

# The Spirituality of Earth\*

BY THOMAS BERRY

The subject we are concerned with is the spirituality of Earth. By this I do not mean a spirituality directed toward an appreciation of Earth. I speak of Earth as subject, not as object. I am concerned with the maternal principle out of which humans were born and whence they derive all that they are and all that they have. Humans in their totality are born of Earth. We are Earthlings. Earth is our origin, our nourishment, our support, our guide. Our spirituality itself is Earth-derived. If there is no spirituality in Earth, then there is no spirituality in us. Humans are a dimension of Earth. These two are totally implicated each in the other.

Not to recognize the spirituality of Earth is to indicate a radical lack of spiritual perception on the part of humans. We see this lack of spiritual insight in the earlier attitude of Euro-Americans, in their inability to perceive the spiritual qualities of Native American peoples and their mysticism of the land. The attack on these spiritual qualities by Christians constitutes one of the most barbaric moments in Christian history. This barbarism turned upon tribal peoples was loosed also upon American Earth with a destructive impact beyond human calculation.

The fragility of Earth has not yet impressed itself upon us. The brutality of our relation to Earth cannot but indicate a radical absence of spirituality in humans, not the lack of a spiritual dimension of Earth. The opaqueness is in human understanding of Earth, not in Earth's structure which expresses an abiding numinous presence. The Earth process has been generally ignored by religious-spiritual currents of the West. Our alienation goes so deep that it is beyond Westerners' conscious mode of awareness. While there are tributes to Earth in the Scriptures and in Christian liturgy, there is a tendency to see Earth as a seductive reality that brought about alienation from God in the agricultural peoples of the near East. Earth worship was the ultimate idolatry,

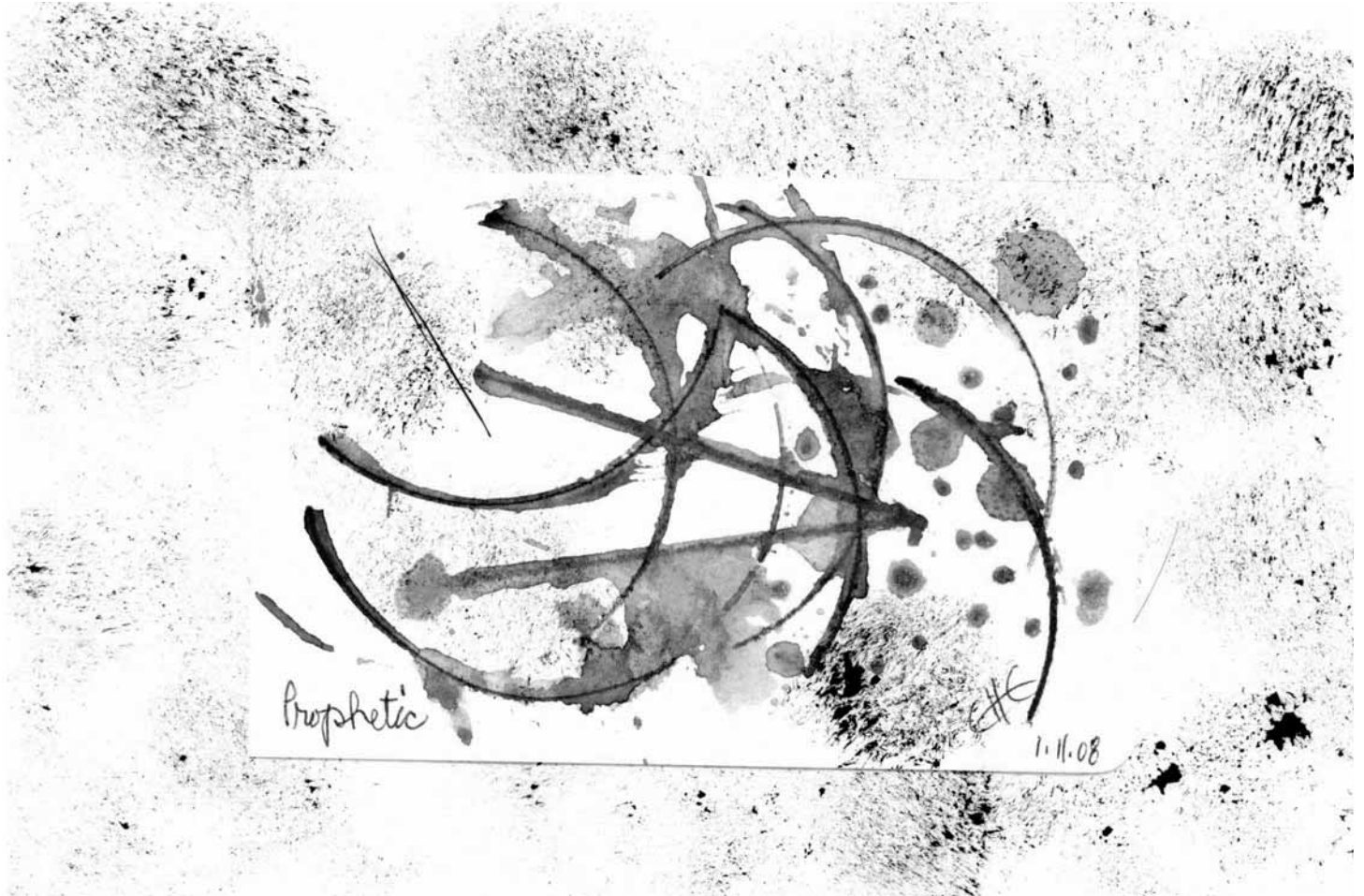
the cause of the Fall, and thereby the cause of sacrificial redemption by Divine personality. Thus, too, the Christian sense of being crucified to the world and living only for the Savior. This personal Savior orientation has led to an inter-personal devotionism that quite easily dispenses with Earth except as a convenient support for life.

This type of redemptive mysticism as it presently exists is possibly related in its origins to the Black Death of the mid-14th century, the most terrifying period in Western history, the period when a third to a half of the population died. At least partially in response to this experience, direct recourse was had to supernatural forces, to ancient spiritual powers, to esoteric traditions, to submerged pre-Christian rituals. But above all there was a new emphasis on redemptive forces within the Christian context, a renewal of primordial faith, of prayer to be sustained in a frightening world. Thus came Pietism, Puritanism, Jansenism, and a long list of sectarian movements, all with intensive spiritualities, generally with a strong Savior attachment.

This basic rejection of Earth in its existing form and longing for a transformed Earth manifested itself in a renewed Millenarianism, which in a variety of forms has dominated much Western thought in the past four centuries. Millenarianism involves a radical dissatisfaction with Earth and with the whole created order.

But while the devotional tradition thought to achieve salvation by spiritual processes in a redemptive context, another tradition emerged seeking to deal with the terror of life by inquiry into the functional dynamics of Earth and the entire universe. This research led to the secular-scientific-technological society now dominating human affairs to an overwhelming degree and establishing the main disciplines in the educational process. Especially when the secular-scientific approach to life is supported by the most powerful political form known in history,

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the modern nation state, the future direction of human affairs as well as the industrial exploitation of Earth is assured. The terror of life was to be answered by the domestication of Earth and the domination of the creative function of Earth by humans. This attitude, however designated as secular in form, involved a certain submerged religious dynamic which can be identified as a concern for creation process rather than redemptive process.

Thus we witness particularly in America two parallel societies: the redemption-oriented society with its spiritualities, and the creation-oriented "secular" society with its "spiritualities." These two communities have given extrinsic recognition to each other. Believing religious personalities are often proud of their acceptance of the modern world of science and technology. Scientists and technologists are often religious believers. Yet both of these societies are trivialized: redemptive-oriented society and its spiritualities because they are

isolated from the larger dynamics of the human community; and the secular-technological society because it has no depth of meaning, no numinous quality. Resolution of this impasse is the greatest single challenge to a functional contemporary spirituality.

We can produce spiritualities that function in a certain isolated context without regard for the larger society. We can produce spiritualities that offer redemptive solutions for society. But this latter is not liable to be effective in any extensive degree. It speaks in a rhetoric not available for secular society, or, if available, it widens rather than lessens the tragic inner division between the world of affairs and the world of divine communion. It does not offer a way of interpreting the inner life of society in a rhetoric available to the society. It does not establish an understanding of that authentic experience in contemporary life oriented toward communion with creation processes. Indeed, it does not recognize that the context

of any authentic spirituality lies in the creation myth governing the total life orientation.

This lack of appreciation of the Earth process is manifested at the present time by the training taking place in most seminaries. It is doubtful whether there is any seminary in the country where adequate attention is given to creation dynamics in the manner in which creation is experienced in our society. A long list could be drawn up of courses explaining redemption, soteriology, Christology, ecclesiology, revelation, Scripture, patristics, pastoral ministry, etc. Creation is generally presented as part of the tract on "God in himself and in relation to his creation." But creation in this metaphysical, Biblical, medieval theological context is not terribly helpful in understanding the creation process as this is set forth in scientific manuals or Earth Sciences or Life Science textbooks such as they are studied by children in elementary grades, high school, or college.

These classroom studies initiate the child into a world that has more continuity with his later adult life in its functional aspect than does the catechetical story of creation taken from Biblical sources. This schoolroom presentation of the world in which the child lives and finds his or her place in the world is all important for the future spirituality of the child. The school fulfills in our times the role of ancient initiation rituals introducing the child to the society and to his or her human and sacred role in this society. The tragedy is that the sacred or spiritual aspect of the initiation process is now absent. The child is given a physical process, a marvelous story of the emergence of the universe, of Earth, and of human beings, without reference to the spiritual aspect of this process. It is doubtful whether separate catechetical instructions with their heavy emphasis on redemptive processes can ever supply what is missing.

It may be that the later alienation of young adults from the redemptive, sacramental tradition is, in some degree, due to this inability to communicate to the child a spirituality grounded more deeply in creation dynamics as harmonized with modern scientific explanations of the galactic emergence of the universe, the shaping of Earth, the appearance of

life, of human beings, and the historical sequence in human development.

In this sequence, the child might learn that Earth has its intrinsic spiritual quality from the beginning, for this aspect of the creation story is what has been missing. This spirituality of Earth is what needs to be established if humans are to have a functional spirituality. Just how to give the child this integral world of spiritual and material—that is the issue. It is also the spiritual issue of the modern religious personality. Among our most immediate tasks is to establish this new sense of Earth as both spiritual and physical, and of humans as the consciousness, interpreter, and protector of that Earth.

We need to understand that Earth acts in all that acts upon Earth. Earth is acting in humans whenever humans act. In and through Earth, spiritual energy is present. This spiritual energy emerges in a total complex of Earth functions. Each form of life is integrated with every other life form. Even beyond Earth by force of gravitation every particle of the physical world attracts and is attracted to every other particle. This attraction holds the differentiated universe together and enables it to be a universe of individual realities. The universe is not a vast smudge of matter, some jelly-like substance extended indefinitely in space. Nor is the universe a collection of unrelated particles. The universe is rather a vast multiplicity of individual realities with both qualitative and quantitative differences, all in spiritual-physical communion with each other. The individuals of similar form are bound together in their unity of form. The species are related to each other by derivation; the later more complex life forms are derived from earlier more simple life forms.

The first shaping of the universe was into those great galactic systems of fiery energy constituting the starry heavens. In these celestial furnaces the elements are shaped. Eventually, after some ten billion years, the solar system and Earth are born out of stardust resulting from exploded stars. Earth particularly is our concern. So far as we know, Earth is the most unique of all the heavenly bodies. Here life, both plant and animal life,

was born in the primordial seas some three billion years ago. Plants came out upon the land some six hundred million years ago after planet Earth had shaped itself through a great series of transformations in forming the continents, the mountains, the valleys, the rivers, and the streams. The atmosphere was long in developing. Then animals came ashore along with plants. As life forms established themselves over some hundreds of millions of years, luxuriant foliage formed layer after layer of matter, which, then buried in the crust of Earth, became fossil formations. One hundred million years ago, flowers appeared and the full beauty of Earth began to manifest itself. Some sixty million years ago, birds were in the air. Mammals walked through the forest. Some of them, whales, porpoises, and dolphins, went back into the sea.

Finally, some two million years ago the ascending forms of life culminated in the awakening consciousness of humans. A wandering food-gatherer and hunter through all of this time until some eight thousand years ago, humans began to settle into village life. This change led to the archaic classical civilizations which have flourished so brilliantly over the past five thousand years.

Then some four hundred years ago a new stage of scientific development took place, which, in the 18th and 19th centuries, brought about that human technological dominance of Earth out of which the modern human being has emerged. This dramatic advance can be interpreted as Earth awakening to consciousness of itself in humans. The story of this awakening consciousness is the most dramatic episode of the entire Earth story.

The spiritual attitude that then caused or permitted humans to attack Earth with such savagery as we witness has never been adequately explained. That it was done by a Christian-derived society, and even with the belief that this was the Christian task of humans, makes explanation especially harsh for our society. Possibly it was the millennial drives toward a total transformation of the human condition that led humans, resentful that the perfect world was not yet achieved by divine means, to set about the violent sub-

jugating of Earth by their own powers in the hope that in this way the higher life of humans would be attained and human afflictions healed.

While this attainment and healing is the positive goal sought, it must be added that the negative, even fearful, attitude toward Earth resulting from the general hardships of life led to the radical disturbance of the entire Earth process. The increasing intensity shown in exploiting Earth was also the result of ever-rising and unsatiated expectations of Western peoples. Even further, the natural antagonisms of Earth were fostered by the Darwinian principle of the survival-of-the-fittest, indicating that the primary attitude of each individual and each species is for its own survival at the expense of the others. Out of this strife, supposedly, the glorious achievements of Earth would take place. Darwin's blindness to the cooperative and mutual dependence of each form of life on the other forms of life is amazing since he himself discovered the great web of life. Still he could not appreciate the principle of intercommunion.

Much more needs to be said on the conditions that permitted such a mutually destructive situation to arise between humans and Earth, but we must pass on to give some indication of the new attitude needing to be adopted toward Earth. This attitude involves a new spiritual and even mystical communion with Earth, a true aesthetic of Earth, a valid economy of Earth. We need a way of designating the Earth-human world in its continuity and identity rather than in its discontinuity and difference. In spirituality, especially, we need to recognize the numinous qualities of Earth. We might begin with some awareness of what it is to be human, what is the role of consciousness on Earth, what is the place of humans in the universe.

While the scholastic definition of a human being as a rational animal gives us some idea of humans among the biological species, it gives us a rather inadequate sense of the role of humans in the total Earth process. The Chinese have a better definition of humans as the *hsin* of heaven and Earth. This word *hsin* is written as a pictograph of the human heart. It

should be translated by a single word or a phrase with both a feeling and an understanding aspect. It could thus be translated by saying that humans are the “understanding heart of heaven and Earth.” Even more briefly the phrase has been translated by Julia Ch’ing in the statement that humans are the “heart of the universe.” It could, finally, be translated by saying that humans are “the consciousness of the world,” or that humans are “the psyche of the universe.” Here we have a remarkable feeling for the absolute dimensions of the human, the total integration of reality in humans, the total integration of humans in reality.

We need a spirituality that emerges out of a reality deeper than human beings, even deeper than life, a spirituality that as deep as the Earth process itself, a spirituality born out of the solar system and even out of the heavens beyond the solar system. There in the stars is where the primordial elements take shape in both their physical and psychic aspects. Out of these elements the solar system and Earth took shape, and out of Earth, human beings.

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. A spirituality is a mode of being in which, not only the divine and the human commune with each other, but in which humans discover themselves in the universe and the universe discovers itself in humans. The Sioux Indian, Crazy Horse, called upon these depths of his own being when he invoked cosmic forces to support himself in battle. Upon his cheek he painted the lightning, placed a rock behind his ear, an eagle feather in his hair, and the head of a hawk upon his head. Assumption of the cosmic insignia is also evident in the Sun Dance Ceremony. In this dance the symbols of the sun and moon and stars are cut out of rawhide and worn by the dancers. The world of living, moving things is indicated by the form of the buffalo cut from rawhide, and by the eagle feathers. The plant world is represented by the cottonwood tree set up in the center of the ceremonial circle. The supreme spirit is represented by the circular form of the dance area.

So the spiritual personality should feel that he or she is constantly in communion with those numinous cosmic forces out of which he or she was born. This cosmic-Earth order needs to be supplemented by the entire historical order of human development such as was depicted on the shield of Achilles by Homer and on the shield of Aeneas by Virgil. Virgil spends long pages enumerating past and future historical events wrought on the shield of Aeneas by Vulcan at the command of Venus, Aeneas’s heavenly mother. All these forces are presently available to us in a new mode of appreciation. The historical and the cosmic can be seen as a single process. This vision of Earth-human development produces the sustaining dynamics of the contemporary world.

That there is an organizing force within the Earth process with both physical and psychic dimensions needs to be acknowledged in language and in imagery. It needs to be named and spoken of in its integral form. Earth has a unified functioning similar to the more particular organisms we are acquainted with. When we speak of Earth, we are speaking of a numinous maternal principle in and through which the total complex of Earth phenomena takes its shape. Recently, biologist Lewis Thomas, considering the integration of life systems of Earth, had a sudden intuition in which he saw the total life process of Earth as a single cell. Such is their radical interdependence.

In antiquity this mode of being of Earth was indicated by personification. The name “Earth” itself designates a deity in Hesiod and in the Homeric hymns. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the personification is expressed as Cybele, and in the Greek world as Demeter. Biblical revelation, however, represents a basic antagonism between the transcendent deity, Yahweh, and the Earth mother of the surrounding societies. There is a basic effort here to keep the asymmetry in the relationship between the divine and the created. In the doctrine of the Madonna in later

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Christian history, many passages indicate that Mary was to be thought of as Earth, in which the True Vine is planted and made fruitful by the Holy Spirit. This Mary-Earth equation was not as adequately developed as it might have been in association with the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Probably it belongs to the dialectics of history that the direct personal association of humans with the unique historical individuals, the Savior and his Mother, had to develop before any adequate feeling for the mystique of Earth could take place. Perhaps, too, a full development of redemption processes was needed before this new mode of human-Earth communion could find expression in our times.

However this may be, a shift in attention is now taking place. Several things are happening. The most notable single event is that modern science is giving us a new and more comprehensive account of how humans were born out of Earth. The story of the birth of humans was never known so well as now. After discovery of the geological stages of Earth transformation and the discovery of the sequence of life in ancient fossil remains by George-Louis Leclerc Buffon, James Hutton, and Charles Lyell, came Charles Darwin's discovery of the emergence of all life from primordial forms presented in his 1859 *Origin of Species*. While Darwin saw the birth of humans only out of the physical Earth, Teilhard de Chardin saw the birth of humans out of both the physical and the psychic dimensions of Earth. Thus the whole burden of modern studies is to narrate the story of the birth of humans from our Mother Earth.

Once this story is told, it immediately becomes obvious how significant the title Mother Earth really is, how intimate a relationship exists, how absolute our gratitude must be, how delicate our concern. The long motherless period of modernity is coming to a close. Hopefully, too, the long period of human mistreatment of Earth is being termi-

nated. If it is not terminated, if we fail to perceive not only our Earth origin, but also our continuing dependence on our Earth-Mother, then it will be due in no small measure to the ephemeral spiritualities that have governed our thoughts and attitudes and actions.

In this mother-child relationship, however, a new and fundamental shift in dependence has now taken place. Until recently the child was taken care of by the Mother. Now, however, the mother must be extensively cared for by the child. The child has grown to adult status. The mother-child relationship needs to undergo a renewal similar to that in the ordinary process of maturing. In this process, both child and mother experience a period of alienation. Then follows a reconciliation period, when mother and child relate to each other with a new type of intimacy, a new depth of appreciation, and a new mode of interdependence. Such is the historical period in which we are living. Development of this new mode of Earth-human communion can only take place within a profound spiritual context: Thus the need for a spirituality that will encompass this process.

As a second observation concerning our newly awakening sense of Earth, we could say that a new phase in the history of the Madonna figure of Western civilization has begun. Association of the Virgin Mother with Earth may now be a condition of Mary returning to the center of Western civilization. Her presence may also be a condition for overcoming our estrangement from Earth. In the Western world, Earth known only in itself as universal mother is not sufficient. It must be identified with an historical person in and through whom Earth functions in its ultimate reaches. Phrases referring to Mary as Earth are found throughout Western religious literature. Whether this is anything more than a simple rhetorical device needs a thorough inquiry at the present time. But whether or not this relationship is given in any extensive manner in prior Christian literature, it is a subject of utmost importance for our entire civilizational venture. Few if any other civilizations were so deeply grounded in a feminine mystique as the Medieval Period of

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Western Christendom. A vital contact with this earlier phase of Western civilization is hardly possible without some deep appreciation of its feminine component. Thus we cannot fail to unite in some manner these two realities: Earth and Mary. Earth needs embodiment in an historical person; such an historical person needs an Earth identity to fulfill adequately her role as divine mother.

A third observation is that the essence of the new culture will necessarily be an age dominated by the symbol of woman. This, too, depends on the identification of woman with Earth and its creativity. Woman and Earth, these two are inseparable. The fate of one is the fate of the other. This association is given in such a variety of cultural developments throughout the world in differing historical periods that it is hardly possible to disassociate the two. Earth consciousness, woman consciousness; these go together. Both play a stupendous role in the spirituality of humankind as well as in the structure of civilizations. Our alienation from Earth, from ourselves, and from a truly creative man-woman relationship in an overly masculine mode of being, demands a reciprocal historical period in which not only a balance will be achieved but even, perhaps, a period of feminine emphasis.

A fourth observation I would make is to note our new capacity for subjectivity, for subjective communion. In this we are recovering the more primitive genius of humans. For in earlier years, humans experienced both the intimacy and the destiny of their relation with Earth and with the entire natural world. Above all they lived in a spirit world, a world that could be addressed in a reciprocal mood of affectionate concern. This is what gave rise to sympathetic magic as well as to the great rituals, the majestic poetry, and the awesome architecture of past ages. Nothing on Earth was a mere "thing." Every being had its own divine, numinous, subjectivity, its self, its center, its unique identity. Every being was a presence to every other being. Among the more massive civilizations, China gave clear-

est expression to this intimacy of beings with each other in its splendid concept of *jen* (human-heartedness). All beings are held together in *jen* as in Saint Paul all things are held together in Christ. But perhaps an even better analogy is to say that while for Newton the universal law of gravitation whereby each particle of matter attracts and is attracted to every other particle of matter in the universe indicates a mere physical force of attraction, the universal law of attraction for the Chinese is a form of feeling identity.

For this reason there is in China the universal law of compassion. This is especially observable in humans, for all men and women have hearts that cannot bear to witness the suffering of others. When the objection was made to Wang Yang-ming in the 15th century that this is evident only in human relations, Master Wang replied by noting that even the frightened cry of the bird or the crushing of a plant or the shattering of a tile or the senseless breaking of a stone immediately and spontaneously causes pain in the human heart. This would not be, he tells us, unless there exists a bond of intimacy and even identity between ourselves and these other beings.

Recovery of this capacity for subjective communion with Earth is a consequence and a cause of a newly emerging spirituality. Subjective communion with Earth, identification with the cosmic-Earth-human process, provides the context in which we now make our spiritual journey. This journey is no longer the journey of Dante through the heavenly spheres. It is no longer simply the journey of the Christian community through history to the heavenly Jerusalem. It is the journey of primordial matter through its marvelous sequence of transformations—in the stars, in Earth, in human beings toward an ever more complete spiritual-physical intercommunion of the parts with each other, with the whole, and with that numinous presence which has ever been manifested throughout this entire cosmic-Earth-human process.