

Ecological Spirituality

Beatrice Bruteau

Beatrice Bruteau is a philosopher and author with a background in Vedanta, Catholicism, and the natural sciences. Her books include *Worthy Is the World: the Hindu Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 1971; *Evolution to Divinity: Teilhard de Chardin and the Hindu Tradition*, 1974; and *The Grand Option: Personal Transformation and a New Creation*, 2001.

In August 2008, the Center for Ecozoic Studies received a letter from Beatrice Bruteau, which contained a copy of her article “Eucharistic Ecology And Ecological Spirituality,” which appeared in *Cross Currents*, Winter 1990-91, Vol. 40 Issue 4, at 499. In her letter she stated: “I wrote this article 18 years ago when I was seeing a lot of Father Berry. I had him in mind when I wrote it.”

Given below are excerpts from that article (footnotes omitted). A word is in order that the ideas are those of Beatrice Bruteau, not those of Thomas Berry. He supported generally the renewal of the four institutions of religion, government, business and education. Dr. Bruteau’s writing illustrates the work of transforming religious tradition.

This view of the world, which I am here calling the Eucharistic Planet, a view of the world as the Real Presence of the Divine, of the Absolute, a view of the world as a single living Body, in which the various members freely give themselves as food to one another--this view of reality has been around a long time. It has surfaced in almost every culture in one form or another. A number of ancient traditions described the unity of the world as the living body of a single divine person. Purusha in the Vedic tradition, Osiris in the Egyptian, the 18,000-year-old god of Chinese myth whose head became the sun and moon, his blood the rivers and seas, his hair the plants, his limbs the mountains, his voice the thunder, his sweat the rain, his breath the wind--and there are similar accounts in the other ancient tales--all these deities gave their flesh to be the life of the world. The Cosmic [Person who shares in the Divine and the human] is a well-nigh universal image of the organic unity in which we all share.

....

The cosmos, (like the Trinity), is communitarian, a single body of mutually feeding processes-- much more like beings that are in one another than like beings that are outside one another. It embodies, in its various finite organizations and processes and its ever more complex growth, the radiant expansive nature of that which it inevitably expresses. It is a Symbiotic Cosmos, and it is the artistic self-expression of the Trinity.

Hee-jin Kim, in his book *Dogen Kigen, Mystical Realist*, speaking of the Hua-yen school of Buddhist philosophy, says that

the entire universe consists of creative processes in which the multiplicity of things and events interact with and interpenetrate one another without obstruction. Particularities are not obliterated or deficient in any way, yet are unhindered in the perfect harmony of the total.

I think that is the right idea, the idea of the universe as the self-expression, or incarnation, or artwork, of the Trinity. Even among us, the work of the artist carries the reality of the artist in some way. Even when the work is something made outside the artist (as distinguished from, say, singing and dancing), if it is really a work of art, there is no way that the artist can not be present in that work. This reinforces the claim that the model for the universe is a community of beings in one another, rather than a collection of beings outside one another, and that it is not inappropriate to regard the cosmos as an “incarnation” of the Trinity.

The cosmos has all the marks of the Trinity: it is a unity; it is internally differentiated but interpenetrating; and it is dynamic, giving, expanding, radiant. And, as a work of art, the cosmos has another very important character: it does not exist for the sake of something else, something beyond itself; it is not useful, it is not instrumental; it is an end in itself, self-justifying, valuable in its own right and in its very process. This, I think, is foundational for the ecological virtue that is the moral dimension of the Eucharistic Ecology I am proposing. As the Artwork of God, the cosmos has value in itself, and that entitles it to certain rights.

• • • •

Ecology began as a scale of understanding biological relationships: besides the way cells and organs interrelate in the organism, and besides the way individuals interrelate in the species, there is the way species interrelate in a locality. Ecology has as its hallmark the principle that no one species is the species from whose viewpoint the whole is to be understood and appreciated. An ecological system is not, for instance, “cattle and their environment.” An ecological system has no privileged members, no single master. All members interact with all others: the soil and water, the weather and seasons, the bacteria, the various plants and animals, and all their ever-changing activities, these constitute the ecological system of a locality.

But now we can see into the matter more deeply. Beyond being the regional scale of biological interrelationships, ecology can refer to the moral “standing” of natural elements. Some years ago an attempt was made to defend a grove of redwood trees in California against a developer who proposed to make a parking lot on the land where they were living. The case was brought to court but was rejected by the judge on the grounds that the trees did not have “legal standing,” meaning that they did not have any rights that could, be infringed by another party. A deeper appreciation of our ecological situation would recognize the moral, if not the legal, standing of all parties to any ecological system, as well as the integrity of the system itself. Living beings and even inanimate aspects of the planet would

be conceived as having some kind of “rights” to their own existence and to protection in their own terms (as distinguished from protection derived from their utility for human beings). The definition of such rights--obviously a very difficult problem--and the acknowledgement of the obligation to respect them would constitute the basis of ecological morality.

And then we can do another thing with a deepened sense of ecology. We can use it as a metaphor for human relations and for the development of a planetary spirituality. The central theme in both these expanded meanings would be the abandonment of the privileged status of any particular party to the ecological system. Since no member of the system is to be seen as the system’s master, the motto of such a deepened sense of ecology could well be “All of you are brethren” (Matt 23:8). The basic moral virtue would be respect--the minimal degree of self-giving love--accorded to every member.

The deeper sense of biological ecology holds that our obligation to protect the environment is not based on our need or desire to preserve things in good working order only for ourselves and our descendants--so that our grandchildren will inherit unpolluted air, water, and land, and will still be able to enjoy seeing a variety of animals and plants. No, our obligation to protect the environment is based on the rights of the creatures who compose the ecosystem to their own lives, and on the value of cooperating with the natural movement of the planet in terms of the good of the whole. Indeed, we shouldn’t even speak of “the environment,” because that implies a privileged viewpoint, the viewpoint of the species whose “environment” it is deemed to be; whereas we propose a commitment to an ecological morality which abjures such privilege. Instead of saying that we human beings are the only really valuable or meaningful beings on the planet, and that everything else exists as our support system, put here by a thoughtful Deity for our convenience and pleasure, we seek a view in which all creatures compose the whole system together, in which all are valuable and significant. In such a view the living ecosystem is dependent on, and must be respectful of, all of them. “You are brethren, all of you.”

....

We can see ecology as spirituality and again we can see spirituality as ecological. Taking the first way first, we can see, for instance, that concern for the ecology, for the welfare of the planet, may be functioning at the present time as an avenue for development of a global spirituality. Earth Day is celebrated all over the world, and environmentalists everywhere preach much the same doctrines: rescue from pollution, recycling, thinking as a bioregion, respect for the dignity and beauty of the Earth, identifying with the planet as a whole, setting aside human in-group greediness

to reach out to the needy and to other species. There are common spiritual values, common spiritual insights in all these movements. They are bound to grow stronger and more explicit, because the problems that provoked them are real everywhere and are also growing.

....

Taking a privileged viewpoint--choosing one traditional spirituality to be the umbrella, or the master form, for the planetary soul--is not an ecological way of proceeding. The ecological paradigm shows all parties collaborating with equal dignity and constituting jointly the "we" of the ecosystem.

Another metaphor suggests itself, a musical metaphor: polyphony. Why should any of us insist that our particular history/doctrine/practice is the major theme, the melody, to which others can be considered harmony, counterpoint, accompaniment, back-up group? Why should we not each sing our own melodic line, interweaving it with all others so that the whole composes a living, moving harmony? Why not be a jazz band and improvise, with each musician creating—within the general, the generic, universal, planetary themes—a unique contribution? Why not all the Earth pray a polyphonic prayer?

Something like this may be the way we are naturally tending, despite the upsurge of fundamentalisms in several traditions. Planetary intercommunication is so inescapable now that themes of general concern and consensus are bound to emerge, even if they are initially overshadowed by conflicts. We may expect to grow into an ecological spirituality in the same natural--groping--way any ecosystem finds its balance among a variety of species, each in its own niche.

This will be a new thing for the planet, for the history of humanity's efforts to interpret its experience in spiritual, or ultimate, terms. And we will need stories even about how this new thing has arisen and what it means. But those stories will come. The time of revelation is not past. Revelation is what the whole history of the world is. If the time of revelation were past, God wouldn't be creative and the universe would be dead.