

Ecotheology: “God-talk” and “Earth-talk” together

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Ecotheology is the study of the interconnectedness of human life within the planetary Web of Life and the connection of both to the Sacred Mystery and Source of Cosmic reality. The multitude of world religions today are all returning to their ancient scriptures and traditions to ground their exploration into offering meaning in this unparalleled time. We must hold the paradox of the unraveling of the Web of Life through climate chaos along with the expansive stories of Cosmic beginnings. So, ecotheology blends spiritual tradition with science’s recognition of the complete Oneness of all that is. Our lives of faith, ritual, and ethics must give us footing in these uncertain times; preaching, praying, and acting together with the expanded consciousness of ecotheology helps provide such footing.

“It’s all a matter of Story,” says Thomas Berry, who coined the term “geologian” for his work: a theologian who includes the Earth as the basis of his thinking and practice. Human beings orient their lives around the stories that they hear, learn, and live. At one time, the Biblical story or other sacred, religious/spiritual stories grounded the lives of the majority of people in every culture.

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Now, too many stories of the world’s people have been coopted through colonialism. Or the economic story has overridden sacred stories, based on the “invisible hand” of the market, as if humanity were nothing more than consumers, the Earth our resource base, and endless advertising at every possible turn, the gospel. Entering the newer story of the long unfolding of the Universe gives all peoples the opportunity of blending their religious and cultural stories with the current, almost mystical story of Creation offered by science.

Reflecting on “The Great Unfolding” (Berry’s term), we come to recognize the Oneness of All That Is, a truth at which mystics of all religions and spiritual paths have always arrived. Praying within this story of Oneness prompts us to act differently, more expansively and yet particularly, full of intention for the flourishing of all life.

The stories we live will dictate, automatically, our ethics. Philosophers and social researchers have found that our behaviors and choices proceed in a natural flow from the stories that form our lives. If our spiritual stories no longer hold the most potency in what matters to us as a culture and society, and our relationship to the Earth community/-ies is merely tangential to our daily lives, then our choices throughout our daily life will not incorporate the importance of this Life Planet and our (humanly) appropriate place within it.

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Ecotheological thinking invites us to raise our consciousness to see *all* our daily choices as ethical and impinging on the Earth. What we eat, what we wear, how we transport ourselves; what we give as gifts; how we power our homes and workplaces: in these times, every possible thing that we choose contributes to or undermines the flourishing of life among human communities and all the Life systems of the planet. How do we see, as God does (per Genesis 1: 31), that all of Creation is “very good” – and live accordingly? We are Earthlings.

The name “Adam” given to the first human in the Book of Genesis is derived from the word for Earth, which is “*Adamah*”. The human creature, formed of Earth’s clay and imbued with Divine Breath/Spirit, is Earthling, commanded to till and keep the land which supports its life (Genesis 2:15). So, this story underpins the Jewish and Christian ethics of Earth-keeping: valuing that which is so deeply valued by God, while attending in wonder to how the Creation manifests aspects of the Source of Life.

In Buddhist *dharma* (teaching), Indra’s Jeweled Net provides an image of a web in which each knotted juncture holds a multifaceted jewel reflecting every other complicated and related jewel/being. An ethics of dense interconnectivity arises from such a story: an ethics that is contextual, relational and responsible. Similarly, Confucian philosophy emphasizes the human being, on the one hand, as the Child of the Great Parents of Heaven and Earth. On the other hand, each person is *only* who they are in concentric circles of human and cosmic relationships – never a separate individual standing unrelated to the whole. Again, these images from the ancient Chinese teacher impel us toward honorably taking our place in serving the greater Whole.

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If one includes the story of The Great Flaring Forth a study of “deep time and space” from the beginnings of the universe, we come to recognize that the very elements of our bodies – and those of every being of every sort on the Planet – derive from the implosion of the supernova, giving birth to all the heavy elements that formed the Earth and related planets of our solar system. Oneness of all things again presents the truth of the ethics that must underpin our actions now.

As wondrous as it is to explore the glories of the vast reaches of the Cosmos through the likes of Hubble telescope images, for example, one of the best places to “land” ecotheology is in our own place. The watershed and “foodshed” where we live our lives open us to the daily mysteries that uphold our lives – earth, air, fire [the energy that cooks our food and heats and lights our dwellings], and water. In Jewish and Christian traditions, Divine Spirit manifests Itself in all these natural phenomena. In the Chinese philosophy of Taoism, and in the Indian medical system of Ayurveda, the well-being of the human derives from keeping these earthly elements in balance. From our physical well-being to our mental health, from our social and political interactions, our local place invites us to create relationships of justice, peace, and flourishing of life for all peoples and life-forms, right where we live.

The stresses of our contemporary lives are manifest at every turn, are they not? The sacred traditions of all peoples offer us ways to slow the speed of modern life; to wonder at the simple and complex beauties that surround and inhabit us; to desire less and love more – love all things and all peoples. Ecotheology and its accompanying ethics asks us to weave Earth and Cosmos into our God-talk and our daily and seasonal prayer and practices: for the Good of All That Is.

To see Ecotheology in action check out:

1. Yes Magazine - <https://www.yesmagazine.org/>