

Stewardship versus deep ecology

Rich Heffern | Mar. 21, 2011 Eco Catholic

In 1987 church environmental activists convened a nationwide ecumenical gathering in Indiana, the first Conference on Christianity and Ecology. Their aim was to bring together people from Christian churches around the country to discuss what could be done to bring a more active environmental awareness to the forefront in both preaching and praxis.

The conference was held on the shores of Lake Webster. Hundreds came from every corner of the United States.

Almost immediately it became apparent that there were two points of view present and active in the gathered conference-goers.

The first was the stewardship view, which proposes that humanity is charged by God to take care of the natural world but that we humans are in significant ways separate from it and superior to it.

The other vantage point could be called the "deep ecological" view, holding that we humans are derivative of the natural world, that we directly come from it, that its fate is our fate. Deep ecologists believe that the Creator God chose a 15 billion year evolutionary process not a seven-day week, as the mechanism by which life and consciousness could flourish in the universe.

Fr. Thomas Berry well articulated this view when he said in his own address to the summer conference: "Listen to these words carefully. The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. And listen to this: the human is derivative. The planet is primary."

As Fr. Diarmuid O'Murchu says, we did not come *into* this world, we came *out of* it.

Biologist Lewis Thomas points out that Earth is not a planet with life on it; rather it is a living planet. The core, mantle and mountain ranges act as the skeleton. The soil that covers its grasslands and forests is like a vast digestive system, where everything is broken down, absorbed and recycled into new growth. The oceans, rivers and rain cycles serve as a circulatory system. The bacteria, algae and trees provide the planet with lungs, constantly regenerating the entire atmosphere. Each species is a unique expression of planetary consciousness, with its own unique gifts.

The human enables the Earth to reflect on itself and on the divine Mystery out of which it has come and in which it exists. "We are the means by which nature can appreciate its own beauty and feel its own splendor," writes Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow. "The backyard astronomer peering through her telescope is literally the universe looking at itself. The child enchanted by the immensity of the ocean is Earth enraptured by itself. The student learning biology is the planet learning how it functioned unconsciously for billions of years. The worshiper singing praises is the universe celebrating the wonder of the divine Mystery from whence it came, and in which it exists."

Physicist Brian Swimme likes to say, "The planet Earth, once molten rock, now sings opera."

This shift from seeing ourselves as separate beings placed on Earth to seeing ourselves as an expression of Earth is a major shift in our understanding of who we are. Earth is not just a backdrop to a drama between humans and God. It is a shift at the deepest possible level.

From the point of view of deep ecology, what is wrong with our culture is that it offers us an incorrect view of our place within nature. It causes us to act in competition and in opposition to the natural world. Deep ecology is grounded in science's new cosmology and in the story of evolution. The environment is not "out there" separate from us.

This view has profound significance for our religious questioning, and it was recognized at that conference that these two points of view are widely different. In fact, at the end of the conference two different advocacy groups emerged.

Consider this parable offered by Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow:

"Once upon a time a group of brain cells debated the relative importance of the rest of the body. Some suggested that the body was dispensable. "After all," said one, "we are the only cells in the body that know that we know things." "Only we can reflect on our dreams," said another, "so we must be the only part of the body that is spiritual, right?" "Why just think of the awesome accomplishments we are capable of!" And they all were thinking they were separate from and superior to the rest of the body.

The brain cells had convinced themselves that the Great Life lived completely outside the body and could be known only through their dreams or theological speculation. They believed they were destined to leave the body and dwell in a separate place called heaven. They also assumed that the rest of the body was not really alive at all, that it was an inexhaustible supply of "resources" for the benefit of the brain. Needless to say, the health of the body worsened day by day and was soon on the verge of dying."

Science writer Brian Patrick observes: "A cancer cell is a normal cell disconnected from its genetic memory, cut off from the wisdom of millions of years of evolutionary development. It experiences itself as separate from the body, overpopulates and consumes the organism which supports it. Cancer eventually kills itself by consuming its own environment."

The deep ecological view reverses this disconnection in our religious views, changes arrogance into respect, and builds an abiding sense of eco-morality.

"It's no longer credible to imagine we can love God," says Michael Dowd, without honoring nature, that we can love God without honoring each other with reverence, respect and dignity. "Future generations will look back on our time as that pivotal moment when the Great Story, the universe story, the epic of evolution emerged into human awareness " and changed everything!"

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