

The Ecumenism of Ecology

Anthony J. Kelly

Abstract: *In anticipation of Pope Francis's forthcoming encyclical on ecology, this article points to the ecumenical significance of an ecological conversion as integral to the Christian vocation and the promotion of an authentic catholicity. Etymologically speaking, a "religious" commitment intrinsically brings together spiritual and ecologically concerns, and inspires new choices in our moral conduct. In ecumenical terms, among the many possible topics, those of creation, Trinity and Eucharist suggest broad and deep dimensions of ecological vision and commitment for the churches that can continue to grow.*

Key Words: Ecumenical greening, ecological conversion, Spirit, creation, Trinity, Eucharist.

Ecumenical developments among the Christian communities in recent decades have not moved simply by discussing the core doctrines of Christian tradition in an abstract fashion. There has been an outward turn of common concern which arose from the realisation that all human beings are the beneficiaries of God's saving love and are called to participate in the planetary biosphere in a spirit of thanksgiving and justice.¹ The awareness of being part of one web of planetary life, provoked in some measure by writings such as Lynn White's "The historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis",² has both ecumenical and ecological consequences as faith awakens to the whole mystery of life and Christian responsibilities within it. Some authors speak of an "ecological conversion" taking place as an essential dimension of Christian conversion at this time,³ at least in regard to the development of an environmental conscience and a more keen consciousness of the Christian vocation within a planetary biosphere.⁴

¹ For example, Pope John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation", World Day for Peace message, 1990; Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, "We Are Still Betraying the Mandate God Has Given Us": A Declaration on the Environment, June 10, 2002; U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good", 2001; "Christian Faith Statement on the Ecology", from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the World Council of Churches, and the Vatican Franciscan Center of Environmental Studies; "A Common Declaration on the Environment", by the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, March 1998. These and many more statements can be accessed through the following links: <http://www3.villanova.edu/mission/CSTresource/ecology/front.htm>; <http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary.environ.htm>.

² Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis", *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7. For an apposite comment on White's influence, see Daniel Cowdin, "Environmental Ethics", *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 164-84, especially 165.

³ For example, Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 2-4.

⁴ For a notable further resource and a larger frame of reference, see Roger Gottlieb, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (New York: Oxford University, 2006).

BACKGROUND

An Ecumenical “Greening”

Up to a comparatively recent past, the ecumenical search tended to concentrate on one or other end of the spectrum of human experience in the world. At the upper extreme, Christian unity beckoned from the ethereal indigo of world-transcending spirituality, and in the wordless and supra-conceptual violet realm of inexpressible mystery. More recently, ecumenical activity has turned to the lower extreme, the red of the flesh and blood of our humanity as it experiences suffering and oppression. Less dramatically, the ecumenical movement has affirmed the orange and gold of common Christian and human values such as human dignity, solidarity and hope as the animating force of human culture. Between the two extremes of the spectrum is the green of a new ecological realisation. In this middle band, the vivid colours of history and culture come together in the hitherto unnoticed green—the colour of the earth and all its living systems in the great community of planetary life.⁵ This simple metaphor of the spectrum of light points to how the ecumenical movement has begun to be aware of all the colours of the spectrum of faith and human experience. In the pursuit of Christian unity, the old simplicities of black and white are no longer useful. Christian consciousness grows and expands, unfolding in an astonishingly vast, subtle and beautifully differentiated universe of many colours. Thus faith stretches upward and outward, to the One who dwells in “unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16), more fully to appreciate the all-illuminating light which, in Christ, “was coming into the world” (John 1:9).

The result has been a notable “greening” in ecumenical communications and, more generally, in the tone of Christian sensibilities and ecumenical commitments.⁶ Indeed, Christian tradition has a great range of resources to bring to bear on environmental and ecological issues by drawing on its theological, moral, spiritual, philosophical, and artistic capital, and by celebrating the goodness of creation as a whole, centred on the focal truth of the incarnation.⁷ Then there are the larger dimensions of specifically human experience of special relevance in this critical moment. Firstly, there is a sense of the immense, labouring fertility of the past which has brought us forth and placed us together in this present moment; and, secondly, a responsibility for the future which in some quite new way will be the product of our present decisions. A “common era” has been forced upon us by the sheer extent of the ecological responsibilities we must now shoulder.

The Ecumenical Contribution

Effective organisation for the sake of the environment presupposes a large measure of community. Here, Christian *koinonia* is especially relevant for redefining the Church’s

⁵ Thomas Hughson, “Creation as an Ecumenical Problem: Renewed Belief through Green Experience”, *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 816–846.

⁶ For example, Ian Bradley, *God is Green: Christianity and the Environment* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990); and Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992); Roger Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future* (New York: Oxford University, 2006).

⁷ J. Ronald Engel, ‘The Ethics of Sustainable Development’, in *Ethics of Environment and Development*, I. Robert Engel and Joan Gibb Engel, (eds.), (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1989), 13–15. Also James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) is especially valuable in the section “The Ecological Complaint against Christianity” 68–91.

ecumenical mission to the world and its search for new forms of planetary cooperation geared to the ecological well-being of the planet. There is no simple answer to be found by legislating for the structures necessary to maintain the quality of the biosphere. The deep values and meanings inspiring human life on planet earth cannot be produced by legal decree. Legislative bodies can change laws, but they cannot change hearts. But the Church is familiar with the great *oikumene* of religious faith with its cultivation of the transcendent, the holy, the ultimately worthwhile, producing an energy powerful in its ability to sustain communities of meaning and moral action.

Here, the churches have both a redemptive and a constructive role. All forms of community are vulnerable to the baleful influence of “the seven deadly sins”: pride and greed, envy and apathy, violence and dishonesty remain ever apt to frustrate the possibilities of collaboration in the common good. For Christian faith, forgiveness and reconciliation remain real imperatives, no matter how godforsaken the historical situation seems to be, and whatever the extent of past failure and destructiveness. In that hope, the Church acts within culture by witnessing to limitless mercy, and thereby encourages the integrity required to confess our social sins for what they are, and to renew hope even when healing seems impossible. Without such honesty and hope, any culture is locked in an endless rationalising in regard to its deepest failures. A new beginning can be made. Hope inspires an imagination of the world “otherwise”, so that history is not the sum total of human failures, but always remains subject to a last word of grace and limitless mercy.

More positively still, the Church has a constructive role to play in the global and ecological turn in human consciousness. Christian faith lives in a familiarity with the universe as the one creation of God. The Spirit of God’s self-giving love is the field of life-giving, transforming energy pervading all creation. In those who surrender to it, this Holy Spirit inspires a sense of the totality, a *uni-verse*, of all things in Christ, along with an outreach to what is most forgotten, vulnerable—the suffering other, in whatever form she or he (or it!) is present. Such faith particularly celebrates the divine presence within creation in the sacramental forms of its worship. There the humble realities of our world become icons of the mystery at work.

The energies of Christian faith, then, offer deep resources for the development of a global and ecologically attuned consciousness. On the other hand, an ecumenical faith learns from the explorations of science and from the ethical concerns now stirring in human history. Further, discovering the riches of other religious faiths and traditions, the churches find themselves in a situation for which its central mysteries have been preparing it, and out of which it can contribute powerfully to the one, global human community. Christian faith witnesses to transcendent beauty—to the glory that has been revealed, yet too often remains concealed by excessive rationalism and moralising. To inspire a deeper ecological sense, faith allies itself to the world of art, that domain of creativity by which our experience is freed and refreshed to perceive even the beauty of the natural environment—that the pressures of life obscure and distort.⁸

Thus, the ecumenical, community-forming ministry of the Church operates within the planetary community. The Church is not a world to itself, for it is now both a teacher

⁸ For a discussion of beauty, see Daniel Cowdin, “Environmental Ethics.”

and a learner in a new situation. In its Greek roots, “ecology” signifies “the ordered meaning of the home.” It promises for Christian faith a new home-coming through the doors of ecological awareness and concerns. In this regard, the Christian Church comes not as an alien intruder, but as a member of the whole human family, and as embodied in the interconnected, pluriform web of life of the planet itself. The overall horizon is that of a humanity freshly perceived as “earthed” in the great temporal and spatial genesis of the cosmos itself. Christian humility deepens with the realisation of our inescapable dependence on a world of living and non-living things for our co-existence, nourishment and delight. There follows a growth of responsibility, too, with the recognition that it is given to human beings, for better or worse, to deeply affect the ecological well-being of the world. The fate of the planetary biosphere has come to depend on human decision. But there is also hope, too, since faith lives from the conviction that we are not alone in the universe. There is the *Other*, creatively, graciously present in its every moment.

Three Interweaving Meanings

The word, “ecology” was coined little more than a century by the German zoologist, Ernst Haeckel.⁹ Its Greek roots imply, “the meaning of the home”, and it came to refer to the study of the complex totality of conditions necessary for the survival of all living organisms. These are symbiotically interrelated within the one matrix or web of life on planet Earth. Thus, ecology explores nature “in the round”, so to speak, alert to all the intricate, delicate interactions that characterise life on this planet. Planetary life emerges as a biological community of communities in which each living thing and each species is not an isolated self-contained entity, but participates in a living, interconnected totality.¹⁰

Ecumenism in relation to ecology implies a religious dimension. The Latin roots of *religio* are instructive: *religare* (“to bind together again”) or *re-eligere* (“to renew one’s choice”). This suggests a relationship between faith and action. The religion of our era must “choose” to “bind” faith and responsibility together in a new ways, and so choose the path of wholeness, healing, and common well-being. A deliberate “earthing” of faith both in the biosphere of this planet, and in the uncanny, emergent reality of the universe itself, will enable believers to taste life, not as a bundle of problems to be solved, but, first of all, as a gift, a shared participation in a life-giving mystery. The ecological crises taking shape in recent centuries have not been helped by a religion floating free of a connection with the life of this earth, with a dulled sense of communion with all living things. An tragic attenuation of Christian experience is the result: with its accent on creation, the incarnation of the Word, the resurrection of the body, and the sacramental character of the divine presence, Christian faith is, in so many ways, the most earthy and material of all religions.¹¹

The mark of the Church that is most characteristic of the ecumenical progress is catholicity. The Greek roots, *kat’ holou*, are literally, “universal”, “all-embracing”, “in

⁹ See Frank N. Egerton, “Ernst Haeckel’s Ecology”, *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 94/3 (2013): 222–44 for useful background.

¹⁰ For a serious attempt to set new perceptions into a larger tradition of philosophy, see Laura Landen, “A Thomistic Look at the Gaia Hypothesis: How New Is This New Look At Life?”, *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 1–18.

¹¹ John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) 67–68; 121–147.

communion with the whole.” It has, of course, an historical meaning in the self-description of the Catholic Church, presided over by the popes throughout history, institutionally intent on recognising and guarding the totality of God’s revelation and the totality of Christian response to the Word in all the variety of cultures and languages in which it proclaimed. But in all the particular Christian traditions—Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant—catholicity is generally accepted as a mark of the authenticity of the community of faith and of the ecclesial community professing the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” of the Nicene Creed. The feature of catholicity is today enjoying a larger application. It opens to an ecological and cosmic frame of reference, within the mystery of Christ “in whom all things hold together” (Col 1:17). Simone Weil’s question is pertinent, “How can Christianity call itself ‘catholic’ if the universe is left out?”¹² We might continue to ask, “how is the catholicity of faith credible if the earth and its diversity of life are ignored?”

All this is to suggest that an ecological sensibility flows naturally from ecumenical commitment. The key doctrines of a shared Christian faith—the incarnation, Trinity, the unity of all creation in Christ, the one Holy Spirit manifest in a diversity of gifts—cannot but brim over with ecological significance. Indeed, ecumenism itself is somewhat akin to the discovery of an “ecology” of Christian life. In the process of facing up to doctrinal and institutional differences, the sources of original unity and present reconciliation emerge, along with a respect for diversity and differences within the one faith. The door is thus opened to the development of ecumenical interrelationships, and to respectful but critical interactions of mutual enrichment. All this can serve a healthy ecology of Christian consciousness in the faith, hope, and love that shape the particular life-form of Christian existence in the world. More basically still, the love of God that is the heart of the Gospel not only brings with it the imperative to love our neighbor. If that is to be effective, it must overflow into love of, and care for, the “neighbourhood”—if the neighbor is to be truly loved, and if the Creator of all is to be truly honoured. Such ecological imperatives are based in the Bible itself. Against the background of the creation accounts of Genesis and the Wisdom literature, the Word is presented as the light and life of all creation (Jn 1:3–5), and all things are created in Christ (Col 1:15–17).

In other words, the holistic sense of everything created in Christ is at once a model and an inspiration for an ecological vision of love and care for the created world. Christian faith can contribute a sense of thanksgiving for all creation and reverence for all God’s creatures in the light of Christ. To adore the will of God necessarily means concern, in love and justice, for the neighbor and the “neighbourhood”—social and ecological. Furthermore, because of the resurrection of the Crucified One, there is hope for all, despite the mortality and travail that are inescapably dimensions of earthly life.

After these general considerations, we can now pass on to the ecumenical and ecological significance of three core doctrines of Christian faith. Clearly, creation has been the most favoured theme, and the Eucharist has been the focus in some cases. On the other hand, the topic of the Trinity, though well established in more general theological writing and in specifically ecumenical statements, does not seem to have had a notable ecological resonance. A word, then, on each of these topics.

¹² Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (London: Fontana, 1959) 116.

CREATION

Under this heading, we make three references—biblical, patristic, and medieval, respectively.

In Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40–55), the great theme of God as Creator is employed to bolster the hopes of Israel in its experience of captivity. God can bring about a new exodus. For their part, the two creation accounts in the early chapters of Genesis are not expressed under the same degree of historical pressure. They represent a marvellous morning dream of the universe as God’s original gift. The world appears as an ordered and differentiated whole. Human beings are introduced into such a totality to share in God’s own creativity through responsibility and care. Within such a world, the human community will find nothing to equal God, for God is the world-originating source of all good. Though evil has its opaque presence in human experience, it is not from God. Evil is from creatures gone wrong—a perversion of creation, and not its original or final condition. In every reality, and behind every moment of history, is the utterly free and unconditioned power of divine creativity.

The sense of creation that Christianity inherits from Israel would be truncated if no mention were made of the more immanent, participative emphasis evident in the Wisdom literature. It contrasts with the rather hierarchical and pictorial accounts characteristic of Genesis. The sensory texture of the Sapiential experience of creation is not so much visual and auditory, but more kinetic and tactile. The feminine character of creative wisdom is to the forefront, as the divine presence pervades and encompasses all experience. To give one example,

for wisdom the fashioner of all things taught me. There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure and altogether subtle ... she is the breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty (Wis 7: 22–25).

Divine wisdom moves in and through the “all things” as an attractive, all-pervasive, life-giving reality (see Prov 8:22–9:6; Sir 1:1–20; 24:1–22; Wis 7:22–9:18. also Eph 4:6). In this, we have an indication of Israel’s true *philosophia*, the “love of wisdom.” It might be asked whether a certain neglect of the Wisdom literature in some Christian traditions weakened their ability to face the great ecological and cosmic questions of these latter days.

For a patristic reference, we here note how that the great saint of the Eastern and Western Church, Maximus Confessor, understood the role of the human humanity within the cosmos of creation. He writes,

the human person which is the laboratory in which everything is concentrated and itself naturally mediates between the extremities of each division, having been drawn into everything in a good and fitting way through becoming. [Difficulty 41:1305B]¹³

With his emphasis is on the global multi-relational character of the human existence, Maximus exploits the Platonic idea (*Timaeus*) of the human being as a microcosm of the

¹³ See Andrew Louth, *Maximus The Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996) 32–3. I am relying on Louth’s translation.

cosmic totality. He developed this in his biblically attuned sense of creation in a manner which can speak powerfully to the ecological concerns of today.¹⁴

To take another example, from Thomas Aquinas in 13th century. He is heir to the whole patristic inheritance when, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*,¹⁵ he asks whether the “consideration of creatures” is useful for the enlightenment of faith. His positive answer reveals a sturdy and reverent realism. Creatures in all their variety image forth God in some way, lead to an appreciation of the divine wisdom, and witness to the manifold creativity of God’s power. Further, the beauty and delicacy of the created world ignites in the human mind a love for the divine goodness, the *fontana bonitas*, from which created realities derive. By contemplating the Creator and God’s creation, human beings achieve in themselves “a certain likeness to the divine perfection and wisdom.” The human mind and heart begin to participate in God’s own self-knowledge and love, and thereby share in God’s own awareness of the created world as manifesting the divine perfections.¹⁶

In such medieval theology, we find a wisdom that deeply appreciates the variety and precious particularities of creation. Each element of creation has its own quasi-absolute value, as a particular realisation of the divine. The numinous sense of nature that so many ecologists bring to their commitments today is no doubt living from a subterranean connection with this great medieval vision. Aquinas writes,

God planned to create many distinct things in order to share with them and reproduce in them his goodness. Because no one creature could do this, he produced many diverse creatures, so that what was lacking in one expression of his goodness could be made up by another; for the goodness which is simply and wholly in God, is shared in by creatures in many different ways. Hence, the whole universe shares and expresses that goodness better than any individual creature.¹⁷

The medieval mind envisaged a stable world of particular natures linked in a great chain of being—in contrast to the evolutionary mentality of today’s worldview. Still, there is, in Aquinas, for instance, a serene delight in the specific value of each element of creation. Each being serves to manifest the divine goodness in a particular way. To that degree, a sense of divine creation mitigates the cosmic sadness of a dispassionate evolutionary mythology. In its sense of the past, such a myth reads like an obituary for the casualties of evolution. The fittest survived; the weakest did not; and even what survives is subjected to the blind, harsh law that values only the future. In contrast, the medieval vision, even while it leaves unknown the mysterious ways of Providence, finds an existential value in things simply because they exist—or existed—in a certain way, and at a certain time. It is a reminder to those who would hurry to frame the laws of evolution to take into account two considerations. First, each individual entity is a world of mystery in the sheer fact of *existence*. Before it can be considered a link in the chain of evolution, or as an aspect of the larger emerging complexity, it is, or was, *there!* The evolutionary potential—or lack of it—of the *Marella splendens*, or of any of eighty thousand extraordinarily complex creatures unearthed in the Burgess Shale in Western Canada, does not evacuate the fundamental wonder of its existence in the play and contingency of what happened in

¹⁴ Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos. The Vision of St Maximus The Confessor* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary, 1985) 132–137.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, l. 2, c. 2.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, l. 2, c. 45.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 47, a. 1.

time.¹⁸ The value of the unique existence of the individual is not sufficiently explored in evolutionary thinking. Secondly, the seemingly purposeless variety of what once existed (or is existing) in its unique manner should make us wary of any premature closure on the whole story of what is going on. The human mind is not a detached spectator, but is part of the emerging process. As science progresses, our present reconstructions and extrapolations access only fragments of the meaning of the whole process. An ecumenical theological vision can reclaim the past by contributing to present ecological awareness a sense of the necessary plurality of creation and the radical value of each existent. It thereby contests the simplicity of evolutionary myths, but serves to keep genuine evolutionary theory humbly respectful of the full meaning of creation to be found only in God.¹⁹

While so much has changed with the expansion of scientific knowledge, it is worth recalling in any ecumenical context of discussion that, in the biblical vision of creation, the existence of other and higher forms of life is presumed. Their presence is now largely mediated to faith in the various liturgical prefaces in which the assembly is invited to join with “angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim” in a cosmic hymn of praise. To evoke that largely unrecognised biblical and liturgical aspect of creation is to suggest a more wonderful view of the universe as a living communion compared to that afforded by a flat, materialist anthropocentrism. The cosmic feelings and symbols of solidarity with all that is both below and above our form of life cannot but promote a greater awe and fresh questioning in the presence of so much that is still unknown. While the realm of created supra-human intelligence is largely ignored in current preoccupations, it still has a suggestive power. It functions as a symbol, to say the very least, of dimensions of reality that have yet to be considered in our efforts to understand the commonwealth of life and the community of consciousness in the universe of our present perceptions.²⁰

TRINITY

A second select focus of ecumenical and ecological significance is Trinitarian faith. Beatrice Bruteau’s remark is especially suggestive:

The cosmos has all the marks of the Trinity: it is a unity; it is internally differentiated but interpenetrating; and it is dynamic, giving, expansive, radiant. And, as a work of art, the cosmos has another important character: it does not exist for the sake of something else, something beyond itself; it is not useful, it is not instrumental; it is an end in itself, self-justifying, valuable in its own right and in its very process. This, I think, is foundational for ... ecological virtue.²¹

¹⁸ Apart from an abundance of exciting documentation and marvellous instances of the variety of the past, Stephen Jay Goulding, *Wonderful Life. The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (London: Penguin, 1989), is a striking model of scientific reconstruction, even as it poses profound philosophical questions.

¹⁹ Jame Schaefer, “Valuing Earth Intrinsically and Instrumentally: A Theological Framework for Environmental Ethics”, *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 783–814. In the context of her reflection in patristic and medieval theologies of creation, she argues that the Christian tradition can indeed inspire a collaborative response to the ecological crisis—see especially, 809–10.

²⁰ For an inspiring Orthodox view of Vladimir Solovyov, see S.L. Frank (ed.), *A Solovyov Anthology* (London: The Saint Austin, 2001) 127–138; likewise, drawing on Eastern Christian sources such as St Ephrem, Ps. Dionysius and Armenian hymns, Vigan Guroian, *The Fragrance of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

²¹ Beatrice Bruteau, “Eucharistic Ecology and Ecological Spirituality”, *Cross Currents* (1990): 504. See also, Anthony J. Kelly, *The Eucharistic Imagination* (Melbourne/Liguori MO: Harper Collins/Liguori Publications, 2001).

One way in which the Trinity can be viewed as the foundation of ecological virtue is to be found in the tradition from earliest times of reflecting on the mystery of God by way of analogy with created realities; and, conversely, of seeing the world of creation as made in the image of the Creator. Augustine's "vestige" and "image" doctrine, with its underpinning in Greek exemplarism, is a good instance.²² In the West, this Trinitarian approach developed into the typically Franciscan cosmic sense of all reality sacramentally manifesting God. A medieval scholar could contemplate a speck of dust as a manifestation of the divine persons in its existence, form and movement.²³ Admittedly, a mote caught in the light beaming in through a medieval scholar's window is rather different from other "specks" we might know today. For example, the earth is a mere speck in a universe of some hundred billion galaxies. Indeed, the Big Bang represents the unfolding of the cosmos through billions of years from the infinitesimal super-compressed speck of its beginnings. Theology, however, can claim continuity with its past in contemplating the originality, the dynamic form, the wonder and beauty of cosmic reality. Such is the setting for a deeper appreciation of the planetary biosphere and the ecology of its interrelated life-forms. The sheer originality of life, its profusion of forms and its evolutionary dynamics can serve to inspire deeper insight into the Trinitarian origin, form, and movement of the universe. As St Bonaventure writes,

the creation of the world as a book in which the creative Trinity shines forth. It is read according to the three levels of expression, the ways of vestige, image and likeness. By these, as up a ladder's steps, the human intellect has the power to climb by stages to the supreme principle which is God.²⁴

The implied metaphor of a stable ladder leading upward must yield today to the image of the arrow of time moving forward along an evolutionary path. The "footsteps" (*vestigia*) of God now have to be tracked in the history of over fourteen billion years of the world's emergence. The "image" (*imago*) of God is now to be found within human consciousness as it emerges in such an evolutionary world as a light and a love in which the universe is known and appreciated. The "likeness" (*similitudo*) of God, in its turn, is realised in a consciousness transformed and indwelt by the primordial mystery of creative Wisdom and Love.

The contemplation of creation in the light of the Trinity derives not only from an objective understanding but also, and more intimately, arises out of a participation in the current of God's life and love: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7-8). To experience God in such a way is to find oneself as an "inter-relational self", a self-to-be-realised in relationship to the other in God. This "other" today admits of a global, ecological, and cosmic extension. Hence, the adoration of the Trinitarian God orientates the believer into a world of relationship and communion. It implies an agenda for the transformation of ourselves, our communities, and our global co-existence.²⁵ Both an ecumenical movement

²² Augustine, *De Trinitate* VI; VIII-XV.

²³ Servus Gieben, "Traces of God in Nature according to Robert Grosseteste", *Franciscan Studies* XXIV (1964): 154-6.

²⁴ Saint Bonaventure, *Intinerarium Mentis in Deum* c. 3, n. 5. Translation taken from *Intinerarium Mentis in Deum*, trans. Zachary Hayes, *The Works of St Bonaventure*, Vol. 3 (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002) 125.

²⁵ Anne Hunt, *Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of Trinitarian Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005) 104-114.

of faith and a growing ecological awareness can alike be grounded in the mystery of the Trinity, as moves from the background to the foreground of Christian thought and action.²⁶

A vivid sense of the Trinitarian dimension of human existence profoundly affects the lived sense of human selfhood. Christian theology speaks of the divine indwelling. It is at once God dwelling in us, and ourselves dwelling in God. To search into who we are is to find ourselves in the presence of God. For God is the “Self” in all our selves in that the Trinitarian communion of love and life has overflowed into the wonder of creation as a primordial gift. To be created is to participate in a living, interacting community of beings in the universe arising from the Word, and held in existence and moved to fulfillment, by the Spirit, “the Lord and giver of Life.

EUCCHARIST

Our third focus of general ecumenical and ecological significance is what I call here, “the Eucharistic imagination”—in order to allow maximum inclusiveness of different traditions and theological options in regard to the Eucharist. This kind of Eucharistic imagination has to address an essentially ecological question as it stirs deep within modern culture: How can a respect for nature find its proper place in our technologically driven and consumer-oriented culture? Must human culture always be at the expense of natural world? On the other hand, is that natural world preserved only by banishing the human presence as destructive and parasitical?²⁷

In an ecumenical theology, the Eucharist suggests its own ecological vision. The celebration of the Eucharist brings together nature and culture, precisely by relating them to the incarnate reality of Christ. The “real presence” of the whole Body of Christ is communicated to the community through the transformation of the shared “fruit of the earth and the work of human hands.” Through the power of the Spirit, the bread becomes for us “the bread of life”, and the wine that is offered becomes “our spiritual drink.” Thus, the earthy elements that sustain human life and communication have an essential place in God’s self-giving in Christ. Indeed, unless creation were radically from God, it could not figure so intrinsically in God’s relationship to humanity. In this respect, the Eucharist brings together many gifts and many forms of giving in the world of human experience, to draw all believers into a holy communion, within a universe of grace and giving. From nature’s giving we have the grain and the grapes. From the giving of human work and skill, we have the gifts of bread and wine. From the giving of family and friends, there flow the gifts of good meals and festive celebrations. From Jesus’ self-giving at the Last Supper, the disciples were given his “body and blood”, the food and drink to nourish life in him. He breathes into his disciples the gift of the Spirit. And working in and through all these gifts and modes of giving, there is the gift of the Father who so loved the world. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, all these gifts come together to nourish Christian life with the gift of communion with God.²⁸

²⁶ Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* 65–80.

²⁷ See Simon Oliver, “The Eucharist Before Nature and Culture”, *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 331–353

²⁸ John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, Luke Ben Tallon (ed.), (London: T&T Clark, 2011) 128–131; 135–140; 151–154.

And this is not without ecological significance for Christians united in responding to the present ecological challenges. Admittedly, the problem is compounded by the artificiality of technological culture. That dimension of modern existence has uprooted humanity from nature so that human beings are not clearly aware of themselves as humbly *part* of nature, but are inclined to see themselves set *apart* from nature. In the interests of a better ecological relationship with the biosphere, the Eucharist inspires a more humble and far-reaching wisdom. In the richness of its sacramentality, it stimulates an expansively catholic imagination, an “openness to the whole” (*kat-holou*) in a full communal and inclusive sense. It enacts a theocentric totality in which each part lives in the whole, and in which the whole is present in each part. To celebrate this sacrament in the time and space of human existence, is to confess that “God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself” (2 Cor 5: 19). It leads toward a “holy communion” excluding nothing and no one from the gift of God.

The ecumenical development (or recovery) of the Eucharistic imagination brings with it a restored sense of being creatures of this earth and stewards of God’s good creation. It is, thus, exposure to God’s judgment on the earth—what it is, and what it is called to be.²⁹ For Christians inspired by a strong Eucharistic tradition, the most intense moment of communion with God is at the same time an intense moment of communion with the earth. For “the fruits of the earth and the works of human hands” are not magically vaporised by the action of the Spirit. They come into their own as the nourishment for life unending. Put most simply in the idiom of John’s Gospel, the bread and wine are fully realised as “true food and true drink” (John 6:55). Thus, the sacramental elements anticipate the cosmic transformation that is afoot, not as leaving the created cosmos behind, but as promising its healing and transformation.³⁰ As a World Council of Churches document has it,

The Eucharist opens up the vision of the divine rule, which has been promised as the final renewal of creation, and is a foretaste of it ... the Eucharist is the feast at which the Church joyfully celebrates and anticipates the coming of the Kingdom in Christ (1 Cor 11: 26; Mt 26:29).³¹

This Eucharistic imagination and vision is one of the important ingredients that Christian faith can offer to ecological awareness. Respect for the diversity of life and the wonder of this unique biosphere needs more than a purely scientific, let alone rationalist, approach. The ever-renewable resources of faith, hope, and love have a part to play in the conservation of the non-renewal resources of our planet. More positively, the Eucharistic imagination anticipates a cosmic transformation in Christ. It envisages in the world of nature a movement toward an ultimate transformation. This contrasts with the stasis of a naive ecological ideology as when nature in the past is thought of as an unspoilt and innocent state. Moreover, if a doctrinaire evolutionary ideology empties out the significance of the present to locate it in an impersonal and incalculable future, both past and present are devalued. In cosmic contrast, the Eucharist celebrates the “real presence” of Christ, as redeeming the past, filling the present, and anticipating the future.

²⁹ Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* 28–31.

³⁰ On this cosmic transformation in Christ, see Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* 82–98; 122.

³¹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper, no. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 15.

The point made in the preceding paragraph can be fully appreciated only with the realisation of the heavy cost exacted in the great emancipations of the modern age. Release from a range of biological limitations has the effect of uprooting the human from a sense of nature. As a result, human consciousness has been numbed to any sense of a sacred, nurturing universe. No longer the englobing, mysterious, fertile totality in which all participated, nature appeared more like something external—that *against* which humanity defines itself, that *from* which humans are liberated, and find their distinctive freedom. In the measure that a sense of connection and participation in nature is lost, the world seems merely raw material—or an energy-source to be harnessed and exploited to cater from human self-fulfilment in all its forms.

Here, a Eucharistic faith provides a more generous framework for ecological thinking and action. It relates, in an embodied and earthed fashion, the gift and the self-giving of God to this present world of life and death, time and space. Our God-given future is not indifferent to what we now are. Our earth, our flesh and blood—all are matter to God's creative purpose. In the Christian perspective, we are indeed fed with the Bread of Heaven and filled with the energies of the Spirit, through the wheat of the bread and wine of the grapes of this present existence. As the Christmas antiphon sings, "Let the earth be open to bud forth the saviour!" The Holy Spirit works both through Mary, this woman of Israel, and the earth, to bring forth the Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into life on this planet. His self-gift, in death and resurrection, draws creation into the field of Trinitarian life: "May they be one, as we are one" (John 17: 22). The natural longing of the human spirit for fulfilment unfolds in a horizon already filled with the self-giving love of the Creator, forming all humanity and our world into the Body of Christ.

Under the inspiration of the Spirit, Christian faith blossoms into its sacramental imagination: symbols, gestures, words, relationships and biological processes of our world come to be appreciated, in their respective ritual forms, as "visible signs of invisible grace" (Augustine). Sacramental activity culminates in the Eucharist as the risen Lord takes fragments of creation, the elements of earthly reality which nature and history have combined to produce, in order to transform them into something more, in anticipation of a new totality: "This is my body; this is my blood." Jesus' transforming identification with the matter of our world is continued through history in each Eucharist gathering: "Do this in memory of me." For Christians to receive the Eucharistic gift of his body and blood is to own this world in the way that Christ already possesses it. We thus become immeasurably larger selves in a world of divine incarnation. The result is not some vague form of pantheism, but what is involved in appreciating the cosmic extension of the event of the Incarnation itself. By assuming our humanity, the divine Word necessarily claims as his own the world and universe to which that humanity is essentially related. In short, the Eucharist is enacted within a process of cosmic transformation, even of this ecological world.³²

CONCLUSION

We can appropriately conclude that there can be a fruitful interaction between the ecumenical outreach of Christian faith and ecological concerns. As a result, there has been

³² Peter C. Phan, "Eschatology and Ecology: The Environment in the End-Time", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 62 (1996): 3-16.

a notable “greening” of Christian consciousness, and of the various traditions, churches and communities that embody it. At the same time, the churches have grown in their abilities to shape, enrich and inspire ecological awareness and commitment in the light of their core doctrines and commitments. The three focal doctrines we have selected—creation, Trinity and Eucharist—suggest how an ecumenical Christian faith can call upon deep contemplative, liturgical, theological, moral and artistic resources to inspire and enrich an ecological awareness. The all-embracing horizon is a celebration of the goodness of creation as a whole, just as this is centred on the focal truth of the Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection.³³

The energies of Christian faith, then, offer deep resources for the development of a global and ecologically-attuned consciousness. On the other hand, an ecumenical faith learns from the explorations of science and the ethical concerns now stirring in human history. Further, through the discovery of the riches of other religious faiths and traditions, the churches find themselves in a situation for which their core mysteries have been preparing them, and out of which the whole Church can contribute powerfully to the one, global human community. Christian faith witnesses to transcendent beauty—to the glory that has been revealed, yet too often remains concealed by excessive rationalism and moralising. In that respect, and in order to inspire a deeper ecological sense, faith allies itself to the world of art, For art is that domain of creativity by which experience is freed and refreshed to perceive all forms of beauty—including the beauty of the natural environment that the pressures of life obscure and distort.³⁴

Christians are most surely united when they share the wonder of life in all its forms, and act to protect the integrity of the biosphere of Earth for future generations.

Author: *Anthony J. Kelly, CSsR, is a Professor of Theology in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy at Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. From 2004-15, he was a member of the International Theological Commission and was made a Fellow of the Australian Catholic Theological Association in 2010. His areas of special competence include the interdisciplinary framework of theological method, trinitarian theology, and the Thomistic tradition. His most recent book is Upward: Faith, Church, and the Ascension of Christ (Liturgical Press, 2014).*

Email: Anthony.kelly@acu.edu.au

© Anthony Kelly 2015

³³ J. Ronald Engel, ‘The Ethics of Sustainable Development’, in *Ethics of Environment and Development*, I. Robert Engel and Joan Gibb Engel, (eds.), (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1989), 13–15. Also James A. Nash, *Loving Nature. Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), for an especially valuable treatment of “The Ecological Complaint against Christianity”, 68–91.

³⁴ For a discussion of beauty, Daniel Cowdin, “Environmental Ethics.”