual and each species is for its own survival at the expense of others”¹⁷ is not unlike the individualistic, competitive tendencies fostered by capitalistic values. Berry points out that even though Darwin established the theory of organic evolution, he showed “no real appreciation of the principle of intercommunion.”¹⁸ Leopold’s community

¹⁵Robert Bellah, et al. Habits of the Heart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 142.

¹⁶Ibid., 234.

¹⁷Berry, Liberating 154.

¹⁸Ibid.

concept expands Darwin's idea, placing it in a moral context which acknowledges the capacity of humans for reflective self consciousness: "[Man's] instincts prompt him to compete for his place in [the] community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for). The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land."¹⁹ It is not difficult to see the parallel between the ethical implications of individual competition for survival and economic competition as the disciplinary process of the market system. Following the profit incentive is the legitimate object of market behavior and the profit motive has favored progress over process, with devastating results for both man and earth.

The ethics of what we now call land use and agriculture emerged with the inauguration of tool-using practices by the first humans 2.6 million years ago, followed by the selection and cultivation of plants and the domestication and pasturing of animals. Our socio-political order is largely derived from changes in economic relationships that began with the earliest inter-village trade in the Neolithic period. Berry and Swimme write, "With the emphasis on private property a sense of the individual came into being, and the right of

¹⁹Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic" in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 219.

the individual to own and exploit property.”²⁰ Later, “industrial development undermined the 19th century independent citizen’s basis for dignity, which was labor on his own property.”²¹ The tendency towards specialization to increase material well-being resulted in the fragmentation of the spiritual and cultural life.²² Wendell Berry has called specialization the “disease of the modern character,” and writes,

The aim of specialization may seem desirable enough...The aim is to see that the responsibilities of government, law, medicine, engineering, agriculture, education, etc., are given into the hands of the most skilled, best prepared people. The difficulties do not appear until we look at specialization from the opposite standpoint -- that of individual persons. We then begin to see the grotesquery -- indeed the impossibility -- of an idea of community wholeness that divorces itself from any idea of personal wholeness. The first, and best known, hazard of the specialist system is that it produces specialists. . . [for example] inventors, manufacturers, and salesmen who have no concern for the possible effects of those devices. . . [it also leads to] a calamitous disintegration. . . of the various functions of character: workmanship, care, conscience, responsibility. Even worse, a system of specialization requires the abdication. . . of various competencies that were once personal and universal.²³

²⁰Swimme and Berry 213-14.

²¹Bellah 261.

²²In 1956, Frederick Kapel, then President of AT&T, expressed his belief that “we are involved in one of the greatest ideological struggles of all time . . . a contest between two basic concepts: One is that men are capable of faith in ideas that lift their minds and hearts, ideas that raise their sights and give them hope, energy and enthusiasm. Opposing this is the belief that the pursuit of material goods is what life is all about” (Heilbroner, Limits 98).

²³Wendell Berry 19.

The dignity of man has been compromised by this radical change in economic, and hence socio-political, structure: the ideal society, “whose overriding aim will be the cultivation and the enrichment of all human beings, in all their diversity, complexity, and profundity”²⁴ is a myth. Now, Bellah maintains, the primary aim of modern society is to provide physical security and material well-being for its members. From the perspective of the average citizen, Jim Reichert laments that “our whole thinking process is behind trying to stay alive financially.”²⁵

Convenience is the cornerstone of the modern push for technological advancement, and controlling nature for the benefit of man built and sustains our economic systems. Economics, which as a discipline is concerned with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services, is essential to any discussion of how we live. It incorporates many fundamental issues, including how we define progress, how we define value, and our conception of personal freedom and the public good. However, consumption, as Berry argues, can only continue until the natural resources of the planet are exhausted or until the poisons introduced by humans into

²⁴Robert Heilbroner, The Limits of American Capitalism (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 134.

²⁵Bellah 198.

the environment cycle back into the system of food production. Simply, "an exhausted planet is an exhausted economy;" therefore, it is imperative that we recognize human economic functions as subordinate to those of the planetary economy. Berry observes that the consumptive patterns which threaten to close down "the life systems of the planet in such an order of magnitude. . . are symptoms and consequences of a vast turn in human consciousness that originated deep in the human process itself."²⁶

Harvey Cox, author of The Secular City (1965), early identified and glorified the secularization of modern man and woman, living in world characterized by automation, mass communication, mobility, and anonymity. His argument that we are "pragmatic men, whose interest in religion is at best peripheral" offers further evidence of the negation of the intimate unity between man, nature and the divine. Cox's observation regarding religion is quite different from Toqueville (Democracy in America, 1835), who "saw religion primarily as a powerful influence on individual character and action. . . as reinforcing self-control and maintaining moral standards but also as an expression of the benevolence and self-sacrifice that are antithetical to competitive individualism."²⁷

²⁶Berry, Dream 38.

²⁷Bellah 223.

The alienation and isolation of the natural world is one reason Berry cites for our destructive tendencies toward the material world: we view the natural world as an external element to be manipulated by man and machine. Our separation from the natural world is profound. As Jerry Mander, author of In the Absence of the Sacred (1991), writes, we live within

a world that is totally manufactured, a creation of human invention. We are surrounded by pavement, machinery, concrete structures. Automobiles, airplanes, computers, appliances, television, electric lights, artificial air have become the physical universe with which our senses interact. They are what we touch, observe, react to. They are themselves "information", in that they shape how we think and, in the absence of an alternate reality (i.e. nature), what we think about and what we know.²⁸

Human intrusion on the evolutionary process through scientific technologies has brought us to a point where "we consistently think of the human as primary and the earth as derivative."²⁹ Berry further observes that "our alienation goes so deep that it is beyond our cultural mode of awareness."³⁰

Our focus on knowing the universe through "empirical observational sciences rather than through intuitive process" has led us to regard scientific technology with the same reverence that classical cultures had for religious

²⁸Mander 31.

²⁹Berry, Pluralism 112.

³⁰Berry, Liberating 152.

world views. As religion has moved to the "periphery," the nation-state has become the primary sacred community. Berry finds this to be a flawed perspective, and argues that the "real history that is being made is interspecies and human-earth history, not nation or international history."³¹

The nation-state, defined by political boundaries, has become the primary referent for meaning and value. The socio-political order is both cause and effect of technological production. The nation-state provides both cultural identity and, through its production, the objects necessary for human sustenance and comfort. The acquisition of objects, products of the industrial-technological revolution, is succeeding spiritual and religious values as the basis for human value. Economic competition has become the dominant framework for considering our relations with other nations. Yet, as Berry argues, this view is short-sighted: "Our real threat is from the retaliatory powers of the abused earth, not from other nations."³²

Berry writes that the economics of our technological society

is dedicated to the role of moving the greatest amount of natural resources, with the greatest possible efficiency, through the consumer society, to the waste heap that is not the source of new life by way of fertilizing the fields and farms, but a waste heap that is dead-end at best and often enough a toxic source of further death. To increase this

³¹Berry, *Dream* 76.

³²Lonergan and Richards 11.

activity is the basic norm of 'progress.'³³

Berry finds that "...our supposed progress toward an ever-improving human situation is bringing us to wasteworld instead of wonderworld."³⁴

Herein lies the technological paradox: in trying to overcome hardships of life we have inaugurated others. How ironic that science, founded on human curiosity and meant "to have unlocked all the bounties of nature, has given us the power to destroy all life on earth."³⁵ This disregard of the relationship between part and whole has had unfortunate consequences as man has developed the land for profit and convenience. As Aldo Leopold notes, "[there are] . . . many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning."³⁶ The folly of man's domination over nature is stated aptly in Rachel Carson's observation that: ". . . insecticides are not selective poisons; they do not single out the one species of which we desire to be rid."³⁷

Specialization and fragmentation, functions of competition and

³³Thomas Berry, as quoted by Hope and Young, 752.

³⁴Berry, *Dream* 17.

³⁵Bellah 277.

³⁶Leopold 229.

³⁷Carson 99.

hallmarks of modern culture, have led us to lose sight of the idea of cosmic interrelatedness and have reinforced the idea of science as incompatible with religion. Robert Bellah maintains that "science, the most respected and influential part of our high culture. . . is not a whole, offering a general interpretation of reality, as theology and philosophy once did, but a collection of disciplines each having little to do with the others."³⁸ Berry and Swimme argue that "scientists have provided detailed accounts of the cosmos, but have focused exclusively on the physical dimensions and have ignored the human dimension of the universe. In this context we have fractured our educational system into its scientific and its humanistic aspects, as though those were somehow independent of each other."

Specialization as a function of competition is perhaps most evident in education. As the primary means by which we transfer cultural values, Berry writes, "the school fulfills in our times the role of the ancient initiation rituals, which introduced our children to the society and to their human and sacred role in this society. The tragedy is that the sacred or spiritual aspect of this process is now absent."³⁹ This loss occurred as we moved from what Berry has identified as the classical civilizational period to the scientific-

³⁸Bellah 277-78.

³⁹Berry, Liberating 152.

technological period:

education was more a training in manipulative techniques. . .the skills to be mastered were not the contemplative skills or imaginative capacities for dealing with numinous presence or with the aesthetic insight into the inner structure of reality; they were rather the skills needed by industry to bring forth the natural resources from the hidden depths of the planet, the skills to shape them in the manufacturing establishment and to make them available to a consumer-oriented society.⁴⁰

A recent letter to the editor of the *New Yorker* magazine further illustrates the extent to which the division between spiritual and material world is embedded in our educational system: Joseph McKeown, a high school teacher, criticizes "the popular notion. . .that reading stories is a leisure activity that has little to do with what employers require and, as such, it should give way in our curriculum to more technical writing and work with computers. Overlooked is the fact that without stories it is practically impossible to contemplate the human condition in any sustained meaningful way."⁴¹ Further evidence of how deeply the profit motive is ingrained in our value system is the evolution of the "practical" curriculum. Wendell Berry distinguishes between the practical, having "the nature of a commodity to be exchanged for position, status, wealth, etc. in the future" and the liberal

⁴⁰Berry, *Dream* 94.

⁴¹Joseph McKeown, "In the Mail," *The New Yorker* 10 April, 1995: 12.

curriculum, which “looks upon the student as the potential heir of a cultural birthright” and is based “upon definitions of excellence in the various disciplines. . . [studied] to understand the orders and kinds of thought and to furnish the mind with subjects and examples.”⁴² Eva Brann warns that “when education becomes an instrument for individual careerism, it cannot provide either personal meaning or civic culture.” Carolyn Merchant adds, “Ideas and ideologies, such as myths, cosmologies, religion, art, and science, offer frameworks of consciousness for interpreting life and making ethical decisions.”⁴³

We are faced with a physical and intellectual crisis which is directly linked to the degradation of the earth’s resources, yet we continue to ruin the earth in the name of progress. “That these centuries of ‘progress’ should now be ending in increasing stress for the human is a final evidence that what humans do to the outer world they do to their own interior world.”⁴⁴ The spiritual dimension of this crisis is marked by the “loss of meaning beyond consumerism, loss of community and connectedness with other people, and a

⁴²Wendell Berry 157.

⁴³Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 9.

⁴⁴Berry and Swimme 22.

loss of a secure sense of embeddedness in the rest of the natural world"⁴⁵ The link is clear. "As the natural world recedes in its diversity and abundance, so the human finds itself impoverished in its economic resources, in its imaginative powers, in its human sensitivities, and in significant aspects of its intellectual intuitions."⁴⁶

Simply, the industrial economy, based on specialization, fragmentation and competition, is not sustainable as presently constructed. The irony is that our progress will be obliterated by progress. Yet Berry proposes that "the crassness of our relation to the earth cannot but indicate a radical absence of spirituality in ourselves, not the lack of a spiritual dimension of the earth."⁴⁷ We will look more closely at this idea in the following chapter.

⁴⁵Spretnak 4.

⁴⁶Berry and Swimme 242.

⁴⁷Berry, Liberating 151.

CHAPTER 2

CHRISTOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

Having looked at the condition of modern economic man, let us turn to the religio-cultural context within which our present socio-economic structure emerged. This chapter will consider Berry's argument that the present ecological crisis has been fostered by certain aspects of subject-centered Christianity, particularly its anthropocentric and redemptive emphasis.

Traditional religious values and the spiritual values we associate with the earth are at the very core of humanity and society. In a broad sense, religion serves as a frame of reference by which an individual may relate himself to his group and his universe. By functioning as a code of behavior by which an individual may judge the personal and social consequences of his actions, religion has served as the ethical basis for Western civilization. Another dimension of religion recognizes a transcendent, sacred order and elaborates a technique to deal with the inexplicable or unpredictable. The origin of Christian theology lies in man's desire to explain the mystery of the human experience.

As John Haught points out, ". . . planetary environmental abuse stems predominantly from lands and cultures in which the Christian faith has been

a strong cultural influence.”⁴⁸ In this context, let us briefly look at the structure of subject-centered theology. I have relied heavily on William French’s explanation and critique of the subject-centered paradigm and have found a significant correlation between his work and that of Berry. Both criticize the tendency of the subject-centered model to “hold humanity as radically sovereign in relation to nature.”⁴⁹ Judeo-Christian religions are a model of hierarchical structure: one God, above all, certain humans over other humans, and humans over nature. French further defines the subject-centered paradigm as encompassing “a processive, eschatological focus, a *homo faber* anthropology, a wide-ranging endorsement of technology, industry, and science, and a buoyant optimism regarding our possibilities for progress.”⁵⁰ Like Berry, French does not disregard the positive contributions of the subject-centered paradigm, such as its reinforcement of the “emphases on human rights and the dignity of persons.” His concern is that by “turning to the person and to history” to the exclusion of creation and nature, “the nonhuman. . . world has been depicted as an arena to be transformed aggressively and dominated.” We have taken literally God’s injunction to

⁴⁸John Haught, The Promise of Nature (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) 4.

⁴⁹French 57.

⁵⁰Ibid., 58.

man in Genesis to “subdue the earth.”

Anthropocentrism

As Berry, French, Haught and others have argued, the subject-centered paradigm fosters an “anthropocentric ethic.” Environmentalism is an anthropocentric construct, Berry argues, rooted in our desire to improve our surroundings for human benefit while ecological consciousness implies recognition of and appreciation of the totality of relations between organisms (human and nonhuman) and their environment. Environmentalism, by failing to perceive the interconnectedness of the human-earth-divine relationship, trivializes nature and thus religion.

John Haught has argued that anthropocentrism is a response to a feeling of “cosmic homelessness”⁵¹ or, more precisely, a “defensive reaction” to our perceived lack of human significance in the universe. Although he finds that our sense of separation from the natural world and the universe is reinforced by both science and theology, we are limited here to a discussion of how Christian theology has promoted a sense of cosmic exile. “Christian theology under the influence of dualism has directed us to look toward a spiritual world independent of the physical universe, and so it has perhaps

⁵¹Haught, Liberating 161.

innocently sabotaged human concern for the earth and life.”⁵² He offers as an example of this “theology of exile” existentialist thought, which “. . .exalts human freedom. . .[but] has located the realm of freedom completely apart from nature.”⁵³ Correspondingly, we have located creativity “solely in the human sphere.”⁵⁴ Haught supports Berry’s idea of “the universe itself as the primary revelation” also proposing a view of religion as “expressions of the universe and earth” yet recognizes that there is little support for this view: “Social science looks at religious activity and expression as something done *on* the earth by our species, instead of. . . something the earth does through us, as a further phase of evolution’s groping toward mystery.” Like Matthew Fox and other followers of Thomas Berry, Haught finds “the image of the cosmos itself as story or an adventure into mystery provides the key” to “a hermeneutic of religions that distinguishes religious homelessness from cosmic exile.”⁵⁵

⁵²Haught, Liberating 169.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., 171.

⁵⁵Ibid., 161.

Redemption

Redemption can be defined in several ways, all of which lend themselves to technological or religious interpretation. Its literal meaning is (1) to free from what distresses or harms; (2) to free from the consequences of sin; or (3) to release from blame or debt.⁵⁶ Berry argues that emphasizing redemption over creation diminishes human responsibility for the natural world and does not emphasize divine presence in the natural order of things, fostering the “expectation of a . . . millennial period in which the human condition [strife] will be overcome” and superceded by a “spiritual reign” of peace and justice⁵⁷

In our secular age, we look to the church as provider of moral leadership. As we enter a period of unprecedented ecological devastation, Berry challenges “the relative silence of Christian traditions in dealing with this basic issue of human relationships with the earth, a situation which is undoubtedly due to the strong emphasis on the redemption experience with relatively little concern for the functional processes of the created world. . . we can identify the moral evil of suicide, homicide. . .and geocide, yet we have

⁵⁶Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1984 ed., s.v. “redemption.”

⁵⁷Lonergan and Richards 16.

little objection to biocide or geocide, evils of much greater dimension.⁵⁸ This inadequacy of religious response is puzzling given the biblical mandate of stewardship. Although stewardship implies control or management, which seems to run counter to Berry's conception of the natural world as the larger sacred community to which we all belong, its full meaning includes regard for the rights of others. The Western conception of grace (the unmerited divine assistance given man for his regeneration or sanctification), according to Charlene Spretnak, "has been influenced by St. Augustine, who presents grace almost entirely in terms of sin and redemption, a private matter in which no external elements are relevant."⁵⁹ Berry charges that the "personal savior orientation has led to an interpersonal devotionism that quite easily dispenses with earth except as convenient support for life."⁶⁰

Berry finds fault with several other elements of biblical tradition. Although acknowledging that "there are tributes to the earth in the scriptures and in Christian liturgy," he maintains that favoring the Bible as the only sacred scripture violates the principle of differentiation. Berry identifies

⁵⁸Berry, Teilhard 20.

⁵⁹Spretnak 25.

⁶⁰Berry, Liberating 152.

differentiation, subjectivity, and communion as the three basic laws that govern the entire structure and functioning of the universe. By differentiation, Berry means that the universe is composed of “identifiable and structured beings. . .with individual identity.” Each thing that composes the universe -- from galaxies, atomic entities, elemental forms, individual energy particles, living beings, to the “conscious world of the human where the differentiation attains its maximum expression” -- is an integral part of the whole. With regard to religion, Berry holds that each tradition “will be its full self only in its bonding with other traditions.”⁶¹

Rather than looking to the Bible alone for revelation, Berry holds that the universe itself is God’s primary revelation. In addition, the “Biblical commitment to a transcendent personal monotheistic deity” has led to a “diminishment of the divine in the natural world.”⁶² Berry maintains that covenant with creation must replace the commitment to a transcendent God.

Berry also finds fault with the classical Christian emphasis on the spiritual nature of the human against the physical nature of other beings.⁶³ We view the “natural world as object, without subjectivity or rights, certainly

⁶¹Berry, Pluralism 109.

⁶²Lonergan and Richards 15.

⁶³Ibid., 16.

not as participant in single earth community.”⁶⁴

The influence of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a paleontologist and Jesuit philosopher is evident in Berry’s work. Teilhard envisioned evolution as a spiritual as well as a material process, maintaining that the entire universe is evolving, and that there is a clear direction to this evolution based on the continuous rise in organized complexity, through which consciousness becomes possible. Although he regarded the human as both product and part of nature and held that “God’s grace infuses nature with vitality and lures evolution forward,” Teilhard’s break from creation-centered thought is evidenced by his view that “the emergence of the human personality ‘represents the culmination of the whole movement of matter and life.’ As such, humankind holds ‘title to the sovereignty of the universe.’”⁶⁵ Berry rejects “Teilhard’s sweeping endorsement of technological and industrial development.”⁶⁶ “That the most advanced Christian thinker of the century with a scientific background could not see the conflict in those relations is another sign of the inadequacies of our spiritual traditions, says Berry.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴Hope and Young 751.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶French 63.

⁶⁷Hope and Young 751.

CHAPTER 3

WISDOM TRADITIONS & THE NEW ORIGIN STORY

Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest and follower of Thomas Berry, writes that “to live is not merely to survive,” but also involves a “quest for wisdom.” In his book Original Blessing (1983), he criticizes fall/redemption spirituality for its failure to “teach believers about. . . creativity, about justice-making and social transformation, or about Eros, play, pleasure, and the God of delight. . .love of the earth or care of the cosmos.”⁶⁸ He argues for the recovery of a creation-centered spirituality as a means for reintegrating nature and religious traditions as the primary sources of wisdom. Such a reintegration is imperative to counteract two related crises: the ecological crisis, which we have considered in Chapter One, and the unemployment crisis. These crises of resources and independence are evidenced by what Charlene Spretnak has identified as a “loss of meaning beyond consumerism, loss of community and connectedness with other people, and a loss of a secure sense of embeddedness in the rest of the natural world.”⁶⁹

Creation-centered theologies “locate subjects integrally within the

⁶⁸Matthew Fox, Original Blessing (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983) 11.

⁶⁹Spretnak 4.

broader community of creation, all of which is understood historically,"⁷⁰ emphasizing original blessing over original sin. Matthew Fox writes, "The universe itself, blessed and graced, is the proper starting point for spirituality. Original blessing is prior to any sin."⁷¹ Concentration on human sin, rather than fostering hope, creates pessimism, leading to cynicism and lack of caring.

As William French notes, creation-centered theologies emerged "primarily from three contemporary sources: writers in spirituality [such as Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox], feminist theologians [such as Rosemary Ruether], and liberationist-oriented theologians. Feminist and liberation movements are rooted in opposition to domination. Like Berry, Ruether finds "ecological harmony" to be dependent on a view in which "each part is equally vital to the whole, rather than the linear competitive model in which the above prospers by defeating and suppressing what is below."⁷² Creation-centered traditions are feminist and Universalist rather than elitist, hierarchical, or patriarchal.

Creation-centered spirituality recognizes that "all persons and all

⁷⁰French 68.

⁷¹Unless otherwise noted, I have relied on Matthew Fox's comparison of fall/redemption and creation-centered spiritualities for this chapter. See Original Blessing, Appendix B.

⁷²As quoted in French, "Paradigms in Recent Catholic Thought," 66.

religions share creation in common.” Instead of an emphasis on personal salvation [Augustine], creation-centered spirituality emphasizes the “salvation and healing of the *people* of God and the cosmos.”

Correspondingly, rather than locating the Kingdom of God solely in the church, creation-centered traditions perceive the Kingdom to extend throughout cosmos and creation. “Because the fall/redemption tradition considers all nature “fallen” and does not seek God in nature but inside the individual soul, it is not only silent toward science but hostile to it.”⁷³

Creation-centered spirituality holds that “science, by teaching us about nature, teaches us about the Creator.”

Instead of viewing suffering as wages for sin, suffering is recognized as the birth pangs of the universe. Contemplation as the goal of spirituality gives way to compassion, justice and celebration. Guilt and redemption give way to thanks and praise and the recognition that eternal life is now rather than after death. Holiness as the quest for perfection gives way to a sense of cosmic hospitality. Redemption/fall traditions emphasize purity from world rather than hospitality to all of being, and place faith in intellect rather than in imagination. Redemption/fall traditions identify passion as a curse rather than as a blessing. They are dualistic (either/or) rather than dialectical (both/and) in nature, introspective rather than cosmic.

⁷³Fox 11.

The concept of original sin and the Fall is deeply embedded in Western culture, yet Berry argues that “the context of any authentic spirituality lies in the creation myth that governs total life orientation.”⁷⁴ He offers Native American spirituality as an example of a creation-centered tradition that combines reverence for land and nature with religious traditions. Charlene Spretnak writes, “Native peoples hold at the center of human life experiences of deep communion with the cosmos; from those, a people understand and honor their relationships and seek to retain the revealed wisdom through cosmologically oriented cultural practices that inform basic tasks. . .”⁷⁵

The imposition of a commercial trading economy on the Native American populations was devastating. Bernard Devoto wrote in The Course of Empire, “A culture was forced to change much faster than change could be adjusted to. All corruptions of culture produce breakdowns of moral, of communal integrity, and of personality, and this force was as strong as any other in the white man’s subjugation of the red man.”⁷⁶ We have subjugated ourselves through our own technology, by losing sight of the

⁷⁴Berry, Liberating 152.

⁷⁵Spretnak 102.

⁷⁶As quoted by Wendell Berry in The Unsettling of America, 6.

sacredness of air, water, and soil, the basic elements of a sustainable ecosystem. As Berry notes, "There is a certain triviality in any spiritual discipline that does not experience itself as supported by the spiritual as well as the physical dynamics of the entire cosmic-earth process."⁷⁷ It would appear that our present-day redemption/fall theologies are inadequate, for they fail to recognize the interconnection of "process; mind, nature, body and community."

Charlene Spretnak has questioned "modernity's flight from the insights of the wisdom traditions" in light of "the very real crises and suffering in the Earth community at this time, from which spirituality is too often discussed in isolation."⁷⁸ She adds, "There is no inherent reason that scientific inquiry and technological innovation could not have been informed all along by a spirit of communion with the sacred whole (rather than church politics or expansionist economics)."⁷⁹

In an essay entitled "The Historical Role of the American Indian,"⁸⁰ Berry describes the "mystical understanding" and "communion with the

⁷⁷Berry, Liberating 155.

⁷⁸Spretnak 7.

⁷⁹Ibid., 105.

⁸⁰Berry, Dream 180.

continent” central to native American spirituality. Both are integral to maintaining planetary and human health (physical and spiritual). The European invasion and subsequent drive to provide “civilization” by conferring dubious political, social, economic and religious salvation on a highly developed culture is indicative of an exploitative mentality that persists to the present. Ironically, few people are aware of the extent to which our constitution is drawn from the Great Binding Law of the Iroquois Confederacy, dating back to the 1400s. In addition, Berry points out, Indian-derived plants provide close to 1 / 2 of the world’s food.

The “exclusive commitment to white mans’ values, lifestyle, and sense of superiority” has almost destroyed the earth. We must look to the wisdom traditions for the survival of the continent as a viable habitat. Berry enumerates the qualities of this creation-based spiritual tradition which he feels are responsible for its survival and from which we can effect a return to a viable ecology: recognition of the presence of the cosmic, human, and divine to each other; recognition of a numinous mode of consciousness; and the capacity to reach deep into the numinous realm through art and ritual.

Wendell Berry’s classic review of modern agriculture, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (1978), addresses the interdependence of humans and the land. He criticizes the “mentality of exploitation” which is so “deeply rooted in our past” for producing our present condition, warning

that the

revolution did not stop with the subjugation of the Indians...is still going on. The economy is still substantially that of the fur trade, still based on the same general kinds of commercial items: technology, weapons, ornaments, novelties, drugs. The one great difference is that by now the revolution has deprived the mass of consumers of any independent access to the staples of life: clothing, shelter, food, even water. Air remains the only necessity that the average user can still get for himself, and the revolution has imposed a heavy tax on that by way of pollution. Commercial conquest is far more thorough and final than military defeat. The Indian became a redskin, not by loss in battle, but by accepting a dependence on traders that made necessities of industrial goods.⁸¹

Our contemporary relationship to traditional subsistence societies, described below by Peter Matthiessen, illustrates the political dimension of the modern "environmental movement," and provides a clear example of anthropocentrism compounded by western imperialistic tendencies:

How astonishing it must seem to the Greenlanders (and to the Icelanders and the Faroese), who have managed their marine resources so much better than the United States and Britain, that the English-speaking countries, which only recently desisted from pursuing the great whales to near-extinction, and then did so only when the slaughter became unprofitable, have awarded themselves the sovereign right to determine acceptable types of hunting for these peoples. . . Throughout Greenland, it is sea mammals, birds, and fish that permit the ongoing existence of human beings so the people's life depends on responsible harvesting of marine creatures, which are the basis not only of their diet and their livelihood but of their myth, tradition and culture. . . In traditional hunting, land and life belong to every member of a community. Greenland's mute sea ice and empty land are not an "environment" in the Western sense--a human habitat to be exploited. They are the ground of a hard life, and a realm of

⁸¹Wendell Berry, *Unsettling* 6.

memory and cultural renewal, providing a sense of continuity and tradition which lies at the heart of Inuit well-being.⁸²

We would do well to heed the example of the Inuits, who place great value on the function of myth as an interpretive device. Lewis Mumford, writing in 1961, recognized that

Our elaborate rituals of mechanization cannot take the place of the human dialogue, the drama, the living circle of mates and associates, the society of friends. These sustain the growth and reproduction of human culture, and without them, the whole elaborate structure becomes meaningless -- indeed actively hostile to the purposes of life.⁸³

Let us turn briefly to bioregionalism, a specific goal espoused by Thomas Berry, which links sustainable native traditions to our complex economic system and social structure. Addressing the relationship between community and character, Wendell Berry wrote

The community disintegrates because it loses the necessary understandings, forms, and enactments of the relations among materials and processes, principles and actions, ideals and realities, past and present, present and future, men and women, body and spirit, city and country, civilization and wilderness, growth and decay, life and death--just as the individual character loses a sense of a responsible involvement in these relations. No longer does human life rise from the earth like a pyramid, broadly and considerately founded upon its sources. Now it scatters itself out in a reckless horizontal sprawl, like a

⁸²Peter Matthiessen, "Annals of Conservation: Survival of the Hunter," The New Yorker, 24 April 1995: 76.

⁸³Lewis Mumford, The City in History (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961) 569-70.

disorderly city whose suburbs and pavements destroy the fields.⁸⁴

E. F. Schumacher, in his essay "Buddhist Economics," writes that "human activity is most effective and most enduring when it is in accord with the natural functioning of the ecosystem into which it is inserted."⁸⁵ His influence is apparent in Berry's promotion of bioregions, "identifiable geographical regions with mutually supporting life-systems that are relatively self-sustaining," as a model for moving toward a functional economy and sustainable human culture.

William French writes, "Science, [Berry] believes, has given us a remarkable spiritual opportunity by developing an empirical account of the birth of the universe and the emergence of the earth, of life, and of humanity. This "new story" of origins provides all cultures with a common source story even as it emphasizes humanity's integral relationship with the rest of the material world."⁸⁶ The new origin story views evolution as a spiritual as well as a physical process. Transcending present religious traditions, the "historical and cosmic can be seen as a single process."⁸⁷ Moreover, "the

⁸⁴Wendell Berry, Unsettling 21.

⁸⁵E. F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 56.

⁸⁶French 63.

⁸⁷Berry, Liberating 155.

human being is not a detached observer of this development but integral to the entire process.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸Thomas Berry, Comments 190.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the relationship between individuals and their environment plays a significant role in shaping people's lives and culture, particularly in an increasingly mechanistic age. We have looked at the ways the dualism of the redemption/fall tradition has contributed to the decline of our most important life support systems and why Berry feels that we must move from an anthropocentric to a biocentric norm.

Berry's writings on the relationship between theology and ecology reach across many disciplines to address the interdependence of human and nonhuman life systems, an interdependence which has existed throughout the evolutionary process of the universe, life forms, humans and consciousness. He urges us to look beyond the depletion of natural resources and acknowledge the relationship between material and spiritual progress and recognize where we fit into the universe process. Without a major reorientation of religious thought toward the understanding that "we are all part of the emergent process through which the cosmos reaches self-awareness," he argues, we will perish.

Why are we not responding to the obvious threats to planetary (and thus human) survival? Rachel Carson points out that "it is human nature to

shrug off what may seem to us the vague threat of future disaster."⁸⁹ The fact that these ideas are not in the mainstream of contemporary theology offers further evidence of how entrenched the subject-centered redemption model is in contemporary culture and our disinclination to contemplate the meaning of the human or our universe role in an interdisciplinary way.

Although interpretation of Berry's work has been largely confined to the academic press, the range of critical responses to his ideas from different disciplines indicates the importance of his vision for our time. While many people familiar with his work find that Berry's ideas comprise an important theological and ecological world view, several have questioned the feasibility of implementing his ideas. Hope and Young praise his "synthesis, imaginative insights, and courage in confronting the narrowness of traditional theology." Boyd, while applauding Berry's initiation of dialogue, writes

. . . I do not think that the Christian world will ever be willing to sacrifice the Redemption Story for the New Story. Not only is the Redemption theme central to the rituals that light our lives, but it is embedded in the human psyche and has found expression in the myths of ancient civilizations, as well as in our own sacred literature.⁹⁰

Others feel that Berry and other environmental thinkers exaggerate the extent

⁸⁹Carson 189.

⁹⁰Eunice Boyd, Review of Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology, Cross Currents 34 (1989): 116.

to which the Bible justifies an exploitative approach toward the natural world, or that Biblical tradition provides, in the words of Kenneth Woodward, “cultural sanction for the Industrial Revolution and its plundering of nature.” In one of the few references to Berry in the mainstream press, Woodward makes an important point:

It is one thing to rediscover the goodness of creation, quite another to regard the process of evolution as God’s primary word to man. To derive moral standards from the cosmos is to suppose that whatever has evolved is good.....But Berry’s theory of the self-regulating universe does not take into account the existence of moral evil, despite the evidence in the world around him. The human species has no doubt sinned against the environment, but it has also sinned against itself--and God--which is why stories of redemption still possess power, even in an ecological age.⁹¹

Aldo Leopold wrote in 1966: “No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it.” But Berry and other creation-centered thinkers have been calling for precisely this kind of change, recognizing that the way into the future is neither through faith in unlimited progress nor through scientific insight and technology. Berry would agree with Leopold’s admonition that we “need to quit thinking about decent land-use solely as an economic problem, and examine it in terms of what is ethically and

⁹¹Woodward 72.

esthetically right. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community."⁹² Berry writes, "As humans we need to recognize the limitations in our capacity to deal with these comprehensive issues of the earth's functioning. So long as we are under the illusion that we know what is best for the world, then we will continue our present course, with its devastating consequences on the entire earth community."⁹³ But Berry has faith that a reversal is possible, but only through a life orientation that goes beyond ending pollution to embrace ecological unity.

⁹²Leopold 240.

⁹³Thomas Berry, Dream 35.

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