The Integrity of Creation: Do we need a New Theology?[1]

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The 'Greening' of Opinion

In February 1988 I took part in a consultation in Norway, held under the auspices of the WCC, on the subject of the Integrity of Creation. On returning from that meeting, I was deeply convinced of the urgency of getting Christians to be seriously interested in ecological issues – but, even at that stage, it felt as though this would be an uphill struggle. Now, however, very shortly afterwards, these issues seem to be on everyone's mind. The change of public attitude has been sufficient to make environmentally-friendly products a viable sales-line even in the chain supermarkets. No longer does one have to search through the catalogues of 'ideologically sound' alternative traders if one wants to buy recycled toilet paper! Green politics and environmental consumerism are coming into fashion. But will this all be too late, too superficial, and not sustained enough? Is not one of the besetting sins of public opinion a kind of laziness – an unwillingness to look deep and long at an issue, and to work hard at the conclusions which should be drawn? Or, as perhaps that is rather harsh, one might prefer to say that as most people have plenty of issues to absorb their energies on the microscopic scale of family, work, local community, etc, it is not surprising if they feel that there is little they can or should do about macroscopic, global issues. Most of us need a deeper motivation than sheer knowledge of the facts to sustain prolonged analysis and action on matters of worldwide importance, whose outcomes may mainly affect future generations. We also need a profound source of hope to fuel us in the struggle against what may look like inevitable disaster. In other words, people need a deeply held philosophy or theology to undergird costly action on behalf of the living environment.

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation?

The World Council of Churches' study theme of *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* is intended to stimulate Christians to contribute from

1 This article is adapted from a paper originally delivered to a conference of clergy from the Kensington Episcopal Area on 10th May, 1989.

their resources of faith to the work of public motivation at this deeper level. The phrase 'Integrity of Creation' in the interlinked trio of concerns *'signifies an attempt to rediscover a sense of wholeness of the creation in relation to God and the need for ethical imperatives towards renewal and at-oneness.'*[1]

It is, of course, important that the theme of the 'Integrity of Creation' is linked to those of Justice and Peace. No longer can it be said that environmental concern is a luxury for the rich nations. All too often, as the development agencies make clear to us, it is people who are already desperately poor and politically oppressed who are the immediate victims of environmental disaster. One only has to think of the floods which hit Bangladesh again and again – already one of the poorest countries of the world – and now seriously suffering because of deforestation in the mountains of neighbouring countries, leading to the silting-up of the many watercourses which thread their way through the vast delta of East Bengal. Or, to take another example, it has been claimed that the civil war in El Salvador is as much about the destruction of the environment through ruthless land-use as about anything else. More and more we are seeing environmental groups, development agencies, and human rights organisations highlighting the same issues.

Or, the Integrity of Creation, Justice and Peace?

At the 1988 consultation to which I first referred it was suggested, particularly by representatives of indigenous peoples (a native North American theologian, an Andean Indian Methodist bishop, and two Maori representatives) that the theme of Integrity of Creation should be placed first in the churches' concern, and that if we got that right in the world, Justice and Peace would thereby be generated. Certainly, many of the indigenous peoples who have suffered colonisation have held (and continue to hold) beliefs in which the land is sacred, and the people belong to the land rather than the other way round. Their encounter with European colonisers was experienced as confrontation with a culture which had no respect for indigenous peoples, precisely because it had a rapacious attitude towards the earth.

Similar claims have been made by feminists: the rape of earth and the oppressive exploitation of women arise from the same mind-set. Carolyn Merchant points out how Francis Bacon, generally seen as the founder of modern scientific method in the seventeenth century, continued the ancient convention of referring to nature in femine terms; but instead of investing this terminology with the respect due to a mother, he spoke of nature more as a harlot, a slave, a concubine. He said that by the *'art and hand of man'* nature can be *'forced out of her natural state and squeezed and moulded'*. Scientific method, and technological discoveries such as gun-

1 David Gosling, 'Toward a Credible Ecumenical Theology of Nature' in *The Ecumenical Review*, 1986, p 322.

powder made it possible for mankind to investigate the secrets *'still locked in nature's bosom'* and to *'recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest.'*[1]

The argument then is that the birth of modern empirical science was closely allied to early renaissance technology, which, in itself was closely related to colonial expansion and the aggrandisement of the European male at the expense both of other 'lesser' human beings, and, eventually, of the whole natural environment. And just as empirical scientific method led to the objectification of nature and of subject peoples, so it also generated an increasingly atomistic attitude, in which both things and people were considered and manipulated as individual entities, without a proper appreciation of the complex network of interrelationships to which they belonged. So was born 'Enlightenment' individualism.

'Enlightenment' or Christianity?

It has, of course, been claimed that this development was the natural fruit of Judaeo-Christian culture, rooted in the ideas that God has given man unqualified 'dominion' over nature, that he has made females subject to males, and that he chooses and saves individual souls 'out of the world'. When it is put as starkly as this, any group of well-informed Christians is likely to object that the ideas being held responsible for so much oppression and exploitation are gross distortions of the biblical originals. Yet, clearly these distorted versions of Christian belief have had much currency in our history, and have played their part in providing cultural justification for the growth of manipulative and exploitative attitudes towards 'natives', women, other living creatures, and the earth itself. If Christians want, in these critical days, to contribute to Justice, Peace and a respect for the Integrity of Creation, they must get their theology right. And an appropriate theology will be one which matches up not only with moral facts, but also with the concrete constitution of the world.

During this century, science has moved away from atomistic and mechanisitic concepts towards a growing sense of the interrelatedness of things. This has, (with a time lag), been reflected in popular thought to some extent. It is often remarked that photographs of the earth, taken from space, have profoundly affected our perceptions, helping us to see our world as a single, complex and fragile entity. James Lovelock's *Gaia Hypothesis,* which considers the world as a single organic system, is a scientific elaboration of this perception. On the negative side, our experiences of such events as the Chernobyl disaster have driven home the fact that damage to one part of the earth cannot be confined in its effects. Our theology of creation needs to help us make sense of this new understanding that all beings, including ourselves, are interrelated in ecological mutuality. This is why there is wisdom in focussing on the theme of integrity, or wholeness, when we talk about creation.

1 *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution,* San Francisco, 1980, pp 171f. (quoting Bacon's *Novum Organum).*

Does Christianity need a new theology?

But does this mean that, in some sense, we need a *'new theology'*, if Christians are to contribute to the deep and lasting change of attitudes which would constitute ecological sanity? Many have said that we do.

The most famous such claim must be that of Lynn White, whose article, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis'[1] attributed exploitative attitudes towards the earth directly to the injunctions of Genesis 1:26-28, that humanity should subdue the earth and have dominion over it and all its creatures and, meanwhile, 'be fruitful and multiply' White's argument can easily be refuted, as being far too sweeping in the way in which it lays all the blame at the door of the biblical tradition, without taking account of aspects of that tradition which are much more 'environmentally-friendly' than the single concept of dominion, taken by itself, might imply. Such a refutation is to be found in Arthur Peacocke's book, *Creation and the World of Science.*[2] (I am assuming that I do not need to enumerate all the celebrations of nature as God's creation which are to be found in the Bible, because the reader will be familiar with them, and will be quite aware that the first chapters of Genesis do not begin to exhaust the richness of biblical teaching on the subject).

However, there are more subtle and more damaging accusations than Lynn White's which can be made against the Judaeo-Christian theological tradition, including the Bible itself. For example, those indigenous peoples who maintain a reverence for sacred space and a sense of awe (as well as kinship) in the face of other creatures, say that the problem with the biblical tradition is precisely that quality for which it has often been praised: by contrast with the belief systems of surrounding nations, the Hebrew account of creation *desacralizes* the created order divorcing divinity from nature, so that nothing is to be revered by humanity but God above nature, and (perhaps) the 'image of God' within other human beings. Likewise, many feminists, whose concerns we have already briefly considered, see a deep malaise of *patriarchy and hierarchical thinking* infecting the whole biblical and Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Such accusations are often telescoped together in a generalised attack upon *dualism,* a conceptual matrix in which things are artificially separated which ought to belong together; God and nature, spirit and flesh, supernatural and natural, male and female, human and non-human, subject and object, reason and passion, death and life, time and space, energy and matter – and so forth. Some thinkers hold that it was Greek thought which really introduced dualism damagingly into the Christian tradition; others

1 *Science,* 1967, pp 1203-7.
2 Oxford 1979.

point to dualism within the Bible itself, going right back to the creation account of the separation of earth from sky.[1]

Whenever there is an attack on dualism as the root of all evils, there is a call for a new theology. The extent to which that new theology is seen as being in continuity with the Christian faith which has gone before depends, to a large extent, upon how deeply dualism is seen to inhere as a disease in the biblical tradition.

One possibility for a new theology which might overcome dualism is, of course, pantheism – theology which identifies God and the world, or finds God contained within the world without remainder. This would certainly resacralize the earth. The problem is that it might also be very conservative in effect, sacralizing the *status quo*. The other problem for us, of course, is that pantheism would clearly not be in continuity with the Church's beliefs, and would make absolute nonsense of most of our scripture and traditions.

There are, however, other less extreme proposals for a new theology, made within the Christian camp. I shall briefly examine two of these, which – with differing degrees of radicalism – want to rewrite tradition in order to help us envision more fully the Integrity of Creation.

'Theology for an Ecological, nuclear age'

The first author to whom I turn is Professor Sallie McFague, of Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. Her book *Models of God* is subtitled *'Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age'*.[2] She describes her approach as 'revisionist', 'constructive' and 'heuristic', by contrast with the approach of 'hermeneutic' theology, which starts and ends with the interpretation of the canonical text. What does this mean?

McFague feels free to 'deconstruct' unhelpful models of God which she finds in Scripture and tradition; this is what makes her 'revisionist'. She then imaginatively tries out other models, to see whether they may be more helpful to us than the old. This is the constructive and heuristic aspect of her work. Her criterion of a successful theological model or construct is whether it would motivate people to create a better reality in the world, and whether it relates more successfully than traditional thought to the holisitic, ecological view I have already discussed, and the reality of the nuclear threat.

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1 Sallie McFague (*Models of God*, p 189 n) cites as non-dualist writers, feminists such as Ynestra King and Susan Griffin, feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, and representatives of modern witchcraft, such as Starhawk. In England, a sustained attack on dualism as the Platonic disease of language and conceptuality is being mounted by Don Cupitt (see, for example, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, SCM, London 1989, p 102) as part of his attack on Christian orthodoxy.

2 SCM, London 1987.

The constructions McFague offers to Christian thinking are models of God as mother, lover and friend, in the context of an overall view which sees the world as God's body. She stresses that any metaphor is limited in its application, and wants her readers to be quite clear that the metaphor of the world as God's body is not a pantheistic model of identity: it is an expression of the idea that God's palpable presence to us is *through* the world.

Interestingly enough, for someone who mounts the customary attack on dualisms, it seems that McFague cannot entirely do away with a dualism of mind and body, or at least of personal identity and bodily existence, if her model is to begin to work in the way she wants! However, more importantly for us, in the process of offering these new models for theology, McFague mounts a sharp attack on the traditional ideas of divine monarchy, patriarchy, triumph, otherworldly and individual salvation, and any kind of exclusivism. The 'scandal of particularity', in all its forms, is truly a scandal to Professor McFague.

Perhaps her most serious attack on the traditional picture of God the king is the claim that such a model of divinity is bound to make us shirk our own responsibility for the future of the earth, particularly in the face of the nuclear threat. On the one hand, it sets before us an image of power as control and domination, and feeds our triumphalist militarism; on the other hand, by claiming that God is ultimately in control, it leads to escapism, and a refusal to face up to the choice which lies in *our* hands between life and extinction.

The first of these criticisms is easier to counter than the second, by a deeper penetration of biblical sources, in which we recapture the image of the king not as a domineering, self-serving politician, but as the shepherd of his people, the guarantor of justice in the community, who 'shall judge the poor of the earth with equity', and maintain the balance of justice precisely against the depredations of tyrannical manipulators. 'The Lord reigns – the earth may be glad thereof.'... could be an ecological statement, and certainly is no basis for human militarism and self-aggrandisement. And, indeed, even if we include in our purview those very difficult parts of the Old Testament which see the Lord as literally fighting on behalf of his people, a repeated message seems to be that God's commitment to the earthly salvation of his people is in inverse proportion to their own expenditure on military hardware! So there is little comfort in a truly conservative reading of the Lord's kingship for the policy of testing and stockpiling ever deadlier weapons, with all their disastrous consequences for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.

However, the accusation that the doctrine of providence alienates us from a true sense of responsibility for the future of the world is rather more forceful. And yet, on the other side of that coin is the question, 'If God is utterly vulnerable to our actions – if the future is totally open – what basis of hope has our faith? If God and goodness and life itself could finally be defeated by human folly, are we any more free from the bonds of fatal despair than our Germanic and Norse ancestors, who envisaged a great battle at the end of the world in which evil would finally triumph over gods and men?'

I think it is psychologically demonstrable that a struggle for responsible action is more likely to be persisted with in hope than in despairing fear. As St Paul said, 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain' (I Cor. 15:58). This is the sense in which we should be reading New Testament apocalyptic – not as a threat of destruction which makes all human cherishing of the earth irrelevant, but as the promise of a new heavens and a new earth in which all the riches of goodness, responsibility and creativity within this world will be taken up and transfigured.

Since McFague rejects the approach of 'hermeneutic' theology, and thus, implicitly, the idea of biblical revelation, what exactly is her relationship to the Christian tradition?

As well as setting the criteria that a successful theological model should relate to holism and the nuclear threat, she also says that it should relate better than old models to what Christian faith is 'really about', which she later defines as 'the matter of theology – the salvific power of God'. She defines for herself, in common with the liberation theologians, a very attractive picture of what the salvific power of God should mean for our age – a 'destabilizing, inclusive, non-hierarchical vision of fulfilment for all creation', and she finds in Jesus' parables, table fellowship, and death on the cross a paradigm of this kind of salvation.

I say that her vision of salvation is attractive, just as Jesus' parables, his welcome to the poor and outsiders, and his death with forgiveness on his lips, are attractive. But I also have to admit that McFague's handling of the story is selective; it sidesteps the discipline of facing up to the 'hard sayings' for example. And, in the end, her idea of salvation is not generated by the story of Jesus – his historical life is no more necessary to it than it was to the ideal figure whom Kant constructed in his book *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone,* whose postulated story had some interesting parallels to the story of Jesus of Nazareth. If one wished to be harsh, one could say that McFague, like Kant, evokes the story of Jesus more for nostalgic than for essential reasons.

Yet she does raid that story and other parts of the Christian tradition selectively, to help her ground and enrich her models. Indeed, the metaphors of God as mother, lover and friend, are by no means unbiblical in themselves, whilst many traditional Christians would resonate to the idea that the material world is sacramental, even if they would find the notion of 'the world as God's body' an unfamiliar way of expressing the thought. And McFague does also appeal to the resurrection stories as signifying a continuing *empowerment* available to those who see in Jesus a paradigm of God's relationship to the world. This would seem to imply that Jesus is not just a parable of salvation, but also a source of salvific power. So, for all her radicality, McFague still offers grounds for further conversation with more traditional Christians who believe that theology is the interpretation of a given revelation. Most importantly she should remind us how our concept of salvation and and the salvific power of God has not in fact been generated from our revelational foundations taken as a whole, but has built up and overemphasised certain metaphors taken from those sources very selectively. And it is just such an imbalance in Western theology which may well be blamed for the disastrous results which Lynn White, feminists and indigenous peoples have alerted us to.

'Creation Spirituality'

We turn now to our second author, Matthew Fox – an American Dominican who, whilst by no means so radical as Sallie McFague, is still radical enough to have been 'silenced' by the Vatican for a year.

In his book *Original Blessing – A Primer in Creation Spirituality*[1] Fox takes the Bible and Christian tradition much more as 'givens' than does Professor McFague, but he discerns within the Western tradition in particular a massive distortion which he attributes chiefly to St Augustine, whom he sees as the father of 'fall/redemption' theology. Fox locates Augustine's doctrine of original sin at the root of much of the alienation between and within human beings, and in their relationships with nature. The dominance of the 'fall/redemption' pattern in our thinking since Augustine, Fox claims, has led us to overlook other positive factors in our tradition, such as the Old Testament's celebration of earthy fertility and creativity as God's original blessing, the importance of passion or 'eros' as the major motive force for creativity in our lives, and the existence within us of the image of God, which Fox describes as our created divinity, and identifies with the gift of creative imagination. Being too caught up with the ideas of fallenness and redemption, we have substituted abstract righteousness for prophetic justice and anger, abstract propositional faith for fundamental trust and celebration, contemplation for compassion, and futuristic or otherworldly eschatology for realised or this-worldly eschatology.

Like McFague, Fox wants to emphasise the immanence of God, and our co-operative responsibility with him for the world. He approaches the idea of immanence in a slightly more traditional way, through the doctrine of the Trinity, but he handles the doctrine in very untraditional language, and it is to be noticed how he draws on imagery of the feminine and the circular, as he celebrates the passionate God who works through us:

> Has it begun to enter believers' hearts and right brains what is truly powerful in the trinitarian formula? . . . What is being celebrated in the trinitarian doctrine is the truth that neither the universe nor the Creator is static; they are unfolding, pulsating, passionate, loving, creating, breathing, spiralling. And that humankind's imaging of such a creating triune God must also be an imaging of generation and creativity . . . . Just as God is in continual process of birthing God –

1 Santa Fe 1983.

> the Spirit flows from the Father and the Son as traditional doctrine insists – so too are we humans to be in the process of birthing ourselves, our lives, our society, our cosmos.[1]

I have to say that there is something very attractive here, not least because Fox is using his 'creation spirituality' to bring alive such a fundamental Christian insight as the doctrine of the Trinity. His emphasis on trust, justice, passion and prophecy, as well as on the image of God within us, also rings true. Yet, ironically, as an attacker of dualisms, he himself falls into one when he espouses one side of the Christian story at the expense of the other. This is pendulum-swing theology with a vengeance. Fox embraces the image of God, and feels that this must mean rejecting fallenness. Yet it is quite possible to see human beings as in some way flawed and trapped into being less than they might be, without adopting Augustine's full-blown concept that we are born *guilty* as well as with a tendency to sin. Fox celebrates creation at the expense of redemption, and it is entertaining to note that he tries to rehabilitate Pelagius as part of suppressed Celtic tradition of creation theology! In the end, his Christology is fundamentally exemplarist; Jesus lived and died and rose as a prophet of human creativity – not as a saviour. To experience freedom we have to decide to follow him, and not to repress or distort the imagination within us.

Yet, surely, the world needs more than a prophet of human goodness? And those who have experienced the demonic, whether in personal oppression or in social structures, will know that whilst it expresses itself pre-eminently through warped imagination and its results, it cannot be simply redeemed or integrated by a choice to re-imagine the world and humanity as good and unfallen. A decisive struggle and deliverance is needed, both for the world, for social structures and for individuals, interrelated as all these are.

Cross and circle, history and cosmos

This language of decisive struggle and deliverance points towards the historical nature of traditional Christianity – 'historical' in the sense of salvation history. Both our authors see such a concept as a masculine linear view, involving dualism and suppression of nature, together with a concept of power as control or domination by God. They object to the exclusivity of the idea of historical revelation, preferring the universal sense of God which may be found in cosmic religions, where the cycles of life speak of the interdependence of all things and the immanence of the divine.

It is my belief that in the biblical tradition the two patterns of thought which may be symbolised by the line (for God's transcendence and salvation history) and the circle (for divine immananence and the interdependence of creation) are not divorced, but held together. Creation theology and cosmic universalism, on the one hand, coexist with election, covenant, and the struggle in which evil is decisively defeated, on the other. The

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1 op. cit. p 214.

Epistle to the Ephesians is a striking example of a document in which these supposedly contrasting packages of ideas are held together. It begins with that marvellous hymn of praise which culminates in the cosmic vision of God's 'plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.' (Eph. 1:10). Yet the same Epistle ends with the theme of the decisive struggle against evil, in the great passage about the whole armour of God. Salvation history and apocalyptic struggle are somehow united with a vision of cosmic unity. And likewise, the very ascension and transcendence of Christ are linked with his universal immanence, in at least two places: 'and God has put all things under feet and his made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills in all.' (Eph. 1:22f.); 'He who descended is also he who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things' (Eph. 4:10). Here is a pattern of thinking in which immanance and transcendence do not fly apart dualistically, but are related dialectically. It is a pattern to which our theological tradition has not always been faithful, too often removing God far from creation, and divorcing Christian concern for the kingdom of heaven from a vision of the unity of all things.

Yet, on the other hand, we notice that the biblical tradition as found in Ephesians (and I am taking only one particularly striking example of a book to whose wholeness of thinking the church has not always done justice) does not use its vision of cosmic unity and divine immanence to undercut its perception of the reality and hostility of evil. 'The principalities . . . the powers . . . the world rulers of this present darkness . . . the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places . . .' (Eph. 6:12) are not elements of darkness which we must redeem by integrating them, but enemies against whom we must struggle in the power of the Spirit. Whether the radical evil which disrupts the spiritual ecology of the cosmos is to be integrated by God himself in the final recapitulation of all things, (as Origen speculated), or whether, on the other hand, it is to be eliminated so that the proper balance of God's creation can reassert itself without it, is not for us to know. The important thing is the decisiveness of Christ's victory in cross and resurrection, and the reality of the power of the Spirit which communicates that victory to us.

The 'ecological' Trinity

Just as there is in the biblical material this rich dialectic of transcendence and immanence, cosmos and salvation history, so too in the doctrine of the Trinity we find a dialectic of transcendence and immanence which neither leaves God remote, nor reduces him to a godling who can do nothing but suffer in, with and under his creation. We also find a picture of perfect interdependence and mutuality – a divine 'ecology' if you like – which is not related to the world simply as an original is to a reflection, but indeed catches the complex interrelatedness of the world up into itself through the sustaining Word in whom all things are held together, and through the flow of Spirit, who is the Lord and giver of life. Here are rich themes, worthy of meditation, giving birth to a theology in which a phrase such as 'the Integrity of Creation' resonates with a deeper and greater wholeness.

In this article I have only been able to sketch an outline of my answer to the question 'do we need a new theology if we are to inspire Christians to care deeply enough about God's creation to act responsibly in it?' My answer has been 'no': we do not need either a new theology, nor an over-compensatory, one-sided interpretation of our tradition if we are to undo the damage of false emphases in the reading of that tradition in previous centuries. With the grace of God, we can go back to the old theology, and get the balance right.

I want to conclude with a visual image. It is that of a Celtic cross in which the linear pattern of the cross takes to itself the disc of religion grounded in the cycles of nature. This is but one symbol of an ancient theology in which nature and salvation history were not set against each other, but held together, united. Another symbol of the same unifying of the cosmic and the redemptive is found in our hands every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

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