

RECOVERING CHRISTIAN PANTHEISM AS THE LOST GOSPEL OF CREATION - REVISITED
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When I was thirteen, I went backpacking for the first time, and in so doing, accidentally became a mystic. I say it was accidental, because I was not on any intentional vision or mystic quest. But nonetheless, the spirit of life that I encountered in the wilderness touched me in a deep way that my rational self still struggles to understand. I have never been the same. That early experience led me in my early teens to reject the Christian fundamentalism of my upbringing and immediately thereafter to replace that faith with Thoreauvian Transcendentalism, and in due course of time with Unitarian Universalism.

These conversions also led me to pursue environmentalism as my career. I have been an environmental activist for the last 25 years, leading up to my current position as National Vice President of the Sierra Club, and the experience has been disheartening. Instead of making progress, we are, by and large, losing the war. What limited legislative gains were made in the early seventies are constantly being eroded. Under George W. Bush, the rate of destruction is accelerating. And with few exceptions, the public at large seems generally disinterested. There seems to be a growing acceptance in the general public, especially in rural areas, that the greatest intentionally caused extinction spasm in history of the planet is simply a necessary and acceptable price for maintaining our modern lifestyle. This knowing public willingness to subsidize our modern lifestyle with the death of our planet, thereby denying life to whole species of our non-human cousins, and denying to future generations of humans an earthly home rich in diversity and beauty, demonstrates the moral dimension of this issue. Today, we are enslaving the planet to maintain a lifestyle. We stand exactly in the shoes of the landed aristocracy of the Old South who had built a life of privilege on the enslavement of a vulnerable human community. Our environmental crisis is, therefore, a moral, that is to say, religious crisis.

So, if the crisis is religious and moral, what is the role of Christianity in this crisis. Given that one-third of humanity claims allegiance to some form of Christianity, the question is important. All of us here are probably aware of Professor Lynn White's provocative 1967 essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, where he assigned a major portion of the blame for our current environmental crisis at the feet of attitudes flowing out of traditional formulations of Christianity. Wendell Berry has noted that, largely as a result of this essay, "the culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction are now established cliches of the conservation movement." In my home town of Boise, Idaho, there is a bumper sticker that is sometimes seen around town that is distributed by a local Baptist church. It is a large bumpersticker, because it has all of the following to say: "Forget 'Save the Earth'; What about your soul? The earth is going to burn, What about you?" The author of this sticker obviously has a different sort of global warming on his mind. Such earth-hating propaganda being spouted in the name of Christianity certainly lends support to Professor White's suggestion that Christianity bears some responsibility for our current planetary crisis. For the better part of two decades, I was one of those leaders in America's conservation movement who thought Christianity was a big part of our environmental problem, and had little if anything to contribute to it's solution.

About 12 years ago, I began reconsidering this position as a result of my encounter with the work of the Jesus Seminar. The work of the Jesus Seminar has attracted wide attention in the media and, as most of you are probably aware, is a group of both secular and religious biblical scholars who have issued a report on the authentic words of the

historical Jesus. Among their conclusions are the following: Jesus was a teacher of intuitive wisdom, did not think he was the Messiah, and did not think he had come to die for anybody's sins. He did, however, teach a message of radical egalitarianism and sternly challenged the injustices and rigid religious dogmas of his day. And the one thing the scholars, conservative to liberal, are nearly unanimous on is that the historical person of Jesus really did throw the money changers out of the temple, thereby creating an incident that probably led to his arrest and summary execution.

For me, the work of the Jesus Seminar solved a persistent, puzzling riddle: Why are some of the sayings attributed to Jesus so profound, while so much else attributed to Jesus strikes the modern mind as grotesque, apocalyptic nonsense. The Jesus Seminar provides a convincing, if simple, explanation. Jesus didn't actually say those grotesque, apocalyptic sayings, nor did he indulge in the self-absorbed "I am" ramblings found in the Gospel of John wherein Jesus is alleged to have gone on ad nauseam about how he was the be all and end all to human history. Those sayings are a reflection of how others, much later and deeply influenced by the other mystery religions of the time and the traumatic aftermath of the Judeo-Roman war of A.D. 66-70, came to view the teachings and life of Jesus. In short, newly informed by the scholarship of the Jesus Seminar, I found myself newly empowered to embrace the good, inspiring Jesus, and reject the bad, judgmental Jesus. Jesus' message of radical egalitarianism, compassion, and, most importantly, action, is profoundly needed by us today. Further, even some elements of the Christian tradition which do not trace back to the historical Jesus himself, are supremely valuable. We can now realize with confidence that a Christianity that is genuinely faithful to the teachings of Jesus will have nothing to do with a blind faith in an atoning death of an incarnate God through which we attain some blissful state in a hereafter. This tragic accumulation can now be tossed aside.

So if Christianity need not be about pie in the sky by and by, what else might it offer? I have titled my talk "Recovering Christian Pantheism as a Lost Gospel of Creation." The term Christian Pantheism will strike many as oxymoronic. Isn't Christianity monotheistic, albeit, with the strange wrinkle of the trinity? Indeed, much of the Bible can be read monotheistically. As John Van Cleve has said, the Bible is a fiddle on which many different tunes can be played, and the dominant, popular tune played to date has been monotheistic. However, the Bible has significant pantheistic strains. Jesus' authentic saying that "the kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation . . . because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21) is one pantheistic saying tracing back to Jesus himself.

Two of the most pantheistic texts are from the Apostle Paul. In the Book of Acts, in an account of one of Paul's sermons to the Athenians, Paul is reported to say the following: "[God] is not far from each one of us 'for in him we live and move and have our being.'" Acts 17:27-28. Here, Paul is actually quoting the Greek pagan philosopher Epimenides for authority. Then, in Paul's Epistle to the Colossians he states "Christ is all, and in all," Col. 3:11, thereby identifying the Christ principle as a cosmic presence in all things, not a resurrected God/person living in some heavenly paradise.

Finally, what in my opinion is the most important text for any Christian Pantheism is Paul's following statement in his letter to the Romans: "What may be known about God is plain. . . For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--His eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what is made, so that men are without excuse [in regards to knowing God]." Rom. 1:19-20. The catholic eco-theologian Thomas Berry has said "the Earth is the primary scripture." Apparently, the Apostle Paul would have agreed.

What this says to me is that in our efforts to understand the divine, we need look no further than nature. Further, when new knowledge about nature is revealed through science, that knowledge supplements earlier, imperfect efforts to articulate our understanding of the divine. Indeed, new scientific understandings of the true nature of the

cosmos may totally overturn earlier understandings about the divine. Augustine's notion of death entering the world due to original sin is one example of a traditional Christian doctrine that becomes logically untenable in the face of the evolving cosmos revealed by science. Under Paul's maxim, new knowledge from nature trumps earlier, imperfect, human strivings toward understanding. The Christian tradition declares, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:32. Any formulation of dogma which requires people to ignore new truth of divine nature that comes to us through science cannot be regarded as authentically Christian.

Christian pantheism liberates us from 2,000 years of accumulated dogma about Jesus, and frees us to listen anew to the teachings of Jesus. Throughout his teachings, Jesus stressed that the value of a simple life and cautioned, indeed ranted, against using wealth and privilege to oppress. As Matthew Fox has noted, Mother Earth is the most oppressed among us. Indeed, our modern culture and institutions "have left us all with maternal blood on our hands [, t]he blood of Mother Earth crucified." Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan can be interpreted as a strong call to environmental responsibility. Today, to speak metaphorically, Mother Nature is the mugged, bleeding, and left for dead victim laying beside our modern superhighway of consumption. Jesus' parable calls us not to turn away, as we are doing, from a dying Mother Earth.

Time permits me to give only one more example of how the Christian tradition speaks to our environmental crisis. The emerging Christian tradition as recorded in Matthew contains the following account attributed to Jesus.

When the son of Adam comes . . . [H]e will say to those at his right . . . "You may remember, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a foreigner and you showed me hospitality; I was naked and you clothed me; I was in prison and you came to see me.

Then the virtuous will say to him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we notice that you were a foreigner and extend hospitality to you? Or naked and clothe you? When did we find you ill or in prison and come to visit you?

And the King will respond to them: I swear to you, whatever you did for the most inconspicuous members of my family, you did for me as well.

Matt. 25:31-40. Thus, the Christian tradition declares that work on behalf of the oppressed is work for God. And, as Matthew Fox said, Mother Earth is the most neglected of the suffering, voiceless ones today.

My friend Mike Medberry confided to me some years ago that unless a new religion emerges that inspires humans with feelings of caring and duty towards the earth, our cause is lost. Mike was right that the solution is essentially religious but wrong that the solution was a "new" religion. The gospel of creation has been here all along. We need only to heed its call.

What I have presented you so far is a somewhat condensed version of a sermon I first delivered in April of 1997 to my Unitarian Universalist congregation in Boise.¹ At that time, I had just started exploring the world of the internet. I was inspired for some reason to do a search on "Christian" and "Pantheism," and the only website that came up was Paul Harrison's Scientific Pantheism website, where he has a page discussing what he calls "The gospel roots of Christian pantheism."² It was really my encounter with Harrison's discussion that led me to formulate my own version of Christian Pantheism. Shortly after delivering my sermon, I registered the domain name, www.christianecology.org, and posted my sermon to that site. As of today, Yahoo shows that 70 other sites have created links

to my site. Thus, over the last decade, a variety of cyber-apostles that I do not know and have never met have been helping me spread my heretical notions to the world. My little sermon has been quoted in "Science and Spirit" magazine, and provides an interesting case study in the power of the internet to spread new ideas and to empower ordinary folk to get in on the act. In the past, I would have written and delivered my talk to 50 or so people in Boise on a Sunday in 1997, and that would have been it. Now, Google finds 553 hits for "christian pantheism". Yahoo finds 415.³ A lot of those sites are by traditionally inclined Christians attacking the notion of Christian Pantheism.

One persistent criticism of Christian Pantheism is "What about the resurrection?" As a child of the modern age, I cannot believe Jesus literally rose from the dead. So, is there any worthwhile way of re-imagining Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection that doesn't offend the modern mind? This is how I metaphorically re-imagine these events. Jesus so inspired his followers that he became metaphorically identified with "the good" on a cosmic scale. Indeed, within Western Civilization, he became the embodiment of cosmic goodness. His crucifixion is not merely an event two millennia ago, but an ongoing event. Every time I fail to follow Jesus' message of love, compassion, and selflessness, I crucify him anew. And every time I do follow, however imperfectly and briefly, his message, I enable Jesus' ongoing resurrection and ultimate victory over the daily deaths that flow from greed and selfishness. Jesus' resurrection exists in those who follow his path to union with the sacred through justice making and compassion.

At a minimum, a conversation about new ways of imagining Christianity has begun. This is a good thing. In this spirit, I'll close with this from Wendell Berry.

there is an enormous number of people, and I am one of them, whose native religion, for better or worse, is Christianity. We were born to it; we began to learn about it before we became conscious; it is, whatever we think of it, an intimate belonging of our being; it informs our consciousness, our language, and our dreams. We can turn away from it or against it, but that will only bind us tightly to a reduced version of it. A better possibility is that this, our native religion, should survive and renew itself, so that it may become as largely and truly instructive as we need it to be. On such a survival and renewal of the Christian religion may depend the survival of that Creation which is its subject.⁴

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1. Zaleha, Bernard, "Recovering Christian Pantheism as the Lost Gospel of Creation," April 20, 1997, published by the Fund for Christian Ecology, Inc., at its website: www.christianecology.org/ConsiderLillies.html.
 2. <http://www.pantheism.net/paul/gospel.htm> (formerly published by Harrison at <http://members.aol.com/heraklit1/gospel.htm>).
 3. As of February 9, 2009, Google now finds 2,730 and Yahoo now finds 8,150 occurrences of "Christian Pantheism."
 4. Berry, Wendell, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," reprinted in his collection of essays, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 93, reproduced at <http://www.crosscurrents.org/berry.htm>.