



EARTH MATTERS:
THOMAS BERRY, THE PACIFISM OF RELIGIOUS
COSMOLOGY AND THE NEED FOR ECOJUSTICE

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Abstract

This article begins by unfolding Thomas Berry's notion of *Pax Gaia*, using the concept as a key to unlock cogent aspects of his geobiological thought. Then, suggesting an addition to John Howard Yoder's typologies, the authors argue that Berry's vision of the peace of the Earth can be categorized as a "the pacifism of religious cosmology." Berry's cosmology of peace is then grounded with reference to concrete issues of ecojustice, with a particular focus on the interrelated concepts of "biocide" and "geocide." The article ends by highlighting the need for reinvention of the human, which emerges from the moral imperatives associated with the pacifism of religious cosmology.

"In the end, I suspect it will all come down to a decision of ethics—how we value the natural worlds in which we evolved and now, increasingly, how we regard our status as individuals."

-E.O. Wilson (1999, 16).

"Every particular being has the universe for context. To challenge this principle by trying to establish humans as self-referent and other beings as human referent in their primary value subverts the most basic principle of the universe. Once we accept that we exist as an integral member of this larger community of existence, we can begin to act in a more appropriate human way."

-Thomas Berry (2009, 138).

Thomas Berry's Peace of the Earth and a Geological View of Violence

In the closing chapter of *The Dream of the Earth*, North American historian of world religions and cultures Thomas Berry (1914-2009) lays out his vision for a cosmology of peace. Reflecting the principles of his Earth-centered focus, he argues for a peace beyond conceptions like *Pax Romana* or *Pax Humana* towards "*Pax Gaia*." Berry's chosen term signifies "the Peace of Earth [and is derived] from the ancient mythic name for the planet" (1990, 220). Berry identifies four characteristics of *Pax Gaia*, which rest on a recognition of: (1) the indivisibility of the Earth; (2) the dynamic nature of the Peace of the Earth; (3) a progressive dependence of human decision-making; and (4) the necessity of hopefulness (1990, 220-221). A more detailed exposition of each of these characteristics of *Pax Gaia* will demonstrate how, from Berry's perspective, "Earth matters" if one desires a substantive peace and justice.

First, Berry identifies the need to recognize that "the earth is a single community composed of all its geological, biological and human components" (1990, 220). Earth and its inhabitants have emerged from a continuous evolutionary process that began with the birth of the universe 13.7 billion years ago. Following on this understanding, Berry declares "that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects," since every player who has emerged within this epic of evolution has contributed in some way to the furtherance of this story (1999, 82). Within a reality of *Pax Gaia*, every member of Earth's community, whether human or other, belongs and cannot be discounted. Berry's perspective echoes Irving Goldman's description of "consubstantiality" that typifies the unity of organic life in the Kwakiutl worldview (1975, 201). Building on the work of pioneering anthropologist Franz Boas, Goldman reports that the Kwakiutl people of north-eastern Vancouver Island, "as genuine naturalists...accept the parity and the indestructible uniqueness of all other members of the common universe. Kwakiutl religion represents the concern of the people to occupy their own proper place within the total system of life, and to act responsibly within it" (1975, 201).

In line with this principle of consubstantiality, Berry argues that the universe forms a single, integral community in which all Earth's inhabitants are interdependent subjects. As such, the level of analysis for decision-making becomes the entire planet (1999, 4). Whereas the realist school of international relations sees the nation-state as the most significant unit in world politics (Morgenthau 1978, 4-15), Berry holds up the entire Earth community as the referential unit. On this bio-global level, issues that negatively affect ecosystem health in one area of the

planet are seen as ultimately problematic for all life.² Here, Berry is naming the crisis of relationship that occurs when the forces of greed and patriarchy damage human-Earth relationships (1990, 157). As such, Berry argues that it is not a United Nations that we need to carry us through the current planetary crisis, but rather, a “United Species” (1990, 161). Furthermore, Berry reminds us that the nations themselves are dependent on the Earth; without a viable planet, the nations would cease to exist. Indeed, because they have arisen on this Earth within the evolutionary processes of its geobiological history, Berry asserts that the nations also have a responsibility to allow for the continuance of the active functioning of diverse biosystems.

To save the earth is a necessity for every nation. No part of the earth in its essential functioning can be the exclusive possession or concern of any nation. The air cannot be nationalized or privatized; it must circulate everywhere on the planet to fulfill its life giving function anywhere on the planet. It must be available for the nonhuman as well as for the human lifeforms if it is to sustain life. So it is with the waters on the earth. They must circulate throughout the planet if they are to benefit any of the lifeforms on the planet (1990, 220).³

Secondly, *Pax Gaia* is “not some fixed condition, but a creative process activated by polarity tension requiring a high level of endurance” (1990, 220). *Pax Gaia* does not promote a static vision of peace. Rather, it recognizes that, just as a creative evolutionary disequilibrium has prompted Earth’s transformations to new levels of greater complexity and organization, any life-giving peace will necessarily emerge out of a similar creative tension (Berry 1999, 52). Sometimes the nature of this creative tension or conflict can be quite violent, such as the eruption of a volcano or the fury of a forest fire. Nonetheless, as Berry notes,

The Earth has found its way into being amid an amazing sequence of both destructive and creative experiences. A long sequence of cataclysmic events has shaped the continents and the various forms of life have themselves engaged in a continuing struggle for survival (1999, 167).

To grasp why Berry does not advocate static tranquility—a state that he describes as “bovine placidity”—in order to achieve peace, and why he favours creative tension in order to realize a “creative resolution of our present antagonisms,” it is necessary to understand his perspective on the role of violence in the “long arc” of geobiological history (1999, 217-219). According to Berry, the creative conflict associated with natural antagonisms is beneficial

since it is within such a context that geobiological history evolves to greater levels of complexity and diversity. For example,

Many of the inventions of the natural world arose out of beings meeting the constraints of the universe with creative responses. Only by dealing with the difficulty does the creativity come forth. The violence associated with the hawk starving to death or the vole being consumed are intrinsically tied to the creativity of each (Swimme and Berry 1992, 56).

Indeed, evolutionary history has many moments of supreme creativity fostered in a violent disruption of the status quo. Recognizing some of these innovative moments in planetary history, without embracing a methodology that would justify deliberate and oppressive (human) violence, is one of the crucial challenges of telling the universe story that Berry considers so central to his biocratic project. In telling that story, Berry and his colleague, mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme, demonstrate how such moments of supreme creativity have emerged out of violent antagonisms at various moments in the epic of evolution. These instances of creative conflict have undeniably shaped both where the present Earth community has come from and where the universe is headed.

For example, the Pauli exclusion principle declares that two particles cannot occupy the same quantum state at the same time. In a universe comprised of distinct entities and not “an infinitely extended homogenous smudge” (Berry 1990, 106), these diverse entities will resist attempts to remove them from their existence, thereby maintaining both their unique identity, which has emerged through the creativity of cosmogenesis, as well as their creative contributions to that same continuing cosmogenesis. In this manner, the law of nature “in protecting the viability of the elementary particle, works to ensure the particle of its place, of its role in the unfolding story” (Swimme and Berry 1992, 52). Through such means, these elementary particles emerge as the nexus for all creative antagonism in the universe.

Creativity, however, takes energy. In opposition to the notion of limitless growth, this cosmological perspective recognizes that an energy payment is necessary for any change of state (Swimme and Berry 1992, 52). What we experience as beauty, good, and evil cannot come into being without energy expenditures. We humans (and indeed everything that exists) need a certain amount of energy in order to be molded into intelligible forms. How we seek and tap into that energy depends upon our inner nature—the dolphin needs to eat the fish; the female mosquito needs to find mammalian blood. Herein lays the origin of all violence in the universe: because energy is finite, conflict will necessarily

occur as every entity seeks the energy it requires to fuel its existence. This point is not meant to assert that life is a necessarily a zero-sum game but, rather, that the amount of energy in the cosmological system is finite, which in turn has important implications for conflict.

For instance, invoking Thomist and Marxist images, consider what happens when an acorn asserts its species-specific being and does its best to become an oak tree. Its creativity lies in getting itself implanted in the soil and reaching up and out with its shoots and young branches as well as deep and out with its roots. While doing so, the acorn limits the possibilities for other life around it. Even as it realizes its full potential, in responding creatively to its context, the acorn is in conflict with life-forms seeking the same energy sources. Variations on this story are replicated over and over again in geobiological history. Creativity and conflict thus come to be viewed as inseparable from the universe story. It is from working within this very framework of creative antagonisms that the present diverse life community emerged.

Without such creative tension, the universe would have remained a single primal point, static and fixed. The almost incomprehensible violence of the "big bang" set everything in motion. Now that humans have begun to grasp the implication of an evolving universe, our retrospective assessment notes that a creatively turbulent cosmogenesis has made us who we are. However, according to Berry and Swimme, we are now forming pathological responses to the very dynamic processes that have created and sustained us. When humanity's awareness of the struggle and violence inherent in creation sparked feelings of terror, we did not limit our response to mere self-preservation. Forgetting our status as a member of the larger geobiological community, we used our increasing technological skills to manufacture a Saccharin world that would be as free as possible of the risks, dangers, and wants associated with life in the Earth community; we sought to control and tame nature in unsustainable ways (Swimme and Berry 1992, 56). In a twist of irony, human endeavors to avoid terror too often increased terror, especially when the resultant efforts spurred on the current Western war against the rest of the natural world. Swimme and Berry further assert that it is the pathological worldview that all insecurity could be eliminated which has "eventuated racism, militarism, sexism and anthropocentrism, dysfunctional efforts of the human species to deal with what it regarded as the unacceptable aspects of the universe" (1992, 56). This point is not meant to assert that in place of our determined efforts to shield ourselves from life's struggles and violence we should seek out violence and pain for their own sake, since that too would

represent a similarly pathological response as maladaptive as the current mass effort to deny the costs and demands of existence.

According to Swimme and Berry's analysis, in contrast to both these forms of human pathology stands the life-giving tension of the natural world. For instance, reflect on the wonder-inspiring adaptation of cyano-bacterium to the concentration of oxygen on this planet, even as previous life forms were bursting into flames due to that element's very presence (Swimme and Berry 1992, 94-98). Or ponder the feat of ingenuity when eukaryotes invented meiotic sex and the Earth's diversity multiplied as two genetically different beings were able to "unite and fashion out of their genetic endowment a radically new being" (Swimme and Berry 1992, 9). Or consider the manner in which a springbok grazes with its ears aloft, ready to dart off (when it perceives danger) in a stunning and speedy pattern that South Africa's very best rugby players can only dream of emulating.⁴ When the option of total control over all the variables in life does not exist, a fear of death and violence can spawn remarkable innovation. Today, we can bear witness to a contextually significant alternative to disembodied escapism, one that is present in the powerful innovative tendencies that accompany the creative antagonisms all around us in the larger life community.

Given that the violence associated with natural rhythms can foster such life-enriching creativity, the main issue of the current Earth crisis is brought more clearly into view. The deep moral issue at hand becomes evident when we consider the possibility that we humans, in spite of our ability to image the future and our capacity for self-reflective consciousness, may be instrumental in shutting down the life-sustaining functions of this planet and causing ecological collapse. Thus, in addition to its acknowledgment of the indivisibility of the Earth and its identification of the dynamic nature of the Peace of the Earth, *Pax Gaia*, thirdly, looks to the responsibility of humanity for both the institution and transformation of the ecological crisis. This recognizes the unique role of human agency in Earth history. *Homo sapiens* have now arrived at the point where we, a single species, are in a position to change the chemical and biological makeup of the world on a global scale (Wilson 1994, 5). No other species has ever had this ability. Currently, human violence directed towards the natural world is effecting change on a level that has not been witnessed since the constitutive period of planetary history (Berry 1990, 219).

In terms of the geobiological story, the present danger marks the first time that there has been "a conscious intrusion on this scale into the natural rhythms of Earth processes" (Berry 1999, 167). Yet, because humans have brought about

this crisis we (at least for now) still have the chance to avoid ecological collapse. Today, we can witness how this opportunity for creativity is arrived at when we use our very human ability to reason and reflect on the consequences of our way of being for the entire life community. Indeed, from a geobiological perspective, humans are the one member of the universe community known to fully possess the ability for self-reflective consciousness. Applied within the ecosphere, this ability allows us to see that we are members of the global life community and thus our fate is tied together with the fate of the rest of the natural world.

The pioneering conservationist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) set the concomitant challenge more than a half-century ago. When considering possible responses to the ecological crisis, Leopold suggested that “a special nobility inherent in the human race—a special cosmic value, distinctive from and superior to all other life” (1997, 642) is only available to humans. As such, we can choose to be remembered either as

a society respectful of its own and all other life, capable of inhabiting the earth without defiling it or [as] a society like that of John Burroughs’ potato bug, which exterminated the potato, and thereby exterminated itself. As one or the other, shall we be judged in ‘the derisive silence of history’ (Leopold 1997, 642).

Fourthly, in line with the positive option in Leopold’s thought, Berry reminds us that *Pax Gaia* is representative of a deep hope (1990, 221). Such optimism is centered on the way geobiological history bears witness to the survival of the planet through previous violent crisis moments. For Berry, it is essential that we have hope. By not surrendering to despair, the vision of *Pax Gaia* and our ability to grasp the consequences of our actions in an integral manner may allow us to demonstrate our special cosmic value. In this manner, integral human knowing allows us to use our human agency to avoid a destructively violent rupture in Earth processes. Additionally, it provides for the continuance of *homo sapiens* as a species located within (and not somehow trying to establish itself as apart from) a diverse community of life. Otherwise, we risk a drift into a type of pathological disconnect from the universe that nurtures and sustains us. To avoid this danger, hope must be “grounded” in the sense that it serves to reconnect us with the Earth community.

Misappropriated hope is indeed a feature of our recent past. To counteract such misdirection, Berry’s hope for a sustainable future is centered on multiple possibilities for the integration of a new story, informed by the principle that Earth matters and we are essentially located within the aforementioned communion of subjects. As Berry writes in partnership with Swimme, a

reconfiguration of our understanding of who or what constitutes the ethical community is increasingly necessary:

Without entrancement within this new context of existence it is unlikely that the human community will have the psychic energy needed for the renewal of the Earth. This entrancement comes from the immediate communion of the human with the natural world, a capacity to appreciate the ultimate subjectivity and spontaneities within every form of natural being (1992, 268).

To realize such entrancement, an integration of the “new story” into our collective being is needed. At the very least, our responsibility to a lively future mandates the presence of something akin to the “new story” in our human cultures. Our ability to be self-creating allows for this possible future to be incarnated in a vital manner. It is well within the human potential to foster a future that is respectful and nourishing towards all life forms. Intervention in ecological violence on this level is at once simple and challenging: we need only to grasp the possibility of a future of mutually enhancing human-Earth community relationships and act to make it a reality. Yet, such a possible world seems too often to be beyond our grasp. In this regard Berry advocates a movement “beyond democracy to biocracy” (Berry 1990, xiii). In such a biocratic movement, the larger life community is factored into our human decision-making processes. Within this expanded context, human affairs gain their meaning through intercommunion (Berry 1990, 136). When a biocratic reality has been fully realized, the value of all professions, occupations and activities will be determined by precisely to what degree they enhance and contribute to the larger life community. This formulation rings true, in Berry’s estimation, because it is only when we take our cues “from the very structure and functioning of the universe [that] we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture” (Berry 1990, 137). In light of the magnitude of these proposed changes to human-Earth relationships, *Pax Gaia*’s image of the moral community will also have important implications for the way we think about pacifism.

The Pacifism of Religious Cosmology— Adding a New Variety to Yoder’s Typologies

In his monograph, *Nevertheless*, Mennonite theological ethicist and former Notre Dame Professor John Howard Yoder (1927-1997) identifies and then comments on over twenty-five varieties of religious pacifism. Because it grows out of Berry’s reflections on his Roman Catholic identity, Christian faith and his interactions with both Eastern religions and Indigenous spiritualities, it is not

surprising that *Pax Gaia* displays certain characteristics identified in Yoder's typologies. For instance, in so much as *Pax Gaia* holds a vision of a global community, it corresponds with aspects of what Yoder labels "the pacifism of Christian cosmopolitanism" (Yoder, 2002, 19). Yet, on the whole, Yoder's criteria fail to adequately capture Berry's more biocentric form of religious pacifism since Yoder deals with relational categories that are mostly inter-human and transcendent (in the other worldly sense). Thus, Yoder's project does not take into account the mediating presence of the cosmos and the Earth community in these social and divine relationships. Therefore, in this contextual sense, it is appropriate to conclude that Berry's vision of *Pax Gaia* exposes the need to add another category to Yoder's typologies, namely a cosmological one. This conclusion is based on Yoder's recognition of categories like "the pacifism of honest study of cases" under which he included the exercise of Roman Catholic just war "pacifism" because such approaches are, according to Yoder's analysis, geared towards violence limitation. For instance, Yoder points out how the many thinkers employing the just war tradition have concluded, based on the realities of the "disproportionate destructiveness of uncontrolled high-tech weapons" (1992, 24), that mass military violence between two international actors is no longer morally tenable according to established ethical criteria. Further, contra the misconception that just war invokes a general support of war, he adds that as one of its central organizing principles a just war perspective "constitutes a denial that war can ever be *generally* justified" (Yoder, 1992, 25 [emphasis in the original]).

The very existence of such categories as the "pacifism of the honest study of cases" offers a response to an objection that *Pax Gaia*'s notion of "creative antagonism" disqualifies the geobiological perspective from being authentically characterized as a form of pacifism in light of Yoder's typologies of religious peacebuilding. Additionally, as David Cortright (2008) argues, moving beyond naiveté, recovering a sense of "pacifism" as not solely a moral stance, and embracing a definition of the term that encompasses all those working on the problems of how to prevent war and build peace, can help overcome the utopianism associated with contemporary peace movements. In this light, the most effective excises of pacifism might well be contextual, in the sense of being grounded in the reality of the human and Earth communities.

Building on Yoder's work in this regard, it follows that a cosmology of religious pacifism can be described as centered on the idea that right relationship with the transcendent (i.e., Berry's "numinous presence") and among humans includes an aspect of right relationship with the natural world. From the human

perspective, our embodiment leads us towards seeing the value of this world, not only in terms of a testing ground for the afterlife, but as morally worthy in and of itself. This type of religious pacifism is not content with a single or static vision of conflict which pits peace and violence as opposites. Rather, it hopes to establish diverse ways of existing in life-giving creative tension amongst the transcendent, humanity, and the rest of the natural world.

This formulation of *Pax Gaia* challenges the norms of an absolute moral vision of peace as represented by the Quaker, Edward Hick's, famous series of paintings, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. In some sixty versions of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, the accord among the white settlers, William Penn and the Lenape (Delaware) people in the background is accompanied by the absence of any "red tooth and claw" as children, the lion and the lamb (amongst other representatives of the larger life community) literally lie down together in the foreground.⁵ By rejecting such a vision of placidity, a perspective inspired by Berry's work is well-poised to discern the "spirals of violence" that oppress marginalized humans through poverty, inequity, injustice and militarism (Câmara 1971, 77) as well as other forces, such as patriarchy. In this sense, Berry's perspective returns to the essential commitments that lie at the heart of "the mission" of many nonviolent activists who struggle for social and political equity. The call by *Pax Gaia* for a comprehensive and profound reinvention of human structures and behaviors seeks a socially just peace. This confluence between many nonviolent activists and *Pax Gaia* can be found in the type of reflection encouraged by various Psalms, capturing what we might term the "unsustainability of repression." For instance, commenting on Jacqueline Osherow's poetic re-imagining of Psalm 37 at Auschwitz, Ellen Davies offers a poignant illustration of the type of hope, one with a deep ethical dimension, which emerges when one becomes cognizant of the unsustainable qualities of repressive systems:

In such a situation, hope cannot mean naive expectation of personal prosperity, nor even perhaps one's own survival. Rather, it means looking to the inevitable collapse of the system, with the visionary realism that often emerges amongst the oppressed, knowing that on the other side of destruction there may be within a radically different kind of social and economic system, one that might truly be called community (2009, 117).

Such powerful exegesis, a form that invokes longing for ethical interconnectivity, can serve to liberate all creation as emancipatory concerns for humans extend to the structural injustices that plague both human society and the rest of the natural world. Through such means, hope becomes centered not so much on the destruction of a repressive system, as Davies would shade it, but rather hope

begins to seek a positive transformation of relationships previously characterized by destructive conflict and oppression. This transformation is intimately connected to what is identified in this section as the pacifism of religious cosmology. Similar visions have been rhetorically extolled at the highest levels of social teaching in the Roman Catholic Church. For instance, in 1990, John Paul II's "World Peace Day" message highlighted the ecological crisis as a common responsibility for all humanity and situated "peace with God the creator [in] peace with all of creation" (#1). War, that more traditional "peace issue," is also classified in that same address as an environmental issue and as a waste of precious resources:

Today, any form of war on a global scale would lead to incalculable ecological damage. But even local or regional wars, however limited, not only destroy human life and social structures but also damage the land, ruining crops and vegetation as well as poisoning soil and water. The survivors of war are forced to begin a new life in very difficult environmental conditions, which in turn create situations of extreme social unrest, with further negative consequences for the environment (John Paul II 1990, #13).

Given present lived realities, such as ecological degradation, the loss of biodiversity and the presence of landmines left over from conflicts, these words of John Paul II remain particularly poignant. They remind us of the value of cosmological pacifism for all members of the natural world, and they foreshadow the call of the United Nations each year, since 2001, to recognize November 6 as the "International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict."⁶

Recognizing this substantive value of cosmological pacifism, we consider a geobiological perspective to be helpful for addressing issues of structural violence and inequity in order to move toward a more substantively peaceful and just world. If embraced holistically, such deep green thought has the potential to correct injustice and effect healing relationships on many levels because it is representative of a dynamic life-enriching force. Nevertheless, incarnating this view in the lived reality of humans, when so much injustice, inequity and ecological degradation are present all around us, remains a pressing and complex contextual challenge.

Any movement toward such a dynamic peace would represent a contextually cogent application of the principles of *Pax Gaia*. However, we must note a further characteristic of the type of relational social change that Berry is recommending. Berry is not engaged in prophetic or technological prediction, which, as highlighted by Karl Popper, can lead to a social-scientific

methodology for social change based on “engineering” (2007, 38). In contrast, Berry’s approach to social change is based much more upon expanding ethical categories than social-scientific methodology. Indeed, because they have not corresponded to an integral worldview, he explicitly decries both prophetic and technological traditions of social change in his work. In their place, Berry suggests that what is needed to effectively address the current ecological and social crises is not a prophetic reply (the mode in which some have misinterpreted his work) but rather a shamanic response (1996a). Departing from normative anthropological renderings of the shaman (see Lessa and Vogt 1997, 301-302), Berry prefers the shamanic personality over the prophetic voice in our contemporary context because of the way the former

journeys into the far regions of the cosmic mystery and brings back the vision and power needed by the human community at the most elementary level. This shamanic personality speaks and best understands the language of the various creatures of the earth.... This shamanic insight is especially important just now when history is being made not primarily within nations or between nations, but between humans and the earth, with all its living creatures. In this context all our professions and institutions must be judged primarily by the extent to which they foster this mutually enhancing human-earth relationship (Berry 1990, 211-212).

In this manner, Berry is asserting that the spirituality of the shaman represents “what is going forward” (Loneragan 1990, 189) for the human project. Berry further argues that, in the contemporary world: “Our spiritual guidance must now come from those who combine shamanic and scientific sensibilities” (1996a).

Returning to the dangers that Popper associates with the social-scientific predictive methodology leading to social engineering (2007, 38), let us consider Berry’s recommendations for the contemporary context. Berry writes that:

We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world, from a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the written scriptures to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us, from a spirituality concerned with justice only for humans to a spirituality of justice for the devastated Earth community, from the spirituality of the prophet to the spirituality of the shaman (2009b).

With the emancipatory and justice-based ethical implications of this integral spirituality of the shaman in mind, we shall now move toward applying Berry’s vision to concrete issues of substantive peace and justice in this world. In so doing, we will demonstrate how cosmological pacifism, if embraced holistically,

has the potential to heal and prevent even the most heinous acts of violence. The ecofeminist liberation theologian Heather Eaton adds that the response to the current global climate crisis needs to work more out of insight and less from a mere data-based perspective (2007b). In this spirit, we shall now ground Thomas Berry's thought with a focus on the urgent need for ecological justice.

The Need for Ecojustice:

An Appropriate Role for Humans in the Earth Community

Although our jurisprudence systems are relatively well equipped to deal with categories such as "suicide," "homicide," and even "genocide," we have no effective ethical or legal systems to deal with "biocide," the destruction of Earth's life systems,⁷ or "geocide," the destruction of Earth's systems and therefore of the planet itself (See Berry 1996b). In light of the pacifism of religious cosmology, this is a major oversight requiring our attention. Similarly, in the West, we have fashioned ethical principles to guide human behavior. However, at their best, these systems mainly focus on conduct that will promote flourishing among humans within a human community. Such an anthropocentric focus on human well-being and personal behavior has detrimentally affected the well-being of the planet on which we depend for our survival. When the accompanying malaise of undervaluing the Earth's well-being is added to this anthropocentric mix, there emerge many ethical implications to the interrelated problems of biocide and genocide. To highlight some of the moral content of these problems and to ground our more theoretical reflections presented above, we will focus on two timely issues of ecojustice: species loss and climate justice.

Connecting these problems, Oberlin College Environmental Studies and Politics Professor David Orr posits that the whole Earth faces the prospect of ecological collapse, which would severely reduce biodiversity. He further asserts that this outcome has occurred because of human over-consumption and exploitation of the planet. Orr writes:

If today is a typical day on planet earth, we will lose 166 square miles of rain forest, or about an acre a second. We will lose another 72 square miles to encroaching deserts, the result of human mismanagement and overpopulation. We will lose 40 to 250 species, and no one knows whether the number is 40 or 250. Today the human population will increase by 250,000. And today we will add 2,700 tons of chlorofluorocarbons and 15 million tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Tonight the earth will be a little hotter, its waters more acidic and the fabric of life more threadbare.... [P]erhaps as much as 20% of the life forms extant on the planet in the year 1900...[are now] extinct (2004, 7).

With particular reference to species loss, some biologists rightly label this phenomenon the “biodiversity crisis” (Butler 2007). In terms relevant to this article, the existence of the biodiversity crisis and the accompanying moral phenomenon of biocide can be linked to a lack of a specific form of love: biophilia. Translated from Greek, the term biophilia is centered on human love for the biological world. Yet, the first popular use of the term went beyond this to encompass the deep biological need of humans for relationship. In 1984, the Harvard biologist, Edward Wilson, wrote *Biophilia*, in which he defined his main term as “the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life” (1984, 350). He connects his love-based project to the biodiversity crisis and humanity’s responsibility to future generations: “The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us” (Wilson 1984, 121).

Wilson was not, however, the first person to connect love with a solution to the biodiversity crisis. For example, in the late 1940s, Leopold argued that a key part of this new imaging of rights for the natural world would involve recognition by humans that the force of love should mediate relations with the land. He concluded that extending the moral community to cover the land could mean only one thing—that the force of love has a real presence. Leopold posits: “It is inconceivable...that an ethical relation to land can...exist without love, respect, and admiration for land and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense” (1997, 638).

Understood in this integrated sense, love represents a community-building force that necessarily accompanies any movement toward an integrated manner of imaging human-Earth relationships. Love, for the inter-layered community of the Earth, can be seen to have the power to solidify the connection among all members of the life community. Such a spiritual love comes into being when it is recognized that, “In the measure that the community becomes a community of love and so capable of making real and great sacrifices, in that measure it can wipe out grievances and correct the objective absurdities that its unauthenticity has brought about” (Lonergan quoted in Crowe 1992, 34). To be an effective tool of community-building, this love requires looking beyond selfish and immediate concerns, instead moving toward the needs of the whole community and future generations. This shift is necessary for any diverse and compassionate society to come into being. Such a caring society would respect diverse forms of life on this planet, and its legal and ethical systems would foster a multi-species and

multi-generational form of respect. This is a vision of the future that is both biophilic and biocratic.

A possible objection to the constitution of a biophilic future, where humans mediate a biocratic reality, is the notion that we are such selfish animals that it lies beyond our basic mammalian capability to work co-operatively with each other and the rest of the natural world in order to avoid the pending biodiversity collapse. Certainly, Western civilization, in particular, provides far too much supporting evidence for the conclusion that humans are resolutely selfish animals. According to the joint analysis of Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, this conclusion is particularly problematic because the growing Western influence in various cultures around the globe is generating an all-pervasive "addiction to commercial-industrial progress" (Swimme and Berry 1992, 254).

In terms of human justice, this "addiction" has been born out in a hugely unequal distribution of wealth and resources, so that today 97.5% of the world's eco-footprint is made by a mere 20% of the global population.⁸ This selfishness is particularly worrisome when the Earth's carrying capacity is finite, and we may be reaching the point where the collective impact of human lifestyles on the planet is unsustainable. At the present time, the Western vision of commercial consumption is being propagated around the world, and the "overshoot of the human economy" (Wackernagel et. al. 2002, 9266) is already placing multiple stressors on the continuance of diverse life in many bioregions. From the perspective of the pacifism of religious cosmology, it would be highly problematic if humans have evolved to be so selfish as to be pathologically incapable of steering a course that prevents the collapse of the biologically diverse world that has nurtured and sustained us. Unfortunately, such a negative outcome is implied by Oxford ethologist Richard Dawkins' rereading of Darwin. Dawkins famously concludes that evolution, especially amongst larger animals, has advantaged selfishness as a behavioral trait (Dawkins 1989, 47).

This new shading of competitive advantage is not as highly individualist as it may seem on the surface because even Dawkins recognizes that the more complex animals are themselves examples of cooperation amongst both genes (2004, 433) and cells (1989, 258). He further contends that "nice guys can finish first" even if the rules of the game of life are essentially governed by selfishness (Dawkins 1989, 202). According to Dawkins' reading of Darwinian theory, "nice guys" are those who behave in such ways that that they act unselfishly so that others from their species may continue. Dawkins sees such a being as destined to die a Darwinian death. He does, however, concede the possibility

that a sort of symbiotic “reciprocal altruism” may be evolutionarily advantageous even across species (Dawkins 1989, 202).

In recognizing the ethical tensions associated with anthropocentrism, it is possible to envision individuals whose entire being is connected to an integrated epistemology of biodiversity. These people would take the opening conceded by Dawkins for “nice guys” and remove many speciesist tendencies from this sphere of action. Their orientation would be so total in this regard that they would enter into a symbiotic and solidarity-driven relationship with the entire life community.⁹ Such individuals would think, act and love in ways that support the continuance of diverse life of this planet. This does not mean that they would always be successful in achieving these goals. Nonetheless, these people would endeavor with the spirit of love, in their thoughts and in their actions, to counteract the negative effects of the biodiversity crisis and act in ways that are mutually enhancing for all humanity and the rest of the ecosystem (Berry 1990, 80).

Unless this all sound overly utopian, it should be remembered that we can bear witness to people who are able to transcend human selfishness and live in this integrated fashion today. A prime example of such integrated living is found in the community of Dominican Sisters of Blairstown, New Jersey and other “Green Sisters” who commit their lives in services to the poor, the Earth, and God in the spirit of “engaged monasticism” (McFarland Taylor, 124). At Blairstown, inspired and nourished by Berry’s thought, their entire vocation is lived out intellectually, morally, and religiously in line with biocratic principles (see Dominican Sisters of Blairstown 2010). Other poignant examples include the Jain who lives all of her life doing as little harm as possible to other members of the natural world,¹⁰ the native leader in the Chiapas who seeks to keep his people outside of the money economy so that they may live in harmony with the forest ecosystem (see Action for Community and Ecology in the Region of Central America 1998), and the ecofeminist who, through a special expression of embodied knowing, ties her being and liberationist project to the plight of the Earth.¹¹ In responding to the ecological crisis in a manner which is authentic in relation to their own being (Knitter 2000, 366), such individuals can be understood as holders of a worldview which is supportive of the pacifism of religious cosmology.

Applied to the problems of the climate justice, this worldview exposes significant moral dimensions that relate to any movement towards geocide. For instance, consider a reading of the following passage, informed by an understanding of *Pax Gaia*:

The issue of the environment, now so crucial, ties us to one another as never before. Selfishness is no longer merely immoral, it is becoming suicidal. ...[I]t is impossible to protect the environment if entire areas of continents continue to live in misery. Many of our brothers and sisters are forced into a way of life that is unacceptable and unworthy of their human condition. We are more aware of this than ever, but we behave as if we were blind, deaf and insensible (The Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops 2008, 5).

Building on such statements, a perspective in accord with the pacifism of religious cosmology would note that it is not just an act of suicide that we are committing as we use up the Earth's resources, but also an act of homicide. The truth of this somewhat provocative statement is manifested by those human beings on the periphery of both global and local societies who pay the ultimate price for our military industrial model of consumption and its manifestations in climate and ecological crises. In this sense, Dom Hélder Câmara was correct to speak of poverty as a horrible form of violence akin to a bomb (1971, 29). It is understandable, therefore, that in continuing Câmara's legacy of praxis-based work with the poor in Northeastern Brazil, ecofeminist liberation theologian, Ivone Gebara, connects the suffering of the poor with the suffering of the Earth community, despite the resistance of the current bishop.¹² This link between ecology, poverty, and violence is all around us. Hence, the importance of the vision of the future that Arthur Walker-Jones has discerned as operative in the spiritual tradition of the Psalms in which "social justice is interrelated with the well-being of Earth" (2009, 65).

Despite such a vision of integral justice, under present conditions, we are left with inequality for the Earth and its human inhabitants when market morality is made normative. Environmental harms are distributed unequally in the present context, raising important ecojustice issues about the health and well-being of both people and the planet (Deane-Drummond 2008, 27). In terms of human justice, developing countries and those with access to the fewest resources are bearing the greatest cost of the present climate crisis. Regrettably, in our present circumstances, those who have contributed the most to climate change are those who are the least vulnerable and the best able to adapt to the impacts of shifting weather patterns (with, for example, heating and air conditioning, dikes, irrigation, increased health care). At the same time those who have contributed the least are the most vulnerable and the least able to adapt to the consequences of shifting climatic conditions, which result in drought, desertification, flooding and extreme weather patterns (Stern 2009, 37). In this regard, when focusing on climate justice, the pacifism of religious cosmology recognizes the moral

problems inherent in our current way of being. But even societies with a high capacity for adaptability are vulnerable to climate-related events, such as the 2003 heat wave in Europe and Hurricane Katrina in the USA (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007, 56). Climate change not only threatens each person's fundamental and inalienable "right to life, liberty, and personal security" as guaranteed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948, article 3), it is also already responsible for considerable death and enormous hardship. In one snapshot of this problem, the World Health Organization concluded that in the year 2000 climate change caused the deaths of approximately 150,000 people and resulted in the loss of about 5.5 million Disability Adjusted Life Years¹³ (2003, 31). Further, adding to the issues of genocide, biocide and homicide, there is a sense in which climate change can be connected to cultural genocide as members of societies whose cultures are intimately connected to specific bioregions are forced to migrate away from their traditional lands. This point has even been made by The Australian Human Rights Commission's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's Office in their *2008 Native Title Report*. During their discussion of the impacts of climate change on indigenous Australians, the report's authors noted that one of the challenges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders "will" face is

people being forced to leave their lands particularly in coastal areas. Dispossession and a loss of access to traditional lands, waters, and natural resources may be described as cultural genocide; a loss of our ancestral, spiritual, totemic and language connections to lands and associated areas (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2009, 117).

It follows that the factors that cause climate change and the efforts to both mitigate and adapt to climate change are moral issues that require an ethical response.

In addition to concerns for social justice, the IPCC report also lends statistical support to moral vision of connectivity mentioned above by demonstrating that not only will poorer human communities, and particularly those in high risk areas, be especially vulnerable as a result of the impacts of future anthropogenic climate change (IPCC 2007, 48) but simultaneously, the report notes,

approximately 20 to 30% of plant and animal species assessed so far are *likely* to be at increased risk of extinction if increases in global average temperature exceed 1.5 to 2.5°C over 1980-1999 levels. Confidence has increased that a 1 to 2°C increase in global mean temperature above 1990 levels (about 1.5 to 2.5°C above pre-industrial) poses significant risks to many unique and threatened systems including many biodiversity hotspots. Corals are vulnerable to thermal stress and have low adaptive capacity.

Increases in sea surface temperature of about 1 to 3°C are projected to result in more frequent coral bleaching events and widespread mortality, unless there is thermal adaptation or acclimatization by corals. Increasing vulnerability of Arctic indigenous communities and small island communities to warming is projected (IPCC 2007, 56).

These negative effects on the larger, life community are additional reasons for speaking of climate change as a moral crisis. In the spirit of liberation theologians who called to our attention the need for a preferential option for the poor in order to overcome social injustice, and given the current effects of the climate crisis, we might also now speak of the need for a preferential option for the earth made poorer by human abuse (The Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops 2003, #7).

Conclusion: Moving Forward as One Earth Community

It follows from the perspective of the pacifism of religious cosmology and indeed most other ethical systems, that when we know that our actions are causing the death of others but we persist in those actions, we are contributing to a moral problem. As part of his favored “historical-cosmological approach to such problems” (Berry 2009a, 24), Berry encourages us to see that this present moment has required billions of years to come into being.¹⁴ Change any part of the Universe story during those 137 billion years, and the current context would be different. As cosmological processes have unfolded, we have been formed by and remain dependent upon our irreducible location as part of the universe and its story. On the planetary level, like everything else in Earth’s community, we are the way we are because of our interactions with the other members of that community. Today, as part of our responsibility to where we have come from and to where we are going as a communion of subjects, there emerges duties in relation to the other actors in the universe story. From the perspective of the pacifism of religious cosmology, a zone of respect among all life forms needs to be fostered by humans not only because of the inherent rights of other members of the Earth community, but because to do less imperils the essential human qualities of our existence. Just as we resist the notion of another part of the larger life community extinguishing our lives—we would likely strive to prevent a lion from eating our child or our self—so should we resist any actions that would extinguish other life forms unnecessarily since they too are an integral part of this one biodynamic community. It follows that the pacifism of religious cosmology holds that other-than-human creatures and the natural systems of Earth need to be respected, valued and considered in decision-making for the 21st century and beyond. In integral terms, concern for sustainability includes both humans and the rest of

Earth community. Given the present realities of the interrelated ecological and social crises, the road toward human flourishing will be constituted in proper relationships with each other and the rest of the natural world.

Mindsets that choose to flee the world, to ignore the moral problems associated with ecojustice, or to subdue the natural world solely or primarily to meet human needs are not representative of ways of being that will guide humanity to live on Earth in a manner that is mutually enhancing for us and the rest of the Earth's ecosystems. In ethical and legal terms, the anthropocentric exaltation of the human that has informed Christianity and Western humanism will not adequately address our current state of affairs. As Berry summarizes, "we begin to realize that the devastation taking place cannot be critiqued effectively from within the traditional religions or humanist ethics. Nor can it be dealt with from within the perspectives of the industrial society that brought it about" (Berry 1996b).

When considering the ecological updating of the human project proposed by a pacifism of religious cosmology, it is important to note the inclusion of a sufficient focus on basic human needs because meeting such needs is a necessary precondition for our survival and our flourishing in proper relationships within a communion of subjects. Simultaneously, Berry's geobiological perspective demonstrates that a focus on the human that excludes the survival and flourishing of the rest of the ecosystem is a narcissism which previews our demise. For Berry, we require a more functional cosmology to underlie all religions and ethics, a worldview which firmly situates humanity within the universe story. As Berry writes, "[t]he basic ethical norm is the well-being of the comprehensive community, and the attainment of human well-being within this comprehensive community. The Earth is not part of the human story, the human story is part of the Earth story" (1996b). In short, to fully recognize that Earth matters and to deal with a crisis that affects the entire planet, we will need to embrace the reinvention of the human. Such reinvention will be fostered by a vision and inspiration of comparable magnitude. Happily, as evidenced by our framing of the pacifism of religious cosmology, humanity has within its traditions the resources that can inform a contextually appropriate reinvention of the human. Such an integral orientation to the problems of ecojustice can provide a vital source of hope for a vibrant and just future.

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ENDNOTES

¹Berry described himself as a “geologist” (i.e., an earth-thinker), a label that denotes Berry’s deep commitment to discerning humanity’s proper place within Earth’s evolution and the integral ecological ethics that result. For a comment on the origins of Berry’s self-identification as a geologist, see Tucker and Grim (2009, xxvi).

²As Swimme and Berry write, “Earth cannot survive in fragments.... The well-being of the planet is a condition for the well-being of any of the component members of the planetary community. To preserve the economic viability of the planet must be the first law of economics. ... The well-being of the Earth is primary. Human well-being is derivative” (1992, 243).

³Berry’s discussion of the atmosphere and seas being held in common anticipates climate change debates on the atmospheric commons. See: P. Baer, J Harte, and et al. 2000. Equity and greenhouse gas responsibility. *Science* 289 (5488):2287.

⁴The South African national Rugby team is known as the Springboks. For an interesting comment on the rehabilitation of this symbol in post-Apartheid South Africa see Carlin (2008).

⁵See, for example, The Worcester Art Museum’s 1833 version of Edward Hicks The Peaceable Kingdom at <http://www.worcesterart.org/Collection/American/1934.65.html>.

⁶See: United Nations “International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict.” <http://www.un.org/en/events/environment-conflictday/>. Accessed April 2, 2011.

⁷Other ecological thinkers have commented on ecocide’s moral significance. For instance, Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff recently wrote that “the threat of ecocide...[is]...the key ethical challenge of our day” (Hathaway and Boff 2009, 348).

⁸For an explanation of the concept of eco-footprint (and the source of this statistic) see Addison (2007).

⁹In Judeo-Christian terms, this solidarity could be supported by “the good news that Creator and creation are bound together in a relationship that is trustworthy but at the same time delicate” (Binz 2007, 61).

¹⁰Sital Prashad offers a good description of the efforts of Jains to live holistic lives that are respectful of the entire life community (1995).

¹¹It follows from this tying together of the plight of women and the plight of the Earth based in a realization of the interlocking patterns of oppression that the emancipatory project of feminism would be included in the ecological project and vice versa so that various expression of the women’s movement can seek inspiration and nourishment from an identification with the diverse natural world (Gebera 2000, 29-46).

¹²Câmara’s successor, Bishop José Cardoso, thought that the pastoral work in the diocese had been too focussed on social questions, to the point that “spiritual matters” had been severely neglected (Marin 1995, 325). Hence, many of the reforms Câmara instituted in the diocese of Recife were reversed. Cardoso’s actions included the closing of

the praxis-based seminary where Ivone Gebara was employed (Radford Ruether 1999, 24). Cardoso even tried to silence Gebara by bringing the full weight of Vatican discipline down upon her (Gebara 2009).

¹³A disability adjusted life year is a measure of the number of years lost over a person's life span due to ill-effects of disease and environmental factors.

¹⁴For a discussion of the importance of cosmological consciousness for contemporary spirituality and ethical practice, see Eaton (2007a, 6-31).

WILL YOU REALLY PROTECT US WITHOUT A GUN? UNARMED CIVILIAN PEACEKEEPING IN THE U.S.

Eli S. McCarthy

Abstract

The habits of direct violence in U.S. society continue to pose dangerous and dehumanizing trends. As scholars and activists cultivate alternatives to the use of violence, a key need involves providing direct experience for U.S. residents to explore and see the power of unarmed civilian peacekeeping. In this paper I ask the following questions: How can the international unarmed civilian peacekeeping models influence the U.S. in the form of domestic peace teams? What are the accomplishments and the challenges for local peace teams with an eye toward further development? First, I describe some broad trends in the international work of unarmed civilian peacekeeping. Second, I analyze the accomplishments and challenges for the Michigan Peace Team and Ceasefire in Chicago. Third, I integrate these insights to recommend key contributions from each program toward developing more domestic peace teams. I briefly provide a recent example and analysis of implementing these recommendations in the DC Peace Team.

The habits of direct violence in U.S. society continue to pose dangerous and dehumanizing trends. Although we have access to great material and educational resources, the character of our society too often corresponds to the "culture of death" as described by some Catholic leaders. U.S. youth homicide rates are ten times higher than other leading industrial countries. We are the most heavily armed society in the world with 90 guns per 100 citizens, with Yemen being second at 61 per 100 citizens. U.S. citizens own about one-third of the world's firearms and over half of new guns worldwide are purchased in the U.S.¹ In terms of our military, we spend about 45% of global military spending which is more than the next 29 biggest spending countries combined. We also lead the world by far in selling military arms to other countries and we have over 700 military bases around the world. As we saw with the Occupy movement, our police are increasingly militarized in weapons and in hiring. Further, gun massacres have been repeatedly occurring in the U.S. over the past few years. Yet we continue to have some leaders and residents call for increasing arms in our society.