

Reconstructing Christian Theology

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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

RECONSTRUCTING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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chaos, destroying evil, and reconciling the world to Godself. The new order that comes into existence through reconciliation is a community of interdependent persons, *all* of whom are differently abled: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . God has so adjusted the body . . . that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:12, 24b-26).

6. HUMAN BEINGS, EMBODIMENT, AND OUR HOME THE EARTH

Traditional Christian theology, including North American theology, has not taken the body seriously: Christianity has focused on saving souls, not on ministering to bodies. And yet Christianity is the religion of the incarnation, the religion of embodiment, as proclaimed in its central doctrines of Christology (the Word made flesh), the Eucharist (the body and blood of Christ), and the church (the body of Christ). The refusal of Christianity to take seriously its own proclaimed incarnationalism—and even worse, its historical disparagement of bodies, especially the bodies of women, as well as the natural world—has contributed to our present ecological crisis.¹ Christian hierarchical dualism of spirit over flesh, male over female, and human beings over the natural world has been a factor in the Western utilitarian and imperialistic attitude toward the earth.² This attitude says: it is here for our use and subject to our control. To be sure, Christianity is not alone responsible for the deterioration and destruction of our planet, and there are traditions within Christianity that sup-

1. See the work of Margaret Miles, especially *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), and *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

2. Lynn White in his famous essay entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” puts this case strongly, though others have qualified it (White’s essay can be found in *Ecology and Life: Accepting Our Environmental Responsibility*, ed. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1988]).

port the well-being of creation, but Christianity has not preached a gospel of embodiment, has not proposed an earthly anthropology, and has not taught us to think of our planet as our home.

It should do so—not only because our dying planet needs every helpful voice but also because as the religion of the incarnation, which proclaims that the *whole creation* is the theater of God's saving activity, its most basic goal ought to be the well-being of bodies of all sorts. It should insist on the cosmological context for doing theology, which is one of the classic contexts along with two others, the psychological and the political.³ The cosmological context is the oldest and broadest one and is being revived in present-day ecological theology. In the last few hundred years, however, this context has been narrowed to the psychological, which focuses on the redemption of individual human beings. In the past few decades various liberation theologies have insisted on the broader political context in order to address the needs and well-being of oppressed groups of people. We need now to widen the circle still further to include all oppressed creatures as well as the deteriorating ecosystems that support all life-forms, including human ones. The gospel of Jesus is proclaimed to the oppressed, to the poor: in our time nature is oppressed, nature is the new poor.

Thus, justice and ecology issues join hands in a theology of embodiment. The focus is on bodies and their basic needs: food and water, shelter, companionship. An earthly theology, epitomized in the model of the world as God's body, claims that *bodies matter*, and whatever else salvation means, it starts with the needs of bodies, all the wonderful, various, strange, and beautiful bodies on our planet.⁴ In this theology the needs of human bodies are central but not unique or absolute, for the entire creation,

3. For an analysis of these three contexts, see George S. Hendry, ed., *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), chap. 1.

4. For a fuller treatment of this model see chap. 3 of my book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), as well as *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

the whole world, is in God's hand. All bodies live and move and have their being in the body of God—a model that radicalizes Christian incarnationalism. God is Emmanuel not only in Jesus of Nazareth but also in the flesh of our planet.

ANALYSIS: THE COMMON CREATION STORY AND OUR PLACE IN THE SCHEME OF THINGS

Turning toward Nature

What does a Christian embodiment theology say about the place of human beings? How does it change how we think about ourselves, other creatures, and the earth? A brief meditation on space will help us to answer this question. An embodiment theology is a theology of space and place. It is a theology that begins with the body, each and every body, which is the most basic, primary notion of space: each life-form is a body that occupies and needs space. A theology of embodiment takes space seriously, for the first thing bodies need is space to obtain the necessities to continue in existence—food, water, air. Space is not an empty notion from an ecological perspective (“empty space”), but a central one, for it means the basic world that each and every creature inhabits. Finding one's niche, one's space that will provide the necessities for life, is the primary struggle of all life-forms, including human ones.

Space is an earthy, physical, lowly category unlike time, which is a peculiarly human, often mental, and sometimes grand notion.⁵ In Christian thought, space has often been connected with “pagan” fertility religions that are earthy and celebrate the rebirth of life in the spring after its wintry death. The eternal return of the earth's physical cycle is contrasted with the historical movement toward the eschatological fulfillment of creation in the kingdom of God, a fulfillment beyond earthly joys. In space

5. One of the few contemporary theologians to deal with space is Jürgen Moltmann. See chap. 6 of his *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985).

versus time, the old dichotomy of nature versus history is played out. The dichotomy is certainly not absolute, for history takes place in nature, and nature itself has a history, as the common creation story clearly demonstrates; however, for the past several hundred years at least, the focus and preference of Western thought have been on history to the detriment of nature. The importance of time and history in relation to evolutionary development, both biological and cultural, can scarcely be overstated: we *are*, everything *is*, only as it has become and is becoming through the complex machinations of temporal development. However, since this essay deals with bodies and their most basic needs, it will focus on a neglected necessity for bodies: space. For us, now, space should become the primary category with which we think about ourselves and other life-forms. Let us look at a few reasons why this ought to be the case.

First, space is a leveling, democratic notion that places us on a par with all other life-forms. This is certainly not our only status, for as is becoming increasingly evident and as this essay will underscore, we are the self-conscious, responsible form of life on our planet and therefore have an awesome vocation to work for its well-being. But we need to begin our anthropology (who we are in the scheme of things) with the basics. The category of space reminds us not only that each and every life-form needs space for its own physical needs but also that we all exist together in one space, our finite planet. We are all enclosed together in the womb-like space of our spherical planet, a tiny part of God's body, but to us the indispensable space from which we all derive nourishment. Each and every different life-form needs its own particular space and habitat in which to grow and flourish. This includes, of course, human beings, who need not only food, water, and shelter but also loving families, education, medicine, meaningful work, and (some would say) music, art, and poetry. Spaces are specific and different for the billions of species on our planet; hence, the notion of space helps us to acknowledge both the basic need of all life-forms for space to

satisfy their physical needs as well as the specific environments needed by each life-form, given their real differences. And yet all these differences and special needs must be satisfied within one overarching space, the body of our planet. We are united to one another through complex networks of interrelationship and interdependence, so that when one species overreaches its habitat, encroaching on that of others, sucking the available resources out of others' space, diminishment and death must occur at some point. This process (natural selection) has been going on since the beginning of the earth and has resulted in the rich, diverse planet we presently inhabit. The issue now, however, is whether one species, our own, has encroached so heavily on the space, the habitats, of other species that serious imbalance has occurred. As the dominant species for the last few thousand years, we have forgotten the primary reality of planetary space: it is limited, and therefore attention to the primacy of space for other life-forms entails a leveling move toward egalitarianism. We need to remember that at a basic level all life-forms are the same: all need a space for the basics of life.

The second reason we need to turn from a historical (temporal) to a natural (spatial) perspective is because space highlights the relationship between ecological and justice issues. The crisis facing our planet is, in a sense, a temporal one: How much time do we have left for preserving life in community? But the reason time matters is that we are misusing space. Theoretically, we have plenty of time, at least the five billion years of our sun's life, but we may have only a few hundred because of what we have done and continue to do to our plants, trees, water, and atmosphere. We are ruining the space, and when this occurs, justice issues emerge centrally and painfully. When good space—arable land with clean water and air, comfortable temperatures, and shade trees—becomes scarce, turf wars are inevitable. Wars have usually, and not just accidentally, been fought over land, for land is the bottom line. Without good land, none of the other goods of human existence is possible. Geography, often considered a triv-

ial subject compared to more splendid history (the feats of the forefathers), may well be *the* subject of the twenty-first century. Where is the best land and who controls it? How much good space is left, and who is caring for it? Justice for those on the underside, whether these be human beings or other vulnerable species, has everything to do with space. In a theology of embodiment, space is the central category, for if justice is to be done to the many different kinds of bodies that comprise the planet, they must each have the space, the habitat, they need.

The third reason that we ought to focus on nature rather than history, on space rather than time, is that we need to realize that the earth is our home, that we belong here, that this is not only our space but our *place*. Christians have often not been allowed to feel at home on the earth, convinced after centuries of emphasis on otherworldliness that they belong somewhere else—in heaven or another world. That sojourner sensibility has faded with the rise of secularism, but it has not been replaced with a hearty embrace of the earth as our only and beloved home. Rather, many still feel, if not like aliens or tourists, at least like lords of the manor who inhabit the place but do not necessarily consider it their only, let alone beloved, home. Christian theologies as well as works of spirituality have not encouraged meditation on the beauty, preciousness, and vulnerability of the earth and its many creatures. The profound ascetic strain within the tradition that has feared too close association with human bodies has extended this to other animals and the body of the earth. But what if we were not only allowed but encouraged to love the earth? What if we saw the earth as part of the body of God, not as separate from God (who dwells elsewhere), but as the visible reality of the invisible God? What if we also saw this body as overlain by the body of the cosmic Christ, so that wherever we looked we would see bodies that are incorporated into the liberating, healing, inclusive love of God? Would we not then feel obliged to love the earth and all its many bodies? Would that not be the first duty of those who not only belong to the earth

but know we belong to it? We *do* belong to the earth: it is not only our space but our place, our beloved home.

Our meditation on space and place has suggested that we keep our eyes on the earth as we begin our theological anthropology. An embodiment anthropology must start with who we are as earthly, physical creatures who have evolved over billions of years as pictured by postmodern science. This is a modest, humble beginning but one with enormous consequences for how we view both our status and our responsibilities. Reflections on our place in the scheme of things will provide clues to where we belong, our proper place, and hence what improper behavior might be. Thus we will look first at the place (space) of human beings, not primarily from a Christian or even a religious perspective, but from the broad parameters of the common creation story. Our reflections on our proper place and behavior, in light of contemporary science, will show that we have been *decentered* as the point and goal of creation. The paradigmatic Christian story will suggest that we have been *recentered* as God's partners in helping creation to grow and prosper in our tiny part of God's body. A new place and a new vocation have been given to us: these are informed both by contemporary science and by Christian faith, for they are grounded in the mundane and the physical but are shaped by a new calling that evolutionary science could never have envisioned—the calling to solidarity with all other creatures on earth, especially the vulnerable and needy ones.

Toward a Postmodern Theological Anthropology

The first step in a theological anthropology for our time is not to follow the clues from the Christic paradigm or even from the model of the universe as God's body, but to step backward and to ask, Who are we in the scheme of things as pictured by postmodern science? Who are we simply as creatures of planet Earth, quite apart from our religious traditions? That is not a question Christians have usually asked, believing that theolog-

ical anthropology had little relationship with so-called secular views of human nature. Failing to ask that question, however, has often meant that Christian reflection on human existence has been “docetic”: human beings come off as a little lower than the angels—not fully human. We have not been seen as mundane, as being of this earth, of the earth, earthy. Our place and duties have been defined primarily in relationship to God (First Great Commandment) and secondarily in relationship to other human beings (Second Great Commandment), but seldom in relationship to the earth, its creatures, and its care. A first, sobering step, therefore, is to look at ourselves from the perspective of the earth, rather than from that of the sky. The contemporary scientific picture of reality will by no means tell us all we need to know about ourselves, but it will give us a base in reality (as understood in our time), so that what we say about ourselves from the perspective of belonging to the body of God will be grounded, literally rooted, in the earth.

As we begin this task, let us briefly describe the central features of the postmodern scientific view of reality. At its heart is the common creation story.⁶ In broad strokes, the story emerging from the various sciences claims that some fifteen billion years ago the universe began with a big bang that was infinitely hot and infinitely concentrated. This explosion eventually created

6. Over the past decade or so, a large number of books have appeared that were written for the educated layperson and that give various aspects of this story. Here are a few of them: Robert K. Adair, *The Great Design: Particles, Fields, and Creation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987); John D. Barrow and Joseph Silk, *The Left Hand of Creation: The Origin and Evolution of the Expanding Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Marcia Bartusiak, *Thursday's Universe: A Report from the Frontier on the Origin, Nature and Destiny of the Universe* (Redmond, Wash.: Tempus, 1986); Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint: New Discoveries in Nature's Creative Ability to Order the Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Freeman Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); George B. Field and Eric J. Chaisson, *The Invisible Universe: Probing the Frontiers of Astrophysics* (Boston: Birkhauser, 1985); Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton, 1989); other relevant writings include: Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1980); Alan Lightman, *Ancient Light: Our Changing View of the Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991); James Trefil, *The Moment of Creation: Big Bang Physics from before the First Millisecond to the Present Universe* (New York: Basic, 1983).

some hundred billion galaxies of which our galaxy, the Milky Way, is one, itself containing billions of stars including our sun and its planets. From this beginning came all that followed, so that everything is related, woven into a seamless network, with life gradually emerging after billions of years on our planet (and probably on others as well) and evolving into the marvelously complex and beautiful earth that is our home. All things living and all things not living are the products of the same primal explosion and evolutionary history and hence have been interrelated in an internal way right from the beginning. We are distant cousins to the stars and near relations to the oceans, plants, and all other living creatures on our planet.

We need to highlight several features of this story as we consider how it might help reformulate a postmodern theological anthropology, that is, who we are in the scheme of things. The world here is, first of all, the universe, beside which the traditional range of divine concern mainly with human subjects dwindles, to say the least. In this view, God would relate to the entire fifteen-billion-year history of the universe and all its entities and inhabitants, living and nonliving. On the clock of the universe, human existence appears a *few seconds* before midnight. This suggests, surely, that the whole show could scarcely have been put on for our benefit; our natural anthropocentrism is sobered, to put it mildly. Nevertheless, since it took fifteen billion years to evolve creatures as complex as human beings, the question arises as to our peculiar role in this story, especially in relation to our planet.

A second feature of the new picture is its story character: it is a historical narrative with a beginning, middle, and presumed end, unlike the Newtonian universe, which is static and deterministic. It is not a realm belonging to a king or an artifact made by an artist, but a changing, living, evolving event (with billions of smaller events making up its history). In our new cosmic story, time is irreversible, genuine novelty results through the interplay of chance and law, and the future is open. This is an unfinished

universe, a dynamic universe, still in process. Other cosmologies, including mythic ones such as Genesis and even earlier scientific ones, have not been historical, for in them creation was finished. At the very least, this suggests that in our current picture God would be understood as a continuing Creator, but of equal importance, we human beings might be seen as partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process.

A third characteristic of the common creation story is the radical interrelatedness and interdependence of all aspects of it, a feature of utmost importance in the development of an ecological sensibility. It is one story, a common story, so that everything that it traces its ancestral roots within it, and the closer in time and space entities are, the closer they are related. The organic character of the universe in no sense, however, supports a leveling or simplifying direction, that is, a lack of individuation. Precisely the opposite is the case. Whether one turns to the macrocosm or the microcosm, what one sees is an incredibly complex, highly individuated variety of things, both living and nonliving. No two things, whether they be exploding stars or the veins on two maple leaves, are the same: individuality is not just a human phenomenon—it is a cosmic one. At the same time, however, the exploding stars and the veins on the leaves are related through their common origin and history. The implications of this feature of the universe for theological anthropology are immense. The common character of the story undercuts notions of human existence as separate from the natural, physical world; or of human individuality as the only form of individuality; or of human individuals existing apart from radical interdependence and interrelatedness with others of our own species, with other species, and with the ecosystem. Were this feature of the scientific picture to become a permanent and deep aspect of our sensibility, it would be the beginning of an evolutionary, ecological, theological anthropology that could have immense significance in transforming how we think about ourselves as well as our

relations and responsibilities toward other human beings, other species, and our home, planet Earth.

A fourth feature is the multileveled character of the universe, from the flow of energy in subatomic reality to the incredibly complex set of levels that comprise a human being. One critical aspect of this complexification is increasing subjectivity or the ability to experience and feel. Whatever one might or might not want to say about subjectivity in atoms or rocks, it surely increases as one progresses to animals and its present culmination in human self-consciousness. This means that there is no absolute distinction between the living and the nonliving, for life is a type of organization, not an entity or substance. Thus, as Ian Barbour puts it, “[T]he chemical elements in your hand and in your brain were forged in the furnaces of the stars.”⁷ What is significant, however, for a theological anthropology is not only the continuity from the simplest events in the universe to the most complex but also their inverse dependency, which undercuts any sense of absolute superiority. That is, the so-called higher levels depend on the lower ones rather than vice versa. This is obviously the case with human beings and plants; the plants can do very nicely without us, in fact would do better, but we would quickly perish without them. But it is also the case with aspects of our earth that we have until recently taken for granted, such as clean air and water. This very important point needs to be underscored: *the higher and more complex the level, the more vulnerable it is and the more dependent upon the levels that support it.* For theological anthropology, this is a very sobering thought, especially for a tradition that has been accused of advising human beings to subdue and have dominion over all other created beings. It has profound implications for reconceiving the place of human beings in the scheme of things.

Finally, the common creation story is a public one, available to all who wish to learn about it. The full implications of other

7. Ian Barbour, “Creation and Cosmology,” in *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance*, ed. Ted Peters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 147.

creation stories, the cosmogonies of the various world religions, tend to be limited to the adherents of those specific religions. Our present one is not so limited, for any person on the planet has potential access to it and simply as a human being is included in it. This common story is available to be remythologized in different ways by any and every religious tradition and hence is a place of meeting for the religions, whose conflicts in the past and present have often been the cause of immense suffering and bloodshed as belief is pitted against belief. Moreover, the common story itself can be enriched by various ancient organic creation stories. What this common story suggests is that our primary loyalty should be not to nation or religion, but to the earth and its Creator (albeit that Creator would be understood in different ways). We are members of the universe and citizens of planet Earth. Again, were that reality to sink into human consciousness all over the world, not only war among human beings but ecological destruction would have little support in reality. This is not to say that they would disappear, but those who continued in such practices would be living a lie, that is, living in a way out of keeping with reality as currently understood.

RECONSTRUCTION: SIN—THE REFUSAL TO ACCEPT OUR PLACE IN THE SCHEME OF THINGS

Who are we, then, according to the common creation story? According to the major characteristics of that story, human beings are radically other than what either the Christian tradition, especially since the Reformation, claims we are or what secular, modern culture allows. These two views differ in critical ways: the religious picture focuses on the importance of those human beings who accept Jesus Christ as savior, whereas the secular picture elevates individualism, consumerism, and technology. In both cases, the focus is on human beings, especially in terms of individual well-being. In light of the common creation story, however, this is a narrow vision indeed. Yet it is so profoundly

a part of the post-Enlightenment consciousness that we, for the most part, accept it as natural, that is, as the proper order of things.

Decentering and Recentering Human Life

But, according to postmodern science, the religious/secular/modern picture of human reality is a lie, a very large and dangerous lie. According to the common creation story, we are not the center of things by any stretch of the imagination, although in a curious reversal, we are increasingly very important. That is, even as the sense of our insignificance deepens when we see our place in an unimaginably old and immense universe, nonetheless, at least on our tiny planet at this time, because of the wedding of science and technology, we are in a critically important position. We have the knowledge and power to destroy ourselves as well as many other species, *and* we have the knowledge and the power to help the process of the ongoing creation continue. This means, in a way unprecedented in the past, we are profoundly responsible.

The several characteristics of the common creation story we have highlighted suggest, then, a decentering and a recentering of human beings. From this story we learn that we are radically interrelated with and dependent on everything else in the universe and especially on our planet. We exist as individuals in a vast community of individuals within the ecosystem, each of which is related in intricate ways to all others in the community of life. We exist with all other human beings from other nations and religions within a common creation story that each of us can know about and identify with. The creation of which we are a part is an ongoing, dynamic story that we alone (we believe) understand and hence have the potential to help continue and thrive or let deteriorate through our destructive, greedy ways. Our position in this story is radically different than it is, for instance, in the king/realm story, one of the major models in Western religion. We are decentered as the only subjects of the king and

recentered as those responsible for both knowing the common creation story and helping it to flourish. In this story we feel profoundly connected with all other forms of life, not in a romantic but in a realistic way. We *are* so connected, and hence we had better live as if we were. We feel deeply related, especially, to all other human beings, our closest relatives, and realize that together we need to learn to live responsibly and appropriately in our common home.

In light of this story it is obvious that the model of the human being seeking its own individual salvation, whether through spiritual or material means, is not only anachronistic to the postmodern sense of reality but dangerous. We need to think holistically and not just in terms of the well-being of human beings. We need to move beyond democracy to biocracy, seeing ourselves as one species among millions of other species on a planet that is our common home.⁸ This is not the only context in which we need to view ourselves, but it is an important, neglected perspective. Our loyalty needs to move beyond family, nation, and even our own species to identify, in the broadest possible horizon, with all life: we *are* citizens of planet Earth.

We began our theological anthropology with the place of human beings as seen in the common creation story rather than as a reflection of divine reality, understood either from revelation or from fundamental theology. It is important to underscore that this is a modest thesis that is not directly concerned with the liberation and salvation of the outcast and the oppressed—in other words, with the heart of Christian faith, as I understand it. The focus has been on our empirical, cosmic setting as earthlings. This setting has been for the most part neglected in recent theology and needs to be recalled and reinterpreted. Christian theologians will want to say more and other things about who we are, but we need to begin with our planetary citizenship.

8. See Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 161.

It is a modest thesis, but given the great differences between the understanding of our proper place in post-Reformation Christianity and the common creation story, theological reflection conducted in terms of the new story would have revolutionary results. Once the scales have fallen from our eyes, once we have seen and believed that reality is put together in such a fashion that we are profoundly united to and interdependent with all other beings, everything is changed. One sees the world differently, not anthropocentrically, not in a utilitarian way, not in terms of dualistic hierarchies, not in parochial terms. One has a sense of belonging to the earth, of having a place in it, and loving it more than one ever thought possible.

Theological anthropologies emerging out of this understanding of human being can and will vary greatly, given the tradition, social context, and kinds of oppression experienced by different communities and individuals. The context with which we are dealing is the broadest one possible—the human being as species. It is, nevertheless, but *one* context, not the only one. But were it to become a feature of theology for the planetary agenda, it would contribute some of the following notes: a focus on gratitude for the gift of life rather than a longing for eternal life; an end to dualistic hierarchies, including human beings over nature; an appreciation for the individuality of all things rather than the glorification of human individualism; a sense of radical interrelatedness and interdependence with all that exists; the acceptance of responsibility for other forms of life and the ecosystem, as guardians and partners of the planet; the acknowledgment that salvation is physical as well as spiritual and, hence, that sharing the basics of existence is a necessity; and finally the recognition that sin is the refusal to stay in our proper place—sin is, as it always has been understood in the Jewish and Christian traditions, living a lie.

A Deeper Understanding of Sin

The sense of place—proper and improper—is one of the most important insights that theological reconstruction can gain from the common creation story.⁹ We need, then, to delve more deeply into the issue of sin. The common creation story helps us with this issue because it gives us a functional cosmology, a working cosmology. It gives us a way of understanding where we fit. It tells us that we belong and where we belong: it is both a welcoming word celebrating our grandeur as the most developed, complex creatures on our planet to date and a cautionary word reminding us that we belong in *a* place, not all places, on the earth. In the words of James Gustafson, human beings are thus reminded of “their awesome possibilities and their inexorable limitations.”¹⁰ The Genesis myth no longer functions for most people as a working cosmology, a framework providing a sense of both space and place, grandeur and groundedness, possibilities and limitations, for the conduct of daily living. The Genesis myth, rich and profound as it still can be shown to be, does not strike most people as a working model or construct within which the ordinary events and details of their lives can be understood. Moreover, the creation story that does function, at least implicitly, in Western culture is one heavy with otherworldly overtones, seeing human beings as resident aliens on the earth. In contrast, the common creation story orients human beings within this world, this planet, and therefore has credibility for many as soon as they first hear it. “So this is where I, we, fit, not as a little lower than the angels but as an inspirited body among other living bodies, one with some distinctive and mar-

9. The notions of “where we fit” and “proper place” in the scheme of things are *not* meant to support, in any fashion, cultural stereotypes of subservience and quietism, as when certain ethnic groups or children are told to “know their place” or “keep their place.” Rather, the concept of limited space and a proper place for human beings vis-à-vis other species (as well as other members of our own species) carries the connotation of not taking more than one’s share: the implication is of justice for all, not the subservience of some.

10. James Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, vol. 1, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 96–97.

velous characteristics and some genuine limitations. I am of the earth, a product of its ancient and awesome history, and I really and truly belong here. But I am only one among millions, now billions, of other human beings, who have a place, a space, on the earth. I am also a member of one species among millions, perhaps billions, of other species that need places on the earth. We are all, human beings and other species, inhabitants of the same space, planet Earth, and interdependent in intricate and inexorable ways. I feel a sense of comfort, of settledness, of belonging as I consider my place in this cosmology but also a sense of responsibility, for I know that I am a citizen of the planet. I have an expanded horizon as I reflect on my place in the common creation story: I belong not only to my immediate family or country or even my species, but also to the earth and all its life-forms. I *do* belong to this whole. I know this now. The question is, Can I, will I, *live* as if I did? Will I accept my proper place in the scheme of things? Will *we*, the human beings of the planet, do so?”

This little meditation suggests that the common creation story, in giving us a functional cosmology, also gives us a grounded or earthly understanding of sin. One of the advantages of starting our reflections on human existence with our possibilities and limitations as seen in light of the common creation story is that it keeps them from being either overstated or spiritualized. In this story we are not a little lower than the angels, nor the only creatures made in the image of God: our particular form of grandeur is in relation to the earth and derived from it—we are the self-conscious, responsible creatures. Likewise, in the common creation story we are not sinners because we rebel against God or are unable to be sufficiently spiritual: our particular failing (closely related to our peculiar form of grandeur) is our unwillingness to stay in our place, to accept our proper limits so that other individuals in our own species, other individuals of other species, as well as other species in general can also have needed space. From the perspective of the common creation

story, we gain a sober, realistic, mundane picture of ourselves: our grandeur is our role as responsible partners helping our planet prosper, and our sin is just plain old selfishness—wanting to have everything for ourselves.

What is the relation of this ecological view of sin to the classical Christian view? It both deepens and grounds it. The classical view can be summarized with the phrase “living a lie,” living out of proper relations with God, self, and other beings. Sin, in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, is a relational notion, having to do with the perversion of fitting, appropriate attitudes and actions in relation to other beings and the source of all being. Sin is, therefore, thinking, feeling, and acting in ways contrary to reality, contrary to the proper, right relations among the beings and entities that constitute reality.

An autobiographical note might clarify the point. When I was first introduced to Christian theology as a college student, I recall being deeply impressed with its view of sin—it struck a chord of authenticity in me—while I remained unmoved by the various traditional interpretations of redemption. The classical understanding of sin focuses on wanting to be the center of things, and I already knew and knew deeply that longing. Augustine calls it “concupiscence,” literally sexual desire, but more broadly it is wanting to have it all, whatever the all is—that is, sin is limitless greed. As a privileged member of the world’s elite, I was an easy target for this view of sin. While as a female in the American 1950s I perhaps lacked an overbearing sense of my self-worth—or sin as pride—by class and race I fitted the pattern of the voracious Western appetite for more than my share: I was an “ecological” sinner. The Augustinian view, in focusing on the bloated self, the self that wants it all, the self that refuses to share, highlights the ecological dimension of sin. From this perspective, selfishness is the one-word definition of sin—at least for us First World types.¹¹

11. To say that sin is selfishness does not entail claiming that righteousness is selfless-

The common creation story deepens and grounds this view of sin because it forces us, as a first step, to apply it to our relations with other members of our own species, other species, and the natural world that is our common home. It advises us to ask: What does selfishness mean in relation to other human beings? What does the refusal to share mean in relation to other animals? What does our unwillingness to stay in our proper place, our space, mean in relation to nature?

*Us versus Us: Living a Lie
in Relation to Other Human Beings*

The evidence of disproportionate space and place of some human beings in contrast to others—the rich and poor within nations and between nations—is everywhere and growing.¹² If the most basic meaning of justice is fairness, then from an ecological point of view, justice means sharing the limited resources of our common space. From the perspective of the one home we all share, injustice is living a lie, living contrary to reality, pretending that all the space or the best space belongs to some so that they can live in lavish comfort and affluence, while others are denied even the barest necessities of physical existence. The disproportion here, epitomized in the billionaires versus the homeless, the standard of living of the First World versus that in the Third World, the swollen stomachs of starving people versus obesity in others, forces us to think concretely and physically about sin.

ness. Traditional understandings of sin as pride fail, as Valerie Saiving pointed out in her classic essay over thirty years ago, to acknowledge women’s problem of a lack of self in our society (“The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979], 25–42).

12. “The global balance-sheet is sobering. Since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment the gap in living standards between the world’s rich and poor has steadily grown. Industrialized countries and some parts of the developing world have prospered, but a billion people live in absolute poverty. Per capita income in the world’s 41 poorest countries is well below \$300, a sharp contrast to the \$14,500 average of developed market-economy countries. Some 70 per cent of the world’s income is produced and consumed by 15 per cent of the population” (Foreword, *Notes to Speakers, Earth Summit ’92: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* [New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1991]).

The common creation story deepens the classical view of right relations in regard to members of our own species: it suggests that loving the neighbor must be grounded in mundane issues of space, turf, habitat, land. Every human being needs an environment capable of supporting its sustenance and growth. While this might at first glance appear to be a minimalist view, reducing human beings to the physical level, it is precisely the minimum that those individuals and nations bloated with self, living the life of insatiable greed, refuse to recognize. It is far easier as well as less costly to one's own lifestyle to offer spiritual rather than material goods to the poor. The ecological view of sin refuses to raise its eyes above the minimalist view, insisting that justice among human beings means first of all adequate space for basic needs. It also means, for some, staying in their own proper, limited place.

The issue on which to focus when we consider justice versus ecological issues is not our species versus other species (the rights of humans versus the rights of other animals), but *some members* of our species versus other members. While it is certainly the case that the human population is too large and encroaches on the habitats of other species, lumping human beings all together as *the* ecological problem masks the profound justice issues within our own population. Those to whom this essay is addressed—we relatively well-off Westerners—need to admit that the first lie we live is in relation to others of our own kind. *The* ecological sin is the refusal of the haves to share space and land with the have-nots. It has been shown that human populations stabilize when the standard of living improves; hence, the problem is not only our gross numbers but also the disproportionate way in which space is controlled by some humans to the disadvantage of others. Over the long haul, stabilizing the human population at a sustainable level is primarily a justice issue between human beings. Thus, justice issues *within* the human species have a direct effect on environmental issues between our species and other species. Simply put, we need to do some housecleaning as a first

step. Until we rectify gross injustices among human beings, in other words, begin our ecological work at home, we will have little chance of success abroad, that is, in relation to other species and the planet as a whole.

*Us versus Them: Living a Lie
in Relation to Other Animals*

The ecological view of sin deepens when we realize that other animals, beside human ones, must have space, that they too have a place. While the model of the universe as God's body tells us that we are united with the physical bodies of all other animals, the common creation story gives detail and depth to this statement. While there are tens of billions of known kinds of organic molecules, only about fifty are used for the essential activities of life. Molecules are essentially identical in all plants and animals. "An oak tree and I are made of the same stuff. If you go back far enough, we have a common ancestor."¹³ If some degree of intimacy is true of us and oak trees, it is astonishingly true of us and other animals. We not only *are* animals but also are genetically very similar to all other animals and only a fraction of difference away from those animals, the higher mammals, closest to us. And yet one would scarcely suspect this from the way animals are conventionally regarded as well as used in our culture. While most people now have or pretend to have a raised consciousness in regard to the needs of all human beings for the basic necessities of life, the same cannot be said for attitudes about other animals. This is not the place for a review of human use and misuse of animals as manifest in pleasure hunting, excessive meat eating, the fur trade, circuses and traditional zoos, vivisection, testing of cosmetics on animals, and so on.¹⁴ But even listing a few of our more callous practices in regard to animals illustrates

13. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 34.

14. See Tom Regan, ed., *Animal Sacrifices: Religious Perspectives on the Uses of Animals in Science* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1986); Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983); Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1991).

our degree of insensitivity to their needs, wishes, and feelings. In fact, it is by suppressing any thought that they might have needs, wishes, or feelings, in other words, that they are *anything like us* (or we like them—the more valid evolutionary comparison), that we can continue such practices with good or at least numbed consciences.

What does it mean to live a lie in relation to other animals? What is ecological sin in regard to them? The common creation story helps us answer this question most specifically by providing a realistic picture of who we are in relation to other animals, both our profound intimacy with them and our important differences from them. We recall that one of the special features of this story is the way both unity and diversity are understood: the interrelationship and interdependence of all living things *and* distinctive individuality and differences among living forms. The common creation story helps us to move into a new paradigm for responding to our fellow animals, one in which we appreciate the network of our interdependence with them as well as their real differences from us. In the conventional model, the model that views them as resources or means of recreation, as something to serve us or amuse us, we can appreciate neither their profound closeness nor our genuine differences: they are simply “other.” The new paradigm, however, presses us into a much more complex, highly nuanced relationship with other animals, one that refuses either a sentimental fusion or an absolute separation. In this paradigm, we are neither “a species among species” nor “the crown of creation.” Who, then, are we?

We are like other animals in complex ways; we are also different from them—and they from one another—in complex ways.¹⁵ We have simplified our relationship with other animals by focusing on one human characteristic, a kind of rationality divorced

15. One highly interesting, provocative analysis of our relationship with other animals—and one to which I am indebted—is in the various writings of Mary Midgley. See *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1983); *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978); *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (London: Methuen, 1985).

from feeling, which has allowed us to put ourselves on top with other animals as inferior to us and radically different from us. The operating model here is the ladder, with rationality at the top and ourselves as its sole possessor. Everything that does not possess rationality is alien, including our own feelings and bodies as well as other animals, plant life, and the earth. But what if the evolutionary model were the bush rather than the ladder, a model much closer to what the common creation story tells us? A bush does not have a main trunk, a dominant direction of growth, or a top. There is no privileged place on a bush; rather, what a bush suggests is *diversity* (while at the same time interconnectedness and interdependence since all its parts are related and all are fed by a common root system). The bush model helps us to appreciate different kinds of excellence, each of which is an end in itself. In this model other animals are not defined by their *lack* of rationality. “Is there nothing to a giraffe except being a person *manqué*?”¹⁶ Or the same point, asked positively: Would a dolphin think that we could swim, a dog be impressed with our sense of smell, or a migrating bird with our sense of direction?¹⁷ We are profoundly and complexly united with other animals as well as profoundly and complexly different from them and they from each other.

Our most important difference is not perhaps our grand rationality but a more humbling trait, one that we share with young children and that the poets and artists among us retain into adulthood: our ability to wonder. We are the creatures who *know* that we know. Many creatures know many things; intelligence is not limited to human beings. But the ability to step back, to reflect on *that* we know and *what* we know—in other words, self-consciousness—may well be our peculiar speciality. As Annie Dillard notes, “[T]he point is that not only does time fly and . . . we die, but that in these reckless conditions we live at all, and are vouchsafed, for the duration of certain inexplicable

16. Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, 358.

17. *Ibid.*, 225ff.

moments, to know it.”¹⁸ To live at all and to know it: these are the roots of wonder. It is a wonder to be alive, but it is a deeper wonder to know it. Knowing that we know places special possibilities as well as special responsibilities on us. Self-consciousness is the basis of free will, imagination, choice, or whatever one calls that dimension of human beings making us capable of changing ourselves and our world. In relation to other animals, our ability to wonder, to step back and reflect on what we know, places us in a singular position: our place in the scheme of things may well be to exercise this ability. We are the ones, the only ones we believe, who know the story of life and the only ones who know that we know: the only ones capable of being filled with wonder, surprise, curiosity, and fascination by it. A first step, then, toward a healthy ecological sensibility may well be a return, via a second naïveté, to the wonder we had as children at the world, but a naïveté now informed by knowledge of and a sense of responsibility for our planet and its many life-forms.¹⁹ We know that we know: we have a choice to act on behalf of the wonderful life that we are and that surrounds us.

Living a lie in relation to other animals, then, is pretending through numbed consciences that they are so totally unlike us that they do not need space, places, to eat and rest and raise their young, to run and fly and swim and do all the other wonderful things that each different one does so well. Living a lie in relation to them also means refusing to accept our special difference from them: our ability to know the common creation story that unites us all and that we alone can become partners in helping to continue.

18. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: A Mystical Excursion into the Natural World* (New York: Bantam, 1974), 81.

19. The phrase “second naïveté” is Paul Ricoeur’s and refers to the possibility of returning to the most basic roots of our being by a conscious, informed route when intuitive acceptance found in our own youth and the youth of the human community is no longer possible for us.

Us versus It: Living a Lie in Relation to Nature

John Muir, the eminent American naturalist, wrote at the end of his life: “I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay until sundown, for going out, I discovered, was actually going in.”²⁰ This is a summary statement of a lifelong conversion to the earth, the realization that one *belongs* to the earth. It is not natural for most of us to believe, let alone feel, that we belong to nature, to realize that by going out one is actually going in. Susan Griffin, poet and ecofeminist, eloquently expresses our complex in-and-out relationship with nature: “We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature. We are nature with a concept of nature. Nature weeping. Nature speaking of nature to nature.”²¹ We are the self-conscious ones who can think about, weep for, and speak of nature, but we are also one in flesh and blood with nature. It is this dual awareness of both our responsibility for nature and our profound and complex unity with it that is the heart of the appropriate, indeed necessary, sensibility that we need to develop.

The proper balance of this dual awareness in relation to nature, specifically the earth, the land, may be even more difficult than in relation to other people and other animals, for we have a clearer notion of the ways we are both united to and distinct from them than we do with such things as oceans, plants, and land. For most Westerners the tendency is to objectify nature so totally that human beings are essentially distinct from it. One way to overcome this is to enlarge our sense of self—that is, what we include in our definition of who we are.²² A narrow

20. As quoted by Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1987), 205.

21. Susan Griffin, *Made from This Earth: An Anthology of Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 343.

22. See analysis of this concept by Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), chap. 8.

self-definition includes only one's nearest and dearest: family and friends or, at most, one's tribe or nation. A broader self-definition takes in not only all people but also some of the higher or more interesting animals (at least the poster ones, such as baby seals, panda bears, and snowy egrets). But a cosmological or ecological self-definition acknowledges that we are part and parcel of everything on the planet, or, as Alan Watts puts it, "the world is your body."²³

Only as we are able both to think and to feel this enlarged definition of self will we be able to begin to respond appropriately and responsibly to the crises facing our planet. We need to be radicalized into a new way of looking at the earth in which we are decentered as masters, as crown, as goal, and begin to feel empathy in an internal way for the sufferings of other species and even for the earth itself. As Aldo Leopold comments, "For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun."²⁴ It is indeed new and requires an expanded self-identification, a sense that I care about another species in a way analogous to the way I care about those near and dear to me. I do not merely regret the loss, but I feel and weep for it. Can we also expand this sense of self to include ecosystems and even the planet? When we read of the pollution of the oceans or the destruction of rain forests, do we feel grief for the earth itself, for that beautiful blue-green living marvel of a planet spinning alone in space?

We are *a part* of the whole, and we need to internalize that insight as a first step toward living truthfully, rightly, on our planet. But we need more than a sense of oneness with the earth to live appropriately on it. An environmental ethic in regard to nature—the land, ecosystems, the planet—must be based on knowledge of and appreciation for the intrinsic and particular differences

23. As quoted in the introduction to J. Baird Callicott and Robert Ames, eds., *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1989), 62.

24. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), 110.

of various species, biotic regions, oceanic ecosystems, and so on. We need to learn about these differences and make them central in our interaction with the environment. A sense of oneness with the planet and all its life-forms is a necessary first step, but an *informed* sensibility is the prerequisite second step. Leopold is on the right track when he tells us that we need a "land ethic," an ethic toward the land that no longer sees it as mere property, entailing privileges but no responsibilities. A land ethic that aims "to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" is an example of living appropriately on the land, refusing to live the lie that we are the conquerors, the possessors, the masters of the earth.²⁵ A land ethic deals with the issue of space—the primary issue for an environmental anthropology—in its broadest and deepest context. *The* space, the ultimate space, as it were, that we *all* share is the land, oceans, and atmosphere that comprise the planet. The complex question facing us is how to share this space with justice and care for our own species, other species, and the ecosystems that support us all. How can we live appropriately and justly with others that inhabit this space, realizing that we have a place but not all places, that we need space but cannot have the whole space?

Our reflection on sin in three contexts—as living a lie in relation to other human beings, other animals, and nature—has highlighted space as a central category for an ecological anthropology. In each case, we have insisted that attention to *difference*, while at the same time acknowledging and *feeling* our profound unity with these others, is central.

PRAXIS: A NEW PLACE FOR HUMANITY

A new way of being in the world begins to emerge from our reflections on our place in the scheme of things as pictured by the common creation story. We have been decentered as the point

25. *Ibid.*, 224–25.

and goal of evolutionary history; hence, ecological sin means living as if we were the center, denying space and place to other human beings, other species, and the ecosystems of the planet. But that same history suggests, in the words of biologist Stephen Jay Gould, a recentering for us as “the stewards of life’s continuity on earth.”²⁶ We have arrived at these conclusions by looking at ourselves from the pedestrian, mundane, earth-up perspective, by seeing ourselves as part of the profound, intricate kind of unity that characterizes the contemporary organic model of reality as well as seeing the special sort of difference that distinguishes us from other beings on the planet. The new place for humanity is not only, however, a product of who we are in the common creation story; for Christians this also involves being members of God’s body qualified by the liberating, healing, and inclusive love of Christ. This identification presses us beyond stewardship of life on earth to solidarity with all earth’s creatures, especially the vulnerable. The Christic shape for humanity is built upon our evolutionary distinction but is also a radical intensification of it.

To be stewards of life’s continuity on earth and partners with God in solidarity with the oppressed is an awesome vocation, a far higher status than being a little lower than the angels or subjects of a divine king or even the goal of evolutionary history. We now realize that our knowledge of the common creation story and where we fit into it means that we are responsible for taking evolution to its next step, one in which we will consciously bond with other human beings and other life-forms in ways that will create a sustainable, wholesome existence for the rich variety of beings on our planet. To be stewards of life on our planet and, even more, to side with the oppressed life-forms on earth is a sublime, formidable, and baffling vocation for mere human beings. It is not one we probably would have chosen, but it has been thrust upon us as the self-conscious ones and as Christians.

26. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1985), 431.

We need to recall, however, that we are not the creators or redeemers of creation, only the stewards and partners of the Creator and savior. Christians believe that our efforts on behalf of the planet are not ours alone and that the source and power of life in the universe is working in and through us for the well-being of all creation, including our tiny bit of it. A reading from a lover of the planet, novelist Alice Walker, has given me courage as I think about our new vocation, and I share it in closing:

Helped are those who love the Earth, their mother, and who willingly suffer that she may not die; in their grief over her pain they will weep rivers of blood, and in their joy in her lively response to love, they will converse with trees. . . .

Helped are those who find the courage to do at least one small thing each day to help the existence of another—plant, animal, river, human being. They shall be joined by a multitude of the timid.

Helped are those who lose their fear of death; theirs is the power to envision the future in a blade of grass.

Helped are those who love and actively support the diversity of life; they shall be secure in their differentness.

Helped are those who *know*.²⁷

We *do* know and we ask for help.

27. Alice Walker, “The Gospel according to Shug,” in *The Temple of My Familiar* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 288–89.