

Ultimacy-Changing the Way We Understand Ourselves and Our World

John B. Cobb, Jr.

By Earth Day 1970 it had become clear to a good many of us that one danger loomed over all others for the whole of humanity and indeed the whole earthly biosphere. For the first time in human history, humanity as a whole, and not simply its local groups, was threatened by destruction. We had earlier assimilated the fact that a nuclear war could have such consequences, but now we saw that even if such a catastrophe was avoided, the danger remained. It was not that someone might take a peculiarly dangerous or extraordinary action. It was rather that the consequence of continuing in the ruts in which we were already traveling would carry us over a precipice.

When this realization struck, most of us were already involved in multiple causes. We were trying to support the Civil Rights movement and stop the war in Vietnam. There was a liberation movement in Latin America, and feminism was gaining attention in the United States. Poverty remained a terrible problem worldwide. There were injustices everywhere. The response of many people was to add the “environmental crisis” to this list of important concerns. But it was obvious to others of us that this was not enough.

My own initial response was to emphasize the priority of making the changes that could lead to survival. This involved a certain withdrawal of time and energy from other causes, and making statements that seemed to belittle other concerns. But after a few months, I changed my mind and followed the leadership of the churches. Those in the church who understood the situation decided what was needed was to build alliances between environmental, peace, and justice oriented groups. The World Council of Churches added “sustainable” to its characterization of the good society as “just” and “participatory.” In the United States many church-related groups called for “eco-justice.”

This strategy reduced the suspicion on the part of ethnic minority groups and Third World peoples that improving the environment was just another excuse employed by the privileged for avoiding basic issues of justice. It also encouraged the effort for different people to find particular handles on environmental issues around which wide consensus could be reached. But this strategy also allowed the great majority of concerned people to treat the issue of sustainability as just one more to be put on the laundry list. In the local church it often received attention just one Sunday in the year. Few could claim that as a result of the widespread recognition of the importance of developing a sustainable society, the church has re-ordered its priorities so as to deal effectively with what is clearly the most important of all the problems we face.

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One Christian did not allow himself to be diverted by other issues. His name is Thomas Berry. He knew that humanity as a whole faced its ultimate crisis. Every issue should be faced with this fact in view. Its claim to priority should be fully acknowledged. Even those of us who have tried to weave the concerns of peace, justice, and sustainability together are profoundly grateful that his witness to priorities was not diluted.

Others of us saw the need to work at many levels. We needed improved technology and more efficient use of resources. We needed businesses to change their practices. We also needed different economic theories and practices. We could not get these without political changes; so we needed these as well. We recognized that basic change in attitude and vision on the part of all of us must take place, but this was just one level among the many that attracted our attention.

Berry believed that the changes we need will not occur at the many levels until they occur at the basic one—the way we understand ourselves and our world. Again he refused to be distracted from the fundamental task. Further, his work in the history of religion led him to believe that the key to changing the way people see themselves and their world is through their creation stories. He judged that today such a story must correspond with what is scientifically known. But simply repeating what physicists and astronomers say does not meet the need. The universe must be understood as a communion of subjects, and the story of its rise and development must be told in these terms. This would lead to the sense of participation in the universe and in the present stage of the story. With the help of Brian Swimme, he wrote a truly remarkable account of the ongoing creation of which we are a part, *The Universe Story*. Building on that account he named the next phase of life on this planet “the Ecozoic Age.” By using the language of geological epochs, he made clear the radical uniqueness of this crisis. He also communicated hope that the required changes would occur.

Thousands of people, perhaps tens or even hundreds of thousands, have been led to give real primacy to the task of living into the Ecozoic Age. No other writer in the ecological movement has had analogous effectiveness. In the decades ahead, more and more people, tens of millions at least, will fully recognize that the ecological crisis has the ultimacy that Berry has insisted on throughout his career. Others will give new formulations and make different proposals. But Berry’s formulation has pride of place, and it may prove the most durable and effective of all. However that may be, we all have reason to be deeply grateful for his unique calling and his extraordinary faithfulness to it.